CHINESE LITERATURE

Monthly

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YANG MEI-CHING

The Cloud Maiden

The narrative poem published below is based on a folk legend passed down by word of mouth in the Tali Pai Autonomous *Chou*, Yunnan Province. In about the first century A.D. the Pai people settled down by the mountain lake Erh Hai (*Hai* in Chinese means "sea") near Tali. Like the other nationalities of China, they have a rich store of folk legends, which are full of local colour, being closely connected with their life and immediate surroundings. Every autumn an interesting phenomenon would occur over Erh Hai: First a white cloud appears on a mountain peak near by, then a storm starts and the water is blown until a huge rock in the middle of the lake is revealed. Then the storm subsides. The Pai people call this cloud that heralds a storm the Cloud Maiden and the rock in the lake her husband. With this phenomenon as a symbol they weave a story of enduring love that defies tyranny.

The author, Yang Mei-ching, a collector of folk tales and legends, is at present working in the Tali Pai Autonomous *Chou*.

1

A fair and lovely land is this
    Beneath the azure sky;
The whole year long snow caps Mount Tsang,*
    Waves roll in Lake Erh Hai.**

A fair and lovely land is this,
    A land of dance and song;
The sun comes up above the lake
    And sets behind Mount Tsang.

A fair and lovely land is this
    Where every blossom grows;
Camellias bloom upon the hill
    And by the lake the rose.

2

A dark and evil place is this,
    A palace wrapped in gloom;
For here the king of Nanchao*** dwells,
    And here are death and doom.

A dark and evil place is this,
    A place most dire and drear,
All travellers who pass this way
    Avert their eyes in fear.

* The Tientsang mountains.

** A beautiful mountain lake east of Tali, Yunnan Province.

*** An ancient kingdom in present-day Tali in the province of Yunnan.

A dark and evil place is this,
    Where wretched peasants groan:
Their harvest reaped with toil and sweat
    The king has made his own.

A dark and evil place is this
    Where wicked deeds are done,
And scores of girls are snatched away
    No more to see the sun.

3

Within the palace of Nanchao
    There lives a maiden fair,
And not one beauty in the realm
    Can with this girl compare.

Her lovely eyes and arching brows
    Are like a fountain-head,
And like the buds of early spring
    Her lips so curved and red.

Her black, black hair is like a cloud
    On some sweet summer night,
And like a lotus in the pool
    Her feet that glimmer white.

She pines within the palace now —
No bird that's caged will sing —
Three years she stays a prisoner,
Three years she sees no spring.

She stands upon the tower* now
And gazes at the sky.
"Blow, wind, and bear me far away!"
She murmurs with a sigh.

She stands upon the tower now
And gazes at the lake.
"Sail, boat, and bear me far away,
Or else my heart will break."

She stands upon the tower now,
The peach blooms red below.
"Oh, will there come a day, sweet peach,
When in my heart you grow?"

She stands upon the tower now,
As past the wild geese fly.
"Wild geese, wild geese, you fly in pairs,
But all alone am I!

*The Tower of Five Glories in Tali, which was said to stand originally in the back garden of the palace of Nanchao.

"A warbler's love song to its mate
Is borne upon the breeze;
A butterfly that flits alone
Can whisper to the bees.

"The apricot has blossomed here,
But who can tell its grief?
The palace maiden has no friend
To give her heart relief."

4

Upon the tower the maiden stands
One morning bright and clear,
When sweet and strong a shepherd's song
Rings gaily in her ear.

"Oh, who is singing far away,
His voice so clear and strong?
If he comes by I shall reply
And help to swell his song."

She strains each ear as he draws near
To catch each tuneful sound;
While sharp as pine-needles her eyes
Search all the woods around.

Then on the green and mossy path
A hunter comes in sight;
A hunting spear in his left hand,
A monkey in his right.

Like some bamboo in early spring
This hunter in his might;
And sparkling with the joy of youth
His eyes so large and bright.

The hunter passes by the wall
And sees the maiden fair;
Then loud and clear up floats his song
To linger in the air.

What bud is there that will not bloom?
What bird that will not sing?
The hunter steals her heart away —
How fast that heart takes wing!

5

Nor carp nor swan can carry word
To him so far away;
Each day she stands upon the tower
And gazes down each day.

Below the tower each day he stands
And gazes high above;
He dares not greet the palace maid
Or tell her all his love.

She frets because he will not speak,
She longs his heart to know;
At last she calls a riddle down
In accents faint and low.

"When will the lily bloom, and who
Will sip its nectar sweet?"
" 'Twill bloom in springtime, and the bee
Will sip its nectar sweet."

"The apricot has blossomed here
And yet there comes no bee."
"The palace wall is thick and high,
No bee can pass," says he.

"If he is barred from entering,
How gladly she will fly!
If she is certain of his love,
All dangers she'll defy."

"But here dread cold and hunger reign
To bring her sore distress;
He longs for her but would not cause
His love unhappiness."

"She hates the palace dark and grim,
She loves the lakes and hills;
If she is certain of his love,
She fears no want nor ills."

"Hundreds of men the king has killed
To give his anger vent;
The bee may love the butterfly,
But will the king consent?"

"White snow lies thick upon Mount Tsang,
Which rises sheer and high;
The king will search for them in vain
If to those heights they fly."

"No flow'r can blossom all year round,
No moon is full for ever;
If now she flee to join the bee,
Will she desert him never?"

"A bird escaping from its cage
Flies far away for ever;
If now she flee to join the bee
She will desert him never."

6

The thrush desires their happiness
And joys in their delight;
It dances for the lovers both
And sings with all its might.

The parrot is a meddling bird
    Whose gossip holds a sting;
The parrot learns the maiden's plan
    And tells the ruthless king.

The jealous king locks up the maid
    In dungeon black as night;
And there she lies, with no escape,
    Kept from her hunter's sight.

7

With sinking heart the hunter learns
    The maid's unhappy fate,
And bow in hand at dead of night
    Comes to the palace gate.

The palace gate is locked and barred,
    No voice, no footfall sounds;
The moon is bright and by its light
    Across the wall he bounds.

In that dark palace nothing stirs,
    For all is still as death;
But eagle-eyed he scans each side
    And treads with bated breath.

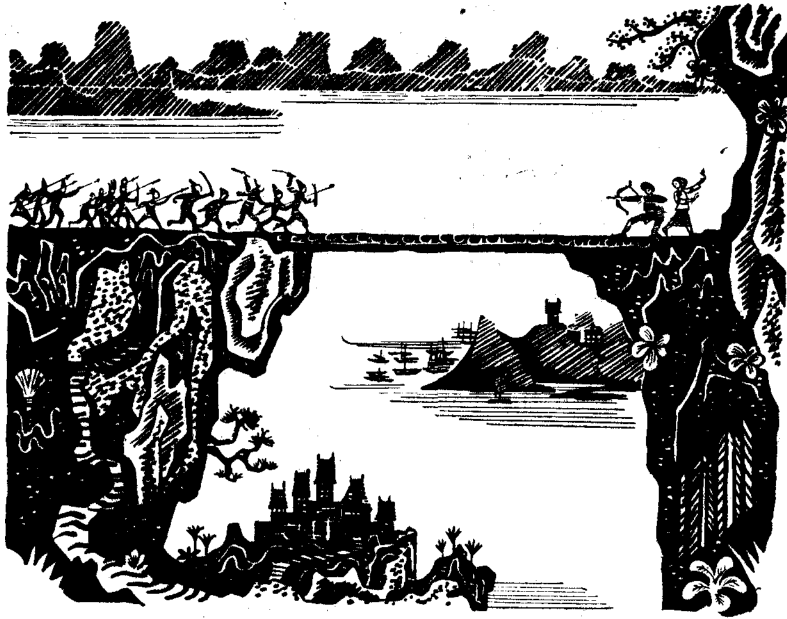
He rushes to the dungeon door,
    By force he kicks it down;
The palace maid is sore afraid —
    Salt tears have wet her gown.

The hunter takes the maiden's arm,
    Dark galleries fly past;
They leave the louring palace gate
    And she is free at last!

But cries ring out and shouts are heard
    As on the lovers race;
The startled hunter turns his head —
    The guards are giving chase!

Fast, fast into the leafy woods
    He helps the maiden dear;
But at their heels the palace guards
    Are swiftly drawing near.

The maid begins to falter now,
    Grown faint in every limb;
And turning to the hunter brave
    With tears she urges him:



"Our hearts are one and we are one,
As close as man and wife;
But you must leave me here and fly
If you would save your life."

"Never," he cries, "till from the west
Shall rise the morning sun!
Not till the river leaves its bed
And back begins to run!"

"The sun can rise in western skies
If two hearts beat as one;
And since our love is strong and true
The stream can backward run."

"A bird that's parted from its mate
Will neither sing nor fly;
Together we have sworn to live,
Together let us die!"

The hunter bears the maiden off
And presses fast ahead;
Range after range of hills they cross
And mountains sheer and dread.

But hoof-beats sound, the chase draws near,
The guards must reach them soon;
The hunter sees their murky shapes
Beneath the silver moon.

A kite that sights a flock of crows
Can soon defeat them all;
The hunter lets his arrows fly
And one by one they fall.

The hunter seizes at this chance
    Some sanctuary to seek,
And pressing on one day and night
    They reach Jade Chessboard Peak.*

8

This peak no human foot has trod,
    It soars so sheer and high;
Their shelter is a rocky cave,
    Their roof the azure sky.

East, like a silken belt, the Erh**
    Has girt the mountain round;
And west springs Butterfly Cascade
    Where butterflies abound.

South spreads vast, rolling Lake Erh Hai
    Its billows green and cold;
While north, upon the mountainside,
    The buckwheat shimmers gold.

At dawn the hunter and the maid
    Go out to hunt for game;
At dusk they tend their buckwheat crop,
    The wilderness they tame.

* One of the nineteen peaks in the Tientsang mountains.
** The Erh River which runs into Lake Erh Hai.

The bright sun lends its warmth to them,
    The moon gives light at night;
The mountain breezes sing to them
    And give their hearts delight.

Like butterflies upon the hill
    They dance for joy in spring;
Or like two orioles in the wood
    Among the flowers they sing.

"Here flowers blossom all year long,
    For spring stays always here;
No better refuge could be found,"
    She tells her hunter dear.

"Here we can sing and we can dance,
    Or wander hand in hand;
Ah, surely nowhere else on earth
    Is such a happy land."

9

The king of Nanchao swears an oath,
    A savage oath and dread:
He vows to bring the maiden back
    Be she alive or dead.

He calls the abbot of Lochuan
And asks the abbot's aid:
"Burn incense now and weave your spells
To find my missing maid!"

The abbot tells the wicked king:
"Their hiding place I know.
Up there is spring the whole year round,
But I shall send them snow."

The abbot charms the sky, and lo!
It darkens in a trice:
The north wind howls about the peak
And all is snow and ice.

The snow piles high, the drifts lie deep,
The meadows disappear;
Ice locks the peaks and will not melt
For many a bitter year.

The hunter clasps the maiden now
As fast the snowflakes fly;
He longs to shelter her from cold,
To cover up the sky.

The snow falls fast, the blizzard howls,
The maid is numb with cold;
The hunter sees her sore distress
And suffers pain untold.

"Such snow, such cold could never be
Without some wicked charm;
The abbot has a magic cloak
With which he works much harm.

"But if I steal his magic cloak
'Twill surely break the spell,
Once more the sun will shine on us
And happy we shall dwell."

10

One cold and bitter day at dawn
He leaves the maid asleep,
And swiftly strides down mountainsides
Through snowdrifts three feet deep.

The maiden wakes to find him gone,
Her heart is filled with dread.
"Ah, surely I can catch him up
If in his steps I tread."

Her face and hands are red and numb,
For icy cold the air;
She finds the hunter on the hill
And begs him to beware.

"The abbot is a sorcerer
And great his magic art;
Take care lest you are trapped by him,
For then we two must part."

"I shall be cautious as a fox
And nimble as a deer;
What wall is there I cannot leap?
You have no cause for fear."

"But should you fail to steal the cloak,
Then lose no time but fly!
For though we perish in the snow,
Together let us die!"

"Swift mountain foxes I can catch,
I'll steal his cloak away
And be beside you in our cave
Before the break of day!"

"Guards lie in wait beside the gate;
You must not enter there.
Pay careful heed and act with speed,
Tread lightly and beware!"

Taking his crossbow in his hand,
Off goes the hunter brave;
The maiden, shedding mournful tears,
Walks slowly to the cave.

11

He gains the temple late at night,
When all is still around;
There is no mortal soul in sight,
There is no stir or sound.

His belt he buckles tightly now
To jump the mighty wall;
He makes a search from room to room,
Yet finds no cloak at all.

At last he slips into the hall,
There hangs the cloak on high,
But as he stretches out for it,
Soft footsteps sound near by!

The abbot stands outside the door,
  Half hidden in the gloom;
A crafty smile upon his face,
  He steps inside the room.

The fearless hunter darts at him
  And strikes with all his might;
The sacrificial vessels crash
  As back and forth they fight.

Then fierce they fight from hill to hill
  And to the lake below;
Forward and back, for neither one
  Can overcome his foe.

The nimble hunter leaps aside
  And draws his bow at last;
But casting out a magic rope
  The abbot binds him fast.

12

The hunter is borne off like wind
  Or bird upon the wing,
When next he looks around he sees
  The palace of the king.

Like wolf or tiger sits the king,
  His angry brows are black.
"Bold thief, you stole a palace maid
  And dared to venture back!"

"The prune tree blossoms white as snow,
  The cherry blossoms red;
I did not steal your maid away,
  Of her free will she fled."

"I may this time forgive your crime,
If you return her straight;
But if, you cur, you cling to her,
Swift death will be your fate!"

"All of itself the grass grows green
And flowers bloom in May;
Shall she remain or turn again
The maid herself must say."

"You stole away my palace maid,
My anger you defy,
And if you still resist my will,
This instant you shall die!"

"The maid and I can never part,
For we are man and wife;
And never more will she be yours —
No, never in this life!"

The angry king pronounces doom:
The hunter is to die;
A mule of stone he shall become,
Sunk deep in Lake Erh Hai.*

* The Stone Mule is a large rock usually submerged in the lake, only appearing in the autumn when the water is low.

13

The maiden sits inside the cave
And waits for him in vain;
The maiden walks outside the cave,
But he comes not again.

The griefs and woes of other folk
Are like the morning frost,
For once the sun shines red and bright
All trace of it is lost.

But like the snow upon the peaks
The maiden's grief and woe;
Ere last year's snow can melt away
There comes still greater snow.

"The pangs of hunger I can stand,
And cold I do not fear;
But not one day can I live on
Without my lover dear.

"I fancy that I hear his laugh,
'Tis but the stream that flows;
I fancy that I hear his call,
'Tis but the wind that blows."

The snow falls thick upon the hills
As all alone she stands;
As frail as any crescent moon,
She wrings her snow-white hands.

"Ah, mountain hawk, take word for me
As high you fly above.
What makes him stay so long away,
Or what delays my love?

"Ah, mountain goat, run down the slope;
The temple search for me;
Make them declare if he is there,
Or find where he can be."

The maiden weeps and sobs in vain
Till all her tears run dry;
She cries his name till she is hoarse,
But there is no reply.

"Can he have chased some mountain goat
And tracked it far away;
Or stayed to guide some traveller
Whose feet have gone astray?"

A grim foreboding seizes her
And fills her heart with dread:
The abbot may have captured him,
Her love may be dead!

The maiden's heart is like to break
And wretched is her plight,
Through tears she views the sun by day,
Through tears the moon by night.

14

Day after day she waits for him,
Night after night she waits,
Until one day a man appears —
The abbot whom she hates.

"I come to take you back again,
And by the king am sent;
He will not speak of what is past
If truly you repent."

"To me his halls are dungeon walls,
I love the mountains free;
I am the hunter's loyal wife
And ever more shall be."

"The palace treasures will be yours,
Its silver, gold and jade;
And all your life you need not want
For silk or rich brocade."

"I want no silver, gold or jade,
Pure snow is better far;
I want no silk or rich brocade,
My furs much softer are."

"The palace fires are warm and bright
To drive away the chill;
Its tables groan with fish and flesh
And you can eat your fill."

"I want no charcoal fire for warmth,
The sun will give me heat;
The berries on the mountainside
Are all I ask to eat."

"Dismiss the hunter from your thoughts
And grieve not for his sake;
The king of Nanchao in his rage
Has drowned him in the lake.

"Your husband will come back no more,
For he is dead and gone;
Why linger here in ice and snow,
So cold and woe-begone?"

"Back to the king I will not go
Till blooms the iron tree,*
Till hills and mountains pass away
And sink into the sea.

"For you, the wicked murderers
Who tore us two apart,
A hatred deep as seven seas
For ever fills my heart.

"In your foul greed on men you feed,
My husband's blood you shed;
All rest I shun till, justice done,
His murderers lie dead!"

Then south black thunder-clouds arise,
And north cold blizzards blow,
While west there falls torrential rain
And east falls heavy snow.

* A tree with spike-like green leaves which is said to flower only on very rare occasions, generally once in half a century.

Green leaves turn gold and wither fast,
Fast fade the blossoms gay,
The cavern crumbles on the peak,
The maiden wastes away.

15

A butterfly falls dead in spring,
Upon the ground it lies;
But when the lovely maiden dies
To heaven her spirit flies.

The maiden turns into a cloud
Upon the mountain crest;
And fired with hatred, from the sky
Sweeps down like one possessed.

The fleeting shadows are her face,
Her robe the darkling skies,
The mighty thunderbolt her voice,
The lightning's blaze her eyes.

"Blow, wind! Come blow with all your might,
Blow down the palace wall,
Till every tile is scattered far,
Till every rafter fall!"

The great wind howls with might and main
Till down the tower is blown;
The fearful king is on his knees
To weep, to pray, to groan.

"Blow, wind! Come blow with all your might,
Blow down the temple high.
Make all its pillars crack in two,
Make all its timbers fly!"

The abbot totters to the ground,
The temple bells are smashed,
Uprooted are the mighty trees,
And down the roof has crashed.

But still the maid is unappeased,
To Lake Erh Hai she flies;
She searches east, she searches west,
Her lover's name she cries.

"Ah, tell me, hunter, tell me, pray,
Where is your hiding place?
Appear before me once again
And let me see your face.

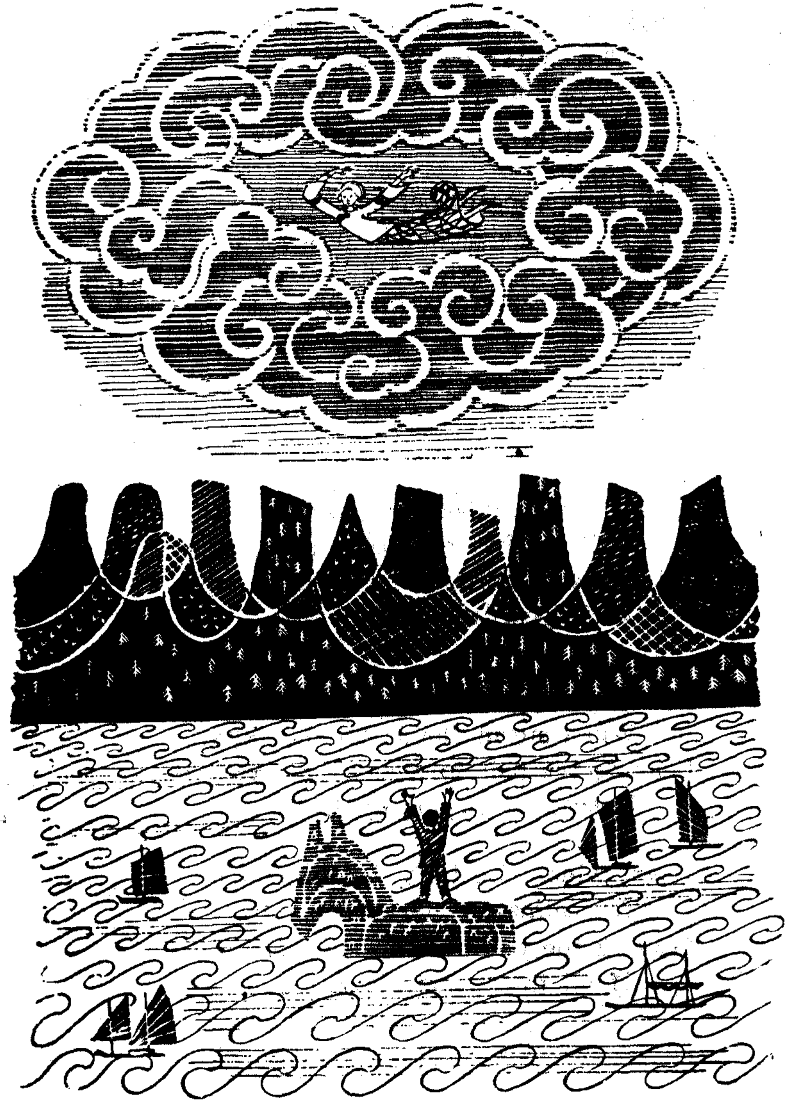
"Lie still, lie still, you angry waves,
You must not roll or leap,
But let me see where he may be,
My lover fast asleep.

"Cloudy, opaque and troubled lake,
Grow limpid now and clear,
That I may trace his resting place
And see my lover dear."

Like one possessed, she will not rest,
But searches high and low,
Pursues her quest from east to west,
Now swift she flies, now slow.

She dreams that he is calling her
And bidding her awake.
"A mule of stone I have become
Deep down beneath the lake."

The wild wind howls, the billows rise,
The waves plunge to and fro;
They leap and plunge like storm-tossed boughs,
With foam like driven snow.



Then rising up before the maid
    The mule of stone appears;
The lovers' hearts are racked with pain,
    Their eyes are dim with tears.

The mule appears before the maid
    Below the mountain peak;
Their eyes are bright with youthful light,
    Their hearts too full to speak.

16

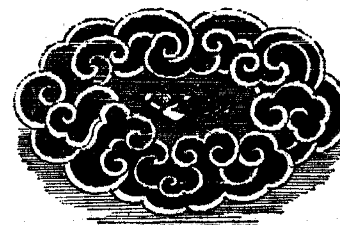
Still green and fair the mountains there,
    Still bright the moon at night;
When leaves turn sere the maid appears
    Each year to mortal sight.

The fisherman rows quickly home
    When storm clouds fill the skies,
Leaving the pair to meet in peace,
    Unseen by prying eyes.

When winds rise high the kestrels fly
    To realms far, far above,
Leaving the pair to whisper there
    Of all their tragic love.

For still the moon shines bright at night,
    The mountains still are green,
And on the peak, when autumn comes,
    Each year the maid is seen.

Translated by Yang Hsien-yi
and Gladys Yang
Illustrations by Chang Kuang-yu



HSIAO HUNG

Hands

None of our form had ever seen hands like hers: blue, black, yet purple too, discoloured from the finger-tips to the wrist.

For the first few days we called her "The Monster." In the break, racing round our class-room, we gave her a wide berth. But as for her hands, no one asked her one word about them.

At roll-call, hard as we tried to control ourselves, she sent us into fits of laughter.

"Li Chieh!"

"Here."

"Chang Chu-fang!"

"Here."

Hsiao Hung, born in 1911, began to write in 1933 when her native province in the Northeast was already under Japanese occupation. She is best known for her novel *Life and Death* and a number of short stories. She died in 1942 at the age of thirty-two. One of China's outstanding woman writers since the May the Fourth Cultural Movement in 1919, she stood always with the people in their struggle for freedom and liberation from the day she began her literary life till she breathed her last. "In my short life," she said on her death-bed, "I met nothing but coldness and rebuff. . . . I am not willing to die so young." She is known for her penetrating observation of life and its subtleties, and shows a great sensibility in her writing.

"Hsu Kuei-chen!"

"Here."

In swift and orderly succession, one stood up as another sat down. But things slowed up each time Wang Ya-ming's name was called.

"Wang Ya-ming, Wang Ya-ming. . . . Speak up!" One of the other girls might prod her. Then she would stand up, her dark discoloured hands hanging by her sides, her shoulders sagging; and staring at the ceiling she would answer:

"*Hei-erh. . . . Hei-erh.*"

No amount of laughter disconcerted her, and not till several minutes had gone by — or so it seemed — would she sit down solemnly, making her chair creak.

In one English lesson, the mistress took off her glasses to rub her eyes with a smile.

"Don't say *hei-erh* next time. Just say 'here.'"

The rest of us started giggling, scuffing our feet on the floor.

But in our English class the next day when Wang Ya-ming was called, we heard the same old: "*Hei-erh. Hei-erh.*"

The English mistress fumbled with her glasses. "Did you learn any English before you came here?" she asked.

"You mean the English language? Yes. My teacher was pock-marked. . . . He taught me *pen-ssu-erh* and *pen.* But I never learned this *hei-erh.*"

"It's 'here,' not *hei-erh.* Say: here, here."

"*Hsi-erh. Hsi-erh.*" Her extraordinary accent made the whole class hysterical. But Ya-ming sat calmly down to turn the pages of a book with her dark, discoloured hands. In fact she started chanting softly to herself:

"*Hua-ti . . . tsei-ssu . . . ah-erh. . . .*"*

In the maths class, she read out problems as if she were declaiming an oration.

"$2x + y = ... x^2 = ...$"

At the lunch table, grasping a steamed roll in one black hand, she would ruminate over the last geography lesson.

---

* "What . . . these . . . are. . . ."

"Mexico produces silver. . . . Yunnan . . . wait a minute, Yunnan has marble!"

At night she would hide herself in the cloak-room to study; at the crack of dawn she would sit on the landing with a book. I kept coming across her wherever there was the least light. One morning during a snowstorm, when the branches outside the window seemed draped with white cotton wool, I saw someone apparently asleep on the window-sill at the far end of the long corridor in our dormitory.

"Who's that? It must be cold there!" In my leather shoes I clumped across the floor — as it was a Sunday the school was unusually still. Some of the girls were dressing up to go out, some were asleep in bed.

While some distance away, I noticed the pages of a book on her knees flapping this way and that in the wind.

"Who can it be? Working so hard on a Sunday!" On the point of calling out, I caught sight of those black hands.

"Wang Ya-ming, Wang Ya-ming . . . wake up!" This was the first time I had called her name and I felt rather awkward.

"Ha. . . . I was asleep!" She interspersed all her remarks with this abrupt laugh.

"*Hua-ti . . . tsei-ssu . . . yu . . . ai. . . .*" She started chanting again before even finding the place in the book.

"*Hua-ti . . . tsei-ssu. . . .* How difficult English is! . . . Not like Chinese which has proper radicals for every character. . . . These words twist and turn like snakes squirming through my head, till I'm so muddled I can't remember a thing. The English mistress says it's not hard, and none of you seem to find it hard either. I must be slow in the uptake: country folk's brains don't work as fast as yours. My father's even worse. He says the only character he knew as a boy was our surname Wang, and learning that took him a good half hour. *Yu . . . ai . . . yu . . . ah-erh. . . .*" She started reading out different words at random.

The ventilator fan on the wall was whirring, while from time to time snowflakes flew in to congeal in pearly drops against the window.

Her eyes were bloodshot. Insatiably greedy to learn, she was stretching out her black hands for a prize beyond her grasp.

I saw her in corners, in spots with merely the faintest glimmer of light, poring over her books like a rat gnawing at something.

The first time her father came to see her, he said she had put on weight.

"I say, you've grown fat! So the grub's better here than at home, eh? Work hard! After three years' hard work, even if you aren't a sage at least some sense will have been drilled into you."

For a week afterwards in our form we did nothing but mimic her father.

The second time her father came to see her, she asked him for a pair of gloves.

"You can have mine. Study, if you study hard, what's a pair of gloves? Hold on, there's no hurry. . . . Take these first, they'll keep you snug! I don't go out much anyway, Ya-ming. I'll buy myself another pair next winter, Ya-ming." He was talking so loudly at the reception-room door that quite a crowd had gathered. It was "Ya-ming this" and "Ya-ming that" as he told her the news from home.

"Third sister's paying a visit to your second aunt: she's been away two or three days. Our pig gets an extra two handfuls of beans everyday: you should see the size of it now and the way its ears stick up. . . . Your elder sister came home and salted us two vats of scallions. . . ."

He was talking away, hot and flushed, when the headmistress picked her way through the crowd to confront him.

"Won't you sit down in the reception-room. . . ."

"There's no need, no need! That would take time and I can't stop. I've a train to catch. . . . I must get back to make sure the children are all right. . . ." He took off his leather cap and bobbed his steaming head. Then he pushed open the door and started out, as if the headmistress had driven him away. He turned back, though, to peel off his gloves.

"You keep them, dad. I don't really need gloves."

Her father's hands were dark and discoloured too, bigger and blacker than hers.

In the newspaper-room, Ya-ming asked me:

"Tell me, is it true? Do you have to pay if you sit and talk in the reception-room?"

"Pay? What an idea! Of course not."

"Don't shout! If the others hear, they'll make fun of me again." She tapped the paper I was reading. "My father saw the teapot and bowls in the reception-room and said if we went in and the porter served tea we'd have to pay. I told him we wouldn't, but he didn't believe me. He says even in the smallest inns you have to pay for just a bowl of water. So you must pay more in a big place like our school."

Before this the headmistress had lectured her several times:

"Those hands of yours — can't you wash them clean? Try using more soap! Give them a thorough scrubbing and soaking in hot water. At morning drill on the playground, when hundreds of white hands go up, you're the only freak. A real freak!" With transparent fingers, like some bloodless fossil, the headmistress tapped Ya-ming's black hands, holding her breath rather fearfully as if forced to pick up a dead crow. "The colour's worn off a good deal — you can see the skin now on the palm. That's much better than when you came, when your hands looked like iron. . . . Are you keeping up with your class? You must work harder. In future you needn't attend morning exercises. Our school wall is low, and in spring you know how many foreigners stroll past and how often they stop to look over the wall. You may join in the drill again when your hands are white."

"I asked my father for a pair of gloves. If I wear gloves, no one will see my hands." She opened her satchel and took out her father's gloves.

The headmistress smiled and coughed. Her pale face flushed. "That's no use! If you're dirty, wearing gloves won't make you clean."

When the snow on the artificial mountain in the garden melted, the porter rang the bell with unusual vigour, the willows in front of the windows put out green shoots, and the playing field seemed to smoke as it steamed in the sun. The sports teacher's whistle in the distance echoed through the crowd of girls among the trees.

We ran and jumped, we twittered like a flock of birds. We were drugged by the honey-sweet air, by the breeze from the tree tops fragrant with fresh leaves. Spirits cabined and confined by winter expanded like matted cotton wadding fluffed out again.

As we left the sports ground we heard a voice from upstairs, which sounded as if it were floating up to the sky:

"What a lovely warm sun! Are you hot? . . ." Ya-ming was standing at the window, looking out across the willows in tender leaf.

By the time the willows were in full leaf, shading the yard, Ya-ming had gradually wilted. Dark shadows lay under her eyes, her ears seemed thinner, even her shoulders had lost their old aggressive sturdiness. On the rare occasions when she came out to enjoy the shade of the trees, her hollow chest reminded me of a consumptive.

"The head says I'm behind the rest of the form. It's true: I am behind. If I can't catch up by the end of the year — ha! — will I really have to stay down?" Though she still laughed when she spoke, her hands were trembling. She thrust her left hand behind her back while her right made a bulge under the lapel of her jacket.

We never knew her to cry till that day when a high wind lashed the willows outside the window and, turning her back on the class-room and on us, she wept to the blustering wind. That was after a party of visitors had left, and she hid her eyes with her black hands, now starting to fade.

"Still crying! What good will that do? What you should have done was keep out of the visitors' way. Look at you — a regular scarecrow! I'm not just talking about your two black hands: look at that jacket — I declare it's nearly grey. All the other girls have blue jackets, you're the only exception. When clothes are too old and shabby they don't

look clean. . . . We can't break the regulations about uniform just for you. . . ." The head clamped her lips together, and clutched Ya-ming's collar with one pale white hand. "I told you to wait downstairs till the visitors had gone. Who told you to stand in the corridor? Did you imagine you were invisible there? Wearing those enormous gloves, too. . . ."

With the glossy tip of one black patent leather shoe, the head kicked a glove which had fallen on the floor.

"Did you think it was perfectly all right to stand here in those gloves? Disgusting objects!" She stamped on the glove and laughed sarcastically — it was big enough for a carter.

How Ya-ming cried! Even after the wind had dropped she was still crying.

She came back after the summer holiday. The late summer was as cool as autumn, and the setting sun stained the paving stones vermilion. We had clustered under a crab-apple tree and were nibbling its fruit when Ya-ming's cart rumbled up from Lama Mount. In the absolute silence which followed the cart's arrival, her father unloaded the luggage while she carried in her basin and small bundles. We didn't make way at once as she came up the steps. Some said: "You're back!" "So it's you!" Others just gaped.

Not till her father had stumped up the steps with a white towel flapping at his belt did someone exclaim:

"Well! See how black her hands are again after a summer at home? As black as iron."

I didn't pay much attention to those iron-black hands at the time, not till autumn came and we moved to a different dormitory. Half asleep that evening, I heard a commotion next door.

"I don't want her! I refuse to sleep next to her!"

"So do I!"

Though I pricked up my ears I couldn't hear anything clearly, only a buzz of laughter and noisy argument. But going to the corridor that night for a drink of water, I saw someone sleeping there on a deck-chair and recognized Ya-ming instantly. Her black hands were over her face, her

quilt was half on the floor, half over her legs. My first thought was that she must have been reading by the corridor light; but there were no books beside her. Instead, all around her were scattered her odds and ends of belongings.

The next night the headmistress walked up to Ya-ming, sniffing. Then she inspected the beds in one room, patting the smooth white sheets with one slender hand.

"Here in this row there are seven beds to only eight girls, while over there nine girls are sleeping on six beds." She tugged at one quilt and moved it a little to one side, then told Ya-ming to put her bedding there.

Ya-ming was so pleased that she whistled as she made her bed — the first whistling I ever heard in a girl's school.

When the bed was made she sat down on it, open-mouthed, tilting her chin up a little, as if it had shown a tendency to droop. The head had gone downstairs: she may have left the dormitory and gone home. But now the old matron with lack-lustre hair shuffled in to pad to and fro.

"Upon my word, this won't do. . . . Such an unhygienic girl! Crawling with bugs! Of course nobody wants to sleep next to her." She took a few steps towards my corner and rolled her eyes at me: "See that quilt! Smell it! It has an unpleasant odour two feet away. . . . The idea of anyone sleeping next to her! First thing you knew, bugs would be all over you. Take a look and see how filthy that wadding is!"

Matron liked to talk about herself: since her husband had studied in Japan and she had gone there with him, she counted herself a "foreign-returned student" too.

"What did you study?" some of the girls once asked her.

"You don't have to study any special subject! In Japan you speak Japanese, you learn Japanese customs — that's studying abroad, isn't it?" Her conversation was larded with such expressions as "unhygienic," "the idea!" "filthy." She referred to lice as bugs.

"A filthy girl has filthy hands!" She hunched her massive shoulders and hurried out as if a cold blast had struck her.

"A girl like that . . . I don't know why the head keeps her." After the bell sounded for lights out, matron could still be heard talking in the corridor.

On the third night, Ya-ming decamped with her bundles and bedding again, and the pasty-faced head walked up to our wing again.

"We don't want her. We're full up!"

The girls called out before the head had time to lay a finger on their bedding. This happened in the next room too.

"We're full up too. There are even more of us here: nine to six beds — how can you add any more!"

"One, two, three, four. . . ." The head started counting. "No, you can take one more. There should be six girls to four beds, but there are only five of you. . . . Here, Wang Ya-ming."

"No, I'm keeping that for my sister who's coming tomorrow. . . ." A girl ran over and held the quilt firmly in place.

Finally the head took Ya-ming to a different dormitory.

"She's got lice, I won't sleep next to her. . . ."

"Nor will I!"

"Wang Ya-ming's quilt has no cover, she sleeps next to the cotton. If you don't believe me, just look!"

Finally they made joke of the whole business, pretending that they dared not go near Ya-ming for fear of her black hands.

In the end, the owner of the black hands slept on the deck-chair in the corridor. When I got up early, I used to find her rolling up her bedding and carrying it downstairs. Sometimes I met her in the cellar which served as a storeroom; and as this was naturally in the evening, I could see her shadow on the wall as I talked to her, her hands the same colour as the hair they were rumpling.

"Once you're used to it, it's the same thing sleeping on a chair. It's somewhere to sleep, that's all that matters. The main thing is study. . . . I wonder how many marks Miss Ma will give me for my English in the next exam? If I don't pass, will I have to stay down next year?"

"Don't worry. You don't stay down for failing in one subject," I assured her.

"My father says I must finish school in three years: he can't afford to keep me here even one term more. . . . I just can't twist my tongue round those English words. Ha! . . ."

The entire dormitory was disgusted with her, even though she slept in the corridor, because she coughed every night. . . . And she started dyeing her stockings and blouses there too.

"Old clothes dyed are almost as good as new. I mean to say, if you dye your summer uniform grey it'll do for the autumn. . . . Or you can buy white stockings and dye them black. . . ."

"Why don't you buy black stockings?" I asked her.

"Black stockings are machine-dyed and too much alum is used. . . . They don't wear well, but ladder almost as soon as you put them on. . . . Home dyeing is better. A pair of stockings costs nearly half a dollar. . . . Who's going to throw money away like that?"

One Saturday evening some girls boiled a chicken in a small pan. It was our practice to cook something good on Saturdays. When the chicken was dished up — I was there when this happened — it was black! I thought it must have been poisoned. The girl dishing it up gave such a shriek that her spectacles nearly fell off.

"Who did this? Who? Who was it?"

Ya-ming turned towards us and lumbered into the kitchen. She pushed her way through the others with her usual laugh.

"It was me! I didn't know you'd be using this pan so I dyed two pairs of stockings in it. Ha! . . . I'll go. . . ."

"Where'll you go? You. . . ."

"I'll go and wash it."

"How can we cook in a pan that's stewed your stinking stockings? D'you think we still want it?" The pan hurtled with a clatter across the floor. And pandemonium broke out as the girl in spectacles hurled the black chicken after it.

When they had gone Ya-ming picked up the chicken.

"Well, now!" she said to herself. "Just because I dyed two pairs of new stockings in it, they don't want the pan! How can new stockings stink?"

On winter evenings, when the lane from the class-rooms to our dormitories was deep in snow, we used to charge ahead and make a dash for it or turn round and round in a flurry of snow if there was a high wind, walking backwards or sideways. First thing in the morning we had to set out again, and in December our feet were numb with cold even if we ran. We grumbled and complained, and some girls called the head a "horrid old cat" because the dormitory was so far from the class-rooms and we had to sally out before it was light.

Sometimes I met Ya-ming by herself in the lane, when the distant sky and the distant snow were sparkling and the moon cast our shadows before us as we plodded along. There was no one else in sight. The wind howled through the roadside trees, and window panes creaked and groaned as the snow drove against them. The temperature, well below freezing, made our voices crisper than usual. But when our lips were as stiff and numb as our legs, we had to stop talking. All we could do then was listen to the snow going crunch! crunch! under our feet.

By the time you pressed your finger on the bell your legs were almost ready to fall apart: your knees sagged as if they wanted to give way.

One morning some time that winter I set out from the dormitory with a novel I wanted to read under my arm. As I turned to pull the wicker gate to after me, a shiver ran down my spine. The sight of those shadowy buildings in the distance, the sound of the wind-driven snow hissing after me, did nothing to allay my fears. The stars were faint and small. The moon had set or been swallowed up by grey, leaden clouds.

With each step I took, the more endless seemed the road. I longed to meet someone on the way, yet dreaded it too; for on a moonless night you could hear footsteps before anyone appeared — till a figure sprang up without warning out of the ground.

My heart was still pounding as I climbed the school steps, and it was with a nerveless hand that I pressed the bell. Suddenly I sensed that someone was beside me.

"Who's that? Who's there?"

"Me! It's me."

"Were you walking behind me?" An even more fearful idea, for I had heard no footsteps but my own on the road!

"No, I wasn't behind you, I've been here for some time. The porter won't let me in. I've been calling for goodness knows how long."

"Didn't you ring the bell?"

"Ha, ringing the bell is no use! He turned on the light and came to the door, and looked out through the window. . . . But he wouldn't let me in."

The light inside went on and the porter, grumbling noisily, opened the door.

"Trying to get in at this time of the night! As if that could help you to pass when you're bound to fail!"

"What's that? What are you talking about?" As soon as I spoke, the porter changed his tune.

"Miss Hsiao! Have you been waiting long?"

Ya-ming and I went together to the cellar. She was coughing, her face was peaked and pinched, and she shivered for several minutes like an old woman. The tears brought to her eyes by the wind were still on her cheeks as she opened her lesson book.

"Why didn't the porter let you in?" I asked.

"I don't know. He said I was too early, I'd better go back. That was the head's order, he said. . . ."

"How long did you wait?"

"Not too long. Anyway, what does a short wait matter? The time for a meal maybe, ha!"

She studied differently now. Her voice had lost its former resonance and she simply mumbled. Her shoulders, once so sturdy, had shrunk and narrowed. She stooped and her chest had grown hollow.

I was reading a story aloud, but kept my voice down for fear of disturbing her. This was the first time that any

such scruples had troubled me — why was it the first time, I wondered?

She asked what I was reading. Did I know the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*? Sometimes she picked it up to look at the cover or turn over a few pages. "You others are so brainy. You hardly look at your books, but you aren't a bit scared of exams. I'm just plain stupid. I'd like to rest sometimes and read a story or two . . . but I can't. . . ."

One Sunday when the dormitory was empty, I was reading aloud that passage in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* where the working girl Maria collapses in the snow, and the snowy landscape outside brought the scene home vividly. I was quite unaware that Ya-ming was standing behind me.

"Will you lend me one of the books you've finished with? All this snow gets on my nerves, but I've no family here and nothing to buy. Besides, going into town means spending money on fares. . . ."

"Your father hasn't been to see you for a long time, has he?" I imagined she was homesick.

"How can he? The return fare by train comes to over two dollars. . . . Besides, there's no one at home. . . ."

I put the translation of Upton Sinclair's novel into her hands since I'd finished it already.

"Ha!" she laughed. She bumped twice into the bed as she started examining the cover of the book. After she went out I heard her in the corridor reading the first sentence aloud as she'd heard me doing.

Some time later — it must have been a holiday for the dormitory was deserted — the whole place was utterly silent all day till moonlight started streaming through the window. I heard a rustling by my pillow as if someone were groping about, and opened my eyes to see Ya-ming's black hands. She laid the book she had borrowed down beside me.

"Find it interesting? Did you like it?"

At first she did not answer. Then she covered her face with her hands, and her very hair seemed to tremble as she breathed:

"Yes!"

Her voice was trembling too. I sat up in bed. But she ran away, her face still buried in hands as black as her hair.

The long corridor was empty. I could see the cracks in the floor-boards in the moonlight.

"Maria seems a real live person, and look at the way she collapses in the snow — I do hope she doesn't die! She mustn't die! But if the doctor knows she has no money, he won't treat her. . . . Ha!" Her high-pitched laugh made the tears in her eyes brim over. "I went for the doctor once when my mother was ill, but do you think he would come? First he asked me for the cab fare. I told him the money was at home and begged him to come straight away — she was very bad. But do you think he would? He stood in the yard and asked: 'What does your family do? You're dyers, eh?' I don't know why, but as soon as I told him we were dyers he went back into his room. . . . I waited for some time and then knocked again. He called from inside: 'I can't attend your mother. Go away!' I went home. . . ." She dabbed her eyes again before going on: "After that I had to take care of two younger brothers and two younger sisters. Father dyed the black and the blue things, my elder sister dyed the red. The winter that her marriage was arranged, her future mother-in-law came in from the country to stay with us. At first sight of my sister she cried: 'Mercy! She's got hands like a butcher!' After that, father wouldn't let any of us dye one colour only. My hands are black, but if you look hard you can see traces of purple. My two younger sisters are the same."

"Aren't your sisters at school?"

"No. I'm to teach them later on. Only I don't know how much I've learned myself. If I don't study hard, I'll be letting my two small sisters down. . . . Dyeing one bolt of cloth brings in no more than thirty cents . . . and how many bolts do we get in a month? Garments are ten cents apiece, regardless of size, and most sent to us are big ones. . . . When you take away the cost of fuel and dyes . . . see what I mean? To pay my school fees they've had to scrape up every penny, even the little spent on salt. . . . Don't you

see, I have to work hard, I simply have to!" She reached for her book again.

I went on staring at the cracks in the floor. Her tears, to my mind, were worth far more than my sympathy.

One morning, before it was time for the holidays, Ya-ming tidied up her satchel and her bits and pieces — her big luggage was already firmly roped and stood by the corridor wall.

No one bid her goodbye or said any parting words. To leave the dormitory each of us had to pass the deck-chair where she slept, and she smiled at each of us, gazing far away through the window in between. We tramped and clattered along the corridor, down the stairs and across the yard; but at the wicker gate she caught up with us and called out to us, panting:

"My father hasn't come yet. Each extra hour I can study is all to the good. . . ."

She put all she had into those last extra hours. During the English lesson, she busily copied all the new words on the blackboard into her notebook. Not only this, she read them aloud and put down quite unnecessarily the words we already knew. The second period was geography, and she laboriously copied into her notebook the map the mistress drew on the board. . . . Apparently she set great store by every moment of this final day: she was not going to let it slip by unrecorded.

During the break I looked at her notebook: it was full of mistakes. Some of the English words had a letter missing, some had a letter too many. . . . She had lost her head completely.

That night, since her father still hadn't come to fetch her, she spread her quilt over the deck-chair again. For the first time she went to bed early and slept soundly. Her quilt was drawn up nearly to her head, her shoulders were relaxed and she breathed deeply. There were no books beside her tonight.

The next morning, when the sun still hung over the trembling, snow-covered boughs and the birds had just left their nests, her father arrived. He stopped on the landing,

put down the big felt boots slung over his shoulder and wiped the icicles off his beard with the white towel round his neck.

"So you failed, eh? Well. . . ." The icicles melted on the stairs in drops of water.

"No, we haven't had the exams yet. The head told me I needn't take them — I couldn't pass. . . ."

Standing on the landing, he turned his face to the wall and the white cloth hanging at his belt was completely still.

Ya-ming had dragged her luggage to the landing, and now she fetched her satchel, basin and other odds and ends. She handed the enormous gloves to her father.

"I don't want them, you wear them!" With each step he took, his boots left muddy imprints on the floor.

Since it was still very early, few girls were there to watch. With a faint chuckle, Ya-ming slipped on the gloves.

"Put on the boots! You've made a mess of your schooling, but don't let's have your feet frozen." Her father untied the string fastening the boots together.

The boots came up over her knees, and she fastened a white felt hood over her head like a carter.

"I shall be back." I don't know to whom she was talking. "I'll take my books home and study hard and then I'll come back. . . . Ha!" She picked up her satchel again and asked her father:

"Is the cart at the door?"

"Cart? What cart? We're walking to the station. . . . I'll carry your things."

Ya-ming flip-flopped down the stairs in her felt boots. Her father led the way, a corner of the bedding roll in his discoloured hands.

Slender shadows cast by the morning sun bobbed up and down in front of them and crawled up the wicker gate. From the window, they looked as insubstantial as shadows. There they were in full sight, but not a sound did they make.

They passed through the wicker gate and headed into the distance, trudging in the direction of the hazy morning sun.

The snow on the ground was like little splinters of glass, more and more dazzling the farther away it was. I stared at the distant snow till my eyes were smarting.

March 1936

Translated by Gladys Yang

Studying at Night by Chou Chang-ku →

Chou Chang-ku, a young painter, is an assistant lecturer in the Chekiang Institute of Fine Arts. This painting is one of his recent works done when he was on a tour of Tali Pai Autonomous *Chou* in Yunnan.

WANG WEN-SHIH

The Shrewd Vegetable Vendor

Wang Family Village was situated on the southern bank of the Weiho River. The villagers here grew vegetables for a living and in the course of time, they became known as "the Wangs of the Vegetable Garden" to the nearby people.

Poverty had driven them to undertake all kinds of trade and craft in addition to growing vegetables, and it was poverty too that taught them wisdom. They were known as capable business people, honest but shrewd. It was said for this reason that Wang Family Village produced "sages." Actually not all the villagers were people of this type. At most there were about eight, each with his own merits, and they were known as the "eight great sages" of the Wang Family Village.

Wang Yun-ho was one of them. He lost his father when he was a boy, and his family was poor. At the early age of fourteen he left home to serve as an apprentice in a shop. Clever, keen and capable, he was an all-round man in the village, an indispensable person in the life of the peasants.

Now, well over sixty, he was still full of energy and sound in health. His sturdy frame, strong arms, ruddy

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Wang Wen-shih is one of China's outstanding young writers of short stories.

face and merry eyes told you at first sight that here was a warm-hearted man, mature in thinking and brimming with energy.

Once a mobile cinema team came to show a Soviet film about the agronomist Michurin, Old Man Yun-ho got himself a good seat in the front row long before the movie began. He was so fascinated by it that he was unwilling to leave even after the screen was folded up. From that day on he became an ardent admirer of Michurin, and his heart was set on turning his patch into a Michurin garden. He used a cabbage for experiment, cutting off its head and keeping its root, and covered it with a thick layer of horse manure. As a matter of fact, it did sprout a new head, but the head didn't grow very large in spite of Yun-ho's efforts. Yun-ho was old in age, but not old in his heart. He took enthusiastic part in all the activities of the village. The youngsters called him "Uncle Activist." This, of course, made him very happy.

Old Man Yun-ho was the agronomist of his agricultural co-op's vegetable team, and he put all his energy into the vegetable garden. Even when there was no work for him to do, he would stroll between the rows, trimming a bit here, digging a bit there. Under his management, the vegetable garden was tended like a beautiful park. Whatever he did was directed towards his one goal: increasing the co-op members' income.

When the co-op management committee was re-elected a few days earlier, he was chosen to the vegetable committee and also to lead the sales team. This made him even more enthusiastic. You could see his animated bright face and hear his loud clear voice everywhere.

It was about the time of Ching Ming Festival. All the wild geese had deserted the Weiho River beach; in their place came flocks of merry little swallows who built their nests under the ridges of the peasants' homes.

Cotton had just been sown; the new crop of vegetables was already harvested.

One bright moon-lit night, Yun-ho started for Hokou Town with two other co-op members, Wang Kai-ping and Wang Fu-hou. They were specially chosen by Yun-ho for his sales team.

Kai-ping was an honest straightforward lad of nineteen. Broad in the forehead, dark skinned, with a square face, he was quite a handsome young man. Kai-king was Yun-ho's nephew. Knowing him to be honest and steady, the old man wanted to train him and give him some practical experience. He therefore had the boy transferred to be book-keeper in the vegetable sales team. This was Kai-ping's first trip to market.

Fu-hou was a man just turned fifty. He had never travelled far from home, having spent half his time in the fields, and the other half at the local market. Before joining the co-op, he had sold noodles in spring, vegetables in winter. Fu-hou never talked much, but observed and remembered everything quietly. He was polite to one and all and was glad to do what people asked him. That was how he gradually came to monopolize most of the odd jobs in the village: running errands, sending letters, calling people to meetings, etc. In his pedlar's mind, all who came to him were customers to be served politely. Because he had such merits, naturally Yun-ho chose him as one of his helpers.

The vegetable cart rumbled across the vast field, leaving the village behind. Old Man Yun-ho felt light-hearted and relaxed as he followed behind on foot. He found the scene before him more beautiful than usual.

The night was misty. On the Weiho plain thousands of acres of wheat stretched to the horizon like an immense lake, deep and tranquil. Moonlight streamed down on the dark green wheat, drenched with sparkling dewdrops.

The young wheat was already up to the hub of the cart, which was now some distance ahead of the walking men. Like a little boat sailing at night on an unruffled sea, it made its way carefully across the green expanse. Listening to the rumbling of the cart and gazing at the

enchanting night scene, Yun-ho mused about all the new and strange happenings of the past few years. He smiled and then laughed out loud. "Yes, I'm getting old," he murmured. "But the older I get the more interesting I find this life of ours."

The cart belonged to all of them in the village, and so did the cattle and the vegetables. Why, even Yun-ho himself belonged to them. He, an old man over sixty, was travelling at night to the distant Hokou Town not for the sake of earning a little money to buy oil and charcoal for himself. No, he was doing it for the benefit of the hundred or so households in their village and for this reason he didn't mind losing his sleep and walking at night.

At dawn, they reached Hokou Town.

It was a big vegetable market. South of the village was a little station on the Lunghai Railway line; to the north was a ferry. Hokou not only supplied vegetables to the vast countryside north and south of the River, but also to several cities along the railway. With the increase in city populations, the demand for vegetables also grew. The town became more bustling everyday.

Before they entered the town, Yun-ho hurried on ahead of the cart. Carts of vegetables were coming in from many different villages. He went quickly to the market centre, and selected a good spot to display their wares under a big locust tree. A few steps from the tree was a small inn owned by a man named Feng, who many years before had been an apprentice in the same shop with Yun-ho. Yun-ho piled up a few pieces of broken bricks under the locust tree to show that the place was taken and then went to knock at the inn gate.

Inn-keeper Feng greeted him warmly. "Why, it's Yun-ho! Haven't seen you for over a year. You must have forgotten us."

"What a thing to say. I've been thinking of you all the time. Haven't I come to see you the moment I got here?"

By then, Fu-hou and Kai-ping also arrived. Feng asked, "Is that your cart? Bring it into the inn yard."

"No, no, don't bother about us," Yun-ho said hurriedly. "Your customers will be leaving now, go and attend to them." He turned to Fu-hou, "Just unload the cart here."

"What's the idea of unloading outside? There's plenty of space in the yard and water and fodder too. Come, Fu-hou, drive it in."

But Yun-ho insisted on unloading outside the gate. He had his reasons, and this Feng also understood, so he said in the end, "Well, I'll go and attend to my guests. Come drink some tea after unloading."

While Fu-hou was busy unloading Yun-ho pulled Kai-ping aside. "Look, what a good place this is. All experienced sellers have their eyes on it."

Kai-ping said, "I think the place near the street is better. You have more space and can spread out. If we sell out early and want to leave, our way won't be blocked."

"Silly child," reproached Yun-ho. "This is the centre of the market, people from both the east and west sides meet here. Customers never buy things near the entrance. They need to ask the prices, compare the goods. By the time they get here, they already have an idea and can start to buy without hesitation. Besides, this place is near Sun's Shop, where there's a sweet-water well; it's not only convenient to feed the animals, but it may come in handy for a more important purpose. . . ."

"What's that?" Kai-ping was astonished.

"Don't ask now, just watch carefully and you'll understand," answered Yun-ho mysteriously. "Another thing is this inn can serve as our temporary store-room. We have a great deal of vegetables to sell, not just a few baskets. We can leave the vegetable inside, and stock the stall from time to time. . . ."

"That'll be tiresome! Why not sell all at once if we get a buyer?"

"There's no room to put all the vegetables out at the same time, nor can you sell them all at once," said Yun-ho. "The prices are different in a day. If you put all your stock out, you'll have no chance to adjust the price."

"Then why wouldn't you drive the cart into the inn?"

"You don't understand," the old man lowered his voice. "If you drive the cart into the inn, that means you've put up there; in that case, even if you don't use any of the inn-keeper's hay or fodder, and he doesn't ask you to pay, still it's only right to pay a little before leaving. But if you unload the cart outside, that's different. It'll be just as convenient, yet it won't count as putting up. As an old acquaintance, it's all right for me to bother the inn-keeper a little; that doesn't have to be entered into the books. If there's anything left when we leave, we can give a few egg-plants or a pumpkin to the inn-keeper as a present."

"But how can we give presents? The vegetables belong to our agricultural co-operative!" Kai-ping asked in bewilderment.

"Not now of course," the old man explained hastily. "A co-op is naturally a different matter."

Kai-ping didn't seem to understand much of his uncle's words. He blinked and stared at Yun-ho, as if to say, "I never knew this was so complicated. Is it all necessary?"

Yun-ho could see that Kai-ping was sceptical, but he didn't understand young people nor could he make out what the doubts were. To him, Kai-ping was selling vegetables for the first time and couldn't understand the market. He said patiently, "It's too much to expect you to see all this at once. Learn bit by bit. You'll know everything after some practice."

Kai-ping still looked perplexed. "This tree is excellent," he said naively. "It can shade both men and vegetables. And what a nice thing to have that opening up there, just the right place for our banner." So saying, he plucked a banner inscribed "Red Flag Agricultural Co-op" from the shaft and hung it high on the old locust tree.

After his customers had left the inn, Feng asked Yun-ho into his office, and the two chatted over a pot of strong tea.

"You haven't been here for a year. Anything happened at home?" Feng asked as he poured out the tea. He was a fat man, short and dark. The square black head on his shoulders looked like a piece of charcoal on a wicker oil-

basket. Although his hair had turned white at the temples, he was still very nimble, and looked a smart and capable man.

"We've joined the co-op. Unless there are errands to do I've no need to come to the market," Yun-ho answered as he sipped his tea.

"Oh, that's right," Feng struck himself on the head. "What a poor memory I have — I've heard people from your village say that you're now an important character in your Red Flag Co-op."

"Don't believe them. I'm only a vegetable grower," answered Yun-ho modestly. "How about you? . . . Is business good?"

"Not good at all. You ought to know that without my saying. Ever since last winter, people have been so busy in the fields that not many have had time to come out. It's very different from a few years ago. . . ."

"How's the market these days?"

"To put it briefly, there are more buyers than sellers. Spring vegetables this year could hardly satisfy the demand. Consumers have increased a lot you know. No need to go far, just take our town alone. How the population has grown these few years — all these new middle schools, the Yellow River surveying team, the tractor station. . . ."

They chatted of this and that as they drank. Soon sunlight was shining on the window. Fu-hou came in to borrow two benches and a board from Feng to put up the vegetable stall.

Having got the information he wanted from Feng and having had his fill of tea, Yun-ho said goodbye and left. By now customers had already gathered under the locust tree. The Red Flag Co-op had gained a high reputation in this market and had won many faithful customers. Yun-ho was delighted with the large number of buyers.

If I don't seize this chance to make a good profit for the co-op, I'm either the biggest fool in the world or a very wicked person because I don't try, he thought to himself. Calling Kai-ping to him, he whispered into his ear, "Just sell what you have here. Don't touch the

vegetables in the inn before I return. I'll have a look around the market."

During the past few years, under the government's supervision, the market had been well run, with reasonable prices. Vegetables and other seasonal products still varied somewhat in price, as there was much difference in quality.

Experienced vegetable sellers always inspected the market before it opened. They could estimate at a glance the amount of vegetables on sale that day, and on this basis, they fixed their price and decided whether to sell quickly or little by little.

It was exactly for this purpose that Yun-ho went to inspect the market. Since it was spring, there weren't many kinds of vegetables. Spinach wasn't worth much now, but scallions were fresh on the market. As for last year's crop of vegetables such as potatoes and cabbages there wasn't much of that left. It didn't take Yun-ho long to grasp the whole situation. He soon hurried back to their stall.

Customers were many but there were only seven or eight catties of vegetables left on the stall. Kai-ping was busy, weighing the vegetables and collecting money. Yun-ho asked him, "Where is Fu-hou?"

Kai-ping, intent on weighing, gave no answer.

"Where has Fu-hou gone?" Yun-ho asked again.

"Inside."

Yun-ho tugged Kai-ping's sleeve and whispered, "There's not much left. Don't be in such a hurry to sell."

Kai-ping said nothing and Yun-ho went to the inn.

He met Fu-hou in the doorway with a big basket of vegetables. Yun-ho hurriedly stopped him, waving his hand.

"Why do you take these vegetables out without asking me, Fu-hou?" he asked.

"Kai-ping told me to," Fu-hou answered slowly.

"Kai-ping?" Yun-ho was angry. "That boy is really. . . . Didn't I tell him not to touch the vegetables inside before I came back? How can he decide on his own? The vegetables on the market today are far from enough."

"After you left," Fu-hou said, "many people came to our stall to ask about the vegetables. Seeing that we didn't have much stuff on the stall, some said sarcastically that the Red Flag Co-op is only performing a little skit today, it's not putting on a full show!"

"Everybody's got a tongue. How can you prevent people from making idle remarks?"

"When Kai-ping heard this, he said to me, 'Let's bring the whole lot out. We mustn't disappoint our customers.'"

Yun-ho shook his head angrily, "Hey, the silly lad, he's really a busy-body. Why didn't you tell him what's what, Fu-hou? This isn't the first time you've come to market."

"But we always did put out all our stuff in one go. We never quit selling."

"Those fellows who came with you before. . . ." Yun-ho swallowed the rest of his sentence. In his heart he said, "They only knew how to save themselves bother, they never thought of the co-op members' interest."

Fu-hou felt a little annoyed at the unfinished sentence, but he was not one to retort or contradict. He often said to his wife, "If you've got the time to quarrel, much better to spend it hoeing more land." Now he looked at Yun-ho's agitated face and said smiling, "You're the leader. I'll do what you say. What shall I do with these?"

"Put them down," said Yun-ho.

"I'll go tell Kai-ping." Fu-hou went outside.

After a while Kai-ping ran back and asked bluntly, "Uncle, why don't you let us take more vegetables out? There are only two or three catties left on the stall."

"All sold out?" asked Yun-ho casually, as if he didn't care much about what Kai-ping was saying. "I told you to go slow. Why did you sell out so quickly?"

"But there're so many customers. Some have come from quite a distance away just to buy our co-op's vegetables. What a good reputation our co-op has! . . ." Kai-ping said elatedly. He looked as proud as a new soldier who had just won his first battle.

"These vegetables are already sold," Yun-ho cut in. Knowing how stubborn these hot-blooded young people sometimes are, he lied in order to stop further questioning from Kai-ping.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" Kai-ping was as dejected as if he had fallen into a ice dungeon. "I told the customers that we had lots of stuff and guaranteed that there'd be enough vegetables for all."

Yun-ho raised his brows and looked at Kai-ping with a sigh, "Ai, what a rash boy you are. Why do you have to say so much to the customers?"

"What if the customers won't leave?" Kai-ping muttered.

"You've got to explain to them, that's all."

"Are these vegetables really sold?" asked Kai-ping hesitatingly.

"Am I just making it up? Am I going to eat all the vegetables that are left over?" Old Man Yun-ho was getting angry.

"How am I going to face the customers!" Kai-ping mumbled as he went out of the inn.

Yun-ho shouted after him, "Tell Fu-hou we'll have breakfast after he's sold those few remaining catties."

When the sun hung high in the sky, the market buzzed with activity. Old women carrying baskets over their arms and sticks in their hands, old men with sacks on their backs, young wives in bright coloured clothes . . . came sauntering in twos and threes. All sorts of noises and voices were woven into a wonderful chorus. The small town was enveloped in waves of harmonious, resonant sound.

It was time for breakfast. Yun-ho signalled Fu-hou and Kai-ping to go and eat. They found seats at a crowded food stall. Business in this section of the market was good. Many peasants who never used to eat at the market now found that they could afford a meal. Also some of the co-op peasants working in the fields nearby liked to drop in at the market after work for a good meal.

The three of them, however, sat in silence, each engrossed in his own thoughts. Kai-ping seemed to be sulking. Fu-hou concentrated on eating. Though Yun-ho was eager to talk, he could win no response from the others. Several times Kai-ping impatiently stood up to go.

"We are spending too much time on a meal," he said. "What if your buyer is looking for us? Aren't we holding up business?"

"Listen son, you just eat your fill," Yun-ho comforted him. "I'll take care of business. I know everyone here at this market. I can even tell you the names of their fathers and grandfathers as well as their birthdays. You just leave things to me. If you don't believe me, ask Fu-hou."

Fu-hou kept his mouth on his steamed bun and only grunted.

His helpers' attitude was not to Yun-ho's liking, but his confidence was not shaken. He noticed that more and more people were thronging to the market. He heard them discuss the prices of vegetables and complain how hard it was to buy any vegetables even at such prices. This made him feel assured. Picturing to himself how they would go back at dusk and the co-op members would gather around

their empty cart to congratulate them on their success and thank them for the large profit they had earned for the co-op, he felt comforted.

Something, however, began to worry Yun-ho. As they were waiting to be served, he saw the distant tree tops tilting westward and trembling like mad. The small banners waving over the stalls began to flutter and rustle and smoke from the chimneys curling into black balls rushed round the food stall while yellow dust whirled on the ground.

"A gale is coming up!" Yun-ho exclaimed to himself.

It was typical of the fickle northern spring weather. The wind from outside the Great Wall swept southwest, bringing with it cold air and yellow sand. Sometimes it went on for days on end, sometimes it blew past in a wink. Now, in the fields carpeted by green wheat, the wind brought only gusts of cold air. In town, though, it was different. Yellow dust swirling with chicken feathers and onion skins made the whole place smoky and foul. A busy mart could easily be broken up by the bad weather.

Yun-ho swallowed his food in a hurry. Having paid the bill, the three of them left the still crowded food stall. By the time they reached the vegetable market, beads of sweat besprinkled Yun-ho's brow. . . .

More than half the buyers were gone. The price for scallions had dropped from twelve to ten cents per catty. The calls were no longer those of the buyers but those of the sellers. As if somebody had issued an order, the sellers were all raising their voices to attract customers. Back at the inn Yun-ho squatted on the stone steps, hugging his head in silence.

Kai-ping walked over and asked, "Uncle! How is it that your customer still hasn't appeared? Could he have come while we were eating?"

". . . . . ."

"Uncle, . . ." Kai-ping repeated his question several times. At last, seeing that his uncle was worried, he asked no more and stood by with knitted brows.

After pondering a while, Old Man Yun-ho suddenly waved his hand. "Kai-ping," he ordered. "Put all the vegetables out for sale."

"But hasn't our stuff been bought by someone already?" Kai-ping asked in surprise.

"We'll deal with him when he comes. It's not our fault. Why didn't he come earlier!" Yun-ho was again lying to his nephew. He felt very bad and stood up. Turning, he waved his hand and said, "Be quick now, the weather is no good."

The wind roared and yellow dust whirled. The three of them stood round the stall, struggling against the stormy wind. The wind was playing havoc, messing up the stalls and sweeping bunches of vegetables to the ground. What was more, the big stack of vegetables had to be covered with a sheet to protect it from the dust and dirt. This was no easy job. Several times Yun-ho was forced to chase after the sheet when it was blown away by the wind. He had to grip the corners with both hands to hold them down.

Half an hour passed. Only a few came to inquire after the price. Altogether they sold less than five catties. All this time Kai-ping with tightly-knitted brows kept glancing questioningly at Yun-ho. His eyes seemed to say, "What about that customer of yours?" Old Man Yun-ho was pulling a long face. Whenever anyone passed, he immediately went up to him with a smile saying, "Buy some vegetables! These are very fresh and tender." He pointed at the stacks of vegetables under the sheet. Most people shook their heads; some went by without heeding him at all. Old Man Yun-ho's face again became as glum as a slab of iron. "Damn him . . . what haughty airs!"

Fewer and fewer people remained now. Staying around in a sandstorm was no use. Yun-ho told Kai-ping to look after the customers as he himself turned to go down the street. Believing that he was going off to look for the customer to whom the vegetables were promised, Kai-ping said, "Uncle, ask that man to come and take the

vegetables away quickly. The weather is bad and we have a long way to go." Yun-ho waved his hand but said nothing.

Standing by the stall, Kai-ping held the small banner of the Red Flag Co-op in his hands. Whenever somebody paused to look at the banner he would say, "We are from the Red Flag Co-op. Are you the one who arranged to buy all these vegetables?" The man thus confronted always shook his head in bewilderment and walked away. Fu-hou watched the silly expression on Kai-ping's face and smiled with amusement. "Forget it, Kai-ping," he finally advised. "It's no use asking."

After a while, Kai-ping exclaimed in high spirits, "Here he is. He's coming at last. He really had us worried!"

Fu-hou looked in the direction Kai-ping was pointing. In the distance Yun-ho came pushing an empty cart; by his side walked a man with a scale in his hand. They were talking to each other chummily. Kai-ping folded the banner and stuck it in his belt. About to help his uncle push, he saw the other man put the scale in the cart, murmuring something to Yun-ho, wave goodbye and walk away. He heard his uncle say to the man, "I'll send these to your house later."

"Who is that fellow anyway?" Kai-ping wondered. "Instead of coming for the vegetables, he waited for uncle to seek him out. Now he lets others push the cart for him and wants the vegetables to be delivered at his house. This is too much!"

Soon Yun-ho brought the cart to the stall. He rolled up his sleeves and began to put bunches of scallions into it.

Kai-ping asked, "Shouldn't we weigh them first?"

"Why?" asked Yun-ho.

I suppose it's just as well to weigh the stuff when we deliver it to his house, thought Kai-ping.

By the time the cart was fully loaded, there were still two-thirds of their vegetables left.

"One trip isn't enough. Shall we come back for two more trips?" asked Kai-ping.

"The rest can be sold here. Just take this one cartload along," said Yun-ho.

So that fellow wanted to cancel his order. It was only when uncle looked him up that he was forced to buy some, Kai-ping thought to himself. Meanwhile, Yun-ho pushed the cart a few paces, gauged the weight of the load and said, "Fu-hou, you and Kai-ping go along with these. Take this scale. I'll look after things here."

"Where shall we send it to? You didn't give us the address. Who has bought it?" demanded Kai-ping.

Fu-hou who had been reticent so far, now said calmly, "You silly youngster. Address? The streets. Customer? Whoever wants to buy."

Kai-ping turned to Yun-ho. "Wasn't that man who came with you just now the customer who agreed to buy all our vegetables?"

"What customer?" Yun-ho murmured. "That man is the owner of this cart. He agreed to lend it to us and the scale too. He's one of my old friends." After a while he added, "You hawk these in the street. Maybe the townsfolk will buy. If there are any customers, it's all right to sell at a lower price." The old man was deeply upset. He had been hoping to make a big profit for his fellow co-op members!

With Kai-ping pushing the cart and Fu-hou walking beside him, the two walked through the market and went down the streets and lanes. Kai-ping had never peddled vegetables before. He was too shy to cry his wares. Fu-hou, however, was an expert, he raised his husky voice and chanted the vegetable sellers' call.

The streets and lanes were deserted. They saw only the whirling sand and the wind, but no people. After quite some time, they still had not met anybody interested in their vegetables. When they reached a spot out of the wind, Kai-ping angrily put the cart down.

"I don't understand what this is all about. The stuff is supposed to have been sold, and now we've to hawk it!"

"Silly youngster," remarked Fu-hou. "You are too straightforward and simple-minded, if you don't mind my saying so. Your uncle is far too cunning. When he saw that there were many buyers and very few vegetables on the market, he decided to hold until the busiest time of

the fair, that is, around noon. He meant to sell at a good price. Of course he didn't expect a wind to turn up and sweep half the market away."

As Fu-hou revealed the secret of the old man, Kai-ping stared with opened mouth. After a long while he muttered, "Really?"

"Don't you believe me?" Fu-hou asked, producing some tobacco from his case. He rolled himself a cigarette and lit it. "Your uncle Yun-ho is one of the eight 'sages' of our village. All his life he has been a shrewd one. Whatever he does he makes careful plans and calculations. He knows how many puffs you can get out of a pipe, how many if you take deep drags, how many if you take light ones. He has it all figured out and no mistake. If you knew some of the things he's done, you'd realize how calculating he is."

Just then, a woman went by and Fu-hou immediately stopped his words to shout, "Scallions! First scallions of the year!" The woman was not attracted though, so Fu-hou had another pull on his cigarette and told Kai-ping a story about Old Man Yun-ho.

"Maybe this actually happened to somebody else but people attribute it to Old Man Yun-ho, and he's never denied it.

"One summer evening when the moon was bright and the breeze nice and cool, your uncle Yun-ho, stripped to the waist, was lying on a bench in the courtyard. As he waved his fan, he gazed at the sky and observed the stars — he knows something about astrology, you know — trying to calculate whether it would be a good or lean year for wheat. Suddenly he heard a rustling. Without looking, he knew that a scorpion was creeping towards his waist. He was unwilling to get up on account of a mere scorpion. So he arched his body, making room for the scorpion to pass under him peacefully. There was no need for the scorpion and him to come to blows. He figured the time too. Having given the scorpion sufficient time to crawl by, he was certain that it was gone and he stretched out again in comfort. According to his calculation, nothing could go amiss.

"But it seems that the scorpion was afraid of the moonlight and was looking for a shady place to hide. The arch made by Yun-ho's body must have seemed just the right place, it was so dark and drafty. So the scorpion went no further. Your uncle did not count on this of course, and he settled down again. He was stung on the bottom by the scorpion. How he howled."

Kai-ping laughed until he nearly toppled the cart over. Finally, suppressing his mirth and rubbing his eyes he said, "Today I think he's sat on a scorpoin again!"

"He's hardly to be blamed," said Fu-hou. "He has the best of intentions; he wants to earn more for all of us co-op members."

Kai-ping stood up abruptly. "He went about it the wrong way," he said coldly.

"Don't be too hard on your uncle. You know, he's quite a different person from what he was in the past. Nowadays, people progress fast!"

"You're right," Kai-ping acknowledged. "During the past year, Uncle Yun-ho has really worked very enthusiastically, always thinking of the interests of the co-op as a whole. But it's wrong to confine his concern just to our co-op."

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While Fu-hou was telling Kai-ping old tales about Yun-ho, Yun-ho himself was sitting beside the stall, cursing himself for being too greedy and causing damage to the co-op. He kept looking up at the sky, hoping that it would clear up again soon. Maybe the scallions on the cart could be sold after all. It was the season when people liked to make scallion dumplings and scallion fritters. The town was a big one. Surely many a household could do with two or three catties of scallions. Not until Kai-ping brought back the cart still fully loaded did he realize that his calculations had gone awry.

"No customers?" he asked gloomily.

"No. I'm afraid we've sat on the scorpion," Kai-ping replied with a mischievous grin.

Old Man Yun-ho's face twitched. He felt the sting of Kai-ping's remark. But he controlled himself and said, "Put down the cart then. It's early yet and the wind is dropping. Maybe it will clear again."

Just as Yun-ho anticipated, the wind finally died. In a little while the storm was over. The tree tops stayed perfectly still, and the little red banner hung without a flutter. Once again the sky was an ocean of deep blue. The sun reappeared in the east and the air was balmy and fresh.

People flowed to the fair in a continuous stream once more. By noon, the fair was in full swing. In the vegetable market there was a shortage of supply, for when it started to blow, many small vegetable vendors had sold out in a hurry. Others had gone elsewhere or returned home. Now, the supply of vegetables was small, and the number of buyers was increasing. This situation gladdened Yun-ho's heart. The self-reproach he had felt a moment before vanished entirely and his ambitions began to soar.

"Listen to me, and you won't go wrong," he told Kai-ping. "All sorts of situations arise in the vegetable market. The main thing is to estimate it correctly and make a firm and clever decision."

"It depends," Kai-ping retorted, not at all convinced. "It would be better if you were not so firm about your kind of decision."

Yun-ho was about to say something when a man came up to ask the price of the scallions. You could tell at a glance that he was a big customer. Yun-ho hastened over to him.

"Have a look at the stuff first. The very first crop, straight from the field. Very fresh."

The customer looked, and was satisfied. "You name a fair price. I want to buy a lot," said he.

"Whatever price you think fit," Yun-ho said genially. "Vegetables in spring have no fixed prices."

"But it's for you to name a price."

Yun-ho hesitated a little, then said, treating the customer like an old friend, "I won't ask much from you. Ten cents per catty will be all right."

"Would eight cents do?" the customer bargained.

"No, comrade," Yun-ho replied smiling, "you go and inquire about the price somewhere else. Everyone sells at this price. Then you can compare the stuff we offer. You'll find how good our scallions are."

The customer insisted on eight cents per catty. Yun-ho refused to haggle but smiled and repeated, "Comrade, you go and look at the scallions on other stalls. See if there are any as fresh as these. When you feel really satisfied with ours, come back again. We can discuss the price later."

The customer went away. Yun-ho told Kai-ping and Fu-hou to stay by the stall while he went into the inn.

It was not for nothing that Yun-ho went back to the inn. Here was the opportunity he had mentioned to Kai-ping. "A well may come in handy for a more important purpose." It was a market trick which all old-timer vegetable vendors knew and used. Experienced vendors knew the customers' psychology. They could tell at a glance whether a man was bent on buying or merely asking. When it was an intent customer, they would not bargain over the price but would ask him to look the stuff over until he felt very satisfied. Then they would quote a slightly higher price and the customer would cut a little bit, but they would not give in nor would they haggle. Their intention was not to make the bargain at once but they'd ask the customer to look over the market first. For well they knew that the customer was also unwilling to close the bargain at once, he also wanted to have a look elsewhere and make comparisons. As soon as the customer left, they would pour a bucket of water over their vegetables to increase their weight. The experienced vendors were always certain that the customer would return. First of all, he was satisfied with their wares, and then he was deeply impressed with their fair and just attitude. By the time the customer had inquired elsewhere and returned to the vendor it was time for the deal to be concluded.

"Well, how about it? Are you going to sell?"

"Can't you offer a bit more?"

"Sorry, I can't. See how wet the vegetables are!"

"Green vegetables, how can you let them go dry in the sun? How much do you want?"

"A few hundred catties."

"Couldn't you give a higher price?"

"No."

"Ah well, all right, then. I'll have to let you have them," the vendor would sigh. "It's only because I have a long way to go and I want to get home early. Otherwise I'd never sell at this price."

The customer would be very pleased with himself, sure that he had got a real bargain, or at any rate that he had not paid too much.

Having explained this much, we can well understand why Old Man Yun-ho let such a good customer go away and hurried back to the inn.

He filled a bucket in a few minutes and reappeared. But at the gate of the inn he saw that a large number of customers stood around his stall and Fu-hou was busy weighing the scallions while Kai-ping took their money and paid out change. Yun-ho could not sprinkle water on the vegetables in front of the customers. So he took the bucket back into the inn, where there were still some scallions left. He hurriedly lifted the cloth over the crate only to discover that no more than fifteen catties or so of scallions remained.

"Damn it! I shouldn't have put all the vegetables outside. Too bad so many customers have arrived." He was thinking hard. "All right, I'll take these out. Then I can bring back those that are in the cart and on the ground outside." Having made up his mind, Yun-ho rolled up his sleeves and poured water over the scallions in the crate.

The watered scallions looked much fresher and greener. Yun-ho gave Fu-hou a complacent wink and said, "Sell these green vegetables to the customers first." He left the crate on the stall, turned and pushed the cart into the inn.

He had just taken off the sheet covering the cart and was going for the bucket, when Inn-keeper Feng came out. "Haven't sold everything yet, Yun-ho?" Feng inquired casually.

"Won't take long now," Yun-ho replied laconically. He looked at the bucket and hoped that Feng would go away.

But people who are getting on in years are usually chatty and long-winded. Feng was no exception. He looked at the sky — the sun was high and bright, filling the courtyard with warmth and sweet fresh spring air. Such fine weather made him want to linger outside. He squatted down on the threshold, enjoying the sunshine, and began dreamily, "What immense and fast changes these two years have brought! The market is so different now. Buyers have changed, and the sellers too. The buyers are no longer afraid of being cheated, and the vendors are no longer worried that the customers will be fussy and find fault. But in the old days. . . ."

When old people start with "in the old days," there's no end to their rambling. Even forty-eight hours a day wouldn't be enough time for them.

Old Man Yun-ho was in no mood to talk about "in the old days." He answered Feng only now and again while his hands busily arranged the bunches of scallions. He pretended that he was too occupied to take in what Feng was saying.

Feng saw that he was in no mood for conversation so he said, "When you have time to spare, we can have a good chat. It's only with people our age that I can talk. . . ." He stood up. Thinking that he was going inside, Yun-ho heaved a sigh of relief. But instead of returning to his room Feng began a leisurely stroll in the courtyard.

"Damn you," Yun-ho muttered angrily at Feng's back. "Devil take you!"

Suddenly a loud commotion was heard outside. Yun-ho was so tense and sensitive by then that the slightest noise made him jump. He listened intently: Kai-ping was arguing with a woman. The woman was shouting shrilly, "How can you act like that!"

Kai-ping said, "Haven't you got eyes? Even if you haven't, you have hands! Why don't you feel the vegetables first and see if they're really wet?"

Afraid that the young fellow wouldn't know how to deal with the situation, Yun-ho hurried out. A long line of people was standing before the stall. A small middle-aged woman with a bamboo basket over her arm stood nearest the stall. With one accusing finger pointing at the stall, she said angrily, "Where are your eyes? Look at the board; isn't it wet? And you say you didn't sprinkle water over the scallions!"

"The board may be wet, but the scallions are scallions," argued Kai-ping. "There is no water on them!"

How dare he argue with a customer at such a time? Yun-ho looked at Kai-ping in despair. He pushed forward. As his hand touched the board he recoiled in dismay, blushing all over his face. He dared not look at the board nor the scallions on it. Pulling himself together, he said genially to the woman:

"How can green vegetables be without a bit of water? Vegetables wilt in a minute, in the hot sun. You don't want to buy dry faggots, do you? Ha, ha, ha. . . ."

"You stay out of this," Kai-ping told him severely, his sharp eyes darting right through the old man's heart. Yun-ho was so agitated, his legs trembled. The woman continued to make a row.

"Don't be angry. We can talk the matter over, can't we?" Yun-ho tried to pacify her. Turning to Fu-hou, he said, "Let the customer choose for herself. It's a mere trifle — only a matter of one or two catties."

But young Kai-ping would not give in. To him it was not a mere trifle, it was a matter of defending the prestige of the Red Flag Co-op and all the other co-ops as well. He was determined not to accept a baseless slander. He pushed his uncle aside, picked up the bunch of scallions in the woman's basket and said loudly, "There are many people here. Let everybody look and judge."

This was a veritable bomb. Old Man Yun-ho felt that his heart was jumping out of his mouth. Many customers pressed forward. It was too late to do anything now. Beads of sweat oozed out on the old man's forehead. He

stood with his hands hanging like a culprit waiting to be reprimanded.

But a number of customers began blaming the woman. Some said that she was looking at the new society with old eyes. Others said she did not properly understand the co-op. An old man in the back row remarked to somebody beside him, "This woman, bah! She hasn't made any progress. Her sort doesn't understand much because she seldom goes to meetings."

A young girl squeezed her way through the crowd and came up to the woman. "Look, this is the Red Flag Co-op," she said, pointing at the banner over the stall. "We're all their old customers. We have been coming to them for more than a year already. Everybody likes to buy vegetables from them."

The middle-aged woman persisted with, "Look at that board!"

Someone beside her said, "The board is wet, but not the scallions. If you don't sprinkle the board with water, the scallions become too dry."

The girl unfastened a bundle of scallions and said, "Look, is there any water on these? Some vendors here raised the price to twelve cents per catty when they saw a lot of buyers. But here they haven't raised their price; they're still selling at ten cents a catty. Don't worry. They won't cheat you. You see they are from the co-op; they're not private vendors."

All the people tried to convince the woman that she ought to trust the Red Flag Co-op implicitly. Someone even pointed at Yun-ho and remarked, "See this old man with white hair. He's come fifty *li* to sell you only one or two catties of vegetables. When you said the scallions are no good, he offered to let you choose for yourself. Can't you see that they are not the sort who cheat customers?"

An old man at the back said impatiently, "Let's not bother with her any more. She really doesn't understand the society we are living in and whose vegetables she's buying."

At first when Yun-ho heard what the customers were saying, he felt comforted and a sense of relief at not being

found out. But the more he listened, the more confused he felt until he was dizzy with shame. He couldn't face those honest, warm-hearted customers. Turning away from the crowd, he walked weakly to the inn and sat down on a rock beside the door. There he beckoned Kai-ping, who came up to him.

"Kai-ping . . . that woman found our weak point . . . go and remove all the scallions on the board."

"There's really no water on them, uncle. The ones you brought out I tucked away under the board. I didn't sell a single ounce of them. See there? They're still in the crate."

Surprised, Yun-ho gazed at the dripping crate of scallions under the board. Then he looked at Kai-ping's serious face and sighed, "Really? . . . That's good, good. Kai-ping, your uncle hasn't taught you anything, but you've taught me a lot. Though I've sold vegetables all my life, today, those customers finally showed me how vegetables ought to be sold."

Just then, the man who had inquired about the price of scallions came back again and said politely, "Old uncle, I have come back to you."

Yun-ho nodded, "Oh, yes . . . talk it over with my nephew here," he said, pointing at Kai-ping. "Kai-ping, this comrade here wants to buy scallions; you deal with him."

He stood up, tottered over to the board and took away the crate which had been soaked with water.

The February sun was warm and bright. The sky was clear and fine. A gentle spring breeze wafting over from the fields made the willows around the well dance in graceful movements. As Inn-keeper Feng bent over his desk he saw through the glass window his old friend, a man who was sharp and shrewd all his life, spread a sheet on the ground; on this he was unfastening bunches of scallions and laying them out, turning them over from time to time. Feng was at a loss to understand. Why should his old friend dry scallions in the sun — was it some new-fangled trick of his?

"Hey, old sage," he called out through the window. "What are you up to now?"

Old Man Yun-ho replied, "The old ways are no good. There must be new inventions!" After a pause, he sighed and continued, "Life is like a journey to the sacred mountain. If you want to attain the truth and become a 'saint' you have to climb stage to stage, from height to height!"

Translated by Sun Su
Illustrations by Lu Chih-hsiang

WANG AN-YU

Sister-in-law Remarries

1

Aunt Li lived at the east end of Yang Village. Even when Uncle Li was living he was too shy and simple to be of much use. The household was managed completely by Aunt Li who kept him under her thumb without any trouble. "Bring my tobacco box, old man," she'd drawl after a meal. If Uncle Li happened to be somewhat slow she'd be displeased and say, "Are you a dead turtle or what? Not a peep out of you when you're kicked!"

Now a widow, Aunt Li was short and stout with a pair of feet like flattened sweet potatoes. Though going on fifty, she still combed her hair back into a smooth and glossy bun. She was fond of rolling her yellowish eyeballs in a way that warned people that here was a sharp woman not to be underestimated. If so much as a bean pod or melon happened to be missing from her fields, she would stride into the middle of the street and swinging her hips and cursing like a whirlwind, call the unknown culprit all kinds of foul names. The neighbours were fully aware of

Wang An-yu is a young peasant writer who has never been to school. He learned to write on his own and has become a well-known short-story writer. The incident of this story took place in a liberated area, before the People's Republic was established.

her temper. Everyone slipped away as soon as she came dashing out of her door. That was why the young people in the village nicknamed her "The Fearless Shrew."

There used to be six people in the Shrew's household, but because she was difficult to live with, two years earlier her eldest son, Li Yuan, took his wife and child and moved in with his father-in-law in a neighbouring village. About a year later, the Shrew's second son died, so that now her household consisted only of her twenty-one-year-old widowed daughter-in-law and her youngest son, Li Chung. They owned eight *mou* of land. With only Li Chung to help her, the Shrew felt the shortage of manpower in her household. They could not get enough out of the land to support themselves.

It happened that there were two rogues in the village by the name of Li Seven and Little Dog. Seeing that the Shrew had a beautiful widowed daughter-in-law, they volunteered to lend her some money to start a grocery store in her house. While this helped the Shrew, it gave the rogues an excuse to meet frequently at her home. The woman liked having people around and the store was always full of loafers and idlers. At times they got so rowdy that it was really shocking, but nobody dared murmur a word against her. It was useless to speak to the Shrew mildly — she'd have paid no attention — and no one dared speak to her harshly — she'd have made a scene and the rogues would have backed her up. Most people just left her alone. Since she was the kind of woman who had to have the upper hand in everything she did, it is easy to imagine how she mistreated her daughter-in-law.

This young woman, Sister-in-law as she was generally called, was the daughter of the Lius from a neighbouring village. Her family was very poor and the Shrew was displeased with her the day she entered the Li's doors because she brought no present or dowry.

Young women change as they grow up. Sister-in-law was now quite different from the girl who came to the Li house as a bride. Fairer and prettier, she had also learnt to become a good seamstress from a neighbour, Hsiao-po's

Ma. But she never could learn to accept her mother-in-law's shrewish temper and couldn't help answering back now and again. On her part, the Shrew saw no good at all in her daughter-in-law. The girl simply didn't suit her. The Shrew berated her everyday and called her a bad daughter-in-law. When her son died, she even blamed that on the girl. Thus the poor widow was always in the wrong in her mother-in-law's eyes. When a literacy class was started in the village, Sister-in-law enrolled. The Shrew was against it. "With her mind full of wild thoughts, she trots off soon as the whistle goes without so much as a by your leave," she said. "Very unwomanly behaviour!" There was just no pleasing her.

Later, the Shrew began treating her daughter-in-law somewhat better. One reason was that the women now had their own organization and the young ones, who could see that Sister-in-law was bullied, took her side. "Don't be afraid of her," they'd say. "Just do your work well and she won't dare to pick on you."

That, however, was not the main reason. The Shrew's change was the outcome of their most recent quarrel. Sister-in-law had been feeling unhappy ever since her husband's death. One day she brooded long over her sad state. She was only twenty-one and already a widow with a mother-in-law who treated her like dirt. How many more years must she endure before she could win a better life? Was there any hope for her? The more she brooded the sadder she felt and the result was she grew despondent and spiritless in her work. The Shrew had no sympathy with the young widow's moods. Employing her usual mother-in-law's high-handed airs, she berated the girl sorely. This time Sister-in-law was too upset to care about the consequences and put up a stiff fight. They quarrelled violently and the Shrew got some hard words from Sister-in-law. Her neck puffed out in rage, the Shrew raised her arm to strike, but then she thought better of it. Stamping angrily, she rushed out of the house to air her grievances to the old women on the street.

"That wench is really the limit. Nearly tore me to pieces today. I d like to ask her mother how a daughter should treat her elders. I'll have to give her a lesson." The Shrew slapped her palms and smacked her lips righteously.

But her next-door neighbour, Hsiao-po's Ma, knew that Sister-in-law was a quiet sensible girl who would never dare cross her mother-in-law if she hadn't been pushed beyond endurance. This quarrel must have been started by the Shrew. As the Shrew went on ranting, Hsiao-po's Ma said:

"It's time you changed that temper of yours, Aunt Li. Be honest, what's wrong with your daughter-in-law? You'll not find a finer woman anywhere in the village, and she does all your household work. As the saying goes, 'It's hard to keep guests when there's no wine in the pot.' Your son's dead and his widow's young. If you fuss so much that she leaves you, how will you get another good daughter-in-law?"

Another neighbour also said, "Count your blessings, Aunt. Who does all the work for you? Nowadays young people are free to arrange their own marriages. If she decides to remarry and leave your household, there's nothing you can do." At that the women dispersed.

The Shrew had meant to let off steam a little but she somehow ended up in the wrong. Cupping her fat double chin, she stared at the ground woodenly. "The world has changed," she told herself sadly.

2

One afternoon when the setting sun made a pattern of gold on the western wall, Sister-in-law returned from the district after listening to a talk on the question of free choice in marriage. On the street a young cowherd cracked his whip over his flock. A calf dashed out of line to frolic by the roadside but when the whip cracked returned to its mother's side. As the flock left the village, the oxen ambled towards the tall green hills beyond.

Frowning thoughtfully, Sister-in-law told herself, I'm just like a calf driven by the whip. When will the driving end, though? . . . The comrade at the district had said, "It is lawful and right for a widow to remarry." The sentence kept turning in Sister-in-law's head. She threw herself down on the bed as soon as she got home and started thinking of her future.

Remarry! That's it, I must remarry. I can't stand life in this house any longer. But how was she to carry out this plan? It started another battle in her mind. The comrade from the district was right of course when he said, "Only when young people make their own choice can there be happiness in marriage." She remembered that she was still a child when her mother betrothed her in exchange for three hundred catties of grain. But how she had suffered in the Li household. Now her husband was dead. If she had been able to choose for herself, she wouldn't have come to such a past. Shall I let my mother choose a husband for me again? I'll still suffer if I get a mother-in-law like the Shrew. Suppose I choose a husband myself? But how can one talk of such things with a man? The widow lay in bed, musing. After

much thought she came to the conclusion that only Hsiao-lu could help her.

He's a fine young man and works very well in the fields. If I marry him we'll probably be happy. What made Sister-in-law think of Hsiao-lu? Here's the reason.

Hsiao-lu came from a poor family too. In the old days his family of four depended solely on his father who was a hired hand. When what he earned was not enough, the mother took Hsiao-lu and his baby sister begging. By the time Hsiao-lu was eleven, his father felt it was too degrading for a boy his age to go begging and sent him to be cowherd for the landlord. That was how the boy became a hired hand and he remained one until the land reform in 1946 gave the family six *mou* of land. For the first time, Hsiao-lu began to work on his own land.

A poor man could have little ambitions in the old society. Hsiao-lu, exhausted after working for the landlord all day long, had little energy to think much of anything, though he was a good-looking lad and even-tempered. Only during the slack winter season, did the young men of the village have time to gather together, but then Hsiao-lu was always among them. During the Spring Festival he was an enthusiastic member of the lantern dance team; even before liberation he was already a much-liked lad. When the area was liberated, a militia was set up and Hsiao-lu and his young chums were the first to join.

In 1947 he and the other young men took the lead in forming temporary mutual-aid teams. Hsiao-lu and the Shrew's son, Li Chung, were in one team. As Li was very young, his family's land was more than he could cope with. The Shrew therefore often asked Hsiao-lu to work on their plot longer than usual. Hsiao-lu had no one to sew and mend for him, so he often asked Sister-in-law to help him. In this way the two families carried mutual help a step further than just farming. Occasionally, when everyone was busy and Hsiao-lu's mother couldn't get the mid-day meal ready for him in time, Hsiao-lu ate with the Lis. On festivals when every family prepared special food to celebrate, Sister-in-law went to the Changs to help Hsiao-lu's

mother knead dough or make dumplings. Mrs. Chang was old and had lost her sight, she was unable to do much. In this way Hsiao-lu and Sister-in-law became good friends. When a piece of cloth was left over from making Hsiao-lu's jacket, Sister-in-law didn't bother to return it. She knew him enough to know she could use it to make a pair of uppers for her own shoes. On the other hand, when Hsiao-lu had no lining cloth for shoes, Sister-in-law rummaged in her sewing basket and made up the shoes for him with cloth of her own.

Hsiao-lu was after all a grown man. It had entered his head that he had no one to take care of him and here was Sister-in-law as kind as could be. But they always kept a distance between them. He felt sure she would remarry someday. But to whom? He had no idea. Once or twice he longed to ask her about her feelings on this subject, but being a simple honest lad he was afraid to start anything. Everyone knew what a virago the Shrew was; what if he stirred up that hornet's nest? Thus, although Hsiao-lu many times wanted to talk to Sister-in-law, he ended up by saying nothing.

One evening after supper as twilight fell, an oil lamp was lit in the Shrew's hall, brightening the whole room. Hsiao-lu sat smoking by the table.

"Come and try on your shoes," Sister-in-law beckoned from the door. He followed her to the east room.

"I didn't have proper lining material for this pair, so I tore up an old shirt and used it," said Sister-in-law passing him a pair of new cloth shoes, her eyes on his face. Full of gratitude, Hsiao-lu took the shoes, at a loss for words. He beamed at the handsome sturdy shoes. Sister-in-law drew closer. Placing one hand on his shoulder and pointing to the new shoes with the other, she said, "People always say you can't turn out fine work if you're in a hurry. I know you need new shoes so I made these as fast as I could, working under the lamp at night. I'm afraid they're poorly done."

Hsiao-lu laid the shoes on the bed, then picked them up again. He seemed reluctant to let them out of his

hands. There was a warm gladness in his heart. Turning to gaze at Sister-in-law, he found her smiling at him. He was more at a loss for words than ever. His whole body burned as if with fever. When he touched his forehead, to his surprise it was quite dry.

"Sister-in-law," he finally blurted, "you've been very good to me. With my mother unable to see, who'd have bothered about me if it weren't for you?"

"Your mother's old and blind but why don't you get yourself a wife?" Sister-in-law smiled at him from the bed.

"Why, who'd want to marry a poor fellow like me?" Hsiao-lu sounded helpless.

"You've got land and a house now, all you need is a wife. You'll have to marry sooner or later."

"That's easy to say. How can I get married without any money?"

"Today everyone is free to choose his own mate and no money is involved. I think you ought to find someone."

"I'd like to look for a bride, but I don't know where."

Sister-in-law couldn't repress a laugh, but she said no more. She could see Hsiao-lu was hinting at something and she began to ponder. Shall I open the subject? No, she felt too shy to do that. But she'd have to speak eventually — why not now? Trying to think of what to say, she lowered her head and lapsed into thought.

Hsiao-lu also told himself that her words were significant. Perhaps he ought to ask her outright. But what if a wrong word should bungle the whole thing? He too lowered his head in thought.

Sitting thus, they looked like little pupils who'd forgotten their lesson when called on to recite. Except for the scuffling of mice somewhere above, silence reigned in the room. The lamp on the table flickered wildly in the wind, as if winking at them merrily. At last the girl looked up. Her heart said, ever since the comrade in the district said it's right and lawful for a widow to remarry, I've wanted to marry you. But her lips made no sound.

He looked up too while she wasn't noticing. I've longed to talk to you of marriage, he was thinking, but every time I choked back the words for fear of rousing your mother-in-law's anger.

The silence soon became unbearable. Sister-in-law walked to the door, looked out to make sure there was no one around, then came back to sit by Hsiao-lu's side. "I'm going to remarry," she whispered close to his ear. Hsiao-lu nodded his sympathy. She continued, "What about you?"

Hsiao-lu was befuddled. Does she mean I must find someone else to do my sewing and mending? he wondered. Aloud, he asked, "Where do you intend to go?"

"Well, I intend to. . . ." She had meant to say "go with you," but how could she utter these words? From her face, Hsiao-lu realized it was difficult for her to finish the sentence.

Understanding finally dawned on him. He too went to the door to make sure no one was listening, then came back and said, "Sister-in-law, let's be frank. I like everything about you. I've wanted to talk to you about marriage long ago but I was afraid you weren't willing. If it didn't work out and your mother-in-law got wind of it, it would not have been good for either of us. That was why I have been silent."

At last Sister-in-law was sure that Hsiao-lu cared for her too. How groundless were her own fears and hesitations. Yes, Hsiao-lu was the man for her. A strange emotion filled her heart, tender yet sad. Holding his hands tightly in hers, she looked into his eyes while her tears dripped onto his chest.

3

After their heart-to-heart talk, Hsiao-lu and Sister-in-law grew even closer. For Hsiao-lu, she was the one and only; for Sister-in-law he was her mainstay and only hope in life. The two young people felt a deep longing if they didn't see each other everyday. Sister-in-law's little room became a home to Hsiao-lu; he had to spend a few minutes

there everyday or else he was unhappy. Sister-in-law's whole heart was filled with Hsiao-lu, and her thoughts followed him to the fields while she busied herself at home. If Hsiao-lu was delayed, Sister-in-law would say, "Mother, I'm going over to see if Aunt Chang has recovered from her illness." Then she'd trot off to look for Hsiao-lu. As time went by, it was only natural that people began to suspect there was something between them.

Ever since the Shrew had been told off by her neighbours, she had been battling in her mind. The Li family had always been respectable, she thought. She should not let her daughter-in-law attend the literacy class. It was held at night and many of the village's young men were in it. But if she restricted her freedom so that the wilful girl should leave her, she'd never be able to find another fine and capable daughter-in-law to serve her.

In order to keep the girl, the Shrew changed her tactics. She began to treat her daughter-in-law better. Even her tone of voice softened. Whenever the family had an especially good meal, she let her daughter-in-law share it. She also curbed her temper somewhat. For the first time in the five years since Sister-in-law married into the family she occasionally got a kind look from her mother-in-law.

One afternoon returning from the market, the Shrew plunked herself down on the *kang*. She cut a length of fine black cloth into two and said, "See, I'm not the least bit partial. You and Chung each get one piece. You two are my only care. Who else have I got? After all both of you are my flesh and blood. Why should I be partial?" The Shrew sounded so kind and like a real mother that Sister-in-law wondered whether the sun had risen in the west that day.

One day Sister-in-law returned from washing clothes by the river to find the hall full of people. The Shrew had bought in a jar of fragrant, bubbling wine and some villagers were examining it. Laughter and merriment soon filled the room, but Sister-in-law didn't bother to listen. She quietly slipped away to her own room in the east wing. Li Seven and the other rogues got wind of the

new wine and gathered in the evening. The Shrew poured them cup after cup and they drank heartily until midnight.

After the Shrew had barred the door behind the last departing guest, she thought she heard voices in the east wing. Suspicious, she peered through the window and saw there was still light in her daughter-in-law's room. She edged closer to listen. Yes, two people were talking.

"We can marry in the autumn," said a woman's voice. "By then the harvest will be in and we won't have to worry about entertaining a few guests."

"Anyway our minds are made up," said a man's voice. "Does it matter much when we actually get married?"

"Better to get married and be really settled," said the woman. "This way we're neither one thing nor another. People who don't understand might say we're behaving improperly."

The man said, "Don't worry. It's no sin for a man to come and see the woman he loves. As long as we two are willing, your mother-in-law can't stop us from marrying."

The Shrew recognized the voices of Sister-in-law and Hsiao-lu. She got so angry that a lump gathered in her breast and she panted like a buffalo. Afraid that the two inside might hear her, she covered her mouth with one hand to muffle the noise she was making. But this made it so difficult to breathe that she was forced to return to the hall. "Marry! Ha, we'll see if you marry!" she fumed.

From then on, she watched Hsiao-lu and Sister-in-law closely. Though she did not try anything in the open, she planned secretly to break up the lovers.

Though Hsiao-lu and Sister-in-law were not yet married their relationship was moving along like a south lake water buffalo — calm and steady. By April, the two were seeing a great deal of each other.

One day, the head of Yang Village returned from a meeting in the district to announce that a stretcher team was to be organized to serve in the war of liberation for six months. The following day, the villagers got busy preparing the stretchers and getting things ready. The team was to set out the next day. As day turned into night and the sparrows in the bamboo grove twittered like noisy squabbling children, the militia's whistle resounded throughout the village. People gathered at militia headquarters for a meeting. The village head explained the reason for sending a stretcher team. No sooner had he finished than Li Wen, secretary of the Communist Party branch, stood up and volunteered to serve as a stretcher bearer. He announced that he was determined to fulfil the task with honour. The atmosphere in the room was solemn. He was followed by several young men who volunteered also.

Sitting on a log, Hsiao-lu struggled with himself mentally. Should I volunteer too? That means I'll be gone six months and won't be able to get married in the autumn. Suppose I stay quiet then. But how can I? I'm a militiaman, I must. . . . He finally stood up. "Count me in too. I must defend this good life liberation has brought us!"

There were fifteen volunteers in all. When the meeting adjourned, the stretcher bearers were asked to remain. Arrangements were made to help their families with work in the fields during their absence. Hsiao-lu slipped away to break the news to his beloved.

Sister-in-law was awakened from her dreams that night when Hsiao-lu came to her door unexpectedly. Her heart turned over when she learnt that he was going on the morrow. But as he'd already volunteered, she could hardly stop him.

"How are we to get married this autumn then?" she merely asked.

Hsiao-lu was baffled for a minute, then he said soothingly, "We'll marry at the New Year then."

"You know that rogue Li Seven has been making eyes at me," said Sister-in-law. "He's a bad one. What shall I do when you're gone?"

"Never mind him. If he comes again, just ignore him." Hsiao-lu then went home to bed.

Early the next morning, the whole literacy class gathered at the west edge of the village to send the stretcher team off to the front. Fifteen young militiamen filed past in a straight line. Hsiao-lu brought up the rear, a greyish blanket under his arm. He turned to look for Sister-in-law's slim figure when they were nearly out of the village. Yes, she was still there staring after him. Hsiao-lu waved, meaning for her to go back, but she didn't seem to understand. She stood watching fixedly and did not leave until he was out of sight.

4

Young people are bound to be impatient. Hsiao-lu's departure left Sister-in-law feeling forlorn and ill at ease. She was unable to hide her feelings from prying eyes.

Ever since that night when the Shrew overheard her daughter-in-law discuss marriage with Hsiao-lu, she was ready to burst with anger. Noticing that the young woman was pining for the militiaman, she grew more indignant, and resumed her scolding and ranting.

One day she started to shout at the dog for fighting with the cat. "You beast," she screamed. "You go out on all-night orgies and then come back to make trouble. I'll let you off this time, but next time I'll give it to you."

This was obviously meant for Sister-in-law. The poor girl could hardly listen unmoved. She packed a few things and went home to her mother.

The Shrew's third son Li Chung had also gone with the stretcher team. After her daughter-in-law left, she was all by herself in the house. With nothing much to do all day long, she spent her time thinking of a way to stop the girl from marrying Hsiao-lu. Finally she hit upon a plan. She would take advantage of Hsiao-lu's absence to persuade his old mother to arrange a match for him with another girl. Her plans mapped out, the Shrew started going to the Changs frequently.

One hot day when the southwesterly wind blew in a fiery air, the Shrew was driven out of doors by the stifling heat. Waving a plantain leaf fan, she ambled down the street. A group of women were sitting under the big locust tree outside Hsiao-lu's house, some twisting hemp thread, others stitching cloth shoes. Even Hsiao-lu's nearly blind mother was not idle. Groping with her hands, she was chopping vegetables.

When the Shrew arrived no one said anything. The Shrew chose a cool stone slab and sat herself down. As she waved her fan leisurely, she eyed the others busily at work. The Shrew was fond of bragging. Since she knew how to make money, she considered herself cleverer than

the ordinary housewives. Under the locust tree with so many women gathered, here was another chance for her to indulge in her favourite pastime. She went on about her accomplishments for a long time before she finally led up to the subject she had in mind.

"Sister Chang," said she to Hsiao-lu's mother. "You're getting on in years. Isn't it time you get a wife for Hsiao-lu? Why should you have to grope around doing your household chores." The Shrew was full of sympathy for the hard lot of Mrs. Chang. Engrossed in her task, Mrs. Chang's hands stopped in mid-air when she heard herself addressed. When she realized it was the Shrew's voice, she put down her knife and picked up the hem of her jacket to wipe her red sightless eyes.

"Aunt Li," said she in the direction of the Shrew's voice, "I've been thinking about that too. It's so difficult to find a suitable person though. If you'll take pity on an old woman, please help me arrange a match for my Hsiao-lu."

Since the other women knew that Hsiao-lu was friendly with Sister-in-law and marriage between them was probable, none of them said anything. There was a Mrs. Sun, however, who was a silly, muddle-headed sort.

"If you don't mind my butting in, Aunt," she offered eagerly, "I'll make a good match for Brother Hsiao-lu."

"That would be wonderful," Mrs. Chang answered delightedly. "If you are successful I'll treat you to a fine carp dinner." Mrs. Chang realized that her family was not well off, and she added quickly, "Any kind of a match will do. We're not particular. We're poor and can't afford to be choosy."

The Shrew saw that Mrs. Chang was very anxious to get a daughter-in-law. Things look hopeful, she told herself.

"Now Mrs. Sun," she said encouragingly, "you must do your best for Aunt Chang. She'll remember you always if you get her son a wife."

"Of course," said Mrs. Chang. "Once the match is made, I'll reward you well."

And so the matter was settled.

When the women went home to cook dinner, the Shrew took Mrs. Sun home, and they talked in secret. There was no eligible woman around except a thirty-eight-year-old widow of a landlord's family in a neighbouring village whose husband had died the previous year leaving two children. In dire want with no rice even for the next day's meals, she was eager to remarry.

"The only trouble is she's too old," said Mrs. Sun with regret.

"Never mind," said the Shrew. "As long as she's young enough to bear children, any wife is better than none."

This widow lived in the same village as Mrs. Sun's father. The old man was asked to talk to the widow's family about the marriage. The Shrew also asked Little Dog, whose wife came from that village, to put in a good word and encourage the match through his father-in-law. The widow's family was only too eager to agree to the marriage, asking for only a small gift of five hundred catties of grain. Mrs. Sun rushed back to consult Mrs. Chang.

"The woman has two children whom she'll bring with her to her new home. They are very poor and the family only wants five hundred catties of grain. What do you think, Aunt?" she asked.

Mrs. Chang had not placed much hope in getting a daughter-in-law. Now, all that was needed was five hundred catties of grain. It wasn't much, really. If she could make her son happy, when he came back he could easily earn much more than that. She agreed to the match at once.

"Choose an auspicious day and tell her to come to your house," suggested Mrs. Sun. "They've no food at home. This is her second marriage so there's no need to have any ceremony."

Mrs. Chang was only too glad to have help in the house as soon as possible. The suggestion met with her approval. An auspicious day was soon found in the month of June. Mrs. Chang sent two neighbours off with a cart to fetch the bride. The Shrew very kindly bustled over to the Changs to help with preparations.

Mrs. Chang felt extremely happy. "As a mother I've done my duty by my son. Now I can die in peace."

The news of Mrs. Chang getting a wife for her son spread quickly through the village. As the day drew to an end, all the neighbourhood women waited eagerly for a glimpse of the bride. The creaking of a cart was heard just before sundown. Children are always the quickest to scent news. In a few minutes, a whole flock had surrounded the cart which was covered by new matting. Young wives and old ladies of eighty all turned out. Even before the cart arrived, the yard was thronged with people.

Mrs. Chang, lighting the kitchen stove, heard the voices of the crowd outside. It was the first time so many people had ever come to her door. She couldn't help smiling to herself as she thought, a poor old woman like me, I've arranged a marriage for my son at last.

The bride was surrounded the minute she stepped out of the cart. An old woman, leaning on her stick, squeezed her way through the crowd. Peering into the bride's face she gave an exclamation of surprise, "Oh my, what a lot of wrinkles!"

When Hsiao-po's Ma had looked the bride over, she announced that the woman must be forty, at least. Some one remarked that her child was eight, how could you expect her to be a blushing young maid. There was speculation as to whether Hsiao-lu would have her when he came back.

"She's so old he'll never accept her, I'm sure," was the opinion of Hsiao-po's Ma.

When Sister-in-law returned from her visit, she heard the news even before she arrived at her own door. Not only had Hsiao-lu's mother arranged a match for him but the bride was already in his house. Sister-in-law felt cold from head to foot. What a wretch Hsiao-lu turned out to be, she thought. He spoke so sweetly; how could he do a thing like this behind my back? The more she thought the more miserable she felt. By the time she got home, she was quite sick.

A few days later Hsiao-po's Ma came visiting. Before long she was gossiping about the bride in the Chang's house. "It's ridiculous," said she indignantly. "Why pick a wife like that for her son without his knowledge? We're living in a new society. A woman of thirty-eight! There's going to be trouble when Hsiao-lu comes back. He's sure to refuse her."

Sister-in-law realized that Hsiao-lu was not to blame, and her heart softened. "Well, I'll just have to wait until he comes back."

5

Now that Mrs. Chang had a daughter-in-law, for the first time she had someone at her beck and call. It made her feel rather embarrassed. She had never enjoyed such luxury before and felt uneasy about asking another to fetch and carry for her. So instead of sitting back and enjoying herself like a real mother-in-law, she still pottered round the house. At first the new daughter-in-law wasn't quite sure about the older woman and behaved with proper manners. Soon she saw that Mrs. Chang was the meekest of souls, the kind that couldn't get up if you pushed her down, a woman without the least resemblance to the traditional mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law began to show her real face. She belittled the Chang family, grumbling that their house was small and the rooms dark and narrow.

But the main thing was she and her mother-in-law were so different. Coming from a landlord's family, the woman had lived an easy life and didn't know the meaning of thrift and industry. Her mother-in-law on the other hand had suffered so much in life that she could not tolerate waste or extravagance. Soon after the woman joined their household, Mrs. Chang noticed that she was careless and slovenly. As she had just come Mrs. Chang dared not say anything for fear it would start the neighbours gossiping. Later on, the relations between the two women grew worse

and worse. Mrs. Chang felt bad about it but could do nothing except find a secluded spot and shed tears in private. She decided to wait until Hsiao-lu returned.

"The days are long in spring; in autumn, work speeds time like wings," as the saying goes. In no time at all it was autumn harvest. Crickets chirped merrily at night, singing of the bumper harvest. The weather turned cooler with each rainfall. The northwesterly wind of early morning had a stronger nip with each approaching day. Hsiao-lu had been gone nearly six months but there was no letter from him. Mrs. Chang longed for her son's return all through autumn; the daughter-in-law was giving her a hard time and she dreamed of Hsiao-lu often. Too upset to remain by herself, the dim-sighted Mrs. Chang sometimes groped her way to the neighbours and whiled away her time there. Thus the days went by until November.

At last Hsiao-lu returned. It was past nine o'clock when he reached the village. A light was still shining in his house. He found his mother silently brooding alone. The supper dishes were lying around beside the stove.

"Hello mother, aren't you in bed yet?"

Mrs. Chang had just quarrelled with her daughter-in-law over a matter of New Year shopping. She had been so upset that she couldn't swallow her supper, but had sat there wondering how she could go on living with the nasty woman. When she saw her son, everything else was forgotten. She was down from the *kang* in a flash, lovingly grasping Hsiao-lu's tunic with one hand while caressing his face with the other. "Why have you been away for so many years, my son?" she asked.

"You've got the time all wrong, Mother," said Hsiao-lu, putting his bedding down on the *kang*. "It's only been six months."

With her son by her side, Mrs. Chang felt that all her woes were gone. She told Hsiao-lu how the family had fared during his absence. At the very end she said, "Son, your mother has done her best for you. After you went away, mother racked her brains and succeeded in getting

you a wife by paying five hundred catties of grain. Now our family will be able to have heirs."

Hsiao-lu's heart filled with sweetness at the word wife. His first reaction was that Sister-in-law had come to live in his house. Though his mother went on with a lot of other details, not a word entered his head. All he heard was that he now had a wife, who he took for granted must be the one in his heart. Mrs. Chang made him eat a bit of supper, then sent him to his own room. His heart on wings, Hsiao-lu carried his bedding into the west room.

He lit the lamp as soon as he entered. On the bed was a woman and two children. Drawing nearer he was astounded to see a stranger in his bed. Where had she come from? Who brought her into the house while he was away? Hsiao-lu was consumed with fury. Picking up his bedding, he strode off to Sister-in-law's house.

6

The Li's gate was already barred. Hsiao-lu paced around for a while, then scaled the wall.

"Open the door," he called softly under Sister-in-law's window. In bed but not yet asleep, Sister-in-law heard the footsteps outside and thought it was Li Seven coming again to pester her. The next moment however she made out Hsiao-lu's voice. She rushed to unbar the door. Hsiao-lu gripped her hands and whispered, "Don't be frightened, it's me."

Sister-in-law lit the lamp. She feasted her eyes on the young man, sturdy and strong in khaki uniform. Why have you come only now? her heart was asking, though no words formed on her lips. Instead, a lump rose in her throat, her eyes smarted and tears flowed in a stream. Clinging to Hsiao-lu's big hands, she sobbed with relief.

Hsiao-lu had felt furious at the sight of the stranger in his room. Now Sister-in-law's tears made him feel even more wretched. It was as if he had swallowed twenty-five mice in one gulp, his heart was torn by a hundred claws.

He did his best to console Sister-in-law and at last stopped her tears.

There are always a thousand and one things to say when lovers meet again after a separation. The two young people had not seen each other for more than six months; there was no end of endearments to murmur. Sister-in-law wanted to know what was to be done now that his family had got him a wife.

"Whoever arranged the marriage will have to be responsible," said Hsiao-lu. "I don't acknowledge her as my wife."

"But won't it prevent us from getting married?"

"That's all right. All we have to do is explain it to the district office."

The two talked until the cocks' crow, then Hsiao-lu left to find a temporary lodging for himself. Thereafter he went home only rarely.

Mrs. Chang was bothered by the fact that Hsiao-lu was not sleeping at home. Why did her son stay out now that he had a wife?

One day when Hsiao-lu went home to fetch something, his mother called him into her room. "Where have you been, Son?" she asked. "Why don't you live at home?"

"There's no place for me here," said Hsiao-lu.

His mother could see that he was displeased. "What place do you want?" she asked hurriedly. "You might not think much of your wife, but it wasn't easy for me to get you this woman."

"Since you've brought her into the house, there's nothing I can do. But if you want me to accept her as a wife, it's absolutely impossible." Hsiao-lu stood up.

"But that's unreasonable. She's here now. How can you take her or leave her just as you please?" Mrs. Chang was getting very upset.

"Whoever asked for her can have her. Anyway, I don't want her."

Mrs. Chang became angry and raised her voice. "Did you learn to be unreasonable in those six months away

from home? How can you refuse a wife selected by your mother?" But after a pause she calmed down and said, "Come Son, you know how it is. You'll have to make do with your wife. A worker is hired by the day, a hired hand by the year, and a marriage is arranged for life. If you refuse to have her, what will become of the woman?"

"That's easy. Just tell her to go!"

The argument between mother and son waxed so long that neighbours drifted in to see what was wrong. The yard was again crowded just as on the day the bride came in the cart. The only difference was that then Mrs. Chang's face was wreathed in smiles and full of joy while now her face was clouded with trouble and full of wrinkles.

"Come and say a just word," Hsiao-lu's mother implored the neighbours. "Is it right for Hsiao-lu to refuse the wife his mother got him?"

There were many different opinions but it seemed more people sympathized with Hsiao-lu than with his mother. Only a few old grannies took the mother's side.

After the others had gone, Kuei-hsiang, chairman of the village's women's association, talked a long time to Mrs. Chang about the advantages of marriages by free choice. "I didn't know beforehand of this marriage you arranged," she said. "I'm afraid you've done something very foolish, Aunt. You shouldn't have selected an old widow for your son of twenty-four. Of course he's unwilling. Why, even we women don't like her."

Mrs. Chang knew that Kuei-hsiang was right. Yes, her daughter-in-law was too old, but now that the rice was cooked what could they do?

7

After this quarrel with his mother, Hsiao-lu came home even less often. His visits to Sister-in-law became more frequent and less of a secret. Some people found these calls objectionable, particularly the rogue, Li Seven.

In the old days, Li Seven used to be a landlord's bully. He was always chasing after women and no one in the whole village liked him. After the liberation, the landlords were overthrown and Li Seven found it necessary to behave himself.

Recently, however, he began resorting to his old tricks. He had tried to get gay with Sister-in-law whenever the Shrew was away, however, he received nothing but curses from the young woman. Still the scoundrel was very persistent.

One evening, while the Li family was at supper, he sneaked into the young widow's room and hid under her bed. At about ten, Sister-in-law barred the door to retire. Li Seven clambered out from under the bed, cobwebs in his hair and dirt all over his face. The poor woman thought it was a ghost until the rogue revealed his identity with a wicked laugh.

"How dare you come into my room in the middle of the night?" asked Sister-in-law indignantly.

"I pine for you everyday, Sister. I had to come," said the rogue with a leer.

"If you don't get out at once," said Sister-in-law, "I'll yell."

Afraid she would make a commotion and wake up the neighbours the rogue encircled her waist with one arm and tried to cover her mouth with his hand. Sister-in-law snatched up a pair of scissors from the table. Aiming it at the rogue's throat, she said, "I'll fight you to the death!"

No hero, the rogue didn't care to be hurt. Frightened by the weapon in the woman's hand, he quickly released her and scampered out of the door.

From that time on, Li Seven began to hate Sister-in-law. He vowed he'd catch her with Hsiao-lu some day and shame her in public. He wanted revenge for his thwarted designs.

"Aunt, we shouldn't let Hsiao-lu lord it over us," he said to the Shrew one day. "He has a wife. Why should he come after our family's young widow? It's not right."

The rogue raised his eyebrows and distended his triangular eyes.

"I don't like their carrying on either. But I'm only a woman, what can I do?" The Shrew feigned a helpless manner.

"You had better do something. Under present government policy, a woman can remarry and take her land with her. You'll lose a daughter-in-law and her property too."

"Have you got any ideas?"

"This happens to be a good time. As Hsiao-lu's wife still hasn't been sent away, we can accuse Hsiao-lu of being tired of her and seducing another man's widow. It's a bad enough offence to put him in his place."

The Shrew was pleased. She admitted to the rogue that it was she who had asked Mrs. Sun to arrange the marriage for Hsiao-lu.

"After all, we belong to the same Li family," said Li Seven. "I'm your friend, or else I would not have mentioned the matter to you. Let's wait for a chance to carry out our scheme."

One day a fierce north wind brought so much sand that the sky was dark. A yellow mist swirled over the ground and particles of sand lashed at one's face so that it was impossible to walk. Peasants working on the hillside ran home to take cover. Every house closed its doors. Hsiao-lu was out selling oil for the co-op that day. Because all doors were closed, he could not find a single customer. Taking his wares back to the co-op, he decided to close for the day. Since he had no more work to do, his legs instinctively took him into Sister-in-law's house.

"What a windy day. The whirling dust makes one quite dizzy," said Sister-in-law, rising to greet him.

"I had a hard time selling oil. Nearly got blown away."

"I've finished that jacket for you. It's a cold day, why don't you put it on?" Sister-in-law spoke with gentle concern as she dusted the sand from his shoulders.

The Shrew had been cleaning her room. When she saw Hsiao-lu enter, she hastily covered her head with a kerchief and, braving the wind and sand, went straight to Li

Seven. In a few minutes she had collected him, Little Dog and several other idlers from the street. Marching at the head of this odd procession, the Shrew strode into her daughter-in-law's room. They found Hsiao-lu sitting on a stool and Sister-in-law helping him try on the new jacket. The Shrew snatched up the garment.

"You bully," she shouted. "I won't let you take advantage of us women!" She then threw herself down on the ground, opened her dust-bin mouth and began to wail loudly.

This came like a bolt from heaven. The young lovers were stunned. Li Seven and Little Dog had followed the Shrew into the room. The Shrew began to put on her act in earnest. "Look, kind folks," she wailed to the rogues she had collected. "Hsiao-lu comes to our house to bully and take advantage of us poor widows." She then went on wailing and appealing to heaven.

"Don't cry," said Li Seven. "What are you afraid of? Haven't we got the government to uphold justice? Nobody can be unreasonable in the liberated areas."

Hsiao-lu was angered to see the rogue assuming the role of the upholder of justice. "Where do you come in?" he asked, taking a step closer. "Who's done anything for you to criticize?" Li Seven was set on making trouble. At Hsiao-lu's challenge he assumed more of a righteous air. "Let me tell you, Hsiao-lu, you're not big enough to play the bully in this village. Don't you have a wife of your own? Why don't you stick to her instead of seducing other women?'

Hsiao-lu stepped forward to hit him, but the rogue quickly pulled the Shrew out of the door; together they hurried towards the district office.

The district office was only some six *li* from Yang Village and the two got there in half an hour. The district head happened to be away at a meeting but Yu, the assistant chief, was in the office with a clerk. The Shrew flopped herself down on the door-step and, beating the ground with her hands, burst into wild wails as if bloody murder had been committed.

"Have mercy on us, oh chief of the district. I'm a poor old widow who's been bullied."

This made Yu, the assistant, feel that something terrible had happened. He hurriedly helped the old woman to her feet and seated her on a chair. "Don't cry, Aunt," he said soothingly. "Tell us everything and the government will see to it that you get justice."

The Shrew began to spin the yarn she made up on the way, concluding with, "That Hsiao-lu will be the death of me yet!" She burst into another fit of howling and shed more false tears.

"I'm only a neighbour," chimed in Li Seven to season the Shrew's tale, "but I m indignant at the injustice. Hsiao-lu is a rascal. Not content with one wife, he's openly carrying on with a young widow!"

"When did Hsiao-lu get married?" Yu asked Li Seven.

"I can't remember the exact date. Anyway their children are quite big already."

"Where's the man at this moment?" Yu turned to ask the Shrew.

"He's still sitting in my house and refusing to go away. If you don't help me, Chief, I'll really be tormented to death." The Shrew started to wail afresh.

Yu's job in the district office was to handle accounts and finances. He was a young man and inexperienced in handling cases of family relations. But as the district chief was away at the countyseat on some business, he had to act in his place. With the Shrew wailing and sobbing into his ears and an eye-witness backing her up, he was quite carried away by her tale. His face flushed with anger.

We support the emancipation of women and women's rights. I must not let that rascal Hsiao-lu go unpunished. The government should help down-trodden women. If this old woman is driven to an early grave by that bully, the government will have to be responsible. . . . Having told himself this, he stood up. Without further ado, he assured the Shrew, "Don't you worry, Aunt. We'll look into this right away." He dispatched a messenger for Hsiao-lu.

Sister-in-law began having fearful premonitions as soon as her mother-in-law left for the district office. She didn't want a lawsuit over her head. "What shall we do?" she asked Hsiao-lu, very much worried. "What if she's really gone to complain about us at the district office?"

"We haven't done anything wrong," said Hsiao-lu after some thought. "Why should we be afraid? If they call us to the district, so much the better. We can explain things to the district chief and then register to get married."

They were still discussing what to say and how to prepare for their wedding when the messenger arrived from the district. Hsiao-lu accompanied him without a moment's hesitation.

8

That afternoon, Yu, the assistant district chief, announced that Hsiao-lu had been taken temporarily into custody. The Shrew was overjoyed. Coming home, she heaped her daughter-in-law with invective. Swinging her hips and spitting curses, she said, "Nowadays people are getting so free that there's no decency left. You can go where you like but don't think I'll put up with your disgraceful behaviour."

Sister-in-law felt that she was no match for the old Shrew's whirlwind tirade. She got through the evening somehow and the next morning left for her mother's.

Sister-in-law told her mother all about her difficulties with her mother-in-law, her love for Hsiao-lu and what happened to him. Mrs. Liu herself was an old feudal head. What her daughter told her was not news any more; scraps of gossip had flitted to her ears from time to time. Now she launched into a lecture on the need for chastity in widows.

"You've brought this trouble on yourself," she said. "Didn't your husband's family feed you and clothe you? Why have you behaved so shamelessly? When your brother hears of this, he won't like it."

Sister-in-law was chilled to the heart. Tears welled up in her eyes. It seemed she would get no support from her own family. But she made a last appeal to her mother. "Do you want me to remain a widow for life when I'm still so young? I have many years yet before me."

Mrs. Liu quivered with rage. "Why, you shameless hussy," she said, pointing angrily at her daughter. "How can you disgrace our family so? Your father suffered hunger and cold rather than stoop to anything low. Your brother is the village head now. Your disgraceful conduct will make it difficult for him to raise his head in public."

Mrs. Liu's harsh words reduced her daughter to a fit of weeping. Seeing that it was hopeless to count on help from this quarter, Sister-in-law pulled herself together and rose to leave. Mrs. Liu however had not quite finished. She followed her daughter to the door to admonish again, "Now behave like a proper widow when you go back; don't do anything disgraceful again."

Li Seven was sitting in their courtyard when Sister-in-law reached home. He rolled his eyes at her. Sister-in-law went to her room. As she put her things on the bed she heard the Shrew ask the rogue outside, "Have you heard how Hsiao-lu's case is going?"

Li sneered. "He's getting what he deserves. He'll probably be sentenced to death, or at least several years in gaol."

This conversation was meant for Sister-in-law's ears and it had its effect. She felt all choking and burning inside as if someone had thrust a bunch of straw into her heart. To whom could she turn for help? Her own family was obviously no use; her mother had scolded and called her bad names. The government had taken Hsiao-lu into custody and she had no idea what would happen. She would have to go on being a poor, hopeless widow. It was bad enough living with her mother-in-law before this happened;

now life would be even more unbearable. The more she thought, the more hopeless her situation appeared. There was simply nothing she could look forward to in life. She dried her tears, steeled herself and brought out a jar of lye from under the bed.

A kindly woman neighbour was strolling with her toddler in the yard outside Sister-in-law's room. She caught a glimpse of the widow pouring lye into a bowl and putting the bowl to her lips. Leaving the toddler, she dashed across the yard. By the time she reached the young widow's side and snatched the bowl out of her hands, half of its contents were gone. "Help, help," cried the kind woman, stamping in exasperation and worry. She immediately sent her elder son to fetch the village officials.

When Kuei-hsiang, the women's chairman, and the village head arrived with several others, the yard was thronged with people. The kind neighbour described to them how the poor widow had poisoned herself. Sister-in-law lay senseless on a mat, her jacket stained with the white bean liquid which the others had forced down her throat as an antidote to the lye. Her sunny, pretty face was now pale and wan, and she stared into the sky with a glazed look.

"Glad you've come," said the neighbour woman. "We've given her plenty of bean liquid. She's already out of danger."

The village head thanked the neighbours for their quick action and then consulted the others as to what was to be done next. It was decided that one or two must remain to nurse the unfortunate widow. Another was sent to report the news to her mother, while the rest went to get Hsiao-lu out of custody. The Shrew was told to take good care of her daughter-in-law. By then, even the Shrew was a little frightened by the mischief she had started, and bowed meekly.

9

Let us come back to Hsiao-lu. Actually he was only questioned once at the district office by Yu, the assistant chief.

"Why don't you like your own wife and why are you having an affair with a young widow?" Yu had asked.

"I don't really have a wife. The one you mean is a woman my mother brought to the house during my absence."

"Since your mother got you a wife, you shouldn't sleep with the young widow."

"I thought our government permits free choice in marriage. Sister-in-law's family is short of man-power for farm work and I have no one to do my sewing. We became friends as members of a mutual-aid team and got to care for each other. But I'm not sleeping with anybody."

Yu, the assistant, didn't like Hsiao-lu's answers. "This affair has been going on a long time," he said coldly. "No wonder the old aunt cried so heart-brokenly when she came here. You'd better stay here a couple of days to cool off!"

Hsiao-lu was detained.

When the village head and the others arrived at the district office they went straight to the district chief, who had just returned from the countyseat. The women's chairman was the first to speak.

"We've handled something very badly in our village, Chief, and have come to criticize ourselves before you."

The district chief was baffled.

"It's a good thing to examine one's errors promptly when a mistake's been made," he said genially. "Let's discuss the mistake and try to correct it together."

"You see, we overlooked the interests of two of our fellow villagers," said the village head. "We, as village officials, were bureaucratic and it nearly cost a life. We think we deserve punishment."

Although his visitors looked extremely grave, the district chief had no idea what wind had blown up such a tempest. The village head began from the very beginning

and told him about the love of Sister-in-law and Hsiao-lu. "As head of the village, I deserve to be criticized," he said. "Hsiao-lu's mother asked me to come and get Hsiao-lu out as soon as he was taken into custody, but I was occupied with other work and didn't have time. Because of my negligence a tragedy nearly occurred."

"We hope you will look into the case yourself," said Li Wen, the Party branch secretary. "Hsiao-lu is an honest lad of good peasant stock. We all know him very well and can vouch for his character."

"When Hsiao-lu was away with the stretcher team," said a woman neighbour, "his mother got him a wife of thirty-eight, fourteen years his senior. How do you expect him to take to such a wife?"

The chief realized that Hsiao-lu should not have been detained. From what the others said Hsiao-lu and Sister-in-law loved each other and had done no wrong. He sent for Yu.

As soon as Yu entered he saw the people from Yang Village and knew that they had come because of Hsiao-lu. All eyes were on him as he sat down, but he remained silent for a long time. Then, bringing out the notes he had made the day the Shrew came, he said: "We must view the situation fully. I suppose you people want us to release Hsiao-lu. Don't you know that he neglects his own wife and has seduced a young widow? That's a serious offence. Your village ought to teach him a lesson."

"Do you know what kind of wife he's got?" asked a woman neighbour. "His mother arranged this match without his knowledge and the woman is fourteen years his senior."

"What's this nonsense about seduction?" said Hsiao-po's Ma. "It's pure slander. I'm next door neighbour to Sister-in-law and I know all about her friendship with Hsiao-lu. It's true that they are in love, but I've never seen any sign of anything indecent between them." The woman paused. "Sister-in-law suffered plenty in the Li family from that mother-in-law of hers. She's only twenty-one. Why should she remain a widow for life?"

With everyone chiming in, Yu, the assistant chief, began to see that he had made a mistake. Sweat dripping from his brow, he finally admitted uncomfortably, "I'm afraid it was all my fault."

A cold northwesterly wind blew the next morning and the river froze solid. The district officials went to Yang Village early in the morning and called a conference of all concerned. At this meeting the two old mothers, Mrs. Liu and Mrs. Chang, were convinced that their attitude to their children's marriage had been wrong. The thirty-eight-year-old "wife" also agreed to go home, and everything ended happily.

That evening as the shadows began to fall, Hsiao-lu and Sister-in-law went back to their little east room, now redecorated as a bridal chamber.

Translated by Tang Sheng
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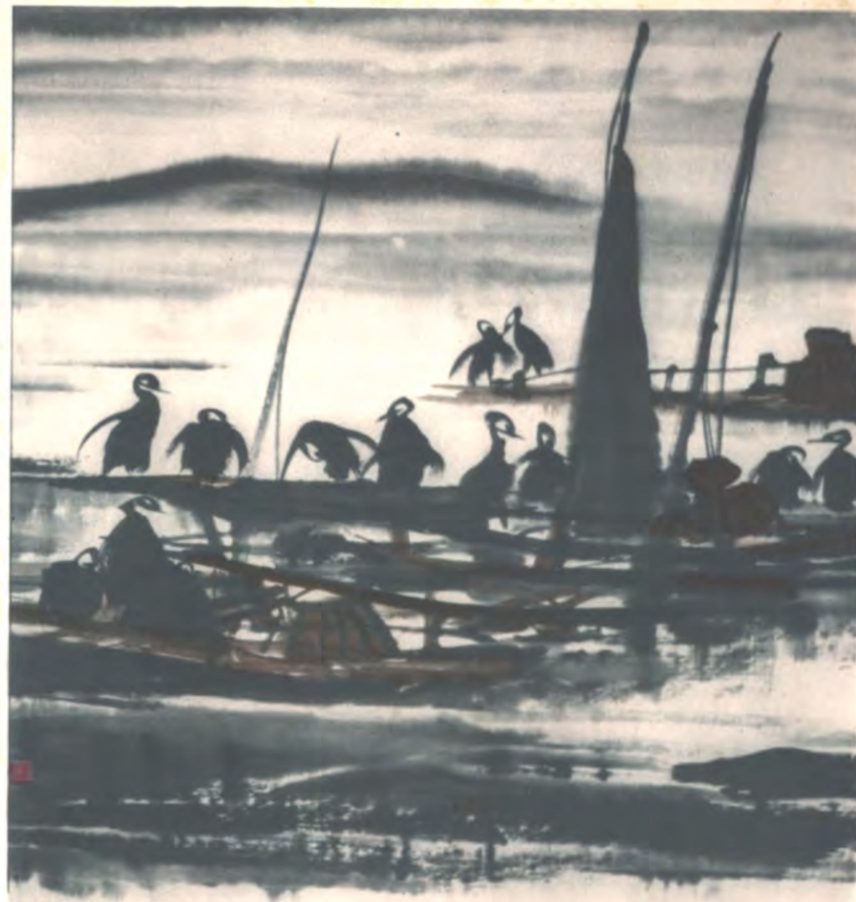
The artist was a professor of Western painting in art schools in Peking and Hangchow before the liberation. Combining Western technique with Chinese brush and ink, he created a distinct style of his own. He is now a professional painter.



TUNG CHUN-LUN
and CHIANG YUAN

The Silkworm Maid

It warmed my heart always to think of my old home. At sunset a wisp or two of pale gold cloud would lie across great Mount Yi, the evening star would shine out in the sapphire sky, while above the sharply silhouetted eastern range the heavens would be red as flame. Before long a huge, orange moon would sail up too, and by that time the white sand dunes would be dotted with villagers sitting there to enjoy the cool. . . . In the morning, when the light mist over the fields swirled like smoke beneath the brilliant sun, my mother took my younger sister and me out to gather mulberry leaves. We were free to do as we liked then: we could laugh or shout at the top of our lungs with no danger of a scolding. At home, though, mother ruled with a rod of iron: we were not allowed to raise our voices in the room where silkworms were reared, and strangers were forbidden to come in. Mother often told us: "Silkworms are sacred insects, clean and unspotted." When the eggs hatched out, the entire household was on pins and needles. I remember one year when our dozen trays of silkworms had passed their third moult: they were beautifully white and flossy.

Tung Chun-lun and Chiang Yuan who always write together, are well-known collectors and compilers of folk tales. They are also story writers.

But one day without any warning they stopped eating, dark spots appeared on them and we were at our wit's end. In desperation, mother burned incense and kowtowed, but it was no use. The whole lot died. Mother seemed heart-broken, tears ran down her cheeks, she beat her breast and wailed between her sobs:

"Silkworm Maid! Silkworm Maid! How do you expect us to live? What's to become of us?"

Ours is a mountain village where the soil is poor. We don't grow enough grain for even half the year, but depend on our silkworms for food, clothes and other necessities the rest of the time. That was why mother lavished such care on the silkworms. She got up several times at night to give them fresh leaves. I wondered whether she would sacrifice to the Silkworm Maid again that year or not. But I hadn't the heart to ask her—she was too upset. Yet when the Dragon Boat Festival came round, she made the usual dumplings of sticky rice steamed in bamboo leaves. She put a plate of these on the table in the inner room with some freshly boiled eggs. In silence she lit the incense and, just as in the past, started chanting a long-drawn-out prayer to the Silkworm Maid.

I remembered mother standing reverently, motionless, in front of the table, her face solemn, her wrinkled forehead smoother than usual. Long years of drudgery and care and countless sleepless nights had left her eyes bloodshot, but she stared as if in a trance at the wreaths of incense smoke.

All that happened twenty years ago and more. I grew up in the stormy days of the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression, and it wasn't till the last year of the war that I persuaded mother to let me join the Eighth Route Army. When I left home they were going through the earth-shaking land reform movement; but in 1947 they fell on evil days when all this good work was undone by the Kuomintang.

And then one day this year mother wrote to me saying: "Come home and see us all. You'll find some big changes. . . ."

So after a journey of seven or eight days, I returned to the village I had left so long.

It was April, when the weather is neither too hot nor too cold but just right for rearing silkworms. The mulberries were red. I picked a few and found them deliciously sweet. I was as happy as a child. My heart leapt up at the sight of each wild flower on the hillside, each boulder by the road.

I reached the gate of our house just before noon. The gourds by the wall had started climbing the trellis, and their tiny white flowers twinkled among the green leaves. Perhaps it was these familiar childhood sights that made me wonder as I crossed the threshold: "Does mother still sacrifice to the Silkworm Maid?"

Mother was cooking on a portable stove in the yard. She ran over the moment she set eyes on me, as if afraid I might disappear again.

"First thing this morning I knew this would be a lucky day—a spider fell on me! I didn't guess, though, that it meant you'd be home, dear!"

Mother looked sturdier than before, some of her wrinkles seemed to have disappeared and she had a fine healthy colour. This was the first time, to my knowledge, that I had seen her wear anything but homespun; but today she was smart in a light grey tunic and blue cotton trousers. She insisted on taking my luggage from my hand.

"You look younger, mother. Why do you still believe those old wives' tales?"

"Who believes old wives' tales?" Mother threw me a merry glance. "You're as bad as your younger sister: that's what she thinks too. I tell you, since your letter came, I've been several times a day to the end of the village to look out for you. I've been talking about you everyday to your sister and the Silkworm Maid."

I stopped short in the middle of the room. "What? The Silkworm Maid?"

Mother looked puzzled for a second, then she chuckled. "The Silkworm Maid who looked after our silkworms for us!"

Mother put my things on the *kang* in the inner room and beamed at me over her shoulder. "You'll be sleeping here with the Silkworm Maid! Your sister's feeding silkworms in our co-op. We hardly ever see her at home these days."

In the past, I remembered, for convenience' sake there had been no partition in the house: the family and the silkworms lived together. Now a paper ceiling had been made in the inner room which was spotlessly clean, and in place of the incense burner on the table there were some magazines and story books.

While mother was talking my younger sister ran in. She was a young woman now, dressed in flowered print. Despite our mutual delight at this reunion, we couldn't help but feel a little constraint after all these years. The room became considerably quieter. Mother went out to cook—I heard her using the bellows—and I told her I had eaten on the road.

"I'm just making a little soup," she said. "You can have a bowl and there'll be one for the Silkworm Maid when she comes back. That child rushed off without breakfast. She's gone fifteen or sixteen *li* on a hot day like this to Peach Village."

My younger sister turned red with vexation and exclaimed: "I suppose their old co-op chairman sent for her again!" She stole a glance at me, as if ashamed of this display of temper in front of a strange elder sister. Then hanging her head she grumbled: "It's not as if she hasn't helped them—she came back from Peach Village only yesterday. How many villages are there in this district? What's so special about the worms in his co-op? Yet he sends over every other day, wet or fine, early or late."

"She's a good-hearted girl, a well-spoken, friendly child," mother remarked from the yard. "If we didn't have the Communist Party leading us, you wouldn't find a girl from a big city coming to a little out-of-the-way place like this."

Then my sister told me that this "Silkworm Maid" who had won all hearts here was from Soochow, the city known throughout the country for fine silk embroidery. After graduating from the College of Sericulture there she had come to this mountain village to work as a "Silkworm

Doctor." At the time of her arrival not a household would allow a stranger in to see its silkworms. When they heard this "doctor" was coming, the women blocked their gates. The Silkworm Maid went from door to door, from the east of the village to the west. But none of the women apart from a few village cadres would let her in however hard she begged. She longed to be of use, but she couldn't force her services upon them!

by Pai Yun-shih

Now, her cooking finished, mother came in and told me with a chuckle: "To start with, all the village women looked down on the Silkworm Maid. Though she was introduced to us at a meeting, we couldn't somehow get used to the idea. I thought: 'A slip of a girl like that, what can she know about silkworms? How many has she reared at home?' One morning she came here wanting to see ours. To stop her bursting in, I stood in the doorway with a few in my hand. 'Look there!' I cried. 'Our silkworms are fine! Have a good look at them!' She's quick in the

uptake, that girl, and she knew at once that I didn't want her inside. She just stood there and answered pleasantly: 'I don't want to look at a handful like this, aunty. I'd like to go in and see all your trays—that's the only way to judge how well they're doing.' I was taken aback to find her so set on coming in. I blocked the doorway with both arms like this." Mother flung out her arms to show us. "I said: 'There's no need, comrade! Please don't come in!' "

My sister and I burst out laughing. Rather shamefaced, mother protested: "We were all the same in those days, I'd have you know!"

My sister said with a giggle: "How can you tell such a story against yourself?"

Mother winked at me and went on stoutly: "I'd taken a liking to her even then. I knew it must be hard for a young girl so far from home. I just didn't want her coming in to see our silkworms. . . ."

My sister spluttered with laughter. "But that very same night you sent for her, didn't you?"

"Hear that? I never knew such a girl for showing her mother up!" Not in the least displeased but determined to tell the whole story, mother went on eagerly:

"That morning when she came I wouldn't let her in. But that afternoon the silkworms stopped eating. By the evening they were changing colour. Your sister was frantic and said she'd fetch the Silkworm Maid. And it seemed our last chance. In those days she was living in Shakou Village to the east, and as soon as your sister went for her she hurried over. I held the lamp for her, spilling the oil because I was so upset. 'Never mind, don't worry!' she told me. 'They'll be all right.' She sieved a little lime on to the trays till my heart went pit-a-pat! Wouldn't the tiny creatures be burned up? But then I thought: It's drastic measures or nothing! Presently she spread a fresh layer of mulberry leaves on top of the lime. When the silkworms had crawled on she told me to change the leaves. And would you believe it—the next morning they were as good as ever!" I could tell from mother's expression how overjoyed she must have been. She went on, obviously speaking from the heart: "In rushing over here that evening she wet both feet in the brook, but she didn't breathe a word about it. It was too bad!" Mother talked as if she were scolding a naughty child. "It wasn't till next morning that I found her shoes were wet."

Mother stopped talking to listen for footsteps outside.

I pricked up my ears too, but the only sounds were the brook burbling past our house and the birds singing in the trees. She turned to me, disappointed and rather worried. "She ought to be back by this time."

"Don't worry," said my sister confidently. "She won't go hungry, wherever she is."

Mother agreed. "The year before last when the time came to collect the cocoons, she was nearly pulled to pieces by people asking her out for a meal, offering her a bowl of millet or a cup of wine. They all wanted to say 'thank you.' Yes, if not for her how could one tray produce seventy catties of cocoons? Such a thing was unheard of in the old days."

That started a discussion of silkworm rearing, and they told me our village co-op had built a house for the silkworms where they were rearing over a hundred trays. The co-op had a nursery garden too, and this year they had raised over a hundred thousand mulberry seedlings to plant on the hills.

Since my sister had to hurry off to feed the silkworms, mother and I went out to see her off.

The sun was setting by the time the Silkworm Maid came back. With her were four or five children, holding her hands or clinging to her dress. She was younger than I had imagined, with a fresh, rosy face, fine eyebrows and large eyes. She looked dainty and rather shy. The children must have told her of my coming, for she wasn't surprised to see me. After shaking hands with me warmly she said to mother: "Well, now you must be happy, aunty!"

"Why are you so late?" mother scolded. "Have you had a meal?"

Mother warmed up the eggs she had kept and put them on the table in front of her. "Off with you now!" she told

the children. "Your aunty's been on the go all day. Give her a chance to rest."

At sight of the eggs, the Silkworm Maid flushed and protested: "Aunty, you know you shouldn't! I'm quite used to flapjacks. . . ."

"I know you are. Don't worry. I didn't make them specially for you. Today my daughter's come home, and I just popped in a few extra for you." Mother's warm, loving glance rested on each of us in turn.

Later that evening I strolled with the Silkworm Maid beside the brook. It was a clear night when you could see all the stars. Massive Mount Yi was no more than a grey shadow in the distance, but the beautiful outline of the smaller hills before us was silhouetted clearly against the horizon. A light ground mist had risen and in it were floating mulberry trees, large and small. We sat down on a sandy dune. There was no wind and not a leaf was stirring. The night was utterly still.

"This isn't a bad place, is it?" I said proudly.

She was gazing raptly at the stars.

"No, indeed! The sky here is so clear and high!" She turned to me. "I do love the people here! I shall hate leaving them."

"Why not settle down in the north, then? Find a husband here. . . ."

Half-jokingly she answered: "I shall go where I'm wanted."

Suddenly she gave a soft exclamation of delight. "Isn't that lovely!" I looked where she was pointing. Beside a tall willow the golden crescent moon was hanging, with a bright silver star above it. You could see the fine tassels of the willow swing to and fro.

Mother brought two middle-aged men up from the dyke. She called out anxiously as they approached: "There's something wrong with their silkworms!"

The two men added, almost in unison: "Some of them have a shiny look. We're a little worried so we came to you."

The Silkworm Maid breathed more easily as she stood up. Brushing the sand from her clothes, she assured them confidently: "It's only the heat. I'll go and have a look."

She went off with the men.

I stood there for a long time till the moon sank. On that brilliant, star-lit night, hills, trees and villages were wrapped in a sound, sweet slumber. But on the winding path the Silkworm Maid's light footsteps could be heard. . . .

Translated by Gladys Yang

Correction

For "The White Snake (a Sung dynasty tale)" under CONTENTS on page 1 of *Chinese Literature* No. 7, 1959, read: "The White Snake (a Ming dynasty tale)."

YANG PIN-KUEI

Praying for Rain

a *tantzu* story

Tantzu is a form of story-telling and singing accompanied by musical instruments. It is popular along the lower reaches of the Yangtse, where many towns and cities have places especially devoted to the performance of *tantzu*. The stage properties involved are extremely simple. The performer sits by a table, a clapper or fan in his hands. In a one-man show, the three-string guitar is used as an accompaniment, in a two-man show the lute is used as well, when there are more than two performers other string instruments can be used.

The *tantzu* artist must be a gifted actor. In a one-man show such as in the following story, he performs all the roles while giving a running commentary on the background, status, appearance, dress, and reactions of each of the characters. Sometimes he must also provide all the sound effects — from the barking of dogs and the singing of birds to a raging storm, and even the pounding of horse hooves on a battlefield.

Praying for Rain is one of the traditional *tantzu* stories, which has been very popular throughout the ages. The translation given here is based on the version as told by Yang Pin-kuei, an old artist of *tantzu*.

Chien: I am Chien Chih-chieh, a Soochow citizen. I make my living by telling fortunes, and I manage pretty well. Today, I'm taking a leisurely stroll to the Hsuantu Temple to watch the praying for rain.

The Narrator: This Chien is a fortune-teller who practises divination by various gadgets. Though he tells nothing but lies, his business is better than most. This is because Chien has a pair of sharp eyes and a slick tongue. His business is thriving and he has become quite popular. People call him Chien the Demi-god. He has put that name on his signboard.

Today, he is dressed like a Taoist priest. He is wearing a priest's cap, a robe of blue gauze, white linen trousers, white stockings and sandals of fine straw. Chien carries a feather fan with a bone handle. He is tall and big-boned and sports a fine beard.

For more than six months there has been no rain in Soochow. Due to the drought, the price of rice and firewood has soared. Life is very hard for the people. The officials are helpless. But since they have to make some pretence of earning their salaries, they have had a high platform erected at the Hsuantu Temple to be used for praying for rain — leave everything to Heaven! An imperial decree has even been posted on the front wall of the temple.

Chien is now fifty-three years of age. Although he has heard of praying for rain, he has never actually seen it. That's why he is going to the temple today. Usually crowded and bustling, the mainstreet is now quiet and deserted. The shops have few customers. People passing by look weary and ill-nourished. When acquaintances meet they just sigh and complain of their plight.

Quite a big crowd has gathered before the temple to see the praying for rain. On the wall beside the closed front gate is posted an imperial decree. Chien waits patiently for the crowd to thin out a bit so that he can read it. But more and more people keep coming. How long will he have to wait? Chien decides to squeeze through the crowd.

Chien (*reading aloud the imperial decree*): "On the thirtieth day of the fifth month of Wan Li Era of the great Ming dynasty, the Heaven-appointed emperor issues the following decree: According to the memorandum

submitted by Fang Po-nien, governor of Kiangsu, there is a serious drought. The officials should be responsible to relieve the people's suffering. In the city of Soochow, there has been no moisture since the snowfall in the middle of the eleventh month last year. The fields are parched. Unless wheat and rice can be planted, there will be no autumn harvest. Now is the time for sowing, and rain is badly needed. The governor and his subordinates have submitted themselves to the emperor for punishment on the grounds that their lack of virtue and ability has enraged Heaven and caused it to impose this disaster upon the people.

"The emperor states that ever since ancient times there have been droughts and floods. The drought is not the governor's fault. Let this imperial decree be dispatched to Soochow and put up immediately. Let it be known to all civilians, officers and people that whoever has the power to summon rain can take down the decree, mount the platform and drive away the evil spirit of drought. If he succeeds in bringing rain and is an official he will be promoted; if he is not, he shall be made one; if he does not want to be an official he shall be rewarded by other means. If he prays to no avail. . . ."

The Narrator: Chien cannot see the remaining words. For the day is hot, the paste has dried and a corner of the paper has rolled up. What it says is: ". . . he shall be punished for the crime of defrauding the emperor." Chien reaches for the corner of the paper, intending to flatten it out. The crowd thinks this priest is ready to undertake praying for rain. Someone says, "Look, he's taking down the imperial decree!" A commotion is created. Everyone crowds forward to have a look at the man who dares to take down the imperial decree. Chien is nearly jostled off his feet.

Chien: Hey! don't push!

The Narrator: Chien's hand, which is holding the paper, is also jostled and half the decree comes away in his fingers. He has taken down the decree! Official messengers, across the street, hearing the people shout and seeing a priest with a piece of the imperial decree in his hand, also think he has torn it down. They dash forward, pushing aside the onlookers.

Messenger A: Make way, make way. . . . Aha! I wondered who would have the courage to take down the imperial decree. So it is Chien the Demi-god.

Chien: No, no. . . .

Messenger A: Of course. Who in Soochow is better qualified? It is very good of you to pray for rain for the sake of the people of your native place.

Chien: I didn't take down the imperial decree. I was just trying to read the words in the rolled-up corner and somebody pushed my hand. Only a small piece was torn. . . .

Messenger A: A small piece is quite enough. Even a tiny corner will do!

Chien: Please paste this bit back on. . . .

Messenger A: Mr. Chien, imperial decrees can't be torn down and pasted up again at will!

Chien: What shall I do, then?

Messenger A: Pray for rain!

Chien: Please don't make fun of me. What do I know about praying for rain?

Messenger A: You don't know how to pray for rain, yet you tore down the imperial decree! Come on, come to the prefect!

Chien: I have something to say. . . .

Messenger A: You can tell it to the city prefect in person.

Chien (*aside*): What bad luck! These messengers know me well. They even borrow money from me. But now they are so official. There's no use talking to them. For one thing, they wouldn't believe me; for another, they can't make decisions anyway. All right, let's go to the prefect. If I pray and it doesn't rain, at most I'll get thirty strokes on my palm.

The Narrator: Chien hands the piece of the imperial decree to the messenger, deciding to trust to his own wit. There is a shout.

Messenger B: The prefect of Soochow and the magistrates of Changchow and Wuhsien Counties are waiting for the diviner at the East Corner Gate.
Messenger A: Please come this way.
Chien (*aside*): Ah, this looks as if I won't get away with a mere thirty strokes on the palm. Perhaps, I shall have to stay in gaol for thirty days.

The Narrator: Chien strolls to the East Corner Gate. More than a hundred servants and messengers are standing there in two rows. The prefect and two magistrates come forward.

Prefect: Ah, venerable sir, it is indeed the good fortune of the people of Soochow that you have taken down the imperial decree. I and my colleagues have been sent by the governor to meet you. We humbly beg your pardon for not havnig come earlier. We humbly beg your pardon.
Chien (*aside*): It looks like even thirty days in gaol won't do. I shall serve three years, at least. But never mind. With officials, money talks. I'm ready to pay. Business has been good for me the past six months. I've plenty of money.

The Narrator: The prefect and the two magistrates accompany Chien into the temple compound. As they walk up to a temporary shelter a guard announces loudly.

Guard: The governor and the local gentry have come to welcome the diviner.
Chien (*aside*): Well! Even the governor has come! This is serious. If I fail to bring rain, they won't let me off with only three years — I'll be exiled three thousand *li* away! It's no joke. I'd better confess to the governor that I know nothing about praying for rain and that the imperial decree was torn down because I was pushed by the crowd. I must keep cool.

The Narrator: Governor Fang, having heard that someone has torn down the imperial decree and volunteered to pray for rain, arrives with the local gentry. He sees a priest holding a feather fan, his beard long and fine, looking quite ethereal. The governor comes forward from the shelter.

Governor: Ah, venerable sir, your disciple heard that you had arrived, but he has not had time to bathe and perfume himself in order to welcome you and has been late in coming. I hope you will pardon me. Please accept my greetings.
The Gentry: Venerable sir, your disciples are late in coming to welcome you. Respectfully, we bow. . . .
Chien: What virtue and ability have I that I should cause you such trouble? I bow respectfully.
Governor: Please come this way.
Chien: Please, you first.
Governor: Let's go together hand in hand then. (*Grasps Chien's hand.*)
Chien (*shivering*): Please.
Governor: Remarkable! (*Aside.*) It's so hot and yet his hand is icy cold. He must be an immortal. They never eat cooked food.
Chien (*aside*): I eat everything. But I'm worried frigid!
Governor: A real immortal!

The Narrator: They enter the shelter. Chien is offered the seat of honour. The officials and gentry also sit down in accordance with their rank. Cooling drinks are served. All take them except Chien who shakes his head indicating that he does not want any. Chien is already shivering; he couldn't bear being any cooler.

Governor: Venerable sir, may I have the honour to know your name?
Chien: My name is Chien Chih-chieh.
Governor: Where is your celestial abode? Who is your divine teacher?
Chien (*aside*): He treats me like a genuine immortal. If the thing were of small consequence, I could afford to fool with him. But it's deadly serious. I must reply

in a dignified manner. (*Aloud.*) My humble hut is located in the Purple Cloud Cave of the Purple Gold Mount. My teacher is Li Tai-po. As he was sitting on his straw mattress in deep meditation, suddenly it occurred to him that for six months there has been no rain in Soochow. He ordered me to descend from the clouds, and I came here. Originally I intended to pray for rain, but the officials of Soochow have committed so much sin that I —

Governor: What great mercy! You have come here specially. How fortunate for the people of Soochow! Please enlighten me, immortal sir, what method will you use to command the rain?

Chien (*aside*): I was going to say that I could do nothing. But he has interrupted me and twisted my sentence. I'd better tell him the truth. . . . (*Aloud.*) First, I cannot remove mountains or empty oceans; second, I cannot scatter beans and turn them into soldiers; third, I have no power to call forth the wind or summon the rain. . . .

Governor: Naturally, there are different schools of magic. It's not necessary that everyone practises in the same way. Please tell me — what form do you use?

Chien: I've only two divination sticks and a divining book. . . .

Governor: Ah, so you are the great diviner! (*Aside.*) He's just an ordinary Taoist priest who tells fortune with pieces of wood. Well, since he's torn down the decree, we mustn't let him go. If he succeeds in summoning the rain, I can report it to the emperor as my own accomplishment. If he fails, I'll condemn him for defrauding the emperor and have him executed. That will show that we officials are concerned with the people's suffering. No one will be able to say that we have done nothing about the drought. By killing this priest, we shall free ourselves of responsibility. (*Smiling, aloud.*) Ah, venerable sir, please apply your magic.

Chien: All right. I'll do my best. First, let a table laid with incense be set up in the hall. Your Honour must kowtow in piety. Then I shall practise divination.

Governor: Servant! Set up a table with incense in the hall.

Servant: Yes, Your Honour.

Governor: Venerable sir, shall we have a look at the praying platform?

Chien (*aside*): When I left home today, I intended to see how people pray for rain. But now I myself must do the praying! I'll have a look at the platform anyway. (*Aloud.*) All right.

Governor: Gentlemen, this way please.

All: After you, Your Honour.

The Narrator: They follow the governor to the platform in the front courtyard. Chien, the governor and the gentry mount the platform. Chien walks around on it, then all come down.

Governor: Venerable sir, is there anything lacking or improper about the platform? We don't want to offend Heaven. Please correct it if anything's amiss.

Chien (*aside*): How do I know whether there's anything lacking or amiss? The ones who built the platform must be experts. I'd better not complain. (*Aloud.*) Your Honour, so far as I can see, the platform is fine. Everything is complete. If it does not rain, it will be because the officials have offended Heaven by their wickedness; it has nothing to do with the platform.

Governor: Oh!

The Narrator: Just then a servant comes to say that the table with incense is laid in the front hall. The governor nods and beckons to the diviner. They walk together into the big hall. An attendant hands long sticks of burning incense to the governor. The governor puts the sticks in the tripod on the table and prays to Heaven. The prefect, two magistrates and all the officials and gentry stand by on both sides. Silence reigns in the hall.

Governor (*sings*):

Long sticks of incense burn in the tripod,
The governor kneels in communion with the gods.
Ever since I took office there's been no rain,
So the people inevitably complain.
I'm not bothered by the drought a bit,
All I fear is the emperor's anger.
Pray Heaven be merciful,
Let it rain in Soochow city,
Let there be a bumper harvest,
So that the emperor will not blame me,
And the people will be grateful.
Then I shall be promoted for certain.
(*Speaks.*) Now let the diviner practise his art, please.

Chien: Yes, Your Honour.

The Narrator: From his bag Chien takes two divining sticks and a "divination book"—actually a few blank sheets bound together. Of course, no one can read them except Chien. Each of the two pieces of wood has a face and a back. When thrown, if they fall both face upward it's called yang, *or brightness; if both are backs, it's called* yin, *or darkness. If they fall one face and another back, it is considered a good omen.*

Chien places the divination book on the table, waves the sticks over the tripod while murmuring an incantation, then throws them. Three times in succession the sticks fall face upward. Chien is worried, for yang *also means sun. If there's plenty of sunshine it will not rain. Chien turns the leaves of the divination book. Of course it makes no difference whether he looks into the book or not. If I predict rain, thinks Chien, I may be able to get away. He assumes a smiling face.*

Chien: Congratulations, Your Honour. All's well, all's well.

Governor: Congratulations for what?

Chien: It is written clearly in the book here, "Within three days there will be rain. No cause for doubt or worry." Isn't that good news?

Governor: Within three days? What is the exact date?

Chien (*aside*): Today is the first of the sixth month, let me pick the third day. That will give me the maximum of time. (*Aloud.*) Ah, yes . . . the third day of the sixth month.

Governor: What hour?

Chien: Three quarters past noon.

Governor: How much rain?

Chien: Three point three inches.

Governor: Then I shall trouble you to stay at the temple for two days more and mount the platform to pray for rain on the third. That will save you the trouble of leaving and coming back again. Servant, call the abbot.

Abbot: I'm here. What is Your Honour's order?

Governor: Abbot, the diviner Chien has come to pray for rain. He will stay for two days in your temple. Have a comfortable and clean room ready for him. You must look after him well.

Abbot: Yes, Your Honour. The back hall is clean and quiet. Sir, this way please.

Chien (*aside*): Too bad! It looks as if I'll really have to produce some rain! But I'll think of something. I'll make so much trouble for them that they'll be glad to get rid of me!

The Narrator: Chien follows the old abbot into the back hall. The room is quiet and clean. Two novices are there to wait upon him. The vegetarian food is of first quality and prepared by famous cooks. But Chien is bent on creating trouble.

Chien: Come here, novices. (*The two novices come forward. One is nine and the other ten years old.*)

Novices: Sir, what do you want?

Chien: Go and tell the abbot that I am a disciple of the poet Li Tai-po and like to drink. Bring me some wine.

Novices: Yes.

Chien: Wait a minute. Say also that I want meat. I cannot dine without it. If you want me to pray for rain, you must let me eat my fill. If I'm hungry I cannot succeed. Understand?

Novices: Yes.

The Narrator: The novices report to the old abbot. The abbot can get wine easily enough, but meat is not so simple. Because of the serious drought the yamen *has ordered that no living thing should be slaughtered in order not to infuriate the Creator who is merciful. The meat shops are closed; fishing boats have been forbidden to cast and haul nets. Where can the abbot get meat? He reports his problem to the* yamen. *The officials have already decided that if Chien fails to call forth rain, he shall be burned, platform and all. They grant his request for meat without the slightest hesitation. An emergency order is issued to slaughter a pig. Chefs are sent from the* yamen *to cook for him. Although the dinner is rather late that night, it is truly a feast.*

Chien (*aside*): Since they have managed it, I might as well eat.

The Narrator: For two days Chien keeps the cooks extremely busy. And he drinks heavily. The novices wait on him every minute. On the second night, he is still drinking. The ten-year-old novice, eager to learn some magic, questions Chien while fanning him.

Novice: Sir, how do you pray for rain?

Chien: Pray for rain? It's very easy. The main thing is to have a pair of eyes which can analyze the clouds and the wind. For instance, if the sun is shining brightly and the sky is without clouds, the day will be rainless. If the sun is hidden by thick clouds, and drops of water fall from the sky, then it is —

Novice: Raining.

Chien: Right. You're beginning to get the idea. Let me test you: Suppose the sun is shining and it's raining at the same time. What do you call that weather?

Novice: Fickle.

Chien: I'll test you again. Suppose there is no sun and the clouds are thick but no drops fall. What is it?

Novice: Cloudy.

Chien: Right! You already know all that's necessary.

Novice (*aside*): He's light-hearted. Doesn't he know that if he fails to bring rain he will be burned to death? I'll tell him and see how merry he remains! (*Aloud.*) Sir, you are joking. Don't you know if you succeed in summoning the rain you will be made an official, but you will be burnt to death if you fail?

The Narrator: Chien is alarmed. A spell of cold sweat makes him sober. How awful, he thinks.

Chien (*sings*):

The words shock me so
My soul nearly flies off to heaven.
You've only yourself to blame for taking things so easily.
You thought tearing down the imperial decree was nothing but a trifle,
Who knew that you'd be burnt if you couldn't bring the rain!
It's painful and unbearable when
You even slightly scorch a finger.
And now my whole body is to be burnt.
I roll my eyes and clench my teeth —
But what's the use of worrying?
The die is cast, better to laugh than to cry.
(*Having made up his mind, Chien assumes a light-hearted air. Aloud.*) Ha, ha, ha. . . .

Novice: What's the matter with you?

Chien: The officials are only foolish mortals. They've eyes but they don't see me in my true self. How ridiculous. Ha, ha, ha . . . .

Novice: Sir, if you are laughing, why are there tears in your eyes?

Chien (*aside*): My laugh is forced. My grief is genuine. But I mustn't let the novice see through me. (*Aloud.*)

You are young; you don't understand. I'm offended that these officials should be disrespectful to me. My tears are tears of anger.

Novice: You said you were offended. Anyone who's offended doesn't feel like laughing.

Chien: There's an old saying that one can feel offended and amused at the same time. Haven't you heard of it?

Abbot: Sir, the third day is drawing near. The governor has sent me to see if you want anything else. Please give me your orders.

Chien (*aside*): All I want is to live. But it's too late for that now. Well, since I'm going to die, I might as well do it in style. (*Aloud.*) Abbot, I want forty-nine monks and forty-nine priests. Let there be plenty of music while I pray for rain.

Abbot: Your order will be carried out.

Chien: And one thing more. I want to borrow your robe and a hat to wear when I mount the platform. After the ceremony I'll return them to you.

Abbot (*unwillingly*): Yes, yes, of course. (*Aside.*) The robe and hat are sure to be burnt together with you into ashes. But I dare not refuse, otherwise he will put the blame on me when he fails to call forth the rain.

The Narrator: The old abbot with brows tightly knit goes out and sends his robe and hat to Chien by a novice. Ready to die, Chien drinks profusely. As the proverb has it, time is as precious as gold, but gold cannot buy time. Soon it is the first hour of the third day. A servant comes and tells Chien it is time to mount the platform.

Chien: I know. (*Stands up, drunkenly.*) Ah, the house is whirling.

Novice: Be careful, sir, walk carefully.

The Narrator: Outside, servants hold the torches high. They help the drunken Chien to the platform. The monks and priests are playing music feverishly. Sounds of drums,

big and small wood clappers, gongs, horns, trumpets and cymbals.

Chien (*aside*): Lovely. The rich always hire monks and priests to play music at their funerals, but the dead can never hear it. Now I can see and hear my funeral ceremony perfectly. I can consider these officers and officials as my grieving sons and grandsons. It's a fine sight.

Governor: Sir, your disciples are waiting for you. You are truly merciful to release the people of Soochow from misfortune. We are very grateful.

Chien (*aside*): So it's the governor. Detestable creature! He's the one who decreed that I should be burned, yet he speaks as if he were the soul of virtue. I'll deal with him properly if I get the chance.

Governor: Ah, you have drunk too much. Come, help the diviner to the platform.

The Narrator: Two servants, one on each side, help Chien walk to the north side of the platform. Chien catches sight of the pile of firewood at the base. Heaven, let it rain! he prays. He wonders whether there is still hope. With one servant pulling from above and another pushing him from below, Chien crawls up the ladder. After they have helped Chien reach the platform, which is three stories high, the servants descend. Chien looks around. On the left are the monks, on the right the priests. Some of his old acquaintances among them nod to him. Chien pulls himself together and walks to the front of the platform. He strikes the table and waves the magic banner. Then he takes up a wooden sword in one hand and makes a magic sign with the other. He faces the northeast and murmurs incantations. Puttering about, he appears to be very busy. Finally he takes up the divining rod. That was a mistake! For when the monks and priests see that Chien means to try his magic power, they all cease playing. Chien is dismayed. He wants them to be absorbed in their music so that no one will see what he is doing. But now all is silent. Everyone is watching him atten-

tively. How awkward! Fortunately, Chien has been in the profession ever since childhood and is an experienced trickster. He begins to chant incantations. He chants and stops, stops and chants again. Not bad. But the summer night is short. In a wink it is dawn. In no time at all, the sun is high. The people who have gathered at the foot of the platform are worried for him. The hum of their voices is heard.

Chien (*looking at the east, aside*): What a big sun! Oh, Sun, usually you don't rise so early. You look as if you didn't have a wink of sleep last night either. But what's the use of complaining? While there's still time, let me bid farewell to my family and country. (*He kneels down facing northwest, thinking of his wife and children.*)

The Narrator: Chien has been drinking ever since he came to the temple, and has not had a single moment's sleep. Now that the sun is high, he feels there is no hope of rain. Chien's bravado crumbles; he becomes dispirited. The heat makes him dizzy and the wine makes him sleepy. Chien yawns and kneels on the platform. The next moment he is fast asleep. The monks and priests think the diviner is kneeling there to receive the angels, but wonder why he kneels so long. Next they hear him snoring. Clearly, he is asleep.

Priest A: Brother, the master is asleep.

Priest B: Brother, I don't think he is asleep. It must be that the angels have failed to come, and his spirit has gone out to invite them. That's why he's snoring.

Priest A: I doubt it.

Priest B: It's certain. Otherwise how can he fall asleep with the flames virtually licking his backside?

Priest A: True. If he's really asleep, it is something quite remarkable. Anyone who can fall asleep under such circumstances is certainly an immortal.

The Narrator: Time passes. It is already a quarter past noon. The governor, the officials and the gentry, convinced that it is not going to rain, order everyone except Chien to come down from the platform. After this is done, the ladder is removed. Twelve-thirty. The servants wait with torches in hand. At three quarters past noon, if there is still no rain, they are to set fire to the platform. The people do not have the heart to watch Chien be burned to death, and they turn to go. But exactly at three quarters past noon, clouds gather at the northeast and rush forward like ten thousand galloping horses. The wind blows and drives away the heat. All of a sudden, the sun is hidden. It becomes very dark and cool. Seeing that the rain is coming, the people shout, "Don't start the fire!" The governor hastily orders the servants to put out the torches. All rush forward to the platform. The wind blows hard. Chien, fast asleep on the platform, is awakened by the wind.

Chien: Ah, it's cold, why don't you cover me with a quilt? Where am I? (*Thinks for a moment and suddenly becomes sober.*) I was praying for rain on the platform. If there was no rain at three quarters past noon I was to be burned. But I saw with my own eyes that the sun was up and there was no hope at all. Does that mean I'm already dead? Where am I? (*Stands up.*)

The Narrator: As he rises, the people and the officials, the monks and the priests, all cheer. The master's magic power is indeed wonderful. They are sure he was not asleep but that his soul had left his body to consult the gods in Heaven. And now it will rain.

All: Wonderful magic, bravo. . . .

Chien (*hears the cheers and looks downward*): Ah, I haven't been burned to death. I see the governor; he certainly wouldn't accompany me to the next world. But why are the people still there? (*Looks up at the sky.*) How dark! Is it really going to rain? This rain-praying trick is actually quite simple. All you have to do is eat your fill, get drunk and go to sleep, then the rain comes. It certainly looks like rain. Now I can hold my head high. Even if it only thunders I

can say that I've succeeded in summoning the wind and the clouds. Let me think. I've got it! I'll shift the whole responsibility to the officials. (*Chien takes up the divining rod from the table. Aloud.*) Let the governor, the prefect, the magistrates, the officers, officials and the gentry put on straw hats and straw capes and kneel before the platform and welcome the rain. If anybody disobeys or offends Heaven, the rain will be taken back and will not come. It will be your own fault; don't let anyone say the diviner is no good!

Governor: Yes, master.

The Narrator: The governor gives the order. All the officers and officials and gentry put on straw hats and straw capes and kneel before the platform. Chien looks down. All is quiet and orderly. Serves you right, you rotten officials, Chien thinks to himself. He continues to chant and gesticulate. The wind blows harder and harder. It begins to rain heavily. The people rush for shelter. But the officials dare not move. They have to wait for the diviner's order. Their clothes are not warm enough and their knees are beginning to ache from kneeling. The cold rain falls on their backs, and they grow chilled. The wind makes them shiver with cold. They are all drenched like chickens in the soup. The governor is soaked to the bone. Since the rain has already come, he thinks, must we remain kneeling like this? He raises his head to look hopefully at the diviner for permission to stand. Acha! He sneezes. As if in response to his lead, everybody begins to sneeze.

Chien (*looks down*): Well, you've had enough for today. This thick robe felt too hot before the rain, but now it's nice and warm. Let me issue my command. (*Aloud.*) The officials and gentry may retire to the shelter.

The Narrator: The officials and gentry hurry to the shelter. The governor sends servants up the platform to help the diviner down and lead him to the shelter. The officials and gentry are full of praise for Chien. Chien changes into dry garments brought from the temple. The officials are still in their wet clothes. An attendant comes in to report.

Attendant: Your Honour, the rain amounts to three point three inches.

Governor: Good. (*Aside.*) The diviner is truly marvellous. He said three point three inches and it turns out exactly so.

The Narrator: Chien himself cannot believe it. It's too much of a coincidence. Obviously, the weather officer has sent this report just to please them. But the rain is not likely to stop at once. If it continues, it will surpass three point three inches. Chien decides to use another trick to make these scurvy officials believe in him even more.

Chien: Ah, Your Honour, originally I intended to summon three point three inches of rain. But since the drought is very serious, I am adding some more.

Governor: How much?

Chien: Thirty-three feet!

Governor: Oh, no!

The Narrator: The governor exclaims in alarm. Although three point three inches of rain is a bit too little, thirty-three feet would certainly cause a flood.

Chien: Your Honour need not worry. The thirty-three feet of rain will not fall all at once. It will rain several times to reach that amount.

Governor: Good, good.

The Narrator: Chien has covered himself neatly. If the rain does not come up to quota this time, he can always claim that it will the following time, or the next.

Governor: Master, you have been working hard for several days, you must take a rest. Won't you please come to my humble residence so that I may show my respect?

Chien: It's not necessary. My family lives near by. I want to go home to see them.

Governor: All right. Bring the sedan-chair. See the master home.

Servants: Yes, Your Honour.

The Narrator: Chien the Diviner rides in the governor's sedan-chair carried by eight bearers and goes home in triumph. The governor rides in the prefect's chair and the prefect rides in the chair of one of the magistrates. The magistrate is compelled to walk home with the officials and gentry. As there has been no rain for six months, the ditches have become blocked with debris. Water overflows into the streets. The officials and gentry are in a bedraggled state. Some take off their shoes and walk barefoot, some roll up their trousers and wade through the puddles. They look like refugees from a flood.

This ends our story of praying for rain.

Translated by Chang Su

By the Yalutsangpo River by Niu Wen→

Born in 1922 to a tenant peasant's family in Shansi, the artist had only an elementary education in his childhood. He joined the Anti-Japanese forces led by the Chinese Communist Party after the War began in 1937 and it was then that he took an interest in art. In 1940 he was sent to the Lu Hsun Institute of Literature and Art in Yenan to study and began his career as a woodcut artist. To collect material for artistic creation, he travelled to Tibet several times in recent years. *By the Yalutsangpo River* was done on one of these trips.

From the Artist's Notebooks

LI KO-JAN

Landscape Painting

Landscape paintings are the artists' odes to their motherland and home. Speaking of "landscapes" in China we say "*shan-shui*," mountains and waters. Many are the beautiful mountains and rivers in the world. As the saying goes, the world is "thirty per cent mountain, sixty per cent water and ten per cent fields." That indicates how important are the mountains and waters in the life of man.

The Chinese have always loved their fields and forests; they have a special regard for the beauties of nature. People want to live in beautiful surroundings and such aspirations are embodied in their love for nature. The peace and relaxation man finds in the mountains and hills help to nurture wisdom and talent and inspire the soul.

During the Southern and Northern Dynasties (317-581), landscape first appeared in paintings as a background for figures. Gradually it became independent of the other objects in the painting and developed into a separate genre — landscape painting. A landscape often takes in a space of dozens of square *li* set with complex forms and objects far and near; all these have to be composed into the painting which must

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Li Ko-jan, well-known landscape painter, is a professor of traditional Chinese painting at the Central Institute of Fine Arts, Peking. One of his paintings *A Village* was published in *Chinese Literature* No. 2, 1955.

convey the proper atmosphere and show the relation of one form to another. By dint of hard work and study down the ages, our landscape painters have accumulated a rich store of expressive techniques; this is a valuable legacy for the future development of landscape painting; it is also a rich source from which other genres of painting can learn valuable lessons. For instance, in the past, simple line was mainly used to draw figures. The many kinds of brushstroke developed for painting rocks and trees were not much used for other objects. Subsequently, these brushstrokes were adapted to figure painting, particularly in large pictures, and they have proved effective in creating striking figures.

To me the most important element in landscape painting is what I call the "creative conception." This is the soul of landscape painting. When I went out to paint landscapes in 1956, I took a two-line maxim: "Boldness is valuable; spirit is essential." I used this to encourage myself so that while carrying on the tradition of Chinese painting, I would be bold enough to break through conventions and create something original. By spirit I meant creative conception. For instance: The mighty and majestic Yangtse Georges are soul-stirring while the vast, misty waters of Taihu Lake inspire the imagination; the peach blossom is so colourful and fresh that dewdrops seem to be part of its petals, while the lotus is pure and white though it rises from the mud. In observing such natural phenomena, the artist's feelings and ideas are intimately involved. It is impossible to produce a good landscape without having a clear creative conception. I once said jokingly about some young students' paintings that "they needed to call back their souls." What I meant was that they lacked creative conception. If, confronted by a scene, you sit right down to paint without giving it much thought, the result can only be a sum total of proportions, perspective, shades and colour. This is painting with technique but not with feeling. The picture painted may be quite accurate as a likeness but it is never good; it will be flat, without a soul. I do not mean to say we can dispense with technique, but rules of art and technique are only means of expressing thoughts and feelings, not an end in themselves. Only when the artist has full mastery of the artistic rules, methods of expression and techniques, only when he can use them freely to express his thoughts and

sentiments without a feeling of restriction, can it be said that he has reached the highest stage of art. To a really mature artist, the question of technique is not the main thing when he is creating; very often he forgets it completely in his concentration on expressing his thoughts and feelings in creative work.

Now, what is this thing called creative conception? I take it to be a synthesis of the scene and the artist's sentiments. In depicting a scene the artist also communicates his sentiments. Landscape painting must not be reduced to a topographical statement or to graphic symbols. A picture must include, of course, the natural elements of the scene but it is essential that it communicate the artist's sentiments and the inspiration aroused by the sight of nature, the sentiments stirred by the scene and which melt into one with the scene. If the painter aims only at a natural likeness then his flowers and birds will turn out to be dead specimens while his whole landscape will be dead and lack artistic beauty. If the painter himself remains unmoved by the scene he paints, then, how can his painting stir others?

Ancient Chinese poems often convey beautiful conceptions of natural scenes. Sometimes there is no mention of "man" in a line but the scene depicted is a moving expression of human sentiment and thought. Take for instance Li Po's *Sending Meng Hao-jan to Kuangling:*

> My friend departed to the west of Yellow Crane Tower,
> Down to Yangchow amid the mists and flowers of spring.
> The lonely sail in the distance fades into the azure sky,
> Only the river towards the edge of heaven flows.

Here we feel the sorrow of parting friends and are reminded of a friend's sadness in saying farewell: A lone sail vanishes in the distance; the remaining friend lingers on by the flowing river as if his heart too had gone with that sail. Sentiment is profoundly conveyed by evocation of scene. Not a single line describes the author's feelings directly, in so many words; the last two lines are wholly devoted to a description of the scene. Yet it is in these two lines that one reads about the poet's deep attachment to his friend.

Mao Tse-tung's poems also have profound creative conceptions. For instance, his *Three Short Poems:*

Mountains!
Faster I whip my speeding horse, never leaving the
saddle;
I start as I turn my head,
For the sky is three foot three above me!

Mountains!
Like surging, heaving seas with your billows rolling,
Like a myriad horses
Rearing and plunging away in the thick of the battle.

Mountains!
Piercing the blue of the heaven, your barbs unblunted!
The sky would fall
But for your strength supporting.

All three poems speak of the mountains yet each verse and line conveys the poet's sentiments. The poems describe the height, majesty and strength of the mountains without mentioning man, yet they are powerful verses of praise of man and his heroic spirit. As the ancients say, these are "sentiments expressed in things," that is to say: a description of a scene actually portrays man's sentiments. When a creative conception is embodied in a poem or painting then that poem or painting can be said to have a soul.

But how is the artist to achieve such a creative conception? I think it depends on having a profound understanding of the subject under observation and a genuine and powerful feeling about that subject.

Creative conception is born of thoughts and feelings which in turn are linked with depth of understanding of a subject. To be fully familiar with a subject it is necessary to be on the spot and observe that subject over a long period of time. Chi Pai-shih, a master in painting prawns, achieved his thorough knowledge of them by observing them day in and day out and in continually giving expression to his observations. Only when the painter has a thorough knowledge of his subject, only when he has the "whole bamboo in his head," can he grasp its salient features and give it life on the white paper with his brush. Chi Pai-shih did not paint his prawns by copying their lines stroke by stroke, he was already so familiar with their

forms and movements that under his brush the pictured prawns came to life. Those without a thorough knowledge of their subject will find it impossible to paint well.

"Depict the scene to convey sentiments" — this is something that outstanding Chinese poets and painters have always had a very clear-cut understanding of. Both in writing poems and painting landscapes it is necessary to stand above reality in order to observe and understand it and so portray it with profundity.

Chinese painting does not emphasize light. This should not be taken as an unscientific approach. The fact is that Chinese artists give much attention to repeated observation and thorough understanding of a subject so as to be able to grasp its salient features. Take the painting of a pine tree.

The important thing is to express the spirit of the pine and what is distinctive about the particular pine you are painting; then it doesn't matter whether you are painting it at eight in the morning or twelve, noon. Ching Hao of the Five Dynasties period (907-960) went to the Taihang Mountains to sketch the pine. There he observed pine trees day in and day out and "sketched a hundred thousand pine trees before he got a true picture." At the other extreme I have known an artist who went on a sketching trip and made more than a hundred different pictures in a fortnight. Of course, this way he only caught random glimpses of what he observed here and there; he had no chance to understand his subject thoroughly nor achieve a clear conception and mood for painting.

When an artist endeavours to give expression to the salient features and spirit of a subject, it is possible to create a full-length drama out of a single pine tree. I recall particularly four ancient cedar trees in Soochow. They had battled through the storms and thunder of the ages. One had fallen to the ground, but lay like a giant dragon still full of life, its branches strong and its luxuriant leaves giving it the appearance of youth. This old tree, toughened in its battle with nature through centuries of life, was still sprouting thousands of twigs and foliage. No one could fail to be impressed by its spirit and the tenacity of nature. But every tree and hill can inspire a creative conception and, properly depicted with the aid of the painter's artistic emphasis or "exaggeration" and composition and colouring, can become a work of art. Paint-

ing without feeling can never result in a good picture. Just as human characters differ, so every landscape has its own distinctive features. But it is useless to expect an original creative conception from any scene if the artist experiences no deep feelings about it and is not fired with a powerful desire to communicate his own observations but can only echo the sentiments of others.

Creative conception is important in painting; without it the artist has no end towards which to direct his art. However, such a creative conception alone is not enough; it is necessary to have the creative skill or means of embodying, of materializing that conception. What I mean by creative skill or craftsmanship is the artist's means of expression. To communicate his thoughts and feelings to others, the artist must be ready to use all the expressive means at his command. Chi Pai-shih had an old seal which he put under his signature and on which he carved, "Chi's means." This shows the great importance he attributed to his means of expression, to his craft. Creative conception and craft are the two keys of landscape painting. Should the artist have a good conception but lack the proper means to give it expression, the conception comes to naught. Tu Fu once wrote that he stood "in pensive search for the design," and also: "I will not stop until I find that line that moves the soul of man." To communicate his observations to others, the poet or the artist must cultivate his skill and rack his brains to find the artistic language which can touch people's hearts.

A few years ago I went with a young comrade to do some sketching in Szechuan. Our boat passed through the Yangtse Gorges and the view at dusk was miraculous. The evening glow of the sunset clouds cast a misty shadow over the thousands of trees, the hills and houses. In the rain and the fog too the mountains and trees were delightful. There was tremendous depth to the view with a hundred things to see but all of them enveloped in a light haze. How was one to express this on paper? We could paint it with a few light, suggestive strokes, but the picture would look sketchy. After many trials we finally found a way. We first put down every form we observed as clearly and in as detailed a way as possible, then we put a light wash over the whole in a single basic tint so that all the original contours gradually blurred and the

tones were readjusted. In this way the forms seemed to be lost and yet not quite lost — which was close to the way we had seen the scene in the Gorges. It is not easy to hit on the right means for conveying a conception, it is not a matter of a few minutes; many trials and failures may be called for before you arrive at a fairly satisfactory solution.

The creative means of Chinese art are bold and distinctive. There is a high degree of artistic exaggeration in both Peking opera and in Chinese painting.

Chinese painting is also bold in cutting out inessentials; this is sometimes carried to the extent of achieving a meaningful emptiness. Both Chinese painting and drama pay great attention to empty space: "Making space serve as colour." This does not weaken the effect but emphasizes the salient points of a picture and so brings them out in sharper relief. Objects are merely the materials of art, raw materials which can be used, rejected, emphasized or toned down. When a love story is being told there is no need "to drag in Wang the Second next door, the man who sells beancurd." In painting prawns it is not necessary to paint the water if the prawns already convey the idea of water. In Po Chu-yi's *Song of the Lute* one line goes like this: "At this moment the silence is more potent than sound." Space or emptiness is very important in Chinese art.

Art should take the most important features from reality and give them powerful expression. Artistic exaggeration means to give the fullest satisfaction to feelings. Art requires that the salient features of a subject be powerfully, effectively and clearly expressed.

A natural scene can and must be reorganized according to the needs of the artistic or creative conception. The composition of the picture depends on how the artist organizes the forms observed and how he places them in accordance with his conception. The composition, dictated by the creative conception, the total artistic effect, may demand that the hills be painted higher, the waters made vaster, the flowers redder, and the trees made more luxuriant than in the natural scene. All this is not only permissible but is part of the artist's right. It is idiotic to imitate nature slavishly in the style of those who tend towards naturalism. It should be noted that the artist paints not only what he sees but also what he knows, that is, the sum total of his experience including the indirect experience

gained from tradition. In painting, the artist relies not only on his senses, sight, sound or touch but more important, on thought. The extension or deepening of vision into knowledge and ideas means to discern universal characteristics in individual phenomena. Imagination is born out of experience and contact with reality; art is more beautiful, moving and imaginative than reality because the artist has put into it his creative craft and his skill. The well-known painter Shih Tao once said, "I exhaust (my knowledge of) all the strange peaks to prepare rough drafts (of pictures)." It is obvious that in depicting a subject, the artist does not restrict himself to what he sees at the moment but creates his picture from the sum total of his observations and by reorganizing and adding artistic touches.

It is said: "An inch of canvas is worth an inch of gold." Complex subjects should be organized and arranged so that the picture that is most pregnant with meaning is achieved with the minimum strokes and the largest image is created on the smallest piece of paper. Simple tabulating, clustering and spreading out of forms will not create a good composition. The canvases of art and of real life are quite different. A stage may be far too small to depict real life but if the content of life is reorganized properly a small stage does quite well. We often say in a letter that "my feelings go beyond the length of this paper," or "my words are simple, but my meaning goes further." In art it is essential always to maintain such an economy of means and express to the full the feelings and thoughts of the artist. When Tu Fu praised Li Po's poems he said, "His pen startles wind and rain; his verse brings tears to ghosts and spirits." When art reaches a high level it moves not only human beings but rain, wind and spirits!

LU HUNG-NIEN

The Yunglokung Murals

One spring day in 1957 we arrived at Yunglo in Juicheng County, Shansi. The Taoist temple Yunglokung (Temple of Eternal Bliss), famous throughout China for its Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) mural paintings, is located here. Legend has it that the town of Yunglo was the birthplace of Lu Tung-pin, a Tang dynasty scholar born in 796 and later known as one of the Eight Immortals of Taoism. One day in spring while boating on the Feng River he met Chungli Chuan who later taught him Taoist philosophy. He then abandoned all worldly cares, built a cottage in Lushan Mountain where he lived in seclusion, and finally achieved sainthood. After his death, a shrine was built to his memory which was subsequently made into a Taoist temple. This was destroyed by fire in 1262, but another magnificent temple was built on the old site, forming the basis of the present-day Yunglokung. Today five buildings remain: Lunghu Hall, Sanching Hall, Chunyang Hall, Chungyang Hall and a gateway built a little later than these. About eight hundred square metres of Yuan dynasty murals are preserved in these four halls.

The Yunglokung murals are among China's most cherished art treasures, but the large reservoir being constructed at Sanmen Gorge to harness the Yellow River will submerge the present site of the temple. In order to preserve these cultural relics the government plans to remove the whole temple to the Juicheng countyseat. All the murals will be moved to the new site and restored. In preparation for the restoration of the murals and to further our studies, the Ministry of Culture sent us, a group of teachers and students of the Central Institute of Fine Arts, to Yunglokung to make copies of the murals. Our

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The Yunglokung Temple

task was to copy exactly all eight hundred square metres of murals, faithfully reproducing each shade of colour and line.

On the evening of our arrival, we entered our palace of art — the Yunglokung. At the end of an avenue of tall poplars are the Yuan dynasty halls with the famous murals. The best of these are the guardian angels in Sanching Hall and the series of pictures of Lu Tung-pin attaining sainthood in Chunyang Hall.

Sanching or Wuchi Hall is a majestic building in glorious colours, its rafters covered with delicate yet powerful carvings in relief. The murals here cover an area of 424 square metres and are 426 centimetres high. There are altogether 289 guardian angels. Brilliant and resplendent as the rainbow, these murals are in keeping with the painted pillars of the hall and the carved rafters. Clouds of every colour, indolently half-furled, dashing like waves, scudding before the wind, or leaping like tongues of fire are painted on three of the walls. The angels depicted on the back wall are gathered at some Taoist ritual. Two heavenly generals, Blue Dragon and White Tiger, on the south wall herald the central figures, eight majestic gods and goddesses surrounded by minor deities, warriors, attendants, pages and serving maids. The figures, not one of which resembles another, are dressed in brilliant cos-

The artist Lu Hung-nien makes copies of the murals in Sanching Hall

tumes. Warrior gods with staring eyes and bristling beards, Taoist saints in flowing robes, and solemn deities contrast with the charming maids. Some of the figures are conversing, some meditating, some listening, some gazing into space, yet together they form one great harmonious whole. Simple, concise lines convey with remarkable skill their differences in sex, age, character and mood.

The murals in Sanching Hall have ink outlines, drawn freely and forcefully. Probably brushes of special bristles were used. These expressive lines present dewy lotus waving gently in the breeze, each hair in a man's beard, and girdles flowing in the wind. This is typical of traditional Chinese murals.

The use of colour is superb. Bold splashes of deep green or vermilion highlight the murals and are interspersed by lighter tones or white. Special care is given to details so that the effect from both far and near is good. The use of gold and other traditional techniques invest these murals with dignity and splendour. But colours are used with great discrimination. Clear washes and strong contrasts are so happily combined that no clash of colours results though a great many are employed. It is obvious that these highly skilled painters worked according to detailed plans and made a careful division

of labour to put the gifts of each to the greatest advantage, fashioning the separate murals into one brilliant, integrated whole.

At one end of the north wall stands a mutilated image of "The Saviour of Suffering Mankind." Behind this stands a boy, above it are fairy mountains and pavilions, below tumble vast blue waves. The deity seems to be floating in the clouds, his girdle and long robe are fluttering, and the colours of this handsome, animated figure are magnificent. It is said that originally there were another boy and a flying stork before the image. This is the only piece of sculpture left in Yunglokung, a fine work of art which brooks comparison with the murals.

The wall paintings of Chunyang Hall depict the story of Lu Tung-pin. The fifty-two pictures in this series form one composite whole. The contents are extremely rich: palaces, mountains and fields, village huts, boats, taverns, tea-shops, kitchens, and such scenes as the birth of child or funeral rites. They reflect the daily life and social customs of those times. Each picture presents a clear story of its own, but is skilfully connected with the others by mountains, rocks, clouds and trees. Often the distant mountains in the lower painting serve as the foreground of the upper. In one and the same picture, as the story develops, Lu Tung-pin may appear more than once, disregarding all the laws of time and space; yet this seems very natural. Though the work was done by a team of artists, a good division of labour ensured unity in style.

One of the guardian angels in Sanching Hall

A wonderful large mural on the north wall shows Chungli Chuan inspiring Lu Tung-pin with divine thoughts so that he abandons the world and becomes a saint. The setting is very beautiful with trees, mountains, strange plants, rare blossoms and gurgling streams. The two men are sitting on rocks facing each other. Gnarled pines like old dragons frolicking in the water stretch over them. Chungli has a frank, persuasive air. His chest is bare and he looks confident that he can convince his disciple. His gaze is fixed eagerly on Lu to watch his response. Lu Tung-pin is bending forward to listen respectfully and his face shows the conflict raging in his mind. He sits there with folded arms, his left thumb lightly pressing his right sleeve — this gesture heightens the atmosphere of meditation. The pines and rocks in the background are painted in bold strokes and splendid colours, the figures appear alive. This is a rare masterpiece.

All we saw in the four halls convinced us that Yunglokung has some of the finest and best preserved Yuan dynasty murals in north China. These masterpieces have weathered six centuries and are still superb today. Painted later than the Tunhuang murals, they reveal an art more mature and nearer to perfection.

We stayed in Yunglokung for six and a half months. During that time we made over a thousand paintings, copying all the eight hundred square metres of murals. Since then, reproductions of the Yunglokung murals have been exhibited in Peking. Yunglokung will soon be transferred to a new site where these ancient works of art will live on through the ages.

Chronicle

Robert Burns Commemorated

The 200th anniversary of Robert Burns' birth was commemorated by poets, writers and people from other cultural fields in Peking in late May. Ting Hsi-lin, vice-president of the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, said at the meeting that this Scottish poet had succeeded most effectively to satirize the ruling class of his time, and became the spokesman of the Scottish working people of his age. This is the reason why his works have won such popularity with the Chinese public.

The first of Burns' poems to be translated into Chinese in 1919 was *The Silver Tassie*. Since then, many more have been translated. Before 1949, the best version was a collection of thirty poems translated by the poet Yuan Shui-pai under the title *My Heart's in the Highlands*. It included some of Burns' more revolutionary works such as *The Tree of Liberty*. In recent years more of Burns' poetical works have been translated. This year, two new selections were published in Chinese, one translated by Professor Wang Tso-liang, the other by Yuan Ko-chia, both of whom are doing special research on Burns.

The Peking Library gave an exhibition of Burns' works, both in Chinese and other languages, in commemoration of the anniversary.

Theatre Festival in Peking

In May, more than twenty companies participated in a theatre festival in Peking, offering a variety of stagecraft.

Famous Peking opera actor Mei Lan-fang played the major role in his new opera, *Mu Kuei-ying*. Critics hailed the excellence of his performance.

The Peking People's Art Theatre produced Kuo Mo-jo's latest historical drama *Lady Tsai Wen-chi*. The use of the

acting and dance movements of traditional Chinese opera to portray historical characters in modern drama intrigued Peking audiences.

The Peking School of Dancing performed *The Corsair*, a world famous classical ballet based on Byron's poem.

Concerts were also held during the festival. Symphony No. 1 by Lo Chung-yung, based on the poem *Reply to Mr. Liu Ya-tzu* by Mao Tse-tung, and the symphony *Red Flag over Heroic Island* by Li Huan-chih were very popular. Lo's music is grand and heroic. Li's is delicate and moving.

The Central Song and Dance Troupe performed the cantata *Lock-dragon Pond*, which reflects the people's will to conquer the Yellow River. Old artiste Yang Hsiao-ting of the China Acrobatic Troupe performed his unique art — ancient magic — which he had not shown for many years. After producing twenty glass bowls filled with water from the folds of his clothes, he took off his long robe and after turning a somersault produced another large glass bowl brimming with water. He brought the house down.

Pushkin's Anniversary Marked

Alexander Pushkin, one of the great Russian classical writers, is well known to the Chinese people ever since the beginning of this century. June 6 this year was the 160th anniversary of his birth. Commemoration meetings were held in Peking, Shanghai, Tientsin and other major cities.

In Peking the meeting was chaired by Tsang Keh-chia, poet and member of the secretariat of the Union of Chinese Writers. Ko Pao-chuan, council member of the Union of Chinese Writers, speaking on "Pushkin and China," talked of the life and work of Pushkin and his relations with China. Said Ko, "Pushkin's works were the first Russian literary works to be translated into Chinese. His novel *The Captain's Daughter* was translated into Chinese in 1903. Lu Hsun, in his essay *On the Demoniac Poets* written in 1907, commented on Pushkin's life and works. During the past forty years almost all of Pushkin's works have appeared in Chinese."

N. G. Sudarikov, councillor of the Soviet Embassy in Peking, also spoke at the meeting.

Revising Tzu Yuan

The Commercial Press is now revising *Tzu Yuan*, making this encyclopedia into a special dictionary of classical Chinese words and phrases.

Tzu Yuan was first published in 1915. Later an additional volume and a combination of all the volumes were published. Comprised of both ancient and modern word-books and thesauri, it contained over 100,000 words and phrases altogether. While useful, certain of its explanations were not entirely accurate and sources were omitted for most of its quotations. In 1958, work was started on a revised edition which is to contain more words to the exclusion of modern terminologies. When completed, *Tzu Yuan* will become the largest dictionary extant so far, having about 11,000,000 characters, with 112,000 entries of classical words, phrases and expressions.

Bulgarian Art Exhibition

An exhibition of modern Bulgarian art opened in the Palace Museum in Peking in the middle of May, containing the best of modern Bulgarian oil paintings, sculptures and woodcuts.

Tsai Jo-hung, vice-chairman of the Union of Chinese Artists, spoke at the opening ceremony, enthusiastically praising the exhibited works of art as expressions of the spiritual life of the Bulgarian people and as true portrayals of their life and struggles.

Many outstanding oil paintings such as *Farewell* by Stoyan Venev, *Martyr* by Ilya Petrov, *Comrade Georgi Dimitrov at the Leipzig Trial in 1933* by Pyotr Mikhailov, *Portrait of Vassil Kolarov* by Asen Yanchev and *The Sea Is Roaring* by Alexander Mutafov (1879-1957) made a strong impression on the visitors to the exhibition.

Neolithic Settlement Discovered

Recently, a settlement of early New Stone Age people, who hunted for their livelihood, was found in Kashing County, Chekiang Province. Some thirty skeletons and sixty articles made of bone, jade, stone and clay have been unearthed.

The settlement covers an area of 15,000 square metres. At the bottom of the settlement are many caves of different sizes, some very shallow, surrounded by small wooden bars, some deeper, stuffed with tortoise shells and other articles. In the caves are some coarse pottery of sandy texture which were used as cooking utensils, a carbonized water-chestnut, scraps of fish bone, and small tools made of animal bone, horns and teeth such as arrow-heads, chisels, awls and needles. Most of the bones are of deer and ox; some are those of hogs, dogs and roebucks; some are unidentifiable. Also there are ornaments made of animal teeth and bone.

Burial grounds are discovered in the upper part of the settlement. Corpses are laid very close together. Some are straight and facing upward or facing downward, and others were buried with bent knees, all heads facing north. Among the articles buried with the corpses are stone axes laid beside the waists and jade rings and pieces beside the heads. These burial grounds are the only ones discovered so far for studying the burial rituals of that area during the neolithic age.

Children's Paintings

On June 1, an exhibition of Chinese children's paintings was opened in Peking.

Six-year-old Huang Hei-man in his *How Happy Are the Goldfish* has painted eight goldfish of different colours frolicking in the water. Two years ago, when he was four, this little artist's *Budding Daffodils* won a prize at the competition of children's paintings organized by *Shankar's Weekly* in New Delhi. Last year, at five, his two entries, *Selling Water-melons* and *Carriages*, won him a first prize in the five-to-seven-age group at the *Daily Worker's* international children's art exhibition in London.

Eight-year-old Li Keng's *Feast of Grapes* vividly depicts the happy mood of children enjoying a grape feast. *Flying the Kite* and *Wiping Out the Flies* by Hung Tun-pin give lively and truthful pictures of the children's own lives. Five-year-old girl Tung Yi-sha's *Watering Flowers* is remarkable with a distinct style of its own. She paints willows with only a few strokes and the clouds with a light touch, showing strong expressiveness.

If they are of use to society, even one hundred chapters are not excessive; if it is of no use, even one chapter is superfluous. If both are useful, then much is better than little.

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Literature should be easy to understand but hard to write, not hard to understand but easy to write.

Wang Chung
1st century thinker

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Chinese Children's Drawings

(1958 Selection)

This album contains thirty pictures painted by Chinese children ranging from three and a half to fifteen years of age. Selected from an exhibition of children's paintings held in Peking in June 1958, they faithfully reflect the life, feelings, thoughts and pursuits of the children of New China.

The pictures, printed by the offset process in full colour, are bound in book form.

26 cm. × 18.4 cm.

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