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### The Longevity Pagoda: A Collection of Short Stories by Ba Jin

Molly Berinato

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# **The Longevity Pagoda: A Collection of Short Stories by Ba Jin**

*Translated by Molly Berinato*

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### Translator's Note

Li Feigan, known under the pen name Ba Jin, was one of 20<sup>th</sup>-century China's most influential writers. He was born in Chengdu, Sichuan, in 1904, to an affluent family. Although he was fortunate enough to receive an education that enabled him to understand the high-profile, traditional literary style favored at the time, Ba Jin is most well-known for his writing in the vernacular, or *baihua*, style that was popularized during the revolutionary, political and social turmoil that characterized the first half of China's 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Ba Jin was perhaps one of the pillars that made this style as popular as it was, as his writing was not only accessible to a wide audience but was also able to capture the attention and hearts of many young revolutionaries who were active at the time.

*The Longevity Pagoda* was originally written as a set of short stories to complement Ba Jin's translation of *The Death of Danton*, a play which dramatized the circumstances surrounding the death of French revolutionary Georges Danton. Being a firm anarchist himself prior to his persecution during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, it comes as no surprise that Ba Jin drew much of his literary and political inspiration from the French and Russian revolutions of years past. These historical events, along with his own complicated relationship with traditional authority, especially in his family life, greatly influenced Ba Jin's work and is visible in many of his writings, notably his most famous novel *Family*, as well as here in the collection of short stories gathered as *The Longevity Pagoda*.

The central defining theme of the stories of *The Longevity Pagoda* is an overarching demonization and aggressive caricature of each story's authority figures, from the Emperor in "The Longevity Pagoda" and "The Pagoda's Secret," to the *yamen* in "The Invisibility Pearl," and the king and his soldiers in "The Tree that Could Speak." In each instance, Ba Jin portrays authority figures as cruel, unjust, and selfish; these figures seek routes of personal gain without any regard to the suffering of others. In contrast, their heinous acts are blatantly foiled by each story's young, innocent protagonists, or, in the case of "The Longevity Pagoda," by the narrator himself. The heavy-handed portrayal of "good" and "bad" gives the stories of *The Longevity Pagoda* a fable-like flavor, with the final moral of each story being conveniently packaged by the narrator's cynical, chain-smoking father.

The relationship between the young narrator and his father throughout the stories is depicted as warm and affectionate, every ounce the typical, heartwarming, father-son relationship one would expect to see in a Hallmark film. This warm relationship is only occasionally broken by the father's pensive, long-suffering, and stoic attitude. Ba Jin made public his complicated relationship with his own family through his writing, where he often made evident that while he loved his family and held traditional Chinese familial obligations very close to his heart, he also was constantly at-odds with the consequences of familial pressure and societal expectations. While it is clear that the father-son relationship in *The Longevity Pagoda* is a positive one, it is interesting to consider where Ba Jin places himself on the spectrum of this relationship, whether he considers himself more the cynical, story-telling father, or the ever-curious, morally bright young son, or perhaps a mix of the two.

Finally, the general unrest surrounding the writing of these works in the 1930s and in the decades before cannot go unmentioned. The political and social upheaval starting with the dissolution of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and followed by the May Fourth Movement less than a

decade later undoubtedly influenced Ba Jin's anarchist thought, and it is clear that in the writing of his works, Ba Jin sought to not only express his own ideas, but also to provide an ideological foothold for the youth growing up at this time who would later become the political foot soldiers of the Republic of China, and then later the People's Republic of China. The contemporary setting of *The Longevity Pagoda* leaves much to be considered, and though they are simple in their language and often artlessly straightforward in their messages, these stories provide an interesting picture of Ba Jin's thoughts at the time.

The translation of this work would not have been made possible without the support and expertise of my advisor, Professor Haoming Liu, as well as my other wonderful Chinese language professors at Vassar College, who sparked within me a passionate interest in language acquisition. Additionally, I would like to thank my mother and grandparents for their hand in teaching me Chinese from a young age. I wouldn't be here without you now!

—Molly Berinato

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*The Immortality Pagoda* was first published by the Culture-Life (*Wenhua Shenghuo*) Press in March of 1937, and by October it underwent a total of eight printings.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a new edition was issued in Shanghai by the Ping Ming Press in June of 1954.

Another edition was published by the Shanghai New Literature and Art Press in February of 1955 and it underwent three printings by November of that year.

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### *Preface*

I am the same as everybody else, I once was also a child. During that time, my father was still alive. He often brought me along when he went out to the theater, among other places. In front of my father, I was a very talkative child. Any time I saw any new, strange thing, I wanted my father to explain it to me so that I would understand. During that time, I felt that I was indeed very fortunate.

But at last, my father has followed my mother to another world. Since then, I only dare to secretly recite that cherished word "papa" when I am alone.

Ever since I was a child, I always loved to dream. Even after my father departed this world, I still could see his face in my dreams. Because of that, I very much enjoyed dreaming. The scenes of my dreams were often incredibly beautiful.

But time cannot flow backwards, those years cannot be revisited, and I have no way of returning to my childhood. Moreover, my father has already been dead for twenty years. But even recently, I have been dreaming of me and my father still being together. To my surprise, the scenes of twenty years ago are still enough to revisit, enough to even live a new life with my father.

Real life is often so suffocating that I cannot breathe. My arms and legs are bound with invisible shackles. However, in my dreams I enjoy an excess of freedom.

I should not let the scenery of my dreams be lost to oblivion, so I have written some of them down. These stories are all a small child's dreams. I will reluctantly call them fairytales, however, calling them "sleep talk" is more suitable.

A pagoda that lives forever, pearls that can conceal themselves, trees that can speak; these all still have that secretive quality. Where in our world can we still find these things? Am I merely sleep talking with my eyes open? To the reader who is undoubtedly wiser than I, please forgive me. I will not burden you to come and listen to sleep talk.

If some people say that sleep talk is too absurd, I will not disagree. However, sleep talk is often audacious and has no sort of restraint. There is no harm in those people about to be suffocated by life's reality using this child's dreams to take a needed breath of fresh air. I am willing to dedicate this little book to them.

Ba Jin, January 1937.

## *The Longevity Pagoda*

“Once upon a time, there was an emperor...”

My father always began telling his stories in this manner.

“Emperor, you’re always talking about an emperor. What exactly is an emperor anyway?”

At times like these I couldn’t help asking him in this fashion, because I had never seen such a thing before.

“An emperor... an emperor is that strange being that sits in a palace all day wearing their crown!”

My father thought for quite a long time before finally giving this answer, then continued to tell his story.

At this time, our boat stopped on the shore underneath a tree, and father sat at the head of the boat leisurely smoking. I was laying on the deck, my eyes turned up to the sky, which was radiating red light. A few faint, faraway mountains were hung on the horizon, as if they themselves were slivers of the vibrant clouds. A few fishing boats sailed with their masts drawn, and looking from here, they appeared to be almost like toy models. The waves knocked gently against the shore with a monotonous sound.

“Once upon a time there, was an emperor, he was a very capable person, and his ministers all admired him, for he governed over a very large kingdom...”

“Are all emperors very capable?”

I interrupted him to ask, because the emperors of his stories were always very capable, amazing people.

“Silly child! That’s why people made up stories about them, after all!” Father replied, before continuing to speak.

“—His majesty the great! His majesty the omnipotent! His ministers all hailed him in this manner. The sounds of these exclamations reached the palace. The emperor happily stroked his beard and smiled.”

“—May the emperor live ten thousand years! Ten thousand years! Thousands and thousands of years! The ministers and subjects who adored the emperor often kneeled before the palace exclaiming such things. Their devotion pleased the emperor. He conferred government positions upon them all. They graciously thanked him for his kindness and cheerfully went home; after that, they even more devotedly came before the emperor to hail him. The emperor liked them all very much.

This way, in this kingdom, the number of government officials suddenly grew very much, it was really quite a lot. The emperor was also very happy, because more government officials meant more devoted subjects, which meant that the kingdom was able to enjoy greater peace

and security. This plethora of devoted ministers and subjects surrounded the emperor all day and waited on him hand and foot.”

By this time, the light of the sunset had already faded, and the sky had become a light gray sheet. The horizon was still slightly lit. The landscape was becoming hazy. The sound of the waves was becoming louder than before, and the boats tied to the tree trunks swayed slightly. I turned my head to look at my father’s face, but I couldn’t read his expression, as a layer of the dim light of the night had enshrouded his face. His cigarette was nearly burnt out, and he threw it into the water. The sound of his voice was also quite tranquil, as if this story had nothing to do with him. As a result, I was beginning to doubt the veracity of this story. If my father had not continued to speak, I would’ve forgotten all about this emperor entirely. Whatever emperor, whatever court, whatever ministers, all would have disappeared.

“This great emperor lived in the palace. He lived the best life, and nothing was ever in short supply. Good things from every place were brought to the palace, and beautiful women were sent from all over to be his concubines. The best carpenters were summoned from all over the country to build an even more magnificent palace and garden. Things that ordinary people believed to be most difficult were accomplished under the decree of this emperor, and by using the collective power of the entire kingdom. In short, the emperor had everything he could ever wish for. Every day he came from one concubine’s quarters to another concubine’s garden, all while listening to this minister’s many praises and that minister’s many compliments. There was no conflict, because the emperor’s might had already forced neighboring kingdoms into subjugation. The generals often came to the palace to accompany the emperor to play chess and attend opera performances. Every day, the best opera troupes performed the most wonderful operas in the palace. In a word, the palace was that kind of sumptuous and opulent, and life there was enjoyable. The emperor and his hundreds of concubines, ministers, and generals all lived an extremely happy life there.”

My father sounded slightly sullen, but I did not know for what reason. His eyes were raised up high, as if he were looking into the distance, but besides a single line of light on the horizon, there was nothing to see.

“Yes, life in the palace was happy, warm, and blessed. But in faraway places, for example, in the mountains, by the sea, in the places where the emperor could not see and could not go, there were a multitude of frigid, tiny sheds, in which countless numbers of ‘coolies’<sup>1</sup> lived. They have toiled endlessly for the emperor. Once upon a time they fought the emperor’s wars, gave him transportation, built his palace and garden, and supplied him the necessities he needed. But they have not received any compensation and have no other choice than to tiredly return to their little sheds and live their cold, hungry lives.”

“Then why didn’t they run to the palace and kneel before it to exclaim ‘may the emperor live ten-thousand years?’” I felt odd, so I asked.

My father smiled slightly. He reached out his hand and tousled my hair, saying: “Clever child, they never had this thought. But even if they had, they wouldn’t have been able to do it. They didn’t have the time, since they were busy toiling away all day at laborious tasks. Every night they tiredly returned home, only to know cold and starvation.”

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<sup>1</sup> A derogatory term popularized in the 16<sup>th</sup> century referring to migrant laborers of Indian or Chinese descent.

My father suddenly spoke resolutely, in contrast to his previously wistful tone, and continued: "Why don't we set aside these 'coolies' for the time being and return to that great emperor. The emperor was happy, great, omnipotent. He contentedly lived his life. He couldn't imagine that there were still many unhappy things in the world. Happy days passed quickly, just like the water flowing ahead of us.

Things that no one could have anticipated were slipping in. Old age and sickness were these two things, and great as the emperor was, even he could not prevent them. Money, power and authority, fortune and happiness – all of these things were useless in this aspect. The emperor's body was becoming more feeble day by day. Although he had the most outstanding imperial physicians to diagnose him, although he had every kind of precious supplement, and although he had his devoted ministers praying daily for his health, none of these things could prevent this natural physiological phenomenon. His hair was gradually stripped away, his teeth began to loosen, and his eyesight became blurred. His body's strength was weakening, and he often felt fatigued with no cause or reason. The emperor often felt very anxious over these things. Since he began to deteriorate with age, he naturally thought about death, and he gradually understood that even an influential emperor could not be free of death's affairs. His complexion began to appear clouded with the color of worry. He felt unsatisfied and restless, and often felt anxious that he had no crown prince to succeed him. His anxieties were accumulating by the day, and the comfort and conciliation of his consorts, the obsequious praises and flattery of his ministers, were all not enough to set the emperor's mind at ease; he was entangled by the secret of death all day. The secret of death had seized away his happy life!

*"—What can I do that is enough to live forever!* The emperor often thought. Because of this, he frequently sent emissaries to every place seeking an elixir of longevity since his outstanding imperial physicians had already exhausted their every effort on this problem. His emissaries also went to the mountains, to the seaside, to those places where those 'coolies' lived.

"Once the coolies heard that the emperor's emissaries were coming to seek the elixir of longevity once again, they were extremely shocked. And so, they said to the emissaries: "You came all this way on such a long road to seek an elixir of longevity? But we only have prescriptions of a quick death! How could the emperor desire a long life whereas we consider it a blessing to die sooner!"

When the emissaries heard this talk, they too were greatly shocked. They regarded these 'coolies' who were willing to die quickly as devil-like and hastily fled from that filthy and terrifying place. As they hastily ran away, their ears were still ringing with the sounds of the grief, resentment, and lamentation of those 'coolies.'

"The messengers left the mountains and the seaside behind, and they travelled all over the kingdom and asked every one of the kingdom's renowned peoples, and in the end could not find the elixir of longevity. Several virtuous elders said that this elixir had once existed and had been hidden away in a longevity treasure pagoda of twenty-seven floors, but it was now lost. Not even the location of the treasure pagoda was known. Even the elders had only heard from their forefathers the story of the pagoda's collapse.

"The messengers could only return empty-handed. Emissaries returning from every place all could not find a single thing. At first, these things depressed the emperor, but later he

only became furious. Even the entirety of the massive kingdom of which he governed over had no such elixir of longevity, such a thing was simply unbelievable! The emissaries must not have used all their efforts, they must not have been devoted, or they simply must not have gone and sought the elixir – the emperor was not the only one to think this way, and his ministers also believed this was the case. Hence, the emperor ordered that the emissaries be punished, and of the emissaries, some were killed, some were imprisoned, and some were banished. Afterwards, the emperor again sent out a second batch of emissaries; this group of emissaries were all chosen from the emperor's devoted ministers, and when they were sent out, they received the emperor's generous remuneration for their service.

"This group of emissaries went to every place that the previous group had visited, and still received the same result. However, this group, after all, was very clever, and they knew that coming back with nothing was not acceptable. Thus, every emissary found some exotic medicinal herb and planned to claim that it was the longevity elixir when they brought them back and presented them to the emperor.

"Looking upon the many elixirs before him, the emperor became extremely happy, and because of this affair, the palace held a grand celebratory party, and the emissaries received even more rewards and were promoted to higher ranks."

"But where these really the mythical elixirs of longevity?" I asked, loudly and with great interest, as though the strange shapes of those many medicinal herbs were right before my eyes.

My father paused a moment and lit his second cigarette, the tip of it glaring briefly and lighting his wrinkled face in the darkness. His mouth, covered with a mustache, slowly inhaled smoke. As I watched him speak, I wanted immediately to know the secrets contained in that very mouth.

But my father smiled slightly and answered: "Child, do not interrupt me, listen to what I have to say. Of course, this elixir of longevity does not exist on our human earth. In short, the emperor ate every single one of those strange herbs, one by one. Of the effects, however: his body not only did not become stronger, but on the contrary, he became weaker by the day, and even his memory was gradually fading.

"Upon seeing that these so-called elixirs of longevity had not even the slightest efficacy, and that the emperor's body was continuously weakening, those ministers and generals also began to panic, for, on one hand, because the emperor was so unhappy, many things were difficult to handle; and on the other hand, the thought of losing this great emperor put them in danger of not knowing how to handle their lives. Needless to say, the panic of those ministers who had been promoted for presenting the elixir was obvious. However, besides their prayers, exclamations, and flattering talk, they had no solutions to deal with the emperor's health situation. They often pondered and discussed in private, and one of the wise, old ministers came up with an explanation: he said that the reason for the medicine's lack of efficacy must be because of the black magic practiced by those 'coolies' who live in the mountains and by the sea, and that they must have secretly used sorcery to curse the emperor.

"—Ah! That's right! They indeed had said words of great irreverence about the emperor! It must be them who are cursing the emperor, I myself heard their misgivings. One of the ministers who had acted as an emissary echoed this sentiment.

“—It must be this way, the coolies have never received the emperor’s benevolence, and therefore they hate him. The ministers echoed this sentiment altogether, and all immediately went to hold an audience with the emperor to tell him this idea.

“The emperor never liked those coolies because the ministers often only told him bad things about them, and occasionally the emperor himself saw their tattered clothes and forlorn faces, but what he was especially unhappy about was that they did not know how to be polite, and did not kneel before him, hail him, or wish him to live ten-thousand years. As soon as the emperor heard the ministers’ suggestions, he himself agreed and did not dwell on it any longer before decreeing orders of punishment on the coolies. Thus, the sounds of crying loudly resonated throughout the mountains and the seaside. Whippings with bamboo, starvation, exile: regarding those unfortunate coolies, these were their punishments. Their young and beautiful women were all sent to the ministers’ homes to become maids and concubines.

“But the emperor’s health still did not improve in the slightest, and his temperament continued to gradually worsen. Without cause or reason, the emperor would often scold his consorts, ministers, and generals; even over the most trivial matters, he would seriously punish the ministers. During this time, it was not only him who was nervous—his consorts, ministers, and generals were all very worried. Later, it was still that wise old minister who thought of a plan – to rebuild the legendary pagoda that had toppled and to have the emperor live within it to meditate. There, not only could the emperor avoid the curse of the human world, but he could furthermore have contact with the divine aura of the heavens. Inside this tower would be only the most holy, exquisite, and stately furnishings. Moreover, they would all be ancient offerings to gods. The only person meditating in the pagoda of longevity ought to live forever.

‘Okay, then build it for me immediately,’ the emperor happily called forth.

‘But I’m afraid this kind of pagoda may take a decade or more of work to complete,’ a minister boldly said.

‘Ten years? Do you think I can still wait ten years? You scoundrel!’ The emperor’s face immediately turned gloomy, he lost his temper, and he smashed a nearby teacup onto the ground.

“The ministers and generals timidly looked at one another, not daring to say another word.

‘I think three years will be enough.’ The old minister finally said.

‘It must be done within one year and no more. Mind you: no matter how great the cost, I don’t care! But it must be built within a year.’ The emperor firmly said before turning and walking away. He went to his most beloved consort’s garden to tell her this good news.

“The emperor’s word was the law, and disobeying his word was a crime. Nobody dared to dawdle. The ministers and generals gathered together to discuss the matter of building the longevity pagoda, and they all grumbled about that wise old minister for fabricating the story of the longevity pagoda.

“The old minister had already carefully deliberated on this matter. With a slight smile he leisurely answered: ‘there is nothing to warrant any worry! Have you all forgotten our kingdom’s many coolies? In any case, the emperor said that he does not care however large the cost.’

'Fine, then we'll do it that way!' The ministers exchanged a knowing look.

"And from this day onward, this order of conscription was carried out, and thousands of coolies were herded like prisoners down from the mountains and from the seaside in an endless stream towards the capitol. The work of building the pagoda began this way.

"Starvation and fatigue alike tormented every person. This task was immense and could not be completed with human power. Therefore, during the first few days, several dozen coolies fled. But this caused the treatment of those remaining coolies to worsen even more. Every coolie was given shackles to wear upon their feet, and additionally were supervised by ferocious soldiers holding leather whips.

"At this time, it was winter, snow was falling, and the roads were covered in ice. Each of the coolies' hands were frostbitten, and their blistered hands bled upon the stones. Their feet were also injured in this manner. Everywhere on the snowy ground were traces of blood, blood and snow mingled together. Under these difficult circumstances, the pagoda slowly began to be built. Every cornerstone of the first floor was stained with the blood of the coolies.

"Work could not be stopped even for a moment. It did not stop even during the night. Of the coolies building the pagoda, some froze to death, some starved to death, and some died of exhaustion; nevertheless, more laborers came. Everybody sang while they carried stones, wielded axes, held chisels and climbed on ladders. But within their songs there was no happiness, there was only tears, only resentment, and only curses.

"The emperor's palace was just opposite the building site, and the sounds of these songs reached him. He called his ministers and generals forth to ask: 'What is this sound?'

'It's those coolies building the tower singing,' the ministers and generals fearfully answered.

'Oh!' The emperor answered with his face drawn, nodded his head slightly, and said nothing else.

"From this time onward, no matter day or night, the emperor's ears were constantly ringing with the sounds of the coolies' songs. Even at night when he was asleep in the bed of his beloved consort, these sounds awakened him from his slumber. These sounds disturbed his mind and made thinking almost impossible. At first, he was annoyed by it, but later he became afraid. These were curses, complaints, sorrowful sobs. He gradually understood.

"One afternoon, the emperor was laying on his bed, and he suddenly called his ministers and generals forth to ask: 'What is this sound?'

'It's those coolies building the tower singing,' the ministers and generals replied as fearfully as they had before.

'Why do they not wish for me to live a long life?' The emperor said, as though talking to himself, and then subsequently indignantly called out '*kill, kill*' before closing his eyes and regaining his composure.

"The ministers and generals did not understand what he meant, but they didn't dare ask any more questions for fear of disturbing him. They only knew that the emperor's words were

the law. When they left the palace, they immediately picked a batch of weak, elderly coolies from those building the pagoda and killed them.

“But the coolies’ singing did not stop, as if they could not carry the stones or wield the axes without singing. After some time, the emperor, reclining on his bed, again called out ‘*kill, kill.*’

“This cycle of killing repeated five or six times, but the pagoda was still not complete, and the emperor’s health continued to worsen until he could not even get out of his bed.

‘When will the longevity pagoda finally be completed?’ The emperor continually asked from his bed. By this time, spring had already passed, summer had already passed, and autumn had just arrived, yet the pagoda was still only built up to its twenty-second floor.

“One day, the wise old minister saw that the emperor’s health was beyond saving, and went to discuss this issue with the other ministers and generals: ‘Let’s stop building here, otherwise I’m afraid this pagoda will become a useless thing.’ Everybody supported his proposition. They then entered the palace to report: in ten days, the emperor would scale the longevity pagoda.

“During these ten days, the ministers worked hard to arrange everything. They had very early dispatched delegates to temples all over the kingdom to collect devotional treasures, and had even paid a high price to ferry the delegates overseas to the eastern kingdoms in order to seek treasures, and by this time, every day delegates were returning from all over the kingdom, and every person returned laden with treasures.

“After ten days the twenty-two-story pagoda was completed, but the emperor had already been unable to get out of bed for three entire days. Once he heard that he was to scale the longevity pagoda, he, to everyone’s surprise, used the very last of his strength to struggle out of bed. Supported by his consorts, ministers, and generals, he, with great difficulty, entered that grand, great treasure pagoda.

‘What a great and divine pagoda!’ It was not only the emperor, but even every consort, every minister, and every general could not help but gasp with admiration. The furnishings of each floor of the pagoda surpassed the floors below it in exquisiteness and solemnity.

‘My life has been saved!’ Upon seeing this heavenly and blissful world, the sick and dying emperor happily exclaimed. With his entourage supporting him, they climbed with great difficulty to the highest floor.

“Child, but what words should I use to describe the furnishings of the twenty-second floor? It is said that the mind of any mortal person could not imagine its exquisite solemnity. That floor was the greatest man-made edifice in the entirety of the human world, and standing upon it, it was as though you had entered another strange and holy world, and just by reaching out your hand you could knock on the doorway to heaven.

“At this time, it was early morning, and the sky was so clear and bright, the sunlight was so brilliant, and the air was so fresh. The palace stood opposite the pagoda, and looking down upon it from the pagoda’s peak simply made it become as tiny and insignificant as a child’s toy. Around the pagoda, an uncountable number of the emperor’s devoted ministers seemed to look like ants as they deeply bowed down, loudly hailing ‘may the emperor live ten-thousand years!’

'My life has been saved!' When the warm, fresh air seemed to caress the emperor's gaunt face, he could not help but also begin to gladly hail. At the same time, he heard an unbroken stream of the chant 'ten-thousand years.'

'Everyone is to be promoted!' The emperor said as he happily nodded at the wise old minister. Everyone's face was colored with happiness, and everyone kneeled to express their gratitude. Once this news reached the ground, another even louder bout of hailing rung out.

"The emperor was happy, the consorts were happy, the ministers and generals were happy, and everyone in the court was happy. It was only those coolies from the mountains and from the seaside who were still crying and cursing. But their voices could not be heard amongst the others.

"Suddenly, the sound of a terrifying crack burst forth. In a split second, that exquisite, solemn, twenty-two-story treasure pagoda began to break apart. It happened so quickly that nobody could guard against it. The emperor had just uttered his final alarmed cry when he followed the pagoda and its stones in tumbling to the ground.

"The turmoil of that instant's circumstances needs not be said. Everyone was focused on running for their lives, and nobody cared about that great emperor. In short, no matter how great the skill, all that was left of that exquisite, solemn longevity treasure pagoda was rubble. On every stone there were still traces of those coolies' who had built the pagoda's blood, and it glinted brilliantly under the morning autumn sunlight.

"The story of the longevity pagoda ends there." Father tossed his second cigarette butt into the water and let out a long, tired sigh.

"Father, but how could this great treasure pagoda topple so quickly? That seems impossible!" I asked, not satisfied with my father's seemingly unfinished story.

"Child, pagodas built upon sand are always unstable," Father replied. "However, all stories are made up by men. Let's go onto the shore, you ought to go home and go to bed. Go home and sleep well, and don't think of whatever emperor or whatever pagoda, otherwise you're going to have nightmares tonight."

Father said this as he stood. As usual, my father took my hand and we went ashore, relying on the Big Dipper to guide us as we slowly walked home.

*Yokohama, Japan. December 1934.*

## *The Pagoda's Secret\**

*\*This piece was first published March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1936, in 'Middle School Students' no. 63. At the time of publication, it was titled "The Pagoda's Secret – A Continuation of the Longevity Pagoda."*

Outside, the snowy wind clawed at the door and the furnace was soon to be extinguished. Father still had not returned. I was nestled under the covers, looking towards the gradually dimming light of the kerosine lamp on the tabletop. I did not dare move. I was afraid. I strained to keep my eyes open and on the light of the lamp.

"*Peng, peng,*" someone outside knocked on the door, but it was not the sound of my father's knocking. I did not dare move or respond. I curled my body into a ball.

"*Peng, peng,*" the person outside continued to knock. The person did not speak, and only kept knocking. I seemed to see the door move. I quickly used the quilt to cover my head. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew into the room and blew my quilt onto the floor. The light went out. The room turned completely dark. The door opened, making an *yi-ya* sound.

Ash-colored snowflakes danced outside the door. With a shrill sound, the wind quickly swept snow inside.

I was the only one in the house. I was cold and afraid. It was so cold that my teeth were chattering, and laying on the bed, I dared not move.

Two bright spots appeared in the distance and approached the room before entering. It was a pair of glittering eyes.

These eyes hung at the center of the room, the light shooting directly onto my face. How strange, their gaze was not at all frightening; rather, it was even quite mild, almost like my father's gaze.

Bewildered, while staring straight at those eyes, I suddenly found that they were gradually growing bigger, and very quickly a face emerged from the darkness. Then, I saw an old man who looked almost like my father standing at the foot of my bed. Yes, even though the room was not lit, I could still see his appearance very clearly. What's more, I could see that he was smiling. He reached out to me.

"Child, get up. Come with me," he said to me mildly. His voice seemed very familiar.

"To go where? Where is my father?" I was perplexed and so I asked.

"I will take you to see him, he told me to come and find you," he mildly answered.

I got up without hesitating in the slightest. I trusted him as if he was my old friend.

He led me by the hand and the two of us strode out the door.

We had barely walked out the door when a strong gust of wind blew against our faces and shut the door with a *bang* behind us. The wind blew upon my body, but I didn't feel cold. The old man and I were swept up into the sky by a gust of wind.

“Ah!” I cried out, alarmed. I anxiously grabbed at his hand. I thought that I would fall to the ground. However, I was still standing stably in the air, and I heard the old man’s mild and encouraging voice: “Child, don’t be afraid. There is nothing to worry about.”

I still wanted to ask him questions, but the wind carried us forward.

“Child, don’t be afraid. There is nothing to worry about.” This statement rang in my ears for a long time before being eliminated.

I didn’t feel cold. My nerve slowly grew. We were going very fast. I only saw mountain upon mountain receding under our feet, followed by river upon river. The wind blew madly at us from all directions and sent wave after wave of snowflakes rolling towards us, which melted as soon as they lingered on our bodies.

All around was still darkness, and below there was only black and white; there were a few mountaintops that were already heaping with snow. I couldn’t see even a single bit of light, but I still continued to advance midair. During our journey, the old man didn’t speak, and I didn’t know where he was taking me.

“Where are we going?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Where are we going?” The old man hung his head to look at me and smiled, “To go to see the longevity pagoda.”

“The longevity pagoda? But father said it had already collapsed!” I said.

“You really are a talkative child! What does a child know?” He scolded me, not answering my question. We continued to advance.

The journey seemed very long. All around was still darkness. Below our feet, mountain upon mountain continued to recede, followed by river upon river. There was no light and no sounds of people. There was only the howling of the wind. I felt that my feet were moving even faster. It was as if I wasn’t walking with my feet, rather that I was flying with wings.

“How have we still not arrived? How much farther?” I again could not restrain myself from asking. “Is my father really there waiting for me?”

“Not far, you impatient child, can you not see the light ahead of us? How could you not see so many lights!” He answered with a smile and held my hand even tighter.

Sure enough, ahead of us was a huge area of light. A high, lofty pagoda was stood to our left, and the pagoda was so tall and so pointed that it seemed to pierce the heart of the sky like a sword. I couldn’t count how many floors the pagoda had, but each of the eaves were strung with lanterns that glowed like stars. Those lights were so bright, and suddenly lit up half the sky. There was no longer wind, no longer snow, and no longer darkness. My heart and my body both fully warmed. I lifted my head with amazement and gazed at the old man—his bald head was also shining, his white beard was trembling slightly, and a beam of light flowed on his beard, causing it to emit a musical sound.

“Strange, this seems like a dream,” I happily said to myself.

That old man laughed: “That is really child’s talk. Have you ever had this kind of dream before?” He patted his hand on my shoulder and said: “Look!”

I looked forward. A dozen or so white cranes flew towards us, flying just as high as we were.

“White cranes!” I happily clapped and called.

“White cranes?” The old man smiled.

The white cranes flew closer. They were actually a group of ten beautiful fairies, all wearing white muslin robes, and each of them had two big, delicate wings, like those of a cicada. They flew so well, and from far away they really did look like a flock of white cranes.

“Welcome! Welcome!” They approached us, smiling, greeted us, and danced all around us before holding us and flying us away.

In the blink of an eye, we were beside the pagoda, and we descended.

Before my eyes was dazzling light. The big gate at the very bottom floor was wide open, and from within ten warriors wearing yellow uniforms came forth; they bowed to us in salutation and loudly said: “Welcome! Welcome!” Then they stood on either side of us, permitting those ten fairies to escort us inside.

The inside of the pagoda was very brilliant, and it seemed as though we were beneath the scorching sun. The furnishings were all very fine. It seemed that they were all made of gold and precious stones, and on the walls were painted beautiful murals. I had never seen anything like it before.

I did not know how much depth the pagoda had, and the soldiers and fairies led us into door after door. Standing in front of every door was a warrior wearing either a green or yellow uniform, a long cap decorated with feathers, equipped with a sword; they all had the same type of face and were each growing the same 八-shaped mustache. When they saw us, they bowed deeply in salutation, respectfully calling out, “welcome, welcome!” before they permitted us to enter.

After we passed about ten doors, we stood in front of two large, vermillion-colored sliding doors. The doors were tightly shut, and there were no warriors guarding them. These two door panels were more beautiful than all the others—they were inlaid with many precious stones depicting all kinds of flowers. On the doors were also two gold rings, and above the rings was a lion’s head, its jade eyes facing towards us.

The sound of music spilled through a crack in the door. We heard a chorus of many voices calling, “Emperor.” Then the door opened widely, and my eyes were immediately dazzled by all the colors. I had never seen so many bright colors so beautifully coordinating together.

I rubbed my eyes, and only after did I see many people, men and women, among whom were the fairies and warriors I had seen a moment ago, and all of them were supporting a 40-year-old or so emperor as he came forth.

“Emperor, I have brought the child,” the old man who had brought me respectfully said as he saw the emperor, kneeling before him.

“Good, good work!” The emperor opened his big mouth and laughed, reaching out his big hand and patting the old man’s bald head. As soon as his hand reached the old man’s head,

the old man immediately disappeared; it seemed like that fat palm had slapped him right down into the ground.

I suddenly became afraid and could not help but make a sound.

“Haha! Little friend, you’ve come. Don’t be afraid, we welcome you as our little guest!” When the emperor saw me fearfully look towards him, he laughed again, exposing his gold teeth, and his mouth appeared even wider. He grabbed my arm and pulled me beside him, using his big hand to pat my head.

I cried out in terror, assuming that I of course would also be forced into the ground. However, once he retracted his hand, I was still standing on the ground as I had been before. The top of my head still hurt a little, and I heard him complacently say: “Okay, this child is indeed strong!”

I stood still and looked around in every direction in panic, and no matter where I looked, I could not see that old man’s shadow. In each direction there were only strange faces, not only strange, but also expressionless, unfeeling; these were not the faces of the living. Even the fairies from before had changed their appearance. What amazed me even more was that the old man had so plainly told me that my father was here waiting for me, but how could I not see him? I thought that I must have been cheated. I didn’t know what to do. I regretted coming with the old man to this place.

“Come in, what are you so foolishly thinking about, my little guest?” The emperor patted my head once again, and it made me nearly fall onto the ground. Before I regained my balance, he grabbed my arm, and we were thrust inside by the crowd.

The furnishings inside were even more gorgeous than those of the other rooms. The emperor sat upon his throne and placed a small chair beside it for me to sit upon. As soon as we sat down, that uncountable number of men and women kneeled together with a ‘*thump*’ and kowtowed towards us.

Sitting on his throne, the emperor let out a bellowing and complacent laugh. His mouth grew to be so big, and his gold teeth were all exposed, all of them as sharp as little knives.

I didn’t know what trick he wanted to play. I was very scared, and only hoped that my father would come soon enough to take me home.

“May the emperor live ten-thousand years! May the emperor live ten-thousand years!” That uncountable number of people continued to kneel and chant loudly, not even raising their heads.

“Good, enough, all of you, get up!” The emperor ordered, satisfied.

“We are grateful for the emperor’s grace!” The crowd called out together, once again respectfully kowtowing before standing up and hanging their heads, awaiting the emperor’s next command.

“Okay, you may go. Leave ten women behind to dance so that our little guest may watch,” the emperor commanded.

“Yes.” As soon as they answered, the crowd immediately disappeared, with only ten of the beautiful women remaining, and they began to dance.

The emperor watched them dance with satisfaction. They danced excellently, their bodies were agile, and even as they moved, they didn’t make a sound; it seemed like they had wings. He attentively watched them, and from time to time laughed with admiration.

I was very uncomfortable sitting on the chair. I was not in the mood to watch dancing, I was thinking of my father, and I only hoped he would come soon to take me home so I could go to sleep.

“Is the dancing enjoyable to watch? Do you like it?” The emperor suddenly turned to me and asked.

“I don’t like it. I want my father to come and take me home.” I truthfully answered, having felt anxious at hearing his question.

He let out another bellowing laugh, and after a moment finally answered: “Don’t be anxious, just watch the dancing. We’ll have some fun, and then I will take you to go and see your father.” He mildly comforted me, and again used his hand to pat me on the head, gentler this time, but I was still afraid of him. However, as soon as I heard him say that he would take me to go see my father, I became happy.

“Is he really here then, my father?” I boldly asked.

“Who is kidding you? Your father is upstairs. Wait a while, after eating dinner I will take you to see him.” He said, laughing at me maliciously.

“No. I don’t want to eat dinner. I want to go!” I suddenly jumped off the chair. I prepared to run away and find my father myself.

“Don’t be anxious, don’t worry!” He grabbed my arm and pulled me back to his side, forcing me to stand in front of him. He was holding my arm so tightly that my struggling had no use. He laughed. His laughter sounded like the call of a crow; a sound that made people afraid.

At that time, I had no other choice but to stand there and watch the dancing, my heart focused on other matters.

“Okay, you dancers go tell people to begin dinner!” Those ten women wearing the pink dancing clothes danced with great enthusiasm: they stood on their tiptoes and spun their bodies, pirouetting very fast, and it seemed as though their spinning blew forth a violent blast of wind. It looked as though ten flower buds were slowly blooming in front of us. The emperor suddenly gave an order to stop. The dancers stopped immediately, and together kneeled to the ground, saluting, and then disappeared.

I didn’t know from which place they exited. While I was astonished, the doors suddenly opened. Many warriors brought forth food and tableware and set the table before calling the emperor and I to sit down and eat.

The table was covered in bowls and dishes made of gold, and they all flashed under the brilliant light of the lanterns. There was so much food, and every dish I had never seen before, nor could I name them. The emperor ate with great relish, but I didn’t dare eat anything, and

only grabbed a small piece of some light red thing to try. Its flavor was excellent; I'd never eaten something so delicious before.

"What's this? Little guest, you haven't eaten anything!" Having seen that I hadn't eaten, the emperor asked this with great surprise. The corners of his mouth were covered in grease.

"I'm not hungry," I simply answered; I only wanted to immediately see my father.

"This food is the best in the world! No matter where you go, you cannot eat it anywhere else!" The emperor stubbornly wanted me to eat. He grabbed a big piece of the meat I had just tasted and handed it to me, saying: "This is very good, it's the flesh of the thigh of one of my consorts!"

"What, it's not pork?" I shouted, alarmed.

"Pork? The emperor still eats pork? Haha!" He laughed loudly and tossed that piece of meat back into his own mouth and began to chew.

I fearfully watched him, and I still could not believe what he said.

"I'll tell you, on this table is all human flesh. Only human flesh is good." He still smiled as he said this. He pointed out a big pot of pale-yellow colored meat and said: "This is the meat of the warriors," and then, pointing at a pot of white flesh, "this is the meat of children," pointing at a pot of black flesh, "this is the meat of the coolies," pointing at a pot of deep yellow flesh, "this is the meat of the elderly. It's the flesh of that old man who brought you here." And there were still many, many kinds of human flesh. I was not in the mood to continue to listen.

"You're lying to me! That's not his flesh! Why would you kill him? He was a good person!" I jumped up in terror. I wanted to run away.

He grabbed my arm and didn't let me go, and fiendishly gave me a fierce grin. He continued to point at that pot of deep yellow flesh and said: "Only the flesh of good people is delicious! If you don't believe me, try a piece yourself." He said, taking a small piece and passing it to me.

Looking at the flesh, it was as though I could see the old man's kind face; the meat was still covered in some blood. I shut my eyes at once and shook my head, saying, "I won't eat it! I won't eat it!"

"What are you afraid of? I'm not going to eat you." I heard him laughing as he continued to chew that piece of meat. The sound of his teeth was really frightening. I thought that I would certainly be eaten by him tonight. My father wasn't here, there was nobody to save me.

He ate more than half of the things on the table, and seeing that I was not eating and knowing that persuading me had no use, he called people to clear away the bowls and plates.

"Okay, I'll take you up to see your father," he suddenly said, leading me by the hand to a small door to the side. We began to climb a staircase, and after scaling a few flights we arrived at the upper floor.

Up here was just as bright as before and was arranged just as gorgeously. We had just reached the top when we heard cries of "ten-thousand years." The warriors kneeled and gave us salutations.

“They’ve all eaten?” The emperor smiled slightly and asked the chief warrior.

“Yes, they are all waiting for the emperor,” the chief warrior respectfully answered, bowing.

“All seven-hundred fifty-nine are very good?”

“Yes, emperor, they are all very good.”

“Which palace should I stay in tonight?”

“Number three-hundred sixty-seven, emperor.”

“Tell them to get it ready.”

“Yes, emperor!” The chief warrior gave the most respectful of bows, then left.

“I am taking you to see my consorts,” the emperor smugly said to me, leading me into a corridor. There were many large rooms, all of which had glass doors that were closed tightly and locked.

Every room was absolutely gorgeous, and inside them were many young, pretty women, and once they saw the emperor they rushed to the doors, kneeling and offering salutations.

The emperor nodded his head slightly, his face becoming greasy. He touched his 八-shaped mustache and happily smiled.

“These are my consorts. They all love me, fear me, worship me,” he whispered into my ear.

He brought me into those many rooms and pointed out for me those many beautiful, youthful faces. They all knelt on the ground and stole glances up at us. Their faces were beautiful, but their expressions were haggard. They smiled slightly, but their eyes showed a fearful look. Only the consort’s calls of “ten-thousand years” were as crisp as the sounds of birds.

I pitied them, asking: “Do they stay in here all day?”

“Of course, only when I call them do they come out. Besides me, they cannot speak with other men,” he proudly answered.

“Why don’t you let them out? You’re only one person. There are so many of them, more than seven hundred. You shouldn’t lock them all in here,” I cried in front of the crowd of women.

“Shut your mouth!” The emperor’s complexion changed. He loudly reprimanded me, and did not say anything further, only dragging me away by the shoulder.

“I’ll still take you up one more floor, but I cannot allow you to be so talkative, otherwise I will not permit you to meet with your father!” He sternly said.

We walked up to the third floor, and inside it was the same as the second floor. Many warriors knelt to greet us.

“How many died today?” The emperor asked the chief warrior.

“One, they have already been sent to the kitchen,” the chief warrior respectfully replied.

“How have so few died?” The emperor unhappily said, frowning his brow, then he asked: “All together, how many are still alive?”

“Originally there were two-hundred forty-one, now there are only one-hundred and three.”

“Are there still more elderly ones?”

“Yes, those who died were generally young. The older ones are actually more hardy and more likely to survive.”

“The flesh of the young is still delicious. If too few die tomorrow, killing two more of the younger ones will be fine,” the emperor grimly ordered.

We walked into a corridor, and here also had many rooms, all without glass doors, and instead had gold railings as partitions. Inside were many women, some of them young and beautiful, but most of them were approaching old age; moreover, all of them were wearing long black robes, and all of them wore worried expressions.

The emperor led me by the hand with his head held high through these rooms.

Those women all quietly cursed him, and not a single person was willing to give him salutations. However, on his part, he wore a cruel smile as he slowly walked through the rooms.

“These are all my consorts, some of which are now old and useless, some of which are unwilling to submit to me, or have betrayed me and fallen in love with my warriors. I lock them inside of here and let them slowly die by themselves. The flesh we just ate was theirs,” he cruelly explained.

“But they haven’t committed any crimes,” I said disapprovingly.

“No crimes? Not submitting to me is a crime! Being of no use to me is a crime! My will is the law, my will is everything!” He firmly said, his complexion immediately changing. He looked at me with those fiendish eyes and grabbed my upper arm even tighter.

I didn’t dare argue with him. I thought he must’ve been crazy.

We climbed up to the fourth floor, which still had many warriors who kneeled to us in salutation.

“Has anyone inside pleaded guilty?” The emperor proudly asked the chief warrior.

“None, emperor, they are all very stubborn,” the chief warrior bowed and answered, terrified.

“Has corporal punishment been used? It’s not likely that all of them do not fear punishment,” he said, smiling cruelly.

“Every type of punishment has already been used. Three died today. However, not one was willing to submit to the emperor. That seventeen-year-old girl, the one that the emperor liked most, just died, and has already been sent to the kitchen.” The chief warrior bowed his head even more deeply.

"I don't believe this! How could she not fear me, how could she not worship me! This is impossible! You must be speaking nonsense!" He suddenly got angry and began to scold the chief warrior, his face becoming as red as a pig's liver.

"May the emperor go and see for himself," the chief warrior said, kneeling and trembling.

The emperor did not speak, and was about to move forward, when suddenly the sound of a woman's miserable cry came from within the room, alongside the sound of a leather whip, iron instruments, and other things. These sounds seemed like a raging snowstorm, rushing at our faces. The emperor furrowed his brows slightly, stopped walking, turned, and in a deep voice called to the chief warrior: "Kill!" Only that single word!

We climbed to the fifth floor, and on the way there, the emperor's face was gloomy. His mouth kept muttering: "This is impossible!"

We arrived at the fifth floor, but he did not stop and hurried to the sixth; that was the place he stored gold. Once he saw those uncommon and rare treasures, his attitude changed once again. We'd climbed six floors in a row. He happily pointed out each of his treasures for me to look at one by one, flaunting them, and said: "Tell me, who on this earth is richer than I?"

These things could not arouse my interest. My mind was very uneasy, scared, and full of loathing. I just wanted to see my father sooner.

"I don't want to look at these things, please take me to see my father!" I couldn't help but to cry out.

"Don't panic, don't get anxious. You should finish seeing my treasures first, there are still seven more floors until we finish seeing all of them. Don't be anxious, just wait a while and you will see your father," he calmly said to me. I didn't understand what kind of trick he was trying to play after all.

We finally walked through nineteen floors and saw all his many, many valuable treasures.

On the twenty-second floor of the pagoda, I saw a peculiar scene. There were especially many warriors there, and they were all wearing armor and grasping long lances. It seemed like they were about to go onto the battlefield.

The emperor asked the chief warrior: "Has there been an uproar again today? Have they shouted that they will seek that secret?"

"They caused an uproar just now and wanted to fight with us. We had to expend a lot of effort to restrain them. We injured quite a few of them. Now there are no sounds, they are probably asleep," the chief warrior said, bowing at the waist.

"None of them died?"

"It's very strange, no matter how they were struck, not a single one died. Probably because they are so young, and their bodies are very strong."

"Then lead a few to the kitchens. It's been a long time since I ate that kind of flesh. Did I not command this several times already?"

“Yes, the emperor has commanded it. However, the chef says that their bones are too hard, there’s nothing that can be done about it.” The chief warrior fearfully and deeply lowered his head, almost reaching the emperor’s feet.

“Why are they not dying on their own?” The emperor asked again, angrily.

“I don’t know. A while ago, there was one that jumped out the window, and I don’t know if they died or not.” The chief warrior kowtowed once, trembling.

“You herd of bastards! Why weren’t you carefully guarding them? They jumped out, if they didn’t die, they will certainly encourage others to go and seek that secret!” The emperor could not help but scold.

The chief warrior kneeled with his torso upright and answered, terrified: “They jumped from a twenty-story high pagoda, if they did not die, then they will become disabled.”

“What kind of person was the one who jumped?” The emperor suddenly asked.

“I do not dare to conceal this from the emperor. It was that most active leader, every day he shouted wanted to find that secret,” the chief warrior said, once again kowtowing.

“Then this is serious. If he’s alive, he will certainly incite even more young people to come and oppose me. No one can say he won’t find that secret.” The emperor was alarmed and gave a panicked look. He muttered to himself for a moment before turning to the chief warrior and ordering: “Take all of the young ones and lock them up immediately. That is the safest method. Moreover, each warrior here must receive a disciplinary action that will go on their record.”

It was at exactly that moment that the sound of “Down with!” came from inside. The sound was very powerful, and the warriors immediately became alert.

The emperor timidly looked all around and pulled me away, dispirited.

“Where is my father, then? I don’t want to see anything else; I want to see my father!” I impatiently cried out as we walked on the staircase.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be there very soon. He’s just up another floor. You can see him very soon,” the emperor patted my head and comforted me. I noticed that a shadow had appeared on his face, and only then did I realize that he had not laughed for some time.

We arrived to the twenty-first floor of the pagoda. Here it was a little quieter, and there were also fewer warriors.

“How are they?” The emperor impatiently asked.

“Of the seven people inside, four have died,” the chief warrior respectfully answered.

“And none of them revealed that secret?”

“No matter how they were coerced and seduced, nothing had any use. Even facing death, none of them were willing to say a word relating to that secret. They seemed as though they didn’t know at what place that secret is hidden away.” The chief warrior bowed deeply and dared not raise his head.

"You idiot!" The emperor scolded.

"Yes, sir."

"The person who came today is this way?"

"He's very quiet, and alone in his room pacing back and forth," the chief warrior answered, absolutely terrified.

"Father!" I cried, struggling out of the emperor's grasp and running inside.

In a small room at the very end of the corridor I saw my father. His head was held down as he walked back and forth. An iron grid imprisoned him. The emperor led the warrior to come and open the door, and I rushed to my father at once.

"Child, you've come, good." My father smiled slightly at me, and gently patted my back and shoulder.

"Father, take me home," I said, pulling his hand.

The emperor came before my father, and pointing at me, said: "I brought your child here for you, do you have anything to say? Where the secret is hidden, now you can tell me."

"I cannot tell," my father answered resolutely.

"I will give you the biggest reward," the emperor said, smiling politely.

"I cannot tell," my father said in the same tone.

"Whatever you want I will give to you, so long as you say where that secret is hidden. I just want you to say one word," the emperor said, continuing to use a persuasive tone.

"I cannot tell."

"But I need you to tell me!" The emperor became angry.

"You don't have that kind of authority." Father's attitude was very adamant.

"I want to kill you!" The emperor went blue in the face, waving his clenched fist as he sternly said.

"Father!" I called out, terrified.

"Child, don't be afraid," father looked at me mildly and spoke while patting my shoulder.

It was quite a while before he turned to the emperor and very coldly said: "I await your orders. However, they will have no use. That secret will certainly be unveiled. Locking me up will also have no use."

"You're speaking nonsense! You must tell me the secret tonight, otherwise I will have you sent to the kitchens!" The emperor sternly said, striding out of the room. The iron lattice door was locked at once. Within the room was only my father and I.

The sound of the emperor's footsteps grew distant. The sword-bearing warriors paced in the corridor. Besides that, it was silent. Father gave me a worried look, and he did not say anything for a long time.

“Child, you’re crying,” he mildly said, suddenly cupping my face in his hands and reaching to wipe away my tears.

I couldn’t help but cry loudly. I knew what being “sent to the kitchens” meant, and I thought of that pot of deep yellow flesh.

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“Father, tell him. It doesn’t matter what secret, just tell him. Your life is at stake!” I pleaded, crying.

Father shook his head slightly. He again looked at me for a long time, and suddenly shed two tears. He sorrowfully said: “Child, life is not important. Every person must die, what am I to be afraid of. Where that secret is hidden, he simply cannot know. Even if he kills me, it will have no use.”

“Father, don’t you love me very much? If you die, then what will happen to me? You can’t leave me all alone on this earth. You know that I cannot be without you.” I cried, using all my might to tug at my father’s sleeve.

Father sighed and caressed my head for a while before painfully saying: “But for your own sake, do you really have the heart to let me harm an uncountable number of people? I will not do this.”

“What is that secret? What does it have to do with an uncountable number of people?” Father’s talk had befuddled me. I didn’t know what kind of affair this secret was.

“Okay, let’s sit down first, then I’ll quietly tell you,” father said, sitting down on the chair and calling me to sit by his knee. He looked down towards my face, and mildly narrated his story, his expression no different than usual. “Eat this piece of candy first.” He took out a long strip of candy and passed it to me. I placed it in my mouth, and how strange! It immediately slid down into my stomach.

“Once upon a time there was an emperor. He was infatuated with riches and glory, and searched everywhere for a magic herb. Eventually he found a type of legendary herb, one that was said to allow the one who ate it to live without aging. However, this herb could not grow in the ground, and needed to be planted on a pagoda that extended to the heavens in order to grow. For that reason, the emperor built a twenty-seven-story pagoda. The herb was planted on the twenty-seventh story. Building the pagoda was extremely laborious. All the kingdom’s ‘coolies,’ no matter young or old, were tasked with this punitive labor, and all the country’s marble and stone were brought from far and wide to the capital. From the most desolate villages all the way to the flourishing capital, thousands of people lined the roads, all of them coming to build the emperor’s magnificent longevity pagoda. The emperor concentrated all the kingdom’s strength on building this pagoda for ten years. As incredibly difficult as the work was, the emperor still hoped it would be finished in a short period of time. The supervising warriors used every method to force the people to work, causing tens of thousands to die each year. Yet, the pagoda was finally completed.

“The pagoda was built. The emperor happily threw a grand feast within the pagoda to celebrate his longevity. By this time, the workers who had built the pagoda were nearly all dead, and only five remained. Of that uncountable number of people, there remained only five.

“After the pagoda was finished, those five people were sent far away by the emperor to complete penal labor. They knew a secret. This kind of secret was kept by many workers who built pagodas. These workers were originally not willing to accept their fate, and therefore they were not willing to build the pagoda to be very stable. They came up with a plan of vengeance: inside one foundational stone, they hid the pagoda’s secret—a written record of the process of building the pagoda, written with the blood of that uncountable number of workers. If this secret was uncovered in the future, placed within the bellies of the living, and allowed to warm for some time before being removed and burned in the pagoda, the pagoda would immediately collapse, and the legendary herb would lose its efficacy.

“Among those five people happened to be my grandfather. My grandfather died, poor, in a faraway secluded mountain, and during his life could not return to the capital. My father also did not have the opportunity. The other four people probably also met the same fate, because up until now this secret still has not been discovered. When my father died, he told me this secret, like my grandfather had told him. Since then, it has been our family’s principal job to expose that secret. If during my lifetime I also do not have the opportunity, then I must leave it to you.

“But I did have an opportunity to come to the capital. However, the emperor has already discovered this plot. He knows the pagoda’s secret, one of the five people’s grandchildren told it to him. Fortunately, that person didn’t know in what place the secret was hidden, therefore the emperor does not know either. He issued orders to search everywhere for the grandchildren of the other four families in order to uncover the secret, but both efforts were unsuccessful.

“Yet the information that there existed such a secret was spread, and as a result, those young people who had no good feelings towards the emperor in the first place became restless. They’ve been crazily running about everywhere, seeking the pagoda’s secret. The result of this rushing about was that the secret was still not found, and they all got locked up in the pagoda by the emperor. Since then, the emperor has begun to be more vigilant. Sure enough, he captured all the grandchildren of those other three families. The other remaining family had very early informed the emperor of the secret and had received his reward by becoming the emperor’s warriors. There was still another family, but it only consisted of me and you.

“Those people seemed not to know in what place the secret was hidden. I’m probably the only one who knows the secret. He finally caught me as well. Now he wants to get the pagoda’s secret from me. If I tell him, then this pagoda will really become the longevity pagoda, and the blood of that uncountable number of ‘coolies’ will have been shed in vain.”

Father suddenly stood up, keeping his hand on my head, and strictly said: “Child, you are my son. Your blood is related with mine. You honestly say to me: are you willing to let me die, or are you willing to allow the longevity pagoda to survive forever?”

I lifted my head and thought that my father’s gaze was piercing into my body like a needle. I stood, trembling. I forgot everything and crazily begged: “Father, tell me, tell me the secret. I will do it; I will do it for you!”

“Good, that’s my son.” Father hugged me, smiled at me, and finally put me back down.

At this time, the sound of the warrior’s footsteps in the corridor started again. The lanterns rocked terribly. Without our realizing it, it was daylight.

“Father, quickly, quickly! Tell me that secret, it’s daylight, they are coming.” I anxiously urged him.

“I’ve already got it, only after I obtained the secret did they catch me,” Father replied quietly, smiling slightly.

“Then where is it? Hand it to me, quickly!” I faced him and reached for his arm.

Father looked all around and suddenly paled. From within his breast, he pulled out a knife and painfully said: “I already told you. That secret is hidden in your belly.”

Once he saw my bewildered expression, he continued to speak: “Don’t you remember that piece of candy you ate just now?”

Once I heard what my father said, saw his expression and the knife in his hand, I immediately understood everything. I knew that there was no more hesitation required. I lifted my shirt to expose my chest and bravely said: “Father, you do it then, I am your child.” I closed my eyes in spite of everything and welcomed the blade in his hand.

“Child!” I heard my father miserably softly cry. I wanted to open my eyes to look at him, but I felt a sharp pain from my stomach. I couldn’t help but cry out loudly. I fell to the ground.

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“Child, child!” Beside my ear was my father’s voice. Terrified, I opened my eyes. Father’s face was close to mine, and he was looking at me serenely.

“What is it?” He asked mildly.

“Did you get that secret out yet?” I asked, concerned. I still remembered that secret.

“What secret? What are you talking about?” Father asked, astonished.

“Weren’t you saying that you had to cut open my stomach, so that you could get the pagoda’s secret?”

Father didn’t answer, he just smiled slightly.

“Where’s your knife? Why didn’t you cut open my stomach? Cut, I’m not afraid, I am your child.” I lifted away the bed covers and loosened my clothes. I wanted to expose my stomach for him to see.

“Child, go back to sleep, you’re dreaming again,” Father smiled slightly and moved my hand, placing the covers back over me.

“Did the longevity pagoda already collapse?” I still asked, half-awake and half-dreaming.

Father exhaled slowly and mildly said to me: “Child, you should not sleep-talk any longer. The longevity pagoda simply never existed.”

“I bet it’s still snowing outside, the wind is really strong.” I also sighed. I thought I had already woken up.

“Snow? You silly child, how could it snow now? I see that you’re really dreaming, and very confused. Today I just told you a story about a longevity pagoda, then you dreamed very many dreams,” my father affectionately reproached.

“I did dream a lot of dreams.” I said vaguely, looking towards my father’s face with doubt.

“Go back to sleep. Tomorrow morning we’ll get up early to go hiking.” Father said, reaching out his hand to touch my cheek, again giving a gentle smile.

I nodded, smiling slightly, before drowsily closing my eyes again.

Shanghai. Winter, 1935.

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*The Pearl of Invisibility\**

*\*“The Pearl of Invisibility” was first published in the September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1936 issue of the Literary Supplement “Modern Art and Literature” to the Wuhan Daily Newspaper. Its title at publication was “The Longevity Pagoda, #3.”*

“Child, drink, I see that you’re also a little bit tired,” Father called from behind me.

“No, I’m not even a little tired!” I blurted out, not caring in the least. I also didn’t turn my head to look at my father, instead I was solely preoccupied with tapping the bamboo pole held in my hand as I walked forward. At this time, we were walking through the mid-levels of the mountains and following along the winding mountain road. We circled around and around. On the mountain there were many trees, and on both sides of the path ginkgo trees and trees with red autumn leaves grew tangled together. It seemed as though the overcast light was a magician’s finger and was turning the leaves of the ginkgo trees golden and glowing. Several mountain birds sat at the tips of the tree branches and together they melodiously called out their companions’ names. As soon as I lifted my head, I saw a squirrel on a tree branch, its tail like a ball of yarn, raised high. It stared at me blankly with its two little eyes before suddenly following the length of the branch and scuttling away. A slight gust of wind blew against my face and I felt relaxed and refreshed. I effortlessly moved my feet and stepped forward.

“Child, drink. Let’s sit down. Wait for me to smoke a cigarette,” Father said from behind me again. I heard the sound of his gasping, so I turned my head and looked back at him. Father’s face was red, and his forehead was beaded with sweat. He used his handkerchief to wipe his sweat away.

Father did not reproach me, instead I started to blame myself. I had been so engrossed with watching my own path that I forgot my father’s age. I was like a wild horse that had escaped its reins to tire my father out in this manner. I didn’t dare continue walking forward, instead I listened to him and stopped, sitting on a protruding mountain stone at the side of the road.

Under the ginkgo tree at my father’s side was a piece of bluestone. He sat on it and took out a cigarette, lighting it and placing it in his mouth to smoke. He took a long inhale and exhaled the smoke. A carefree smile gradually appeared on his slightly aged face. He suddenly beckoned me over with a smile, saying: “Child, come, sit here. I’ll tell you a story.”

Once I heard that my father was going to tell a story, I was very happy. Father’s stories could capture my attention better than anything else. I forgot about the mountaintop’s beautiful scenery; I forgot about the squirrel and the mountain birds. I only hurriedly ran to my father and sat at his feet. I placed my upper arm on his knee and happily asked:

“Are you going to tell the story about the longevity pagoda?”

Father shook his head and exhaled a mouthful of smoke, then said: “You still want me to tell the longevity pagoda story! Where are there so many longevity pagodas? The longevity pagoda already collapsed, why do you need to continue to remember it?”

“Then you’ll tell a story about the emperor,” I said. I assumed I had guessed correctly.

Father used his fingertips to pinch the butt of his cigarette and took a hard drag before placing it beneath his foot and stamping it to extinguish it. He took the last mouthful of smoke and puffed it out his nostrils before using the back of his hand to wipe at his mouth, shaking his head, and said: "This time I will not be telling the emperor's story. Now don't interrupt me, let me tell you the story."

I didn't interrupt father again. I looked at my father's face with wide eyes, especially at his mouth, quietly waiting for him to begin telling the story.

"Once upon a time there was a child, just about your age—"

"Father, you're toying with me! I won't listen!" I thought this child was referring to me, so I interrupted the thread of my father's speech.

"Child, I told you not to interrupt. The child I'm talking about is not you, I am seriously telling you a story. You only need to worry about listening. If you interrupt again, I won't tell the story." Father said gravely, but his expression was still quite warm. I knew he wasn't joking, so I relaxed and impatiently answered:

"I won't interrupt, speak, quickly speak!"

"Once upon a time there was a child who was about the same age as you are. His family was very poor. His father was a teacher in the country, where they opened a primary school in a ruined temple and taught several students to scrape by.

"There was one year that was bad. They faced a drought, and all the rice in the fields dried up and died. The farmers had no harvest, but *yamen*<sup>2</sup> still came to collect tax. A few people were arrested, while others were punished. The officials were still not satisfied. They went from door to door and house to house blackmailing the residents, but gathered no money. Instead, the *yamen* took away anything they could. Those people eating tree bark and grass roots were forced to have no means to live and began to riot. A great number of people surrounded the *yamen* and beat them, snatching back the things that had been seized from them. It wasn't long before a team of horses and soldiers came from the city. There was a burst of gun fires, yelling, and cries of anguish. Not even half a day passed before those fighting with their bare hands were subdued. Some of them died, some of them ran, and some of them were captured. The road was completely painted with traces of blood and covered in dead bodies. A great number of thatched cottages were burned down, and many women were taken away. Of the entire village, only a few old women and children remained to defend those unburned, broken houses and to sigh and cry."

"Father, you're lying to me! Something like that would never happen! Those people never did anything bad, why were they punished? That isn't fair!" I couldn't help but angrily interrupt.

"Child, you are still young. You still don't understand the world's affairs," father mildly consoled me. He then furrowed his brow slightly and, in a muffled voice, said: "There are very many unfair things! Don't interrupt me, listen well. Remember, these are stories made up by man."

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<sup>2</sup> An administrative officer in Imperial China.

I fell quiet; however, I still looked distrustfully at my father. I always thought the stories my father told me were real.

“That teacher was not captured, and at this time he luckily emerged to tend to those elderly women and children. But after two days, the *yamen* returned to the village and also took him away.”

“Why did they arrest him? He didn’t commit even a single crime!” I indignantly blurted out.

Father glanced at me, but then he smiled slightly again. I don’t know if he realized that I always knew that this type of smile didn’t represent happy feelings.

“Listen, what’s that sound?” Father suddenly asked.

A gust of wind blew, followed by a billowing sound. I knew it was coming from the mountain’s pine forest, and simply answered: “The pine trees—” I still wanted to speak, but father ignored me and continued:

“That teacher was imprisoned. They say he instigated the riots, however they could not find any evidence, so after a few days of imprisonment, they said they wanted to release him. Then things suddenly changed. It is said that someone informed the *yamen* that the teacher and his family had hidden a pearl, that this was a treasure. The people took with them this pearl, and they tried everything, but it could not be seen. This was called the pearl of invisibility. The informant was one of the teacher’s friends, and he said that this invisibility pearl was the biggest evidence that the teacher had incited the riots.

“The *yamen* used severe punishment to beat the teacher and wanted him to hand over the pearl. But the teacher denied it outright and said that he had simply never seen such an invisibility pearl.

“Every type of cruel instrument of punishment was used. Yet from beginning to end, the teacher was not willing to confess a single word. In the end, he did not even have the strength left to open his mouth. It was only a matter of time before he died.

“The *yamen* ordered people to throw his body into the river. They again dispatched *yamen* to his home in order to search, and it was precisely that friend that had informed on him who led the way. They got there and forced the teacher’s wife and son into the corner of the room. They began to scour everywhere, searching each thing and each place, but from beginning to end they could not find a single pearl.

“The teacher’s son and wife could only squat, trembling, full of grief and indignation, in the corner of the room, their eyes wide as they watched the violent activity. They didn’t dare say a word.

“The teacher’s son suddenly touched his mother’s elbow and very softly called out ‘Ma.’ He had seen a tiny red pearl sparkling by his feet and was unable to contain his amazement.

“His mother had also seen the pearl. She hurriedly whispered into her son’s ear: ‘shut your mouth,’ but the boy had already picked it up. He wanted to answer his mother, but he suddenly saw the *yamen* turn to look at him and he became flustered. Without thinking, he stuffed the pearl into his mouth.

“Father’s friend’s eyes were sharp, and his suspicion was suddenly aroused. He strode over and loudly demanded: ‘Open your mouth!’

“The child hesitated for a second before opening his mouth, and that man pulled open the child’s mouth and carefully inspected it but could not find anything; this was because the pearl had already slid down into the boy’s stomach.

“The *yamen* continued to carefully search for hours, but still could not find the pearl. Instead, they took everything in the room back to the city with them, only leaving behind an empty room for that poor mother and son.

“Once the *yamen* left, the child couldn’t help but loudly cry out: ‘Ma, I’m thirsty!’ He took a broken pot off the floor and drank the remaining bit of cold water inside it in one gulp. His mother looked, astonished, at his feverish face and suddenly remembered the pearl, asking: ‘Child, where is the pearl? I haven’t seen it since before. I don’t know if it is or is not the invisibility pearl.’

“Being reminded of the pearl, the child finally remembered that he had already swallowed it, and replied, terrified: ‘Ma, I swallowed the pearl.’ As soon as he finished saying this, he felt another burst of heat around his heart. His mouth was very dry and he couldn’t swallow. He again cried out: ‘Cold water, cold water! I’m thirsty, so thirsty...’ He didn’t wait for his mother to answer before running outside and finding a small jar full of water, suddenly stooping his head down, not caring if the water inside was clean or not, as he was only concerned with the *gudou gudou* of swallowing it.

“His mother followed, and seeing the child act in this manner, hurriedly pulled him away, grabbing his head and worriedly asking: ‘Child, what’s wrong? What are you doing, drinking like crazy?’

“The child stared blankly and his face became red; he shook his head and crazily answered: ‘I’m thirsty! I’m thirsty!’ But in fact, he had, in one gulp, drank the water from the jar until it was empty, even swallowing a little bug down into his stomach in the process.

“The mother held the boy, whimpering, and said: ‘Child, why don’t you go inside and lay down. How are you suddenly ill? Whether your father is alive or dead is not clear, if you have some accident, what will I depend on to pass my days? Am I to right your father’s wrongs again?’ She pulled him close, wanting to help him into the house.

“The child’s eyes were also shedding tears, but his forehead was dripping with even more beads of sweat. His face was so red that it was frightening. He just said to his mother: ‘Don’t worry, Ma, I will right father’s—’ He only uttered that half a statement before suddenly and frantically calling out: ‘Ma, I’m thirsty! Water, water!’

“His mother panicked and was alarmed again. She hugged the child, crying, and said: ‘You’ve drank even all the filthy water. Where is there still water? You must restrain yourself.’

“The boy looked painfully at his mother and pleaded: ‘That won’t do, my heart is burning. I’m thirsty, I’m thirsty, Ma, give me a little water to drink.’ The boy said, using one hand to pull away his shirt and forcefully paw at his chest.

“His mother, who couldn’t do anything about this and could only endure the pain of her heart, said: ‘Then I’ll take you to the riverside, the river has enough water for you to drink.’

“And so, the mother led her child to the riverside. This was a small river, and it was like the wandering path of an earthworm as it followed along the mountain all the way to the city. It was already dark. The little river seemed like a glittering belt flashing in the darkness. As soon as the boy saw the river, he called out, happily surprised. He struggled free of his mother’s arms and ran to the riverside. ‘Child, slow down, you might trip!’ His mother called repeatedly, concerned, from behind, but the boy had already thrown himself down on the grass by the riverside, tipping his head down into the water and opening his mouth wide to drink.

“His mother rushed to his side, grabbing his torso to pull him away. But the boy suddenly turned his head and said: ‘Ma, leave me, I want to drink water, I still haven’t drunk enough.’ He struggled with all his might, wanting to free himself. His mother saw a pair of seemingly electric, strange eyes flickering in the darkness. She was amazed, so she gradually let go of his hand, letting the boy’s body slowly slide into the water. By the time she hurriedly grabbed him again, her hand only latched onto his foot.

“She couldn’t see anything in the darkness and could only call out, panic-stricken. She loudly called ‘Child!’ The boy suddenly turned his head, and in the clear sky there was a thunderbolt. Lightning surrounded them and entirely lit up the mountain and the water. In this radiant and dazzling light, the mother saw her son’s face. Two horns suddenly grew from his head; two long whiskers sprouted from his big nose and constantly swayed to his left and right; a bloody mouth opened wide, and inside was a row of sharp teeth; only that huge pair of lantern-like eyes full of tears was directed at her. His body was covered in golden scales, and it swayed in the water, splashing water high into the air. The child had turned into a dragon. Only in his mother’s hand did she still hold a human’s foot, her child’s foot. She held onto that foot, terrified, and was not willing to let go. She sorrowfully called out ‘Child.’

“Painful tears rested in the dragon’s eyes. He still turned his head back to look at his mother, his voice muddled as he called ‘Ma.’ He repeatedly nodded his head, as if he was pleading with his mother to let him go.

“She understood. She cried, brokenhearted, and used all her strength to grasp that unchanged foot. She shook her head and firmly said: ‘That won’t do, that won’t do. I can’t let you go!’

“The dragon painfully nodded its head towards its mother, and two tears fell down like rain. He sadly said, ‘Ma,’ still pleading with his mother to let go.

“‘I can’t, I can’t, I can’t let you go,’ she cried, calling madly. She firmly hugged her son’s unchanged foot.

“The dragon’s mouth suddenly opened, letting out a painful howl, and the ground all around shook. His eyes looked towards his mother again. He suddenly broke away, and that unchanged foot was immediately freed from his mother’s grasp. As soon as it entered the water, it also changed into a dragon’s claw. Everywhere was suddenly extremely bright, and then there was a great sound as if the heavens were bursting and the earth was cracking. The river water swelled and splashed high into the air, the ground shook, and even the mountains rocked as though they wanted to collapse.

“The mother powerlessly sat down on the grass by the riverside. Her eyes were open wide as she stared blankly at the water; she couldn’t help crying out: ‘Child.’ However, her son swayed his body and swam away.

“Following the dragon’s swaying movements, the river gradually widened, swallowing a wide swath of land with it. The dragon splashed waves as he swam along, following the river towards the city. His mother still called out sadly to him from behind. He could hear her very clearly. He turned his head to look back at his mother. Every time he turned his head, he called ‘Ma,’ and caused an enormous sound. A thunderclap sounded in the sky, one of the mountain’s peaks collapsed, and the earth sunk. He heard his mother’s cries, and his own eyes also couldn’t help but shed tears. His tears submerged even more of the land to the point of disappearing. He followed to river to the city. Everywhere had already become a river, and only the village remained intact.” Father spoke until here and then suddenly stopped, taking out a second cigarette and lighting it before placed it in his mouth. He drew in a breath of smoke and then continued to speak: “Let’s keep heading to the top, then.”

“But what happened? What happened when the dragon got to the city?” I impatiently asked, as I saw that my father hadn’t finished the story and instead wanted to continue hiking.

“Once the dragon reached the city, he naturally drowned it all, and that place also became a huge river,” father nonchalantly replied.

“What about the city’s people? And those *yamen*? And that teacher’s friend?”

“I’m not entirely sure. They probably all became fish and shrimp.”

“What about the dragon?” I asked. I still wasn’t satisfied.

“Who knows! Why are you so persistent about finding the answer?” Father said a little reproachfully, but his attitude was still very mild. “This is no more than a story. A story made up by man. Do you really believe a child could turn into a dragon?”

“But why would they make up this kind of story? Wouldn’t making up a more realistic story be better?” I continued to ask with suspicion.

Father affectionately touched my head and replied: “This is just a kind of fable. The man who makes up the story is just like you. They probably also enjoy meddling with other people’s business.” He said this and began to laugh.

I blankly stared at my father’s face, unable to fathom the reason why my strange father wanted to toy with me.

“Child, let’s go, you just heard a story. Why are you being so foolish?” Father said loudly into my ear after a while, patting my shoulder.

At this time, there was another unexpected gust of wind, and a burst of billowing from the pine forest below muffled my father’s voice. A ginkgo leaf fell gently down onto my head, I reached out my hand and grabbed my father’s tightly.

Autumn, 1936.

### *The Tree That Could Speak\**

*\*"The Tree That Could Speak" was originally published in New Youth, vol. 1, no. 3, on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1937.*

The campfire was gradually growing smaller. Father's nonstop talking also suddenly stopped. He stood up, tossing a bundle of dried branches into the fire. I also added a few leaves. We sat down beside the fire again.

The fire gave off smoke, and its power gradually became great again. The branches fueling the fire emitted soft sounds, like the groaning of small animals. Father silently looked towards the fire, as though he was deep in thought. I didn't know what he was thinking about. The air suddenly turned cold. A gust of wind blew and fanned the fire until it roared, burning fiercely. Father's face reflected the scarlet light of the fire. He didn't make a sound for a long while, and almost seemed to have entered a dream.

Beside us, not far, were a few birch trees. There was a gust of wind, and the leaves rustled, almost as though someone was treading on the fallen leaves on the ground. Father took out a cigarette and took a dried branch from the fire to light it. He smoked without speaking.

All around there was no other sounds. The night became gradually darker. I felt cold and a little afraid. I curled my body into a ball and reached out two hands to be warmed by the fire.

The burst of a shrill whistle sounded from faraway. I knew it came from the train station as a train passed through and then moved away. I suddenly shivered.

"Father, I'm scared!" I couldn't help but cry.

Father seemed to have been startled out of his dream and glanced at me; he asked, surprised: "Child, what are you afraid of?" He lightly spouted a mouthful of smoke.

Once I heard my father's mild voice and received his concerned gaze, I calmed down again. Grumbling, I replied: "You're not talking again! Listen to those leaves..." I reached out my hand and pointed towards the two or three birch trees to our left. By this time, they had become a pile of shadows, like two or three giants concealing themselves there, setting a trap and waiting to capture some game. Just then, there was another gust of wind, the rustling sound of it even stronger than before.

Father sneered slightly. He flippantly replied: "That's the sound of the wind blowing the leaves, this is a very ordinary thing. You don't need to be afraid." When he saw I wasn't making a sound, he added: "I'm here, even more reason for you to be unafraid."

I vaguely replied, but my eyes were still directed towards those birch trees. That heap of black shadows moved slightly. My eyes became blurry. The black shadows menacingly pounced towards me. I withdrew my hand and hurriedly raced to my father's side, pressing myself tightly against his chest.

"Child, you're tired, why don't you stay in my arms and sleep a while, you'll also warm up a bit," Father said affectionately.

Laying against my father's chest, I relaxed greatly. But I still could not close my eyes. I looked up at my father's face. He still wasn't making any sounds and wore a stern expression as he looked out into the distance. I didn't know what he was looking at.

A gust of wind. He caressed my arm, and as though he was soothing a baby to sleep, said: "Don't worry, it's just the sound of the leaves again. Go to sleep."

I couldn't close my eyes. I said: "The leaves are talking!"

"Right, the leaves are talking," my father said without thinking, easily repeating my words.

"Father, can leaves really talk?" I asked suspiciously at his repetition.

Father didn't answer me, he only looked towards the birch trees, and from them a whistling sound came forth frequently, as though several people were quietly conversing and walking. My head moved against my father's chest for a moment. Father caressed my head, suddenly letting out a sigh, as he said: "Once upon a time there was a tree, a tree that could speak." He cast the butt of his cigarette into the fire.

"Really?" I suddenly sat up, curiously asking: "Father, are there really trees that can speak?"

A dotting smile betrayed father's serious attitude. He stooped his head down to my face and said calmly: "This is a story!"

"A story?" I suspiciously repeated. I began to lose a bit of hope, as I knew stories were all made up by man, and I had hoped that trees that could talk were real things. But after a moment I was happy again. I wanted to hear my father tell a story all along; even if it was a story, it came from my father's mouth, and touched me in the same way as real things did. I added: "Father, tell me a story, the story about the tree that could speak." I pleaded.

The wind blew, and this time the shadows of the birch trees shivered even more fiercely, and the whistling did not stop. There was a sound like the crying of a ghost. The leaves and the dust were stirred up into the air by the wind, some of it falling into the campfire. The fire burned with even more vigor, and wave after wave of firelight spouted towards my father's face.

Father still sat calmly there, unmoving. He lowered his head, patted my shoulder, tousled my hair, and affectionately asked: "Child, are you cold?"

Father's loving care gave me warmth and bravery. I looked at him with a grateful smile. I shook my head and replied: "I'm not cold. I want to hear you tell the story about the tree that could speak."

"Alright, I'll tell you," father said, nodding. He lifted his head again and looked towards the shadows of the birch trees before continuing:

"Once upon a time there was a tree. Right, once upon a time there was a tree, and this tree was exactly the same as all the other many trees; it wasn't any different from these trees right here." He reached out his hand and pointed at the shadows of the birch trees. "In short, once upon a time there was this kind of tree—"

"Father, you're toying with me again," I couldn't help but interrupt, "since it's a tree that can speak, how can it be exactly like all the others?"

"Just listen. If you don't hear what I say after, I won't allow you to be so talkative." Father lightly knocked on my head.

I didn't make another sound. I wanted to listen to what he had to say.

## II.

This tree stood by the side of a big road, and this road led to a big city; moreover, it went directly to the king's palace. This country was like many others: it also had a king, and the king lived in a stately, lofty palace.

This tree, like many other similar trees, grew in one place, and nobody cared about it, because it was exactly the same as all the other trees; it was just a common tree.

This tree was young. Since it was born, it stood beside that big road. It saw many people—old people, young people, government officials, workers, students. They all travelled this road. And so did the king, sitting in his beautiful chariot, his cabinet's carriages following behind, and all around him were warriors to protect him. The horses were big and white as snow, and the body of the carriage was golden and brilliant. The warrior's weapons glinted coldly. The king sat conceitedly in his carriage with his red nose and slanted eyes; below his chin was the shadow of a scant beard. The ordinary people could not see his imperial face, and they had long since been ushered away by the king's warriors. The only ones who could see the king's face were those trees by the roadside. However, those trees could not speak.

The king's carriage passed. The cabinet's carriages also passed. That uncountable number of warriors also passed, making a huge racket. After this party had passed and was far away, so far that even their shadows were not visible, only then did another type of people appear on the road. These people were called 'coolies.' These people's clothes were shabby, they were barefoot, their hands were dirty, their faces were sickly yellow, and their bodies were emaciated, in addition to many, many more grotesque features. If they were not carrying things in hand, they were carrying things on their shoulders. They were usually silent as they slowly passed through. Their faces never betrayed a smile. This silent, depressed procession would sometimes be frightened apart by the sound of the king's party. They hid themselves amongst the trees, going deep into the woods, and waited for the carriages to be long gone before stealthily reemerging. If they did not hide, and instead hindered the path of the king or cabinet's carriages, then if they were not trampled to death by the horses, then they would be locked away in prison. The trees by the roadside saw this. However, the trees could not speak.

In the wintertime snow fell. It snowed a lot, and the ground was completely covered. The wind blew in the early morning, when the sun had just risen, and the figures of people swayed on the road. It was the coolies with tattered clothes and bare feet covered in scars. Some of them shouldered hoes and spades, some of them carried things on shoulder poles, some of them pulled things, hauling carts at their maximum capacity and braving the wind on the highway. The freezing winter forced them to remain silent, but they couldn't help but let out a song which sounded like moaning and groaning. The weather got better in the afternoon, and the king brought his consorts upon sleds and ordered a group of warriors to protect them. The warriors fawned over the emperor, hailing him. The consorts' clear and melodious laughter sounded out along with the king's duck-like guffaws. The trees by the roadside saw this, and they also heard it. But at this time, even the yellow and withered tree leaves had been blown away, and the trees were bare.

In the spring, the trees blossomed, and the weather was clear, bright, and warm. In the early morning, everywhere on the big road was tattered clothing and bare feet. There was still a

depressed procession, to the extent that even the inebriating breeze was unable to cause even one happy word. It was as though they didn't even know it was spring. In the afternoon, the king's carriages once again proudly appeared. The king's smile filled his entire face. His nose was even more red, his eyes even more slanted, and his beard was a little gray. His face was oily. He laughed happily, and the sound of his laughter was like the caws of an old crow. His consorts seductively fawned over him, waited on him; his cabinet doted on him; his warriors respectfully guarded him. The carriages traveled to and fro on the highway several times until dusk.

The sky darkened. At night, the highway was very quiet. Only one man's sluggish footsteps made monotonous sounds for a long time. These footsteps were a young man's. He finally sat down, exhausted, under a tree. He leaned his body against the tree trunk and sat there silently. He raised his head to look at the sky. Above, the sky was full of stars. The fragrant scent of the trees diffused through the air. But tormented, he called out: "Why can't I see the stars? They must all be in the sky. Why can't I see the starlight? Everywhere is darkness, everywhere is darkness! Ah, I remember now! What did they do to my eyes? I can't see anything anymore!" He reached up his hand to rub at his eyes and felt a burst of pain. His eyelashes and eyelids were glued together with only a thin slit between them. He still couldn't see anything and sadly cried out: "I can't see! I can't see!" He wept in despair. The trees saw this scene and heard his cries; however, they could not speak.

Then the sound of another person's footsteps sounded in the silent night from far away and gradually came closer. It was a woman walking on the road. It was a young girl, not more than about fifteen or sixteen years old. She also heard that young man's cries, and it was those cries that led her to walk on this stretch of road. She looked all over for a person but could not see where that person was in the darkness. As she walked, she also kept her head down, looking all over. She called out, but the sound was very low, and others could not hear it.

The young man was still weeping with despair. He suddenly cried out madly: "Give back my eyes! Give back my eyes!" This sound alerted the girl to where he was. She finally found him beneath the tree. He sat underneath it, his head raised, his two hands cupping his chin, seemingly staring at the stars, but really, he couldn't see anything. Pearl after pearl of tears dripped down from the seam at the corner of his eyes. The gentle wind softly stroked his childlike face, as though it wanted to sweep away the traces of his tears.

The sound of the young woman's footsteps caused the young man to bewilderedly turn his head and look all around. He couldn't see anything, and he also did not speak; however, he rubbed his eyes, wiping away the tear stains from his face.

"Brother," the young woman sobbed, flinging herself to the ground; she sat down by his side, hugging him, and sadly pleaded: "Brother, you're here, come home with me."

The man did not answer. He only cried, holding tightly onto his little sister's arm, and spoke after a long while: "Don't bother me."

She did not understand what her brother meant, and swallowed down her tears before demanding: "Why don't you come home? This morning I went there, but they said you had already left. I went home again to wait for you, but still did not see you return. Later, some people said they saw you on this highway, and then I finally came here."

"I'm also not sure, it was them who drove me and left me here on this highway, and then I finally walked here and took a rest," he quietly replied.

"You've suffered enough this past two weeks, they changed you into this!" She said, pitifully looking at her brother's face.

She pleaded with her brother to come home, but from beginning to end her brother did not agree. He didn't speak much, but when he did it was all terse talk. His sister did not understand what he meant. Only the trees by the roadside knew his state of mind. But the trees could not speak. The wind blew gently, and the trees nodded their heads slightly and sighed.

The night was gradually becoming darker. There was suddenly the sound of footsteps on the highway. Very many people were walking. There was a burst of the sound of leather whips and chains and shackles. There were people cursing, there were people shouting. Whips sounded. Many paper lanterns emitted a red light, constantly swaying. That pair of young siblings held onto each other, trembling, hiding beneath the trees, holding their breath and not even daring to move.

That group of people marched in front of them. The red lanternlight rocked in all directions. Warriors were cursing loudly, brandishing the whips in their hands, and lashing them at random at the chained and fettered youths' backs and heads. Following the sound of leather whips was a burst of shrill shouting and several indignant curses. The warriors continuously urged those fettered young prisoners to walk faster. Those young people weren't much more than fifteen or sixteen years old, the oldest being around twenty. Their childlike faces were already devoid of color, and along with their wild hair illuminated by the lanternlight, made their faces all the more terrifying. Their bare feet were covered in blood and mire. Their exhausted bodies trembled under the whips. They moved their feet with great difficulty. One of the children suddenly fell on the ground, a tiny groan escaping his lips, as blood flowed from his face, his back, and his feet. An imposing warrior used his hand to grab the child, his hairy fist hitting him on his face along with another burst of verbal abuse. That child was carried forward by the others. There was no pleading and there was no sobbing, that crowd of children only grit their teeth and continued forward, step by step. They suddenly all began to sing. The warriors were not happy to hear this song, but the warriors' whips also had no use. The more the whips came down, the louder the singing became. On that highway, three or four children died beneath those whips.

The trees by the roadside saw this. The younger trees could not help but think: *why does this happen? What crimes did those children commit to suffer this kind of punishment?* But the trees could not speak. They were silent.

The young children were slowly escorted away by those cruel and ferocious warriors. The red lanternlight also disappeared into the distance. Where were they going? Those old trees knew. Because among them, some of them had been transplanted from other places. They had seen a big fortress, and locked away inside of it was an uncountable number of children behind iron windows and iron doors. Behind the fortress was a bottomless pool, and every night several children who were nearing their deaths were thrown down into the pool. Every year many children passed through this route to be taken to this fortress, but no one ever saw a single one of them return. What crimes did they really commit? Even the old trees did not know this.

“Brother, did you see?” Under that young tree, the younger sister’s trembling voice broke the silence.

Her brother painfully shook his head; he couldn’t see a thing. But the sounds depicted the scene for him. What had just happened in front of him was already familiar in his mind; from very early on he knew about this affair from other people. However, in front of his little sister he could only silently shake his head.

“Brother, please change from now on! Your good heart can’t even make a response. Look how they treated those like you!” His sister sincerely pleaded.

He shook his head harder, not making a sound. His heart was in great pain.

“I’m afraid. I’m afraid they will catch you again and send you there. I won’t dare to imagine one day that you will be among those children,” she continued.

He finally couldn’t restrain himself any longer and opened his mouth to reply: “Being afraid has no use. Since I am also that type of person, I deserve to receive that fate. If they want to destroy people like me, then let them. In any case, my thinking will not change.”

His sister continued to plead, but it had no use. She cried. Her brother wanted to cast her aside, to send her home alone. But she was not willing. She said: “Now I only have you. If you won’t go home, then I won’t either. Wherever you go, I will go with you.”

The two siblings hugged each other again and cried. Why her brother was crying, she did not understand; she also did not understand her brother’s way of thinking.

“Brother, why were they treating those children that way?”

“All children have committed crimes! We all have committed crimes! You didn’t know? Not a single child has ever ran to the palace to shout: ‘May the king live ten-thousand years!’ Not a single child has ever taken their foot and trampled on the coolies’ heads. You will never be able to find a child on those beautiful carriages. In this country, under our king’s rule, all children have committed crimes. Sister, do you remember, there was a time when an old man with white hair was almost beaten to death by the warriors of an official’s mansion, and we took him into our home and cared for him? That is my crime! Don’t you remember when we saw a group of warriors rudely evict a poor family out of their own thatched hut, and I ran over to negotiate with them? That is my crime! I have committed a crime because I don’t believe that what happened just now was fair. We should help others, sympathize with others, and love others. I have committed crimes. They should punish me.” He indignantly rambled. He tried hard to open his eyes, but it had no use. He still couldn’t see a thing.

“Then let me to go with you. I have also committed crimes. I also went with you to do those things,” his sister suddenly and courageously said. She had made up her mind and wanted to go wherever her brother did. But her brother thought of something and prevented her. He added: “No, that won’t do, you cannot come with me!”

His sister was no longer sad. She had already wiped away her tears. She resolutely said: “I must go with you, on the entirety of this earth I only have you, my only brother. You are my only kin; I cannot allow you to leave me. Tell me, wherever you want to go, I will go with you. You can teach me how to do things.”

Her brother was very moved. He originally had been willing to have such a circumstance, but he believed now it was too late. He could no longer hide from her, so he finally painfully told her the truth: "Sister, can't you see what is now different about my eyes? I can't even see your face!"

She made an alarmed sound. She took his face in her hands and lifted his head, carefully looking at his eyes. The night was very dark, so she could not see anything clearly. But that bright pair of pupils she was ordinarily so familiar with were gone. On her brother's face was a blanket of darkness. He said he couldn't even see her face. They must have stolen his eyes! How ruthless! She pitifully caressed that pair of closed eyes, sadly calling, 'brother.' Her heart hurt terribly, and she held her brother's head tightly to her chest.

"Now you understand. So leave me, go home alone. I'm a useless person, I don't deserve people's pity." His head trembled slightly against his sister's chest as he spit out those words. But his sister had already decided that she wouldn't listen to what he had to say.

His sister kissed his eyes, her tears dripping down onto them. The two siblings' tears mingled together, wetting the young man's face.

"Sister, let me go. I cannot live if I have no eyes! What meaning does being a disabled person and suffering through daily life have? That is wasting life! Let me go!" He suddenly struggled free of his sister's arms, stood up, and planned to walk towards the road. But he had just stood up and had not even started walking when he fell. He despairingly cried out, his body moved briefly, and his face was coincidentally pressed against the root of the tree where a teardrop soaked into it. As if it had thirsted for rain for an eternity, the tree immediately began to tremble. The entire tree became damp with that single tear, and from the very tips of its branches came a susurrantion.

His sister hurriedly threw herself at his body and helped him sit up. Deeply worried, she asked: "What's wrong? Are you hurt?" He was not injured. His wound was within his heart. He painfully said to his sister, "Go home, don't worry about me. I am already finished."

She leaned in closely to him beneath the tree. Now she understood what her brother was feeling. She knew her brother's heart was hurt, but she did not know how to comfort him. Because he was exhausted, he gradually began to fall asleep in his sister's arms. She didn't dare look at his face. She thought of the past. She thought of scenes of her and her brother's life together after their parents had passed away. A wound also split open on her heart. She pressed her face against the trunk of the tree and painfully pleaded: "To the clear judgement of the great god of the heavens, why were these affairs arranged in such a way? Why should that uncountable number of young people receive this cruel treatment? Did you permit these events?"

The god did not answer. There was only the susurrantion of the trees. They knew the god did not exist. But they could not speak and could only make that rustling sound.

"Oh, great omnipotent god of the heavens, please heed this small girl's pleas. How can all children have crimes? How can people only live for themselves? Aren't people supposed to sympathize with others? When we see these types of people getting beaten, insulted, and maltreated, shouldn't we help them? Why are there so many chains and fetters, so many whips, so many dungeons? Why have they taken my brother's eyes?"

The god did not answer, because the god did not exist. That tree knew this, and it sympathized with that persistently pleading girl; however, that tree could not speak. It could only make that rustling sound.

“Oh, gloriously shining god, are all people not your creations? Why can one person build their fortune on another’s suffering? Why must we have distinctions between the king and his ministers and the ‘coolies’? Why should the king sit upon his carriage and complacently laugh while those coolies spend all day walking barefoot and dirty handed, toiling away? Why should those young people who sympathize for others, help others, and love others, wear chains and fetters, be struck by whips, sit in dungeons, have their eyes taken away, and be tortured until they die?

Oh, gloriously shining god, please listen to this small girl’s pleas. Tell me, did you permit all of this? Is all this reasonable? Is all of it necessary? ...My brother says that without eyes he cannot live any longer; without a brother, I also cannot live any longer. Oh, great and omnipotent gods, please listen to this small girl’s pleas.”

But they still did not answer. The god could not hear this small girl’s pleas, because the heavens simply did not contain any god. The tree knew this, and as a result, it sympathized with the girl, and so it trembled even more fiercely. It rustled nonstop, wanting to give her an answer. But the tree could not speak.

The little girl wept in despair. She knew that she was just a tiny creature undeserving of the god’s sympathy. Before her eyes was darkness. She did not pay attention for a while, only crying brokenheartedly, her tears falling down onto the tree’s trunk.

The tree absorbed her tears. This time, from the tree’s roots all the way to the treetop, the treetop, branches, leaves, trunk, and roots were all moistened. It seemed as though a spell had been cast on it, and it began to quake. It had a huge change from within; it felt that it could speak:

“These events were not arranged fairly. All the people on earth are no different. Nobody should receive special treatment. Anyone who builds their happiness and good fortune upon the suffering of others, or anyone who uses chains and fetters or whips and dungeons to maintain their own happiness, will not live very long. They will, in the end, lose their happiness. Even that twenty-two-story longevity pagoda will collapse one day. Only in a child’s heart can it exist forever. Not a single thing can destroy a child’s heart. Go, accompany your brother and go. Do not assume your brother has already lost his eyes – your eyes can serve as his own. He can use your eyes to see. Go, go help others, sympathize with others, and love others. Help, sympathy, and love are not crimes.”

The solemn speech came down loud and clear from the treetops, the sound resonating throughout the entire tree, rendering the other trees astonished. They thought it quite strange that such a young tree could speak, and moreover speak those kinds of words.

The young girl was unexpectedly shocked. Ever since the tree had said its first words, she raised her head higher to look above. Above were the treetops, the sky, the stars, and nothing else. She thought that this must have been the god speaking, that it must have been the god answering her pleas. She attentively listened to each word with a devout heart. Every word seemed to light her up from within like a star. Her sadness and fear all flew away. She happily

pushed her brother's head, calling him awake before telling him everything that had just happened.

He always trusted his sister. This news also caused his mood to entirely change. She supported him, and the two of them bravely stood up, stopping under the tree for a while, hoping to receive the god's instruction once again. But they did not hear anything else, and finally set off for the road. The younger sister's eyes acted as her brother's, and the two people leaned tightly against each other, following the road and slowly walking into the distance.

That young tree watched the two children get farther away. It was very happy, and still wanted to speak, but could only make a susurrantion, and from then on could only make that susurrantion. As for the ability to speak, it accidently received "it," but also lost it.

### III.

Father told this story without stopping. This time, he even forgot about smoking. As soon as he closed his mouth, he took out another cigarette and lit it to smoke. He forcefully drew in a breath and then let out a huge plume of smoke. Everything before my eyes was smoke. My gaze penetrated the smoke to look at my father's face. The light from the campfire was very weak, so I couldn't see his face clearly; however, I still felt that my father's expression was different than usual. He must have been thinking about some weighty matters tonight, otherwise he would not have such a serious expression, and he would not have told this seemingly unfinished story. Naturally, this story had moved me deeply. I was especially concerned with the whereabouts of that pair of children. Father didn't tell me. I finally could not help but ask.

"Father, you still haven't finished the story! What happened after the brother and sister left? What happened to them?"

"You really are such a curious child!" Father exhaled several mouthfuls of smoke and gently knocked on my head again, reproaching me. "What happened after, I myself do not know. Why don't you wait until you're older to ask about it." He stood up, inhaling deeply again, before tossing his cigarette into the rapidly dying fire. He gently, but somewhat tiredly, instructed:

"Child, the fire is going out, let's go to sleep. Tomorrow morning we'll get up a bit earlier, it will be good to go hunting."

The surrounding air suddenly turned cold. Only embers remained in the fire pit. I shivered.

I knew my father wouldn't tell me anything more, so I stood up.

I didn't speak anymore, I only grabbed father's hand, going back to the tent with him.

Our surroundings were silent except for the rustling of the birch trees. The shadows of two children seemed to appear before my eyes from between the birch trees, the two siblings still holding each other tightly and walking forward. It seemed as though we were following behind them.

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Shanghai. Winter, 1936.

*To Shuji (Postscript):*

Shuji:

If you hadn't sent me a copy of *Stories of the French Revolution* asking me to make revisions, I would've completely forgotten about that essay. These past two days I've perused through several books, recalled a few old events, and it seems that I've rediscovered a few lost things. I've once again become skillful in my writing style of fifty years ago. I finished reading the first draft and once again found the second. I revised them without a hitch. The copy I am sending you now was the second draft, revised in the beginning of 1936. I will also tell you why I wrote these stories.

In 1930, I finished translating the Soviet author Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy's play *The Death of Danton*, which was published by the Kaiming bookstore. The bookstore's editor-in-chief, Mr. Jixia Mianzun, suggested that I discuss the conditions of the French Revolution in the preface, or to write a "story" about the bourgeoisie revolution in France. I took his suggestion and wrote a relatively long "Translator's Preface."

At the time, I never imagined that I would write *Robespierre's Secrets and Other Short Stories*. That was in 1934. That same year, Chief Ji published my sixth collection of short stories, titled *Silence*, and within it were collected those three short stories about the French Revolution. I suddenly realized that in 1930, my "Translator's Preface" did not have many readers, so I ferreted it out and made minor revisions to be appended in the collection. This would also allow readers to better understand those three protagonists' "secrets."

This is the first draft of those "stories," and is exactly the photocopy you sent to me. At the end of 1935, I repossessed the copyright for several books I had sold to the Shanghai New Publishing House and compiled two other collections of short stories that I then gave to the Kaiming bookstore for publication. The manuscript of the second book was submitted for revisions at the beginning of 1936, and it is said that preparing it "took almost half a month of work." Actually, it was longer than that. During this time, I revised the "stories" again. In the first half of 1935 I gathered some materials, and because that was only a few months before the revision, my memory of them was still fresh. Only then did I pick up a pen, and then it all seemed to fall onto the page like a fountain. After about a week I finished the revision work. That was collected in the *Stories of the French Revolution (Second Edition)*, which was collected in the fourth series of the second collection of the Kaiming edition. When *The Death of Danton* was reprinted, I again cut out some of what constituted the "story" from the "Translator's Preface," and took those supplemental "stories" from the anthology and used it as the appendix of the play. This time what I am sending you is based on the seventh edition of *The Death of Danton*. I proofread it once but did not change it much. In the fifties and sixties, I did not collect the "stories" into *My Collected Works*. In the seventies and eighties, when I prepared *Self-Selected Works*, I again left them out. Now I thank you for your reminder, and they have finally been collected in my *Complete Works*.

Ba Jin, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1988, Shanghai during the heat wave.

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