

# ABI-SWORD PREQUEL (Vol. 1): A SEAL REOPENED

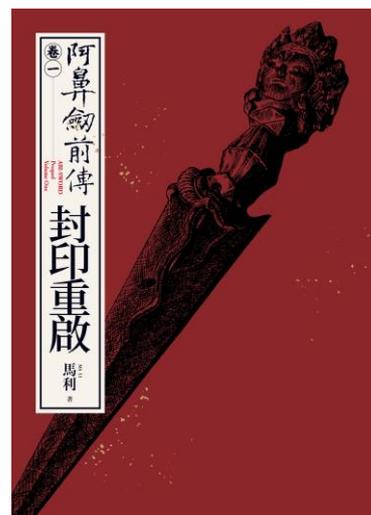
## 阿鼻劍前傳 〈卷一〉： 封印重啟

*This brand-new prequel to the martial arts comic book classic Abi-Sword grips the reader with the fast-paced story of a young man who leaves home on a journey of discovery and terrifying risk – truly an Asian counterpart to the King Arthur saga.*

Every Taiwanese comic book reader remembers *Abi-Sword*, the 1989 martial arts series by Chen Uen that held an entire generation in thrall. Now, years after the famous series was cut short and its creator Chen Uen passed away, former series scriptwriter Ma Li has decided to pick up the master's pen and narrate in novel form the backstory of *Abi-Sword's* central protagonist.

At nineteen, young Ping Chuan dreams of nothing else but leaving his position as an innkeeper's assistant and traveling the country. When that opportunity arrives, however, he soon finds that the road is a harder taskmaster than he can endure. He attempts suicide, but fails, and his rescue at the hands of an old man and his beautiful daughter, Cricket, signals the beginning of a new – yet still dangerous – life.

In a subsequent moment of peril, Ping Chuan is rescued by a man of great ability – none other, in fact, than the peerless swordsman Wu-Sheng. Having pledged to serve Wu-Sheng as his valet and caretaker, Ping Chuan learns that Wu-Sheng is hunting for an old, hidden asset – the Abi-Sword, the weapon Wu-Sheng once wielded on the battlefield, then sealed beneath a mountain to escape its bloodlust. But whether or not Wu-Sheng can still wield it – indeed, or even draw it from its stone casing – is yet to be seen.



**Category:** Martial Arts, Fantasy

**Publisher:** Dala

**Date:** 2/2020

**Rights contact:**

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

**Pages:** 416

**Length:** 100,000 characters

(approx. 65,000 words in English)

**Volume:** 1 (ongoing)

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By Ma Li

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

## Preface

The fire raged. It cast a shadow like a vast, black wave swallowing everything in its wake before swiftly rising again. The scene unfolding in the sky was like something from a classical painting, a dark green dragon with golden horns and black whiskers was fighting fiercely against a giant scarlet python. As they wrapped around one another, they mated. A great axe against a copper claw, the clashing of swords rumbling like thunder.

Then everything dissipated. All that remained was Wu-Sheng's face, shrouded in light and shadow from the flickering flames. Despite his breathlessness, his final sentence was clear: "You must wait for me to return."

This was the task he bestowed upon me. It would take three hundred and thirty years.

My fate was not death but immortality. I have been alive for two hundred and eighty seven years, a fate ordinary people could only dream of, but for me it has become a trap from which I cannot escape. A punishment rather than a task.

As I watched him die, in that moment I knew I was wrong. I should never have promised him this. After everything we'd been through together I knew I should have died there with him. It would have made for a good end to my life and at least we would have died together. We had been like bells ringing in harmony, but our many songs had been reduced to a single chord, quiet and hollow. This emptiness drove me to the edge of my sanity.

Time passed quickly at first, so fast it was gone in the blink of an eye. Years passed like days. In a flash the whistling northern winds became the croaks of the frogs in summer before rapidly turning back again. Then gradually time began to slow, until one spring the dewdrops on the leaves and grass became perpetually round and full. There was such an abundance of everything that it was difficult to breathe.

After one hundred and twenty years, I was fortunate enough to find a cave which gave me a place to escape. While it was easy to find a cave without light, it was far harder to find one without sound. Movements appeared in layers undulating in the darkness, but all I had to do was be still.

I sat in absolute stillness, until I could no longer tell if I had been born from the rock or if I had slipped through its cracks into an endless void.

I always wanted to believe that this was the face of death, or perhaps that this was what it meant to be closest to death. In the end, I knew it was neither because I could still hear a sound that hit me like a tidal wave. My own heartbeat.

After nearly three hundred years the river of memories had become blocked, leaving behind just a vague sense of something on the surface. Following the sound of the current, I was guided as though clinging to driftwood for support. Thus, it wasn't so much that I found the memories, but rather that the memories found me.

But what does it matter? After all, if when Wu-Sheng made his promise he was right about the date, then in forty-three years' time we would meet again. The time had come for me to try and piece my memories together.

Meeting Wu-Sheng by chance and witnessing him become a Venerable Master. The expedition we took, travelling 8,000 miles as the wind blows. The arrival of that final night and the reason we must wait for his resurrection.

As the ninth envoy of the Abi-Sword, I remembered it all.

## **01 The Red Robes and the Scimitar**

The beginning of autumn was swiftly approaching and I stood there perplexed at how the rain could still be this heavy. Had this tiny shack not been crammed with people, there would have been no harm at staring out at the rain. That's just how it was. To my right, nearest to the entryway, three farmers squatted. They must have come late from a market day, happy as they were to let themselves get soaked with rain as long as their goods stayed dry.

Further inside sat a man wearing a Daoist hat and robes, but he didn't seem to be holding his horsetail whisk. He was probably drenched from the rain and kept having to shake out his wide sleeves. The man who had come in before the Daoist priest looked like a scholar. He kept sneezing which made his slight frame seem so small that the bag by his feet looked huge.

To my left was a couple; they arrived at almost the same time I did. The man was tall and erect of posture, carrying a woven bamboo box in his hands. He looked like a traveling merchant but there was something in his expression that made it seem like he wasn't. He had looked me over once when he came in, then turned his eye toward the door.

I guessed the woman sitting beside him on the shack's only stool was his wife. She was dressed completely in green and wore a pale jacket that matched her grass-colored skirt. With her head lowered and her husband blocking my view, I could see little besides her hair, which was up in a bun, and the pale neck beneath. I couldn't see her face clearly. Beside her was a donkey that she must have ridden here.

I was stuck in between all of them. The real discomfort was still to come.

I was nineteen years old. The day before, I got sick from something I'd eaten while I was on the road. I had felt a little better this morning, but then my stomach started to turn again.

The rain fell harder. Had the shack been empty, it would have been fine. Squashed in amongst the crowd, I had no idea what to do. I prayed to the temple of my body to please not humiliate me like this. My stomach still ached but it seemed like the gods might have heard my prayers. The rain was lighter now. I looked beyond the scholar and the Daoist priest for someplace to go.

I saw a grove where I could hide and find shelter from the rain. I grabbed my things, muttering “excuse me” as I rushed out. The rain felt even colder than it had before. I ran as fast as I could out of the shack.

I hid under a tree where I struggled with diarrhea for a while. Luckily, I could watch the diminishing rain and the people inside the shack through a gap in the trees, so I wasn’t bored. Just as I was about to get up, I saw a shadow appear on the road in the distance. For an instant, I couldn’t make out what it was or how it came to look and move as it did.

As it got closer, I saw it was a person – bald, and wearing a burgundy robe. He had a weird posture and was walking very quickly. At first I thought he’d just stumbled but once I could see a bit more clearly I felt a shiver down my spine. To my horror, I saw that there were no facial features on his bald head and it was as smooth as a hen’s egg. I suddenly felt a tingling in my scalp.

Then I finally understood. He was walking backwards and I was looking at the back of his head. He swayed left and right but it was like he’d grown eyes in the back of his head and he walked faster and faster as he made his way toward the shack. He was heading straight for it.

The rain tapered somewhat. No one in the shack moved. Even though they were looking directly at the red-robed man headed straight toward them, it was as if none of them really saw him.

I glanced at the woman in the green jacket and shirt; she did not raise her head. Just as the man was about to burst into the shack, I saw him stop so abruptly that his body began to fall toward us. Yet he pulled himself back up again like his feet were tacked to the ground and stood bolt upright.

The drizzle suddenly stopped. I shifted a little so my head was at an angle where I could see the red-robed man’s face. There wasn’t a single hair on his gaunt head; he didn’t even have eyebrows. I couldn’t make out his age. He had narrow eyes, the corners of which sloped so high upwards that he looked half-asleep. He had large, protruding ears and his lips were thin and turned upwards in a way that made it look like he could be smiling.

I ducked my head down lower.

The people in the shack still hadn’t made a sound. I heard the scholar sneeze occasionally. Anyone passing by on the road might think that the red-robed man was part of the crowd, staring at the sky after the rain had finished.

“Hand them over,” he said in a strange, piercing voice, sounding out each word.

I stared at him. He stood firm. I didn’t see his mouth move and he looked like he was smiling even though he wasn’t.

The people in the shack finally reacted. The Daoist priest was first. Agile despite his wide-sleeved robes, he was out of the shack in the blink of an eye, flashing a black shadow in his hands toward the back of the red-robed man.

In the same instant, the scholar leapt from his spot on the ground into the sky and soared toward the bald man. One would never think that such a small, sickly man would be so lithe and skillful.

There was a clash of metal. The Daoist had his iron *sai* parried away, while the scholar was knocked out of air before the red-robed man, who still hadn't turned to face them. The red-robed man had a short weapon in each hand but I couldn't see them properly underneath his long sleeves.

Others joined the battle, surrounding the bald man. The three farmers were holding weapons of various lengths. I gasped. I certainly hadn't expected them to know martial arts, I hadn't even realized that they were a group, I just thought they were three people who were sheltering from the rain.

"What, so you're all just students of reputable schools who wanna have a gang fight?" asked the red-robed bald man in his thin voice. When he spoke, his words all ran together and he had such a strange manner of speaking that made him difficult to understand. His strange, half-smiling mouth still didn't seem to move as he spoke.

"There's no need to be picky when dealing with villains," the tall man said as he walked out of the shack. The woman in green had raised her head slightly, as though she was looking at something on the ground ahead of her.

The bald man laughed, his voice even softer. "It makes no odds to me if I kill you now or later, but why are you so set on dying?"

"Who do you want? Tell us!" demanded one of the farmers, his voice tightening.

"What are you doing, pretending to be guards so you can escort Tien-Chien Zhuang's mistress," said the bald man without turning around.

Although he had his back to the shack, the corners of his mouth twisted upwards and his eyes narrowed even more as he studied the woman in front of him.

"The audacity!" there was a flash of light and the woman in green shot out of the shack.

*Clang!*

The bald man fought off the woman's sword without even turning around. Despite the cold expression on her face, you could still see she was beautiful and elegant. She was so skilled it was no surprise she stayed calm and collected.

The bald man revealed his weapons: a pair of curved daggers. "Such grace and skill. I like it!" he sneered.

The tall man cried out and thrust forward with his sword. The Daoist priest appeared beside him and brandished his dagger.

I'll never forget what happened next.

It was as though the red-robed bald man wasn't even fighting, he was just advancing and retreating like a dance from left to right and back again. His daggers glinted as he blocked and stabbed, and he seemed to expend no effort in the midst of combat.

"*Touché!*" he barked, and the Daoist priest's throat opened in a spray of blood; then "*Ha!*" as he sank his blade into the middle of the scholar's chest. He opened the three farmers from stomach to their chest. Of all the wounds, the gash he'd cut in the tall man's neck had splattered the most blood on his face.

The woman in green was last, or rather, I should say he left her until last. As soon as she saw him kill the tall man, she screamed and put her sword to her throat. He knocked it away with the dagger in his left hand then turned her around so he could stab her in the pressure point. Paralyzed, she fell to the ground. He lifted her back up, his scimitars clanging as they fell to the ground.

His grin widened, then with sudden force he ripped her clothes off and one of her white breasts burst out. Without stopping to pause, he squeezed it with his bloody hand and lowered his head to bite it. His large red robe unfolded to engulf her entire body. The red robes were like a squirming mound on the ground strewn with corpses.

A long time passed and then the man got up and stood there for a moment before walking away. This time he didn't walk backwards but he still swaggered as he gradually disappeared into the distance. A twisted piece of gleaming white flesh sat in a puddle of blood right where he'd been writhing on the ground. At some point, the donkey had disappeared from the shack.

Birds were singing in the forest and a rainbow appeared in the sky, the leaves and grass now sparkled with water droplets. I realized that at some point I had collapsed prostrate on the ground. I shivered, my entire body drenched in a cold sweat. Even though it was nothing compared to some of the massacres I would see in future, it's a memory that comes back to me often.

It was the first time I encountered the Eighteen Evils. The demon I saw was the Woman Eater, a spirit who pursued daughters from illustrious families and particularly women who had a talent for martial arts.

## **02 My Name**

My name is Ping Chuan. The characters are simple and easy to write, and carry a strong meaning: smooth sailing through troubled times. At least, that's what the fortune teller told my father.

My parents certainly hadn't been blessed on that front. My family came from Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, but fled to Poyang to seek refuge with my uncle who had moved there during the early years. However, we experienced indescribable hardships and my father died when I was four years old.

My uncle, an innkeeper, offered us shelter and let my mother make a living doing needlework while she raised me. However, she passed away when I was twelve. At the time, I had

just started working as a waiter for the guests. I wouldn't remember her face if she hadn't passed her incredibly influential knowledge on to me the night before she died. My aunt often said that my mother and I were cut from the same cloth.

I wasn't sad for long and adapted to life on my own. I waited on guests from dawn till dusk, I passed out from exhaustion each night and didn't have the energy to think too much. We also had plenty of guests at the inn who traveled a lot, they would stay and eat at the inn. All sorts of people came to stay, some of them were nice and some weren't, but there was always something new each day for me to focus on.

That era was later known as the Five Dynasties. People described it as a troubled time for the world, but it didn't seem that way to me while I was growing up. The Yangtze River Delta was relatively peaceful compared to the northlands, where the flames of war still raged. I was in the state of Wu which had been retaken and established by the Tang commander Yang Xingmi, who became the first governor. After his death, Xu Wen took over; when he died, his adopted son Xu Zhigao assumed total control.

While the royal court of the Wu Kingdom was filled with constant power struggles, the people hadn't experienced the ravages of war as they had in the North. Yang Xingmi, Xu Wen and Xu Zhigao were all experienced, capable leaders. The time of their governance would later be described as years of continuous prosperity, when food was bountiful and there were arms to spare. The area around Poyang Lake, with its intersections of major land and waterways, was especially prosperous.

Thus, as a waiter, when I heard tragedies about wars ravaging other places, they always felt far away. People who traveled for business lived well, but they were honest about what they'd seen. Those from the north brought medicinal herbs, horses, and sheep with them, while those from the south took porcelain and tea leaves, and those from even further south brought spices. They tipped me well. There were also a lot of people in Poyang who'd made a fortune on the road. One fat businessman named Zhan had made a fortune trading timber and hosted an extravagant banquet whenever he came home which made him the envy of the town.

It has long been true that officials look down on civilians; no matter how much money you have, you will always be part of the underclass. And likewise, the rich don't even see the poor as people. At the inn, the easiest people to serve were the passing travelers or the businessmen going north and south; the hardest were the local gentry. Those who traveled tended to be more prudent toward others, whereas the local elite were insufferably arrogant and tried to throw their weight about. When they experienced setbacks as officials, they often took it out on the poor.

However, it was a very different story if you were poor but highly skilled in martial arts. At the time, martial artists were like businessmen in that it was easier for them to make a living. There were three very different types of people I often heard about: those who became foot soldiers for an official and rose quickly through the ranks; those who worked as local militia for landowners; or those who got a group together and became bandits, they'd go into the mountains and form martial arts sects, it didn't sound so bad. Ultimately, it was the oppressive government that drove people to rebel. After Huang Chao, everyone knew how powerful bandits could become.

What's more, even heroes could rise from lower-class backgrounds: Yang Xingmi himself had started as a bandit.

My uncle was a stout, heavy-set man. We sold food at the inn and while our other dishes were decent, our real specialties are pork shoulder sauces and spiced-pot stews. Our visiting guests loved them and we were locally famous enough that people came from far and wide to experience my uncle's unrivalled cooking skills.

My aunt was a little taller than him and spoke faster. Whenever she saw me receive a tip, she would always take it away and say that she was storing it for me.

They had a son three years older than I, who never paid any attention to me. When he was young he would go out and play with the other children in the neighborhood, then when he got older, kick a ball about with friends or go cockfighting, I never saw him do any hard work. He often said with pride that his father's secret recipes for the sauces and stews would only be left to him and nobody else, so all he ever needed to do was be able to prepare those dishes.

Meanwhile, I was looking at a lifetime of waiting on tables as the two other waiters and I continued to be his servants. Hearing all those stories from rich people about how they made their money drove me to daydream. Could I go out and travel one day? If I did, who would I do business with? The most captivating scenes in our guests' stories were those from the North and South.

A traveler from the state of Min said that after their capital, Fuzhou, was renamed Changle, it had given the city a new lease on life. Boats from Silla, Japan and the Southern Seas all brought lots of rare goods. When he mentioned the sea, I asked what it looked like. He described it for a long time and when I said Poyang Lake also stretched to the horizon, he scoffed and said, "Ha, what do you know?"

To the North were the vast grasslands beyond the Shanhai pass. I heard someone say that they rode a horse for several days and there were no borders between North, South, East, and West. I had heard much about the terrible wars in the North and the fierceness of the northern tribes, but I couldn't imagine what such a vast grassland would be like. Which was bigger, the grassland or the sea? Just thinking about them made my heart soar.

After I'd been living like this for five years, I thought about begging one of the guests to take me with them. There were a lot of risks involved in going out on your own, but was it any worse than a lifetime spent the way I was living now? What's more, maybe it was my turn to go out make myself proud?

As time passed, I realized it was all just wishful thinking and slowly began to calm down. After another year, I had resigned myself to working as a waiter for the rest of my life. I had listened to guests' stories from far and wide, and I'd decided that they really were just stories.

We had one guest who told riddles. There's one which I remember very clearly: "There is something that can carry heavy weights but can't move. Its head is its tail and its tail is its head. Sometimes it's bent over and sometimes it's stretched out." The answer was a bridge but nobody guessed it.

There was another guest who did magic. He said he could use magic to do any bad deed and wasn't afraid of being caught by others. He could tell people about it without ever worrying

about being caught. It was useless to try and behead him because as soon as you chopped his head off he would grow a new one. I found out afterwards that to break the spell they had to wait until night and tie him to the moon, then spit on his shadow three times and cut its head off. That time, when his head fell off it did not grow back.

My days passed by, busy or not. Then one day, a scholar arrived at the inn.

### 03 The Scholar

The scholar was a thin young man who carried a trunk with him. He had taken sick while traveling, and stopped at the inn intending to rest for a couple of days. But he soon developed a fever and couldn't walk.

Initially, the scholar said that he understood medicine, so he drew up his own prescription and asked for someone to take it to a pharmacy. When his condition worsened, my uncle sent for a doctor, again to no avail. His disease dragged on, his condition becoming critical after he used up all his travel funds.

My uncle rifled through his trunk and was sad to only find a sword and a few books.

"At least we can pawn this for him so he can support himself for a while."

I watched him gradually deteriorate until he was on the verge of death. A fur trader came to stay at the inn, putting us at a shortage of rooms, and I decided to move the scholar into the woodshed where I slept. I took care of him from there, thinking that he might get lucky. And if he didn't recover then at least he wouldn't bring us misfortune by dying in one of the guest rooms.

It really worked. After I moved him to the woodshed and kept an eye on him day and night, his condition slowly began to turn. Over the next ten days his breathing became less labored, then after a fortnight his energy levels had improved dramatically. By the time high summer arrived, he was already able to get out of bed and walk around with ease.

One day at around noon, I got him some food and saw he was holding a book and chanting something aloud. I didn't understand it, but I found it very interesting. I asked him about it that night.

"Oh?" he looked at me. "Why would you want to know this?"

I blushed. Like my uncle, I only recognized the few characters you'd write on a bill.

Seeing my embarrassment, he said, "No, what I meant to ask was: were you able to understand it when you heard it?"

I told him no, but I thought the tone sounded good when it was read aloud, as though there was a lot of meaning in it.

He laughed and read aloud the poem that I'd heard the first time. It was a great poem. I listened, captivated. No better still, I was moved.

*There was a brave woman of the East China Sea,  
Who could even put Su Ziqing to shame.*

*This southern maiden who learnt swordsmanship,  
She soared like a shooting star.  
Without hesitating, she dedicated her life to avenging her husband,  
And wouldn't have regretted it even if she'd died a thousand deaths.  
Her naked blade was as glorious as the purest snow,  
And her sincerity was felt by the heavens.  
She could take ten steps in a mere two bounds,  
And would sound the attack three times when fighting her enemies.  
After beheading them she hung their heads high above the city gate,  
And trampled their organs into mud beneath her feet.*

He told me that the poem written by a poet called Li Bai. The lines stirred a torrent of emotion within me, this virtually illiterate kid, whose vision was now blurry with tears.

The scholar asked: "What are you crying for?"

In that moment, I had no idea how to answer. A day later, I admitted, "I cried because I haven't even lived as well as a woman."

The scholar looked at me for a long while, his eyes huge in his thin face, a red mole standing out in the corner of the left one.

Summoning my courage, I announced, "I want to learn how to use a sword."

"Do you have any enemies?" he asked.

I shook my head.

He thought about it for a moment, then asked me, "Is it so that you have a skill you can take with you when you go out to make your way in the world?"

I shook my head, nodded, and shook my head again. "I just want to learn."

The scholar smiled slightly and said nothing more.

The next morning, his trunk was still there but he was gone. He disappeared for ten days straight. Then one night I was woken by his movements as he came back. He looked at me, his large eyes shining in the darkness.

"Do you really want to learn how to use a sword?"

And that is how I got someone to teach me how to read and use a sword.

"Illiterate people aren't good at studying swordsmanship," he said.

I begged him to let me have Li Bai's poem as my first literary copybook, but he was determined not to take me on as his student.

"You took care of me and saved my life. I will teach you one thing in return, that's my only intention."

I knelt and prostrated myself three times.

He didn't stop me, instead he too bowed three times and said, "It is an honor."

For the next month, he taught me some moves with the sword, as well as shadowboxing, meditation, and breathing exercises. He also revealed a little about himself.

His surname was Feng. He had come here to settle a vendetta against someone. Once he had recovered from his illness, he'd slipped out to reconnoiter his enemy only to discover that the man himself had died of disease. Having accepted this outcome as the will of Heaven, he decided to come back and teach me a few things.

"My sword is useless now that I don't have an enemy, so I'll just give it to you."

The memory of taking that sword will always remain pristine in my mind. Its hilt and scabbard were dark red. It was about a meter long, slightly longer than an ordinary sword. The glitter of candlelight off its blade dazzled my eyes. I've held so many great swords since then, but none as memorable as that one.

One evening, the scholar said now that I had learnt a little, it was time for him to say goodbye.

He was the first person to tell me that my name, Ping Chuan, didn't just mean "plain sailing." It also referred the vastness and power of a river, which ran smoothly but also with unstoppable force. I was shocked.

When I woke up the next day, he'd disappeared. I was depressed for a while because I felt as though I'd never see him again. Of course, I had no idea that fate had already arranged for us to meet again one day under other circumstances.

#### 04 Setting Out

The scholar had left, but my life would never be the same. I have practiced what I learned every day since then. The scholar said that because he wouldn't take me on as his apprentice, he didn't want other people to see that I was studying under him. He taught me the very basics: horse stance, some unnamed kung fu sequences, and how to cultivate and balance *qi*. In addition to these, he also taught me an extremely common set of skills known as the "*Sancai* Swordsmanship".

He said that because they were so common they weren't even considered new to a lot of people. Most refused to practice them diligently and ended up with bad form which they then passed on to others. He went back to basics and taught me the original, untainted "*Sancai* Swordsmanship". It wasn't just that they were an easy place to start, but building a thorough approach to training would also make it easier to learn new skills in the future. He told me that the going through the kung fu sequences wasn't just about practicing individual moves; I should work until I felt my body follow my *qi*.

"You have to take meditation seriously and balance your *qi*. When you have a foundation of inner strength you'll reach new realms of kung fu and swordsmanship," he said.

He also praised me. "I think you're a good swordsman, you're agile and have a natural gift, you'll definitely get there with practice. However, it's one thing to do sequences or practice with the sword, but it's something else entirely to use those skills on another person. Experienced training is crucial, but often what you really need is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances."

I asked him how. He laughed and said that adaptation wasn't something that could be taught through words. I remembered what he said and practiced diligently day and night. Regardless of the weather, I always found time to practice. It wasn't just martial arts either, I also practiced writing in the *Thousand Character Classic* copybook he'd left me.

Sometimes I woke up late and was scolded by my uncle, but I didn't mind. Day after day I enjoyed feeling like I was steadily making progress. I didn't know what I was waiting for, but deep down I felt a nameless ambition rising within me. The scholar told me the sword must be kept hidden and that I couldn't take it out. I did as he said but I couldn't keep my dream hidden. I didn't just want to spend my days hiding in this peaceful world.

The outside world was changing constantly. The year I met the scholar, Emperor Shi Jingtang enlisted the help of Khitan soldiers to overthrow the Tang dynasty, and then founded the Jin. In my home state of Wu, Xu Zhigao went a step further, abolishing the Yang family's rule and changing the name of the state from Wu to Qi. When the Tang ended in the north, Xu Zhigao claimed to be a descendant of the Tang Emperor Xianzong, changed his name to Li Bian, at the same time changing the title of our state to Tang. In the future, we would come to be known as the Southern Tang.

There would never be a calm time to set out, but since Tang was arguably much more peaceful and prosperous than the northern reaches of the Central Plains, why shouldn't I give it a try? Finally, the day came when my wavering expectations transformed into reality.

There was a tea merchant who would stay at the inn about once a year when he passed through on business. One night, he fell into a dispute with a group of drunk guests that turned into a row. In previous years, he always had an apprentice with him but this year he was alone. When the others saw the merchant was outnumbered, they decided to take advantage.

I went over to break things up. A large, brutish guy looked me in the eye and pushed me, "What are you gonna do?"

I wasn't sure if I was infuriated by his arrogant tone or if I planned to do it, but I pushed him back and punched him in the stomach. In one fell swoop he dropped to the ground. The others gathered round, but after I knocked down another two of them with simple, agile moves they all went quiet.

"Take your bullying somewhere else!" I said to them.

My uncle stared at me, wide-eyed. Later that night, he asked me how I learned to fight. I told him the full story, and when he heard that I had a sword his eyes widened even further. The law was in disarray at the time and an ordinary person having a sword could potentially be a big deal. I was worried that he was going to scold me, but he dropped the question and sent me home.

Early the next morning, my aunt and uncle called me over. Once I heard what they said, it was my turn to look wide-eyed.

"I've often heard you say how great it would be to travel. Do you still feel that way?" asked my uncle in a gentle voice.

He informed me that the tea merchant had been traveling alone this time because his young apprentice had died from dysentery while they were on the road.

“He’s an old customer. I don’t like to see him traveling alone like this. If you want, I can ask him about it for you.”

My aunt, who always spoke quickly and had a lot to say, stared at me without saying a word.

Things were settled quickly. The tea merchant already knew me and then I saved him during the fight yesterday. So when my uncle suggested he take me with him, he pondered it briefly for a moment and then agreed.

During the Tang Dynasty, when you traveled on business through major transport hubs, you had to have official documents that let you clear military checkpoints. The checkpoints weren’t just for businessmen but also for anyone who was accompanying them. You had to clearly indicate your name and there were strict inspections. After the mass chaos of the Five Dynasties period, the borders between states were tightly guarded, and restrictions within states varied considerably.

The tea merchant said that once he was home he would stop traveling on business, so he wouldn’t be able to take me to many far-off places and it was difficult to say how much of the trade he could teach me in that time. However, he’d still be happy to take me with him, if I really wanted to go out and see somewhere other than here. I just had to remember to use his previous apprentice’s name if we were interrogated on the road.

“It helps me out too,” he said to my uncle. “Having him by my side puts my mind at ease and you can rest assured he’ll be fine with me.”

After all these years my long-buried dreams were suddenly coming true. It was like a new world was unfolding before my eyes. I had just fought someone for the first time in my life and now I was being rewarded for it? I didn’t dare believe it.

I had no idea what I would do once the tea merchant got home but I didn’t care. Just to have the chance to travel was enough, and I felt sure that new opportunities would naturally arise while I was on the road.

Within a few days, once the tea merchant had taken care of business, we could set out. My aunt returned all the tips I had made over the last few years, although it wasn’t even half of what I estimated. My uncle on the other hand declared that since I was going on a long trip I should have some cash on me, and so he generously gave me some money for the road. When he found out where the tea merchant was going, he recommended a country town where I could find a friend of his if I needed to. My uncle’s attitude toward me had changed completely; the sneer he used to direct at me had given way to an affable smile. Even his son, who hardly bothered to look at me, nodded to me and regarded me with an expression that bordered on envy.

I took my sword and bundle with me as I set out with the tea merchant. I bid a reluctant farewell to my uncle, then after I’d been walking awhile I turned around to look back at the inn

and saw him pointing me out to other people with a relaxed smile I'd never seen on him before. With that, all my concerns had all been finally laid to rest.

And thus, I set off.

## 05 A Revelation on Officers and Men

I was so keen to study business, but once I started I realized that I wasn't made of the right stuff. The tea merchant's surname was Wen. He really looked after me while we were on the road, he was an all-round good person who was always fair. He was willing to teach me a bit about tea, how to smell and identify it, how to steep it, but I wasn't particularly interested in tea leaves. Spring tea, autumn tea, the various names for tea, I could never distinguish between them. Tea was tea, you just drank it, I really didn't understand how people could pay so much attention to what was in it, or how the price of some teas could be that high.

By contrast, I had a far stronger sense of understanding while I was learning how to use a sword. I didn't want to miss any subtle movements, every move the scholar demonstrated was lodged firmly in my mind.

When I got to my master's hometown and sure enough he decided that he didn't want to travel for work anymore, instead he wanted to open a teahouse with me as his apprentice, I told him that I still had so many places I wanted to see for myself. Having experienced the reality of traveling, I knew that even without the customs documents there were still lots of places I could go. He was happy with that and gave me a piece of silver which was even more than my uncle's family had given me. Elated, I set out on the road again.

However, a few days later I witnessed the fight with the Woman Eater.

Evil people were everywhere after the peasant uprising led by Huang Chao in the late Tang. The Eighteen Evil Forces had appeared among the world of merchants and travelers. Their origin was unknown but they roamed both north and south, in groups and alone. Those who saw them said that they weren't just Chinese, but also Khitan and Japanese too. Others said that the Eighteen Evil Forces weren't just people, they were also beasts and ghosts. Opinions varied, but they were not a single form of horror.

The Woman Eater specifically liked to go after women who were good at kung fu. In the case of Tien-Chien Zhuang's mistress, she wanted to make a trip home to see her parents and disguised herself for the whole journey but still met her sad end. The sudden martial arts scene I witnessed within the forest shocked me to my core, I was beside myself.

The evil's light footsteps were just like dancing and he'd used the two crescent-shaped scimitars to so swiftly slit their throats and the middle of their chests. It was the first time in my life I had ever seen blood spray like that, it was totally astonishing. Looking back on it, I now understood a fact which was even more shocking.

Before, I thought that I could depend on the "Sancai Swordsmanship" I had learnt, and that with enough hard work and determination I would be able to succeed. Now, having seen the

Woman Eater I realized how naïve I was. I kept having recurring nightmares about her green clothes getting ripped open and her pale white breast being gripped by a bloody hand. Worse still, I had this dream every night. I would wake up in a cold sweat, unable to get back to sleep. It would put me in a trance which made it hard to think about anything else.

Dejected, I thought again about joining the army and seeing if there were any chances to be a foot soldier for someone important and achieve meteoric success. However, something I saw on the road one day made me totally dispel the idea.

That day, I was walking along a river bank when I saw some officers and soldiers escorting some sedan chairs in the distance. Immediately I thought of a warning I often heard: "Hide when you see an official" and so I hurriedly hid by the side of the road.

It was quite the spectacle. In front, they had a dozen or so horses carrying five sedan chairs and guiding the way, then another dozen horses, then twenty carts, and finally thirty or forty men bringing up the rear. Not small by any means. It had to be an escort for an important noble family. There was so much wealth, I wasn't sure whether it was preparations for a dowry or something.

When they got to the river bank, they started to cross the bridge. The river and the bridge were both narrow so there wasn't space for the sedan chairs to go across side-by-side. The troops and horses at the front were still crossing, with all five sedan chairs on the bridge, when those at the back started to cross and the whole bridge was completely occupied.

It was then that it happened.

The officers and men at the back suddenly yelled "Oh no!" and urged their horses forward. The sedan chairs in the front fell into the river, some of the people who were riding in them tumbled out onto the bridge, while others staggered out of the sedans but were pushed into the river by everyone forcing their way forward. Two of the people who were riding in the sedan fell straight into the river.

It caused a wave in the river and people struggled as they called for help, screaming again and again. It took less than a moment for them to drown there in the river.

The twenty men who were pushing the carts still weren't done. The officers and soldiers on the riverbank behind them suddenly revealed their swords, glinting in the daylight as they stabbed the people, many of them falling to the ground as they screamed.

The man on the bridge urged his horse forward a few steps and proclaimed in a loud voice: "Lord Kao should have returned home in glory but unfortunately the family encountered bandits on the road and fell into the water! We chased after the bandits, fought them and managed to get the money back. How's that for an explanation to the military commander?"

"Here, here!" sounded out across the bridge.

I couldn't get my head around it, I was so confused.

Suddenly, after the officers and men in front had walked on a bit, I heard the leader shout to the others, "Up ahead! Let's arrest them first!"

I looked in the direction he was pointing in, toward a few people who'd stopped in the road. Although I couldn't see very clearly beyond a few meters, they didn't look like bandits. They

were probably just traveling merchants who weren't sure what was happening up ahead and had stopped to try and covertly have a look. They went limp when they saw the soldiers chase them.

Looking back, I finally realized what happened.

The soldiers called other people thieves when they themselves were the bandits. They had been escorting the nobleman back to his hometown but instead they had killed his entire family and found some unfortunate souls to play the thieves so they could take the riches as their own. He was clearly a corrupt official if he was traveling home with that much wealth. Death would be too good for him but it was tragic to watch his entire family drown. It also made me think that if I hadn't hidden they may have seized me as thief. I shuddered at the thought.

Seeing those officials fight and undermine each other instantly dispelled all my thoughts of enlisting in the military. I couldn't just go along with it and commit those kinds of sins.

## **06 Maha Sword Village**

I originally had another thought: I would go to Maha Sword Village. For many years while I was living in Poyang City I'd heard legends about the Maha Sword Village and Scholar Feng had told me a lot about it when he taught me swordsmanship. I always held it in deep respect.

Martial arts circles originally ruled the roost at the Shaolin monastery and commanded popular support. During times of peace, Shaolin would mediate quarrels and was widely respected by everyone, but in troubled times when you couldn't distinguish between officials and thieves, order meant nothing. Shaolin was situated in the north which was frequently plagued by the chaos of war, but they managed to adopt a closed-door policy which brought them great fortune. As for the Wudang Mountains, there were people there but not nearly enough to form a martial arts sect.

As all this was happening in the background, the Maha Sword Village suddenly emerged in Jinling. It is said that the founder of the village was the son of a monk from Shaolin. In Buddhist scriptures, "Maha" meant "great wisdom and knowledge."

Fang Ching had become the third-generation leader, which coincided with the chaos created by Huang Chao. There were big groups of fly-by-night gangs and blood flowed between the old and new as they massacred each other. At the time, the Maha Sword Village made an important choice, they went from keeping a low profile and focusing on self-study as they had before, to actively protecting places. They formed alliances with the martial arts sect in each place, and in the process they gradually became seen as important by those on all sides.

When Fang Ching's son, Fang Li, took over as the leader of the fourth generation and as the relationship between Jiangsu and Anhui provinces gradually settled down, over the next thirty years he brought the previous Maha Sword Village to its peak.

By the time Fang Li had his sixtieth birthday, the village had become renowned in the martial arts world. Heroes came from all over to wish him congratulations, it caused a massive sensation. It was the year that Li Bian was flying his banner of the Tang Dynasty, the year before

I set out on my travels. There was a national celebration and a joyous event at the Maha Sword Village that everyone heard about through word of mouth.

Fang Li had no son, just a daughter. He took on two apprentices in at birth, the eldest was Wu Yu and the second was Wu-Sheng. Everyone said to each other that Wu Yu was the steady choice, he was extremely talented and could gradually take charge of the Maha Sword Village. Wu-Sheng was bold and passionate, he often helped Fang Li manage his affairs when they traveled so a lot of people called him the “great protector of the Buddha dharma”.

Wu-Sheng was slightly younger than Wu Yu, but he had his own, equally specific experience. He once traveled to the state of Ming in the south where he helped people boost their morale. He built a military career and then returned to the Maha Sword Village.

It was said that because Wu-Sheng had this experience, when he returned to the Maha Sword Village he had a skillset that his fellow apprentice did not.

During this happy time, people particularly loved to talk about one thing: which of the two apprentices he would ultimately choose to take over as commander in chief. Previously, everyone had discussed which of them would marry Fang Li’s daughter, but she ended up marrying someone from a family of scholars who wasn’t involved in martial arts. So, who would succeed Fang Li as the leader became a topic of discussion once again. However, Fang Li said nothing at the banquet for his sixtieth birthday which made people try even harder to guess.

I had long-since dreamed of one day becoming a pupil at the Maha Sword Village. I originally thought that they would appreciate the natural talent which Scholar Feng said I had. But when I saw the fight between the Woman Eater and Tien-Chien Zhuang’s people, even if you took the former out of the equation, every single one of the people from Tien-Chien Zhuang was so skilled that I felt totally inadequate by comparison. I really had no idea how I could have been so naïve.

While I was on the road, I’d heard about a group of scholars who were honest and welcoming. I was excited at the thought of expanding my knowledge. The scholars’ mansion was very impressive. When I got there, I saw a magnificently dressed man guarding the door, but when they didn’t ask why I had come, I left feeling slightly inadequate. Geniuses were all like this, and the ones in the Maha Sword Village even more so.

The skills I knew barely even counted as kung fu, why would anyone else want them? Even if I had gone up to the door, I would still have been driven out.

So, I spent a while hanging around on the road. At the beginning, I was quite content. There weren’t many guards except for those in the important townships, and even then, all I had to do was find a chance to sneak in and have a look around. Otherwise, I would just wander into villages, or go and see the fairs. Life on the road wasn’t boring.

At the time, the village fairs had already started to be called “grass markets”. They were places where people gathered and traded a lot of goods although they were different from goods you could get in the city. I took the chance to find something to eat. This was the day before I

encountered the Woman Eater and the assortment of things I ate was what caused my stomach upset the next day.

One morning, I heard a woman playing a pipa well in a market. I used to listen to people play at the inn and recognized a few songs. I ate my *chaobing* as I listened to her play beside me and felt a bit homesick even if it wasn't for my real home. Afterwards, I gave her two coins and told her she played well. She gave me a gentle smile, a few small pockmarks on her face.

I also had some tough times on the road. South of the river, there were a lot of refugees fleeing from the North. While I was in the city, I hadn't seen any refugees, but there were many once I got outside the city. Some were traveling alone, others had formed groups of three to five. Some villages were willing to look after them for a bit, while others rushed them out. I encountered some and it made me think of my parents fleeing from the North, I took pity on them and fished out some money even though I immediately knew it was an impractical thing to do. All at once, I was swamped by others and fled in embarrassment.

I often saw bodies hanging by the side of the road, most of them were refugees who felt there was no way out.

There were also lots of women from my state. From the Tang Dynasty onwards, it was customary to prepare a large dowry when marrying off a daughter, so women from wealthy families could marry well, while women from poor families often couldn't even get married at all. By the time of the Five Dynasties, because of the political turmoil people weren't paying as much attention to marriage, but some people still took it very hard. If they were too poor to get married they hung themselves by the side of the road.

Looking at these scenes started to give me a new way of thinking, when I considered my prospects I began to feel confident, but it didn't take long for my increasingly empty pockets to make me feel more and more doubtful. Before, the world had felt limitless, but now with nowhere to go my future started to feel bleak.

When you don't know how quickly your dream will come true, you also don't know how soon it might shatter. My trip had gone so quickly, I had set out less than three months ago. I thought about whether I wanted to go back to Poyang and work for my uncle as a waiter again. Now that I'd broadened my knowledge I could be more helpful to him, he should take me back. I probably would have returned home if it wasn't for what happened next.