

# TRIBULATIONS OF YOUTH

BY YUAN HONGBING

Yuan Hongbing, born in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1953, has written two novels describing the suffering of Mongols under Chinese Communist rule. His autobiographical novel, *Elegy*, opens when the author is 12 years old and includes his observations of events during the Cultural Revolution, from which this excerpt is drawn. The book was published overseas after Yuan fled China in 2004.

The harsh winter dragged on, but pale green clouds floating in the sky resurrected thoughts of spring breezes. One afternoon, Yuan Hongbing took a stroll in the woods outside the village to muse over his novel. In the distance, several peasants muffled in worn and faded woolen coats emerged from the slate-colored, frozen steppe. Yuan Hongbing was accustomed to the stooped posture of the peasants, but this time, they struck him as extraordinarily bent and stiff, like dead elm branches ready to snap in the wind. As they drew near with their labored, heavy pace, Yuan Hongbing recognized them as a production team of Mongols from the village. The leader of the production group had previously invited Yuan to tell stories, but today he led the group with only a grim glance in Yuan's direction, looking away again like a stranger as they trudged past. Perplexed, Yuan Hongbing looked after them, wondering what had happened.

In the rear walked a young woman named Hai Tang. She stopped in front of Yuan Hongbing, and with a dull, blank look said to him, "This morning we were called to the commune, where the army representative said we were members of the People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia, and ordered us to confess our crimes within two days, or else. . . . What should we do? What is the People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia?"

Yuan Hongbing could not answer Hai Tang, because this was also the first he had heard of the People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia. Intuitively, however, he sensed the dictatorship once again hovering over the impoverished peas-

ants like a vulture over a rotting corpse. Yuan Hongbing's heart sank at the thought of this kind, beautiful and unfortunate girl being subjected once again to the humiliating depredations of the "Proletarian Dictatorship." His words tumbled out in a rush: "Run!—I'll help you escape!"

"Escape? Escape where? Every place is under the control of the Communist Party. Ai!—" Hai Tang's pale lips curved into a desolate, bitter smile as she gently said, "I know you're a good man, but you can't save me. No one can save me. . . . And I don't want to pull you into this." Then she turned and walked away without another look.

Hai Tang's solitary, helpless figure fading into the background of the slate-gray steppe made Yuan Hongbing aware of his insignificance, an insignificance bordering on repulsiveness. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he turned and walked toward the murky horizon. He suddenly realized that merely writing about tragedy was not enough to give dignity to life. Tyranny destroys humanity, but keeping silent in the face of tyranny makes humanity wither in shame. But although not lacking in courage, Yuan had no idea how to begin resisting it.

After walking aimlessly southward for six or seven miles, Yuan Hongbing found himself on a tract of alkaline soil bleached pale as a shroud. The crunching of the soil beneath his feet gave him the feeling of treading on his own grave. Far in the distance, outside a village, scarlet flames danced among the withered branches of an old elm tree, brilliant against the desolate backdrop. Hoping to thaw the chill in his heart, Yuan Hongbing wandered toward the fire; but the scene he encountered under the old elm tree made him feel that his soul had become enclosed in a thousand-year-old tomb of ice.

An old man was suspended from a limb of the old elm by his arms and legs, which were bound behind him with a hemp rope. The old man had been stripped of his clothes, and beneath him an empty cast iron caldron a yard in diameter was propped up on stones above the fire Yuan Hongbing had seen in the distance. The flames licked the bottom of the caldron like a pack of wild dogs, heating it to a deep red color all the way to its rim. The old man's thin neck looked ready to break as he strained upward, his eyeballs bloodshot in a face gray and suffused with agony. The pale skin on his sunken chest exposed his ribs and countless purple bruises. His belly, roasting above the caldron, was as swollen and unwieldy as that of a pregnant

sow, its translucent bluish skin appearing ready to burst. Between his legs, his genitals hung like moldy cotton batting, dripping urine that sizzled in the caldron as it sparked and emitted a constant snickering sound. The stench of the urine wafted in the wind, but the steam it sent up from the caldron was pale blue, like an enchanting morning mist in spring.

A dozen peasants in ragged clothes covered by the caldron, their faces, weathered as the wind-pummeled alkaline soil, devoid of expression, as if they were beyond horror or sorrow; only their quaking bodies revealed the shriveled vestiges of instinct that had survived their ordeal.

A soldier led several educated youth<sup>1</sup> to stand before the peasants. The soldier's military uniform was dark green, like the skin of the toad emerging too early from hibernation. He frantically waved his short, stout, misshapen arms at the peasants as he yelled, "We've had the evidence a long time already. You're all members of the People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia that aims to split up our socialist homeland. This is your last chance to confess your crimes. All who refuse to confess will get a taste of the proletarian dictatorship from me. I will hang him over the caldron and roast him alive!"

"I'm a member of the People's Revolutionary Party of Inner

Mongolia. . . . You can call me whatever you like, just don't hang me . . ." A peasant knelt on the ground, his tearless sobs like crackling rust. The other peasants proceeded to kneel down one after another as the belly of the old man swelled even more and took on a strange crimson tincture like rouge on the face of a drowned and bloated corpse.

Yuan Hongbing observed the scene with eyes like rocks split by a sword. For all the tragedy he had seen, human misery still struck him to the heart. But what pained him now was not the wretched situation of the old man hung over the burning caldron, or the sobbing peasants kneeling on the ground, but rather the expression in the eyes of the soldier and the educated youth—their excited, agitated expressions as they looked on human misery like a tarantula crawling toward its prey. Yuan Hongbing felt desperate sorrow for the human eye transformed into that of a beast. He felt that even a sea of blood could not wash the beastly excitement and agitation from those eyes.

Suddenly, the air was rent with a long, terrifying shriek as the belly of the old man burst like an over-inflated balloon, and his agonized convulsions sent his entrails tumbling into the dark red caldron, producing plumes of acrid smoke. Through

## Excerpts from an interview with Yuan Hongbing

BY VOICE OF AMERICA

*After Yuan Hongbing obtained political asylum while on a trip to Australia in July 2004, three of his books were published overseas: *Elegy and Freedom at Sunset*, both of which relate the sufferings of Mongols under Chinese Communist rule, and *The Golden Holy Mountain*, about Tibet. Voice of America interviewed him on December 9, 2004.*

**Yuan:** *Freedom at Sunset* mainly focuses on the Cultural Revolution. Using the backdrop of the genocidal acts committed by the Chinese Communist authorities against Mongols at that time, this novel describes the psychology of the Mongols, their culture, art and spiritual aspirations. *Freedom at Sunset* is based on the tragic events I witnessed as a youth. At the time, I was deeply affected by the sufferings endured by many Mongols and their families, including young Mongols who grew up with me. For that reason, at the age of 19, I vowed to the earth and sky of Inner Mongolia that I would write about these tragic events. I hope to resurrect these beautiful, good, free and noble lives in my novel and give their souls a kind of immortality.

My second book, *Elegy*, is more autobiographical. It begins when I'm 12 years old and continues right through to 1996, after I was sent to Guizhou Province, and includes my observations of the democracy movement's struggles against tyranny in the 1980s.

**VOA:** These incidents of gross inhumanity also occurred among the Han majority. During the Cultural Revolution, it was not only Mongols and Tibetans that suffered massacres and other inhumane acts; Han people were also affected.

**Yuan:** Although people in the Han majority were also persecuted, it was different from the persecution of Mongols. There were many complicated reasons that Han Chinese were persecuted, including reasons related to free thought. But the persecution of Mongols and Tibetans, as expressed by the Communist Party, was meant to eradicate all traces of a culture that was incompatible with materialism and communist thought.

**VOA:** But some people might say, you have Mongolian blood, but you were able to become a member of the faculty of the Peking University School of Law. Doesn't that show that the Chinese government does all it can for talented Mongols like yourself?

**Yuan:** The books I write about the history and tragedy of Mongols have nothing to do with my personal ethnicity, but spring from my sense of conscience, in the same way that my other book, *The Golden Holy Mountain*, relating the suffering of the Tibetan people, has nothing to do with my personal ethnicity.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

The full Chinese interview can be read on the VOA Web site: <http://www.voanews.com/chinese/archive/2004-12/a-2004-12-09-20-1.cfm>.

the dark blue smog, the purplish intestines could be seen writhing in the cauldron like a dying snake. The old man's blood-curdling screams continued to ring through the pallid wind, as if in a last savage attempt to breach the boundary between life and death.

Perhaps in hopes of obliterating the last traces of the old man's screams, the soldier began shouting, veins bulging on his short, thick neck, "The death of a counterrevolutionary is nothing. Our great leader Chairman Mao has taught us, 'Revolution is not a genteel pastime like painting; it is the violent overthrow of one class by another!'" But the soldier's voice, for all its resonance, sounded as hollow as an echo in a rusty barrel.

After Yuan Hongbing returned to the village around midnight, he found the educated youth of the village gathered in their dorm. One young man, who had been summoned to a meeting at the commune office that afternoon, was passing on instructions from the authorities on rooting out the People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia.

"... The People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia is a massive secret reactionary organization that aims at splitting the nation. There are several suspected members in our village. The army representative has ordered us educated youth to do our part to expose this reactionary organization..." The young man spoke in a nervous, secretive tone, his agitation raising two rosy spots on his pale, malnourished cheeks. Ignoring his words, Yuan Hongbing looked coolly into the eyes of the other educated youth, where he saw gleams of terror and the muted excitement produced by any stimulus injected into the impoverished spiritual life of the countryside.

Not long before, these young people had themselves been abused and humiliated as "black elements,"<sup>2</sup> yet they were ready to inflict the same cruelty on others. Yuan Hongbing suddenly felt a profound sickness that made him turn wearily from them and walk silently out of the room, followed by several young women. Yuan Hongbing said nothing to them, but intuitively he felt these women would never persecute others.

Several days later, when Yuan Hongbing took his usual stroll outside the village at dusk, he noticed Hai Tang leave the village alone and walk southward on the rugged steppe.

The sunset was particularly dazzling, with sunrays falling like spun gold on the remote horizon. Blossoms crowded the crooked, leafless twigs of several wild almond trees scattered across the steppe, glowing with a whiteness more intense than the scarlet clouds that streaked the setting sun. Only a diffuse grayish fog on the horizon managed to temper the brilliant scene with melancholy.

In the past, when Hai Tang and Yuan Hongbing had encountered each other, she would glance silently at him from a distance, and from the depths of her almond eyes would flash the brilliant shards of dreams no less beautiful for being broken. But that day Hai Tang did not even glance in his direction, but wandered as if in a daze, her eyes locked on the horizon. Lit by the setting sun, her eyes seemed congealed around a shard of golden lament. As she passed a wild almond tree, Hai Tang stopped, and stretching out her arm, she snapped off a sprig of blossoms and placed it between her plump lips. At that moment, a sudden foreboding nearly sent Yuan Hongbing

dashing off to prevent the young woman from venturing further into the steppe. But then he stopped himself.

"What good would I be doing her keeping her here?" Yuan Hongbing thought, watching Hai Tang's gradually receding figure until the faded red of her cotton coat disappeared against the grayish mist of the horizon.

Two days later, gloomy, furtive whispers spread news of Hai Tang's disappearance. Yuan Hongbing set off in the direction he had seen Hai Tang taking. On the parched steppe he saw traces of the wind, but not of Hai Tang's footprints. Still he walked on, because he in his heart he knew where she had gone.

Yuan Hongbing slept on the open steppe that night. By dusk the next day, his path was obstructed by the Yellow River. Huge gray-blue chunks of ice clashed on the wide river with a hard crunching sound. Yuan Hongbing's gaze anxiously tracked the sound, and under a rock along the bluff, he spotted a sprig of almond blossoms. Kneeling solemnly by the rock, Yuan Hongbing plucked a withered flower and put it into the notebook he was carrying, as if in hope that the bewitching fragrance of the young woman, so like that of the wild almond blossom, could be absorbed in the tragedy he recorded.

Eventually Yuan Hongbing stood again, and for some time he gazed over the bluff onto the silvery-gray desert on the far bank of the Yellow River. He neither wished nor dared to look any further for Hai Tang, fearing that discovering her corpse would shatter the conviction that remained in his heart—the belief that the figure of Hai Tang in her faded red cotton coat had floated with the scarlet sunset clouds to some distant recess of the desert, where she found the silver-gray tranquility beyond earthly existence.

On his way back to the village, Yuan Hongbing encountered a beggar with dirty, matted, straw-like hair lying along the roadside. Upon drawing closer, Yuan Hongbing realized that it was Guoguo, Hai Tang's fiancée. His face was haggard and expressionless, and from his cracked, ashen lips issued an incessant muttering, like a glowing ember, "Hai Tang, where have you gone, Hai Tang..."

Lured against his will, Yuan Hongbing drew closer and gazed for a long time into Guoguo's hollow, expressionless eyes. In those rheumy, half-blind eyes Yuan Hongbing saw a breath-takingly ravaged human beauty, for they were eyes that had suffered the afflictions of true love.

Translated by Wei Liu

Yuan Hongbing's autobiographical novel *Elegy* was published by the U.S.-based Broad Press (<http://www.broadpressinc.com/>) in November 2004. Portions of the book are excerpted on Yuan Hongbing's Web site, Sacred Fire of Liberty, <http://www.fireofliberty.org/article/110.asp>.

#### NOTES

1. Educated youth, or *zhiqing*, were young students from China's urban areas who were sent to the countryside at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution to work alongside peasants and gain a deeper understanding of life in the countryside.
2. A label imposed on members of the former ruling class and intelligentsia during the Cultural Revolution.