

The Red Lantern

— A Modern Revolutionary Peking Opera

Revised collectively by
the China Peking Opera Troupe

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CONTENTS

Script

Characters		
<i>Scene One</i>	Contacting the Liaison Man	I
<i>Scene Two</i>	Accepting the Task	4
<i>Scene Three</i>	Narrow Escape at the Gruel Stall	7
<i>Scene Four</i>	Wang Turns Traitor	10
<i>Scene Five</i>	Recounting the Family's Revolutionary History	13
<i>Scene Six</i>	Struggling Against Hatoyama at the Feast	23
<i>Scene Seven</i>	Help from the Masses	28
<i>Scene Eight</i>	Struggle on the Execution Ground	33
<i>Scene Nine</i>	Advancing Wave upon Wave	39
<i>Scene Ten</i>	Ambushing and Annihilating the Enemy	42
<i>Scene Eleven</i>	Forward in Victory	44

Selected Songs

A Poor Man's Child Soon Learns to Manage the House	46
Be a Person Like Them	49
I'm Filled with Courage and Strength	53
A Debt of Blood Must Be Paid with Blood	56
Never Leave the Field Until All the Wolves Are Killed	59
The Communist Party and Chairman Mao Lead the People's Revolution	64
My Spirit Storms the Heavens	67
I'm Brought Up by the Party to Be a Man of Steel	78
A Proletarian Fights All His Life for the People's Liberation	83
The Red Lantern Lights My Path Forward for Ever	86
Let the Hatred Sprout in My Heart	90

Appendices

Explanatory Notes for the Terms Used in Playing Chinese Percussion Instruments	95
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Percussion Instruments Used in Peking Opera	96
Explanatory Notes for the Signs on the Staff	97
Key to Chinese Phonetic Symbols	98

SCENE ONE

CONTACTING THE LIAISON MAN

An early winter night during the War of Resistance Against Japan. North China. Near the Lungtan railway station. The railway embankment is visible. Undulating hills loom in the distance.

(As the curtain rises, the north wind is howling. Four Japanese gendarmes march past on patrol. A signal lantern in his hand, Li Yu-ho, vigorous and calm, enters with firm steps.)

Li:

(Sings "xi pi san ban".)*

Red lantern in hand, I look round;
The leadership is sending a man here to Lungtan;
The time fixed is half past seven.
The next train should bring him.

(The wind whistles. Enter Tieh-mei with a basket, heading into the wind.)

Tieh-mei: Dad!

Li: Well, Tieh-mei! *(Realizing that she must be cold, he takes off his scarf and wraps it round her neck.)* How was business today?

Tieh-mei: Humph! The gendarmes and their thugs kept searching and pestering everybody. People were too jittery to buy anything.

Li: Those bandits!

Tieh-mei: Do be careful, dad.

Li: Right. Go home and tell granny that an uncle is coming.

**Xi pi san ban* and other similar terms found in the text, such as *xi pi yuan ban*, *xi pi liu shui*, *er huang kuai san yan*, *xi pi yao ban*, *xi pi er liu*, *er huang yuan ban*, are various styles of singing in Peking opera. Each has its own fixed tune, structure, mode, rhythm and tempo. Modern revolutionary Peking opera has critically assimilated various styles of singing from traditional Peking opera with many creative improvements to suit the portrayal of proletarian heroes.

Tieh-mei: An uncle?

Li: Yes.

Tieh-mei: What does this uncle look like, dad?

Li: Don't ask such questions.

Tieh-mei: I'll ask granny then.

Li: What a girl!

(Exit Tieh-mei.)

Li (*gazing at her retreating figure, very pleased*): She's a good girl!
(Sings "xi pi yuan ban".)

She peddles goods, collects cinders,
Carries water and chops wood.
Competent in all she does, a poor man's child
Soon learns to manage the house.
Different trees bear different fruits,
Different seeds grow different flowers.

(Enter Wang.)

Wang: Old Li, I've been looking for you for quite a while...

(Li alertly signals Wang not to speak, then looks around.)

Wang: The Japanese posted a tighter guard today, Old Li. They must be up to something.

Li: I know. We should meet as seldom as possible in the future. I'll contact you when necessary.

Wang: All right. *(Exit.)*

(A train whistle sounds in the distance. Li goes off. Lights fade.)

(A train roars past. Shots are heard.)

(Lights brighten. Liaison Man "somersaults" down the embankment and passes out.)

(Li rushes in.)

Li (*murmurs on seeing the man*): A glove on the left hand...

(Gunshots. Wang runs back.)

Wang: Who's that?

Li: One of ours. I'll carry him away, you cover us.

Wang: Right.

(Exit Li with Liaison Man on his back.)

(Shouts of the pursuing Japanese gendarmes. Sound of shooting. Wang fires two shots in the direction opposite to that taken by Li. The Japanese gendarmes can be heard approaching. In order to save his own skin, Wang shoots himself in the arm while shivering all over. He falls.)

(Enter Sergeant with Japanese gendarmes.)

Sergeant (*to Wang*): Did you see the man who jumped off the train?

Wang: Eh?

Sergeant: Where's the man?

Wang: Oh! (*Points towards the opposite direction.*) Over there.

Sergeant (*in alarm*): Hit the ground!

(All the Japanese gendarmes throw themselves down.)

(Lights fade.)

(Curtain)

SCENE TWO

ACCEPTING THE TASK

Immediately after the last scene. Li's house, interior and exterior view. The door opens on to a small lane. A table and several chairs in the middle of the room. A red paper butterfly pasted on the window pane. On the right, towards the rear, an inner room, with a curtain hanging over the doorway.

(As the curtain rises, the north wind is roaring. It's dim in the room. Granny turns up the lamp wick and the room becomes brighter.)

Granny:

(Sings "xi pi san ban".)

Fishermen brave the wind and waves,
Hunters *(switching to "yuan ban")* fear neither tigers nor wolves;
The darkest night must end at last
In the bright blaze of revolution.

(Enter Tieh-mei with the basket.)

Tieh-mei: Granny.

Granny: Tieh-mei.

Tieh-mei: Dad told me an uncle is coming soon. *(Puts down the basket.)*

Granny *(to herself, expectantly):* Ah, an uncle is coming soon!

Tieh-mei: How is it I have so many uncles, granny?

Granny: Your father has many cousins, so of course you have many uncles.

(Mending clothes.)

Tieh-mei: Which one is coming today?

Granny: Don't ask. You'll know when he comes.

Tieh-mei: Even if you won't tell me, granny, I know.

Granny: Do you? What do you know?

Tieh-mei: Granny, just listen.

(Sings "xi pi liu shui".)

I've more uncles than I can count;
They only come when there's important business.
Though we call them relatives, we never met before,
Yet they are closer to us than our own relatives.
Both dad and you call them our own folk;
I can guess part of the reason why:
They're all like my dad,
Men with red, loyal hearts.

(Li hurries in, carrying Liaison Man on his back. He pushes the door open and walks in. He signs to Tieh-mei to close the door and keep an eye on the outside, then helps Liaison Man to a chair and gives him a drink of water.)

Liaison Man *(recovering)*: Can you tell me if there's a switchman here named Li?

Li: That's me.

(Li and Liaison Man exchange passwords.)

Liaison Man: I sell wooden combs.

Li: Any made of peach-wood?

Liaison Man: Yes, for cash down.

Li: Fine, wait a minute.

(Li signs to Granny to give the lamp test.)

Granny *(holds up a kerosene lamp and looks at Liaison Man)*: Neighbour. . . .

Liaison Man *(realizing the method of identification is wrong)*: Thank you for saving my life. I must go.

Li *(holds up the red lantern)*: Comrade!

Liaison Man *(excitedly)*: I've found you at last!

(Tieh-mei takes the red lantern, becomes aware of its significance.)

(Granny signs to Tieh-mei to go out with the basket and keep watch.)

Liaison Man: Old Li, I'm the liaison man from the Pine Peak Base Area. *(Takes a document out of the sole of his shoe.)* This is a secret code.

(Li takes it carefully.)

Liaison Man: Get it to the guerrillas in the Cypress Mountains. Tomorrow afternoon, at the gruel stall in the junk market, a knife-grinder will contact you. Same password as before.

Li: Same password as before.

Liaison Man: Old Li, this is a difficult task!

Li: I guarantee I'll do it without fail.

Liaison Man: Fine. But time is pressing, Old Li, I must go back at once.

Li: Comrade, can you manage? . . .

Liaison Man: A moment ago I passed out simply from the fall. I'm all right now, I can manage.

Li: Wait a minute, you'd better change your clothes. (*Helps Liaison Man change a jacket.*)

Li (*with great concern*): The enemy is searching everywhere. Things are very tight. Be careful on your way back.

Liaison Man: I will, Old Li.

Li: Comrade. . . .

(*Sings "er huang kuai san yan".*)

Be on guard as you go —

Mountains are high, torrents swift.

Follow small lanes and short bridges,

The quiet and safe paths.

To the revolution we offer our loyal hearts.

(*Sees Liaison Man off. Tieh-mei enters.*)

(*Continues to sing.*)

Shouldering the heavy task I'll stand up to any test in the fire.

Bursting with strength, I'll be worthy of the trust of the Party.

No difficulty in the world can daunt a Communist.

(*The siren of a police car wails. With presence of mind, Li motions to Granny to blow out the lamp. With the secret code in his hand, Li strikes a dramatic pose.*)

(*Lights fade.*)

(*Curtain*)

SCENE THREE

NARROW ESCAPE AT THE GRUEL STALL

The next afternoon. The gruel stall in the junk market.

(As the curtain rises, Workman C is sitting at the counter eating gruel. Workmen A and B walk in and sit down at the gruel counter. Cigarette Girl sits not far away from the stall. Workman D buys cigarettes and goes off. Li enters with his lantern in one hand and lunch box in the other, calm and watchful.)

Li:

(Sings "xi pi yao ban".)

Seeking my comrade in the junk market,

I have hidden the code in my lunch box.

No obstacles whatever *(switching to "yao ban")* can stop me,

I must get it to the Cypress Mountains.

Workman C *(stands up)*: Old Li!

Li *(with concern)*: Ah, Old Chang, has your wound healed?

Workman C: It's much better.

Li: Watch out for yourself in the future.

Workman C: Yes. *(To himself.)* What kind of times we live in! The Japanese devil rides in my rickshaw and won't pay, and even beats me up. What a world! *(Exit.)*

(Li walks to the gruel stall and hangs the red lantern on a post.)

Workmen A and B: Hello, Old Li, come here and sit with us.

Li *(warmly)*: Let's all sit down.

Gruel-Seller: A bowl of gruel, Old Li?

Li: Yes, please. How is business?

Gruel-Seller: So-so. *(She serves him.)*

(Enter Workman E.)

Workman E: A bowl of gruel, please. (*Takes the bowl, about to eat.*) What's this?
It's mouldy!

Workman A: It's rationed mixed stuff.

Gruel-Seller: We can do nothing about it.

Workman B: Hey! (*Crunches bits of stone, spits them out.*) Nearly broke my teeth!

Workman A: It's full of grit.

Workman B: They just don't treat us like human beings.

Workman A: Hush! Don't ask for trouble.

Workman B: How can we eat such swill? We just can't live!

Li:

(*Sharing their feelings, sings "xi pi liu shui".*)

So many compatriots are suffering and fuming with discontent,
Struggling under iron heels they seethe with wrath.
Spring thunder will rumble when the time comes,
The brave Chinese people will never bow before the butcher's knife.
May our comrades come soon from the Cypress Mountains!

(*Enter Knife-Grinder.*)

Knife-Grinder:

(*Sings "xi pi yao ban".*)

Looking around for my comrade,
I see the red lantern hanging high to greet me.
I cry: Any knives or scissors to grind?

Li:

(*Continues the singing.*)

The knife-grinder fixes his eyes on my red lantern
And he raises his left hand to hail me.
Through a chat I'll try the password on him.

(*Before Li can speak to Knife-Grinder, a siren wails and Japanese gendarmes charge in. Knife-Grinder deliberately overturns his bench to draw the enemy's attention.*)

Li:

(*Continues to sing, switching to "san ban".*)

He draws the wolves to himself in order to cover me.

(*As he sings he coolly and resourcefully empties his gruel into the lunch box.*)

Li: Another helping, please.

(*Li lets Gruel-Seller fill his lunch box.*)

(*The gendarmes finish searching Knife-Grinder, angrily wave him away and turn towards Li.*)

(Li deliberately holds out his lunch box for search. The Japanese push the smelly gruel away. After searching him they gesture for him to go.)

(Li picks up his lunch box and lantern and walks calmly to the centre of the stage. Having fooled the enemy, he breaks into a serene smile. Then he turns round and, head high, strides off victoriously.)

(Lights fade.)

(Curtain)

SCENE FOUR

WANG TURNS TRAITOR

Afternoon. Hatoyama's office.

(As the curtain rises, Hatoyama is talking on the telephone.)

Hatoyama: Oh, oh! . . . What, the trail lost? . . . Eh, don't worry, I promise to get the code. . . . The case must be cleared up before the deadline! Yes, yes, sir! *(Puts down the receiver and speaks to himself.)* The Communists are really sharp! Just when the headquarters gets on their trail, they shake us off. They're hard nuts to crack, those Communists!
(Sergeant and Hou enter.)

Sergeant: Reporting! We searched everywhere, but found no trace of the man who jumped off the train. We've arrested a few suspects.

Hatoyama: What's the use of suspects? This fellow from the train is a liaison man of the Communists. He has a very important secret code with him. If it reaches the guerrillas in the Cypress Mountains, it will spell big trouble for our empire.

Sergeant: Yes, sir.

Hatoyama: Where is Police Officer Wang?

Hou: He's here.

Hatoyama: Bring him in.

Hou: Yes, sir. *(Calling to the inside.)* Police Officer Wang.

(Enter Wang with a wounded arm in a sling.)

(Exit Hou.)

Wang: Captain. *(Salutes.)*

Hatoyama: Ah, brave young fellow, you've been working hard! On behalf of the headquarters, I present you this medal, third class. *(Pins the medal on Wang's chest.)*

Wang: Thank you, captain.

Hatoyama:

(Sings "xi pi san ban".)

If you serve the empire loyally
You have every chance to rise high;
As the saying goes: The bitter sea has no bounds,
Repent and the shore is at hand.

Now everything depends on whether you are sensible (*sneers*) or not.

Wang: I don't follow you, captain.

Hatoyama: You ought to. Tell me, how could it be that the man who jumped off the train fired at you from a distance of only three centimetres?

Wang: Captain. . . .

Hatoyama: Out with it, young fellow. Who was your accomplice?

Wang (*inadvertently*): Accomplice!

Hatoyama: Exactly! Without one accomplice to help him and another to cover his escape, could the man who jumped off the train have grown wings and flown away?

Wang: I was shot and fell to the ground, captain. How do I know how he escaped?

Hatoyama: You know all right. Why else should you shoot yourself?

(Wang is taken aback.)

Hatoyama (*presses harder*): Tell me the truth, quick, young man. Who's in the underground Communist Party? Who was your accomplice? Where's the liaison man hiding? Who's got the secret code now? Better make a clean breast of it. I have plenty of medals and rewards for you.

Wang: Your words make my brain whirl, captain.

Hatoyama: In that case we shall have to sober you up! Sergeant!

Sergeant: Yes, sir.

Hatoyama: Take this man out and sober him up.

Sergeant: Yes, sir. Guards!

(Two gendarmes enter.)

Sergeant: Take him away!

Wang (*begs for mercy*): Captain. . . .

Sergeant (*grimly*): Bah! (*Kicks Wang to the ground.*)

(The gendarmes press Wang down hard.)

Wang: I . . . I'm innocent.

Hatoyama: Beat him up!

Sergeant: Take him away! Take him away!

(Crying repeatedly "I'm innocent", Wang is dragged out by the gendarmes. Sergeant follows.)

Hatoyama: Let torture open his mouth and make him tell who his accomplice was.

(Enter Sergeant.)

Sergeant: Reporting, sir, he has confessed.

Hatoyama: Who was his accomplice?

Sergeant: Li Yu-ho, the switchman.

Hatoyama *(reflectively)*: Li Yu-ho!?

(Lights fade.)

(Curtain)

SCENE FIVE

RECOUNTING THE FAMILY'S REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

Dusk. Li's house, interior and exterior view

(As the curtain rises, Granny is waiting anxiously for Li.)

Granny:

(Sings "xi pi yao ban".)

It's dusk, but my son still hasn't come back.

(Tieh-mei walks out of the inner room. A police siren wails.)

Tieh-mei:

(Sings "duo ban".)

There's such commotion in the streets, I'm worried about dad.

(Lunch box and red lantern in hand, Li enters and knocks at the door.)

Li: Tieh-mei.

Tieh-mei: Dad is back!

Granny: Open the door, quick.

Tieh-mei *(opens the door):* Dad!

Granny: Yu-ho.

Li: Mother!

Granny: You're back, at last. Have you got in touch with him? *(Takes the red lantern and lunch box from him.)*

Li: Not yet. *(Throws off his overcoat.)*

Granny: Anything wrong?

Li: Mother!

(Sings "xi pi liu shui".)

I was trying to contact the knife-grinder at the gruel stall

When a police car came and the Japanese started a search.