

A Musician's Diary: A Story

BY CHIU FEI

In 1979 a group of young Chinese emigrés in Hong Kong published a collection of short stories under the title Anti-Revisionism House (Fan Hsiu Lou), which received immediate, serious attention in the Chinese press. The writers, almost all former Red Guards, dedicated their book to "the lost, the betrayed, the awakened generation" of China. This dedication is itself inadvertently a story in terse form—an abstract of an era as it affected the millions of young people who once ardently followed the Great Red Pied Piper in Peking.

As the epilogue modestly explains, the stories in Anti-Revisionism House are "unpolished in literary style" but "strong on factual detail." Indeed, they are offered as a form of "reportorial literature" based on personal knowledge of the Cultural Revolution, which burst violently into the open in 1966 and became—in the words of the epi-

logue—"the cruelest experience in modern Chinese history."

The story we have chosen to translate is not the saddest, the most harrowing, or even the most important of the collection. It is, rather, a sample of the better-written stories that seem more directly accessible to the general Western reader. On consultation with the Chinese editor, Tung Tung, who was also a contributor to Anti-Revisionism House, we have edited the story slightly in English translation but have otherwise been strictly faithful to content and style. "A Musician's Diary" appears here for the first time in English.

—Miriam London and Ta-ling Lee

(Miriam London is a researcher in Soviet and Chinese studies; Ta-ling Lee is Professor of History at Southern Connecticut State College.)

This was Wednesday, another day of intolerable heat. When I awoke, the sun was already high in the sky—it must have been well past eight o'clock. I looked at my watch, but, alas, it had stopped again during the night. This broken watch I have worn the last seven-eight years now is long overdue for a cleaning—but that would cost two-and-a-half yuan!* Never mind, my stomach knows the time, anyway. When it begins to mumble-grumble, it is mealtime. It never goes wrong.

I had gone to bed quite late the night before and been awakened repeatedly by nightmares. I did want to sleep longer, but there was that song I had to arrange in the morning for my student's lesson in the afternoon. Besides, with no blind over the broken window, the sun shone straight on my head, causing me to sweat. And then there was the baby crying nonstop next door—I simply couldn't sleep. Languidly, I got up and doused my head with cold water—my favorite way of chasing off drowsiness. Although I usually skip breakfast, I was a bit hungry this morning and decided to make myself a cup of coffee, albeit without sugar. This was my rare little breakfast.

After breakfast, I took out a blank sheet of lined music paper and set to work. What sort of music should I do for my student this time? I flipped through that volume I have of *Revolutionary Songs*. But how difficult to make violin music out of such songs! They are all basically the same—same formula, same basic idea, same slogans—and all devoid of any artistic content. But this is what they call being mass-oriented, nationalistic, revolutionary. Indeed, if the purpose of music is to "serve politics" as they claim, then music truly is no

different from wall slogans and need have no intrinsic artistry. Pen in hand, I sat for a long time, unable to write a single note. I was thinking: After all, I am an artist. Is it right for me to turn out a hack job? But then, if I did not do a revolutionary song, what could I give my student for practice? I had to give the lesson. Besides, this was the day to receive my fee. After hesitating a bit longer, I turned at random to a page in *Revolutionary Songs* with a song by Chieh-fu,** selected a melody, raised the main theme an octave higher, repeated it once with double stops, transposed the key a few times, and ended up with the original melody. That was it—my composition. I tried it out on my violin, added bowing, fingering, tempo, and expression, and hastily put it away, as if ashamed myself to look at those counterfeit notes. But then I told myself, "Were it not for his ignoble belly, a musician would not have his noble soul." That is the "theoretical basis" for consoling myself after every shoddy musical "creation."

Now that the song was completed, my stomach was, indeed, feeling revolutionary. I reached into my pocket—one yuan left. So, lunch was no problem. I picked up my socks and noticed a big hole on the bottom of one of them. My only other pair—my good pair—had been

*At the time of this story, one yuan equaled approximately US \$.50.

**Li Chieh-fu, famed in China for "model" songs like "Long Live Socialism" and "Proudly We Stride Across the Mainland," which were, in fact, musically mediocre. The composer always signed his name simply as Chieh-fu.

washed last night and were not quite dry. I would have to wear these. No matter! Who could see the hole anyway with my shoe on? I tied my laces, locked the door, and left home.

On the streets there were more big character posters than the day before, some with red banner headlines saying "Order" or "Ultimatum." I did not stop to examine them. With my disheveled hair, patched shirt, and faded blue trousers, I considered it unlikely that I'd be singled out as a candidate for a "cow-ghost."^{*} I was, however, a bit concerned about my old leather shoes, which I had bought in Shanghai five years ago for a performance. They were of the "pointy-toe" style, although the tips were really no longer pointed after several repair jobs. Besides, what else could I wear if not these shoes—I could not very well teach my lesson barefoot. Why worry, then? I, too, am a "proletarian." What have I but some old furniture and clothes, a violin, and one yuan in my pocket? There's no sense arresting me. Thus I raised my head high and with clear conscience walked toward the "Masses' Restaurant." The attendants there know me well. Without my asking, they immediately brought me my usual: a bowl of pork-bone soup, a dish of vegetables, and a bowl of plain rice. This is my favorite combination of food because it is not greasy, yet nutritious, and—most important of all—pleases my pocketbook, because I can eat my fill on only twenty-three cents.

It was sultry, without even a wisp of breeze, and my knees began to ache. Since that onset of rheumatic arthritis two years ago, my knee joints have become my barometer. It would probably rain tonight. Really, my barometer is more reliable than the weather forecasts. I glanced at a clock in a shop—it was 1 P.M., exactly two hours before my lesson. I headed north, aimlessly, intending to stroll away two hours of time.

On reaching Te Hsuan Road, I saw a large gathering of primary school pupils. From the midst of the crowd came the noise of metal wash basins being beaten upon—I knew they must be struggling^{**} "cow-ghosts and snake-demons" there. Now, in late July, struggle meetings and parades have become commonplace in Canton. Ordinarily, I never care for the "pleasure" of attending such meetings, but today, partly out of curiosity and partly to kill time, I walked over to take a look. What a shock! There on a wooden stool stood the chairman of our Musicians' Association, half his head shaven clean to the scalp. His shirt was torn and across his bare chest were written the words: "Art and Literature Circle Black Gang Chieftain Chou XX."^{***} His upper arms were tied to his sides with rope, but with his free hands he continuously beat a broken metal wash basin with a stick, shouting hoarsely all the while, "I am Chou XX. I am chieftain of the art and literature circle's black gang. I have committed the most serious crimes against Chairman Mao, the Party, and the people...." He was surrounded by primary school pupils holding red-tasseled spears, yelling, "Tell us how you opposed the Party and Chairman Mao. Talk fast! Bow your head!"

Suddenly, someone in the crowd shouted, "Here they come, here they come!" I turned to see walking toward us on the street another group of students,

including some youths in military caps and rolled-up trousers. They were leading five men and two women. All seven had their hair cut in funny shapes. They wore dunce caps and walked barefoot, beating metal basins and gongs. As they approached, a young man in faded army uniform pushed the musician from the stool, clapped a dunce cap on his head, tied him with rope to the seven, and the "parade" began. The cruel sun, the stifling hot air made the roped captives sweat profusely as they walked upon the macadam road, its tar surface melting in the heat. Bowing their heads and beating their gongs, they shouted over and over "I am a cow-ghost and snake-demon," as children wearing the red scarves of Young Pioneers ran alongside, jeering and making a din.

They marched west facing the fierce sun, these cow-ghosts and snake-demons, a musician among them.... Not so very long ago, this prominent musician had officiated at the Canton Music Festival, where he had glibly spoken about the correct line in literature and art before an audience of thousands, but today.... I felt fortunate that I had several years before given up my position in music. Otherwise, I would have shared the same fate.

At 3 P.M. I reached my student's home by bus. No one was in except an old lady, who handed me my monthly fee of ten yuan and a letter informing me that my student had gone back to his school. The letter, written by his parents, explained that with all these campaigns in high gear, my student would have little time to spare and would no longer want to study the violin—that is, the lessons would stop as of today.

I had anticipated this. Since May, all my students have been "graduating ahead of time," one after another, and I have been making other plans for myself. A friend of mine managed to arrange for me a job in the countryside as a handyman working with clay.^{****} One could earn 1.7 yuan there a day, he said, and no meetings to attend—surely better than being a musician! And so I walked away from my student's home, thinking of when I should depart for the village to become one of the "laboring masses" and say goodbye forever to the wretched musical profession. I never realized that a group of Red Guards had gathered behind me. Just as I reached the bus stop and was about to board a waiting bus, a hand suddenly grabbed me from behind and pulled me violently back. A voice said, "Hey, you! You can't get on this bus!" I turned to see a horde of Young Pioneers wearing red armbands and holding red-tasseled spears. And then it was I realized that even on my last day as a musician, the fate that had befallen Chou "XX" was also inevitably to be mine.

*Teachers and other "intellectuals" selected for persecution by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution were called "cow-ghosts and snake-demons."

**To "struggle" is a form of ritual interrogation resulting in humiliation and confession.

***Chou's given names were crossed out—a practice usually applied to the names of condemned criminals on public placards.

****This sort of work, as also private teaching, was illegal and often referred to as "rat's work."

It would be too difficult for me to describe that struggle meeting on the street—I wasn't quite clear-headed at the time. It seems that someone had hit me hard on the head with a stick. Vaguely I recall only that dark clouds were gathering on the eastern horizon and that, despite the sun's relentless heat, I felt chills. At the same time—I don't know why—great beads of sweat rolled off my forehead and chest and dropped on the road. They waved their fists and red scarves at me, saying, "You teach students to play the works of Beethoven—that's peddling the poisons of the bourgeois class!" It even seemed that my own students were among them, shouting, "Down with cow-ghosts and snake-demons!" Still, they were polite to me; they did not ask me to stand on a wooden stool or make me wear a dunce cap or shave my head. Nor did they make me beat a gong or parade me in the street. They only confiscated my much-mended "pointy-toe" shoes and tore off a small part of my old shirt. They let me go; they let me walk away barefoot on the hot paved road. I did not feel the heat. It was pitch dark when I reached my little room, which rattled under the thunderstorm that had finally broken. Soaked with rain and sweat, I fell into my bed, shaking uncontrollably.

A knock at the door brought me to my senses. I

opened it to find Old Ch'en, who wanted to borrow some money. He had come three times this day, he said; his house had been raided and everything taken away. His family of four had no money for food. I gave him half the fee I had earlier received at my student's home. After he left, I returned to bed and tried to sleep but could not. Strangely, I did not think of the terror I had known in the afternoon. Instead, Tchaikovsky's melancholy *Pathétique* kept resounding in my mind. Who would have thought that this sad B-minor melody written more than seventy years ago could replace tears in my heart?

A clock outside struck three. I got up and turned on the light. Gusty winds were still driving raindrops through my broken window. Pulling my old desk toward a corner away from the rain, I opened my diary and in uncertainty and despair began this, my entry for July 20, 1966, a day perhaps never to be forgot in the life of an ordinary musician.

* * *

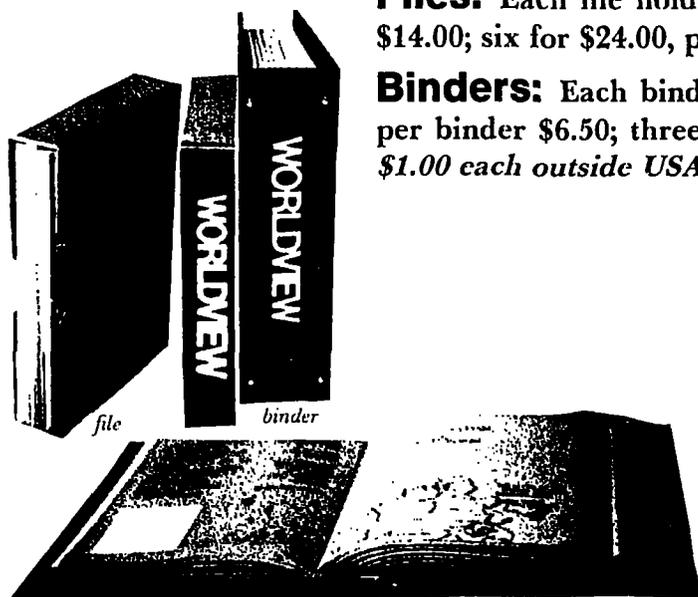
The preceding story was written, in remorse, more than a decade after the date noted by a former student of this "ordinary musician"—one of the Red Guards who took part in the "struggle meeting" on that Canton street.

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