



A Little Wooden Boat

Sunflower was on her way to the river. The rainy season was over and the sky, which had hung so low and so dark, had lifted. Now it was big and bright and the sun, which hadn't been seen for days, seeped across it like fresh water.

Everything was wet: the grass, the flowers, the windmills, the buildings, the buffaloes, the birds, the air. Soon Sunflower was drenched too. Her hair clung to her scalp, making her look thinner than usual. But her little face, which was naturally pale, was full of life.

Along the path, beads of water hung from the grass. Soon her trouser legs were soaked through. The path was muddy and once her shoes had got stuck a few times, she took them off, held one in each hand and walked barefoot through the cool slime. As she passed under a maple tree a gentle breeze blew, shaking off droplets of water. A few of them ran down her neck. Sunflower flinched, hunching her shoulders instinctively, and looked up. The branches above were covered in glistening leaves, washed clean by the many days of rain.

She could hear the river calling her, the sound of flowing water, and she ran towards it. She went to the river almost every day, because on the other side there was a village. A village with a lovely name: Damaidi, which means “the barleylands”.

On this side of the river there were no other children but Sunflower. She was alone, like a solitary bird in a vast blue sky with nothing for company but the sound of its own beating wings. In a sky that stretches on for ever, broken occasionally by a cloud or two, but otherwise huge and unblemished, like a perfect turquoise gemstone. At moments of extreme

loneliness the bird cries out, but its cry only makes the sky seem even emptier.

On this side of the river, the reeds spread endlessly and peacefully as far as the eye could see, as they had for centuries. That spring a group of egrets, startled from their nests, had taken flight with a great commotion. They had circled above the reeds, then flown over to Damaidi, croaking noisily as though keen to share the news of their misfortune. They didn't come back; their old home in the reed marsh was now full of people. Unfamiliar people, quite different from the villagers of Damaidi.

These were city people, and they had come to build houses, to transform the wilderness, to plant crops and dig fish ponds. They sang city people's songs, in the city people's way. Their singing was loud and vigorous, unlike anything the villagers had heard before.

A few months later, seven or eight rows of brick houses with red roofs arose out of the reeds. Soon after that, a very tall flagpole was put up, and early one morning, a red flag appeared in the sky, where it flickered like a ball of fire above the reeds.

The city people were like a flock of birds that had flown in. They looked at the villagers with curiosity, and the villagers looked back in the same way. They felt connected, yet at the same time utterly unconnected. As though they were a different species.

The city people did their own thing. They had their own language, their own activities and their own ways of doing things. In the daytime they worked, and in the evenings they held meetings. Deep into the night, the villagers could see their lights shining in the distance, twinkling like fishermen's lights on the river, full of mystery.

The city people lived in a world of their own. The people of Damaidi soon came to know the name of this "world": the May Seventh Cadre School, which they then shortened to "the Cadre School".

"Your ducks swam over to the Cadre School."

"Your buffalo ate the Cadre School's crops, so they're keeping it."

"The fish in the Cadre School fish pond already weigh a full *jin*." This was about half a kilo.

"This evening they're showing a film at the Cadre School."

And so on.

This was not the only May Seventh Cadre School in the area. There were many more spread across the reed lands. The people who lived in them came from several big cities, some very far away. And they didn't all work in offices; there were writers and artists, too. They had come to do physical labour.

The villagers had a vague idea of what Cadre Schools were, but they weren't sufficiently interested to try to find out more. These people didn't seem to cause any trouble – in fact, they made life more interesting. When they occasionally came over to Damaidi for a stroll, the village children would run after them. They'd stop and stare, or follow them, darting behind a tree or a haystack if the Cadre School people looked back and smiled. The Cadre School people thought the children enchanting and beckoned to them to come closer. The braver ones would step forward and the Cadre School people would reach out and pat their heads. Sometimes they'd pull sweets from their pockets. The children ate the city sweets and treasured the pretty wrappers, smoothing them out and tucking them between the

pages of their schoolbooks. The Cadre School people sometimes bought things in Damaidi to take back with them: melons, vegetables, duck eggs.

The villagers also took walks on the other side of the river. They liked to see how the Cadre School people farmed fish. Damaidi was surrounded by water, and where there was water there were fish – it had never occurred to the villagers to try to control them. But these educated city people knew what they were doing. They gave the fish injections that made them leap with excitement, the males and females weaving around each other, whipping up waves. Then they waited for the fish to calm down, and caught them in nets. The females were now swollen with roe. Gently, the Cadre School people stroked their sides, massaging their bulging bellies. The fish seemed to enjoy this, and, gently, the eggs were squeezed out. They splashed into a big bucket and swirled about. The countless shiny white dots soon became countless shiny black dots, and after a few days, the black dots became the tails of tiny fish. The villagers, young and old, stared in wonder: the Cadre School people could perform magic!

There was another reason why the village children were curious about the Cadre School. There was a little girl there: a city girl who had a country girl's name.



Sunflower was a quiet, gentle little girl who had been brought up to be neat and tidy. She had come with her father to the Cadre School. Her mother had died of an illness two years earlier. Both of her parents had been only children, so her father was her only relative. Wherever he went, he took her with him. When he was sent to the Cadre School, Sunflower came too. She was only seven, and the only child there.

They had arrived in the early summer and at first Sunflower had found everything new and exciting. The reed lands were enormous, they seemed to go on for ever. She was too small to see very far, so she held out her arms for her father to pick her up.

“Can you see where they end?” he asked, holding her up high.

The young reed leaves pointed up at the sky like swords, and as they swayed in the reed marsh, they reminded Sunflower of the ocean she had seen with her father. Here, in front of her, was another vast ocean, rippling with green waves and giving out a fresh fragrance. She recognized the smell from the *zongzi*, the parcels of sticky rice wrapped in reed leaves that she had eaten in the city. But here it was more intense, heavy with moisture. It enveloped her. She sniffed the air.

“Is there an end?” her father asked. She shook her head.

A sudden gust of wind turned the reed marsh into a battlefield. The long swords slashed the air. A group of frightened waterbirds rose up and took to the sky. Sunflower wrapped her arms round her father’s neck. She was drawn to the reed marsh, but it filled her with a mysterious terror.

After that, she didn’t stray from her father’s side, afraid that the marsh would swallow her up, especially on windy days when turbulent waves of reeds surged one way and then the other. And when they surged towards the Cadre School, she would

grab her father's hand or a corner of his jacket, her dark eyes filled with worry.

Her father had come here to work; he couldn't be with her all the time. He was part of a team whose job it was to cut down the reeds and transform the marshes into crop-fields and fish ponds. In the dawn haze, when the wake-up call rang through the reed lands, Sunflower would still be asleep. Her father knew that when she woke and saw that he'd gone, she'd be scared and would cry. But he couldn't bring himself to wake her from her dreams. With hands that were rough and hard from physical labour, he would stroke her soft, warm cheeks, then pick up his tools with a sigh and close the door quietly behind him; and in the pale mist of early morning, he would walk with all the others to the work site. He would think about her all day long. By the time they packed up their tools in the evening, moonlight would be spilling over the marshes.

Sunflower would spend the whole day by herself. She would go to the fish pond to watch the fish, to the kitchens to see the cooks making food, and then wander from one row of buildings to the next. Most

of the doors were locked, but every now and then one would be open – perhaps because someone was ill, or because they were assigned to work at the Cadre School itself. She would walk up to the open door and peer inside. Sometimes a frail but friendly voice would call out, “Come in, Sunflower!”

But she would shake her head and stand for a while in the doorway before running off in another direction. She preferred to talk to a golden chrysanthemum flower, to a crow perched on a branch, to pretty ladybirds on a leaf.

In the evenings, in the dusky lamplight, her father’s heart would fill with sadness. Often, after eating with Sunflower he would have to leave her again to go to a meeting. He was always going to meetings. Sunflower couldn’t understand why, after a full day’s work, he had to go out again. She’d already spent the whole day by herself. She wished he didn’t have to go, leaving her on her own with the sound of silence or the rustling of the reeds in the wind. She wanted him to let her rest her head on his arm and tell her a story. She would cling to him and he would hug her so close, so tight. But she would

have to wait. Later, when the lights were out, they would talk – it was the warmest, happiest time of the whole day.

It was not long before her father was staggering home exhausted. He would begin to tell her a story but would only manage to slur a couple of sentences before nodding off. Sunflower would be left waiting for the next part of the story, but she wouldn't get cross; she would just look around her, quietly resting her head on his arm, taking in the smell of him, waiting for sleep to come. She would reach out her little hand and gently stroke her father's unshaven face as he snored. In the distance she would hear the faint sound of dogs barking, perhaps from Damaidi across the river, or from further away: Youmadi, or even Daoxiangdu.

And so the days passed, one flowing into the next.

The river soon became Sunflower's favourite place. She would spend most of the day there, gazing across at Damaidi, which was a large village surrounded by reeds. The cooking smoke, the sound of buffaloes, dogs and happy voices ... all of this drew her to the riverbank. Most of all, she was fascinated by the

children and their joyful laughter. It seemed such a happy world.

Between Sunflower and the village was the river, a big river with no beginning or end in sight, flowing all day and all night, never ending. The reeds on either side stood guard over its journey from west to east. The river and reeds whispered and chuckled like best friends, teasing and twitching. Day after day, month after month, year after year, they played together tirelessly.

How Sunflower loved this river! She watched it flow, she followed the ripples and waves, watched it carry off wild ducks and fallen leaves, watched boats of different sizes move upstream and down, watched the midday sun paint it gold and the setting sun stain it red, watched the raindrops splash up silver-specked spray, watched fish leap from its green waves, tracing beautiful arcs in the blue sky, then falling back into the water...

And on the other side of the river was Damaidi. Sunflower sat under an old elm tree, quietly gazing across the water. If people on passing boats scanned the long riverbank, they would spot her tiny figure.

They would feel the vastness of the sky and the vastness of the earth, a vastness that seemed to go on for ever.



One day, Sunflower was down by the river. Damaidi looked like a huge boat moored in the reeds on the other side. She saw two haystacks as high as mountains, one on the left, one on the right. She saw a melia tree in blossom, clouds of pale lilac dusting the treetops. She saw milky-white cooking smoke curling up into the sky, then meeting and drifting as one over the reeds. Dogs were running through the streets. A cockerel had flown up into a mulberry tree and was crowing. There was children's laughter everywhere.

Sunflower longed to go there. She turned to look at the little boat that was tied to the old elm tree. She had seen it when she arrived, bobbing about on the water as though trying to attract her attention. A seed of an idea began to form in her mind. It grew like a shoot of grass pushing its way through the wet earth.

As the grass fluttered in the spring wind, the idea took shape: I'm going to get into that boat and go to Damaidi.

But did she dare? She looked back at the Cadre School, then nervously inched towards the boat. There was no landing, just a grassy embankment, quite steep. She didn't know whether to climb down facing the river or facing the embankment. She hesitated a while, then eventually chose to face the embankment. She grabbed hold of the grass with both hands and tried to find a good place to put her feet. Slowly and steadily, she began to climb down to the water's edge.

Boats passed in the distance, helped along by the breeze. If anyone on board had looked her way, they might have been alarmed by what they saw but would have been unable to do anything about it. As she lowered herself down, drenched in sweat, Sunflower could hear the water gurgling below her feet. Her small hands clung to the grass, holding on for dear life.

A sailing boat came along. Seeing a little girl clinging to the embankment like a gecko, the man at the helm called out to her. Then, afraid that he might

startle her, he stopped – although he worried about her long after he had passed by.

Across the river a buffalo was making a strange huffing noise like the whistles of a factory. Sunflower tried to concentrate, but suddenly the earth under her feet loosened. She clutched at the grass but the roots came away in her hands. There was nothing to hold on to, nothing to stop her slipping down. Filled with terror, she closed her eyes.

Then she felt herself come to a stop; her foot was resting against a small tree. She pressed herself against the embankment, not daring to move. She could hear the water flowing below. She raised her head to look at the bank, high above her. She didn't know whether to climb back up or keep going down. All she wanted was for someone to come, and more than anything for her father to come. She buried her face in the grass and clung on.

The sun was high in the sky and she could feel its warmth on her back. A gentle breeze blew past her, like softly flowing water. Sunflower began to sing. Not a city song, but one she had learned from the village girls. She had been sitting on the bank one day,

listening to them singing in the reeds on the opposite bank. She couldn't see them properly through the reeds, but now and then she caught a glimpse of their red and green clothes as they moved. They seemed to be cutting the leaves from the reeds. She soon learned the song by heart, and when they sang on their side of the river, she sang on hers. It was a beautiful song. Sunflower started to sing it now, her voice trembling:

*"The rice cakes smell sweet,
Their scent fills the kitchen.
The leaves smell so sweet,
Their scent fills the house..."*

Her voice was muffled, the sound absorbed by the wet earth.

As she sang, she felt more determined than ever to get to the boat and go to Damaidi. She began to feel her way down the slope again, and in no time her feet were touching the soft shore of the river. She turned around, took a couple of steps forward and let the water roll over her feet. It sent a cold rush through her body that made her gasp.

The little boat rocked gently back and forth. She climbed on board. There was no hurry. She sat in the boat, swaying as it swayed, her heart filled with joy.

But when she was ready to set off, she realized there was no pole or paddle to steer the boat across the river. She looked up at the mooring rope, still tied securely round the old elm, and breathed a sigh of relief. If she had untied it earlier, the boat might have drifted downstream. She couldn't go to Damaidi that day after all, she thought sadly. Without a pole or a paddle, she could only sit in the boat and gaze across the river.

Sunflower sensed that the little boat was drifting. She looked up and saw that the rope had come loose. It was trailing behind the boat, like a long, thin tail. Hurriedly, she tried to pull it in. Then, realizing this was useless, she let go and the rope fell back into the water. That was when she saw the boy standing on the bank above her. He was eleven or twelve and was laughing madly at her. A few days later, she would learn his name: Gayu. He was from Damaidi, and his family had raised ducks there for generations.

Sunflower watched as a flock of ducks emerged from

the reeds. Out they came, hundreds of them, flowing like water, spilling as far as Gayu's feet, flapping their wings and quacking. She wanted to ask why he had untied the rope. But she didn't; she just looked at him helplessly. He laughed even louder, which sent the hundreds of ducks waddling and jostling down the embankment towards the river. A few clever ones flapped their wings and flew, landing on the water with a splash.

After all the rain, the river was full and fast. The little boat drifted sideways. Sunflower looked at the boy. Her eyes filled with tears. He stood there with his arms and legs crossed, leaning on the long handle of a shovel he used for driving the ducks, resting his chin on the back of his hands. His tongue was moving from side to side as he watched her, unmoved by her tears.

But the ducks had more heart. They headed over to the little boat as fast as they could. When Gayu saw this, he dug up a lump of mud with his shovel, then grabbed the handle with both hands, raised it high above him, thrust his shoulders back and his chest forward, and hurled the mud into the air.

It landed with a *splat!* right in front of the furthest duck. Startled, the duck turned, flapping its wings and quacking angrily before swimming off in the opposite direction. The other ducks made a similar fuss and followed it. Sunflower looked around her. She couldn't see another soul, and began to cry.

Gayu turned and went into the reeds. He pulled out a long bamboo pole, which the boat's owner had probably hidden, afraid that someone might make off with his boat. Then, walking along the bank, he gestured that he was going to throw the pole to Sunflower. Her teary eyes blurred with gratitude.

When he was directly above the little boat, Gayu slid down the embankment to the shore. He stepped into the river, laid the bamboo pole on the water and gave it a light push so that the end was almost touching the boat. Sunflower leant over and reached for it. Just as she was about to grasp the pole, he laughed and slowly pulled it back. She looked at him, her hands empty, drops of water falling from her fingertips into the river.

Gayu waded through the shallows and pushed the pole towards her again. He did the same thing over

and over, pushing the pole as close as he could, then pulling it away just as she reached for it. Sunflower struggled to hold back her tears.

Finally, Gayu gestured that this time he would give her the pole. She believed him. As it came towards her, she leant over as far as she could, but Gayu jerked it back and she almost fell in. He roared with laughter. Sunflower sat back in the boat and sobbed.

Seeing that the ducks had swum quite a long way off, Gayu pushed one end of the pole into the shore and used it to climb up the embankment. With two or three strides he was back on the bank again. He glanced at Sunflower one last time, pulled the pole out of the mud, tossed it into the reeds and, without looking back, went hurrying after his flock.



The little boat, angled sideways so it was facing the bank, started drifting downstream. The old elm became smaller and smaller. The red-tiled roofs of the Cadre School gradually disappeared behind the thousands of reeds. Sunflower was numb with fear.

She sat in the boat, tears streaming silently down her face. The green haze before her seemed to spill out of the sky and grow ever wider and mistier. She wondered how much further she would drift.

Occasionally another boat passed by, but Sunflower barely moved. She didn't stand up and wave her arms or shout. At most she gave a little wave. The people in the boats assumed she was a child having fun on the river and didn't pay too much attention. If any of them did wonder, they still carried on their way.

Sunflower was still crying, quietly calling for her father. A solitary white bird flew out from the reeds. It seemed to sense something and hovered above the water, low and calm, not far from the little boat. Sunflower looked at its long wings and the fine feathers on its breast that ruffled in the breeze; its slim neck, yellow beak and bright red feet. From time to time, it cocked its head to one side and peered at her with brown eyes.

The boat drifted on the water; the bird flew in the sky. Between heaven and earth all was peaceful and quiet.

Then, unexpectedly, the bird landed on the boat. It was a big bird, and it looked proud and haughty. Sunflower watched it calmly, as though she had known it for a long time. They looked at each other, at ease. Neither made a sound. There was just the gurgling of the river.

But the bird couldn't stay with her. It had to be on its way. It nodded gracefully, flapped its wings, leant forward and flew off towards the south. Sunflower watched it disappear into the distance, then turned to look downstream. The water stretched as far as the horizon. Tears filled her eyes again.

Not far away, on the grassy shore, a boy was grazing his buffalo, cutting grass while the beast ate. He noticed the little boat adrift on the river and stopped what he was doing. He stood there quietly, his scythe in his hand, watching it.

Sunflower had noticed the boy and his buffalo too. Although she couldn't see his face clearly, suddenly she felt a sense of relief, and hope welled up in her heart. She stood up and looked at him.

The river breeze ruffled the boy's scruffy black hair, which kept falling over his face. His eyes were

sparkling, and as the little boat came closer, his heart beat faster. The buffalo, which had a fine pair of long horns, stopped grazing and stood with its master, gazing at the little girl on the little boat.

The boy could see right away what had happened. As the boat came closer he picked the buffalo's rope from the ground and walked it slowly to the water's edge, keeping level with the boat.

Sunflower had stopped crying. The tear tracks running down her face had dried in the wind and felt tight on her skin.

The boy grabbed the long hair on the buffalo's back and swung himself up. Astride the animal, he looked down at the river, the boat and the girl. Sunflower had to raise her head to see him: he was framed by blue sky and soft white clouds. She couldn't see his eyes clearly, but they seemed to be especially bright, like the stars at night.

Sunflower knew in her heart that this boy would rescue her. She hadn't called out to him. She hadn't made any gestures asking for help. She had just stood on the boat, watching him. The look in her eyes was enough.

The boy gave the buffalo a hard slap on the rump, and it walked obediently into the river. Sunflower watched the boy and buffalo sink lower into the water with every step the buffalo took. Soon the beast was submerged, save for its ears, nose, eyes and the ridge of its spine, which were just visible above the water level. The boy kept the lead tight. His trousers were soaked.

The boat and the buffalo, and the boy and the girl, drew closer.

The boy's eyes were so big and so bright – Sunflower would remember them for the rest of her life. As the buffalo neared the little boat, it flapped its ears, splashing water over Sunflower. She squeezed her eyes shut and put her hands up to shield her face. When she removed them and opened her eyes again, the boy and the buffalo were already at the back of the boat. He leant over and deftly grabbed the rope that was floating in the water. There was a slight jolt, and the little boat stopped drifting.

The boy tied the rope around the buffalo's horns and motioned for Sunflower to sit down. Then he patted the buffalo's head a few times and it set off back

to shore, the boy on its back and Sunflower sitting in the boat behind them.

For a while, the buffalo and the boy's legs were still underwater. Sunflower looked at the boy's back – so straight, so strong – and the back of his head, so shiny, so round. The buffalo pushed through the river. The water parted at its head, rejoined over its back, parted again around the boy, then flowed together over the buffalo's rump before slapping against the boat.

The buffalo led the boat at a steady pace upriver, back towards the old elm. Sunflower's terror had dissolved. She sat in the boat, excited by the river scenery before her. The glints of sunlight on the water rippled into a golden glow that rose and fell with the river. The reeds on either side were bathed in sunlight too. When a cloud moved in front of the sun, the sky would darken, the golden glow would vanish and the river would be an expanse of dark blue water. But when the cloud moved on, the reeds would glow brighter and sharper, more dazzling than before. If smaller clouds drifted in front of the sun, stripes would appear across the reed lands: bright emerald in

the sunlight, dark green in the shade. The reeds in the distance looked black. The clouds, the sunshine, the water and the never-ending reeds were changing with every second. Sunflower was enchanted.

Then the buffalo huffed, reminding her where she was. A long reed with a feathery panicle came floating down the river. The boy leant forward, grabbed it and held it upright. It looked like a giant ink brush with its wet tip pointing to the sky. In the breeze, the wet tip loosened and began to fluff out, catching the light with a silver shimmer. The boy held it up like a flag.

As they neared the old elm, Gayu and his flock of ducks appeared. He was on a flat duck-keeper's boat with a long pole and could go anywhere he liked. At the sight of the buffalo and the little boat, he doubled over with laughter, his deep throaty laughs matching the guttural quacking of his drakes. He lay on his side in the boat, propping up his head on his hand and watched them go by: the boat, the buffalo, the boy, the girl.

The boy did not even glance at Gayu. His only concern was to keep steady on the buffalo, to drive

it forward and to tow the little boat to the old elm. Sunflower's father was standing under the tree, watching anxiously. Once at the shore the boy stood on the buffalo's back and tied the boat to the tree. Then he climbed down, grabbed the side of the boat and pulled it close to the bank.

Sunflower jumped out and clambered up the slope towards her father, who leant forward and reached down to her. The earth was loose and Sunflower struggled to keep her footing. The boy came over and gave her a big shove from behind. Her hands met her father's, and with one pull she was on the bank.

Clutching her father's hand, she looked at the boy and at the buffalo and the boat. Tears ran down her face. Her father sank to his knees, wrapped his arms around her and patted her reassuringly. Then he noticed the boy was looking up at them. A strange feeling took hold of him, and his hand froze on Sunflower's back.

The boy turned and began to walk back towards the buffalo.

"What's your name, child?" Sunflower's father asked.

The boy looked back at Sunflower and her father but said nothing.

“What’s your name?” Sunflower’s father asked again.

The boy suddenly went red, lowered his head and walked away.

“He’s called Bronze. He can’t speak. He’s a mute!” yelled Gayu.

The boy climbed onto the buffalo and drove it back into the water. Sunflower and her father watched him go.

On the path back to the Cadre School, Sunflower’s father seemed lost in thought. They had almost arrived, when suddenly he grabbed her hand and hurried back to the riverside. The boy and his buffalo were gone. Gayu and his ducks were gone too. There was just the open river flowing on.

That evening, when he was putting out the light, Sunflower’s father said, “I can’t believe how much he looked like your brother.”

Sunflower had heard her father talk about her brother before. He had died of meningitis when he was three. She had never met him; it had been before she was born. She nestled her head against her father’s

arm and stared into the dark for a long time.

In the distance she could hear the faint sound of the river and the dogs barking in Damaidi.