

Celebration Cakes

by Doug Shepardson *(an excerpt from a much longer piece)*

Doubao buns. Warm and round and filled with sweet bean paste. You ask why your grandmother insists on making them for you each year on your birthday. You are embarrassed and bored that you have to go to her small house with her old furniture and wait politely while she serves you the soft steamed snacks. It takes her all morning to prepare them. I know, I know. You love Grandma, and you love her tasty cakes. But why is this old Chinese tradition so important to her? Before her memory fades further, I asked her to write the story she has held in her heart for so many years. Perhaps when you read the words that follow, you will understand.

It was early July of that year. A heavy summer storm had passed in the night. Pools of muddy rain water spread across the road in front of our house. The air was motionless. Hidden cicadas sang in the sweltering heat from the shadows of the green jungle. It was clear by then that the period of cooperation with the Japanese occupiers was over. A month earlier someone hidden in the rice paddies by the road to Xianyan had fired a rifle at a passing Japanese patrol truck. A bullet ripped a hole through the spine of a soldier. The next day ten trucks carrying a hundred Japanese troops swarmed into Xianyan. Two local teenage boys were hauled before the Jap commander in the village square and repeatedly beaten while the officer questioned them. *Who killed my soldier? Was it one of your brothers? A cousin? Someone you know?* Local villagers were summoned at bayonet point to watch the torture. As the beatings continued, the boys would collapse into unconsciousness and fall into the dirt. After a few minutes they would be revived and their thin bodies would be hauled upright by the Japanese and the beatings and questions would start again. *Where are your hidden guns? Speak up!* This went on all afternoon. The boys knew nothing, could say nothing. Their faces were swollen purple from the beatings, their mouths filled with blood and broken teeth. At sunset the Jap commander shot them both in the head and left the bodies lying in the dust. *Let this be a lesson to all of you.*

Japanese soldiers on patrol would now force their way into homes and businesses to steal anything of value. And so my little sister Sarah and I became nervous when we heard the sound of a truck slowly coming up our road, gears grinding, tires splashing in the pools of water. It was a Japanese army truck filled with soldiers on patrol. We stood behind the window shutters and watched as the truck stopped in front of our house. What would they steal this time? Cooking pots? Pillows from the beds? Several soldiers jumped down, talking loudly. They appeared to be drunk. They ignored the front house and walked warily to the tractor shed in back. Little sister and I had forgotten to close and lock the

doors! The soldiers went inside and quickly found father's hidden bundles of Gold Yuan notes. They shouted happily as they loaded the thick packets of money into the back of their truck. *We are rich! Rich!* The truck with the soldiers drove away. The loss of the bank notes didn't matter much to our family's finances at that point. Because of rampant inflation the 'Gold Yuan' was almost worthless; a 'junk' currency with low value.

About twenty minutes later we heard more voices in Japanese. Sister Sarah and I again went to the front window and stood very still and watched as two Japanese soldiers approached on foot. Apparently they had failed to board their truck at some earlier rendezvous point and were now walking back to Xian. Their drunken compatriots in the truck didn't realize that two stranglers had been left behind. The pair stopped in front of our house and then stepped onto the porch. They began banging on the door with their long rifles, shouting in Japanese. We did not move, hoping they would just go away. When there was no response from the darkened house the soldiers pried open the door lock with their bayonets. Our maid, Ah Ming, rushed from the kitchen to confront them.

Go away! Not your house! Nobody home!

The soldiers pushed her out of the way and entered the rooms. Both father and mother were down in the village that morning, but father had told us over and over what to do if this happened. Little sister Sarah and I ran swiftly and silently to the maid's room in the back of the house. The window shutters were closed and there was not much light. We hid under Ah Ming's bed and pulled a chamber pot full of smelly urine in front of us at the edge of the bed. We watched in fright as a Japanese soldier entered the room. We could see his boots as he poked at the urine pail with the bayonet on the end of his rifle. After a few moments he said something to his companion and they walked away from the house.

The soldiers didn't know they were being followed. Two Chinese boys watched silently from the thick undergrowth on the other side of the road. Each was armed with a single-shot shotgun. They were waiting for the right moment to ambush the two Japanese. A train of shiny black ants crawled over their legs as they squatted in the ferns. The boys didn't move. They would get one shot and one shot only. The Japs were armed with bolt action rifles that could fire five quick shots before reloading. The taller of the two was a farmer's son from Luanzhen with brown arms and broad hands and thick black hair that seemed to stand up by itself. The shorter one was the round-faced son of the janitor at Yaodian High school. They were both eighteen years old and had decided they had had enough; that it was time to become guerrilla fighters and start killing Japanese. The two unwary Japs passed in front of the boys and continued to walk down the road. They were hardly more than teenagers themselves. The tall farm boy crushed some of the ants with the palm of his hand. The two Japs were now about thirty feet away. The janitor's son pointed with his gun barrel and the tall one nodded: *Yes. Now is the time.* There were loud blasts from the two shotguns. Small balls of hot lead ripped into the backsides of the Japs. One immediately dropped his rifle and slammed to the dirt as if hit by a tree branch, crying in pain. The other one staggered down the road, trying to run on shredded calves and bleeding tendons. The tall boy dashed from the bushes and quickly picked up the rifle

of the fallen soldier. He worked the bolt action and aimed carefully and shot the fleeing Jap in the back. The janitor's son emerged from the brush and walked to the dead soldier and began to remove his belt pouches of bullets. The other Japanese boy lay on his back, wounded, shaking with fear, tears of pain in his eyes.

The tall one leaned over him and slowly lit a cigarette while cradling the long rifle with its deadly bayonet. "Do you know Mei Tam from Jiangmen?" he asked.

The Jap shook his head. The tall one flicked some cigarette ash on the prone figure. "Speak up! I can't hear you!"

Noo. No understand.

"Mei Tam. She had a sister named Wei Fong who was a nurse at St. Stephen's hospital in Hong Kong. You bastards raped and murdered her sister. He flicked the cigarette away. "Mei asked me to give you a message."

The farm boy raised the rifle with its long bayonet above his shoulders. His brown hands trembled with fear and anger. Then he swiftly stabbed the bayonet deep into the soldier's stomach. The Jap shrieked in pain. Now the fear was gone and the strong hands shook only with anger. The farm boy raised the rifle and stabbed the Jap again and again. Then the air was suddenly still, and there was only the shrill hissing of the hidden cicadas. Little sister Sarah and I had witnessed everything from the front window. Her wide eyes filled with tears and she began to cry. Dragonflies darted over the pools of water and blood.

I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her. "Don't look," I told her. "Don't look."

But it was too late. We could not look away. The dead bodies lay motionless in the red mud, the murderous bayonet glistened with red blood in the summer haze. The smell of cordite and death lingered in front of our house.

The two young guerillas pulled the bullet pouches from the bayoneted body and then stepped back. They looked dazed and confused, as if they didn't know what to do next. Ah Ming suddenly emerged from the house carrying some towels and a basin of water and quickly took control of the situation.

"You take bodies there," she commanded, pointing to the dark green thicket on the other side of the road. "Take far, far! Keep ghosts away from house. Then come back. Go!"

We watched as the boys dragged the damp bodies into the ferns. In the next instant, I knew what I must do. *Doubao buns*. I ran back into the kitchen and saw the soft, warm buns on a metal tray on the table. I wrapped them in a faded towel and went back outside.

The two boys emerged from the green shadows a few minutes later. Their faces were sweaty and their pants and shoes caked with dark brown jungle mud. Ah Ming gave them the towels and the bowl of water and they washed their hands and necks and faces. I walked over to the tall farm boy. Even in that sad moment I could not help but notice his handsome face. How his wiry hair seemed to stand up all by itself. He told me their names and where they were from. I gently placed the towel filled with the cakes in his hands.

"Doubao buns," I said. "They were for my birthday. It's today. But you should have them. Please."

The handsome country boy smiled and took the gift and softly said, "Happy birthday." Ah Ming could see this was not the time or place for a budding friendship. "Go!" she commanded. "You good boys. But go now!"

The farm boy and the janitor's son shouldered their new rifles along with their shotguns and disappeared into the tangle of vines and brush.

Doubao buns! Ah Ming had been making them for me in the kitchen when the trouble started. Doubao buns to celebrate my birthday.

It was the 4th day of July of the year 1944.

I was sixteen years old.



Memories.... memories....

Copyright© 2014 Doug Shepardson. All rights reserved.