Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Boat to Redemption

Written by Su Tong

Translated from the Chinese by Howard Goldblatt

Published by Black Swan,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE BOAT TO REDEMPTION

Su Tong

Translated from the Chinese by Howard Goldblatt



BLACK SWAN

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

THE BOAT TO REDEMPTION
A BLACK SWAN BOOK: 9780552774543

First published in Great Britain
in 2010 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Black Swan edition published 2010

Copyright © Su Tong 2009
First published by the People's Literature Publishing House, 2009
Translation © Howard Goldblatt 2010

Su Tong has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact,
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior
consent in any form of binding or cover other than that
in which it is published and without a similar condition,
including this condition, being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK
can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship
Council (FSC), the leading international forest-certification organization.
All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified
paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found
at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in 11/15pt Giovanni Book by
Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed in the UK by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

PART ONE

Son

Most people live on dry land, in houses. But my father and I live on a barge. Nothing surprising about that, since we are boat people; the terra firma does not belong to us.

Everyone knows that the Sunnyside Fleet plies the waters of the Golden Sparrow River all year round, so life for Father and me hardly differs from that of fish: whether heading upriver or down, most of our time is spent on the water. It's been eleven years. I'm still young and strong, but my father, a rash and careless man, is sinking inexorably into the realm of the aged.

Ever since the autumn he has been exhibiting strange symptoms, some age-related, some not. The pupils of his eyes are shrinking and becoming increasingly cloudy – sort of fish-like. He hardly ever sleeps any more; from morning to night he observes life on the shore through fish eyes filled with dejection, occasionally managing to doze a bit in the early morning hours, as he fills the

cabin with a faint fishy odour, the earthy smell of a carp, at times especially heavy – even worse, I think, than a dead fish on a line. Sighs of torment escape from his mouth one minute and transparent bubbles merrily appear the next. I've noticed spots on the backs of his hands and along his spine; a few are brown or dark red, but most glisten like silver, and it's these that are beginning to worry me. I can't help thinking that my father will soon grow scales on his body. He has lived an extraordinary life, and I'm afraid he's on the verge of turning into a fish.

Anyone who lives on the banks of the Golden Sparrow River is familiar with the martyr Deng Shaoxiang. Hers is a name that appeals to all, refined or common, a stirring musical note in the region's revolutionary history. My father's fate is tied up with the ghost of Deng Shaoxiang. For Ku Wenxuan, my father, was once Deng Shaoxiang's son. Please note that I said 'once'. I had no choice, I had to say it, however inconsequential a word it might seem to you. You see, it is the key to unlocking the story of my father's life.

The heroic deeds of underground Party member Deng Shaoxiang, of which there is both a long and a short version, are known to all local residents. The succinct version has been etched on a granite memorial stone and erected at the Milltown chess pavilion where she was killed. Each year, on tomb-sweeping day, children from throughout the region come to Milltown – on

foot for those who live nearby and by boat or tractor for those coming long distances – and when they reach the pier they are greeted by road signs that point to a hexagonal chess pavilion to the southwest:

Tomb-sweeping, straight ahead three hundred yards

Straight ahead one hundred yards

Straight ahead thirty yards

In fact there's no need to bother with the signs, since on tomb-sweeping day a banner with a conspicuous slogan stretching across the top of the pavilion is visible from the pier:

SOLEMNLY COMMEMORATE THE HEROIC SPIRIT OF THE REVOLUTIONARY MARTYR DENG SHAOXIANG

The memorial stone, some two metres high and a metre wide, stands inside the pavilion, and while the homage is virtually identical to all commemorations of martyrs, children are expected to commit it to memory before returning home, so they can use it in school essays. But what visitors find most impressive is the bas relief on the back of the stone: it is the image of a woman with a basket on her back, awesome anger in her eyes as she gazes to the southeast; and if you look

carefully, you can see a child's head poking up over the edge of the basket, a tiny round head. Look even closer and you can see a little tuft of hair.

Every place has its legends. Deng Shaoxiang's legend is a bewildering one. The most popular version has it that her father owned a coffin shop in the town of Phoenix, which earned her, his only child, the nickname Coffin Girl. Just how she strode on to the path of revolution is a bone of contention. Hometown people say she developed a loathing for evil people and evil deeds in childhood, and constantly sought ways to better herself. While other girls sought riches over poverty, she sought poverty over riches. She had uncommonly good looks, her family was well off, and yet she fell in love with an impoverished fruit-grower who sold Chinese bayberries at the school entrance. But when we sift the sands of gossip to find a kernel of truth, we see that this version reveals only selected facts about her life and is little more than propaganda: that is, she chose her path for love, for an ideal. A second version of events, once popular in and around her husband's birthplace of Nine Dragons Hill, tells a different story. Soon after eloping to Nine Dragons Hill with her peasant lover, so the story goes, she had a change of heart, unhappy with a life of tending fruit trees and enduring the taunts of the muddle-headed rustics around her. At first, she voiced her unhappiness only to her husband. But before long, her in-laws suffered from her tirades too, and the arguments grew so violent that one day she

simply stamped her foot and marched off to join the revolution. Most people felt that this account had the air of marketplace gossip and made Deng Shaoxiang appear unsavoury. Had she joined the revolution simply because of unrealistic aspirations? Had she become a revolutionary out of pettiness? This version of events made the rounds for a while, like an evil wind, but it was relatively short-lived. A team of investigators was sent to stamp out the rumour. Three public-criticism sessions were called, at which one of Deng Shaoxiang's sisters-in-law plus the wife of a landlord and two ageing rich peasants were openly criticized. From then on, even among the poor peasants of Nine Dragons Hill, no one dared spread such talk.

People from both Deng Shaoxiang's hometown of Phoenix and her husband's hometown of Nine Dragons Hill found what she had done unimaginable. Who wouldn't? This frail young woman took on the perilous task of smuggling guns and ammunition to guerrilla fighters who, like her, moved stealthily up and down the banks of the Golden Sparrow River during a reign of terror. It was a role for which she was supremely gifted and well placed. The Phoenix coffin shop was an ideal operations base. News of a death in the area always travelled first to her father's shop, and whenever there was a need to bring weapons to the fighters, she would return to her parents' home, secrete the weapons and ammunition in a corpse-filled coffin, then dress in funeral garb and wail all the way to the cemetery. Once

the coffin was in the ground, her mission was accomplished. The rest was up to the guerrillas. And so people said that Deng Shaoxiang relied upon three treasures to carry out her staggering task: a coffin, a corpse and a cemetery.

The mission that day was relatively easy: she was to travel to the Milltown chess pavilion and deliver five pistols to an underground comrade known only as the Chess King. Disdaining the enemy, she chose not to find out if there'd been any recent deaths in the Milltown area, and neglected to learn the location of the Milltown cemetery. She merely confirmed the name of the contact and where he was supposed to be. For the first time, she chose a basket containing a child instead of a coffin to deliver the weapons. She could not have known that this departure from her three treasures would seal her doom: she would not return from Milltown.

After secreting the five pistols in the baby's swaddling clothes, Deng Shaoxiang hoisted the basket on to her back and boarded a coal barge for the trip to Milltown. At the pier she asked for directions to the chess pavilion.

'That is where men play Chinese chess,' a man said, pointing southwest to a six-sided pavilion. 'What business does a woman have there? Do you play?'

She patted the basket on her back. 'Me, play chess? No, the baby's father is watching the Chess King play, and I've come for him.'

Deng Shaoxiang stepped into the pavilion, where two men in long robes were in the middle of a game. One,

a police commander in disguise, had a cultured look, exactly what she'd expected of the Chess King. The other, a fair-skinned, keen-eyed man wearing glasses, was peering around. Not knowing which of the two was her contact, she fixed her gaze on the chessboard and uttered the secret phrase: 'It's going to rain. Time to come home and bring in the corn.'

One of the men looked into the sky; the other coolly sized up Deng Shaoxiang, picked up a chess piece and placed it on his opponent's square. 'The corn is in already,' he said. 'Now it's time to take his general!'

Though the secret phrase had been answered correctly, Deng Shaoxiang did not put down her basket. Seeing the chaotic setup on the board, she suspected that the men did not in fact know how to play. 'How will you do that?' she asked guardedly.

Momentarily stumped for a reply, the police commander glanced at the other man, forcing himself to remain calm, and said, 'Yes, how will you do that? Tell me.'

The second man gave Deng a sideways glance, his mind racing. 'Remove the chariot and jump on the steed,' he said. 'But the cannon, ah, what to do with that?' As he spoke, he let his gaze travel downwards, a salacious glint in his eyes. Then he burst out laughing. 'You are very clever, Coffin Girl, but do you know what the cannon is doing? It's aimed at you!'

Deng blanched and began edging her way out of the pavilion. 'All right,' she said, 'do what you want.

I shouldn't have spoken. Who am I, a woman, to comment on how men play chess?'

But it was too late, for a gang of men sitting outside the tea shop across the way rushed over, as if attacking an enemy bastion. Deng stopped at the pavilion steps, seeing that she was surrounded, and stood still. 'Well, well,' she said. 'So many men to deal with a single woman. You should be ashamed of yourselves.' Her calm demeanour in the face of danger stunned them all. But her concern about her appearance nearly cost her her life on the spot. Seeing her reach into her bundle, the nervous policemen drew their weapons. But what she took out was a compact – she opened it, looked into the tiny mirror and began to powder her face. '*I'm* not worried,' she said. 'So why should you be? All I ask is for a few moments to powder my face before you kill me. Too bad I don't know how to use the weapons I've brought. If I did, I'd at least take one of you with me.'

Stung by the rebuke, a policeman ran up and snatched the compact out of her hand. So she reached back into her bundle and took out a comb. That too was taken from her. Then they took her basket. 'Hold on,' she said as she ran after it. 'You'll scare my baby!' Pushing her way past the policeman, she bent down to kiss the baby in the basket. 'All right,' she said. 'If you won't let me comb my hair, then I'm ready. You can shoot me now.'

With a sneer, the commander said, 'What do you take us for, a bunch of empty coffins, telling us what we can and can't do? First you smuggle guns, then you tell us

to shoot you. Well, you're not getting off that easily.' He signalled to a man outside the pavilion, who ran up with a pole and banged it against an overhead beam, knocking down a cloud of dust and a rope. A noose dangled from the end. With hideous grins, the men clapped their hands.

Momentarily taken aback, Deng Shaoxiang gazed at the beam and at the rope swaying in the autumn breeze like a ghostly pendulum. Those who heard her last words would remember them all their lives. 'So instead of shooting me, you're going to hang me, is that it? Go ahead if that's what you want. All I ask is that you don't leave me with my tongue hanging out. That's hideous. You have a pole. Well, if my tongue hangs out, push it back in.'

After the martyr's death, the weapons hidden in the basket were removed. But what to do with the baby? Eventually someone – no one knows who – put the baby back into the basket, and someone else – also unknown – took it down to the river. Having heard that boat people were known for plucking children out of the river, he left the basket on the steps of the pier. But no boats came and there were no boat people to claim the child. What came was the water. The river rose that night and swept the mysterious basket from dry land.

Water carried Deng Shaoxiang's legacy downriver, floating from wave to wave. People on the bank who ran after the nearly-new basket spotted a clump of water

grasses, like a tow rope, carrying the basket along in fits and starts, disappearing and reappearing, as if warning off anyone who might try to catch it. Ultimately the basket floated to a spot near the town of Horsebridge. Tired from its travels, it twirled once or twice before falling into the net of Feng Four, a fisherman. Driven by curiosity, Feng reached into the net and scooped it up. Inside he discovered an infant who looked strangely like an immortal, naked but for clumps of grass draped across his yellow skin, which was dotted with beads of water. When he picked the boy up he heard the sound of sloshing water. And there, at the bottom of the basket, hidden beneath some gourds, was a large red carp, which flipped into the air before slipping beneath the surface of the river.

My father was once that boy in the relief sculpture on the back of the memorial stone. The person who scooped the basket out of the Golden Sparrow River, the fisherman Feng Four, lived for many years after Liberation, and it was he who pointed out my father in the Horsebridge orphanage. What he recognized after the passage of time was not the face of the mystical child, but the birthmark on his backside. Seven orphan boys, all about the same age, were brought into the sunlight by attendants and told to expose their backsides for inspection. Filled with the importance of his task, Feng Four walked back and forth behind the boys. After eliminating four who bore no resemblance, he painstakingly examined the green birthmarks on the

backsides of the remaining three little boys, his hand held high, twitching nervously; everyone present held their breath in anxious anticipation. Finally his hand landed on the bottom of the tiniest and scrawniest of the three. 'It's this one,' he said. 'The one with a fish-shaped birthmark. It's him, I know it is!'

Feng Four's hand had spanked the bottom of my father, and that loud smack settled the question. From then on, everyone knew that dirty little Wenxuan, the boy no one cared for, was in reality the son of the martyr Deng Shaoxiang.

For years people said that the boy found amidst clumps of water grass and a red carp was the son of the martyred Deng Shaoxiang. But then everything changed. One year, a team of martyr-orphan investigators, shrouded in mystery, was sent by the district government to determine whether the orphan was in fact the martyr's son. Taking up residence in Milltown, they travelled to towns and villages up and down the banks of the Golden Sparrow River, sometimes openly, at other times in secret. The starting point of their investigation was the disgraceful personal history of Feng Four, whose word they had determined was not to be trusted.

Who was this Feng Four, anyway? In his youth he'd been a river pirate, but when he gave up the lifestyle – or as the Chinese proverb goes, washed his hands in a golden basin – he built a hut on the riverbank and settled down to the life of a fisherman. People who lived

near the river agreed that he'd been a handsome young man who'd lived a dissolute life, choosing to become a pirate because of a woman. With a boat and a rifle, he'd pursued an amorous woman who peddled garlic from her boat. Later he went ashore because of yet another woman. He'd had his eye on a farmer's daughter who picked broad beans and gave herself to him in the field, but would not marry him. So he next turned his attention to a widowed seamstress in Horsebridge. She was happy to carry on a furtive affair, but not to live openly with him, and while she refused to marry him, she would not let him marry anyone else. In the end, he simply wove nets on the riverbank all day long, nets for catching both fish and women. A handsome, bold fellow who was favoured by the opposite sex, he caught more women than fish. One – it was never made clear who – passed on a venereal disease that not only forced him to keep his trousers buttoned from then on, but eventually ended his life.

It is wise to avoid examining these matters too closely. How could a man like Feng Four be qualified to recognize the orphaned son of the martyred Deng Shaoxiang? One of the members of the investigative team, a college student who knew his history, even suspected that Feng had done a swap, palming off his own bastard child as the legitimate offspring of Deng Shaoxiang. It was an audacious charge that took the other team members' breath away. Unwilling either to dismiss or endorse this theory, they wound up simply

including it in the remarks column of their report as an item for consideration.

Everything centred on the birthmark. Drawing on the scientific study of heredity, the team rejected the fish-shaped-birthmark theory, announcing that the residents of the Golden Sparrow River region were all Mongoloids, who had birthmarks on their backsides. And if the birthmarks looked exactly like fish, that was mere coincidence, with no basis in science.

But the residents of Milltown hankered after things that had no basis in science. They went crazy that autumn looking for birthmarks on their bodies. At first the craze was limited to males around the age of forty, but it spread to children and then to old men, until nearly every male in Milltown was caught up in it. Walk past any public toilet, and this is what you might have seen: a man taking down his trousers or asking someone else to take his down so they could eagerly look for birthmarks on their backsides. And in public baths, it was rare for a person not to show off his birthmark, which frequently led to watery squabbles, not to mention the occasional fistfight. But despite the outrageous extremes of the birthmark craze, since people lacked eyes in the backs of their heads, they could not examine their own backsides. That, of course, was how the craze worked to some people's advantage, for there was always someone eager to analyse the prophetic symbols imprinted there. Several of the examined backsides revealed fish-shaped

birthmarks. Some were like goldfish, others resembled carp, and some actually looked like pomfrets. But not all inspections ended happily. Some of the exposed flesh was dark as ebony, some white as ivory, but could boast no birthmark. Had it faded over the years or had it never been there in the first place? Imagine the consternation this caused these unfortunate individuals, who quickly covered up and would let no one else look. Left to taste the bitter fruit of failure alone and in silence, they suffered from a crippling sense of inferiority.

As for my family, the craze took a back seat as rising winds threatened to engulf our home. I ignored the gentle and persistent entreaties of my classmates at school and refused to be caught up in the entanglements out on the street, which all centred on one thing: they wanted me to drop my trousers. My backside was not for public viewing – end of discussion! I tightened my belt and heightened my vigilance, taking a brick along whenever I visited a public toilet, and keeping my hands in my pockets when I was out walking, eyes peeled and ears alert to all sounds. By forestalling sneak attacks, I managed to preserve the integrity of my backside, but was powerless to ward off the domestic storm that had been gathering for so long. It hit, in all its fury, on the twenty-seventh of September, when the visiting team announced the startling results of their investigation. Ku Wenxuan, they concluded, was not Deng Shaoxiang's son!

They said my father was *no longer* Deng Shaoxiang's son!

The events of that day are indelibly etched on my memory. The twenty-seventh of September – coincidentally the commemoration day for the martyr Deng Shaoxiang, the day when my father ought to have been wreathed in glory – turned out to be the day of his greatest shame. I recall that my mother emerged from her propaganda broadcast studio in a daze, looking like someone who had just escaped from hell. She wore a white scarf as a makeshift mask as she pedalled her bicycle precariously down the busy People's Avenue, weeping the whole time. People she passed noticed that the scarf was wet. Sending humans and animals scurrying out of her way, she careened into Workers and Peasants Avenue and stopped at a blacksmith's shop, where she borrowed a hammer and chisel. People said they saw her lips quiver under the scarf, though they could not tell if she was cursing or praying. 'Qiao Limin,' they said, 'what do you need those for? What's wrong?'

'It's nothing,' my mother replied. 'It's just my lungs, they're about to explode from anger!'

The twenty-seventh of September. I heard someone hacking away at our front gate, so I went out and saw that my mother had chiselled off the red plaque announcing that we were honoured as a martyr's family. She weighed the plaque in her hand for a moment before stuffing it into a cloth sack. Then, before any

passers-by could open their mouths, she pushed her bicycle into the yard, closed the gate behind her and sat on the ground.

When my mother said her lungs were about to explode, it was no exaggeration. Her anger was so intense that her face had lost all its colour, and there were traces of tears on her cheeks. 'Go and get the first-aid kit,' she said. 'My lungs are bursting, I need to take something.'

But instead of leaving, I asked, 'Why did you take down the martyr's family plaque?'

She removed the scarf from her face and glared at the little table my father and I had set up in the yard the day before, on which a chess board and pieces rested. Another white-hot flash of anger filled her eyes. I stood watching as she walked over, picked up my father's chess set and flung it over the wall, as if she was dumping rubbish. 'So you like to play chess, do you? Well, from this day on, you're no longer a martyr's descendant. No, you're the son of a liar, and the grandson of Feng Four, a river pirate!'

Hearing the sound of shuffling feet outside the yard, I climbed the wall in time to see our neighbours scrabbling about on the ground, snatching up the chess pieces. Some got their hands on steeds, some on warriors; the blacksmith's son managed to get hold of a general, which he waved proudly in my direction. I had no idea why these people had gathered outside our yard, but now they were looking at me as if their eyes

held secrets, happy secrets. A slightly demented guffaw burst from the mouth of one woman. Then she became serious. 'You!' she screeched. 'You gutless little boy, no wonder you wouldn't let anybody see your backside! A guilty conscience, that's what it was. Just whose grandson are you?' I ignored her, preferring to watch what was happening down there from my perch on the wall and to keep my eyes peeled for my father. I didn't see him; what I did see was a town in mutiny, now that the news had spread. I heard shouts of liberation and screams of joy from the heart of Milltown and beyond. Milltown was in uproar.

My father was not Deng Shaoxiang's son. That was not a rumour, not hearsay. He just wasn't. So who was the martyr's son? The investigative team would not say, and my mother certainly didn't know. Based on hope alone, most of the town's residents were caught up in the birthmark craze, running around making wild guesses, with no two people able to agree. *Who is Deng Shaoxiang's son? Whose birthmark looks most like a fish?* I heard several names being mentioned, including the idiot, Bianjin, whose birthmark came closest. I didn't believe that for a second. Nor did anyone else. An idiot like Bianjin could not possibly be a martyr's son. So who was it? No matter what anyone said, only the investigative team could provide the answer. And all they were prepared to say was that Ku Wenxuan was not the one. It was not my father.

There can be no doubt that the injustices I've suffered

have their origin in those visited upon my father. Now that he was no longer Deng Shaoxiang's son, I was not her grandson. Not being Deng Shaoxiang's son meant that he was a nobody. And his being a nobody had a direct impact on my mother and on me. I too was now a nobody.

The next day I became a *kongpi*. And that became my nickname.

Everything happened so fast that I was caught on the back foot. On the day after the news broke, before I had chance to amend my princely ways, I ran into Scabby Five and Scabby Seven on my way to school. They were standing in front of the pharmacy with their older sister, waiting for it to open; Seven's head was swathed in gauze stained by thick gunk that attracted hordes of flies, which encircled all three of them. I stopped. 'Scabby Seven,' I said as I gaped at the flies on his head, 'have you opened a toilet on your head? Is that why all those flies are landing on it?'

Their eyes were glued to me, especially Scabby Seven's, who was looking at the buttered bun I was holding. He swallowed hungrily, then turned to his sister. 'See!' he bawled. 'He's got a buttered bun. He gets one every day!'

With a little pout, his sister shooed the flies away from his head and said, 'What's so great about a buttered bun? Who cares if he's got one?'

'Who cares?' Seven complained. 'I've never tasted

one. I ought to care about something I've never tasted, shouldn't I?'

His sister paused, glancing at the bun in my hand, and sighed. 'They cost seven fen,' she said. 'We can't afford that. I've never tasted one either, so let's just pretend we don't care.'

But Seven was having none of that. Stiffening his neck, he said, 'His father isn't Deng Shaoxiang's son and he's not her grandson. So how come he gets a buttered bun?'

His sister's eyes lit up. 'You're right, he's a nobody. Who said he can eat that for breakfast? He's mocking us.'

The siblings exchanged glances, and in that brief moment I had a premonition that something bad was about to happen. But not ready to trust my instincts, I stood there, unafraid. Then, as if at an agreed signal, they all rushed at me. Holding the bun over my head, I said, 'How dare you try to steal my food?' They ignored me. Seven jumped up and, like a crazed animal, grabbed my wrist. Then his sister prised my fingers apart, one at a time, until she could snatch the bun, now squeezed out of shape, from my grasp.

I was fifteen at the time. Scabby Five and Scabby Seven were both younger than me, and shorter. And their sister, well, she was just a girl. But by ganging up on me, they easily snatched the food out of my hand. For that I have only lack of preparation to blame, thanks to my princely habits, not ability or physique. Someone

riding past on a bicycle turned to look at me and then at the brothers and sister. 'Stealing food,' they said. 'You should be ashamed of yourselves.'

They weren't. Scabby Seven's sister watched with a sense of pride as he took big bites. 'Slow down,' she said. 'Don't eat so fast, you'll choke on it.'

After a long moment I began thinking logically. This incident was tied up with my father. Since he was not the martyr's son, Scabby Seven was free to steal my bun, and bystanders could look on without lifting a hand. I understood what was going on here, but I refused to take it lying down. I pointed at Scabby Seven. 'How dare you eat my bun!' I shouted. 'Spit it out!'

He ignored me. 'What are you shouting about?' his sister said. 'I don't see your name on it. Buns are made of flour, and that comes from wheat, which is planted by peasants. Our mother's a peasant, so some of this belongs to her.' She dragged her younger brother over to the wall and used her body as a shield. 'Hurry up!' she demanded. 'Finish it. He won't be able to prove a thing once it's in your stomach.' Apparently she was getting worried, though she put on a brave front as she searched the faces of the people near the pharmacy. Then she looked at me again. 'What are you complaining about? You eat a bun every day, but my brother has to settle for thin gruel. That's not fair, it's not socialism! It gives socialism a bad name.'

She walked off, dragging Scabby Seven along with her and followed by Scabby Five. I took a few menacing

steps towards them. 'Is this a rebellion?' I said. 'Well, go ahead and rebel. Eat up. Today the bun is my treat; tomorrow I'll bring you shit to eat!'

She raised her arm and gave me a threatening look. 'To rebel is right! Chairman Mao says so! Don't you dare come over here! If you do, you're thumbing your nose at Chairman Mao. Shit this, piss that. How about cleaning out that filthy mouth of yours? See those people? Are they coming to help you? The people's eyes are too bright for that. Your dad has fallen into disgrace, and you're nothing, a nobody, nothing but a *kongpi*!'

No doubt about it, that was a big loss of face. But I can't avoid the fact that, thanks to that girl, I had a new nickname. I was now Kongpi. I can still recall the glee on the faces of the crowd that had gathered at the sound of those two syllables. In wonderful appreciation of his sister's quick-witted sarcasm, Scabby Seven burst out laughing so hard he nearly choked. 'Kongpi! Kongpi! That's right, now he's a *kongpi*.' Their glee infected everyone within hearing. People around the pharmacy, early-morning passers-by on the street, and those standing beneath the family-planning billboard echoed their gleeful laughter, and within seconds I could hear those two syllables swirling triumphantly in the air all over Milltown.

Kongpi, Kongpi, Kongpi!

People may not know that *kongpi* is a Milltown slang term that dates back hundreds of years. It sounds vulgar

and easy to understand, but in fact it has a profound meaning that incorporates both *kong*, or 'empty', and *pi*, or 'ass'. Placed together, the term is emptier than empty and stinkier than an ass.