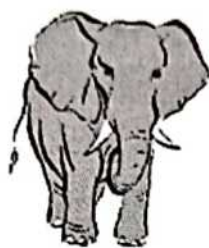


The Last Warrior Elephant

Translated by Xiaoxia Zhuang, Alabama, USA



Before 1949, the elephant warriors roamed in China. Led by General Zhao Pianling of the Dai minority in China, these fighters were menacing and awe-inspiring, fighting while they rode on elephants. Not only were the warriors able to move quickly on the battlefield as if they were on horses, but the elephants also helped in battle, swaying their powerful trunks to hack at enemies, stomping their heavy feet to trample the opposition. When a herd of these elephants tore through enemy forces, the strength of their feet would send dust billowing into the air. The elephants' roars echoed into the sky. The elephant warriors were unstoppable.

However that changed when the Japanese troops invaded. In 1943, they entered China by crossing the Burmese border and invading the Yunnan province. The elephant warriors, like always, fought a fierce battle against the Japanese invaders. The fight was unusually intense—the sound of gunshots and fierce combat shook the sky.



Illustrated by Kevin Zhou, Indiana, USA

The shrieks of the elephants rumbled the earth. After the battle ceased, the dead corpses of over seventy Japanese soldiers littered the riverside. More than eighty of General Zhao's elephants had been shot dead, and their blood dyed the river a deep red. The general asked his troops to dig a ditch twenty-five yards long and twenty-five yards wide. This would be a grave for all of the fallen elephants. They would die with a ceremony of honor. A tombstone was built over the ditch, with an inscription that read "The Mound of One Hundred Elephants."

The mourning soldiers believed that all of the elephants had died in the battle. However when the villagers of the Man-Guang-Long Village moved the bodies of the elephants to the grave, they came upon something they never could have imagined. One of the male elephants was still breathing! Bayonets had cut his neck, a machine gun bullet had wounded his leg, and blood covered his body—but this elephant was still alive! The villagers carried the elephant back to their village with a wagon pulled by eight horses. They healed the male elephant's wounds with kind hearts and fed him without asking anything in return. This elephant was the lone survivor of the battle. His name was Ar-Suo.

When I settled down in that same village in the March of 1969, Ar-Suo was still alive. By that time, he was more than fifty years old. His neck had become badly crooked and his mouth could not close completely. His saliva drooled out of his mouth all day long, and his wounded leg had never fully healed. It was shorter than his other three legs and made him hobble when he tried

to walk. He was almost completely hairless and his wrinkled skin looked very dehydrated, like the surface of raisins. Thick layers of ugly yellow stains covered his two ivory tusks. You could see his age and the trauma of war from his body. He was a warrior elephant. He was a hero with exploits. Ar-Suo received the villager's respecting and nursing.

Ar-Suo never had to do any work. His days consisted of leisurely strolling around the village, receiving bananas from one house and a bucket of spring water from the next house.

Ar-Suo's caretaker, an old man by the name of Bo-Nong-Ding, became my very good friend. We got to know each other well. When Bo-Nong-Ding was young, he was a slave who worked for many years taking care of elephants, so he knew their living habits like the back of his hand.

The third year I lived in the village, Ar-Suo's health seemed to decline rapidly. His appetite shrank and it seemed he ate less and less every day. He would lie down and nap in the shade all day. His skin became loose. Bo-Nong-Ding was watching him one day when he said to me, "The sun is setting. The flame is growing weaker. Ar-Suo will die." Like Bo-Nong-Ding predicted, Ar-Suo only got worse as the days passed by. A couple of days later, Ar-Suo lay on the ground, refusing to eat. The villagers had to grab and shake his trunk for a long time before the elephant opened his eyes with difficulty. He looked like he was barely awake.

It appeared the end was near for Ar-Suo. However

one morning, as I was passing by Ar-Suo's hut, I was astonished to find that he seemed very awake. Although his body was not moving and looked weak, his spirit was so excited in that moment. His two eyes were bright red, and when he saw Bo-Nong-Ding next to me, he growled hurriedly. His trunk stretched up and down and then pointed towards the attic of the house. That was where we usually stored random objects that nobody needed anymore. Ar-Suo's feet quickly tapped the ground. He seemed very eager to get to something in that attic.

At first, Bo-Nong-Ding did nothing in reaction to Ar-Suo's strange behavior. However that made Ar-Suo lose his temper. He used his trunk to beat against the pillars of the hut. He started to beat his body against the walls, causing the hut to nearly collapse. Bo-Nong-Ding was unable to calm him down. Finally, he obliged and I climbed up into the attic. I passed things down to Bo-Nong-Ding one by one, curious to know what Ar-Suo was looking for.

We found nothing interesting. There was a bamboo basket half filled with grain, two dried corncobs, and a few old and tattered bags. Perhaps Ar-Suo was healthier now and just wanted to eat something. I threw the dried corn onto the ground, but Ar-Suo took the dried corn with his trunk and threw them outside the elephant hut like they were trash. I passed Bo-Nong-Ding the basket of grain, but Ar-Suo immediately knocked the basket out of his hands and proceeded to stomp on the grain in a fit of anger. At this point, I didn't know what else to do, so I threw the raggedy bags down. Ar-Suo then tore the bags

to pieces with his ivory tusks.

There was nothing left to throw down except for broken bamboo mats in the corner of the attic. Ar-Suo was now roaring restlessly, and Bo-Nong-Ding said to me, "Please keep searching—there might be something else up there!" I walked over and lifted up the bamboo mats. I saw something underneath that looked like a saddle. It was big and heavy and made out of wild ox skin. I sneezed—it was also covered with a thick layer of dust.

I didn't think it would do anything, but I kicked it down the stairs next to Ar-Suo anyway. The elephant suddenly calmed down when he saw the old saddle. He gently blew the dust off of the top of the saddle with his trunk. Then his trunk began to caress the surface of the saddle for a while. Ar-Suo's eyes filled with tears, as if he had just met up with a long lost friend.

"Oh, this is the reason why he was bothering me all day," Bo-Nong-Ding said. "He wanted his saddle." The elephant caretaker watched Ar-Suo for a while longer before he spoke again. "This was the saddle that he used when he fought in the battlefield. When the villagers brought him here to heal him, he was still wearing this saddle. I took it off of his back and put it up in the attic when he was being treated. Alas, twenty-six years later, I had forgotten all about it. I'm amazed that he still remembers."

Ar-Suo lifted the saddle with his trunk and swung it on to his back, motioning for us to tighten it onto his back. With difficulty, Bo-Nong-Ding and I managed to get the saddle strapped to the elephant.

The saddle was dotted with bloodstains and bullet holes. It smelled like leather, gunpowder, dust, and blood. In the middle of the saddle was a cushion in the shape of a lotus flower. It had silver bells on its edges and was also decorated with apricot-colored tassels. Amazingly enough, this saddle had survived nearly thirty years in the attic. Although it was old, it still looked beautiful and valuable. Ar-Suo looked valiant and heroic with the saddle on his back.

However, I remained confused. "Why did he wait all this time to get the saddle?" I asked Bo-Nong-Ding.

"I fear this is not a good sign," Bo-Nong-Ding said sadly. "I believe Ar-Suo will leave us to go to the elephant mound."

I had heard the legend of the elephant mound before. Apparently, elephants are very intelligent creatures—they can sense when they are about to die, with the exception of those who die suddenly in accidents. About half a month before his death, an elephant will leave his herd, say good-bye to his fellow elephants, and travel a long distance to this mysterious elephant mound by himself. Each herd of elephants has one elephant mound. It is usually a hole caused by the rain, maybe a huge cave, or perhaps a pit caused by an earthquake. All of the elephants in that same herd will end up in the same elephant mound, no matter where he may travel. It truly is amazing—although elephants may never in their lifetime have been to the mound before, in the final moments of their life, with the guidance of a mysterious force, they find their way to their elephant family's mound.