

ESSAY

# A Farce in the Cultural Revolution

by Sue Tong



"Peculiar World" by Julia Groß

## A Child's Handwriting Sparked a Storm

When the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, our family — branded among the “Black Five Categories” — was driven from our home and exiled to a poor, remote village. Labeled “class enemies,” we endured both physical and psychological suffering: laboring from dawn to dusk, living in an abandoned pigsty, and remaining under constant surveillance — not only by the village heads, but also by the peasants around us. In this harsh climate of “class struggle,” suspicion seeped into every corner of life — so much so that even a child's innocent scribbles could be twisted into political crimes.

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My little brother Yong was born not long after the devastating three-year famine (1959–1962). Due to our mother's malnutrition during pregnancy, he came into the world underweight — less than five pounds. With no breast milk and no alternatives, his survival depended on the corn paste our grandmother fed him. He was smaller and thinner than other children his age.

Since the age of three, Yong had lived in the pigsty and had no memory of a real house. One day, we visited our neighbor Bao-tong's home, where his kind mother offered Yong a piece of bread made from dried sweet potato powder. Despite the harsh political environment, Bao-tong's family — his mother and two brothers — were among the few who dared to show us sympathy. Their two-room house, with a grass roof and earthen walls, had no living room and no furniture, but it was far taller and more livable than the pigsty we called home. Yong sat on Bao-tong's bed, his short legs swinging, unable to touch the ground. As he ate, he looked up and exclaimed, “Why is the ceiling so high?”

His innocent question made Mother realize it was time to show him a world beyond the pigsty and village. The first step was literacy. By Yong's age, my older siblings and I could already read simple books. Without education, Yong's world would remain confined to the mud walls around him.

There were no textbooks or children's books then. So Mother bought a large sheet of paper, cut it into six-inch squares, and bound them into a notebook. She wrote simple words and patiently taught Yong, guiding him word by word. He practiced sitting on a small mud stool, using a straw lid atop a clay basin as his desk.

He learned characters like “sky,” “earth,” “big,” “small,” “I,” “yes,” “no,” “father,” “mother,” “love,” and even his own name. He had not yet begun forming sentences.

Across from the pigsty was the village cowshed. Wu Ru-yi, the cattle breeder with limited literacy, often watched us from there. His role caring for the village’s only two aging oxen showed his political standing as a trusted “poor peasant.”

One evening before we finished our dinner, the iron bell rang — an ominous sound villagers knew too well. It was not a real bell, but a section of rusted railway track suspended from a twisted willow tree outside the home of Wu Jun, the village head. Whenever he struck it with a metal rod, its dull, jarring clang summoned villagers for actions, including criticism meetings or denunciations against Mother and Grandmother. In the wake of the bell’s harsh clangs, Wu Jun’s raspy voice rose over the rooftops:

“Members of the Women’s and Peasants’ Association, gather after dinner. We will expose the Rightist Little Piggy who has committed anti-revolutionary acts!”

Mother was labeled a “rightist” (one of the Five Black Categories) during the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign. Her given name included the character “Pearl” (?), chosen by her parents to mark her as their treasured first child. In Chinese, “Pearl” (?) and “Pig” (?) are pronounced the same (zh?), but their meanings and written forms are worlds apart. To deliberately twist “Pearl” into “Pig” was to strip Mother of dignity and humanity. They didn’t even try to hide their contempt, calling her “Little Piggy” openly.

We were all outraged, but dared not speak out. Grandma muttered under her breath, “How can one not bow their head when they are under overwhelming power?” Mother responded differently. “Let them call me whatever they want,” she said. “I’ll just take it as mad dogs barking at the sun.”

Her words stayed with me — words of quiet defiance amid relentless humiliation.

That evening, as the last clang of Wu Jun’s iron bell faded into the twilight, I set down my bowl and helped Mother wrap cotton around her knees, anticipating she might be forced to kneel on *shajiang* — jagged, ginger-shaped stones. This was a common ritual during *pidouhui* or public criticism meetings held in the village. The pain from kneeling on *shajiang* was excruciating, especially in thin clothes. Over time, we learned to wrap knees in cotton from old blankets to dull the agony.

Uncertain of the accusations, Mother and I rushed to the village meeting room. When we arrived, only a few people were there. Under the dim horse lamp stood the two village heads — Wu Jun and Lao-wai (nicknamed for his crooked face). Ru-yi stood beside them, grinning ear to ear, his two bowed legs nearly dancing off the ground.

Lao-wai pointed and barked, “Little Piggy, confess! Why did you write anti-revolutionary slogans?”

Mother stayed calm. “I don’t know what you mean,” she replied.

Wu Jun waved a sheet of paper. “Still denying it? You deserve a beating!”

I glanced at the page — it was in Yong’s handwriting. He had written “sky,” “earth,” “big,” “small,” “I,” and a few repeated characters. I sighed in relief, though I still wondered how they had gotten it.

Chinese characters can be read in multiple directions — left to right, right to left, or top to bottom. While the words Yong wrote were meaningless, reading them top-down could create a distorted message: “Earth is big, sky is big, I, big and big” — a strange sentence that might seem to inflate the self, ignoring the Party. During the Cultural Revolution, a popular song declared:

The sky is big, the earth is big,  
But the Party’s kindness is bigger.  
Father’s love, mother’s love,  
Are not as dear as Chairman Mao’s love.

Mother explained, “My youngest son is learning to write. He wrote this.”

Wu Jun scoffed, “Boasting to the sky! Lies! Who believes Yong could write this?” Laughter erupted.

Mother calmly said, “Does this childish handwriting look like mine? I taught Chinese literature for years. If I wrote like this, how could I be qualified to teach?”

The leaders still insisted she was guilty. Then Ran Dad, a kind elder, suggested, “Bring the child to verify the handwriting.”

I rushed home and gently woke Yong who was sound asleep. Wrapping him in Grandma’s jacket, I led him to the meeting. The room was now packed, villagers crowding in and outside. Some kindly made way for us.

At the front, a board, brush, and paper were ready. Fully awake, Yong picked up the brush. Wu Jun dictated words like “big,” “small,” “sky,” “earth” — and Yong wrote each one flawlessly.

The villagers crowded around Yong, layer upon layer, watching him with wide-eyed curiosity. Murmurs rippled through the room: “He writes so well!” “Even his stroke order is correct!” “This little boy has a bright future!”

The mood shifted. A criticism meeting had turned into a showcase of a child's talent.

Mother seized the moment: "Now it's harvest season. Everyone is busy. It's completely ridiculous to fabricate nonsense and disturb people's peace." Meanwhile, I noticed Ru-yi and the village leaders turned pale. Their faces twisted in humiliation. Ru-yi, in particular, looked as if he wished he could disappear into the floor.

The leaders had no more to say, the meeting dissolved, the crowd dispersed. But we still didn't know how Yong's handwriting had landed in their hands.

It wasn't until later that I learned the truth. A page had dropped from Yong's notebook and blown into the cowshed. Ru-yi had picked it up and, hoping for reward or favor, handed it to the village leaders — claiming it was an anti-revolutionary slogan from us.

The village leaders, eager for any chance to act against our politically marked family, grasped the opportunity to denounce Mother. In those times, no accusation was too absurd.

And so, the farce — driven by power, ignorance, and blind loyalty — came to an end.