# *Wu Zhuoliu (1900–1976)*

## THE DOCTOR'S MOTHER

*Translated by Sylvia Li-chun Lin*

The backyard gate creaked open and out stepped a dignified old lady who seemed accustomed to a comfortable life. Wearing tiny, pointed shoes, she was followed by a young maid carrying a bamboo basket with three kinds of sacrificial meat, gilded paper, and joss sticks.

An old beggar outside the gate craned his neck to see what was going on inside as he waited for the old lady to emerge. He knew she went to the temple to burn incense on the fifteenth day of each month. But, fearful that his fellow beggars might get wind of it, he took great care to conceal the old lady's monthly visits. Each fifteenth day of the month, he stole over to wait by the back gate, something he had done unfailingly for a decade.

When he spotted the old lady, he went up and greeted her respectfully, as if meeting a real live fairy. White-haired, scruffy, he wore tattered and patched clothes, but his staff had a glossy sheen. As he walked up to the old lady, he pined sadly: "Mrs. Doctor, bestow mercy and compassion!"

Aroused by a sense of pity, the doctor's mother quickly handed the beggar's rice sack to the maid with an order, "Go get two pecks of rice."

But the maid hesitated, which made the doctor's mother anxious. She asked sharply: "What are you afraid of? Xinfa is my son, isn't he? You needn't fear him over such trivial matters. Go get it quickly."

"The mistress is right, but I'm such a coward. I'm frightened out of my wits whenever I see the young master."



Having said her piece, the maid crept back into the kitchen, where she looked to her left and right to make sure no one was around before quickly opening the rice bin and measuring the right amount into the beggar's sack. She then fled the kitchen in a panic; going up to the old lady, she patted herself on the chest, finally calming down. The kitchen was next to Qian Xinfa's room, and he would have given her a good dressing-down had he spotted her measuring out rice. He was ruthless in situations like this, unconcerned about how anyone else might feel.

On one occasion, the maid was measuring rice when Qian Xinfa stormed in. Seized by rage, he bellowed at her: "So you're the culprit! How would the beggar get any rice if you didn't give it to him? If the old mistress says one peck, all you need to give him is one liter."

The maid had no choice but to do as he said and measure out a liter. When the doctor's mother heard why she had done that, she flew into a rage.

"That's ridiculous!"

Grabbing the beggar's staff, she rushed into the house, filled with anger. Qian Xinfa, who had yet to learn that his mother was furious, kept on with his harangue.

"This is ridiculous! A beggar usually merits a cup of rice at most. Who ever heard of giving them a peck or two?"

That set his mother off and, without listening to any more, she struck him with the beggar's staff.

"Xinfa! You received more than three thousand bushels of grain from your tenant farmers, but you're unwilling to give away a single peck. You despise the poor, but you go through all sorts of trouble when a prefectural magistrate or section head drops in. Preparing meat and spirits, you spare nothing to entertain them. You've become a lackey, no longer a man."

As she railed against her son, she raised the staff to strike him again. Startled, everyone in the house begged the old lady to calm down, until she was finally appeased. Angry but not willing to talk back to her, Qian Xinfa could only blame the maid for causing him all this trouble. The poor maid didn't dare disobey the old lady but found it hard to disregard the young master's order. So each month, when the fifteenth arrived, she was invariably seized by a minor panic, as she hurriedly measured out rice for the beggar.

Later, as wartime conditions worsened, food rationing, including rice, took effect. The doctor's mother was forced to stop giving rice and replace it with money. Finally, the maid's monthly dilemma was resolved.

A public health physician on K Street, Qian Xinfa wore his uniform wherever he went, when he was traveling, for major or minor public events, funerals, or house calls. No one in the neighborhood had ever seen him in civilian clothes. His uniform was always neatly pressed, as if he were an official, and he wore it as a sign of his prestige. His medical skills, on the other hand, were mediocre, certainly nothing special, although his name was known far and

wide. How had that happened? Because of his ability to trick the honest, simple commoners into believing that his friendliness and kindness toward his patient was genuine. Incapable of seeing the real person, they mistook him for a decent doctor. And so his reputation spread by word of mouth and he grew wealthy. In a mere fourteen or fifteen years, he had accrued more than three thousand bushels of annual grain revenue. Qian Xinfa came from a poor family. During his student days, his uniform had been mended over and over, ridiculed by his classmates as a judo uniform. Patch was sewn over patch until the uniform was so thick it truly did look like a judo uniform. The humiliation angered him beyond words, but he could do nothing but allow himself to be a laughingstock. His father worked hard by day and his mother wove hats by night to pay his tuition and keep him in school. After struggling for five years he finally graduated and married a woman from a wealthy family; her brothers helped him set up a private clinic. For the opening ceremony, his brothers-in-law also helped him by inviting officials, local gentry, merchants, and other powerful dignitaries, who came together for a grand celebration to promote his medical skills. The celebratory gathering helped him garner goodwill from the locals, an unexpected positive result. So he was even more solicitous; his attention to his patients went beyond the usual businesslike manner of other doctors in private practice. He inquired after the patients in great detail and chatted easily with them about things that had nothing to do with their illnesses; but listening to him, the patients were taken by his kind words. When a farmer came, he asked about work in the field; with a merchant, he discussed business. If it was a woman, he said things she wanted to hear.

"Your little gentleman here has such an elegant, refined look, he'll surely be an official when he grows up."

Nothing but flattery.

Sometimes he'd tell a mother sympathetically, "This is a tough illness that could lead to pneumonia. I'd recommend an injection, but it would be quite expensive. What is your opinion, Madam?"

This sweet consultative tone always worked with the country folk, who worried about the severity of their children's illnesses and were won over by his honeyed, soothing words; whatever the expense, they willingly emptied their pockets for the injections.

In addition to this sort of self-promotion, Qian Xinfa always nodded and bowed to people, children as well as adults, when he was on his house calls. If he took a sedan-chair, he climbed down to walk when they reached a steep incline, which won the approval of sedan-chair carriers and the country folk.

During his leisure time at home, he would utilize visiting fortune-tellers and charity workers who came to spread the word. And his self-promotion techniques did not stop here, but even included taking his physician's satchel with him when he was away on personal business. As a result, his prescriptions were in constant demand; his boiled water sold especially well.



What did Qian Xinfa care about most? The balance in his bankbook. His savings went from one thousand to two thousand, then, almost imperceptibly, to three thousand. As the balance increased daily, so did his happiness. He counted the days until his savings would reach ten thousand. After settling on a date, he redoubled his efforts to get patients to opt for injections. Once he reached his goal of ten thousand yen, he bought a plot of land through a middleman. And so it went, year after year, and, before anyone realized it, he had become one of the wealthiest men in the area.

As someone who had gone through tough times as a youngster, Qian Xinfa developed a pathological love for money, which went far beyond the virtue of economizing. His meddling with his mother's rice-giving was a manifestation of his obsession over money. But he was generous in other regards. Such as? Well, he could part with tens of thousands of yen without blinking an eye for matters concerning his reputation and status. These expenditures were made for the sake of his business, a selfish design, pure and simple. But he was praised nonetheless and, gradually, he became a powerful local magnate who assumed most of the local honorary positions, including public health physician, chairman of the Customs Rectification Society, a member of the Coordination Council, and chairman of the local Elders Society. His name appeared on every list of honorary official titles. As a result, he became a leading force on K Street; always the first to follow orders, he gained the trust of the local government, leading the way in implementing the policy of Japanese-only at home and adopting a Japanese name.

But he could never get "the doctor's mother" to follow his lead, no matter how hard he tried.

"Only those who understand and follow the trends can reach the top. Under current circumstances, Mother, why won't you learn to speak Japanese?"

"..."

"Why don't I get Jinying to teach you?"

"That's ridiculous. How can a daughter-in-law teach her mother-in-law?"

"If you don't want your daughter-in-law to teach you, Mother, I can ask Mr. Chen at the school to be your tutor."

"That's even more ridiculous! Since I'm much older than you, you needn't worry. I'm not long for this world and will soon stop being a bother to you."

Left with no recourse, Qian Xinfa let the matter drop so as not to cause himself any more trouble.

But that was not his only problem. Whenever people came to visit, his mother insisted upon meeting the guests in the living room. Dressed in traditional Taiwanese clothes, she spoke Taiwanese in a loud, shrill voice, like someone just in from the countryside. She never changed her style, even if it was the prefectural magistrate or the head of the neighborhood. When he watched the way she greeted these officials, Qian Xinfa prayed that she would stop talking and go quickly to her room. But unresponsive to his prayers, she would continue

her loud conversation in Taiwanese with the guests. Outraged beyond words, he could only suffer in silence. The Qians were a Japanese-only household, and no one was supposed to use Taiwanese. But the doctor's mother did not understand Japanese and had no one to talk to at home, so she took great pleasure in chatting with visitors in the living room. So as not to slight her, the Taiwanese guests spoke with her in Taiwanese, which so delighted her that she was like a child. Japanese visitors were also courteous to the doctor's mother, who, although she did not understand what they said, smiled and returned the courtesy in Taiwanese. Qian Xinfa was pained by the sight of his mother socializing with guests; it upset him terribly, for he was afraid of losing his social status and worried that the officials would think lightly of him. He was also upset by his mother's choice of Taiwanese clothes.

One day Qian Xinfa said to her in front of a guest, "Mother, I have a visitor. Hurry and go inside." Incensed, she yelled back, "What nonsense is this? You have a visitor. You have a visitor. You treat me like a thorn in your side. Go back inside. Where do you expect me to go? Isn't this my house?"

Her scolding so shamed him that his face throbbed redly and had there been a hole nearby, he would have crawled into it. From then on Qian Xinfa no longer dared to make an issue of his mother's presence in the living room. But he remained troubled by the fear that he would lose face and his status in society because of her.

When the Japanese government began promoting the use of Japanese at home, Qian Xinfa tried to deceive himself as well as others and lied to the clerk that his mother knew enough Japanese to socialize, so they passed muster. His family was now classified as a Japanese-only family, which made him feel tremendous pride. He quickly remodeled the house in the Japanese style; the new tatami mats and the sliding paper doors let in so much light that he was praised by those who saw the house. But barely a week had passed before the doctor's mother grew upset over the new Japanese lifestyle. She disliked the miso soup they had for breakfast, forcing herself to swallow it, and she could not tolerate the pain of sitting cross-legged on the Japanese straw mat. At mealtimes she had to bend her stiff legs to sit on the tatami, and the sheer agony and numbness after less than ten minutes made it impossible for her to force anything down her throat; with numbness, she could barely try to stand up.

The doctor's mother was in the habit of taking afternoon naps. But hanging a large mosquito net in a Japanese-style house was difficult, and she had to do it once at midday and again at night, which upset her so much that she nearly burst with anger. This went on until dinner on the ninth day, when the excellent food prolonged mealtime so long that even a massage could not bring circulation back to her feet. Left with no alternative, Qian Xinfa returned the dining room and his mother's room to their original style. He was unhappy, but could do nothing but sigh. Thoughts of his mother always brought with them dark clouds. Hoping to fully implement his ideas, he inevitably ran up against his



mother, who refused to budge no matter how sad or put upon he looked. If he insisted on doing things his way, he would be scolded, even beaten, by his mother. Not being able to enlighten her meant not being able to carry out his ideas. But he was not prepared to give up; rather, he did everything possible to keep from lagging behind others. He was among the first to change his name into Japanese. When the Japanese government allowed the Taiwanese to use Japanese names, he eagerly changed his to Kanai Shinsuke and immediately hung a new sign on the door; at the same time, the family began dressing in kimonos. He even discarded his favorite public health physician uniform. Now that he had built a fully Japanese-style house, he was so elated that he wanted to take a picture and asked his mother to put on a kimono for the occasion. But she refused and was finally photographed in her old Taiwanese clothes. The regret Kanai Shinsuke felt was like that of a rock paired with jade on the same shelf, but he dared not say a word, and could only let the anger build up inside. After the pictures were taken, for some unknown reason, the doctor's mother sliced up the kimono prepared for her with a cleaver, shocking those who looked on and assumed that the doctor's mother had gone mad.

"If I kept this thing, I'm afraid someone might put it on me after I die. I could not face our ancestors wearing something like this."

She continued slicing it until it was beyond recognition, and everyone finally understood how she felt; they were touched by her candor.

Only two people in the area responded to the first call to change their names. One was Kanai Shinsuke, the other was Oyama Kinkichi. Oyama was also a man of wealth and power, so the two of them often got together to study styles of Japanese living and embrace the spirit of the Japanese. Oyama did whatever he wanted, since he did not have to worry about parental interference. Observing the speed at which Oyama changed, Kanai grew anxious over the likelihood that he would be left behind, and his thoughts settled on his obstinate mother, which brought him more anguish.

Four or five names appeared on the next government list of name changes, all second-tier families. Kanai Shinsuke frowned when he heard the news; he actually became light-headed, feeling that his self-respect was on the verge of crumbling and his sense of superiority shaken, as if by a strong wind. He quickly phoned his comrade, Oyama Kinkichi, who rushed over to his living room wearing a newly tailored kimono, carrying a persimmon walking stick in hand, and clip-clopping along in a pair of paulownia-wood geta.

"Mr. Oyama, have you read the news?"

"No. Anything interesting today?"

"Singularly outlandish news! Lai Liangma has changed his name. What makes him think he is qualified?"

"Hmph, that's incredible . . . Ah, ah, Xu Faxin, Guan Zhongshan, Lai Liangma . . . scoundrels, all of them. A bunch of monkey-headed, rat-eared creatures who are trying to act human."

Kanai slammed his fist on the table and roared, "They can try all they want, but at home they don't speak only Japanese, they don't have tatami, they don't even bathe in an ofuro."

"Monkeys like them only know to ape humans. They're nothing but phonies."

"Precisely!"

"What was the government thinking?"

They talked on, filled with indignation, and then fell into a prolonged, pained silence. Kanai could do nothing but smoke, releasing sighs with the cigarette smoke. Oyama fidgeted with his walking stick and said in anguished self-mockery, "Let them be." He sighed and changed the subject.

"I bought a new tea chest, made solely from black sandal-wood. I'll bet rural Japanese don't have anything like it."

"I'd like to see it one of these days. I bought a koto, made from a five- or six-hundred-year-old paulownia tree. Guess how much it cost? Twelve hundred."

When he heard this, Oyama went up to look at the koto in the tokonoma, the living room alcove, and plucked a note.

When the current prefectural magistrate was replaced, the new man came to inspect the area. The neighborhood head was away, so his "assistant" gave a report on the area to the new magistrate. After the ceremony, the new magistrate met with the local gentry, including Kanai. Dressed in a new kimono of Oshima pongee, he looked so impressive that no one could tell he was Taiwanese. The new magistrate was quite a talker and chatted freely with them. When the neighborhood assistant introduced the local gentry individually, he unintentionally revealed Kanai Shinsuke's old name. Shinsuke's face throbbed redly. "What a terrible assistant!" he thought to himself. His disgust raged like a stormy sea, but not a single member of the gentry realized what was going through his mind, and it was all he could do to suppress his emotions. Then it occurred to him that he ought to laugh it off, since professionally it would not be to his advantage to argue with the assistant. Having made up his mind, he smiled and feigned a modest attitude as he continued the conversation. The assistant mentioned Kanai's good points, but it was too late to dispel the humiliation the assistant had caused him.

He was even more upset when the third list of name changes was made public. On it were many people, all with lowly backgrounds. He was too incensed for words, like a mute who cannot express his anguish. Shortly after that, the fourth list was published. Too indignant to sit or to stand, he walked out of the house and went straight to Oyama's house. "Oyama kun," he blurted out, "this is absolutely unheard of. I've never seen the likes of it. Even a barber has changed his name." After reading the article in the newspaper Kanai had brought with him, Oyama was speechless. Finally he released a loud sigh. Short-tempered and impatient, Kanai blurted out in Taiwanese, "Even the lowest of the low are changing their names." He believed that changing one's name was a great honor for a Taiwanese, for his family was now on a par with the Japanese.



Once a Taiwanese changed his name, he was just like the Japanese. But now that even barbers, shoe repairmen, and flute entertainers were changing their names, all his efforts vanished like bubbles; he could feel his status sliding into quicksand, with no hope of pulling himself out.

He agonized over this for a long moment before finally saying to Oyama in despair, "Things are going downhill. All the way down. You can't count on anything. If I'd known this earlier . . . " Without realizing it, he had uttered the truth. It felt to him much the same as if a beggar in rags had stormed into a party thrown by the gentry class.

One day at the local elementary school, Kanai Ryokichi and Ishida Saburo were walking so fast they bumped into each other. Ryokichi balled up his fist and slugged Saburo.

"Uppity dumbbell!" Saburo growled. "My family's changed our name too. I'm not afraid of you." He hit back.

"Your name is phony," Ryokichi replied.

Saburo refused to back down. "Yours is the real phony."

They went at each other in a free-for-all.

Since Saburo was stronger, Ryokichi was quickly pinned to the ground, with Saburo straddling him as he punched nonstop. Just then a sixth-grader walked up and shouted, "No fighting at school." The sixth-grader pushed Saburo off Ryokichi, who was by then sobbing. "Bakayaro!" he cursed. "You changed your name without owning an ofuro, so you're a real phony."

"If you're man enough, let's have it."

Their eyes bulging, the two of them exchanged insults. They would have been fighting again if the sixth-grader hadn't already stopped them. Ryokichi, unable to vent his anger, walked off shouting, "My father said a barber belongs to the lowest of the low. You're lowlife, lowly lowlife. Can't get any lower."

Kanai Ryokichi was the son of a public health physician, while Ishida Saburo's father ran a barbershop. They were third-graders at the same school. A few days after the incident, the barber's wife paid a secret visit to the doctor's mother. "Mistress, at school your little grandson calls others 'lowly lowlifes' and says they are phony. My little one feels too ashamed to show his face. Would you please talk to the doctor about this?"

Having softly pleaded with the doctor's mother, the barber's wife left.

After dinner, Kanai Shinsuke's family gathered round him and his wife, as usual, to enjoy each other's company. His oldest son, his daughter, along with his wife, the nurse, and the pharmacist, all took this opportunity to relax. At such times, Kanai Shinsuke proudly lectured them on the spirit of the Japanese: how they washed their faces, drank their tea, walked, and socialized. He then gave meticulous demonstrations to impress upon them what it meant to be Japanese. After that, his wife elaborated upon the beauty of the koto and the difficulty of ikebana, taking the opportunity to boast of her own accomplishments. The pharmacist, a movie fan, often spoke of his love of movies, while Kanai's eldest son, a college graduate who knew a bit of English, often

contributed a few unintelligible phrases to the conversation. After everyone else had spoken, his daughter would pick up the koto and send tinkling melodies throughout the house. In the end they'd join in a chorus of Japanese songs, with the nurse singing louder and clearer than anyone else. That's how it went, night after night, without fail.

Only the doctor's mother refused to participate in the entertainment. After dinner, she would go alone to her room, where the mosquitoes would sometimes bite her feet. In the winter, she would sit up in bed against the headboard with a blanket over her legs to stay warm, since there was no brazier in her room. Occasionally she would look in on the entertainment room, but since they were all speaking Japanese, which she could not understand, she found them uninteresting. All she heard was a loud clamor and she had no idea what they were doing—which was why she went to her room after dinner. But not on the night after the visit from the barber's wife. Once everyone had settled in, she roared, "Xinfa, why did you teach Liangji [Ryokichi] to call the barber's family 'lowlifes'?"

Shinsuke hemmed and hawed, making excuses and trying to explain, but his mother shook her head to show she did not believe him, pointing out the fight Ryokichi had had at school as proof. When she'd scolded him enough, she explained some things to him: "You have forgotten your past. Your father was a laborer and a sedan-chair bearer. If you call a barber a lowlife, what would you call a sedan-chair bearer?"

Her forceful words seemed to have an effect on Shinsuke, who murmured his agreement.

But a few days later, he was once again acting like a puppet, manipulated by his old feelings.

On the morning of the fifteenth day, the doctor's mother coughed softly as she made her way to burn incense at the temple. The old beggar was waiting at the back gate, as always, and was shocked when he saw her. Alarmed, he said, "Mistress, you don't look so good. Are you not feeling well?"

Showing no concern, the doctor's mother replied lightly, "It's just old age."

She handed the beggar some money.

The next day she felt indisposed, and then she fell ill. Her condition worsened by the day and, although she felt a little better some of the time, the medicine she was taking could not cure her completely.

The old beggar, who knew nothing of her illness, came to wait by the back gate on the fifteenth of the following month, but no one came out. He grew increasingly anxious as he waited; he tried to look inside, but could not get a sense of what was wrong. It was nearly noon when the maid emerged.

"The doctor's mother isn't feeling well, and just now remembered that today is the fifteenth. She told me to bring this for you."

She turned to leave as soon she'd handed the beggar twenty yen. But when he saw that it was so much more than the usual five yen, he sensed that the



doctor's mother was not doing well at all. He pleaded with the maid to let him see the old lady. Feeling sorry for him, the maid sneaked him inside, where he stood respectfully by the head of the bed. When the doctor's mother saw him, she struggled to prop her frail body up into a sitting position.

"I didn't think we'd see each other again. I'm glad you came. Really glad."

She happily invited the beggar to sit. But, conscious of his tattered clothes, the beggar did not want to sit on the glossy, clean stool. He declined several times, but after the doctor's mother's repeated invitations, he had no choice. That put her at ease and she began to chat with him. It was as if she had found someone who truly understood her, and she forgot her troubles. Finally, she said, "Old Brother, I won't be in this world much longer. My only wish is to enjoy one more of those crullers. Then I can die in peace."

Recalling the aroma of the crullers that she had eaten during the hard times, she wanted to taste one once more. But Shinsuke would not buy one, because his was a Japanese-only family that ate miso soup, not crullers.

The next day the beggar bought some crullers and sneaked them into the house. The doctor's mother happily bit into one and chewed it with great pleasure, praising its taste over and over.

"Old Brother, you know that we were once very poor. My husband did manual labor and I wove hats every day till midnight. Sometimes we had nothing to eat but sweet potatoes. But I think I was happier then than now. What's the point of having money? Having a son doesn't guarantee happiness. And a college graduate is useless."

She sighed as she talked, a heartrending sound to the beggar's ears. As the doctor's mother saw the sad second half of her life rushing past her eyes, tears streamed down her face. The beggar tried to comfort her. "Don't be so sad, Mistress. You'll get better."

"Better? No, I won't get better. Besides, what's the point of getting better?"

She muttered to herself as she took out some money from under her pillow for the beggar. After he left, she sent for Shinsuke to instruct him about her funeral.

"I don't know Japanese, so do not hire Japanese monks."

She continued with detailed instructions.

Her condition turned critical on the third day and then she died. But as Shinsuke was the chairman of the Customs Rectification Society, he did not follow her instructions. Instead of hiring Taiwanese monks, he held a Japanese-style funeral. Many people came to pay their respects, including the prefectural magistrate and the neighborhood head; not a single one of the area's powerful individuals was missing. But in spite of the grand spectacle, no one felt the loss of the doctor's mother, not even Shinsuke himself; for him the funeral was business, pure and simple. And yet, there was one person who was truly grief-stricken—the old beggar. He did not dare to get too close on the day of the funeral; instead he lagged behind and wept at the sight of her coffin. From then

on, he prepared incense and paper money to burn by her grave on the fifteenth of each month. After burning the incense, he watched the swirling smoke and could not hold back his tears. He would sigh and say, "Ai! Old Mistress, now you're just like me."

1945

# PART TWO

## *Fiction, 1949–1976*

# *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*

SECOND EDITION

*Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, editors*

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Columbia anthology of modern Chinese literature / Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, editors. — 2nd ed.
p. cm. — (Modern Asian literature series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-231-13840-6 (cloth: alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-231-13841-3 (pbk.: alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-231-13840-7 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-231-13841-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-231-51100-1 (e-book)
ISBN-10: 0-231-51100-0 (e-book)
1. Chinese literature—20th century—Translations into English.
I. Lau, Joseph S. M., 1934– . II. Goldblatt, Howard, 1939– .

PL2658.E1C64 2006
895.1'08005—dc22

2006019770

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Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
p 10 9 8 7

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