

## THE MIND OF AN OX

by Yi Mu-Yong

I

“Daughter! Boil some bean-husks for the ox’s mash today.”

The bent and stooping old woman who was picking ewer the fallen rice ears that she had brought in from the fields called to her daughter-in-law as she went to the store room where the chopped hay was kept, carrying a basket.

With a jerk I lifted my chin from the manger where it had been resting, wondering whether perhaps my hearing was at fault. When I found that my ears had not lied, I drew a deep breath and kneeled down on the wheat-straw. “How accursed is my lot!” I murmured. I well knew what it meant when my mash was boiled with bean husks or soya beans.

I sighed again. So often had I been deceived by a feast of this sort. Three years previously when I was living with Mr. Gim Sôn-Dal at An-ggol, I had danced for joy in my stable on hearing Sôn-Dal, who as thin as a pipe, tell his labourer Dolssoe to put plenty of soya beans in my mash. Though the beans were half cooked and sticky I ate greedily and liked the bottom of the trough till it shone.

“A thousand blessings on this old man!” I cried, and lay down to digest my meal, smiling a bovine smile. It was delicious cud indeed to chew when I had eaten so many soya beans. I chewed the cud slowly till morning.

In the morning Doissoe came out wearing a single cotton robe which he used to wear once a year when he went home to visit his family. “It must be the memorial service for his father!” I thought to myself.

But instead of going to his house for the service to his father as I expected, he fastened his robe with some pieces of straw and came over to the stable. He pulled my rope, clicking with his tongue. “Come along, ox!” he said.

I wondered where he was going to take me, for all the rice sheaves had been brought in from Gure and no work was owing to anyone.

“He must be going to Dalle to buy some turnips,” I thought. I remembered that the previous year Dolssoe had worn the same robe to drive me to Dalle to bring turnips home. I reproached myself for my forgetfulness.

“Come along, Ox. Ggil-ggil!”

Dolssoe clicked his tongue again. Whenever he did that I used to reflect how stupid men must be. When they said “Come along, ox,” they meant “hurry up ox,” but as they said it even when I was walking, I used to laugh at them for it.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to market.”

“Going to market at a busy time like this? Is the harvest all in?”

“Not quite. We just finished the five mazigi (rice field unit) in the field in front of the house only the day before yesterday.”

I caught sight of the fine houses of the town with their zinc roofs.

As we were passing through the new markets I saw a man riding a bicycle, holding in one hand a wooden tray with about ten bowls on it. And when I turned to admire him Dolssoe beat my flank.

“How clever that man is!”

Then there was a discussion with a man who wore a hat that must have cost eighty-five or ninety wôn. When it was finished the man led me away from Dolssoe. “What a fine ox it is!” he said.

When the man with the hat reached his gate some of his friends who might not understand about oxen at all came and stood round me and tested my walking and investigated my various points with great thoroughness.

This was my first experience of being sold since I was old enough to remember. And it was my third sale that had brought me to the house where I was now. The second sale was the most fortunate one for me. I lay down for three days to eat soya beans, and the flies were kept away from me. I remembered that time clearly.

When I was taken Bag Czôm-Zi as his plough-ox he said, “Oh we’ll send you to the slaughter-house before long, too.” If I hadn’t heard that I would have been very happy to hear that they were going to give me bean husks. From the time when I had come to my present owner Dôg-Czil, who was even nicknamed ‘Yellow’ I had been worked extremely hard but fed very badly. In the summertime I could get enough grass to eat from the dykes in the paddy-fields, and so I had no particular complaint against my master, but no sooner had the grass turned yellow than his hand shook when he brought me my hay.

I was sold to my present master last spring at the Ûmsông market. At first I did not like him because he was so inconsiderate, and I could not bear to work so hard on the poor food he gave me, so one day I refused the mash he brought me and began to pant heavily. When I had gone two days without eating Dôg-Czil got alarmed, and turning yellow he summoned the vet, who brought along his needles for acupuncture. With a great turmoil they made me swallow some oil.

From the day I came to this house I had always been fed on hay, and now when I lay down and did not eat Dôg-Czil came out to the stable at night. When by the light of a match he saw the hay left in the manger he was more alarmed and borrowed soya beans from the neighbours and sent for the vet again. And he brought me a good thick mash. I ate ravenously, savouring the delicious smell of the beans.

In the morning the vet again stuck his needles into me. Dôg-Czil and his family came down and stood around my stall looking utterly bewildered, so much so that I felt quite sorry for them. And I had to stand up, for I could not stand the painful pricking of the needles, for I was only pretending to be sick.

“Oh, my ox! What’s the matter with you? You’re just trying to tease me, aren’t you? You don’t know that I sold my house and my fields to buy you. You are going to make the whole family starve, aren’t you?” said Dôg-Czil, in a tone of complaint, leaning on the manger. I saw tears in his eyes. Then for the first time I realised what he had done to buy me. He had been unable to support the nine members of his family with the produce of his field, one day’s ploughing in extent, and so he sold it and mortgaged his house to a Chinese draper to buy me. As I gazed at this tragic scene and saw his tears flow fast, I could no longer pretend to be ill. I am not malicious by nature, and so I felt sorry for him.

It was quite true that he could not support his family of nine with the land he had owned, and so he had become the tenant of four mazigi owned by Mr. Gim Czam-Bong in Bangczu-ggol. He found difficulty in paying the rent, however. However hard he pressed the foreheads of the nine members of his family not a drop

of yellow water would fall from them, they were not well fed enough. It seemed quite reasonable to me that he should have sold his land to buy me.

Dôg-Czil's sixtieth birthday was drawing near. His wife was as thin as an ox's tail, and when she breathed the cold air, consumption made her cough violently. She found such difficulty in breathing that everyone expected her to die before long. She was living, as it were, on the threshold of the grave. Old Dôg-Czil was a strong-minded man, but he was getting very old.

His eldest son, Zang-Song was tall as a cornstalk, and swayed as he walked. At night he looked like a bamboo stem walking along, and his speech was often unintelligible.

"Why isn't he intelligent?" old Dôg-Czil would complain as he watched his son walking along. Unlike the eldest, however, his second son was strong enough. Whom would he be like? He had a powerful personality. He seemed very robust and quick in action. Actually this second-son, Man-Song, was the only one in Dôg-Czil's family who was at all firm. But the old man was always complaining about him. "You are a glutton," he would say, "Always eating like an ox, aren't you?"

Man-Song could gobble up a bowl of rice in no time at all.

His youngest child was his thirteen year old daughter, Ibbuni.

She was a modest and pretty girl, no different from the rest of the family, a thin, dried up girl, always coughing,

Besides these there were Zang-Song's two children, who ate like hungry devils, and Zang-Song's big healthy wife, and the girl they had bought the previous spring to be Man-Song's wife. Counting me, we were ten in number.

Though they were not well off, they had the appetites of hungry demons. They worked hard, but they could never get enough.

It was my misfortune to have been sold to such a family as this, after all my high hopes. They could not even cook me enough porridge. Just as Zang-Sông's children complained at having been born into such a house, I often gazed vacantly at the unfeeling mountains and rivers with the yoke on my neck.

## II

None the less I put up with things rather well. I did often consider myself to be in a way fortunate to have been sold to these people, for it gave me a sense of pride to have the duty of feeding the whole family. And so, although they only fed me on watery gruel, and the very first time they took me out, they drove me the whole day long harnessed to a cart, I did not complain.

Truth to tell, as I hauled the heavy load over the pass of Modowôn, my eyes seemed to pop out with the effort. Man-Sông the glutton whipped me unmercifully and menacingly. People call a man 'Ox-eyed' when he has unusually large eyes, and I had a nickname for having abnormally large eyes. Even a mourner at a funeral laughed when he saw me straining to cross the pass with my eyes wide open, as large as plates.

The thought went through my head, "I'll die on this pass," as all the blood in my body seethed up into my brain and my eyes burnt like blazing fires. All feeling left my legs, and they moved automatically like machines.

"Come along, ox'

My flanks were violently beaten, and I put forth all my strength.

"One step more! Just one step more! Your next step will feed me and the other nine of us!"

I strained to the last sinew.

"That's the way, man! Whip me till I'm stretched out stiff and dead. I'll die one way or another."

Such resentful thoughts filled my mind. as I dragged the cart along.

And I was very glad indeed when a Japanese, who had a neatly trimmed moustache, at the Maruichi Forwarding Company gave Man-Sông three notes bearing a picture of an old man.

For half a year I worked hard in this way. But then a truck came along with clouds of dust, and I no longer had to draw the cart. Men are very clever in the way they use animals. When there were fewer goods to be carried in the cart, I was let out on hire to others. Today Gang Czôrn-Zi, tomorrow Gu Sô-Bang, thus I was daily led from house to house.

The work was easier than it had been before, but the days when my master's family could not cook porridge for me grew more frequent. And the old master would sit on the step with his short pipe and sigh more often. In the end Zang-Sông went to Zong Zu-Sa's as a farm labourer, and the children cried out for food.

"Mummy, I'm hungry!"

"I wish I even had some thin gruel to eat!"

When I heard these young children sitting round the stable and complaining in this way tears came to my eyes, animal as I was, and I wished there were goods for me to carry, though it might kill me to haul them over the pass of Modowôn,

Early next morning I heard the whole family talking in whispers, and about midday some men in European clothes came to my masters house.

"Is the master at home?"

I kept silent.

"Hullo, is the master at home?"

"My old master of this house?"

"Are you the master of this house?"

"Yes I am," my master replied, with a humble bow. "Are you Gim Dông-Song?"

"Yes."

"Then come with us."

They took my old master outside. There was the sound of loud voices. Then I heard the cart being tested and more people walking and then the sound of the women crying in the dinner room.

After the men had left, I spent the afternoon turning Gim Sam-Bong's millstone. As I came back, I saw the cart still standing in the same place. At first I couldn't understand it, but when I looked closely I saw a little red label pasted on that front wheel. I thought it must be a label to show that the cleanliness of the cart had been checked—just as, when the house had been swept, the police came along and inspected it and pasted a label on the gate to show that it had been passed.

A few days later I realised that it was not a label showing that the cart was clean. One day the Japanese Mr. Sato who used to use the cart for fetching goods came and said, "Dông-Song! Will you fetch some goods from Zanghowôn for me?"

"I wish I could, but I haven't got the cart," my old master replied, averting his gaze.

"No cart? But isn't that it?"

"Don't speak to me of it! I'm utterly ruined! Don't you see the red label on it?"

“Oh, yes. What shall I do now?”

The Japanese went away. My master stared vacantly at the cart and then began to complain, and in the end he burst into tears like a child. After a while he sprang up suddenly as if he had gone out of his mind, and scratched the label off the cart with his nails. “You devils!” he shouted. “I won’t leave it there.”

When he had torn it off, he rushed to the gate, and I saw that there was another red label pasted on the house. He tore that one off too. Then he beat the ground with his hands and burst into tears again. I couldn’t bear to watch, and so I turned my head aside.

My old master was put in jail because he had torn the labels down, and it was twenty days before he came back.

### III

After they had given me the soya bean porridge, they took me to the town as I had expected. About sunset the previous day I had performed my last duty, going to Suczông-ggol to carry Gim Czam-Bong’s farm rent for him. The year’s harvest for which my master had toiled with blood and sweat came to only a little over two mal of unhulled rice.

My old master took up my leading-rope, and a Chinese, the village headman, and Bag Sô-Bang of Anggol came after me. I well knew that they were not only my master’s creditors but also rich men with perhaps ten thousand wôn apiece.

When I was driven out the gate I heard loud weeping. My master’s wife, their daughters-in-law, and the children were crying in one another’s arms, and there was a great uproar. My old master wiped away his tears with the hand that held the rope.

The headman of the village urged haste. “We must hurry. What will you do if we are late for the market?”

I followed my master who was greatly distressed, and walking with tears on his eyes, I heard them say we were not going far, only one or so, about two and a half miles, but in the end it turned out to be at least twice that distance.

It was the busy season and the market place in the town was very crowded. We went down a narrow lane, and then the men tethered me near a wineshop and went in to refresh themselves. There were hundreds of my race tethered to stakes in the market place.

One of the men said to my master, “Won’t you have something to eat?” but he shook his head.

“Surely you must be hungry?”

Then my old master said in a querulous tone, “Headman, you have something to eat with them. Surely everyone knows how to eat, but when he has brought no money, no one will ask him to eat.” He looked at the soup overflowing the kettle and turned his face aside lest he be tempted by the smell of the food. I even heard him sighing, “The devils! How can they eat by themselves and leave me here alone, me who came with them?”

I began to feel angry. I could see inside the room where they were drinking the great bowls of milky wine that the woman in the shop had filled for each of them and devouring the soup and the rice. They were exchanging bowls with one another, which displeased me so much that it seemed to tear out my entrails. It was beyond my comprehension that these men could pour out wine for the Chinese and ignore their own countryman, who had lived all his life in their own village. A sudden urge came over me to run my horns through their entrails and string them up like slices of

meat on bamboo skewers and trample on them with my hooves.

Suddenly a terrible sight met my eyes, and a chill sweat poured over my whole body, as if an arrow had pierced my breast. I was obliged to avert my gaze. I saw it with my own eyes. I looked at it carefully once again to make sure, and terror permeated my whole being. There was no mistaking it. It was the face of a dear friend of mine whom I had known from my earliest childhood. She had been my most intimate friend, and I had first met her three years before when Dolssoe was driving me out to plough the ricefield. I met her often after that, for she lived in the same village. We became lovers, and before long she bore my child. But she and I were sold into bondage. We were wretched slaves who did not know when we would be sold again. Whenever we met we heaved great sighs together. We were often very sad, and we wondered how we might gain our freedom and live our own lives far from the yoke of men. But misfortune befell me, for the following year I was torn away from her and my child and sold to my present master.

Now the thing I had seen was unmistakably her, my dear wife.

Oh, how could such a fate have befallen her! Her head was lying by itself beside the kettle. Who had severed her neck in this way? Was not the blood still flowing from her neck? She was a winsome creature with flaxen hair—how heartless that man must have been who cut off her head, with her horns as pretty as they always were.

Her eyes were closed, as if she did not wish to see me. Traces of her painful death remained in the lines on her face. Her eyes! Those eyes which used to be so bright! Those lips that had hummed the song, “The milky way in the blue sky,” copying Gûm-Sun, the primary school girl who used to sing it! My head reeled. How could such men go unpunished? At the thought the tears streamed down my face. Was this what we lived for?

My tear-filled eyes saw something else. Her legs! My wife’s feet!

They still seemed to bleed. And then I saw some lumps of red meat in a wire case over there where the men were drinking their milky wine. There was a great lump of meat stuck on an iron skewer—it must have been the flesh of my wife’s thigh. It still seemed to be twitching.

Someone came up and slapped my flank. “Is this ox for sale?” he said. I looked round in surprise. I saw a man of forty with a rather dark complexion. He was wearing a jacket without a robe over it, and he held a slender whip in his hand.

“Yes it is,” my master replied in an unpleasant tone.

“How much is it?”

Without waiting for my master to reply, the man struck my thigh again and examined me closely all over. He gripped my back tightly at the waist and let go again. Then he asked again, “How much?”

“Why, do you want to buy it?”

“Of course, that’s why I’m asking you the price.” Then he repeated, “How much is it?”

“Give me a hundred and thirty wôn.”

“What, as much as that?”

“One hundred and thirty wôn, I say.” The man burst out laughing.

“One hundred and thirty wôn! However did you remember that word ‘hundred’?”

When I heard my master ask one hundred and thirty wôn, I thought he was a simple soul, for I guessed that his debts amounted to one hundred and thirty wôn,

and that was why he only asked a hundred and thirty wôn.

“Are you crazy, my man?”

The man looked to be no more than forty, yet he spoke disrespectfully to my old master.

“Do you think it’s not worth the money?”

“Don’t talk nonsense, fellow. Don’t you realise that the price of cattle has fallen terribly? How can you ask more than a hundred? Even a strong young one only fetched ninety wôn last market day.”

“Examine it carefully before you speak. It’s a cart ox, you know.”

“Cart ox? This broken down old bag of bones, a cart ox?”

“Then how much will you offer? Fix a price yourself, will you?” My old master was wringing his hands in disappointment.

“How about seventy-five wôn? It’s the best price you’ll get for it. I always lose on the old ones. An old cart ox isn’t much use for meat, it’s so tasteless. It’s just chewing the bark off an old log.”

“That’s it! He’s the butcher,” I knew now. He looked a wicked man. He had a hooked nose and big eyes like chestnut burrs.

“Forget it! I’d rather eat it myself than sell at that price”

My old master turned his offer down. Then the others came out of the wine shop.

The headman was the first to speak. “Are you going to buy this ox?” he said.

“The price is too high. I can’t afford it.”

Bag Sô-Bang turned to my master. “How much did you ask it?” he asked.

“I asked a hundred and thirty wôn.”

“A hundred and thirty? H’m, you’re asking too much.” said Bag Sô-Bang. Then he turned to the other man. “How much did you offer?” he asked.

“I told him he could get seventy-five wôn for it.”

Wang Sô-Bang, the Chinese, cut in. “H’m, you’ve put it to low.” he said.

They haggled over the price for a while, setting it higher and lower. My old master insisted on a hundred wôn, and refused to sell me for less. But his creditors preferred to sell a day earlier than they had expected, and they agreed on a price of ninety wôn.

My master spat on the ground. “I’ll never sell for ninety wôn,” he said.

“That’s the market price. You can’t ask more than that, can you?” the village headman snapped at my master.

“That’s what I say. You shouldn’t speak nonsense,” said the man in the jacket without a cloak. Then he glared at my master and stepped aside. He turned his back and said, “See that cow over there? It fetched seventy wôn. Can old ox meat be compared with cow meat? And then this is a broken down old bag of bones of a cart ox, isn’t it?”

I felt furiously indignant. “You devil, am I a broken down old bag of bones?” I thought.

This was the devil who cut my wife’s throat and sold her meat.

I felt my eyes rolling wildly, and I could hardly breathe, my limbs trembled violently and my heart pounded.

I looked at my wife’s neck, her bleeding throat, her severed limbs, the red lump of her thigh, and her heart’s blood. And I saw my wife quaking in terror as the axe fell. I saw her face with tears pouring from her eyes. I saw the pool of blood where her four legs stretched out in unbearable agony as her head was cut off. And I

heard her cry, calling her friend, her husband, I heard her lowing for her child, crying out to her fellows.

“Ū-ûng!” I bellowed.

I can only remember bellowing. I tore myself loose from the rope, and ran after the devil. I was roaring mad. My eyes turned upside down. I gored him with my horns and trampled him with my hooves. And I saw his blood spurt out.

I have no other memory than this. I can only remember that I bellowed at the top of my voice and called to my wife. And I do not know what became of the others. My last memory is of wandering alone in the market.

This is all I can tell.

(November 1933.)