The Threshing Machine

by Alai

An engineer came down from the prefecture the year the hydroelectric station was built. Soon, he had recruited young people in the village who were fond of newfangled things. He kept them busy on the threshing floor, and he predicted that come harvest time, it would no longer be necessary for so many people to keep beating the grain, back and forth and up and down, over and over again.

They dug two deep pits in the perfectly level threshing floor, and then one day, cement appeared in the village... No, cement had already appeared when they were fixing up the hydroelectric station. The villagers already knew that the arrival of this special kind of mud meant that electric machines were soon to follow. In its invisibility, electricity was really an amazing thing. You flipped a little switch on, and the current went flying up a wire. It could dash into a light and make it shine, or into another machine and make it run. You flipped the switch off, and the current immediately withdrew back into the Mother Machine. Yes, that's what the villagers called the generator: the Mother Machine. She let the swift current of the river swirl around inside her, turning it into an electric current. Behold, when the turbine whirled and the machine started to hum, if you didn't raise the switch and release the current so it could flow up the wire all the way to the village to make lamps shine, loudspeakers blare, and other machines whirl, well, then that machine would behave just like a mother cow bursting with an inexhaustible flow of milk; it would start screeching and shaking all over. It might even get mad, so mad it could tear itself away from its firm cement base. A milk cow is restrained with a rope while the machine was fastened with metal screws. A cow could never break its rope, but an angry machine might snap its iron screws and wreak terrible havoc. When the station was first finished, the men in the village, pipes dangling from their mouths, tried to get a feel for "the machine's temperament" by observing it as its workings whirred round and round. As the needles on instrument panel meters went higher and higher, the tinted electric bulbs inside the shed became brighter and brighter. Then the operator, who'd received half a year's training in the prefecture, put on his white gloves, clutched the master switch, and said, "Go and see! The electricity's on its way up to the village."

Those villagers scrambled out from the shed, but from where they were standing, they couldn't see the village up on the level ground atop the river bluff. They yelled, "We can't see a thing!"

The operator shouted, "Get ready... NOW!" On the last syllable, he lifted the switch. Then everyone saw in the sky above the village what looked like a flash of lightning – no, it wasn't a lightning flash, which would disappear in an instant and leave a deeper darkness in its wake. The light they saw burst forth like lightning when it first appeared, then it faded slightly, withdrawing and focusing itself until it was like a circle of light above the village. It was brightest at the center, growing dimmer

as it spread out into the night. In the villagers' experience, except for the sun or the moon on occasion, only the great spirits depicted in the temple murals wore such halos. But those halos were drawn by master painters, while electricity had mantled the village in a beautiful nimbus of light.

The villagers wondered at it a goodly while, until the operator lowered the switch and the light vanished. All they could see was a swath of darkness, and this darkness seemed all the deeper for following the light. The villagers poured back into the generator shed. Forced to hold the electric current in, the workings of that machine turned faster and faster, and its steady hum became a shriek. The whole thing started shaking violently, and the needles on the instrument panel meters were jumping frantically. The operator lifted the switch, the current raced out, and once again the village was wrapped in a mantle of glimmering light. Coming down from this climax, the machine gave a long sigh, and its fearful trembling slowly subsided.

Then someone uttered its name, "Mother Machine", which sounded like a scientific name for a machine that made machines.

People were silent for a moment, then they roared with lively, appreciative laughter at the pun. These men kept sitting around while the operator, with a satisfied expression on his face, waxed the belt drive and used an oil can with a long spout to dribble lubricant into some little holes in the machine, until he too had nothing else to do. Someone couldn't help chuckling again at the nickname they'd given the machine, but most people didn't think it was that funny anymore. By that time, that machine was running smoothly, humming along almost drowsily.

The operator said, "Everyone go home and see how your houses are lit up."

They put away their pipes and headed home. They climbed up the bluff, and at the entrance to the village, all they could see was electric light shining in the windows of every home. When they looked up, they couldn't see the radiance above the village anymore since they were directly beneath it. They also encountered some wild animals, foxes and wolves and the like, crouching on the ground. Those curious creatures were entranced; the village had become uncanny on account of this unusual light. And because of this light, the windows of every house danced with moths and mosquitoes, many more than normal. The bats that fed on these little bugs were blinded and disorientated, crashing into one another.

Electricity had given the village an unprecedented radiance, but people were still peeved by the pits that had been dug in the threshing floor for some new machine. But there will always be new things in life, and it's unwise for people to complain about something before they get to know it and see what it can do. This is a question of old versus new ways of thinking. In other words, it's an ideological problem, a huge problem. So the villagers kept their feelings to themselves. The time to get the fine brown clay out from its appointed

place and hammer the threshing floor until it was mirror-flat came and went, but nobody said a thing. It was the most wonderful time of the year in a farming village. The fields had been fertilized and weeded for the last time. The wheat and barley had flowered and started to ripen. Now the ears of grain, heavy and full, were swaying in the breeze. The fields were deep, viscous lakes, with sunlight dancing on their satiny surfaces. Since time immemorial, people had fixed the fences in the month of May; come August, when the autumn wind drew nigh, they would repair the threshing floor with brown clay so fine that it could be used to fire ceramic vases; and in October they would harvest the grain, dry it on tall racks, toss it down, and lay it out on the perfectly level threshing floor. The rising sun would beat down, and the hay on the threshing floor would whisper and permeate the air with its fragrance. Then men and women would line up facing one another and start swinging their flails to the rhythm of a threshing song:

Behold the pretty beak of that peacock by the stream!
Pa! Pa Pa!
Its gorgeous painted feathers are glazèd, they seem!
Pa! Pa Pa!

Flails are visible, and so are peacocks. But now something invisible, electricity, had come into being. The water turned the massive turbine, the spinning turbine made the "Mother Machine" hum – and voila! – electricity appeared. Electricity not only made lamps shine and loudspeakers boom in the village, but could also summon a labor saving appliance that meant that people would no longer have to go up and down, back and forth, over and over again, beating the hay on the threshing floor. Several huge crates covered with waterproof canvas had been carried to the threshing floor. To the side, the two pits, dug deep, now had steel bars sticking up. The engineer directed people to pour pre-mixed cement into the pits to lay a solid foundation for the new machine.

Once the base had been poured, the engineer went back to the prefecture to take a break. People were desperate to know what the machine looked like, but it had been placed on the threshing floor under a protective canvas covering, and there were militiamen guarding it day and night. During the day it was okay – the militiamen could do some work around the threshing floor as long as they made sure no one stopped and loitered. But at night it was an entirely different situation. Pairs of militiamen had to patrol the machine with loaded rifles, bayonets bared "in order to prevent overt or covert class enemies from interfering with agricultural mechanization." Of course, the class enemies didn't have the guts to appear. But curious kids and blossoming maidens did, and they were always hanging around in the evening hours. Not until the sickles were brought out for the harvest did the engineer reappear to install the machine. The first day, he opened those wooden crates. Just like everything from the city, the steel components inside were slathered with a thick layer of grease. The engineer directed his

handpicked assistants to wash the grease off with gasoline. They waited until the second day before mounting the machine on its cement base. On the third day, the engineer had the generator operator bring over a dedicated electrical line. On the fourth day, the engineer "took a break", during which he enjoyed a nice fat lamb, freshly slaughtered by the production team. On the fifth day, he connected the wire to the machine with his own two hands, and once the switch on the machine had been lifted, it started running. Covered in iron teeth, a cylinder was spinning restlessly under a metal cover. Because there was no grain for it to process, the cover began vibrating so much it seemed ready to fly off, and the fine brown dust from the threshing floor went flying. The engineer lowered the switch, but the cylinder kept rotating for quite a while before reluctantly coming to a rest.

The engineer gave all the screws a final tightening with a wrench, and had everyone form a line from the pile of hay by the drying racks to the machine. This time, he stood to one side, nodded, and directed the villagers, "Begin."

This time, it was his assistant who lifted the switch, and as the machine started to run, sheaves of grain were handed down the line and into the engineer's hands. He fed a sheaf of grain into the maw, and fine hay started flying out the other side onto a metal sieve. As the hay was pushed along, the golden grains of wheat fell through the gaps in the sieve into a long, thin metal collection trough. He fed the machine with over ten sheaves of wheat, and then waved his hand, signaling his assistant to lower the switch. People squeezed forward to see how much grain had been threshed in such a short period of time.

The engineer clapped his hands and said, "See? That's how you do it!"

People continued threshing the grain according to his example.

The engineer warned them, "Be careful! You must never put your hands into the maw of the machine!"

Who knows how many people it would have taken to thresh that grain, dancing their flails over the threshing floor again and again countless times. Once more the people marveled.

"What a machine!"

"Oh, electricity!"

That harvest season, the villagers only needed a little bit of time and energy to do the work that used to take a lot of people a long time. The electric current raced up the electrical cord, a wire wrapped in a rubber casing; all you had to do was lift the switch, and the machine would separate the wheat from the chaff. The villagers used the thresher for two or three years, and people would still marvel at the mystery of electricity and the immense power of the machine. A few more years passed, and many were the times when folks oiled the machine or changed a safety or something. Some folks would notice what a huge racket the machine made and reflect that threshing just wasn't the same as in the olden days, when men and women

would brandish flails and beat the grain, up and down, singing to the slow, regular rhythm of the labor. The cylinder with its metal teeth roared under its cover, and the sound of grain being separated from stalk and husk stifled any desire people might have had to sing.

With a deafening voice and immense strength, the machine cultivated an image of overwhelming might.

To feed the machine's voracious appetite, people rushed around as if they themselves were running on electricity; if they slacked off even just a little, the serrated cylinder would rev up and the machine would start snarling, as if it were going to snap its screws and leap away from its cement base. The only way they could get a bit of rest was to lower the switch and let the machine power down. Actually, people couldn't turn the machine off whenever they felt like it, since once it stopped operating, the pressure of the electric current in the "Mother Machine" would start building up.

So the machine could only be stopped at certain times. When those times came, the harried people could come away and lay their tired bodies down, down in the hay. The hay felt soft and warm beneath them, but the noise of the machine still echoed in their ears. The sunlight poured down upon them as they stared up into the blue. They could see the snowy peaks and the village fields, exhausted and limp after the harvest. The rhythmic cadence and the playful melody of the threshing song echoed faintly in their ears.

One day, three years after the threshing machine came to the village, the people were walking back to work after taking a break in the hay. The machine was already running when, unbelievably, this one guy was overcome with nostalgia for the good old days, and started humming a threshing song:

Behold the pretty beak of that peacock at the shore!
Its plumage shines like a vase on the floor!

Without grain to chew on, the machine began roaring at the guy, but he was still humming. The machine almost went berserk before the guy finally came to his senses. Fumbling around, he managed to feed his hand along with the sheaf of wheat it was holding into the maw of the machine. This fellow immediately fell unconscious.

Translated by Darryl Sterk