“Book War” (Author: Wang Ping)

I discovered “The Little Mermaid,” my first fairy tale, in 1968. That morning, when I opened the door to light my stove, I found my new neighbor, a girl a few years older, sitting under the streetlight, a book in her lap. The red plastic wrap indicated it was Mao’s collected work. She must have been there all night long, for her hair and shoulders were covered with frost, and her body shivered violently from cold. Another loyal Maoist, I thought to myself. Then I heard her sobbing. I got curious. What kind of person would weep from reading Mao’s words? I walked over and peeked over her shoulders. What I saw made me freeze in fear and excitement. The book in her hands had nothing to do with Mao; it was Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, the story of “The Little Mermaid.” Since I heard the story in my kindergarten, I was determined to read it myself someday. Just when I was ready, the Cultural Revolution began. Schools were closed, books, condemned as “poisonous weeds,” were burnt on streets, and the rest were confiscated.

My clever neighbor had disguised the “poisonous weed “with the scarlet cover of Mao’s work. Engrossed in the story, she didn’t realize my presence behind her until I started weeping. She jumped up, fairy tales clutched to her budding chest. Her panic stricken face said she was ready to fight me to death if I dared to report her. We stared at each other for an eternity. Suddenly she started laughing, pointing at my tear-stained face. She knew then that her secret was safe with me.

She gave me twenty-four hours to read the fairy tales, and I loaned her *The Arabian Nights*, which was missing the first fifteen pages and the last story, but no matter. The girl squealed and danced in the dawn light. When we finished each other’s books, we decided to start an underground book exchange network. With strict rules and determination, we had books to read almost every day, all “poisonous” classics.

Soon I excavated a box of books my mother had buried beneath the chicken coop. I pried it open with a screwdriver, and pulled out one treasure after another: *The Dream of the Red Chamber, The Book of Songs, Grimms’ Fairy Tales, Romeo and Juliet, Huckleberry Finn, American Dream*, each wrapped with waxed paper.

I devoured them all, in rice paddies and wheat fields, on my way home from school and errands. I tried to be careful. The consequences could have been catastrophic, not only for myself but also for my entire family, had these books fallen into wrong hands. But my “enemy” was my own mother. Once she discovered I had unearthed her treasure box, she set out to destroy these “time bombs,” combing every possible place in the house. It was a hopeless battle. My mother knew my habits, my little tricks. I couldn’t outsmart her. Whenever she caught me red-handed, she’d order me to tear the pages and place them in the stove, and she’d sit nearby, tears in her eyes, muttering: “This is for your safety, everyone’s safety.” And my heart, our hearts, turned into ashes.

When the last book was gone, I went to sit in the chicken coop. Hens surrounded me, pecking at my closed fists for food. As tears flowed, the stories became alive from inside. They flapped their wings and flew out of my mouth like mourning doves. I started telling them to my siblings, friend, and neighbors; stories I’d read from those forbidden treasures, stories I made up for myself and my audience. We gathered on summer nights, during winter darkness. When I saw stars rising in their dimmed eyes, I knew I had won the war.

“How I Learned Geography” (Author: Uri Shulevitz)

When war devastated the land, building crumbled to dust. Everything we had was lost, and we fled empty-handed.

We travelled far, far east to another country, where summers were hot and winters were cold, to a city of houses made of clay, straw, and camel dung, surrounded by dusty steppes, burned by the sun.

We lived in a small room with a couple we did not know. We slept on a dirt floor. I had no toys and no books. Worst of all: food was scarce.

One day, Father went to the bazaar to buy bread. As evening approached, he hadn’t returned. Mother and I were worried and hungry. It was nearly dark when he came home. He carried a long roll of paper under his arm.

“I bought a map,” he announced triumphantly.

“Where is the bread?” Mother asked.

“I bought a map,” he said again.

Mother and I said nothing.

“I had enough money to buy only a tiny piece of bread, and we would still be hungry,” he explained apologetically.

“No supper tonight,” Mother said bitterly. “We’ll have the map instead.”

I was furious. I didn’t think I would ever forgive him, and I went to bed hungry, while the couple we lived with ate their meager supper.

The husband was a writer. He wrote in silence, but, oh! how loudly he chewed. He chewed a small crust of bread with such enthusiasm, as if it were the most delicious morsel in the world. I envied him his bread and wished I were the one chewing it. I covered my head with my blanket so I would not hear him smacking his lips with such noisy delight.

The next day, Father hung the map. It took up an entire wall. Our cheerless room was flooded with color.

I became fascinated by the map and spent long hours looking at it, studying its every detail, and many days drawing it on any scrap of paper that chanced my way.

I found strange-sounding names on the map and savored their exotic sounds, making a little rhyme out of them:

Fukuoka Takaoka Omsk,

Fukuyama Nagayama Tomsk,

Okazaki Miyazaki Pinsk,

Pennsylvania Transylvania Minsk!

I repeated this rhyme like a magic incantation and was transported far away without ever leaving our room.

I landed in burning deserts. I ran on beaches and felt their sand between my toes. I climbed snowy mountains where icy winds licked my face. I saw wondrous temples where stone carvings danced on the walls, and birds of all colors sang on the rooftops.

I passed through fruit groves, eating as many papayas and mangoes as I pleased. I drank fresh water and rested in the shade of palm trees. I came to a city of tall buildings and counted millions of windows, falling asleep before I could finish.

And so I spent enchanted hours far, far from our hunger and misery.

I forgave my father. He was right, after all.

**Author’s Note:**  I was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1935. The Warsaw blitz (Adolf Hitler’s invasion of Poland) occurred in 1939. Shortly thereafter, I fled Poland with my family, and for six years we lived in the Soviet Union, most of the time in Central Asia, in the city of Turkestan in what is now Kazakhstan. This story takes place when I was four or five years old, in the early years of our stay in Turkestan. The original map was lost long ago.