

The Call of the Flying Fish

Hsia-man Lan-po-an

Translated by Cathy Chiu

“Mr. Zero” ran out to buy his teacher a packet of betel nuts and a pack of cigarettes, before starting a leisurely walk on the road toward home.

“Yama¹, take me with you to catch flying-fish in the ocean, please.” Ta-k’ā-an begged his father with a smile. Ta-k’ā-an had just got home, still panting.

His school bag, hanging from his shoulder across his chest, had often been soaked in the sea, but had never been washed and was rarely used for his books or notebooks. On his wet sneakers was dirty foam. His white-and-blue checkered uniform was smeared with red, black, green, yellow—all kinds of colors—from who knows where. Those legs covered with greasy dirt seemed to have never been washed with soap. Few Yami boys on this island looked any different, for very few families could afford soap. Ta-k’ā-an’s father did try his best to buy soap for the children, but now it was the peak of flying fish season and he needed to buy a lot of salt. No money could be spared for soap.

Ta-k’ā-an curled up, facing his father, who was repairing the fishing net on the veranda. It was about five o’clock in the afternoon.

¹ Father

The sun was about to rest in the ocean. The father sped up repairing the fishing net, paying no attention to Ta-k'a-an, whose words passed by him like a breeze.

"Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an, where did you catch so many flying fish last night?" asked the next-door neighbor.

"Not that many. There were only two hundred and six fish. I caught them in the Jiliseng area."

"Is that where you went? I only caught thirty some fish last night. Lousy!"

"Take me to catch flying fish, Yama," Ta-k'a-an begged with his school bag still hanging from his little shoulder.

"What would you come along for? You haven't done well at school. Stay home and do your homework," replied the father irritably.

"Why not let the child go catch flying fish with you? You want him to stay home and do his homework. When has he ever listened? He ends up going to the beach, hiding back of the rock and waiting for you to return from fishing. You ordering him to do his homework hurts as much as not allowing him to go swimming. Take him fishing once and let him have a try. He will learn that catching flying fish is not that easy after all," mumbled the dark and wizened mother.

Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an remained silent and quickly put the net together, as it was getting dark.

"Take me with you! I am in the sixth grade already. My arms are very strong." Ta-k'a-an rolled up his short sleeves, and asked his father to feel the small lumps of muscle in his arms. By showing off his strength, he tried to convince his father, who of course was stronger than he.

"Feel it—my muscle. Feel it! Feel it! Yama."

"What good does it do to have just strength? You are simple-minded. You! You will end up sleeping in rags inside a factory somewhere. You are only fit to be a laborer for Taiwanese, taking orders to do this and that. Strength alone is useless. If you can't read, you will be even worse off. You are a sixth grader and still you know nothing." The more Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an talked the more irritated he got. Casting a sidelong glance at his son, he continued, "Look at you. You haven't even put down your school bag yet. What a lazybones! Though we are too poor to have a chair or desk for you and your brother to study at, you should figure out some way yourself to do your daily homework." Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an continued, "Alas, I can tell that you played all day at school again. All you know is play every day."

Papa will not take a good-for-nothing kid like you to ride in a boat and go fishing on the ocean."

Tears suddenly welled up in the eyes of Ta-k'a-an, a usually carefree and energetic boy. He threw his school bag on the ground. His eyes showed his disappointment and the edge of his mouth started to quiver with anger and frustration. In his thinking, the homework had plainly acted against him. No matter how hard he studied, there were so many new words to study and memorize. It was like encountering an evil spirit

"Yama, why don't you take me to the sea to catch flying fish? Every time I saw how excited you got when you caught a lot of flying fish, I could not wait to grow up so I could go fishing with you. I am old enough now, Yama," said little Ta-k'a-an sadly, leaning against a post on the veranda.

The father, keeping a long face, walked away without saying a word. Ta-k'a-an followed closely in little steps.

"Yama," wailed little Ta-k'a-an, "I will curse the flying fish, if you don't take me out to sea."

All of a sudden, as if shocked by a giant evil spirit, the father stopped, angrily stared at his son, who had intentionally violated a taboo, and scolded, "Speak one more word and I will smash your devil mouth to pieces." Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an said, "You can curse your Papa to keep him from catching fish, but never in a million years curse our flying fish. They are no ordinary fish, but food given by Heaven to our Yami tribe. If other people of the tribe hear your curse, I will have to give a feast to apologize and repent to our people. Where do you suppose I can find a pig to kill for the feast?"

Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an's high-pitched voice drew his neighbors' attention. "Oh, thoughtless kid, how could you curse the flying fish? Did you mean to curse our tribe or what?"

Little Ta-k'a-an walked up to the angry father and implored him in an attempt to please, "I'm sorry. Take me fishing out on the sea, please, Yama!"

"Why in the world does Ta-k'a-an so persistently keep after his father about taking him fishing today?" Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an's dark and shrivelled old mother observed on the side. "Little Ta-k'a-an has never been as serious about going to sea as he is today. Could it be that his teacher slapped him hard for not behaving at school?"

On the beach after sunset many men gathered, ready to set out to sea. Some were working hard to tie up ropes for the oars, some were sorting fishing nets, others were smoking and chatting. These Yami

men appeared extremely calm while preparing to go to sea in the slanting rays of the setting sun. They were familiar with the rhythm of the waves. It was the strong smell of ocean water and fish that especially delighted the Yami people during this season. Since ancient times when the flying fish folklore started, there had never been any island resident who did not love the ocean. The slanting rays of the setting sun shone between the crests of the waves and frequently glittered with silver-white sparks, as if the fallen scales of flying fish were calling the Yami people's fishing fleet.

"Many many years ago the flying fish jumped out of the ocean and landed on the reef. They let our ancestors learn their many different species. In this way the chief of the flying fish, Black Wing, educated our ancestors how to eat flying fish, how to catch them, and how to offer sacrifices to them." Ta-k'a-an never forgot the story his grandfather told him when he was four or five and first learned to swim.

The waves very rhythmically spread over the expansive surface of the ocean.

"Maran, may I take your place in the boat today?" Little Ta-k'a-an turned around, gently begging his uncle to give him this opportunity. "Maran, look at the muscles in my arms. They are as strong as the pebbles on the beach. I am strong enough to row the boat. I am probably stronger than you!"

"Rowing the boat depends not only on strength but also on experience and endurance as well as knowledge of the flow of the ocean currents. It's not that easy. However, if you want to go to sea, go ahead. Do remember not to sleep in the boat. The devil will capture your soul," his uncle exhorted him repeatedly.

The uncle loved little Ta-k'a-an like his own son; all the more because Ta-k'a-an was the one child in the whole village who was most respectful in observing the traditional taboos. It was good to learn rowing skills early, because all the Yami men were supposed to have rowing skills, his uncle thought, and also that was his main purpose in making the plank boat. In his thinking, boats were made for people to show off on the ocean and Yami children were born for that, too.

"Great! Great!" Little Ta-k'a-an leaped with joy and excitement as if he were hearing that school had closed and he no longer had to go. In his joy he felt as if a heavy rock pressing down on his heart had suddenly exploded into pieces.

"Are you sure you want to come along?" his father asked with grave misgivings. At this, Ta-k'a-an nodded his head repeatedly with a

big, happy grin on his face. Since the child had such a strong desire to go to sea, the father now had to abide by the sailing taboo before setting out. Instead of scolding and rejecting little Ta-k'a-an, he taught his son survival skills and rules of conduct to follow on the ocean.

The boat bobbed gently with the ups and downs of the waves. "Yama, how soothing this is!" little Ta-k'a-an exclaimed out of the blue.

With a smile, the father said, "Concentrate on rowing!"

This was his son's virgin sailing. Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an started chanting under his breath an old blessing poem of the Yami people:

"Our old and brave ancestors, please bless and protect this vulnerable descendant. Instruct his rude hands that operate the oars . . . Since ancient times, you have protected and blessed the people of this island by the wisdom of your accumulated experience to live on."

Many tribal children of the same age as Ta-k'a-an or younger by one to two years were standing on the shore in the reflected light of the sunset, seeing off the fishing fleet—one boat after another trailing rows of ripples behind them, which stirred the emotions of the watchers. The force by which the men stuck the oars into the ocean generated small whirlpools time after time. The fleet thus swiftly moved forward to track down the sea area where the flying fish flocked.

Little Ta-k'a-an proudly looked from the distance at his playmates on the shore. At school, Ta-k'a-an wore the dunce cap of "Mr. Zero," which now, however, came to be a symbol of bravery and honor. Every time he stuck the oar into the ocean, he took a peek at his arm muscles to see if they had grown bigger. He rowed hard. "Yama, I have a lot of strength. I am also very good at rowing. None of my classmates can beat me," he said to Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an.

"Hey, this is the only thing you are better at than other kids. Wait until you go back to school. Won't you still do worse than everyone else in everything?" said the father. "Boat rowing is not your daily duty. Doing well in school every day is. Do you understand, Ta-k'a-an?"

Pure moonlight shone on the ocean. The boats near and far were clearly visible. There were so many stars in the sky that you could not see them all. The emotions you felt here were totally different from those on land. The silvery light shimmered on the waves, rising here and falling there. The brave Yami men in every boat waited silently for the sign of fish to appear. The scene and the moment greatly satisfied Ta-k'a-an's desire for fishing on the ocean.

"Yama, it is so beautiful watching the sky from the ocean! Yaro mata no angit!" he blurted out in his native tongue, "the sky with many eyes!"

Little Ta-k'a-an spoke most fluently in his native tongue when he was high in spirits. He spoke affectionately to his father: "Asta pala angit, mo yama." He said, "Look, look at the sky quickly, my father, look at that star."

"Do not point your finger at the sky on the sea. When the devils see that you are so curious, they know immediately that you are a new hand. Be alert! When you go home to sleep, they might capture your ocean soul."

"Really, Papa?" Ta-k'a-an said fearfully.

"All you know is enjoying those scenes. If you liked school as much as you like the ocean, you would not give Papa a headache. You come to catch flying fish, not to watch those stars," said Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an. "Look, Papa is only fit to do heavy labor, working for others, because I do not have much education. Papa had very good grades at school. One Father wanted me to go to a junior high school in T'ai-tung, but was stopped by your grandmother." Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an said children were supposed to obey parents, and so all he could do was obey her. Now when he thought of it, he really regretted it. "If I had disobeyed your grandmother temporarily, your mother and grandmother would not be so skinny and wizened. And they would not need to work for Taiwanese either, doing odd jobs for just a few yüan," said Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an with emotion.

Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an lit a cigarette, took a drag, and blew the smoke into the dark ocean sky. He said, "Men are bound to get old. The strength with which to catch fish will also weaken accordingly. If you don't study hard and get good grades, you won't have a future, and our life in the future will have no hope either. We will always be poor, always have to rely on labor to make ends meet, always be looked down upon, always . . . Why don't you think more about the future benefits of studying hard now?"

Sitting in the bow of the boat, little Ta-k'a-an thought to himself: "It sure is a pain talking about this right now! But how can I get away from Papa's nagging on the ocean?"

The net had been cast about half an hour ago. The father started to feel the motion of flying fish charging into its meshes.

Ta-k'a-an stayed silent. He seemed to have his own idea. Eating sweet potatoes, catching flying fish, and working as a laborer—anything wrong with that? —he was thinking. Those classmates who

did very well at school did not necessarily have the opportunity to ride in a boat, watching the wonderful starry sky from the ocean, enjoying the sensation of floating on the sea, and learning from tribal people the skills to catch flying fish. On Orchid Island, those who got good grades went to Taiwan for further study. After graduation, they would end up settling down in a factory just the same. Ta-k'a-an continued his thought: In the future when his classmates grew up and still did not know how to catch flying fish but wanted to eat flying fish, he could sell them the flying fish he had caught. This way, he would get to play on the ocean and make money out of those classmates who had lost their traditional survival skills. "Mr. Zero" would become "Mr. Flying Fish." As little Ta-k'a-an thought more, he could not help bursting into laughter.

The moonlight, gentle and soft, still shone evenly on the boats operating in the ocean. People awaited quietly the sign of flying fish charging into the net. "Cha... cha..." came the sound of the waves as they hit the shore.

"Ta-k'a-an, row forward. Papa will start pulling up the net."

"Are there any flying fish, Yama?"

The fishing net was pulled up and covered half the boat, but there were still no flying fish to be seen, silver-white without tails. Little Ta-k'a-an, sitting in the bow, stared intensely at the net. He appeared somewhat disappointed.

"Be patient! You need some patience!"

Suddenly, a small silver white wave surged at the far edge of the net.

"Ta-k'a-an, look there. A flying fish is flapping its wings against the sea surface!" said Yama softly.

"Where? Where?" Ta-k'a-an said anxiously. Right then he saw a strip of sparkling silver light leap up in the dark.

Surprised, he yelled, "How beautiful, Yama!"

Under the moonlight, now bright, now dim, with his eyes wide open, little Ta-k'a-an saw the flying fish struggling in the net. Its falling scales were like the stars in the sky swinging and blinking between the crests and hollows of the waves. The silver light of the scales drew near with the waves as the net was being pulled up. Astonished, little Ta-k'a-an sat still as a small statue in the boat and watched the graceful flying fish intently. By now he had almost stopped breathing and felt as if he were drunk in the embrace of fairies.

He took the gasping flying fish out of the net, held it tightly in his hands, and kissed it. He then took off his blue-and-white checkered

uniform, wiped the ocean water off the fish, and wrapped it. "Ah, 'Black Wing', why did you show up so late?" he mumbled. This was what Ta-k'a-an wanted to see—a live flying fish, and better yet, one with black wings, king of flying fish!

At this moment, his wish came true. His nickname, Mr. Zero, at school should now be changed to Mr. Flying Fish, he thought.

"I am Hsi Ta-k'a-an, my flying fish." Little Ta-k'a-an was filled with passion surging in his chest for the first time. Facing the dark ocean, he shouted in his heart, "Now you should recognize me. Some day I hope to take my boat here by myself to catch flying fish. I will be a brave man on the sea—a real Yami hero!"

"Ta-k'a-an, we have almost a hundred and thirty or forty fish. Let's go back. You need to go to school tomorrow . . ."

"No, cast the net one more time!" begged Ta-k'a-an.

"Tomorrow you will doze off in class. Your teacher will beat you again."

"It's all right. Let him beat me. The pain will only last a few seconds."

"Cast the net once more, Yama!" said little Ta-k'a-an.

The father knew very well that his son Ta-k'a-an was not born stupid. Whenever he was taught to do something, he did it well and made people satisfied. Ta-k'a-an's maternal grandfather loved him very much and frequently took him out of school before Ta-k'a-an went into the middle grades. He showed Ta-k'a-an how to recognize the trees in the mountains and the fish in the ocean. Ta-k'a-an thus did not have a good foundation in elementary education and was always listed number one at the bottom of the class.

"In the future, how can Ta-k'a-an survive in the competitive Taiwanese society?" Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an was dejected whenever he came to think of that.

The sea was quiet and smooth like a lake as the waves calmed down. Meanwhile, in the father's heart were roaring waves and billows. Hardship and poverty, his generation could endure all these, Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an thought as he rowed. However, the kids should not have to bear the same hardship, or, even worse, discrimination. What should he do? What should he do? ...

At this moment Ta-k'a-an was counting stars, counting the fishing boats, and counting the everlasting village lights on the distant shore, sometimes in view and sometimes hidden.

"Ta-k'a-an, are you really so afraid of school?" said little Ta-k'a-an's father. "Your teacher told me that you still could not

memorize the multiplication table and the phonetic symbols. Sixth grader already and you still have not learned the very basics. Later, if you ever have any money, you won't even be able to count it. What are you going to do?"

Ta-k'a-an was aware that there was no escaping his father's questioning at this time, although he could just up and jump into the ocean and swim back to the shore. But in his mind, he did not like his father judging his ability by how well he was doing at school. He realized his family's poor situation and he knew he would make money with labor to support his parents. He would buy them appliances and a lot of electronics. He simply did not want to hear anything about school and grades. He was sick and tired of it.

Having given it a few thoughts, Ta-k'a-an said, "Yama, I will use my tough muscles and great strength to make money. Don't worry. Besides, I will not drink or smoke ever. Isn't it also good to farm in the mountains and fish in the ocean?"

"Alas . . ." the father released a deep sigh. It made Ta-k'a-an uneasy. The moon and stars seemed to have much darkened. "You should keep in mind what Papa has said."

Father and son silently rowed on. "Yaro rana liban-gbang ta," said little Ta-k'a-an gently and unexpectedly, "Papa, our flying fish are plenty!"

"Don't say it like that. Saying 'our flying fish' is cursing the sky gods' fish. You should say, 'Ala karapyan tamo rana ya,'" Hsiaman Ta-k'a-an told his son solemnly. "This is how you should put it, 'These seem to be enough for us to eat.' Understand?"

Gathering around the harbor were boats back from fishing. Many tribal people were helping their fathers or grandfathers scrape off fish scales. Apparently, Ta-k'a-an and his father were the last to return, which Ta-k'a-an felt was the greatest honor.

"Ta-k'a-an, you can row?"

"That's something!"

"Rowing can build up your muscle!"

"Ta-k'a-an is a rare Yami kid, who goes fishing with his father. Nowadays kids only like to sit around a TV watching those boring soap operas and imitating what they see in commercials," one neighbor elder emotionally stated. "If my kids were worth half of Ta-k'a-an, coming to the shore to help push the boat, scrape fish scales, and go to sea with me, I wouldn't need to worry about having no fish to eat when I get old."

So many praises made Ta-k'a-an very happy. He truly

realized that catching flying fish was a very toilsome job for the Yami men. Only after you rowed out on the ocean, fishing and experiencing the labor and excitement, did the flying fish taste especially good.

Though the clan was praising Ta-k'a-an for his competence, Ta-k'a-an's father responded as if it were nothing. After all, on the island people strongly believed that too much praise from others would turn into a curse. Therefore one must learn to be humble instead of complacent. The father watched the son, who was scraping fish scales, and thought to himself, "He is really a lovable boy. But why isn't he interested in school?"

Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an walked on the road leading home with the flying fish on his back. His steps looked very heavy.

"Ta-k'a-an, go to school tomorrow. Study hard!" said Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an. "Knowing how to fish is nothing. Not knowing how to read will make you a laborer for Taiwanese, forever being ordered about with no integrity at all. You don't study to be somebody important in the future, but to have an opportunity to choose what you want to do."

Little Ta-k'a-an, carrying the fishing net on his shoulder, seemed to listen to his father attentively.

More than one hundred and eighty flying fish became heavier and heavier on the back. "Nowadays there are electricity and lights, and parents also learn to encourage their kids to study; the kids, on the other hand, resist school. What has gone wrong?" thought Hsia-man Ta-k'a-an.

Walking in front of his father, Ta-k'a-an suddenly cried out in high spirits, "Ina,² we're home!"

"Stand up, Tung Chih-hao!"

Mathematics, 0.

Chinese, 12 points.

Science, 8 points.

Social Science, 32 points.

The teacher openly said in a sarcastic tone, "Mr. Zero, go buy a packet of betel nuts and a pack of cigarettes for me. Run for it!"

Ta-k'a-an sat alone, with his book-less school bag hanging from his shoulder across his chest, on the rock by the Jirakwayo beach, watching tribal people sail out to catch flying fish. It was dusk. The paper with a big zero on it was crumpled in his strong palm.

² Mother

The honor of "Mr. Flying Fish" and the insult of "Mr. Zero" stirred in little Ta-k'a-an's heart. He sat on the rock, watching the flying fish fishing boats sail into the distance, and meanwhile the bright red sun had sunk into the ocean.

The street lamps lit up the road on Ta-k'a-an's way home. The closer he approached home, the dimmer the light appeared. He wore his school bag strap across his shoulder and chest. In the schoolbag there were no books or notebooks, but a crumpled paper with a big zero on it.

"Flying fish..."

"Zero..."

[Selected from Hsia-man Lan-po-an, *Leng-hai ch'ing-shen—hai-yang ch'ao-sheng-che* (Cold Sea and Deep Affection—An Ocean Pilgrim). Lien-he Wen-ts'ung 117. Taipei: Lien-he Wen-hsüeh Ch'u-pan-she, May 1997.]

Hsia-man Lan-po-an, a native of the Yami tribe, was born in 1957. His Chinese name is Shih Nü-lai, and he graduated from Tamkang University majoring in French. He returned to his native home, Orchid Island, after years of hard work in Taiwan, to deepen his understanding in an effort to preserve Yami culture. His book, *Pa-tai-wan te shen-hua—T'ai-wan Ya-me-i-tsu shen-hua-chi* (Myths of Pa-tai-wan—a Collection of Myths of the Yami Tribe) was published in 1992.