

## The Roots of a Novel



PA CHIN in 1941

In the following pages we present, for the first time in English, Pa Chin's own preface to the 10th edition of his celebrated novel *Family* (家). This is by far the author's most extensive and intimate confession on how that work came to be written. We are indebted to Mrs. Shang-lan Mui Yeh for permission to print her hitherto unpublished translation. Pa Chin (original name Li Fei-kan 李芾甘, born 1904) wrote the novel in 1931 as the first part of a trilogy entitled *Turbulent Stream* (激流), the sequels of which were *Spring* (春) and *Autumn* (秋). Upon publication it was a tremendous success with the younger generation of readers who had grown up in the new spirit of the May Fourth Movement. By 1937 it had reached its 10th edition. The social impact and literary merits of the novel moved Shang-lan Mui, then an overseas Chinese student at Colorado

State College in the United States, some years later to begin a correspondence with the author. As Mrs. Yeh now recalls it, "Pa Chin was essentially a writer for youth, with all the sentiments and exaggerated emotions of youth (unchecked by sober experiences of life), and one could readily see oneself in his characters." The fruitful result of this correspondence was a translation of the entire novel, completed in 1947, together with three of its prefaces.\*

*Family*, an early fiction of the prolific writer, remains endeared to young readers as Pa Chin's representative work that reflects a new epoch for China ushered in not through gradual reform but by revolution. The crumbling of the feudal order and the recognition, all too sudden, of many hitherto suppressed human rights were still novel to the majority of people who were slow to understand their implications. It became the avowed task of the intellectuals endowed with a sense of mission to spread the word and help make the new social values a reality. In literature there emerged a new type of hero—the rebel who broke away from the fetters of traditional Confucian ethics and sought enlightenment and salvation in Western ideologies. His foil, whom he usually treated with more pity than contempt, was the weakling who failed to keep up with the spirit of the times and yielded to the stubborn pressures of the outmoded system.

\*Although Mrs. Yeh was the first to make an English translation of *Chia*, which she re-titled *The Kao Family*, she was unsuccessful in her attempt to have it published. In 1958, an English version of the novel made by Sidney Shapiro was published by the Foreign Language Press, Peking. This was used as the basic text for a Doubleday Anchor paperback, published in New York in 1972. An "Editor's Note" explains that "the three Prefaces by Pa Chin, as well as certain parts of the text, were deleted from the 1958 edition". These were translated for the Anchor edition by Lu Kuang-huan. The three prefaces referred to were the general preface to the trilogy *Turbulent Stream* (dated 1931); "Dedication to My Eldest Brother" (1932); and a short prefatory note which Pa Chin wrote in 1936 for the 5th Edition. Still unavailable in English was the longest of the prefaces, "To a Cousin", written in 1937 for the Revised 10th Edition, which is the one presented here to complete the literary background of this novel as supplied by the author himself.

A professed anarchist and humanitarian, Pa Chin wrote with enthusiasm about the new spirit that was exposing the weaknesses of tradition. He wrote in the General Preface to *Turbulent Stream*:

Although I have lived only a little more than twenty summers here on earth, I have not passed this short time in vain. During this time I have seen and heard many things. I am surrounded by darkness, but I refuse to feel lonely or dejected. For everywhere I see life's stream creating a path through rugged cliffs and rocks.

A later preface, dedicated to his eldest brother, recalled the lamentable fate of the young man who had "allowed the negativistic philosophy of appeasement and nonresistance to intoxicate his brain", and committed suicide at the age of thirty. He was the prototype of Chio-sin, the eldest brother in *Family*, equally sentimental and submissive, and tormented by love for a woman which he dared not declare.

Seeing beyond the bonds that had crushed Chio-sin, Pa Chin created his own kindred spirit in the person of the young student Chio-hui, Chio-sin's youngest brother. In league with his second brother Chio-min, the rebellious Chio-hui spoke out against the ancient practices in the well-established, patriarchal family headed by their dictatorial grandfather. The upper middle-class background was familiar to Pa Chin, who saw in his own wealthy, educated family in Chengtu, Szechuan, a "despotic kingdom". In the preface to the novel's 5th edition, he confessed: "I myself am not in the novel, but I see in it my childhood and adolescence."

Chio-hui, though "not a hero" and "quite childish", showed great sympathy for the servants of the household in the true manner of a humanitarian. His love affair with the bondmaid Ming-fung, his social inferior—which ended in the girl's drowning herself in the lake—stemmed from his tender care for the female sex, the oppressed in society. In sympathy with Chio-min and their girl-cousin Chin, who were equally brave in striving for emancipation, he supported Chio-min's escape from home to evade the forceful imposition of a family-arranged marriage, considered by the young generation to be one of the greatest sins of feudalism. At the end of the novel, Chio-hui too made good his escape—like Pa Chin who left Chengtu for Shanghai at the age of nineteen—to plunge himself into a freer and richer life of awakened consciousness.

Behind Chio-min and Chio-hui's attempts to defy tradition and live a new life are Pa Chin's romantic-idealist leanings towards anarchism, which he embraced for the better part of a lifetime. In *Family*, the broadest implication of such a vision was that those who were not brave enough to challenge the old system and seek their happiness in a reformed spirit would eventually be ousted, their lives falling into insignificance. In this perspective, the cousin to whom the following preface was dedicated—who appeared in the novel as the weak, morose rival of Chio-min in seeking the hand of Chin—was a failure. So were Eldest Brother Chio-sin and Mei, Chio-sin's secret love; while Chio-min, Chin and Chio-hui emerged a triumphant new breed. To Pa Chin, who believed that his novels should serve a social-agitation function, it was their triumphs over the establishment, and many others yet to appear in his later novels, that would awaken people's consciousness and spur the advance towards a more progressive society.