



Billows Ferry



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On a bright spring day in March, I was on my way to Langkangyu Island in the East China Sea which I had left more than twenty years before, to gather information on our soldiers' preparedness against war. In a six to seven grade wind, I hurried to the ferry landing at Billows Wharf. /

Not a single boat was in sight. I stood on the rocky beach gazing at the outline of Langkangyu Island in the distance and recalling an unforgettable event of the time when I was last here.





It was early 1950, the eve of the Choushan Islands' liberation. We were to cross the sea, and I went first as liaison man to Langkangyu, then occupied by Kuomintang troops, to reconnoitre. Assisted by our underground communications man Ming-hai, I very soon obtained most of the information wanted.

Then unexpectedly, as I was leaving the island, Kuomintang troops blockaded the ferry landing, detained all boats, and searched the island with a fine-tooth comb. I turned and ran for the rocky far end of the island. Enemy soldiers fired at me from behind.



I had just climbed on a rock when a bullet nicked me in the left shoulder. At this critical moment a pair of strong hands took hold of me and carried me away.





Old Ming-hai carried me into a rock cave and bound up my wound. But now the situation had changed and more information was needed, so he went out at the risk of his life, promising to return with it in the evening.

The plan was for me to get the information to the Party committee as soon as possible, and I waited impatiently. At dusk I suddenly heard a seagull's cry.



Our signal! I rushed up happily
and found not old Ming-hai but
a young fisherwoman with a
baby on her back.






"I'm Ah-chu, comrade. Uncle Ming-hai sent me," she said as she deftly pulled the message I needed from her knot of hair. I took it and asked anxiously, "Where's Uncle Ming-hai?"

"He was captured by the Kuomintang bandits as he was returning after obtaining the information," replied Ah-chu. "They tortured him but he didn't say a word and managed to get the information out." Enraged, I drew my pistol and demanded to know where they'd put Uncle Ming-hai. Ah-chu only said, "You'll have to make the crossing tonight, comrade!"




I calmed down, looked at the stormy sea and said, "How can I get a boat tonight?" Ah-chu took the baby from her back and put it in my arms. Telling me to wait there, she disappeared.

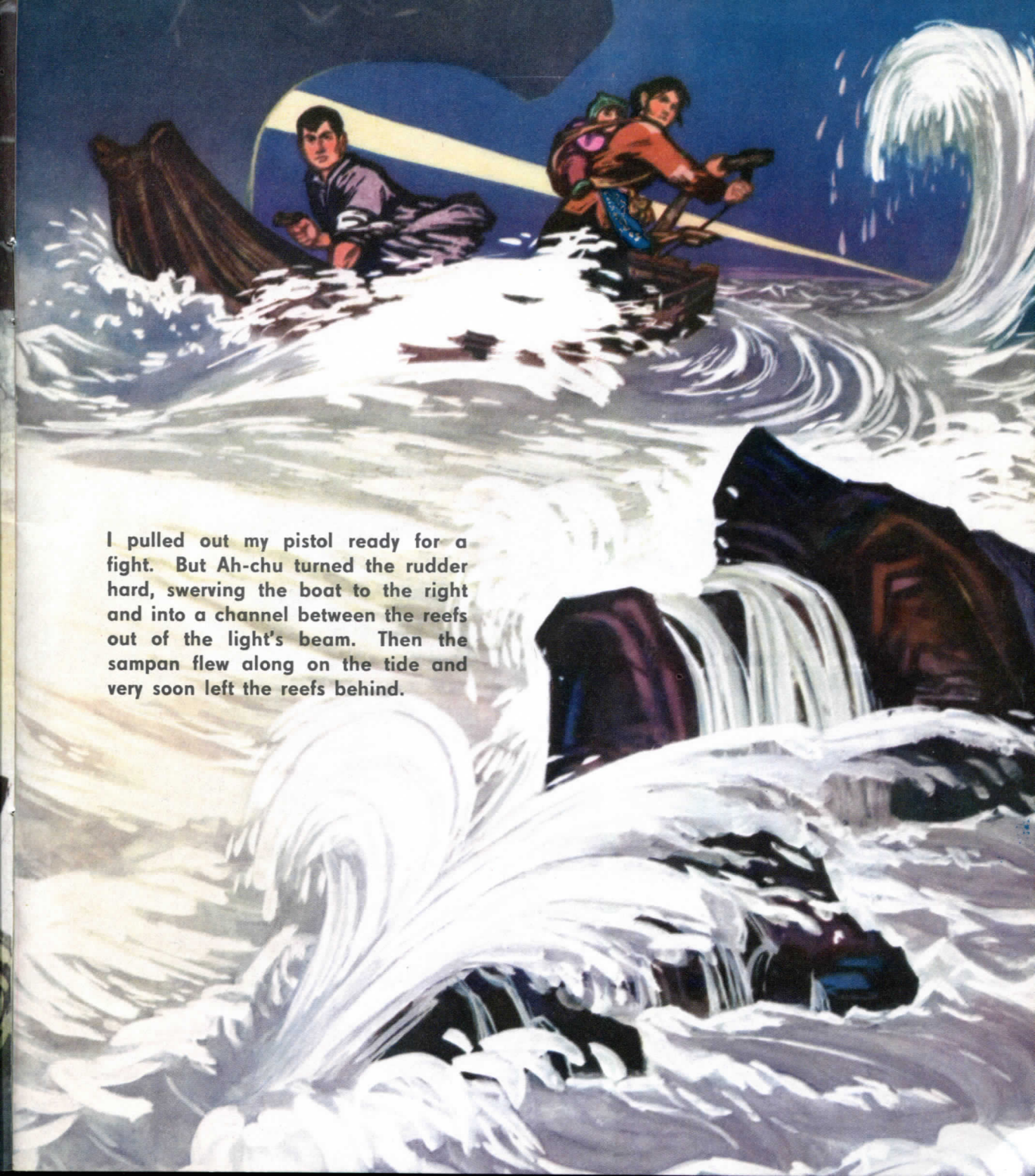


A woman in a red jacket and black pants carries a baby on her back. She stands on a dark, rocky ledge with her arms outstretched. A man in a purple jacket follows her. Below them, a river flows through a valley with mountains in the background. The scene is rendered in a stylized, high-contrast artistic style.

I was worried. After dark Ah-chu suddenly came rowing a small sampan up to the cave entrance. Putting the baby onto her back, she ordered, "Quick, get in!" I learned only on asking that she'd taken the sampan from its moorings right under the enemy's nose.



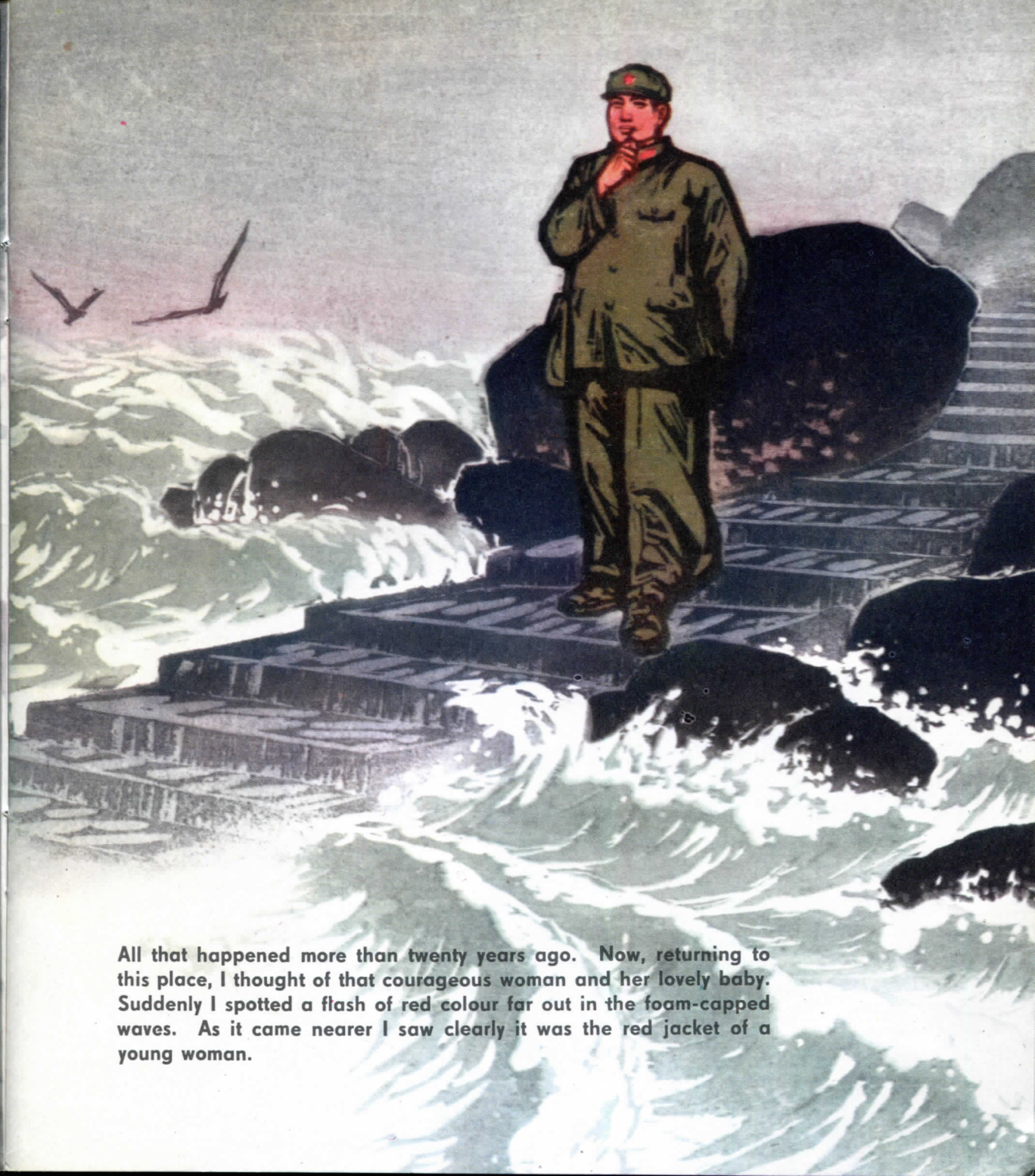
As the sampan pushed against the gale and raging sea towards the ferry landing, Ah-chu cried out in alarm, "A gunboat!" I listened and heard the roar of a motor above the howl of the wind. A shaft of white light swept over us from afar.



I pulled out my pistol ready for a fight. But Ah-chu turned the rudder hard, swerving the boat to the right and into a channel between the reefs out of the light's beam. Then the sampan flew along on the tide and very soon left the reefs behind.



Three hours after, Ah-chu landed me at Billows Ferry. Wiping the sweat from her face, she said, "Comrade, we hope our own army will soon come and liberate us from misery!" I grasped Ah-chu's hands and assured her it would not be long now.



All that happened more than twenty years ago. Now, returning to this place, I thought of that courageous woman and her lovely baby. Suddenly I spotted a flash of red colour far out in the foam-capped waves. As it came nearer I saw clearly it was the red jacket of a young woman.

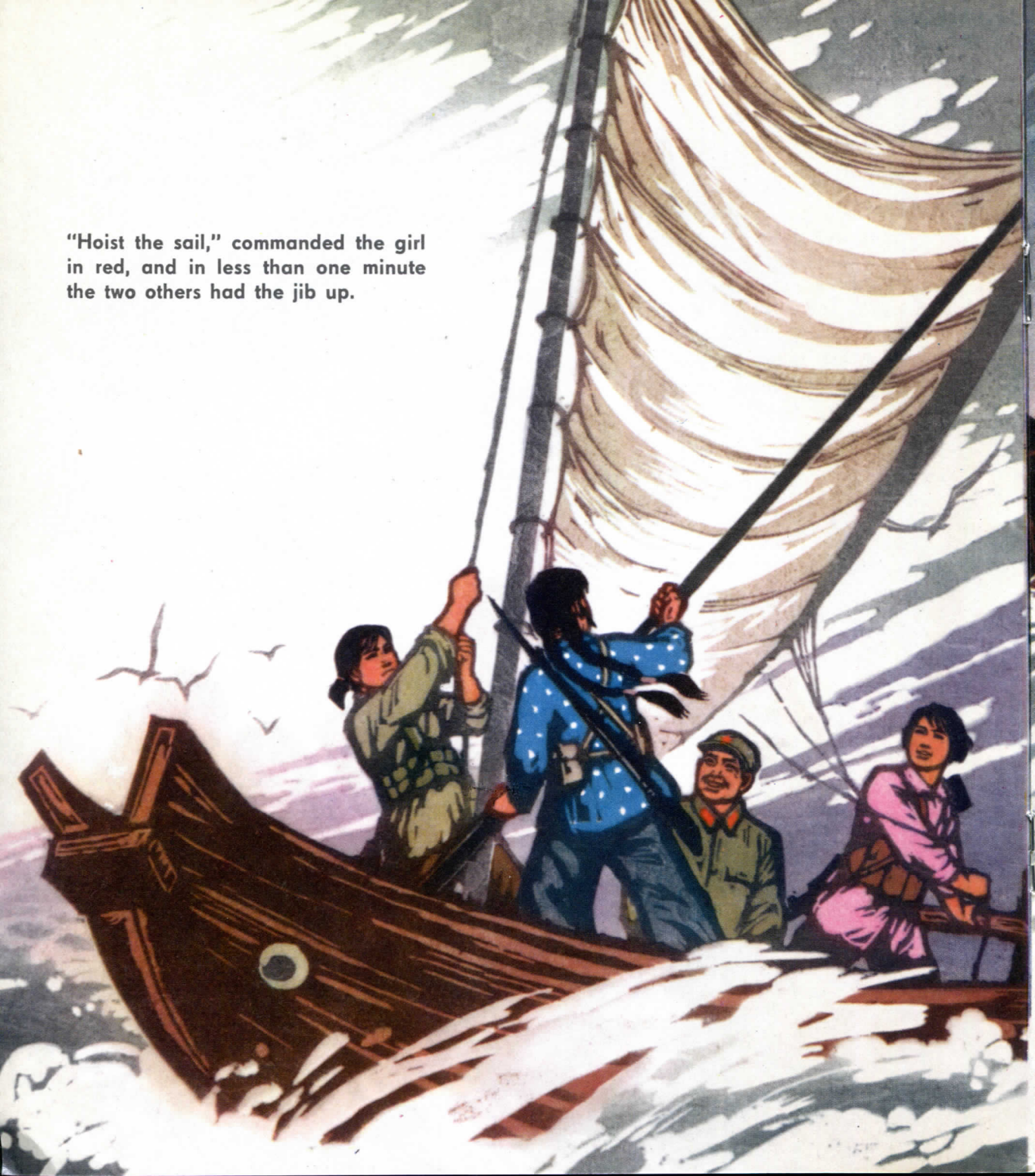


She stood erect on a small boat, a rifle on her shoulder, and there were two other girls with her. I ran to the landing, snatched off my cap and waved it furiously.

When the boat approached the landing the girl in red called out, "Where are you going, comrade?" I shouted back that I was headed for Langkangyu Island. The three looked me over before bringing their boat close. I showed them my letter of introduction, then jumped onto their boat.



"Hoist the sail," commanded the girl in red, and in less than one minute the two others had the jib up.






I learned from them that the name of the girl in the red jacket was Hai-ying, while the two others were Shui-chu and Hai-hua. They were out for marine target practice.



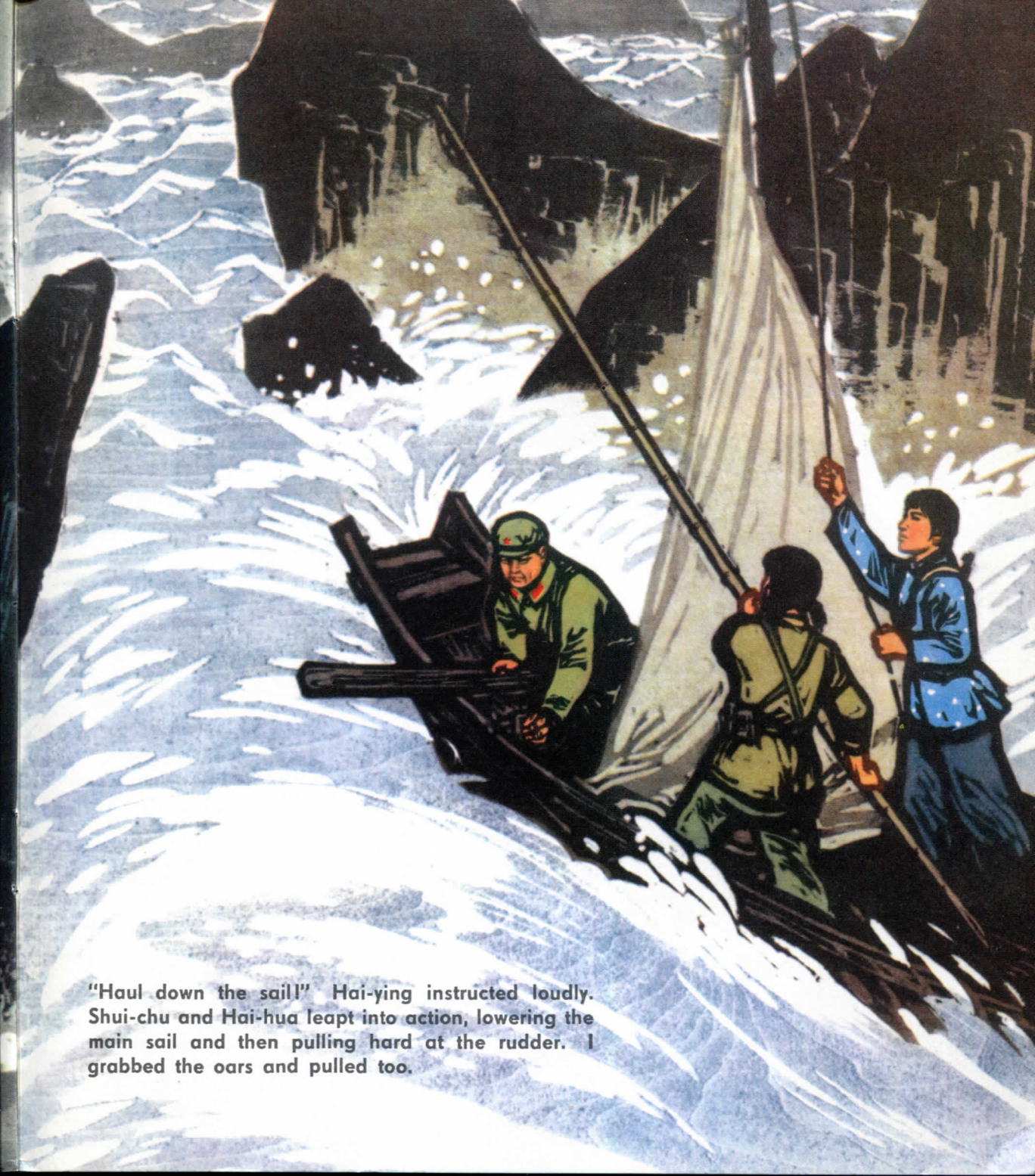
As Shui-chu and Hai-hua took aim with their rifles, I said apologetically to Hai-ying, "Doesn't ferrying me across interfere with your militia drill?" Hai-ying shook her head and said it didn't at all, that their instructor had told them that sea-borne militia must practise in wind and waves!

Just then there was the sudden burst of gunfire from the direction of Tiger Head Reef and Hai-ying shouted, "Comrades, prepare to fight! Change course. Steer along Tiger Head Reef and see what the enemy's up to!"

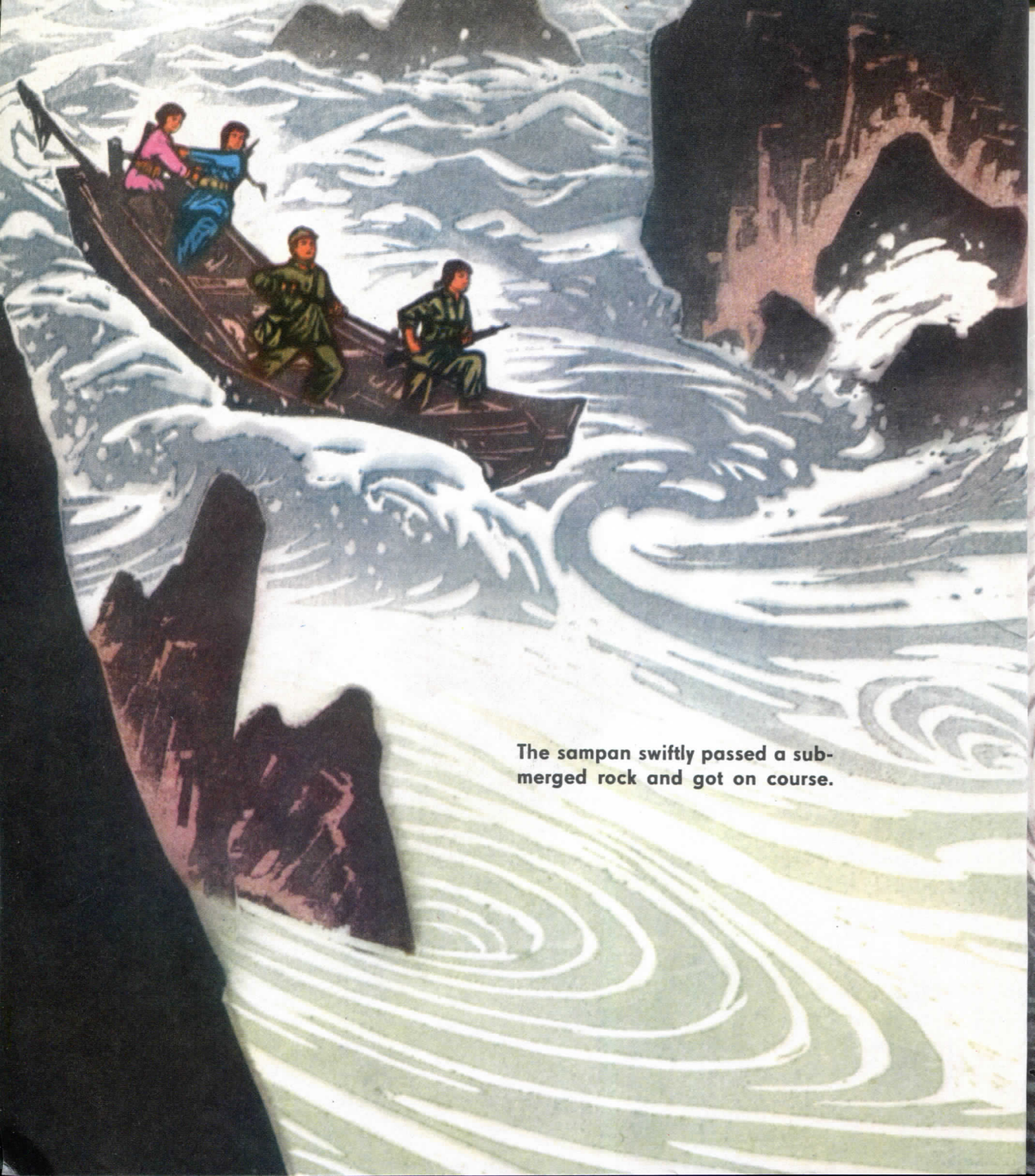




Hai-ying took hold of the rudder, turning the sampan sharply towards Tiger Head Reef. Half an hour later, we saw jagged reefs right in front of us, like tigers' fangs.



"Haul down the sail!" Hai-ying instructed loudly. Shui-chu and Hai-hua leapt into action, lowering the main sail and then pulling hard at the rudder. I grabbed the oars and pulled too.

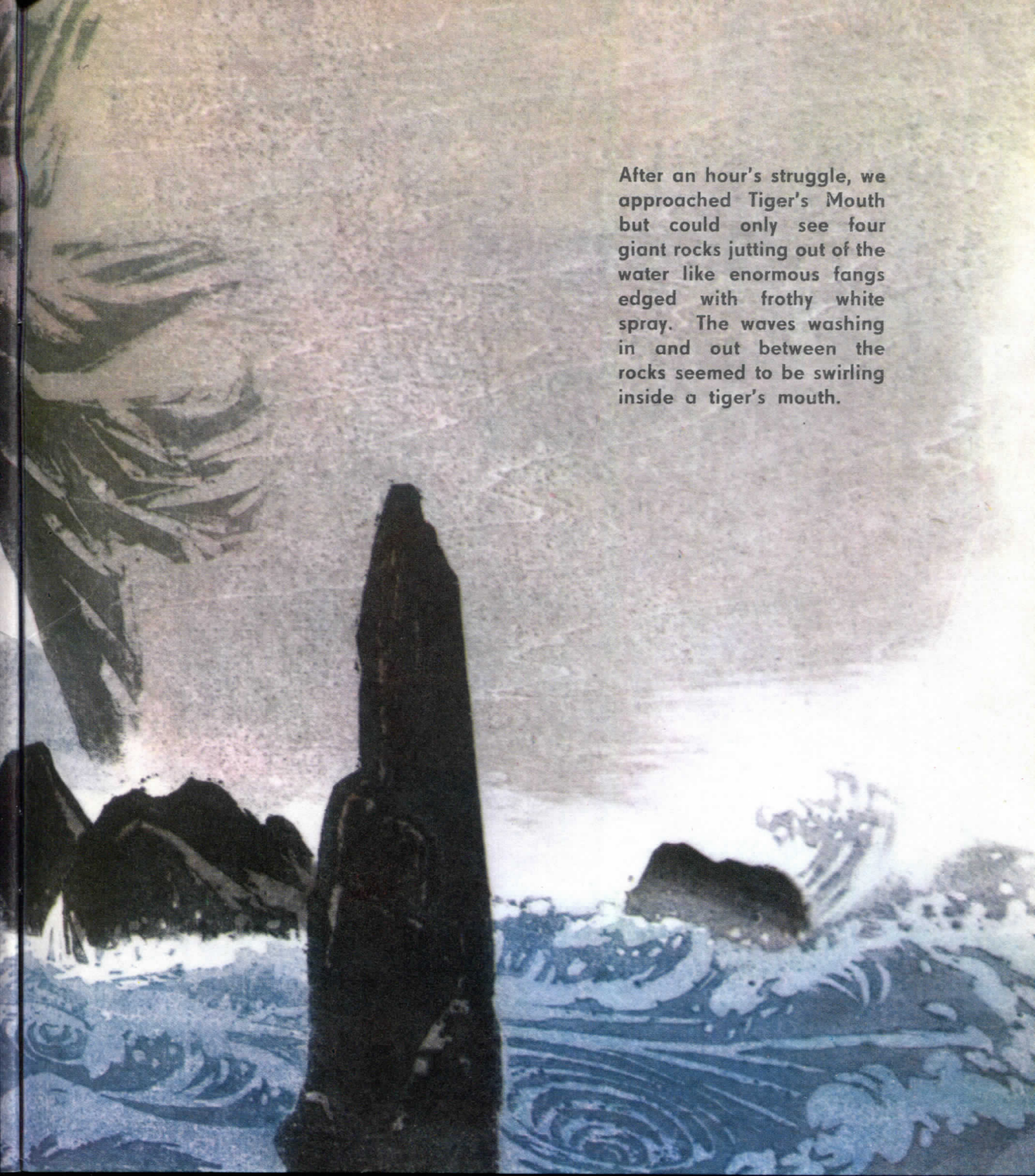


The sampan swiftly passed a submerged rock and got on course.

"Look!" Shui-chu pointed to the outline of a figure in the surf at Tiger's Mouth. Hai-hua took aim with her rifle but Hai-ying hastened to stop her. "Don't get excited, we'll take 'em alive!"



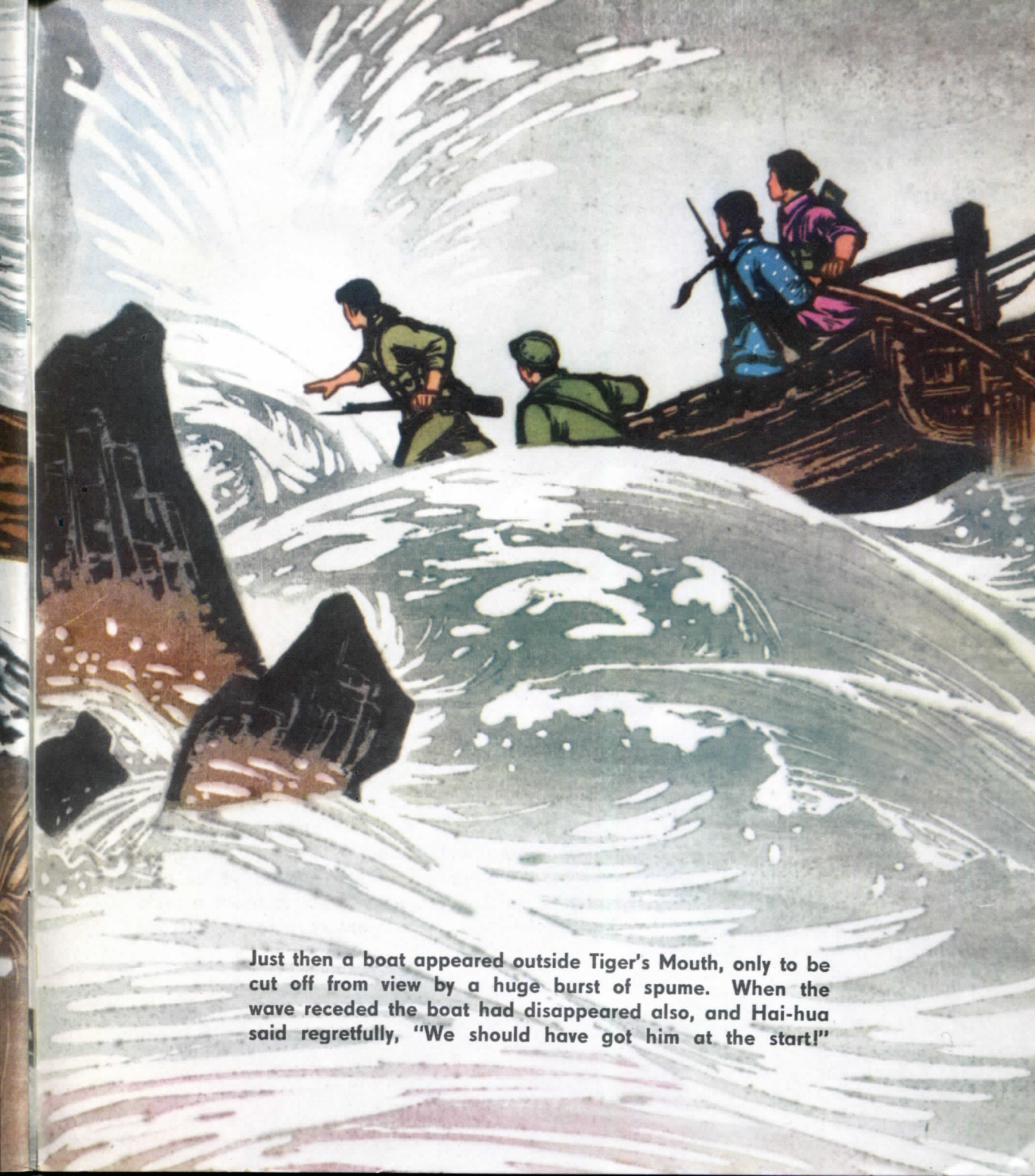




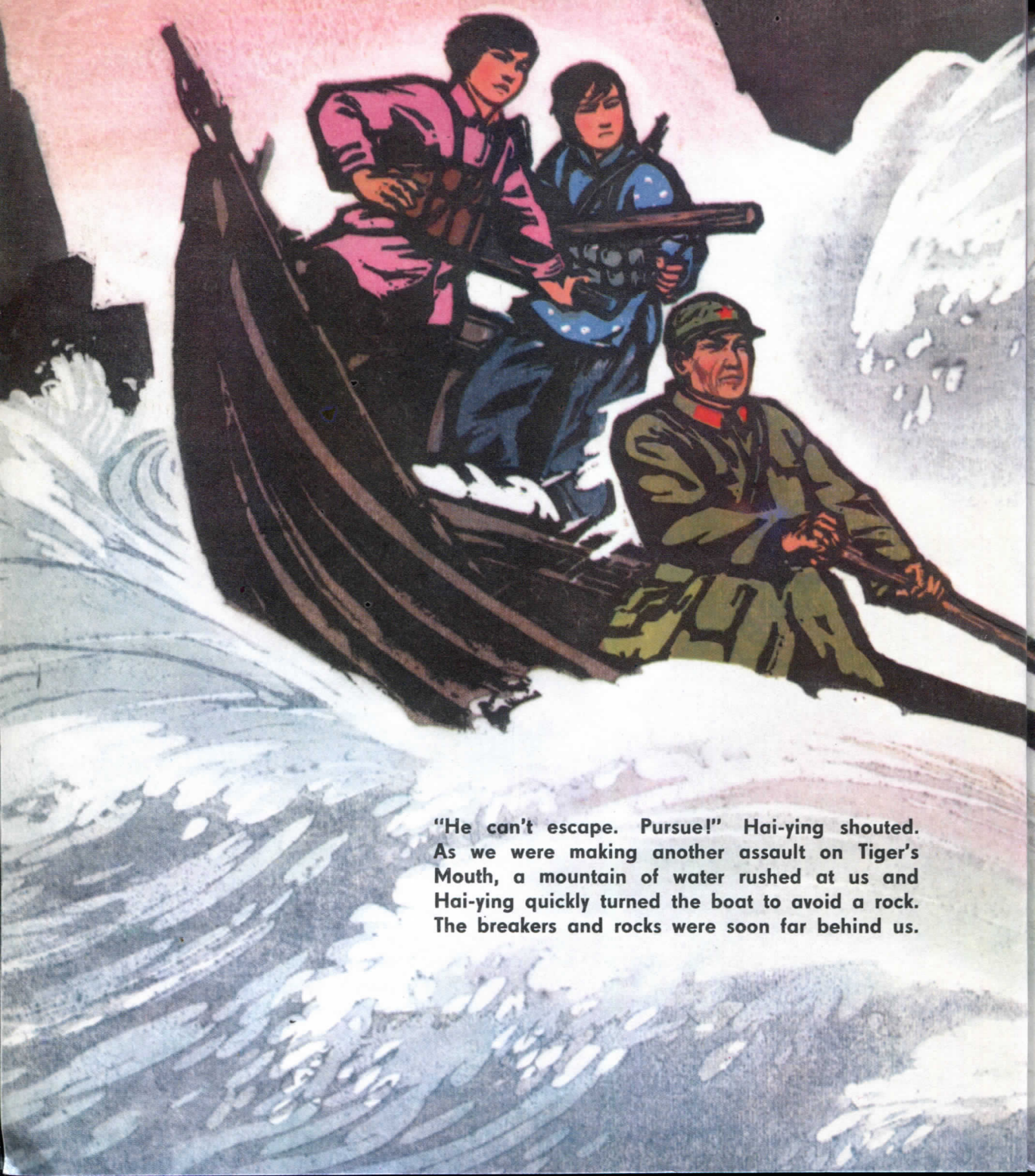
After an hour's struggle, we approached Tiger's Mouth but could only see four giant rocks jutting out of the water like enormous fangs edged with frothy white spray. The waves washing in and out between the rocks seemed to be swirling inside a tiger's mouth.



We all redoubled our efforts, but the wind and tide kept sweeping us back. Hai-ying shouted: "Comrades, no matter how fierce Tiger's Mouth or the storm are, we must get through and not let the enemy escape!"

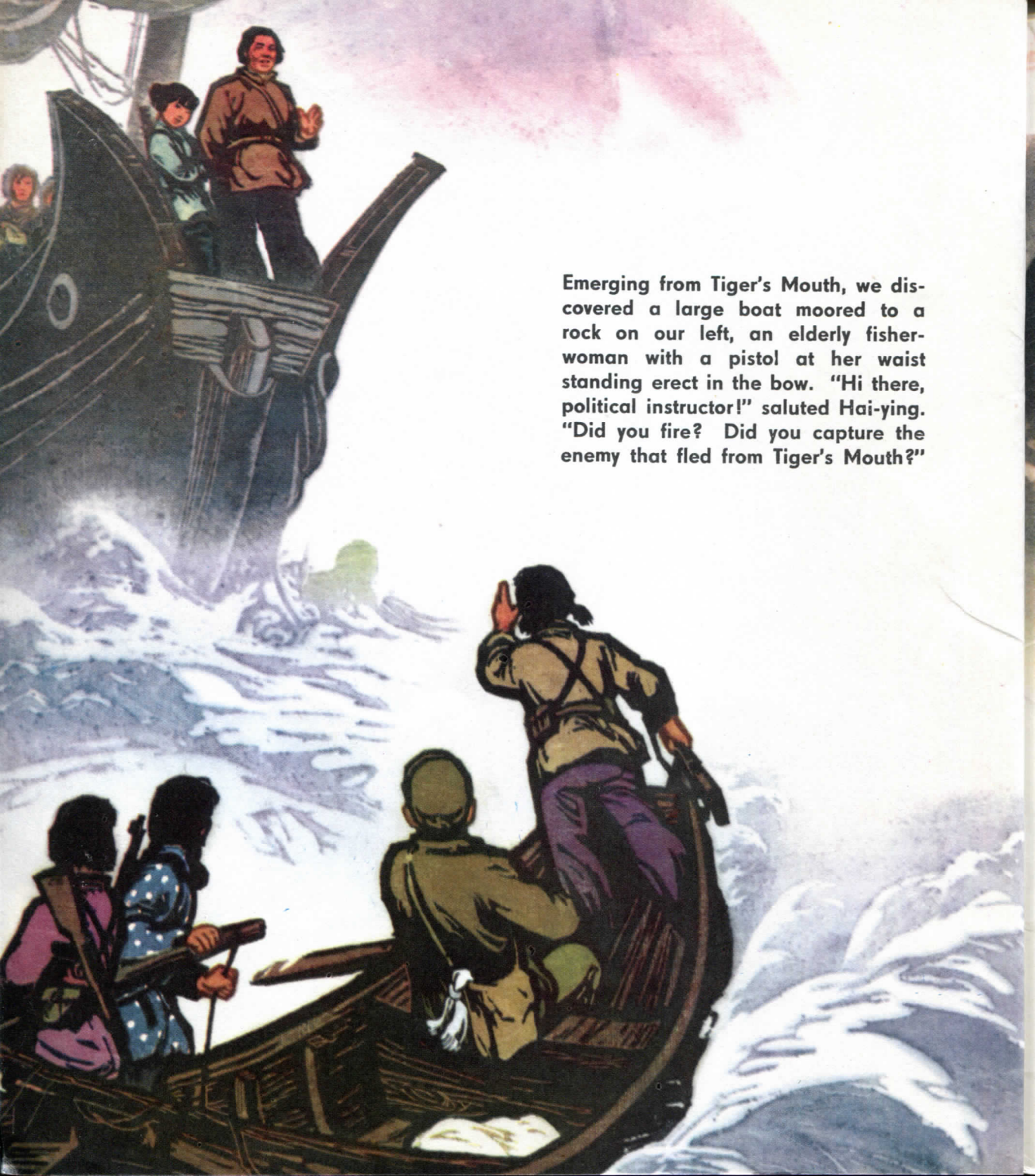


Just then a boat appeared outside Tiger's Mouth, only to be cut off from view by a huge burst of spume. When the wave receded the boat had disappeared also, and Hai-hua said regretfully, "We should have got him at the start!"



"He can't escape. Pursue!" Hai-ying shouted. As we were making another assault on Tiger's Mouth, a mountain of water rushed at us and Hai-ying quickly turned the boat to avoid a rock. The breakers and rocks were soon far behind us.

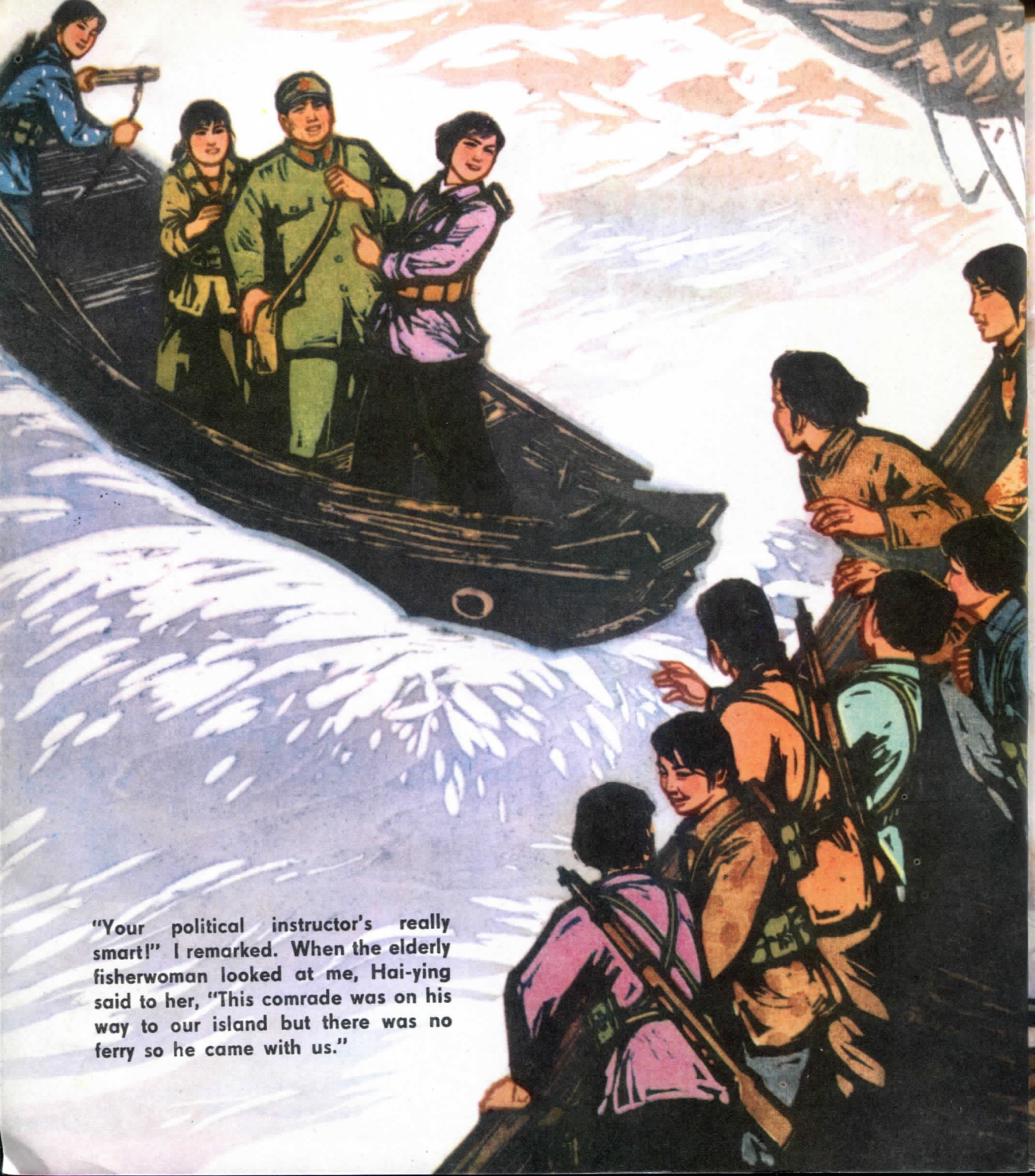




Emerging from Tiger's Mouth, we discovered a large boat moored to a rock on our left, an elderly fisherwoman with a pistol at her waist standing erect in the bow. "Hi there, political instructor!" saluted Hai-ying. "Did you fire? Did you capture the enemy that fled from Tiger's Mouth?"



"We got 'im. Here!" The girls on the large boat laughed. Then one of them pulled a rope from the sea at the end of which was a dummy for target practice. So, the political instructor was using this to test Hai-ying and the others!



"Your political instructor's really smart!" I remarked. When the elderly fisherwoman looked at me, Hai-ying said to her, "This comrade was on his way to our island but there was no ferry so he came with us."

The elderly fisherwoman and I exclaimed almost at the same time, then she stepped into our boat and gripped both my hands. Why, this resourceful political instructor of the women's sea-borne militia was Ah-chu! She seemed even more vigorous than twenty years before!



Ah-chu happily pointed to Hai-ying and asked me if I knew her. "She's the baby I carried on my back. See how she's grown up!" I commented that she certainly had, and so had all the women of these sea islands. When I asked if Uncle Ming-hai was still alive and well, she told me he was going on seventy and could still sail a boat to the open sea.





The wind blew harder and the waves rolled higher. Both craft hoisted sail and, riding with the wind like two stormy petrels, flew towards Langkangyu. The morning sunlight pierced the heavy clouds and tinged the whole eastern sea and the militia women in crimson.





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