

Han Song "Submarines"

As a boy, whenever I asked, my parents would bring me to the shore of the Yangtze River to see the submarines. Following the river's flow, the subs had come to our city in herds and pods. I heard that some subs also came from the Yangtze's tributaries: Wujiang River, Jialing River, Han River, Xiangjiang River, and so on. The subs were so numerous that they looked like a carpet of ants or thousands of wisps of rain-soaked clouds fallen from the heavens.

From time to time, to my amazement, one sub or another would just vanish from the surface. In fact, they had dived. First, the sub slowly wriggled its immense body, which then sank inch by inch, roiling the water around it in complicated and cryptic ripples, until the whole hull disappeared beneath the surface, including the tiny column on top shaped like a miniature watchtower. The flowing river soon recovered its habitual tranquility and mystery, leaving me stunned.

And then, a submarine would explode out of the water like a monster, splashing beautiful waves in every direction. "Look! Look!" I would scream. "It's surfacing!" But my parents never reacted. Their faces remained wooden, looking as dispirited as two houseplants that hadn't been watered for weeks. The appearance of the submarines seemed to have robbed them of their souls.

Most of the time, the subs remained anchored on the placid surface, motionless. Wires were strung over the hulls, stretching from

tower to tower. Drying laundry hung from the wires like colorful flags, pants and shirts mixed with cloth diapers. Women in thick, crude aprons cooked with coal stoves on the decks, and the smoke columns turned the river into a campground. Sometimes the women squatted next to the water, beating the laundry with wooden bats against the sturdy metal hulls. Occasionally, old men and women climbed out of the subs, looking relaxed as they sat with their legs curled under them, smoking long-stemmed pipes with a cat or a dog curled up against them.

The subs belonged to the peasants who had come to our city to seek work. After a day of working in the city, the peasants returned to their submersible abodes. Before the arrival of the subs, peasant laborers had to rent cheap apartments in urban villages, plots of land where the rural population stayed as their farmlands were gobbled up by developers for the expanding city, leaving them stranded in a sea of skyscrapers. The urban villagers rented out one-foot-wide spaces on communal beds, and the rural laborers who built the city had to sleep like pigs or sheep in a pen. The submarines, on the other hand, gave the laborers their own homes.

Ferries operated between the shore and the anchored subs. Peasants piloted these ferryboats, shuttling their brothers and sisters between two completely different worlds. At night, after everyone had returned to their homes, the subs were at their most beautiful. Lit by gas lamps, each boat glowed with a different pattern, like paper-cutting pasted on windowpanes. Bright, lively, they also reminded me of fallen stars adrift on the river. On each sub, a family sat around the table having supper, and the cool river breeze brought their laughter and chatter to the shore, leaving the urban residents with a sense of strange envy. As the night deepened, lights on the vessels winked out one by one until only the anxious searchlight beams from the harbor towers roamed the darkness, revealing motionless hulls like sleeping whales. Many subs, however, chose this time to disappear. Each sweep of the searchlight showed fewer and fewer boats. Without any announcement, they had dived, as if the peasants couldn't sleep soundly without the comfort of being

covered by water, like water birds that had to tuck their heads beneath their wings to nap. Only by submerging their families and homes could they leave their worries behind on the surface, hold danger and uncertainty at bay, and dream sweet dreams without being bothered by the city-dwellers—was that, in fact, the reason they had built the submarines in the first place?

I often wondered how deep the Yangtze was, and how many subs could lie on the riverbed. How eerie and interesting it would have been to see rows upon rows of metal hulls lying next to each other down there! The thought made me gasp at how mysterious the world was, as though there was another world beyond the visible one.

In any event, the submarines settled near us like nesting birds and became a hotly debated sight. Every morning, they popped out of the water like boiled dumplings. Under the shimmering dawn light, the perturbed river surface resembled a spring flood. The scene made me think of alien spaceships from the movies. Busy ferries went back and forth between the subs and the shore, carrying spirited peasants into the city for another day of back-breaking labor at construction sites across the city.

The submarines came from all over China. Besides our city, rumors described pods in other cities and other rivers as well. Every sea, lake, canal, and trench seemed to have its own sub colonies. No one could say for sure who had designed the first sub. Supposedly, a clever folk craftsman had fashioned the first submarines by hand. By the standards of sophisticated urbanites, these boats were crude pieces of technology: most were constructed from scrap metal, though a few were pieced together with fiberglass and plywood. The early subs were shaped like fish, and many had heads and tails painted in red and white, including radiant, vivid eyes, lips, or even fins. These features looked a bit ridiculous, though they also showed the sense of humor unique to peasants. Later, as more submarines were built, the differences in decorative coloration distinguished families from one another.

Typically, a sub was big enough for a single family, on average

five or six people. Bigger subs provided enough space for two or three families. The peasants seemed unable to build large vessels that could carry dozens or hundreds of people. Some city-dwellers had wondered whether the subs were constructed along plans cribbed from Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, or perhaps foreign experts had secretly helped the peasant craftsmen. In the end, however, no connection between the subs and Verne was discovered. The sub makers had never even heard of the author. Everyone sighed with relief.

After a while, the city kids continued to be fascinated by the subs while the adults became either bored or pretended not to notice them. At school, we enthusiastically swapped stories and news about subs, and we drew pictures of them on sheets of paper torn from our composition books. The teachers, however, never mentioned them, and reprimanded us with frowning faces whenever they caught us discussing the subject, tearing apart our sketches and sending the offenders to the principal's office. It was rare to see any TV or newspaper reporting about the activities of the submarines, as though the congregating vessels had nothing to do with the life of the city.

Occasionally, a few curious adults—mostly artists and poets—would come to the shore to gaze at the scene, whispering to each other. They speculated that over time, perhaps the subs would evolve a new civilization. The submarine civilization would be unlike any existing civilization in the world, just as mammals are completely different from reptiles. They wanted to visit the subs to collect folklore and study their customs, but the peasants never showed any inclination to invite the city-dwellers to come aboard. Maybe after a full day of hard labor, they were too tired to deal with strangers. Besides wanting to avoid trouble, they probably also didn't see any profit in it. The peasants made it clear that the only reason they had come to the city was to find work and make money. However, the unsophisticated peasants seemed to not realize that they could have roped the anchored subs off and charged money for

a close-up view, turning their homes into a tourist attraction. Neither did they display any interest in creating a “new civilization.”

After returning to the subs at night, all the peasants wanted to do was to eat and go to sleep. They had to rest well to be able to get up in the morning for another day of hard work. Toiling at the dirtiest and most physically demanding jobs in exchange for the lowest and most uncertain wages, the peasant laborers never complained. This was because they had the subs, which allowed them to be with their families after work instead of having to leave them behind in distant home villages. The subs replaced the fields that they had been forced to sell to local governments and real estate developers at bargain-basement prices so that the fields could be consumed by growing cities. Although the city-dwellers acted as if what had happened to the peasants was none of their concern, in their hearts they felt uneasy and helpless. To be sure, the subs did not pose a threat to the city—they weren’t armed with cannons or torpedoes, for instance.

After I became a good swimmer, my friends and I secretly visited the subs on our adventures. Holding hollow reeds in our mouths, we snorkeled to the middle of the river, out of sight, until we were right next to the anchored subs. Large wooden cages dangled from cables beneath the hulls, and the turbid river water swirled around the cage bars. Inside, we saw many peasant children, their earth-toned bodies nude, swim around like fish, their slender limbs nimbly finning the water and their skin glowing in the silt-filtered light. Guessing that these cages were likely the peasant version of daycare or kindergarten, our hearts filled with wonder.

Our leader was a boy a few grades above me. “Don’t be so impressed,” he said contemptuously. “I bet we can beat them in a swim race.” The rest of us approached one of the cages and asked the children inside, “Have you ever seen a car?”

The children stopped swimming and gathered on our side of the cage, their faces as expressionless as plastic animals’. I saw that they didn’t have scales or fins, as I had hoped. It was a mystery how

they could stay underwater for so long without using a breathing reed.

Finally, a look of curiosity appeared on the face of one of the peasant children. "A car? What's that?" His voice was barely a whisper. I thought he looked like a creature out of manga.

"Ha, I knew it!" Our leader sounded pleased. "There are so many types of cars! Honda, Toyota, Ford, Buick . . . oh, and also BMW and Mercedes!"

"We don't know what you're talking about," said the peasant kid, his voice hesitant. "But we've seen lots of fish. There's red carp, gold carp, black carp, sturgeon, oh, and also white bream and Amur bream!"

Now it was our turn to be nervous. We looked around but didn't see any fish. Our teachers had taught us that all fishes in the Yangtze had gone extinct, so were the peasant children trying to trick us? Where could they have seen fish?

"I hope they really evolve into a different species from us," muttered our leader.

The peasant children blinked uncomprehendingly before returning to their aimless swim in the cage, as though trying to keep away from us.

"Are you going to turn into fish?" I asked.

"No."

"Then what will you become?"

"Don't know. When our mas and das are back from work, you can ask them."

I thought of how they lived underwater, away from fields, gardens, and soil, while we lived on the shore. It was like a picture of fish and shrimp versus cattle and sheep—was that the future?

We pretended to be interested in them and attempted to play with the peasant children some more, but the effort fizzled. They didn't know any of the games we knew, and the bars of the cage stood in our way. It was boring to keep on trying. In the murky shadows of the swaying underwater weeds, we felt the oppressive presence of a nameless terror. And when our leader gave the order,

we gladly headed for the surface after him so that we could return to our own realm.

The peasant children would stay in the water. Let them.

We burst through the surface, our hearts pounding. All around us were the hulking forms of anchored subs, like a pack of hungry, silent wolves in the deep of winter. Like freshly fallen snow, the crude, gloomy hulls reflected the bright sunlight so that we squinted. There were no fish on the surface either, just the drifting corpses of rats and cockroaches, and layers and layers of rotting algae, tangled with thousands of discarded phone chargers and computer keyboards, as well as soda bottles, plastic bags, and other trash. The stench from the feces-colored water was almost unbearable, and swarms of flies buzzed around, their heads an iridescent green.

This was, in fact, an unforgettable, lovely sight that made us linger, and we wondered if the subs had come here specifically to appreciate it. Their long odyssey had left them with a unique value system and sense of beauty. Peasant women busied themselves aboard the subs without gazing down at us in the river. They boiled their rice and cooked their meals with the stinking water we bobbed in, and yet, whereas the city-dwellers would have died from the germs, the peasants were fine.

Just then, anxious adults on shore hollered for us to come home, their faces filled with *danger, frightful, menace*.



The year before I started middle school, something happened involving the subs.

It was an early autumn night. Loud noises woke me from sleep, and it seemed as if the whole city had boiled over. My parents dressed me quickly, and we hurried out the door, heading for the river. We became part of a surging crowd whose thumping footsteps and worried cries were like exploding firecrackers on New Year's Eve. I was so scared that I covered my ears, unsure what was happening.

Once we arrived at the shore, I found out that the subs had

caught fire. The fire had spread and all the boats were burning. In my memory, it was like a major holiday: the whole city's population seemed to be present, their numbed expressions replaced by excitement, screaming and talking as though they were watching a marvelous show. Trembling, I squeezed next to my parents and tried my best to get a peek through the sea of people.

Raging fire danced and leapt from the densely packed subs, swirling, spreading, expanding like the skirts of cruel flamenco dancers. Flickering lights from the flames lit up the skyscrapers onshore so that they glowed like the foliage of late autumn, until the whole scene resembled a fresh painting. It was a shocking sight whose equal I have never experienced again.

For some reason, none of the subs dived. It was as if they had all forgotten what they were. Floating still at the surface, they made no effort to escape as the ice-like fire devoured them one by one. I was certain there was some secret behind it, some indescribable mystery. I wondered if another fantastic fire was also burning underwater—somehow, the water molecules had all transformed into another substance, and the whole Yangtze River was defying the physical properties endowed by nature, which was why the submarines were unable to dive away from this fiery dance stage.

I thought of the children in their underwater cages, and my heart swelled with shock and worry. Turning my head, I saw my parents standing like a pair of zombies, unmoving, their eyes staring straight ahead like lanterns, their faces frozen. Other adults muttered like chanting Buddhist monks, but no one made any effort to extinguish the fire. They seemed to be there only to witness the death of alien creatures in the river, to watch as the uninvited guests achieved total freedom.

That night seemed to last forever, though I never once thought of death, only soaking in the poignancy and meaninglessness of life itself. I never felt sad or mournful, though I was sorry that I would never again be able to swim into that strange realm, to see sights that made my heart leap and my mind confused. A sense of unre-

solvable solitude gripped me, while I knew also that my own future would not be affected in any way by what I was seeing. . . .

Morning finally arrived. Dim sunlight revealed lifeless hunks of blackened metal drifting everywhere on the river. In scattered rows, circles, clumps, they reflected the cold, colorless light, and the air was suffused with the decaying odors of autumn. The city-dwellers brought forth cranes to retrieve the wreckage of the submarines from the river and trucked the pieces to scrap metal yards. The whole process took over a month.

After that, no submarines came to the Yangtze River.