A Woman Soldier's Own Story
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF XIE BINGYING

Xie Bingying

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Suddenly I felt cold and lonely. "We will meet at the front. I hope you will join the army too."

He did not answer. His eyes were glittering and wet. So this was farewell. Without another word I saw him to the school gate. When I returned, my eyes were filled with hot tears.

much of China at that time. The Northern Expedition was their joint military effort aimed at doing this.

In June 1926, Chiang Kai-shek became commander in chief of the hybrid forces comprising the Northern Expedition. In August, Chiang's army successfully defeated the warlord general Wu Peifu in the tri-city area of Wuhan. Hankou fell first, then Hankou, and then Wuchang. In late 1926 and the early months of 1927, Xie Bingying attended military school in Wuhan. In the spring of 1927, she marched away to war for the first time in her life.

The alliance of the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party was edgy, fraught with danger, and not destined to last long. The Guomindang was supported by the moneymen classes, while the Chinese Communist Party sought to put power in the hands of the people. Xie Bingying was often caught between these opposing and very uncertain political currents. As political power shifted this way and that, she frequently found herself persecuted for beliefs and activities that, a little earlier, people had praised.—trans.

AS LONG AS I LIVE I'LL NEVER FORGET MY SECOND BROTHER, FOR IT was through his strength that I succeeded in becoming a soldier.

During the summer recess in 1926 I accompanied him to Yuelu Hill, where he went to convalesce from his tuberculosis. My mind was still overwhelmed by that smiling image of love, my spirits were drained, and all day long I scarcely spoke a sentence. I spent my time reading Peony Pavilion, The Swallow Letter, Western Chamber, Story of the Lute, and all sorts of silly books like that, and this made my brother so angry that one day he finally wrote Father a letter telling him of my behavior. He also scolded me so severely that even today his words burn in my brain: "Women are truly useless. The alarm bell for the era has rung, and yet here you are, still snoring in your dreams. All these books tell the same tale of dissipated scholars and beautiful women—you should have stopped reading such stuff long ago, and dumped it all. You are an intelligent young woman and very fond of modern literature—so why don't you read writings about revolution?"

He began to give me books about the ABCs of Communism and the basics of socialism, and other volumes about social sciences and revolutionary theory. As my interest in these books grew more intense, that love image in my mind began to slowly fade. Also, the subject of my writing
changed. I had many opportunities to be in close contact with farmers in the village, and I began to write essays about their lives and their sufferings. Some of these were published in the Popular Daily News, of which my youngest brother was chief editor. Sometimes he corrected a few words for me. Other times not a single word was altered. My second brother said my writing was improving from essay to essay, and this made me extremely happy.

One morning, on the day before I was scheduled to take the entrance test at the military school, I met with my second and youngest brothers in the dormitory of the Mingde Middle School. We discussed the question of whether I should become a soldier.

"I am opposed to her going into the military," was my youngest brother’s comment. "Military life is dry and mechanical, all absolute obedience, day after day—stand at attention, 'stand at ease.' Her brains will become slow and simple. Soldiering is hardly suitable for a person with literary talent—not to mention that she may not be strong enough to stand that sort of physical hardship."

"You are quite wrong," replied my second brother. "If she wants to create uncommon literature that is full of blood and energy, then she must live an uncommon life. Becoming a soldier is a good way to do that—a way to train her body, to nurture her thinking, and to supply her with material for her literary efforts. There would be only advantage, no harm whatever."

Naturally, his view was correct. My youngest brother did not argue. He was forced to abandon his view.

Anyway, I knew I had to go—even if they all opposed me. For otherwise, Mother would have forced me to get married that winter. To escape that fate I had to get away from Changsha. But where should I go? I was a child, not yet twenty, with not even half a coin in hand. Where could I head to?

My second brother was especially sympathetic, for he had suffered greatly from the pain inflicted by his arranged marriage. He strongly urged me to become a soldier. "This is the only way to free yourself," he said. "Only by joining the revolution will you solve your marriage problem and your problem of finding a future."

I believe that what motivated nine out of ten of my female schoolmates to become soldiers, in those days, was their wish to escape the pressure of their feudal families and to search for their own futures. Yet as soon as we had put on our uniforms and were holding guns and clubs, our motives changed. For who would not wish, in such a moment, to shoulder the burden of the people’s revolution, to build a rich and strong Republic of China?

Without letting our families or schools know, we female students went secretly to take the test at the military school. Those of us who passed it had dancing faces. Our ecstasy could not be described in words.

I REMEMBER IT was an afternoon of pouring rain as 250 of us bold youths, both male and female, gathered at Changsha’s East Station to await the train that would carry us away. Many old ladies and young girls came to send us off. Secretly they all wiped away tears with their handkerchiefs, but we were not in the least sad. Chubby little Shurom told them, "You shouldn’t cry. You should encourage us to dash ahead with bayonets and kill the enemy."

Just at that moment a young man all soaked by the heavy rain ran breathlessly up to me. To my surprise, he handed me a thick pink letter. He was a friend I had not known very long, an editor for the Spark magazine. I did not open his letter, not even after we had reached Wuchang, though I knew this was quite unfair of me.* Ever since the day I had determined to obliterate from my mind a certain beloved image, I had vowed that if ever again someone offered me his passion, I would smother it with ice water.

Fifty of us women crowded together in one boxcar with no place to sit. We used our suitcases as seats, as if we were refugees. The boxcar, which was built for hauling horses and freight, had two iron doors but not one small window. We were suffering considerably from being caged in the dark, so we opened our throats and began to sing very loudly.

And as soon as we began to sing, the male students also took up our song. What commotion! We wanted to celebrate the beginning of a new life, a

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*Wuchang, one of the three cities of the Wuhan tri-city area, is about 180 miles north of Changsha as the crow flies. The Central Military and Political School, which Xie Bingying hoped to attend, was located in Wuhan. —trans.
AT PERHAPS FIVE O'CLOCK IN the afternoon the train stopped at a station without a name.

Shurong and I jumped off in a great hurry and ran toward the village. Many people stared at us in surprise, but no one intervened or tried to stop us.

We had courage enough to become soldiers, but we dared not ask where the toilet was. How utterly disgraceful that we lacked even the simplest knowledge of the world. What fools. It was our first train journey, but why were we so timid?

Three or four hundred feet from the station we used a toilet in someone's house. We hurried back outside but the train had vanished. Frantically—crazily—we ran onto the tracks to chase it. Our four eyes stared straight ahead. Our toes smacked rocks and our heels banged rails. Short and chubby Shurong fell down, barely managed to get up. After another couple steps she fell again. Knew falling. Pitiful! Can there really be idiots in this world who don't know they can't run as fast as a train?

"We can't catch it, let's go back," I said, disappointed.

We had no idea how far we had run. Already the station was out of sight. Dark and gloomy woods stood thick on either side of us. Not a house, not a person to be seen. Quickly we turned and headed back along the tracks the way we'd come. We were a little frightened, also disappointed, and blamed ourselves for being so foolish.

"Stupid pigs." Shurong was nearly in tears from anxiety. "Really, two stupid pigs."

"I am just a village fool," I said. "I have never ridden a train. But you are from Liling. So why didn't you know the train had no toilets, and how long it would stop at each station?"

My questions made her even more distressed. "It's really like bumping into a ghost," she said, "two village fools stumbling into each other—am I not just like you?"

Our spirits were crushed.

We went back to the house where we had just said our numerous thank-yous, and there the middle-aged woman remarked (in a tone that suggested she took pleasure in our predicament)—"Well, the train has left, so what are you going to do?"

"Wait for the next."

"Oh? Then, don't just stand there. Get back to the station."

Feeling tremendous gratitude for her advice, we instantly headed back toward the tracks, running just as we did when chasing the train, feeling like children lost in deep mountains who have suddenly seen a guiding star that seems to show them the way.

But at the station we waited an hour, two hours. Still no light of the Changsha train. Now earth was plunged in blackness. Again, we were frightened. Where could we sleep this night, two village maidens with empty pockets? Who would take us in? Many peddlers kidnap young women and sell them—what if we met such a person?

I thought I glimpsed a shadow rushing toward us with open arms. I drew back and said, with shaking voice, "Shurong, let's get out of here."

We held hands tightly and groped our way through darkness to another village.

"Lady shopkeeper, please open up."

Through a crack in the door we could see people eating by an oil lamp. We knocked lightly.

From inside came a voice, "Who's there? Don't stand at our door."

This cold, cruel, and severe voice had already smothered our considerable courage. My two legs suddenly went soft and couldn't move. "Let's try another house," I whispered.

Shurong said softly, "Lady shopkeeper, pity us. Please open the door."

Now came a voice from another house nearby: "Go somewhere else—we do not have food or money here." It was the voice of an old lady, a gentle voice.

"Granny, we are not beggars. We are girl students, just now dropped off the train."

Two men from some other house heard our voices and called in a leering manner, "Come to us!"

We immediately turned our backs on them and avoided their gaze, as if we had encountered a tiger. The two disgusting villains followed close
behind us as we hurried to the door of another house to beg for help. This
time we found our salvation. An old woman heard our voices and quickly
opened the door—though her expression faltered when she saw us, and she
suddenly looked very unhappy. The reason? Her daughter-in-law was
about to give birth and, according to superstition, if a male entered the
house at this moment, the new child would be a boy.

"Granny, may we stay the night here? We were unable to catch up with
the train."

"No, we are busy and can’t keep you. My daughter-in-law is giving birth.
Go find another place."

"It is late; we don’t know the road. Dogs will bite us. We have no idea
where to go. Please tell us, Granny."

Perhaps she pitied us. Or maybe she just feared we would not leave her
alone. In any case, she guided us to a store run by a widow and her daughter.

Many villagers gathered to gawk, as if we were two strange creatures
dropped from the sky. The widow took us in. She was very courteous and
treated us most affectionately. When we had eaten her excellent meal and
were full, she put bedclothes on top of two counters so we could sleep. I was
slightly relieved that we were sharing the room with both mother and
dughter.

But we couldn’t sleep, just talked the entire night until the sky was light.

Early in the morning I gave our hostess the only yuan in my pocket.
Then, still acting like a couple of village fools, we timidly walked to the for-
gn-style building next to the railroad tracks. A man wearing dark glasses
came out of his office and asked us, "Are you the students who were on
your way to take an exam at the Central Military and Political School? Are
you the ones who came on the train from Changsha yesterday afternoon,
at two o’clock, and got off here?"

"Yes—but how did you know?"

"Well, why didn’t you report here earlier? Every station along the line has
been sending telegrams to ask about you two—and now people have been
dispatched to come and find you. Go quickly and wait for the train. Don’t
be late. The Changsha express will be arriving soon."

Only then did we breathe easier. We kept bowing to him at a ninety-
degree angle. But he didn’t even notice. Already he had hurried off to send
a telegram.

Soon we were jumping on the train. We spotted our classmate, Li, and
we shouted happily, "What! You are here too?"

"Deputy Qiu sent me to find you. He said you are such excellent students
that we cannot afford to lose you."

Shurong and I laughed until our guts hurt. Who would have thought
that we two supposedly excellent students could also be such stupid and
pathetic village fools?

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IT SEEMS LAUGHABLE and unbelievable: I was expelled from the military
school before I had so much as crossed through its gate.

The recruiting committee was supposed to accept only one hundred
males and twenty females, but more than three thousand students took the
exam and most passed it with high grades. So the applicants asked for the
quota to be increased, and the committee finally agreed to accept two hun-
dred males and fifty females as students. When we arrived at Wuchang,
however, we were told that orders had just come down from the top stating
that the specific purpose of this recruitment was to train talented people to
be revolutionary leaders in each province, and this meant each province
must have the same number of candidates in the program. Too many had
been accepted from Hunan, so the number had to be cut back by about
two-thirds—to just eighty males and twenty females. The committee
decided to make the cut by giving a second exam.

When this news reached our ears we all felt stricken with despair, as if a
death sentence had been proclaimed. Our brilliant future again seemed
obscure.

"No, we absolutely refuse to be screened, and we demand that the entire
group enter the school." A male schoolmate said this, and everyone fol-
lowed his lead, saying, "We oppose a second exam. We want everyone to
enter the school, unconditionally."

Big Sister Tie and a male schoolmate named Li gave the most stirring
speeches. Big Sister Tie stood up from the crowd to thunderous applause
and addressed us in a loud, hoarse voice:

"Fellow students, dear sisters! We came here to become soldiers after
having committed ourselves to making this sacrifice. We escaped from our
families in order to offer ourselves to the revolution. Our goal is to save the suffering people—and our suffering selves. The very fact that we female students are entering the military is an unprecedented example of breaking away from Chinese tradition.

"If the government now looks upon males and females as equals, and gives us the opportunity to devote our lives to our country and our people, then it will be a blessing for us as women as well as a glory for the entire human race. But now, just when everyone is exhilarated at this prospect, we suddenly receive news that there will be a reduction by 150 names. This greatly distresses us. Fellow students, let us consider. If in fact we are sent back home, what will we do? Our families won’t recognize us as daughters, and our schools won’t accept us as students. Where will we go?

"All of us have the revolutionary spirit, all of us have decided to sacrifice ourselves—and now is there suddenly no opportunity for us, no place for us? The revolution can only move forward. There can be no retreat. We are not willing to turn back—everyone must enter the military school."

These steely sentences roused every heart. All of us were opposed to taking another exam. We demanded that the entire student body be allowed to enter the school, unconditionally. Within five minutes we formed a committee to oppose a second exam. That afternoon the entire student body lined up and crossed the river to submit our petition to Secretary Tang of the Hankou military committee. The main body of our group stood outside while ten selected to serve as representatives went in to hand over the petition. We promptly received a satisfying and hopeful answer. He said that he would immediately send a telegram to Nanjing to ask for instructions. He also agreed to help us as best he could, so that we might all have an opportunity to join the revolution.

Three days passed. Still we heard no news. But on the morning of the fourth day a male schoolmate ran breathlessly to Gaosheng Inn, where we female students were staying. He said, "Not good, not good—all the students from Hunan must go to take the second exam. Those who don’t will not be allowed to enter the school. Also, a notice has been posted announcing that the ten representatives have been expelled."

"What? The representatives are expelled? Then . . . I . . ." This was like hearing a thunderclap in the middle of the night. I was shocked speechless. I knew perfectly well that to have been selected as a representative, and to have acted for the benefit of everyone, had not been a reckless gesture—and that I would never regret sacrificing myself—yet my heart was filled with inexplicable sadness.

On the following day the newspaper published a story telling of the expulsion of the student representatives and announcing that the exam had been rescheduled for students from Hunan. I felt even more heartbroken when I saw my name in print. It seemed to me that if I now could not become a soldier, I would surely never find another future into which to escape.

My second brother read the news of my expulsion and became very anxious for me. He comforted me and then went to talk with the dean of the military school. But the dean’s only response was, "No way. The order came down and I cannot retract it."

My brother kept insisting, "My sister is really a brave child, and she has no hope for a future unless she joins the revolution. Kindly think of some way to accept her."

"It is just not possible. Send her, instead, to take the test to get into the class in political training."

Nothing could be done. My brother was met with utter refusal. He had no choice but to leave.

The military committee was aware that the second exam to get into the military school had to weed out more than a hundred students from Hunan, yet the committee felt it would be a shame to dismiss us and force us to return home. To accommodate these future unnamed heroes, they opened the eight-month political-training class in Hankou. Big Sister Tie and the eight male representatives who had been expelled, plus those schoolmates who were not selected for the military school, went to take the test for the class, but I still lay in bed, fretting and feeling depressed, and awaiting news from my brother.

"Sister, I know a way!" my second brother cried, leaping with joy. "The large group of students from the North has not yet taken their exam—quickly, change your name and claim a new native province, and report to take the test."

Here was a rare and dangerous opportunity. If ever the school found out, I would surely be made to suffer. But so strong were my hopes for the future, and so ardent my desire to enter the military, that I could not have cared less.
I picked up the application form and sneaked off to register. I wrote down Xie Bingying in the space for my name, and Beijing as my native place.

"Why didn't you bring your school certificate?" the clerk in the military uniform asked sternly.

"I don't have it. Perhaps it will be here in two days. Our certificates of attendance are in the hands of a leader who will be arriving the day after tomorrow." I hoped I would get by this difficult barrier in peace.

Now another clerk, standing in front of me and watching me fill in the form, said, "You are from Beijing? Why do you speak the Hunan dialect?"

"Yes, I am from Beijing. I speak the Hunan dialect because I followed my father to Hunan when I was young and I grew up there."

"You are not one of those representatives who were expelled?" He stared at me like a detective.

"What are you saying? I don't understand." My manner was calm but I could not keep my heart from jumping.

Suddenly, just as my situation was becoming difficult, a big crowd of applicants arrived and the clerks no longer had time to continue questioning me. Luckily.

All my schoolmates from Hunan knew that I had falsified my native place and was taking the test a second time, but they were sympathetic. The school never learned a thing. On the day of the test more than a thousand young men and women from the North all crowded toward the examination hall; I sneaked in among them. The only sound I heard was the northern accent made with a curled tongue; I felt like I had arrived in Beijing. Nearly all the men and women were tall, with coarse dark skin that glowed with health and beauty. Their faces were full of friendly smiles, and my first impression of them was that they were earnest and sincere.

My character is like that of northerners, I thought. Except for the fact that I am short and small and that my skin is too white—and that my speech is different—I could easily pass as a northerner.

During the two-day exam I was always the first to turn in my papers, and I could not tell whether this was because I was answering too carelessly or because the questions were too easy. Each time I turned in my paper, a few proctors noticed me, swerving their eyes toward me as if on cue. At those moments I feared they might discover my secret. My heart felt as frightened and flughty as if it were hanging in the sky.

"Congratulations, you tested number one or the exam."

When Mr. Wang happily told me this news, I simply could not believe him. I feared he must be playing a joke on me—perhaps he meant exactly the reverse of number one.

With a happy and frightened heart I flew to the place where the results were posted, the Academy of Hunan and Hubei. I raised my head and, sure enough, I saw my name at the very top. From the depths of my heart rose a victorious smile.

Trooper, warrior! In a few days I would be starting the life of a soldier. What joy! On the way back I talked to myself, all smiles.

That evening my second brother invited me and a few of his friends to supper. He ordered extra food and asked me to drink wine with him. All this seemed beyond my wildest dreams—that I, who had been expelled, could on this day experience such happiness.

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I REMEMBER IT all very clearly.

On the afternoon of November 25, 1926, we moved into the female company of the Central Military and Political School. As I entered the gate, I saw huddled groups of young women in flowery clothes. They were pressing their heads and ears close together as they talked. On some of their faces I saw expressions of sadness and distress. One girl was standing behind her friend, secretly wiping her tears on her sleeve.

"Why cry? If they won't let us go out today, we will wait for tomorrow."

I figured they were speaking about being allowed to go outside the school grounds. Softly, I asked a fellow student, one who had moved in earlier, "What's happening? You mean to say that even those of us who moved in today are not allowed to go out?"

"Right, no one can go out. Rumor has it we won't be allowed to go out until we have been here a month."

Just at that moment a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old private blew a bugle, Di-di-di-DA-DA-DI-DA. Three officers simultaneously walked out of their living quarters. I was transfixed: one of them was a woman dressed in a combat uniform. She wore yellow woolen puttees, just like the men.

The very tall male officer shouted for our group to line up. We all crowded into a chaotic line. A few schoolmates giggled as they watched the arrogant expression on the female officer's face.
“Hurry! No laughing. Line up quickly.” This was the tall male officer speaking.

We stood for a whole hour before we were divided into three troops and lined up according to our height, tallest to the right. I was number thirty-three of the third troop. Many students were taller than I, but more than ten were shorter. I touched Zheng Meixian’s shoulder and said, “You’re so little, how can you carry a gun?”

“Ha! Do you think you are so terrifically big yourself? You’re a little soldier, just like me.”

We received a warning; “No talking.”

All the others looked to their left. I lowered my head, feeling awful.

Five baskets of uniforms were carried out and each of us was issued gray cotton clothes, a hat, a pair of rubber-soled shoes, a pair of straw shoes, two pairs of black cotton socks, one pair of gray puttees, and a leather belt more than an inch wide. After these had been distributed, the tall male officer (I later learned he was the company commander) showed us how to put on the puttees, how to fasten the leather belt, how to wear the hat, and how to salute. “Now quickly return to your dormitory,” he said, “Take off your young ladies’ clothes and put on your military uniforms. From this moment on you are no longer pampered young ladies but women soldiers.” We all laughed, and the commander continued speaking: “Most important, you must wipe the makeup off your faces, leaving not a single trace. All hair must be cut uniformly short. In fact, it will be best if you shave your heads clean, like ours.”

We all groaned in shock.

The commander quickly altered his amiable manner: “You must face the fact that in coming here you will not live the comfortable and romantic life of young ladies, as you did when you were studying literature. You are all soldiers entering the company, and the duty of a soldier is to obey rules, to obey officers, to be orderly, to be serious, to endure hardship, to do grueling work.” The commander spoke in one breath, and suddenly everyone’s spirit was lifted—for it was true that from today on we were part of a company of soldiers, where habits from the days of studying literature must be forgotten.

After we were dismissed we took the gray clothes to the dormitory to change, and there I heard many voices whining.

“I will be too cold if I take off my leather coat.”
“The hat is like a farmer’s bamboo rain hat.”
“I have never in my life seen socks like these.”
“Lord—the clothes are too big. I look like I’m singing in a puppet show.”

At this last comment we all burst out laughing.

In the dining hall we finished our meal in ten minutes flat, but we could not leave until the officer-of-the-week shouted, “Stand up.” We again lined up and then were dismissed.

That evening Captain Zheng of the female company gave a speech on discipline. He was tall and very thin, a little younger than forty, and his face was so pockmarked that, if I were to exaggerate, I would say it resembled a pineapple. He seemed very honest and refined, with manners not at all military. He had a very strange way of saluting: after the salute he flung his five fingers away from his face as if he meant to slap the ears of someone standing nearby. One schoolmate could not help laughing at this quirk, and the rest of us joined in. A warning glance from the company commander subdued us. The captain’s voice was gentle, but he had one habit of speech we could not help smiling at: he ended almost every sentence with the word time. For instance, he said, “When each of you comrades arrived here you made up your mind to make sacrifices, that time. Now you must extinguish all romantic thoughts, this time. You must get rid of bad habits like dependency and laziness, this time.”

Sometimes he even used the phrase “this time’s time.” When he did, we laughed until our stomachs hurt. Even the company commander had to bite his lower lip.

After the speech came roll call, and then—since we had just arrived and there would be no drill today, and because in the morning we would be required to get up at five-thirty—we were sent off early to bed. But how could one sleep? The eight o’clock night watch had just sounded, and I was lying in a barren room with more than forty strangers, and my bed was a hard plank. On the plank were white sheets, a gray blanket, a thin coverlet. A small white pillow matched the sheets and reminded me of the pillow in my cradle when I was three. Our beds were neat, clean. But a few of the young ladies had been accustomed to sleeping on spring beds with silken covers, and naturally they had complaints.

The female political director came in to check our dormitory. She
seemed concerned about us and looked after us as tenderly as a mother. “No talking after lights out or you will be punished tomorrow.” Instantly, the atmosphere turned still and serious. She shined her flashlight on each bed. She told us not to cover our mouths with the bedcover and not to kick off the bedclothes and not to catch cold.

That night we entered a new world.

_Bong. Bong. Bong._ I was startled awake by the watch in the dead of night. I opened my eyes. Pale moonlight whitened the room and made me feel as if I were lying in a cold and silent hospital. From each person’s nose and mouth rose snoring sounds that mingled to create a night symphony. I could not sleep anymore. I thought how in only a few hours we would be carrying guns and sticks, marching to the cry of “one-two-three-four.” _Soldier._ What a powerful word! I would not have believed that we Chinese women, repressed by ancient custom for thousands of years, would see the day when we would become soldiers. Now we must work hard to carry out our responsibility, to change society, to destroy the powers of feudalism.

A thousand beautiful and inexhaustible hopes rushed through my brain like shooting stars. If it had not been night, I would have jumped up and shouted.

My schoolmate in the next bed awoke when she heard me yawn. In a quiet voice she asked, “Do you know what time it is? Are we getting up soon?”

“Soon. Three o’clock has sounded.”

At first only the two of us were talking. Then more and more people awoke. At last we all got up, fearing that ten minutes would be too little time for us to dress and make our beds and bind our legs and wash our faces. We all ran to the exercise field; it was not yet four in the morning.

“Hey! What is this? You are all up? The bugle call for reveille has not sounded yet. Too early, too early! Quickly, return to your dormitory.” The company commander had come out of his bedroom. He was bewildered and almost frightened to see such a huge clump of black shadows where the entire company had gathered on the exercise field.

Someone replied, “Officer, we do not dare sleep anymore. We are afraid we won’t awaken when the bugle calls.”

(At that time we didn’t know we were supposed to stand at attention and use the word _report_ whenever we spoke to an officer.)

“You are very enthusiastic, which is a good sign. I hope you will never lose this spirit.”

We began a life of four hours in class, four hours in drill. The rifle was quite heavy, probably weighing more than ten pounds. Six short people like Shurong were not as tall as the gun, and whenever the drill started, the tall people at the front of the line all watched them and laughed. Sometimes the short ones simply could not tug their guns along when we ran, but this happened only in the first few days. After a week they were all transformed into able and spirited sentries.

Strange. After growing used to the chaotic and free life of students, we had suddenly come to live this mechanical and rigorous military life marked by order and obedience. Yet none of us felt pain or discomfort; none of us considered deserting. We did, however, think that the rule restricting us to a single leave per month during our three-month training period was too strict.

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WINTER. SNOWFLOWERS DRIFTED over the earth. While other people slept in sweet dreams, we stamped our neat footprints into clean snow. We opened our mouths wide and shouted, “One-two-three-four!”

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AFTER WE HAD LEARNED the song of struggle, everyone went about singing it:

“Study quickly, quickly drill,
Strive to lead the people.
Feudal shackles—smash them all,
Smash romantic dreams.
Fulfill the people’s revolution
Wonderful, wonderful women!”
When we sang the phrase “smash romantic dreams,” we raised our voices to encourage ourselves and to warn the world that none must fall in love during the days of revolution.

The God of Spring sent breezes that made a person feel warm and drunk, wafting sweet love seeds and scattering them in the hearts of young men and women, blowing life’s energy into their bodies. But loud cries of “Charge!” and “Slaughter the enemy!” awakened the young from their delusory dreams: one after another they rushed out of their pink palaces and strode toward society’s battlefield, now strewn with countless skeletons and swept with the smell of blood. Discarding their selfish love, they replaced it with love of country and love of the people.

A few of our comrades did fall in love, but their first condition was that their mates must share their ideals, must be willing to sacrifice all for the revolution. In short, they practiced revolutionary romance.

Common sense would say that those who had tasted the repression and pain of ancient custom would feel a greater need for love’s comfort once they were freed from their iron cages, but actually the opposite was true: they were not intrigued by the mystery of romance, did not even regard it as very important. Their most urgent desire was encompassed in a single word: 

revolution. They staked their future and their happiness on their revolutionary work. Romantic love, they believed, is mere selfishness. One’s life ought to create happiness for all to enjoy. To those who believed strongly in offering their lives to their country and its people, romance seemed merely a toy for young ladies and young men of the idle class.

Such, in those revolutionary days, was our view of romance.

ONE MORNING DURING my second month in the company, the officer on duty handed me a thick letter. It was heavy, weighed like lead in my palm. My schoolmates smiled and watched me, thinking that here was another sweet love note from someone. The instant I saw the writing on the envelope my body turned numb. I felt as if I had been electrocuted. My mind whirled. At last our group was dismissed. I skulked off to a corner of the exercise field and tore open the letter.

What? When I saw that the paper was smeared with blood stains and sloppy writing, I hadn’t the courage to read it. Quickly I put it into my pocket. Had it fallen into my hands two months earlier, I would have considered it precious. Now I was not in the mood. My views had changed utterly. I had dedicated my life to my country, had vowed to escape this selfish love that drains ambition. I felt like tearing the letter into pieces and tossing it into the wastebasket or burning it so not a trace would remain. And yet I was inconsistent; I did not have the courage to destroy it. In the end, I read it, this sad and passionate plea. He said that he hoped I would accept his sincere love, that he was willing to stand with me forever on the battle line to fight, that he was willing to sacrifice his life for our country. On the final page he had written the words symbol of the tide of blood in his own blood.

Seeing these words, I recalled what I had written in my own diary about my first love, and I felt very sad—but fortunately for only a split second. The bugle call to assembly sounded and I quickly ran to fall in with the troop.

Shurong whispered in my ear, “Whose love letter?”

I shook my head. Tears almost fell.

Shurong was my good friend. We told each other everything. That evening I let her read the letter. She sighed and said, “Ohhh, unfortunately, he’s not a comrade. . . .”

From other sources I learned that his ideals were the reverse of mine. What was there to say? Finished! Finished!

Still, I was moved to write him a short letter, asking him to come to Wuhan immediately and join the military. Several months passed and I received no reply. At last I realized that his letter must have been written in the flush of momentary emotion, that he was not able to put down his pen and pick up a gun. Then I knew I could not love him, that I must let his memory fade forever from my mind.

RONGZHEN WAS A FEMALE SOLDIER who liked to put on a little powder and wear nice clothes. One day she sneaked away to see her lover without applying for leave, so the moment she returned she was sent to the isolation cell, where she was given neither food nor a single drop of water.
guard at her door didn’t dare to give her food even though they were fellow students. And whenever the officer in charge saw us stopping to visit her after we had come out of the washroom, he would immediately stiffen his face and say, “You must be thinking about joining her. Good, I’ll lock you up together.”

She had been locked up for three days and still there was no news of her release. Everyone was anxious for her and felt that Commander Yang’s punishment was perhaps a bit too harsh. We felt that he should be more lenient toward a female soldier—especially since she was only a first-time offender. Shurong and I were particularly sad. Sometimes we sneaked her steamed buns, and each time we did this we saw that her eyes were filled with tears. She lay on a hard plank and had only one gray blanket. Her toilet was in her cell. Every day she had only two bowls of white rice and one bowl of salt water. I went to the commander and asked why she was not given a dish of food to go with the rice. He replied, “Only those who have disobeyed rules are in the isolation cell. She is a criminal now and she must suffer this kind of treatment. If she lives and eats like you do, then everyone will want to break the rules.”

“When will she be freed?”

“We only need her to admit her mistake. Then she will be released tomorrow.”

The original regulation specified that she should be locked in isolation for three days. Who would have guessed that Rongzhen was so strong-minded that she would refuse to admit her mistake and that two more days would be added to her sentence? Then she got into trouble again by complaining about the toilet and asking for improvement in her bed and her food. The commander said that she was deliberately causing trouble, and he added another two days to her sentence. News spread throughout the school that Rongzhen was locked up for a week. All were very concerned that their day too would come. When she was released, her face seemed to have aged considerably and her spirit seemed less lively. We surrounded her and asked:

“What was the taste of life in the black room?”

“Did you sacrifice yourself for love?”

When we joined the company, we lived by this code: “Military orders are like a mountain, party regulations like iron.” Every day at least two of us had to stand at attention as punishment for returning late from leave or for laughing while standing in the food line. Although I never stayed in the isolation cell, I was punished numerous times by being made to stand at attention.

I regret to say that I deserved punishment from the start. I had entered a military school that had strict rules and that treated us exactly as if we were already soldiers, yet I naturally loved the arts, loved freedom, and I refused to change my childlike disposition. On one occasion the commander found in my desk drawer little ducks, cats, foreign dolls, little drums, and cymbals. After that he often scolded me, saying, “Those who study literature are romantics—they cannot be revolutionaries.”

This so provoked me that I not only let him confiscate my little toys but took several novels that I had brought from Changsha and flung them into the corners of the storage room and never read them. Every day my eyes encountered books about the problems of the farmers’ revolution, the history of global revolution, about economics, politics, military affairs, and so on. One book in particular, The Foot Soldier’s Exercise Manual, I read so often that I could nearly recite more than half of it from memory.

Perhaps I was proof of the old saying that rivers and mountains are easily moved but natural temperaments cannot be altered. Though I was able to control my emotions, and though I had made up my mind to train my character like steel, I could never escape my childish spirit. I still remember the time we had field exercises and no sooner had the bugle sounded for us to rest than I immediately threw down my gun and decided to play. I climbed onto the back of a water buffalo.

Lieutenant Wang was furious. He came over to reprimand me. I answered him with a smile, “Lieutenant, the school has no horse for us to practice riding, so I can only ride on the buffalo.”

These words made the lieutenant and all my schoolmates laugh.

IN 1927 WE PASSIONATELY celebrated the bright-red May, dyed with the blood of dead revolutionaries.* Apart from those cold-blooded animals

*As she describes the revolutionary events in Wuhan in 1927, Xie Bingying alludes to the revolutionaries who were killed in Shanghai by the British in the May Thirtieth incident of 1925.—trans.
who opposed the revolution, every person—old and young, even women with bound feet—raised their fists to urge defeat of the warlords and imperialists. All people stood beneath a single revolutionary flag waving in the sky. In all minds was deeply engraved the single belief that tomorrow is our world, a day when a new society would be born—for yesterday we had discarded the shackles of slavery and had become humans.

The overwhelming power of the masses was impossible to resist. The alliance of thousands and thousands of hearts allowed us to regain possession of the British Concession after only an hour. Laborers, students, soldiers, and the common people took over the land that had been tightly gripped by the imperialists, and they did so without wasting a single bullet or drop of blood. It was inspiring. More than ten foreign war vessels had dropped anchor in the Yangzi River, and their sailors had set up machine guns on the shore. But when they saw our united forces fiercely thrusting forward, these imperialists (not to mention their children and grandchildren to come) began vanishing, shitting and pissing with fear, and scattering to the far corners. They lost their machine guns to our forces. Their sailors—the executioners who had operated the machine guns—clambered back onto their vessels.

This was the first time I had witnessed the power of the masses.

This victory helped raise the confidence of every citizen. The final victory would surely belong to us, if only we were united and unafraid to sacrifice.

In bloody May the international workers' representatives arrived at Wuhan, the heart of the revolution. Leaders of labor revolts and peasant revolts also came. Every day we were busy welcoming them, drilling soldiers for military review, publishing special issues, writing slogans and handbills.

Huge red banners with slogans were hung in the schools and in the three towns of Wuhan.* On the day of the welcoming ceremony the revolutionary leaders from each country brought us love on behalf of their own brothers, and we gave our love in return, and our powers were united. Old Man Tom, who was in his seventies, pulled from his pocket a red silk cloth as large as a flag and waved it in the air after he had finished his speech. He jumped up and shouted, "Long live the success of world revolution!"

People on and off the platform also jumped and shouted.

The more than twenty thousand people standing on the vast field all went crazy, as if the world revolution would succeed tomorrow. They all forgot the darkness of repression and looked only at the brightness of revolution. No one felt pain; all knew only happiness. From each individual standing in the crowd a joyous heart flew upward into the sky, like a swallow.

In that bright red May, Isadora Duncan’s dance company came to perform at Hankou’s World of Bloody Flower Theater. Under pale green light a group of strong, energetic, and youthful women, all draped in blood-red silk, sang, “How we have suffered the pains of slavery and labor!” Their lively synchronized steps and their strong singing roused the passion of all who watched them, and the audience joined in and loudly sang, “The blazing stove completely dried our blood and sweat. . . .”

In the middle of the night countless people swarmed out of the theater, all praising the performance: “Extraordinary! This is the first time I have seen this kind of powerful revolutionary dance.”

The moon shone brightly on the pavement. In the quiet night, people’s humming filled the air.

Also in this bright-red May from factories and huts came young girls and old women with feet like four-inch golden lotus flowers, all going to a meeting at the Horse Parade Ground.

“Walk a little faster, Big Sister Wang. Others have already lined up.”

“My feet hurt.”

“Unbind them quickly! In this revolutionary time you shouldn’t bind your feet!”

“I have no choice. They were bound when I was young.”

Ever since the March Eighth Woman’s Day celebration, most of these women knew that they were as human as men.* But they were pitiful—pairs of feet bound like red peppers. They leaned east and slanted west when they walked. Every time they participated in the mass meetings they would say, painfully: “My feet hurt, can’t move!”

*International Women’s Day, proclaimed at the International Conference of Women in Helsinki in 1910, was celebrated worldwide.—trans.
“You must walk even if you can’t move—this is work we must be part of.”

These were their own words, and what powerful words!

During the bright-red May our throats were hoarse from shouting, our feet had blisters from walking, and we slept only five hours each night. Our footprints were left in factories, huts, schools, and crossroads, at Hanyang Gate and at Jianghanguan harbor.

Ah! May, bright red, dyed with the blood of revolutionaries—I will keep you in my heart forever. But how many of the people who fiercely commemorated you in 1927 would later become heroes themselves?

Suddenly we received an order that the female company must select twenty students to form a propaganda group to accompany the army on its Northern Expedition. The first destination: Henan.*

“Reporting to company commander! I must join the Northern Expedition!”

“Reporting to company commander! I am a northerner, the perfect person for propagandizing northerners!”

“Reporting to company commander! My body is absolutely fit, able, and ready to fight a victorious war—I want to join the Northern Expedition!”

Commander Yang’s room was like a beehive swarming with the comings and goings of our schoolmates. Commander Yang spoke without haste: “Don’t be so noisy. It is not a question of who will join the Northern Expedition but of when you will join. At this time I am selecting only twenty healthy specimens, people who can run fast and who are able to spread propaganda by writing or by speaking. The rest of you will be dispatched later.”

Each person hoped that she would be among the chosen. I was very happy, for I was in excellent health, could run fast, and also could write essays. Why shouldn’t I be chosen?

Sure enough, early the next morning, when Commander Yang announced the names of those who would be going to Henan, I was second on the list. But could it be that I heard him wrong? Surely there could not be two with the same name in the female company. I was crazy with happiness. After we were dismissed I went immediately to pack my bag and to write a letter to my third brother, but I had no idea my brother would actually come to see me two days later, the very next morning after he received it.

“Third Brother! What are you doing here?” I was surprised and delighted.

“Last evening I received your letter telling me you have been dispatched. You wrote with such sadness and such strength that I gave it to the printer to set it up in type, and at the same time I called a ricksha to take me to the East Station. I caught the special express at eight-thirty . . . and here I am.”

His voice trembled a little, tears swimming in his eyes. I feared that I might be influenced, so I quickly focused my eyes on the slogan on the wall, which read, “Revolutionaries do not shed tears, only blood!”

“Maybe our second brother has already gone to Henan, and if so I will surely see him there. You come too, Third Brother. How wonderful it would be for us to meet at the front line.” I glanced at him and forced a smile.

“I don’t dare to tell our family that you have been dispatched. If Father and Mother heard about it, I can’t imagine how sad they would be.”

Honestly, I don’t know why my heart was as hard as a rock at that moment. I shed not a tear, and felt only joy and excitement.

“Can you ask for leave and go out to drink a glass of wine with me?”

“No. The rules become more strict when it is near departure time. If you had not seen the commander and explained how you had rushed here all the way from Changsha, I doubt you could have seen me.”

“Then I must leave immediately and take the train back to Changsha.”

“Yes. And after I return and the war is over, we will drink as much as we like.”

Waiting and more waiting. Our departure date had not been set, and just when the twenty of us were anxious almost to the point of tears, an emergency order came through: the enemy had reached Tingsha Bridge and now the entire company must prepare to fight before enemy troops began advancing on Wuchang. That evening the commanding officer called together all the male and female students and gave us our orders. He organ-
ized us into a central independent division and said we were to set out early the next day. Everyone would go except thirty or more female students who would be left behind to take care of propaganda and ambulance duties.

By five o'clock the following morning we were neatly packed and ready to move out. The scene at our gate was like a river overflowing, a swirling flood of people who had come to say farewell and people who had come to watch the commotion. Next to an officer who wore a slanted leather belt stood several old ladies who were crying and boding at their waists as they begged him:

"My child cannot go to fight the war—she's the only one I have."

"My daughter cannot go. What if something happens to her? I would not be able to live!"

Sounds of weeping, laughing, shouting, bugles blaring.

"Granny, don't be sad. We will fight to victory."

"Granny, don't worry about your daughter. We are all children with parents."

"Forward march!"

The entire regiment began to move forward to the stirring music of crowds cheering, people shouting slogans, our soldiers singing, the sound of bugles.

"Slaughter the enemy, return in triumph!"

The voices of the people rang in our ears like battle drums.

"Slaughter the enemy, return in triumph!"

Crazy with happiness, we echoed the shouts of the crowd. With swelling spirits we headed to the front. . . .

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THE MALE COMPANY had left a day ahead of us and was already opening fire at Tingsha Bridge. Our train stopped. I stuck out my head to look. Suddenly I saw several injured comrades bathed in blood and writhing in pain. Their excruciating cries for help made my heart shudder. Two people were dead, one with his whole head dyed red and the substance of his brain spilling out. The other's eyes were still half open, his arms broken. I asked the lieutenant to let us off so we could save our injured comrades and bury the dead.

"Impossible. The train will be moving soon and the work ahead is more urgent than this. An ambulance corps must be on its way." The lieutenant spoke sternly. I was filled with grief. I began to understand the cruelty of war.

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WE HAD NOT HAD a good meal for three days. Each day we ate at six in the morning and did not eat again until after eight or nine in the evening. But not until we began to march did we realize that a soldier's life is about the most bitter and pathetic life that a human can lead. Sometimes our coarse rice was mixed with husks; eating it was like chewing sand and we couldn't swallow it. The accompanying dish was unspeakable. On the march we carried, for convenience, only a pot of moldy and smelly beans sprinkled with so much salt that we couldn't put them in our mouths. Yet it was curious, when we were hungry, we thought that this coarse hard rice and these stinking beans tasted even better than chicken or fish or meat: they crept into our mouths like dragon pearl rice and slipped down our throats.

June was a sultry month. Our sweat dripped like rain and our clothes were as wet as if they had been soaked in water. We felt very uncomfortable in these clothes, especially when we marched. Our feet burned as if we were walking on a hot stove. The skin on our faces began to peel, layer by layer. Cries of "Hot, hot!" came from all directions. Yet no one complained and no one wished to turn back or desert the company. All were willing to endure the distress and difficulties of the moment. We found our happiness in our struggle for victory.

Our male comrades swam and took baths in the ponds. Sometimes we used pond water not only for washing our faces and our clothes but for drinking.

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*The regiment did not go northwest to Henan Province as originally planned, but instead went to a region about sixty miles south of Wuhan. Among the places Xie Bingying mentions in connection with this "western expedition" are Fengkou, Jiayu, and Xianning. These three towns lie in a straight line running west to east, with Fengkou to the west, Jiayu about thirty-seven miles farther east, and Xianning about twenty-two miles east of Jiayu.—trans.
In the midst of this intensely interesting life I began to write my War Diary. Using my knees as a desk, I wrote every day during the few minutes when we rested from marching, or I would give up sleep and write beneath the bean-size flame of an oil lamp. I mailed my writing to the editor of the Central Daily News supplement, Mr. Sun Fuyuan. Then came the unlucky day that I left my blanket, bundle, water bottle, and rice box on the grass when I went to the toilet next to the railroad tracks. When I came out to get on the train, I found that all my belongings had flown away without wings. At first I thought they must have been taken by a fellow student, but I checked with everyone on the train and no one had seen them. Bad news. I was finished. The diary that I had labored to write (and that I had not read even once) had disappeared, leaving no shadow behind. The shock of this loss, the fatigue of our march (every day we marched an average of thirty miles, sometimes forty), and the frantic work schedule made it impossible for me to continue writing my diary. I wrote only letters and random thoughts. Even now I can clearly recall—as I will forever—each tiny detail of my life in those days. Impressions of each place are vividly etched and still fresh in my mind. Yet it is curious that whenever I begin to write, I feel as if my brain has dried up: the tip of my pen cannot write down my life from that period. A puzzle. Truly an inexplicable puzzle.

IT MUST HAVE BEEN about the tenth day after we had been dispatched to the front that I noticed a schoolmate smiling as he read out loud from the English edition of the Central Daily News, speaking in a very clear voice.
As I walked near him I asked, “What fine article is making you so happy?”
“I’m reading your masterpiece, with great respect—it is quite interesting.”
“Oh, sure. You know my English is poor, so you decide to ridicule me. You really are despicable.” I turned away, angry.
But he impolitely pulled me back by the arm, pointing to the title: MAILED FROM JIAYU. “If you didn’t write this article, who did? Obviously, you are the author. Even without knowing English, you can surely recognize your own name, can’t you? The truth is, it was translated by Mr. Lin Yutang and this is already the fourth article. I was just thinking about looking for the three earlier ones.”
I didn’t believe him until I saw the article with my own eyes. My schoolmates teased me and wanted me to take them out to dinner to celebrate, saying my work would be read overseas. But I really felt no happiness, only shame. For what I had written was very casual and had required no intelligence. What possible value could there be in translating it? This I could not understand, but I didn’t have the courage to write to Mr. Lin and ask why he had bothered.

It was evening. Several schoolmates and I were crowded in a large bed. They had gone to sleep already, but I was still writing beneath the tiny flame of the vegetable-oil lamp.
My essay was translated into English? But no, I just don’t believe it. And yet ... It was my name. Could this be a dream?

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MIXED IN WITH US as part of our troop was a group of farmers. One day these farmers captured three local landowners who had been oppressing the poor. They tied the men up with thick ropes, locked them in a large and dark detention room, and then went almost crazy with joy.

A fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boy pointed his finger at the prisoners. “Hah! You actually lived to see this day!” If he had reached farther through the door—which was made of round wooden posts—he would have touched the face of a white-bearded old man of sixty or so.
The three prisoners were sweating, panting. Their eyes still flashed anger, yet these men had lost their customary pompousness. From the eyes of the white-bearded old man flowed two streams of tears. His hands were tied with a cord. He kept shaking his head. These three had been captured that same day at Chenguang Temple, which was fourteen miles away.

“Why are you crying? For your mother? Do you mean to say no one has sympathy for you?” These words came out of the crowd and seemed to have been spoken by a little soldier.
“Ha-ha! That old villain was also caught—very satisfying, very satisfying!”
“Officer! They are the ones who have repressed us the most. You should shoot them instantly.”
“You should capture their wives and children. Yeah! Their women are terrible.”

“Yeah! Yesterday every life in this village was in their hands, but today their lives are in ours. Ha!”

People poured in like a tidal wave to see these old prisoners. Sounds of victorious laughter mingled with a confusion of other noises. The proud faces of farmers and their wives—and even of young children—were beaming with victory. They all stretched their necks to look into the dark detention room. They jammed themselves in front of the door as if fearing that the prisoners would escape between the cracks.

“Comrades! Please leave—we are going to eat,” said a brave little bugle soldier, jumping forward as he spoke to the crowd. He held in his hand a bugle draped with a large red silk cloth, and he put the bugle to his mouth as if he were about to blow.

Now a burly young farmer forced his way to the front. “Comrades, you all go to eat. We are here to keep guard.”

A gong sounded outside: dang-dang-dang.

“What is that?”

“A meeting for the people.”

The crowd receded like a wave. As they hurried away, several people turned and cautioned us repeatedly, “Comrades, don’t let them escape. Those three are truly contemptible bastards.”

That evening I was on guard duty. I was not in this regiment, but I was substituting for a fellow student who had gone to a meeting. I was very happy about this assignment—though normally I was quite fearful of night guard duty. On a moonless night the blackness and loneliness can be scary: you stand there by yourself, holding your gun, wondering if there might be ghosts about. Tonight, however, my courage was up. My spirits were as buoyant as if I had captured the three prisoners all by myself. I felt indescribably happy. I walked to and fro in front of the cell door, carrying my gun on my back. The oldest man—the one with the white beard and mournful face—began to beg: “Officer, let me go. I am an innocent man. They have arrested me on a false charge.”

Another prisoner even went so far as to kneel down and kowtow to me repeatedly. He was a short man in his forties, thin as a stick, as if he were mere bones wrapped in skin. “Officer, pity me! I have a family of more than twenty, old and young, and they all depend on me to survive. I am no oppr essor of the poor, no part of the landowning gentry. Spare me, Officer—save me!” Tears flowed in two streams from his bulging eyes.

The other man was a nearsighted, opium-smoking ghost with black-stained teeth. He too knelt down and bowed and kowtowed incessantly. But I pretended not to see, turning my face away. I walked back and forth, leisurely.

“What officer are you talking about? I am only a guard. Be quiet. Why all this raucous racket so late at night?”

I had never scolded anyone so loudly in my life. But today I was a guard who was in charge of prisoners—ha! I had to show my authority. Unfortunately, my voice was really not loud enough. They knew I was a female soldier, and they persisted in begging, for they thought a woman’s heart would be soft.

I became more fierce and violent. With every phrase I hit the ground with the butt of my gun: “Save you? Ha! Don’t daydream. Do you know how many people have died because of you? You exploit and oppress farmers. Count how many terrible things you have done in your life.”

Still, they would not stop kowtowing and begging: “Guard officer! I am an upright man. I have never committed any crime. You go and check it out in the village.”

“There is no need for me to check. You were arrested by the people from your village. Look. We have just arrived here. How would we know if you are a criminal?”

“I had a run-in with Wang Sanmazi once, that’s all. And this must be his private revenge. Officer! Save me!” This was spoken by the short one.

“The revolutionary army does not allow private revenge. Today you were arrested by nine hundred people, and they all publicly identified you as local thugs who oppress people, who are criminals. Would this be private revenge? Blind talk!”

“Aagh! My joints will break from pain. Officer, please be merciful and loosen the rope.” The opium ghost howled loudly, as if an injustice had been done to him.

“Be quiet, you bastard. If you cause any more disturbance, you will be dragged away and shot tonight.”

If I had not come down hard on them like that, who knows when the grumbling would have stopped?

Though they did not dare continue their loud protests, they kept on
whining and talking, and this annoyed me considerably. At twelve o’clock the company officer came over to investigate. For an instant—when he shined his flashlight into the room—he was startled: “Ho! Where did the old beard go?”

“By the door.”

“Aa—you must watch diligently. Don’t doze off. If they run away, it will be your head.”

“Yes, Officer,” I said, and I promptly stood at attention and saluted. But already he had hurried off.

The moon hung like a jade plate in the center of the sky. The steaming heat of summer had dissipated completely; cool breeze blew in from the small courtyard. Outside, people were walking to and fro. In the next room four or five female soldiers were discussing what had happened today at the women’s assembly:

“Truly a bastard—he said his wife should not have attended the meeting for women, so when she returned home he used a knife to cut off her ears and slash her eyes.”

“How do you know?”

“Her neighbor came to the barracks to report the incident. The battalion commander then dispatched eight of us to arrest the criminal. Who would have guessed he could escape so quickly? There was no sign of him when we got there.”

“He must have been hiding under the floor, or in the corner of a room, or in the cow corral. You didn’t find him because only a few of you were looking.” This was Shuzhao speaking.

Jizong, captain of the “miscellaneous regiment,” jumped up. “Listen to you! Where didn’t we search? We even used a stick to drag the toilet pit.”

“Ha-ha—do you really think he would hide in the toilet like a maggot in shit?” I joined in and started to chat with them. For a moment I had forgotten my duty.

After a big laugh they all left to go to another meeting. During this time of military emergency we did not distinguish night from day, just kept working.

At last I sat down, wearily. According to military rules, sitting down was absolutely forbidden. But my legs were sore from standing. Four hours had passed and everyone was so busy that no one had come to relieve me. Even so, I dared not be careless, for my duty was to guard the enemy. As I sat on the cold rock I felt infinite pleasure. But my eyes suffered: I had to watch the gate to see if an officer was approaching on night patrol or if a colleague was coming to relieve me. And at the same time, I had to watch the three old reprobates to be certain they didn’t untie their ropes and cause trouble. The cell door was not very sturdy. Had the prisoners been strong men, they might already have broken out.

“Officer, my mouth is terribly dry, give me a little water to drink.”

It was the old beard causing trouble again.

“Wait until the sky is light. Then you will get something to eat.”

“Can’t wait until daylight, Officer. Do a good deed and give us a little water to drink.”

“Even if you plan to cut off our heads, you ought to turn us into ghosts with full stomachs.”

It had not been obvious to me until now that this opium ghost could be so violent.

“I am not going to give you any water, so what will you do about it? Have you reached the point that you are willing to reveal the sort of arrogant bastards you really are?”

The old beard and the dwarf quickly apologized to me. But I, knowing that they would be killed tomorrow, poured a cup of tea and held it to the old beard’s mouth. The opium ghost began struggling to loosen the rope in order to hold the cup himself. I charged at him with my bayonet. Fearful, he politely sat down.

The morning sun rose and now the vast field was crowded with men and women, our comrades among them. Farmer representatives from different villages sat on the chairman’s platform. One of them spoke excitedly and movingly about the crimes that the three prisoners had committed, and each time he described a crime, a loud response came from below the platform:

“Right, right! He was oppressing us just like that, and also—”

“Execution! Execution! Quickly! Quickly!”

“Let me open fire!”

“Everyone gets a slash with the knife!”

“Drag them onto the platform! Let us see the execution!”

When the crime had been proclaimed, the crowd of more than three
thousand could wait no longer. Holding their large rough fists high in the air, they pushed and shoved and shouted.

"The revolutionary army is dedicated to liberating the hardworking farmers and laborers and to giving them their rewards," the chairman told the crowd. "These two country criminals, Wang Fucai and Guo Shoukang, together with the oppressive landowner, Wang Xingxiang, were captured and tied up by you farmers, and you personally brought them here to this army division. At the meeting today representatives from each village proclaimed the prisoners’ twelve serious crimes of oppression against farmers. In addition, more than three thousand people in the audience have raised their hands to support a sentence of death by firing squad. Since this is the will of the farmers . . . of course, we will comply. Now bring them up to the platform to be shot."

"YES!" The crowd shouted.

The chairman’s announcement was soon followed by sounds of pop-pop-pop: the three hated criminals died instantly in a rush of fresh blood.

Waves of laughter and applause and shouting flooded the field where the three corpses lay.

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\AT EIGHT O’CLOCK in the evening we suddenly received orders from the division that the third company was to advance to Qingshanao, more than fourteen miles from Fengkou. We were to go there and protect the city. Intelligence reports said that a small number of injured rebels were hiding in the mountains about halfway along the route of our march and that these rebels might open fire on our army.

"This is the first time since we came to the front that you will be marching at night. A few of you, who have been used to life at school, may be timid and feel unable to take on this kind of hardship. But now you are warriors, willing to sacrifice your lives, so naturally you should not be afraid to suffer. We will be marching at night, first in order to avoid the enemy’s attention, second because we have received an emergency order requiring us to reach our destination before midnight. I have heard that this mountain path is not easily passable. You cannot use flashlights. You must walk carefully. Don’t be nervous or afraid. And don’t make a sound. Even if you fall, just quietly get up. Everyone must keep a hand on his or her gun, to prevent it from hitting against the water bottle and the food tin and making ding-tong ding-tong noises. Remember, everyone must follow the rule of absolute silence. You cannot open your mouths to speak, and you cannot walk with heavy steps. Your footsteps must be as light as a mouse’s—"

When Commander Yang reached this point of his speech, we all broke out laughing.

"What? You are already laughing before you have taken a single step? What nonsense! If anyone laughs later on, while we are marching, it will mean he or she is purposely causing a disturbance to let the enemy know of our presence, and for this the punishment will be severe."

Our smiles did not fade, just floated alongside our mouths—though none of us dared laugh out loud.

"Commander Yang is a born soldier after all. If he had said that our footsteps must be as light as a swallow’s, think how rich with poetry his words would have been." This I whispered into Guanghui’s ear after we were dismissed, and it made her laugh until she cried.

Like a long snake, our troop began to move. At first we could hear the noise of the water bottles hitting the food tins. But later, after several soft reminders by the lieutenant, we heard not even half a sound—except for someone who was wearing new straw shoes that made a sharp tsi-tsi-tsi noise as he walked. Lieutenant Liu stopped.

"Who walks so noisily?"

"Reporting to the lieutenant! It’s no use. I am wearing a pair of new straw shoes, bought just this morning. That’s what is making this rhythmic sound."

This was spoken by Liu Zhuanwan, who seemed inclined to write an essay on the subject.

"Don’t be chattering on. If they make noise again, you will have to take them off and walk barefoot."

Liu was afraid to go barefoot because thorns might stick in his flesh; he walked as lightly as a mouse.

The night was so dark that we couldn’t see our outstretched fingers, couldn’t recognize the person in front of us. Sky and earth were one black mass. We couldn’t possibly distinguish east, west, south, or north. We stepped very carefully, as if treading on thin ice. Suddenly came a sound—
poo-tunk! Someone in front had fallen into the water. Our file stopped temporarily, causing the DING-TONG ding-tong ding-tong sound again.

“Walk! Walk! Those in front walk quickly!”
Again it was the voice of Lieutenant Liu.
“My body is completely covered in mud. I can’t open my eyes.”
Whoever had just climbed out of the water said this, sounding pathetic.
“Keep walking, even if you can’t open them.”
Immediately word traveled through the entire company that someone had fallen into the water. We all cautioned one another: “Walk carefully; don’t fall.”

The road was extraordinarily difficult. Sometimes as we climbed upward we could hear water rushing far below us, loud as a waterfall. We could not see into the depths of the giant chasm, but we could tell from the distant sound of the water that this was a dangerous spot.

“Be careful, you in the back. There is a deep pool here. Everyone walk slowly. It’s no fun to fall.” This voice came from up front.

When we heard “deep pool” we all became concerned. I worried that if I fell down, I wouldn’t be able to get up and the troop would leave me scrambling in mud. Then I would certainly be desperate. Even if I climbed out, I wouldn’t be able to tell directions—and if I took the wrong road, what then? If the enemy comes out now, I thought, we won’t be ready to fight. Surely they are hiding deep in the mountains, whereas we have a cliff to our left and an abyss to our right—so if a fight breaks out, I can’t imagine how many of us will fall poo-tunk, poo-tunk into the water, to become shrimps and frogs.

Someone bravely spoke up and said, “Reporting to the lieutenant. It is too dangerous up ahead. Allow us to use flashlight.”

“You cannot use flashlights. This is a very dangerous place. Injured enemy soldiers may be lying in ambush. Walk slower and stay calm.”

The atmosphere was tense. Yet our curiosity was up. This was our first time on a night march. Perhaps that is why we actually hoped the enemy soldiers would emerge from deep in the mountains so we could welcome them with an attack. I began imagining how we would see nothing at all in this boundless black night except the red lights of exploding bombs, and would hear nothing but the pee-pa! pee-pa! of the guns. Surely, a night scene like that would be beautiful, accompanied by such strong music.

I also thought that at night our courage would swell, our fighting spirit would grow more fierce, since in the dark we would not be able to see the number of the enemy or the mingled blood and flesh of the corpses. The solemnity and stillness of the night was nerve-wracking, yet my energy shot up 100 percent whenever I thought of how we were fighting for truth, for freedom, for our forefathers, for our brothers and sisters. At the same time, I was saddened when I considered how in the dark we would not be able to tell an enemy from our own comrade and would certainly kill many people by mistake.

The deep pool was now behind us. We walked on a little path. To the right and left of us rose tall mountains, enclosing us like windbreaks.

Pa! Pa! Pa!

We heard a few indistinct gunshots. Everyone shivered.

“Stop!” ordered the lieutenant. “Listen. Are those gunshots? If the enemy is ahead, our three rear files must fall back in reserve and the front files must prepare to open fire. But do not fire wildly.”

Everyone became excited and nervous as the lieutenant continued speaking: “Forget fear. The enemy troops are injured, unable to sustain even a single attack. When the time comes to fight, be composed, be courageous, be ready to sacrifice.”

Within three or four minutes the crisis had passed and all was calm once again. Still, I was eager to rush immediately to the front of the column, for I imagined that the enemy might lie waiting there. Our troops walked terribly slowly. I grew impatient. I crowded my way forward, passing close to the ears of those ahead, one after the other.

The class captain reprimanded me: “Why crowd forward like this? You are not allowed to disturb the order.”

“I answered, “I want to get to the very front of the line, to charge with my bayonet.”

Poo-tunk! My right foot suddenly plunged into water, but luckily my left foot stayed on firm ground and I avoided taking a tumble.

“Hey! Who fell this time?” All were concerned.

“Me.” Ashamed, I ran to catch up.

“She talks about charging with a bayonet but she can’t even walk without falling. Oh, ooooooh.”

One fellow mocked me, drawing out his final sigh to such a length that everyone laughed. Even I couldn’t hold back my laughter.

Guanghui couldn’t keep up with me. She had long since fallen behind. Her feet, like mine, had been bound, and hers were even a half-inch shorter.
than mine. Pitiful creature. At age five she had already become a sacrifice for her mother.

Night marching proved quite comfortable. We had to grope our way like blind people, since there was no moonlight or starlight. Yet the clear breeze blew a fragrance of flowers across our faces, and the fragrance penetrated our hearts with the sweetness of ice cream and made us all feel unspeakably happy. The light breeze rushing over the tips of the trees made a clear soughing sound that was absolutely the world's most beautiful music—lovely music that made one drunk.

Everyone strode along silently, each carrying a soul that sought light and revolution. We had walked for three or four hours without stopping to rest, yet no one spoke of weariness. Full of energy, we all hurried to keep up with the troops ahead.

On the sides of the far mountains we suddenly discerned a few red lights, like stars in the sky. Our destination was fast approaching.

"Onward toward the dawn
ahead, oh, Comrades, struggle!"

I was the first to open my mouth in song, and then everyone joined in. A swell of singing swept through the depths of the still, dark night.

§

IT ALL TURNED OUT entirely as we had hoped. The battle lasted a month and four days, and then suddenly the war was over—for the moment—and we were returning in triumph. On this western expedition we had lost more than seventy students and more than a hundred comrades from the education corps. But we had gained several thousand guns, and we had established the foundation for revolution by planting in the mind of every common citizen a belief that could never be shaken. This was our biggest victory: we had taken from the warlords the allegiance of thousands of common people who had met us and who now believed and trusted in us. We had scattered everywhere the seeds of revolution. Having won this victory, we returned from the front.

§

ONLY A FEW shining stars hung in the moonless sky. It was the seventh evening after we had gotten back from the front line. I was sitting at Miss Lu's. She was head nurse for the female company. I was just telling her about our happy and interesting life during the march when suddenly we heard the bugler blow the call for assembly. In three minutes flat the entire school fell into line, reported, and counted off, just as always.

Everyone's eyes fastened on the five male and female officers who stood, with lowered heads on the platform in front of us. We had no notion what they were thinking.

Company Commander Yang began to speak: "Fellow students!"

Strange. All of a sudden his voice seemed so different. Why? It seemed to be trembling. I feared some misfortune had occurred. Sure enough, he was announcing our fate, announcing our death sentence.

"First, please be calm, have courage."

What? Are we again setting out for the front? What is there to be afraid of? Such were my thoughts.

"I have some very unfortunate news. Please try not to be depressed when you hear it. It is common for revolutionaries to suffer obstacles and impediments. We must welcome the challenges and absolutely refuse to lose heart."

What is he trying to say?

"Because the opposition's power is too great, to preserve our revolutionary spirit... there is no way to avoid temporarily disbanding."

This was like a thunder clap in a clear sky or a bomb in the still of night. Stupefied, we scarcely dared listen to any more. But Commander Yang continued speaking, and his voice rang even louder and became more somber:

"Of course, this is certainly not a matter of fear or of giving up our resistance. Whatever happens, we must struggle until the end. Those of you who are healthy and able to run, go follow the Eleventh Army as they set forth. All the rest, return to your families and put up with this temporary disappointment. In the not-too-distant future we perhaps will live happier and freer lives than now."

"Everyone will now receive ten yuan of disbandment money. Quickly, take it and have some clothes made—you can no longer wear your military uniforms."

Why disband us? Our hopes, our beliefs—are they so quickly destroyed?
After Commander Yang had finished his report, each of the other officers gave a grave speech. Their words seared our brains.

“If only your convictions are constant, if always you think of sacrificing for the revolution, then it is all right to become concubines to a warlord, if you have no way to make a living at the moment. But never get so drunk on material pleasures that you forget your own duty. One day you must kill that same hateful warlord. Do this and you will never regret that you have been a warrior, baptized by revolution and trained in military and political tactics, a brave and ambitious and idealistic female.”

These words pierced our hearts like a bright, sharp knife. Many people were crying. And what of our tomorrow? We never thought that our promising tomorrow would prove to be hell. Who would want to be buried in a feudal family? Who?

We did not sleep that night. We sat in a circle on the exercise field and shouted slogans, sang songs, and gave speeches until the sky turned light. The next day the female students from Wuhan returned home, one by one. Flowery and colorful dresses replaced severe and dignified military uniforms. They could not stay in Wuhan, for my feet were injured. I had to return to Changsha with Shuron and Xiang.

Shuron, Xiang, Shanshan, and I all bought the same white silk, and each of us made a long Western-style collarless gown. I say “Western style,” but our dresses were not really like the stylish gowns worn by Western ladies. Ours had no buttons, and each had a peach-shaped collar. We put the dresses on by slipping them over our heads.

All of us had hair that was very short, especially Shuron. Her head was shaved almost like a potato. So no matter how expert we were in applying makeup, people could tell at a glance that until recently we had been female soldiers who had been walking around carrying guns and sticks. Sun had dried and darkened our skin. Months of gripping gun butts had calloused our right palms. These were two other signs by which people recognized us.

Two hot tears fell as I remarked, “After we take off our military uniforms, when will we wear them again?”

Shurong could not help but begin to cry too.

The four of us sat as silent as puppets, staring at our new clothes lying on the bed. None of us wanted to take off our gray military uniform, especially the shiny, slippery, soft leather belt. We remembered how it was when we had put that belt on for the first time, cinching it stiffly around the waist. We had thought it very uncomfortable and troublesome, and whenever we were dismissed the first thing we did was loosen it so we could bend and stretch luxuriously. Sometimes we forgot to put it on when we went to exercise, and for this the lieutenant had bawled us out and punished us by making us stand at attention. But slowly we had grown used to that belt. In the end we seldom allowed our belts to be off our bodies for even fifteen minutes, except when we were sleeping. I came to treat my belt and my gun like my lovers. I needed the belt to tightly bind me, especially in winter, when it kept out the cold wind and kept my body warm. As for the gun, it was more precious than life. I needed it to destroy the old and create a new society.

But now nothing was left. The gun was gone and we couldn’t even keep the leather belt.

Finally came the afternoon when we had to leave Wuchang. We unwillingly changed out of our military uniforms and into our new dresses. They were very much like simple dance dresses. We then went to a very small photo shop and had a picture taken as a souvenir. Because our heads were not fit for public view, we also went to a department store and each of us bought a foreign hat of woven straw.

The hour arrived to board the train. Only Hong came along with us.* What a sad farewell! A month earlier our departure for Xi was grand and awe inspiring. But this time as we left Wuchang the day was thick with clouds, the wind howling and gusting, and every pedestrian’s face seemed as gloomy and overcast as the sky. Freezing weather. Cold anger filled our hearts. We were ruled and beguiled by a strong belief that someday a new China would dawn. If it hadn’t been for this hope, who of us would want to continue living such a miserable life? Wouldn’t the iron tracks be a fine burial ground?

At each station the military police came on board as soon as the train stopped, and the officers questioned each passenger, asking everyone where he or she came from, inspecting each person and each piece of lug-

*Hong appears throughout Xie Bingying’s narrative. He was her comrade in the military and her second brother’s best friend. At some point they had a love affair.” — trans.
gage. Our skin and clothes made the police take special notice of us.* Several times they almost discovered our identities. Fortunately, we were helped by a Mr. Li, who happened to be from Shurong's hometown and who was an assistant officer in a military unit. Whenever the police came aboard, Mr. Li told them we were his relatives and said that we had been studying at a missionary school in Hankou and now were returning home for the summer recess.

When we arrived in Changsha we needed a place to stay, but going to a hotel was out of the question since the four of us had less than six yuan in our pockets. Anyway, we couldn't find anyone to vouch for us. So I boldly took my three companions to see Lan, a girl from my county who had been my schoolmate at Datong Girls School. She and I had been very close friends. I thought she would be the one person who could not refuse to help us. Yet as soon as we entered her door, poor Lan began trembling and whispered in my ear, "Why are you returning now? This is a fearful world. More people are killed than chickens and ducks. My family cannot keep you. Five families must act as guarantors, no matter who the guest is. Do you understand? You must be vouched for by five families. Every day the military police come to inspect several times, not to mention that you just came from Wuhan...!"

What could we do? In everyone's eyes we had become outcasts. To be fair, though, we ought to have forgiven Lan for not daring to keep us in her house. No doubt she had problems of her own.

Shurong and Shanshan went home the next day. Because my feet were hurting terribly, I had to borrow five yuan from Lan to stay at the public hospital. I used the name Xie Tian to register as a patient. A very gentle and considerate nurse named Chen looked after me day and night, and comforted me in my loneliness. A week passed and I still had not recovered. But at least I had received comfort for my spirit.

*The Left-leaning Guomindang leaders in Wuhan were under pressure from Chiang Kai-shek, from their supporters in the Soviet Union, and from local warlords ostensibly allied with the Guomindang. As a result, they constantly shifted policy. In the summer of 1927 they squibbed in the dismantling of labor organizations, peasant organizations, and the Central Military and Political School, and in the ruthless persecution of labor leaders, peasant leaders, and young women whose tanned skin and short hair (cut in what was considered to be the Russian style) gave them away as recent soldiers who might—or might not—be Communists.—trans.

Soon the borrowed money was spent. Things began to look pretty grim. I had no choice but to return home with Xiang. I knew this would be a disaster, whatever few advantages it might bring. But I wanted to end my marriage contract so I decided I had to go home, in any case.

It was exactly one o'clock in the morning when we reached Lantian.* I called for someone to open the gate of the Yu Tongheng shop. The people in the shop thought I was a ghost. They couldn't believe I was still alive, for a half-month earlier they had heard news that I was killed at the front line. Now, suddenly, I was standing before them.

No wonder they were suspicious and startled.

*Lantian is a town near her home village of Xietuoshan.—trans.