From Wife to Widow

In March 1968, one of Taiwan’s most popular essayists, Kuo I-tung (better known by his pen name, Po Yang), began a long spell of imprisonment that continues today. First his wife was taken in on February 29, was slapped around and released late that night. Next he was taken in and grilled about the translation of a Popeye cartoon which he had been editing for a Taipei newspaper. When it turned out that the offensive cartoon (which depicted Popeye taking control of a small island thru a one-candidate election) was not his doing, he was released while the authorities began a search of his early history on the mainland for incriminating evidence. On March 3rd he was taken in for good, for reasons which remain as obscure today as they did then.

The letters by his wife below were written only days after his final arrest to Dr. Sun Kuan-han, an American admirer of his works, and were published in Sun’s Po Yang yu T’a-te Yuan-yu (Po Yang and His Unjust Imprisonment) (Hong Kong, 1974). More information may be had from Save Po Yang C’tee c/o Dr. Sun Kuan-han, 2131 Lindsay Rd., Pittsburgh, Penn. 15521.

Dear Dr. Sun,

March 9, 1968

Professor X relayed your concern. I don’t know how to express my gratitude. I haven’t heard one word from I-tung yet. I can’t sleep at all at night. When I
thumb through your letters to I-tung I can’t stop crying. There’s no way of describing your kind care and appreciation of I-tung. These few days, besides worrying and waiting, I’ve been putting his books and papers in order. I sent you each of Po Yang’s twenty books yesterday for your safekeeping. Sell them if possible; if not, please give them to good friends of I-tung.

This afternoon I received a telephone call from the head of the personnel department of the Broadcasting Company of China (BCC) where I work. He said that the general manager, Li Shih-fen, wants me to voluntarily resign at once. I almost fainted. Even in these troubled times there’s not a shred of sympathy. They want to drive my mother, daughter and me to the end of our rope. Looking at the situation, unemployment seems almost certain. That’s society, that’s human nature—I really can’t restrain my grief.

With your understanding of I-tung, I think you must also feel very bad about his having come to this. You must certainly feel disappointed in human nature. At present, there’s no one in the country able to help or empathize. Please forgive me for the many places where my meaning is unclear.

March 14, 1968

Dear Dr. Sun,

Yesterday and today I received your two letters of the seventh and tenth... I keep on looking forward to your letters—they’re my only spiritual support. These few days seem like two centuries—two centuries of hardships! First, I keep holding out hope for news from I-tung, but as each day passes news seems farther away. Friends inquiring about the case one after another receive warnings. Since there’s no way for them to pursue the matter further, they all back off. I’ve already been forced to resign my job. The head of the personnel department of the Broadcasting Company of China (BCC) ordered the general manager Li Shih-fen to say that if I didn’t resign voluntarily it wouldn’t be good for me later. I’m one weak woman with a child. Friends can’t help either. The only thing to do was tearfully leave my job of seven years. So now I’m completely out of work.

It’s been ten whole days since I-tung was summoned for interrogation. Up to now the family has not been well off. To scrape up enough cash to live on, I-tung’s small business was all we had. How naive of him to think that he would not be taken again. He didn’t make arrangements for anything at all; he didn’t even leave any money for family use. He just said that, if it should come to that, sell the house. We bought this apartment on an installment plan, and even now there’s still over US $1000 left to pay. If we sell the house where will my mother and daughter later rest their heads? And returning to my parents’ house in this wretched mood is no way out either. My parents still don’t know about this, because even were they to know it’d be no help. Indeed, it would be a big blow to them, and at their age, I fear they wouldn’t be up to it. So for now I won’t tell them.

I’m now handling I-tung’s publishing business for the time being, but since I’ve
never had anything to do with publishing before, it's a great mess, with not a trace of organization. But people must live, and I think I'm strong enough. I've already cried myself dry, and after all these painful memories of the past I can make plans for a life. I-tung wrote out a lot of IOU's before and if they all come due at once I can pay only a portion from my own checking account. If the checks bounce I'm sure to be arrested (for breaking the Negotiable Notes Law). But we must continue somehow. After I-tung finds out about this, some printers will not finish the book they're printing, and some will come to demand their money—one can well imagine the consequences.

You know well I-tung's patriotic sentiments, so I need not say more. I-tung is frank and resolute. You probably still don't completely understand him, but we've been together for these past ten years, and I feel he's really a good person. He's ten times better than I—I don't know how he could have fallen into this predicament. And it brings misfortune to his wife and daughter. Socrates had to sacrifice his life for the Truth. Today, Truth still hasn't been found; I wonder if it even exists?

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When I-tung left home his clothes were messy. It's turned hot and I don't know whether he's bathed or not, or changed clothes or not, or received a beating or not. I've heard from reliable friends that it's possible that he's been slapped around. This kind of information is still not available. It's as if there were two worlds... I simply dare not think about it any more.

Peace,

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In Dr. Sun's book, he concludes the publication of these two letters with the note:

These reports are only about the situation at that time. Chinese society has a guilty-by-family-relationship kind of psychology. Because of it prisoners are yet more oppressed by concern for their wives' and children's future. After he was imprisoned, Po Yang started divorce procedures, to complete the break-up of his family to Chinese society's "satisfaction".

DECEMBER 1975
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letter describing his tortures out of his cell at the TGC's Taipei headquarters.

The military tribunal, held at the TGC's Chingmei Prison just outside Taipei, began early September 15th, and is said to have lasted nearly a week. Nobody was allowed in—not Seymour, who planed all the way from New York for his second AI mission in 4 months, nor the press or the few other interested observers who bravely gathered outside the prison compound gates—not even the families. On trial with Hsieh, Wei and Lee were: Li Cheng-yi, Chan Chung-hsiung, Wu Chung-hsin, Kuo Jung-wen and Liu Ch'en-t'an. They were all arrested in February/March 1971, and all except Lee Ao are Taiwanese.

Little is known but that all 8 got reduced sentences—by exactly how much is not clear, but sources, inside the government and out, agree that they all have from 1 to 2 more years to serve. Hsieh, whose health—in spite of surgery performed earlier this year—is steadily worsening, has 1 year and 11 months still to serve. He might not even survive this winter unless released for proper hospital care and recuperation. We must continue to press for his immediate release and the open trials (with international observers attending) of all the others.

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