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3. From the Old Country

原鄉人

I

When I was a child my first lesson in ethnology was the Hoklo (Hokkien). This man was one of my father's business friends. By the time I was about three or four I was aware that he often came to our house and would have lunch before leaving, or sometimes stay the night and not leave until the next day. He was very tall and smiled a lot. If he stayed over, then in the morning before leaving he would be sure to give me and my brother ten or twenty cents; he seemed really nice. Only as I got older did I gradually learn that lots of Hoklo came to our village as traders. Ma often bought salted fish, cloth, or thread from them. By now I could even understand a little Hoklo language.

My second ethnology lesson concerned the Japanese race. They almost always wore a uniform from head to foot, with swords at their waists and trim little mustaches under their noses. They walked with great strides and heads held high. Awe-inspiring and impressive. Wherever they went you could hear a pin drop; people gave them a wide berth.

"The Japanese are coming! The Japanese are coming!"

Mothers would coax their crying children with these words.

The children would stop crying.

The Japanese went around hitting people! They might even carry off children who wouldn't stop crying!

2

One day just after I turned five, Grandma told me a teacher from the Old Country had arrived in the village, and Pa was sending me to school. This Old Country teacher was thin, sallow, and somewhat stooped, but otherwise I couldn't see any difference between him and us. This really

surprised me. The Hoklo and Japanese were different from us. After school I went to Grandma and asked her about this. Grandma listened, then said with a smile: “We moved here from the Old Country.”

This was a big surprise to me, and I was struck speechless.

“Was it my pa who moved here?” I asked Grandma after a pause.

“No! It was your grandpa’s grandpa,” replied Grandma.

“Why did he move here?” I pursued.

“I’m not really sure,” said Grandma with regret. “I suppose they couldn’t find a way to live over there any more.”

“Grandma,” I said again after thinking about this, “where is the Old Country? Is it very far?”

“It’s to the west, very, very far, across a strip of ocean; they had to come by boat.”

The Old Country, the ocean, and boats! This was a whole new field of knowledge. Once more I was dumbfounded—for a while I was stunned. Never before had Grandma taught me such a lot.

A year later we got a new teacher. We’d heard he was also from the Old Country, but he was completely different from the old teacher. He was slightly plump, with a ruddy face and eyes that gleamed; there was a great, big, black mole on his right cheek, and he had a big, booming voice. This new teacher had much more vim than the old one. Something else he had a lot of was phlegm, which he would hawk up any old where. And another thing: he liked to eat dog meat, especially suckling puppies. In those days almost every family in the village had dogs, so there was certainly no problem of supply. As a result, within two years our teacher had gotten even fatter and his complexion was even rosier, but his phlegm was more abundant than ever.

He was a real expert at slaughtering dogs. He would pinch the back of a dog’s neck between his left thumb and forefinger, then with the knife in his right hand he made a quick cut across its throat; the wee dog would drag itself a few steps, yelping, before collapsing. He’d kill three at a time in this way. He also showed us how to use the dog’s tail in gutting it: an amazingly good and convenient method.

He taught school in our village for three years, but then he developed a large sore on the back of his neck that just would not respond to treatment, so he got his things together and left. As we heard it, he died on shipboard and his body was tipped into the sea. Everyone in

the village said he must’ve eaten too much dog meat and that’s why he got the ulceration. Mind you, his teaching methods were good, and he was conscientious; he’d been a good teacher, so the villagers all felt it a great pity.

When I was seven I had to go to Japanese school, so that was the end of my old-style village education.¹

The third Old Country person I met was also closely connected with dog meat. But he was a real puzzle to me because he wasn’t from outside at all—he had always lived in our village. He had a wife and daughter and was getting on in age. His eyesight was poor and his limbs trembled slightly, but when it came to beating dogs he was both brutal and fearless. Whenever he was slaughtering a dog the villagers, young and old, would gather round in a circle. Outside his front door there was a silk-cotton tree, and he would tie the dog to the foot of the trunk, then begin swinging his huge thick wooden club with all his might, bringing it down on the dog’s body. His eyesight prevented him from bringing any one blow down in a fatal place to end the dog’s life quickly, and so its suffering was needlessly increased.

I remember one time the dog was dodging this way and that, as far as the rope allowed, staggering and struggling and yelping piteously, blood dripping from its mouth. All the other dogs in the village barked madly as though possessed by demons, while the people standing around held their breath, their expressions solemn. My brother told me not to dribble, and to keep both hands behind my back. I did as he told me, and watched even more timidly than before.

Red blood and the crazed howling of dogs only spurred on the dog beater’s murderous intent. Down rained the blows: *ba-cha ba-cha*. Suddenly, the dog’s head took a hit and it fell spread-eagled on the floor, blood coming from its nose and even its eyes. Its belly rose and fell violently, and its claws scabbled wildly on the ground. As it struggled to get up, down came the merciless club yet again.

I kept as near as I could to my brother, my eyes closed. Encircling my head with one arm he kept urging me not to be afraid. After one

1. Zhong Lihe’s “old-style village education” took its syllabus from the pre-1905 Chinese civil service examination system curriculum, which consisted primarily of Confucian texts in classical Chinese.

last heartbreaking wowl, I opened my eyes to see the poor animal lying flat out in a pool of blood, its flanks rising and falling more violently than ever, its limbs still twitching.

Finally my brother took me away.

Some grown-ups across the way in front of the village shop were discussing what had just happened.

“What a vicious man!” said somebody.

Another asked whose dog it was, apparently believing the dog’s owner to be equally cruel.

“He paid them, though!” said someone else.

“How much did he give them?” retorted the other. “I’d never have agreed, no matter how much he offered me.”

“All Old Country people love dog meat,” said another grown-up with some feeling.

So he—the dog-killer—was from the Old Country. This was something I had never known before.

When I got home I went straight to Grandma: “Did Grandpa eat dog meat?”

“No!” she replied.

“What about Grandpa’s grandpa?” I asked again.

Grandma looked at me in surprise and smiled: “I don’t know. But I’m sure he didn’t.” Then she asked me why I asked.

I explained to her what I had seen, and told her: “Everybody says Old Country people all eat dog meat.”

“Silly boy,” Grandma’s smile broadened even further. “We’re not Old Country people!”

“But my grandpa’s grandpa was from the Old Country,” I insisted. “You told me so yourself.”

“He was from the Old Country, but we’re not,” said Grandma. “We live in Taiwan now.”

I was pleased to hear that my grandpa and my grandpa’s grandpa didn’t eat dog meat, but Grandma’s explanation of “where we came from” still baffled me.

Later I saw many more Old Country people: drifting types who came and went like migratory birds. As far as I could see all of them were somewhat disreputable: itinerant doctors, plowsmiths, tinsmiths, locksmiths, umbrella repairers, fortune-tellers, geomancers, and so on.

And I found out that they came in all shapes and sizes: their speech, dress, and facial features were by no means all the same. According to the grown-ups, they came from Ningbo, Fuzhou, Wenzhou, and Jiangxi. This really was a strange thing: all from the Old Country, but so many differences! On this point Grandma could no longer give me much help. Meanwhile, I found them all to be mysterious, skilful, capable. Things that had gotten worn or broken through use only needed a few moments in the caress of their hands to be made as good as new. Seeing how satisfied the wives of the village were when they collected their things, I could see that the repairs must be pretty good.

It was the plowsmiths that most amazed and intrigued me. They didn’t work by day like ordinary folk; theirs was a nocturnal trade. There were many of them, and they were big: every one of them a strapping fellow, carrying heavy loads on their shoulders, wearing big broad bamboo hats that doubled as fans to cool the red-hot plowshares just out of the mold. Whenever they arrived in the village they’d go around striking pieces of iron like chimes to collect broken plowshares from people’s houses. When night fell they fired up the furnace and melted the iron; one man bent his back to work the bellows until the furnace glowed brightly, while another put the mold in position and used tongs to tip the furnace. The red-hot molten liquid poured from the mouth of the furnace into the mold, sparks flying everywhere. It was really scary, but the man showed no fear whatsoever. Bare-chested, with sweat pouring off his face, he was carrying out his task calmly and gravely, with all the resolve of those who bear heavy responsibility. The red-hot light produced a sculpturing effect, transforming his body into a gigantic column carved in relief. My thoughts were petrified by the scene. To me this man was a magnificent individual.

Early next morning when I got up they had already left. Where their furnace had been there was a pile of burned coal fragments. The coal had turned into all sorts of shapes and colors, a great bounty for our toy boxes.

3

As I gradually gained in years, I learned from my father’s conversation that “the Old Country” meant China and that “Old Country people” were the Chinese; China had eighteen provinces, and we had come

from Jiaying in Canton province. Later, I looked it up and found that Jiaying was the Qing dynasty name for the place now known as Meixian.

In the fifth grade of Japanese school I started geography lessons. Here I found that China had become “Shina”² and Chinese people had become “Shina jin.” On the map, Taiwan and China were separated only by a narrow belt of water; across the strait China was like a half-moon curving out toward Taiwan, all the way from the southwest corner to the northeast tip. I had never expected it to be so big! It must be hundreds of times bigger than Taiwan! But Grandma had said my grandpa’s grandpa had had to leave because over there he couldn’t find a way to live any more. How ever could that be?

Our Japanese teacher often talked to us about “Shina,” always with great relish and in unusually high spirits. For two years our ears rang with phrases such as “Shina,” “Shina jin,” and “Shina hei,” and stories of them and other Shina phenomena besides.

All these phrases had specific implications: “Shina” meant “decrepit” and “broken-down”; “Shina jin” meant “opium addicts” and a “shameless, filthy race”; “Shina hei” represented craven cowardice, lack of discipline, and so on.

Among the teacher’s Shina stories was the one about a foreigner who had arrived in China for the first time: when he dropped a few coins on the quay some Shina jin rushed over to pick up the fallen money, to his enormous gratitude. But he was mistaken: they pocketed every last coin.

Then there were the stories of the Shina hei. The teacher asked us: “What should we do if our troops are faced with an enemy force?”

“Shoot!” we replied.

“That’s right! And Shina hei would also open fire. But in what direction?”

“At the enemy!” we replied again.

The teacher shook his head, slyly. “Wrong! They’d fire into the air.”

This really baffled us. Why would they do that? So the teacher explained it to us: “They test the two sides, to see who will pay more.

Shina hei fight only for money, you see. They go over to whichever side offers more.”

There were endless stories about Shina jin and Shina hei, and after telling us each one the teacher would always ask what we thought of it. Indeed, what to make of these stories? We weren’t sure at all.

The teacher’s stories were lively, appealing, and consistent; I couldn’t decide whether to believe them.

I stared again at that beautiful curve on the map. The half-moon sure was huge, but otherwise it had nothing at all to tell me.

4

There were two people who simultaneously influenced me from different directions. One was my father, and the other was my brother.

At this time Father was doing business on the Mainland, and every year he made a trip to inspect his investments. His tours would cover all the maritime provinces, from Shandong in the north to Hainan in the south. His knowledge of China was vast, with some of it gained from his reading, and some from personal experience. The people of our village loved to hear him talk about the Old Country. “Old Country this”, “Old Country that”: they could never hear enough on the subject. But when Father talked about China it was in the tone of someone relating news of an uncle³ who had formerly been a great man but had fallen on hard times: a mixture of scorn and lingering respect, but most of all regret. Similarly, his audience listened with disappointment, pride, and sadness. Many’s the time I heard them sighing: “Ah, the Old Country! The Old Country!”

On one occasion Father undertook the arduous trek all the way to our ancestral village in Jiaying to sweep the graves of our forebears. When he returned he brought a youth along with him: my cousin. When the villagers heard of Father’s return they flocked to hear news of “home.” Father shook his head and then angrily told them how the place was just an outrageous mess: all the able-bodied men had gone

2. In this section, the expressions given as “Shina *this*” and “Shina *that*” are transcribed from the Japanese. To Chinese people, these collocations are insulting—“Shina jin” is roughly equivalent to English “Chinaman.”

3. The original has *jiujiu* 舅舅 (mother’s brother); in the popular Chinese imagination the *jiujiu* type of uncle is often seen as somehow lacking or disreputable. My thanks to Professor Ching-ming Ko of National Taiwan University for pointing out that this connotation appears to apply here.

overseas, leaving only the lazy and the weak at home. In this cousin's family, for instance, his father and two older brothers had all gone to the South Seas, and now he too had come to Taiwan; at home there remained only three women—an old lady and her two young daughters-in-law—and otherwise just a few little ones.

Once again everyone sighed deeply at what they heard.

Later Father became very interested in the island of Hainan and conceived the plan of forming a group within our extended family to move to Yulin and go into the trawler business. First he made two inspection trips there alone and was quite satisfied with what he saw. Then he invited four clansmen to go with him on a third trip. The idea was that if they were satisfied with this inspection they'd put their plans into action as soon as they got home. To their dismay, however, on the second day out from Haikou their automobile was ambushed by bandits. After nearly a fortnight stuck in a small town fearing for their very lives, they had no choice but to abandon the reconnoiter and return home in defeat. Father and his clansmen were cruelly disillusioned, and the dream ended there and then.

That same year, Father closed down his Shanghai subsidiary.

5

Secondly, we come to my brother.

It was mainly my brother who inspired my thoughts and feelings toward China. He had what you might call a strong congenital affinity—an adoration of the Mainland, the fatherland. At high school in Kaohsiung he had twice been formally reprimanded—for “dangerous tendencies” (rebellious against his Japanese teachers) and for reading “harmful books” (*The Three Principles of the People*). Worst of all, these misdemeanors resulted in Father being summoned to the school to receive a severe warning.

The year he graduated from high school, my brother finally received permission from Father to realize his long-held ambition to “take a look at China.” He traveled widely for over a month, to Nan-king, Shanghai, and other places. When he returned he brought back a gramophone and a great many photographs of the famous sites of Suzhou, the West Lake, and other places. That night our front courtyard

was full of visitors. I carried the gramophone out into the center of the yard and wound it up, so that everyone could enjoy their fill of songs “from the Old Country.” The records included Mei Lanfang singing from *Farewell to My Concubine*, Lian Jinfeng from *Yutangchun*, and a few arias by Ma Lianliang and Xun Huisheng.⁴ There was also some Cantonese opera: *Little Red Peach Blossom* and *Zhaojun's Lament*, and a small number of popular songs besides.

The Cantonese opera bewitched me; its sentimental undulations, agitated surges, and heartbreaking melancholy intoxicated and stupefied me, making me completely forget where I was. These arias, together with the enchanting pictures of famous places, stimulated my imagination enormously and deepened my longing for the land across the Strait. I asked Father several times to allow me to go to high school on the Mainland, but he wouldn't permit it. I begged my brother to speak for me, but he said it was a hopeless cause, because Father was so disillusioned with China.

After the failure of his Mainland interests Father reconsolidated his business at home in Pingtung. My brother went further away than ever—to university in Japan. In the following year [1937] all-out war with China broke out; the whole Japanese Empire seethed with activity; and before long I was enrolled in the Defense Corps. My cousin from Meixian returned to the Mainland. We'd gotten along well during the years we'd spent under the same roof, so it was a hard parting.

As the war raged ever more fiercely, so the range of activities of the Defense Corps expanded: send-offs for new recruits to the army, victory lantern parades, air-raid drills, traffic control. Within four months, Peking, Tientsin, Taiyuan . . . one fell after the other. The Japanese in Pingtung went mad with jubilation: bright lanterns lit the streets by night and joyous voices rang out until dawn.

It was just at this time that my brother made a hurried trip home from Japan. He looked very tense and his eyes were bloodshot, as if he hadn't been sleeping properly. Nobody knew why he had returned to Taiwan, nor did he say. Every day he rushed all over the place, so busy

4. The details given suggest that these recordings were all scenes or arias from Peking opera.

that he almost had no time for eating and sleeping. Once he took me to a house out in the country where a dozen or more young men were gathered in a room as if by prior appointment. There was a big bed in the room, and everyone sat wherever they pleased. Apart from a cousin of ours, the rest were all strangers to me.

They debated with one another in fluent Japanese, frequently mentioning things like “colonialism,” “the fatherland,” “revolution,” “the Cultural Society,” and “the Sixty-Three Points.” I’d never been interested in these terms, so I understood little of what I heard. The meeting dispersed after two hours, without any outcome. My brother seemed very disappointed.

That same evening my brother and our father were talking in Father’s bedroom, which was next to mine. At first their conversation sounded friendly, but the more they talked the louder their voices grew until finally it was obvious that they were arguing. I could hear the agitation in my brother’s voice. Then suddenly the argument was over. When my brother came out he was in low spirits; his eyes were like two firebrands. When I woke during the night I saw him sitting alone at the desk, writing away at something.

A few days later my brother went back to Japan. Before he went, Father earnestly urged him: “You’re a student, so concentrate on your studies. Keep well away from politics.” Father’s tone was both apologetic and soothing. But my brother remained silent, his ears stoppered against Father’s words.

When he next came back from Japan he was calmer and more at peace. By now the [Chinese] national government had retreated to Chungking and the battle lines were moving toward deadlock. My brother said the Japanese were now planning long term, and China too seemed resolved to fight to the bitter end, so the war was set to drag on. He had already decided to go to the Mainland. To my great surprise Father no longer dug in his heels, though neither did he show any pleasure.

On the day of my brother’s departure, a cousin and I went as far as Kaohsiung with him; he had arranged to meet up with his traveling companions in Taipei. At every stop on the way to Kaohsiung we encountered new recruits being sent off to the war. They wore red sashes

over their shoulders and kept nodding and smiling, while those sending them off craned their necks and belted out the “Infantry March.”

To pacify the unrighteous, to do Heaven’s will,
Our Combined Services are brave and loyal beyond compare,
...

Inside our compartment my brother buried himself deep in his seat, solemn and silent. I had always admired him, and on this occasion I was more impressed than ever by his personal nobility. I told him I too wanted to go to the Mainland. He only smiled and said very quietly: “Good! Good! You’ll be welcome.”

Not long after my brother left, the military police and secret service started coming to our home asking about him. Again and again they pressed us on his whereabouts and activities. We always answered that we did not know. And in fact we hadn’t heard a thing about him since he left; we didn’t even know whether he had reached the Mainland.

6

Exasperatingly, it proved impossible to quit the Defense Corps or get out of it in any way. I did once try to resign, citing a long-standing gallstone condition, but my request was denied. The corps commander was an affable middle-aged doctor from Japan. He lifted his singlet to show me a postoperative scar, then patted me on the shoulder and said soothingly that gallstones were extremely easy to remove surgically, and if I so wished he would be happy to oblige me on the spot.

Once during an air-raid drill, half the corps was directing traffic while the other half monitored the blackout neighborhood by neighborhood. It was past midnight when we spotted a sliver of light in the area my group was patrolling. We quickly pinpointed the source of the light. It was a pastry shop, and the owner came to the door to greet us. He told us that the reason for the breach of blackout was that an invalid in the house had gone out to the toilet and failed to draw the blackout curtain back properly.

Considering this to be pardonable in the circumstances, we issued an admonishment to the owner and were about to leave. But just then

a Japanese policeman with ratlike eyes came into the house from behind us. First he started roaring like a wild beast, fit to bring the place down, and then, brushing aside all attempts to explain, he took down the pastry cook's name.

We trooped outside in silence, feeling very bad at the turn of events.

"That pastry cook's a Mainlander," said a fellow corpsman when we were back at the lookout tower. His family had been in Pingtung for generations. When he said "Mainlander" he used the Hoklo term *Tangshan ren*, the equivalent of our Hakka "Old Country people" (*yuanyang ren*).

"He's Tangshan?" I asked him. "Then why didn't he go back to the Mainland? Doesn't he know there's a war on?"

"Couldn't bring himself to leave, could he?" said the Pingtung man. "His wife's from here, and then there's his shop!"

He went on to tell us that a little while ago, during a fund-raising drive for the war, the pastry cook hadn't donated as much as the Japanese had expected from him. They had been greatly dissatisfied with him, so now he might be in for real trouble.

The conversation turned from the pastry cook to the Sino-Japanese War now being fought. My Pingtung friend felt that China's chances of winning were very slim.

"To fight a war you need unity," he said. "But the Chinese are too selfish; every man loves only his own wife and children."

From our vantage point up on the lookout tower, the city of Pingtung was a sheet of pitch black. With no sounds and no lights, it was like a dead city. Only from a few places, where our traffic patrol was carrying out its duties, did the sound of challenges and barked orders carry faintly to our ears. The crescent moon had already set. Stars twinkled in the sky. The Three Stars had passed diagonally across the middle sky and were now sinking toward the west.

Where was the war?

I thought of my brother, now disappeared without a trace. I suddenly missed him very much. I didn't know if he had made it to Chungking, or what he was doing now. Since I lost him it was as if my life had been emptied of substance: everything had become vacuous and meaningless. Somehow I felt that I should follow him, that he was waiting for me somewhere all this time.

"You'll be welcome! You'll be welcome!"

My brother's voice kept echoing in my ears.

7

I left not long afterward—for the Mainland.

At the time I had no passport, but I had discovered a route I could take: first by ship to Japan, then from Japan to Dalian; if you could only get there, you could then go south or north as you pleased.

And so I just went!

I set myself no plan of what I would do—I just wanted to get away from Taiwan; and I didn't go to Chungking to look for my brother.

I am not a patriot, but Old Country blood must flow back to the Old Country before it can stop seething!

So it was with my brother, and neither could I be any exception.