

A Country Boy Quits School

Lao Hsiang

(Translated by Chi-Chen Wang)

A boy in the country gets to be at least half as useful as a grownup by the time he is eight or nine years old. He can weed in the spring or tie up harvest bundles in summer: he is able to pass bricks when a house is built or open and shut the furrows to the irrigation ditches. This, being the case, who'd want to send him to school? But an official proclamation had been issued in the city to the effect that unless a boy over six years of age.

When they found the cause of her distress, Father said, "We'll have the boy ask his teacher whose mama this really is. Maybe it is the teacher's mama."

The next morning before dawn, Mother woke up her son and made him go to school and ask the teacher for a solution to the problem that had bothered her all night. Arriving at school, the boy found that it was Sunday and that there would be no school. Moreover, the teacher had drunk more wine than was good for him the night before and was still sound asleep. The boy told Mother the circumstances, which made her curse the institution of Sunday.

At general assembly on Monday, the teacher said gently to his charges, "One who wants to learn must not be afraid to ask questions. Anyone who has any question should raise it at once, to his teacher at school or to his parents at home." Thereupon our hero stood up and asked, (the reader says) "This is Mama." Whose is she, really?" The teacher answered even more gently than before. "It is the mama of anyone who happens to read the book, do you understand now?"

"No," the boy said. This embarrassed the teacher a little but he said patiently, "Why don't you understand?"

"Baldy is also reading this, but his mama is not like this lady," the boy said. "Baldy's mother is lame in one arm and has only one eye," Hsiao Li said.

"And you have no mama at all. She died a long time ago," Baldy said in self-defense.

"Don't talk among yourselves" the teacher said, knocking on the blackboard with his ferule. "We are going to have the lesson plan today: This is Papa. Look, everyone. This is Papa, the man with spectacles and puffed hair."

After school, Mother was still warned about who the picture woman was, but when she heard her son reiterating "this is Papa," she did not dare to pursue the question, being afraid that her husband might want to know when she'd found a new papa for their son. She was puzzled more than ever and wondered why the book insisted on presenting people with papas and mamas when they had them already.

A few days later, the boy learned two new sentences: "The ox tends the fire; the horse eats

noodles." He read the text over thousands of times but he could not get over the feeling that there was something queer about the assertions. They had an ox and a horse and he had himself taken them out to tend the hills, but he had never once seen a horse eat noodles and he was sure that their ox could not tend the fire. But could the book be wrong? Since he could not answer these questions, he obeyed his teacher's injunction of the week before and asked his father about it. Father said, "I once went to a foreign circus in the city and saw a horse that could ring a bell and fire a gun. Perhaps the book is talking about such horses and oxen." It in our circumstances. You'll be very ungrateful if you don't study hard and learn something."

The boy took his father's instructions to heart and set out for school the next day at dawn. When he got there, however, the porter said to him in a low voice, "Classes don't start till nine. It's now only five thirty. You are too early. The teacher is asleep and the classroom isn't unlocked. You had better go home now." The boy looked around the yard and found that he was indeed the only student there; he listened outside the teacher's window and heard him snoring; he walked around the lecture room and found no open door. There was nothing for him to do but run back home. Grandfather was sweeping the yard when he suddenly caught sight of the boy. He threw down his broom and said, "What is the use of trying to make a scholar of a boy whom Heaven and Earth intended for the hoe? Look at him, it's only the second day and he is playing truant already!" The boy was just about to explain when his mother gave him two resounding slaps and made him tend the fire for breakfast. Needless to say, the price of the books that they had to buy had a great deal to do with their temper.

When the boy went to school again after breakfast, the teacher was already on the platform and was holding forth on the subject of being late to school. To illustrate his point, he told a story about a little fairy that waited by the wayside with a bag of gold to reward the earliest boy. Our boy was enchanted with the story and the words "fairy" gold" but he could not figure out just what was meant by "earliest." In the afternoon, our young hero came back from school at three thirty, just as his father was going back to work after his midday nap. Luckily his father happened to see the other boys also coming home from school and the teaching taking a stroll with his "dog stick," and concluded that his son was not playing truant. He kept wondering, however, about the strange ways of these foreign schools.

The first six days of school were taken up with the first lesson in the reader, with the text. "This is mama." It couldn't be said that the boy was not diligent. He reviewed his lesson every day after school, reading over and over again "This is Mama," until dusk. With his left hand holding the book open and his right following the characters, he read on faithfully and conscientiously if afraid that the characters would fly away if he did not fix his entire attention on them.

But every time he reads "This is Mama," his mother's heart would jump. On the sixth day of

school she could stand it no longer. She snatched the book from him and said, "Let me see who your mama is!" Thinking that his mother was really eager to learn, the boy pointed to the accompanying picture and said, This is Mama- the lady with leather shoes, bobbed hair, and long dress." One glance at the picture and Mother burst out crying. Grandfather, Grandmother, and Father were frightened, thinking that she might have become possessed by some evil spirits. At first, she only cried and would not say anything when they asked her what the matter was, but when they persisted, she said. "Where did the boy get that vampire-like mama?"

Grandmother, however, did not agree with father's explanation. She said, "The ox must be the Ox-Head Devil King and the horse must also be a demon. Don't you see that all wear human clothing? They haven't changed their heads if human heads yet, but that alone will take to live hundred a years." The old lady then went on to tell stories about demons that could command the wind and summon rain; the result was that the boy dreamed that night of being seized by a winged-wolf demon and woke up crying.

The following day, the boy asked his teacher "Is this ox that can tend the fire a foreign ox ?"

The teacher laughed and said, "You are too literal! The book has only made those things up. It is not true that oxen can really tend the fire or that horses really eat noodles."

The explanation cleared up at one stroke many things in the book that had puzzled the boy. He had read about such things as bread, milk, park, ball, and the like, which he had never seen and which had made him wonder, it dawned upon him that the book dealt only with make believe things.

One day, the boy and his schoolmates decided that they would play tea party as they had read about it in their reading. They agreed that each would contribute twenty cents so that they could send to the city for oranges, apples, chocolates, and things. Our boy knew, of course, that he would be only inviting a beating to ask money for buying sweetmeats. Grandmother always mumbled that school would bankrupt them yet, whenever he had to buy a sheet of writing paper. But he could not resist the glowing picture that his book gave of the tea party, and decided to help himself to the money that his mother had just got from selling more of her jewels and which she had set aside for buying cabbage seedlings.

Grandfather had been suffering for a long time from a chronic cough, and someone had told him that orange peels would give him relief. He kept on asking what orange peels were like and where they could be gotten. Thinking that this was a chance for him to ingratiate himself into his grandfather's favor, the boy said, "We are getting some oranges?" Grandfather asked. "What are you getting oranges for?"

We want to hold a tea party," the boy said.

"What is a tea party?"

"It means to get together and eat things and drink tea," the boy said. "It is in the book

"What kind of book is this that is either making animals talk or tea people to eat and play? No wonder the boys have become lazy and choosy about their food since they went to school" Grandmother said.

"And it is always about foreign food. There doesn't seem to be any corn stew or bean curd with onions in it." Grandfather said.

"Remember, son, to bring back some orange peels for your grandfather's cough," said Mother.

"Where did you get the money to buy oranges?" asked Father.

"The teacher - "but before the boy could finish making up his story, they heard Badly, who live in the next dwelling to the east, suddenly begin to cry. Then they heard his father shout, "We can't even afford salt, and yet you want to buy candy."

This was followed by the voice of Hsiao Lin's uncle, who live in the west. "I let you buy books with my earned-money because it is for your good, but I haven't any money for you to buy sweetmeats. You can ask whoever you want to hold tea parties for it."

The truth came out. The boy's father aimed a kick at him, but fortunately the table intervened. He only upset the table and broke a few rice bowls. Grandfather was of the opinion that it might be better to take the boy out of school, but Grandmother did not want her son to go to jail. After long arguments, it was decided that they would let him try school for a few more days.

After this Humiliation, our young scholar vowed to study harder and to recover his lost prestige in the family. Everyday after school, he read without stopping until it was dark. He did not realize that the source of his troubles lay in the textbook itself.

Grandmother had been feeling that her son was no longer as close to her as before his marriage and that her position in the family had been gradually slipping. Now as she listened to the boy reading aloud his latest lessons, she heard him say, "In my family I have a papa, a mama, a brother, and a sister," but nothing about Grandfather and Grandmother. She became very indignant and shouted. "So this house is now all yours and I have no longer a share in it!" She was mad with fury. She picked up a brick and broke their iron pot into pieces.

"Don't be angry any more!" the boy's father said. "We won't let him read this kind of book any longer. I would rather go to jail."

And so the next day, Father discharged a day laborer and the teacher marked the boy's absence in the record book at school.

"A Country Boy Quits School" by Lao Hsiang is an endearing social satire. It is about a poor Chinese family which is forced to send its boy to school following an official proclamation, ignoring which would mean a jail term. How the English illustrations in books and the literal translation lead to much confusion and misunderstandings in his household is at the centre of the story. The boy is finally pulled out of the school.