

105 ▼ Cao Ming, "A NATIVE OF YAN'AN"

For dedicated revolutionaries literature has one overriding purpose — to further the revolutionary cause. This certainly applies to the Chinese Communist author Cao Ming, whose many short stories and novels made heroes of Mao's followers and villains of his opponents. Cao Ming was born in 1913 to a poor rural family and began her writing career with the publication of a short story in 1932. In the 1930s she wrote anti-Japanese propaganda after the invasion of Manchuria and became a member of the Communist Party in 1940. She spent the next eight years in Yan'an, where she worked with peasants and wrote stories that followed the party line. After the Communist victory in 1949 she held various government posts while continuing her writing.

One of Cao Ming's best-known short stories is "A Native of Yan'an," written in 1947, two years before the Communist victory. Its main character is an old, illiterate peasant woman, Granny Wu, whose self-sacrifice is held up as a model of dedication to the party. Granny Wu's experiences allow the author to present an idealized picture of Mao Zedong and his program while reviling Mao's Guomindang enemies. Although propaganda, it provides insights into the image the Communists sought to present to the Chinese people in the ongoing struggle with the forces of Chiang Kai-shek. The story begins in 1937 when the old woman has a conversation on her doorstep with a Red Army soldier who treats her courteously and urges her to use her hands and mind to support the Communist cause. As he walks away, Granny Wu is approached by her daughter-in-law.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What is the image of Mao portrayed in the short story?
2. How is Granny Wu's life transformed as a result of her conversation with Mao? What point is the author trying to make in this regard?
3. What is the background of the individuals who gather to discuss Mao's visit? What point is the author making here?
4. What are the views of the townspeople about the ideals and achievements of the Communists?
5. How do these views differ from those of the Guomindang?
6. What is revealed about the Guomindang from the behavior of their troops?

"Ma, who have you been talking to for such a long time?" asked her daughter-in-law, when she came out of the house, putting down the winnower and shaking the flour off her body.

"I expect he's a cadre,<sup>1</sup> I've been talking to him." She pointed to the group of people who had just left.

The younger woman shaded the sun from her eyes with her hands and looked carefully in the direction indicated by her mother-in-law. She exclaimed in surprise:

"Ma, that's him. Ma, that's him!"

Granny Wu was alarmed; she stood up slowly: "Who is he?"

"He is Chairman Mao, Ma, that's him. I heard him speak at the May Day celebration; I've also heard him speak at the mobilization meeting." . . .

"That's Chairman Mao!"

"That's Chairman Mao!"

"There's no mistake, it's really him!"

The shopkeepers all ran out of the houses, trying hard to identify the tall shape as that of their beloved leader. A few intellectuals who had just come here from the south, eagerly joined the masses, and confirmed what the people were saying. One of them even said that once he had seen Chairman Mao have a long chat with the peasants in the fields. By now there were about ten people all watching with rapt attention the group that was getting further and further away. Chairman Mao had crossed the Yan River on horse back and had slowly made his way to Yangjialing. His mighty figure grew as he went further away and his genius and solemn appearance seemed to become a tangible brilliance which shone with the sun. The shadow disappeared when it got to the slope of Yangjialing but people seemed to

be still able to see the giant walk steadily up the hill into a newly white-washed old cave.

The old woman who had never been taken seriously before, now unexpectedly became the center of attention. Previously, she had thought that a woman's place was at home doing the house work, so she had been unwilling to attend mass meetings and even when propaganda teams arrived at her home, she received them coolly. However, after chatting with Chairman Mao and then being shown so much respect, she suddenly changed. Her conservative thinking became more enlightened, she began to display her hidden wisdom. She talked eloquently about the ordinary things she had heard in the past and they became part of her experience. Moreover, she felt that from now on she had enough courage to take on anything, however difficult. She sat placidly among the people, proudly enjoying their admiration and answering their questions.

"Immediately I felt that his eyes were different from other people's, they were grey, really exceptional! Ay, without such eyes, how could he see so clearly the suffering of the poor!"

The old woman straightened her back and continued with her description. It seemed as if she had become over ten years younger. "Moreover, I noticed that his forehead was rather broad, what an intelligent head! He can solve problems which have baffled hundreds and thousands of people." . . .

"Only the Communist Party works for us wholeheartedly. For generations we didn't have any land. Now, we've got land, cows, and sheep. Everybody can see that they don't have any privileges, they eat the same food as their soldiers, five cents a day for food, and they wear shabby clothes. It's said that their parents and children

<sup>1</sup>A Communist Party official.

living in the Guomindang areas are being tortured every day by Chiang Kai-shek.

"Did you hear that during the 8,000 mile Long March,<sup>2</sup> Chairman Mao met an old woman who was about to freeze to death? He immediately took off his goat-fur-lined waist coat and put it on her. Have you ever seen anyone serving the people so wholeheartedly? I've lived fifty-three years and it's the first time I've seen such a great man." . . .

Now, the old woman's emotions swelled up like mountain torrents during the monsoon season, or as if thousands of galloping horses were charging inside her head and shaking her soul. While she talked she wiped away her tears of emotion.

"You are quite right!" Wang Xianggui, the blacksmith cut in. "I was told that on the 8,000 mile Long March several cadres were so exhausted that they wanted to rest for three days and three nights. Chairman Mao said to them, 'Have a good rest! I'm going to tell you a story about victory.' After he finished his story, everyone was inspired with enthusiasm and didn't even want to rest for three hours, because they all wanted to march forward toward the final victory. I've also heard that when they were crossing the grass-lands, they ate wild vegetables and leather soles. Some subordinates prepared some . . . wheat flour for him but he gave the flour to the comrades who were sick."

"Who isn't afraid when the word 'landlords' is mentioned. But the Communist Party has suppressed them. Without Chairman Mao and the Communist Party, we don't know how long we would still have to suffer!" sighed the primary school teacher, stroking his long beard.

"How the ruling class harmed us! My boundfeet were only unbound after the Red Army arrived.<sup>3</sup> If it wasn't for feudal oppression wouldn't we women be the same as men?" Her daughter-

in-law began talking but before she could finish, the man from the south butted in:

"Things were plentiful in the south, but under the oppression of Chiang Kai-shek we were forbidden to fight against the Japanese so we came to the liberated area. Here we found freedom. Although the millet here is somewhat coarse, it is more delicious than the fish and meat over there. No wonder the French say: 'Without freedom one might as well die.'" . . .

Another student from Nanjing described Chiang Kai-shek with scorn:

"Chiang Kai-shek doesn't dare to go out without his armored car. In fact he has three armored cars, just as a wily hare has three burrows. Quite unlike Chairman Mao who can walk and chat to people in the streets." . . .

"Chairman Mao is on our side," Old Wang cut in. "We hope he will live for two hundred years!"

"Ah, when the whole country is liberated, may the people of the whole country be able to see Chairman Mao," remarked another peasant sympathetically.

The students laughed naively: "What the Communist Party stands for has been well known to people for a long time. Peasants in the countryside, workers and students in the cities are all longing for an early liberation."

They chatted with enthusiasm the whole morning and didn't disperse until they had poured out their innermost thoughts.

From that day on, Granny Wu responded enthusiastically to every call of the local government. She frequently set a good example for the men and young people in their work. . . .

---

▷ Ten years pass.

---

In March 1947, Chiang Kai-shek and Hu Zongnan's army invaded Yan'an. After destroy-

<sup>2</sup>Cao Ming is exaggerating the length of the Long March, which was approximately six thousand, not eight thousand, miles.

<sup>3</sup>When they took control of an area, the Communists ended the ancient custom of binding the feet of Chinese girls.

ing the enemy's main force, the people and the army voluntarily evacuated this empty town. At that time, Granny Wu had been ill in bed for two months. She refused to be persuaded by her son and daughter-in-law and was determined to stay in Yan'an.

"I want to see Hu Zongnan buried here with my own eyes."

The valleys, bridges, and fields were all mined. With the exception of the local people, no one dared to move about. Half an hour after the covering force had left, Chiang Kai-shek and Hu Zongnan's army became bold enough to rush into the town of Yan'an yelling and shouting.

When the enemy soldiers caught Granny Wu, they acted as if they had captured something valuable. They laughed contemptuously:

"We thought that there must be treasure hidden in Yan'an, but there's nothing but a skinny old granny!"

While the troops were laughing obscenely, one low-ranking officer squeezed forward, and after ordering the soldiers to make room, he asked:

"Are you a native here?"

"I am a Yan'ner!" answered Granny Wu, lifting up her head.

"In what direction did the main forces of the communist army retreat? How far have they gone?"

"Who knows how far they've gone. They left three days ago."

The officer stamped his foot and roared, "Three days ago? We've been tricked by the Communists. It's a pity our senior officers are as timid as mice; they kept shelling but were afraid to come in. We can't level these mountains even if we use up all the shells in America. . . . Well, in what direction did the covering force retreat?"

Weakly, Granny Wu pointed to the narrow mountain path, "They left a few hours ago. If you hurry up, you may catch up to them."

On hearing this, the low-ranking officer was about to report it to his superiors when Granny Wu stopped him:

"Officer, I see you're an honest man. To tell you the truth, they've laid a lot of mines there.

If you want to chase them, it's better to take this narrow path. You should go through there quickly, the faster the better. When you get on to the main road, walk carefully by sticking to one side of the road. . . .

The officer thanked the old woman and ordered his soldiers to watch her.

They sent a company of cavalrymen to chase the Communists at lightning speed along the path pointed out by the old woman.

Granny Wu seated herself on the millstone in front of her house groaning. While the hooves of the galloping horses were running along the narrow path, a terrible deafening explosion thundered through the whole valley. Forty to fifty dead soldiers and horses were thrown in every direction. Scarlet blood flowed down the hillside to the main road like tiny rivulets after the rain.

Granny Wu seemed to be suddenly recovered from her illness. She laughed loudly and vigorously, as if another bomb had exploded inside her body. She laughed as if her sides would split. However, she was immediately seized by numerous devilish hands. One of the soldiers aimed his gun at her, but was stopped by the low-ranking officer who walked up to her and asked in a muddle-headed way:

"Did you know that this meant death for you?"

"Yes, I knew." She stopped laughing.

"What did you do it for? I don't understand.

Is there anything more precious than life?"

"What for? For him!" she answered solemnly.

"Who's he?" He felt somewhat perplexed.

"The benefactor who leads us!"

"He has fled! You'll die here in his stead!"

"No, he's forever with us, we'll never die, we'll win!"

"Why did you tell us to walk through that narrow path quickly?"

"Stupid! So that more of you will be killed!"

The low-ranking officer nodded his head and finally understood the strong willpower of the people of northwest China. After he had finished his questioning, he took up his pistol and fired three shots at Granny Wu's chest.

This old woman destroyed some of the enemy's strength with her patriotic honesty and wisdom. In her dizzy semiconsciousness before death the wave-like songs, now strident, now deep, of the

northwestern people who were prepared to sacrifice everything to defeat the savage onslaught of the enemy, sounded once more.