

RHYMES OF LI YOUCAI AND OTHER STORIES

Zhao Shuli



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ZHAO SHULI

**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
BEIJING**



ZHAO SHULI

First Edition	1950
Fifth Edition	1980

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Woodcuts by
LUO GONGLIU and LI QUN

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Rhymes of Li Youcai

I

In the village of Yanjiashan there was a man by the name of Li Youcai, sometimes called "Old Unsinkable" because of his irrepressibly cheerful nature. He was more than fifty years old and had no land. He earned his living by herding cattle for other villagers, and in the summer and autumn by keeping an eye on their crops. Alone in the world, he had no wife or children. He used to joke, "When I eat my fill, my whole family is satisfied."

The cave in which he lived near the ash-tree grove in the eastern part of the village was all the property he had. Formerly, he owned three mu* of land which he inherited from his father. Afterwards it was foreclosed and taken over by Yan Hengyuan. Yan was the head of the ranking family in the Yan clan, which was the richest and owned the most land in the village, and, for generations, had been its feudal lords. The very name of the village, literally "Yan Clan Mountain", indicated who ruled the roost.

The village was rather peculiar. In the western section, the houses were two-storeyed brick buildings, but in the centre, they were one-storey high, and in the eastern part, at the foot of the hill below the ash-tree grove, they were simply cave dwellings, about thirty in number. The terrain

* One mu is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare or roughly one-sixth of an acre.

of the village itself was fairly level, but if you looked at the line made by the roofs of the houses, you found a distinct slope running down from west to east. This corresponded with the economic status of the inhabitants.

All of the families who lived in the western part of the village were named Yan. In the centre, while some bore the name of Yan, and others had different surnames, these too were natives of the village. But of the poor peasants inhabiting the eastern part, about half were migrants from elsewhere. The other half were local people with various surnames, including three Yan families, who had gone broke, sold their houses in other parts of the village and moved over to the ash-tree grove.

"The people living in the ash-tree grove fall into two categories," said Li Youcai, "the 'olds' and the 'littles'." What he meant by this was that nobody paid any attention to the settlers' given names which were never used except on official documents demanding money or service. In addressing the new settlers, one simply stuck an "Old" before their surnames, like "Old Chen", or "Old Qin". The "littles" were the poor original villagers whom people continued to call by their childhood nicknames, which invariably were "Little" something or other.

The rich villagers who lived in the western section, however, used both their surnames and their given names. No one dared to even hint at their childhood nicknames. For instance, the nickname of the former mayor Yan Hengyuan meant "Little Bin", but in his presence even the word "bin" became taboo. If you wanted to talk about a grain bin, you had to use the word "granary".

But once you got to the ash-tree grove, the atmosphere was different. Eighty-year old-timers were still called "Little" this, or "Little" that. They couldn't use their

surnames even if they wanted to. A man named Chen, who was known as Little Yuan, a couple of years ago asked an old scholar to suggest a formal given name for him. "Wanchang" was chosen, and his given name was duly changed on the village register. The mayor, seeing the name "Chen Wanchang" there, couldn't imagine who it was. When the registrar explained the situation, the mayor took up his pen and changed "Wanchang" back to "Little Yuan". Thus, the original villagers in the ash-tree grove were always addressed as "Little", and the new settlers as "Old". Li Youcai himself really should have been considered a "Little", but because his parents came from Shandong where the children were not called "Little", he was known instead as "Youcai".

Li Youcai was the most popular man in the ash-tree grove. Every night, after supper, any gathering without him was thought dull. He had a way of making people laugh. The most ordinary words, coming from his mouth, could cause his listeners to practically collapse with laughter. He also had a great talent for composing satirical rhymes about village events and village characters, which were catchy and easy to recite.

Before the war he wrote one about Yan Hengyuan, who, year after year, got himself elected mayor of the village. When election time rolled round again, Li Youcai wrote this:

*Mayor Yan Hengyuan
Is a might tower,
Since we've had the job
He's remained in power.
For a "change in office"
Though we vote each year,
When the votes are counted*

*Yan's still there, no fear.
Why bother writing ballots
When elections come about?
Just use a stamp with Yan's name,
For years it won't wear out.*

Yan had a son named Jiaxiang, who was a teacher in the local elementary school. This son had never been to college but took the post upon graduation from the county teachers' training course in 1930. He was rather ugly with bulging cheeks and a receding chin. When he spoke, he blinked furiously. But you couldn't judge him by his grotesque appearance and write him off as a fool; actually, he was full of shrewd dirty tricks. Whoever had any dealings with him always came out the loser. Li Youcai composed in his honour:

*Bulgy-cheeked flat-nosed
Yan Jiaxiang flutters
Long-lashed eyelids
With each word he utters.
He's a schemer, a swindler,
A crook, a cheat,
Nothing pleases him better
Than a quick profit neat.
When he can't get enough
His angry mouth opens big,
While his swinish eyes narrow
Like a fat grunting pig.*

Li Youcai turned out rhymes like these at a rate of almost one a day. They came easily to him, and fulfilled the constant demand from the young people of the ash-tree grove who came to see him every night after supper. Within a day, his latest verses would be known by every-

one in the eastern part of the village. But they seldom filtered westwards. People from the western section never came to the ash-tree grove if they could help it. If one of their children wandered down to play, his parents would scold and threaten:

"Little loafer, tomorrow I'll send you there to live permanently."

The distance between the two ends of the village was more than merely physical.

During the anti-Japanese war, there were many changes in Yanjiashan, and Li Youcai wrote verses describing them. One of them got him into serious difficulty. I have written this little story to tell you about these changes and in the hope of amusing you with some of the verses which Youcai created in an age of upheavals.

A man who writes poetry is a poet. But Li Youcai's works are not poetry, they are rhymes. Therefore we cannot call him a poet. All we can say for him is that he was a rhymers. A book about poetry might be called a "poetry treatise", but since this story is only about rhymes, the best we can do is bestow upon it the title of "Rhymes of Li Youcai" to give it a little dignity.

II

The cave in which Li Youcai lived was rather messy. As you entered, on the left, up against the middle of the wall stood a *kang*.* At both the head and the foot of the

* *Kangs* are rectangular in shape, hollow in the centre, made of mud-brick, and heated by running through them the chimney of the adjacent stove. They are slept on at night and sat on during the day. During the warm weather their connection with the stove is blocked off.

kang there were about five feet to spare to the front and back walls of the cave. The space near the front wall contained the stove. An earthen water vat, a jug with salted vegetables, a pot, spoons, bowls and a couple of dishes lined the left front wall between the stove and the door. Along the rear wall was a jumble of various sized baskets containing walnuts, persimmons and other edibles which Li Youcai had received in payment for acting as crop watchman. In the left hand wall of the cave, level with the *kang* top and as long, he had scooped out an alcove sufficiently high and deep for a person to sleep. Thus, when you entered the cave and looked at the rear wall you had the impression of a preserved fruit and nut shop. As you turned your head to the left, the alcove made you think of the niches for Buddhas in a temple. Another turn to the left, and you were in a small restaurant.

Li Youcai drew people like a hot stove in winter. Whenever he returned from work, men of good fellowship would gather in his cave to joke and chat. After Yanjia-shan had been liberated, on the evening of the twenty-fifth day of the first moon when Li Youcai was finishing his supper, one of his young neighbours, Little Fu, called at the cave, accompanied by another boy in his late teens. Li Youcai greeted them and lighted the oil lamp hanging on the wall.

"This is our Li Youcai," said Little Fu in introduction. Youcai pushed back into the niche and invited them to sit on the warm *kang*.

"Where does our guest come from?" asked Li Youcai.

"He's my cousin from Shiziwa," replied Little Fu.

"Please don't treat me as a guest," his cousin interposed modestly. "Ever since I saw your fine performance here

in the opera 'Jiao Guangpu' a couple of nights ago, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Why hasn't your own village put on any opera lately?" Youcai asked, smiling.

"We couldn't rent costumes before. But we'll start our show tomorrow," replied the cousin.

Youcai dropped the ceremonious style customary with new acquaintances, and plunged directly into an exposition of one of his favourite themes:

"Jiao Guangpu, although a clown, is still an important character. His role should be acted with strength." Illustrating, he took up his long pipe as a riding crop, and flailed vigorously on both sides of his imaginary mount. Still seated in the alcove, he acted out the whole first scene, simultaneously imitating the orchestral accompaniment.

While he was still going strong, the door opened with a bang. Another young fellow, Little Shun, entered and said, laughing, "Take it easy, you're liable to break that gong." He presented a small package, stretching over the *kang* to hand it to Li Youcai in the alcove, "My father wants you to try our new-year's millet cake."

Little Shun sat down on the *kang*, adding, "This year Qichang's wife only gave her hired hand, Little Dan, two small millet cakes to celebrate the new year."

"People who can afford a hired hand should be able to feed him properly," said Little Fu.

"Qichang is all right," commented Youcai, "but that wife of his is a terror."

"Is that the Little Dan who played the role of the emperor's brother-in-law?" asked Little Fu's cousin.

"That's right," said Little Fu, "he's old Degui's son."

"But he's a hundred times better than his father," added Little Shun.

"That goes without saying," Li Youcai agreed.

"What's wrong with old Degui?" Little Fu's cousin whispered.

"There's a rhyme about him," said Little Shun, and he proceeded to recite:

*A real man Zhang Degui,
He moves in Hengyuan's wake,
If Hengyuan says "it's long",
"Not short", Zhang Degui will stake.
If Yan Hengyuan says "square",
Degui insists "not round",
"Crush garlic in an earthen pot,"
"Won't break no matter how you pound."
"Our rooster lays eggs each day,"
"I've seen it," Degui avows,
He can do anything he likes,
As long as Hengyuan allows.*

Little Fu knew the verse by heart, and only smiled slightly, but his cousin, hearing it for the first time, laughed till he nearly split his sides.

"You shouldn't laugh. Degui has many fine qualities," said Little Shun, sarcastically. "He's famous in our village as a wheat-cake-eating official."

"Is he in the government administration?" asked Little Fu's cousin, incredulously.

"Chairman of the peasant association, no less," replied Little Shun. "He's quite a big shot."

"What do you mean by saying that he's a wheat-cake-eating official?"

"Our village is special," explained Little Shun. "Anyone

who wants to bring a civil suit must first present to the local administration twenty catties of flour, five catties of pork, and to each judicial officer one catty of wheat-cakes. Only after the authorities have finished eating can the case begin. Degui's office entitles him to one wheat-cake and he's very careful to pick himself a good one."

"In my village, the custom of feeding officials before you could get a hearing went out of existence nearly three years ago," said Little Fu's cousin.

"That's the case in all villages except this one," said Little Shun. "The practice is kept up by old man Yan. If he should die today, I guarantee that tomorrow there wouldn't be any more of this eating business."

Several more neighbours arrived: Little Fu's father Old Qin, Little Yuan, Little Ming and Little Bao. As they came in the door, Little Yuan cried:

"Big news. Big news."

"What's up?" asked Li Youcai.

"The mayor Yan Xifu has been kicked out." (He was the nephew of landlord Yan and had been mayor of the village since its liberation.)

Little Shun jumped down from the *kang* and shouted, "Really? We should celebrate the new year three more days."

"Count me in," said Little Fu.

"Has it really happened?" mused Li Youcai. "I thought he was a permanent fixture. Who told you about it?"

"It's true all right," replied Little Yuan. "Comrade Zhang, the political worker, brought the order of dismissal from the county government."

Little Fu's cousin was puzzled. "Why do you people hate Mayor Xifu so?"

"Listen to this," said Little Shun:

*Tiger Yan Xifu
Knows how to earn his keep,
Been a soldier, sold opium,
Gambled and stole sheep.
In widows and girls he's trafficked,
There's nought he won't essay,
Folk greet him falsely hearty,
And quickly dash away.*

"So that's the kind of rascal he is," laughed Little Fu's cousin.

"You don't know the half of it," said Little Ming. "That verse only deals with his past history. After the outbreak of the war, the dog took advantage of the upset conditions to get himself elected mayor, and then really began throwing his weight around. With his uncle landlord Yan (may he drop dead) backing him up on every move, he did pretty much as he pleased. If the least business brought you to his office, you had to feed him and bribe him. If you didn't offer him enough he might throw you in jail or have you beaten up. He squeezed families into bankruptcy, and gave his uncle plenty of chances to buy their houses and land for next to nothing. He made one levy after another, but none of us in the ash-tree grove has had the nerve to go to his office to demand an account of how the money was used. You never saw a member of the Yan family doing any work. Whenever there was any public work to be done in the village, it always fell on our shoulders. There's no one in the ash-tree grove who hasn't had to neglect his farming for that kind of thing. You can't imagine. The whole business is rotten."

"What reason was given for his being kicked out?" asked Youcai quietly.

"We still don't know," replied Little Bao. "Probably the county government checked up on him."

"If he's merely kicked out and remains in the village, he's still dangerous. We won't have made a clean job of it until he's finished completely. Of course we don't know whether or not the county government will bring him up on charges," said Youcai.

"The moment he's removed from office, plenty of people will be happy to testify against him," said Little Bao.

Away in the distance, a voice could be heard calling, "Election of the mayor tomorrow in the temple — every one over eighteen must attend."

With each repetition of the call, the sound became closer and louder.

"That's Degui," said Little Fu, after listening for a moment. "Can't you tell his cheap voice?"

A man entered, and sure enough, it was Degui. Except for Youcai, who casually uttered a conventional greeting as the host, no one spoke. Little Fu and Little Shun exchanged winks.

"Quite a gathering," said Degui briskly. "Saves me lots of running around. At tomorrow's village election all those who have attained their eighteenth year are required to be present." Lowering his voice, he added, "Yan Hengyuan proffers the suggestion that we elect Liu Guangju. Pass the word." The words were barely out of his mouth, when he scurried away.

"Go and eat some wheat-cakes," Little Shun shouted after him.

"Fat chance," said Little Yuan. "With Comrade Zhang in town, he'll curb his appetite."

"He'll hear you," whispered Old Qin.

"Let him hear," replied Little Yuan. "What's there to be afraid of?"

"Where does he get that fancy 'all those who have attained their eighteenth year', 'Yan Hengyuan proffers the suggestion', etc.?" Little Bao said in a mocking tone.

"So the humbug is going to become a big shot."

"Who's the humbug?" asked Little Fu's cousin.

"We've got a little verse about him," replied Little Shun:

*Phoney Liu Guangju
Wants to be a big shot,
Fawns on Yan Hengyuan
To use the power he's got.
Liu meddles in all business
No matter big or small,
Though it keeps him on the run,
He doesn't mind at all.*

Little Fu's cousin thought this was all very strange. "How is it your village has so many verses?" he asked.

"There's a verse about everyone in the western part of the village," replied Little Shun. "As soon as something new happens, the next day there's a verse about it." He pointed at Youcai. "This old neighbour is your man if it's rhymes you're after. He's got as many as you want."

"I think we can forget about landlord Yan's proffered suggestion," said Little Yuan. "Tomorrow we'll give them a surprise. We'll round up a big crowd and make sure that Guangju is not elected."

Old Qin shook his head.

"That's a bad business. Nobody in the ash-tree grove will risk offending old Yan the landlord. If he wants