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Short Story: "The Honest Village"

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Short Story
“The Honest Village”

I grew up in Honest Village. Honest is our family name, and the villagers are all related.

Five hundred years ago, the water buffalo shepherd Zhou led his Red Scarf Army into Beijing and chased the Mongolians back to their ancestral home. He stepped upon the dragon-shaped throne and became the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty.

One of his favorite generals, Big Sea Hu, hated people in my native Shandong province. When he was a beggar boy, he knocked at my country-fellows' doors and asked for leftovers.

“Grandpa, please give me something, anything to eat. I haven't had anything for three days.”

“Look at this dirty crook. We work to death to fill our stomachs, and he wants to do it by cheating.” They threw their leftovers to the wild dogs in front of his starving eyes.

Even today, Shandong folks are famous for their sharp tongues.

Big Sea almost starved to death in Shandong. Fortunately, a passing merchant took mercy on the dying boy and helped him leave the province.

Big Sea swore revenge.

After Big Sea emerged as a general out of mountains of dead bodies, he kowtowed to his sworn brother on the throne. “Your Majesty, I have to leave the capital for a few days to take revenge on those heartless Shandongnese.”

The Emperor did not want more blood shedding. But it was hard to refuse Big Sea. Once the emperor was shot by an arrow; Big Sea carried him on his back and walked in the snow for days before their fellow rebels came to rescue them. What kept Big Sea going in the endless snow was his thirst for revenge.

The Emperor pulled one arrow out of his quiver. “Your wish is granted, but you can only take revenge on those who fall within the reach of this arrow.”

Big Sea left the palace crestfallen, but he had an unscrupulous advisor who brought him a wild swan. “Lord, you may shoot the Emperor's arrow into the wings of the wild

swan.” The general was overjoyed. For the next few months, he and his soldiers chased the bird from the northern end of Shandong to the southern end.

The emperor was angry that his general wiped out the whole province, but he could not bring himself to kill his sworn brother. Instead, he asked people from the prosperous Shanxi province to relocate to Shandong. No one wanted to leave their native land. They hid in the mountains, caves, and the trunks of trees. The Emperor then sent out an order: those who could, in a fortnight, make it to the big Chinese scholar-tree in Hongtong town of Shanxi province would be spared. All the others had to relocate.

Shanxi people poured into the town. On the fifteenth day, the Emperor’s soldiers rounded them up and tied their hands with a single rope that lasted for miles and miles. As they were being dragged away, they looked back at their hometown after each step, but gradually all they could see was the gigantic Chinese scholar-tree and the crow nests on it.

The immigrants began to sing in tears,

Where’re my ancestors from?

The big Chinese scholar-tree in Hongtong Town of Shanxi province.

What’s the name of my ancestors’ hometown?

The crow nests on the big Chinese scholar-tree.

But my ancestors, the Honest brothers, were extraordinary. All the way for thousands of miles, they helped the kids and the weak in ways they could, and their good names spread along the shackled rope.

Finally, the Emperor’s soldiers reached the end of the Yellow River. Looking at the fertile plain, the brothers were excited. “Good land. Good farm land.”

An emperor’s soldier asked, “Who wants to settle down here? According to the Emperor’s mandate, brothers from the same village have to settle in different places.”

“I want to build my home here. I’m the eldest son of the Honest family.” The big brother felt guilty: now his little brother had to lie.

“I want to settle down here too.” The younger brother said in a low voice, and his face turned crimson. “And I’m not the second son of the Honest family.”

“Okay then.” The Emperor’s soldier said.

“Could we go with you?” two beautiful sisters asked. The brothers had touched their hearts with their good deeds.

“But life will be hard. We have nothing but the yellow land.”

“Life will be better if we work together,” the sisters replied with assurance.

“And that’s how our village started.” Granny finished the story and looked down at me nestling in her arms. “And my Little Wisdom hasn’t fallen asleep yet.”

As a kid, I greatly enjoyed the genesis of our village. However, when I became bigger, I began to challenge Granny’s story.

“But, Granny, it cannot be true. My history teacher told me it’s the Emperor’s grandson, Zhu Di, who ordered the relocation.”

“Is it?” Granny was taken by surprise, and she thought about it for a moment before she answered my question.

“Little Wisdom, I repeated every word my mother told me. You know, the books could be wrong. Aren’t the stories about *our* village? In that case, they’re very true indeed.”

Sophia Geng is an Assistant Professor in the Modern and Classical Languages Department and Asian Studies Program. She is working on a collection of linked stories set in a rural Chinese village — the Honest Village. The stories capture critical moments in the lives of the Honest villagers who live through the promises and challenges of a China undergoing urbanization. Two of the stories in the collection, “Young Soldier, the Taxi Driver” and “Celery’s Dream,” were published in, respectively, the 2008 and 2009 issues of Headwaters. Sophia sees her stories as a tribute to the ordinary Chinese villagers’ resilience confronting adversity and their unflinching passion for life.