

# RHYMES OF LI YU-TSAI AND OTHER STORIES

CHAO SHU-LI



Cultural Press

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**Rhymes of Li Yu-tsai**  
**and other stories**

*With an introductory article by Chou Yang*

**Cultural Press**

**1950**

P. O. Box 6, Peking, China



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**Printed in the People's Republic of China**

# THE CREATIVE WORKS OF CHAO SHU-LI

*By Chou Yang*

AFTER THE LIBERATION, many villages have been or are in the process of gigantic transformation. Peasants waged intricate and fierce struggles against their landlords. They fought because they wanted rents and taxes to be reduced; because they believed they had the right to live and to govern themselves. During the war against Japan, this struggle helped greatly to improve the living standard and the social position of the peasantry; and the peasantry, thus strengthened, added to the people's power of resistance against the common enemy. After the victory over Japan, the fight for lower rents and taxes combined with anti-traitor and revenge movements, fully developed the battle between landlord and peasant. This battle was destined to extinguish what was left of feudalism in village-life and to lead the peasants onto the path of true liberation. After eight years of war, the peasants have become highly class-conscious and firmly united. They at last discovered the real reason why they were poverty-stricken, and they were determined to fight until they were poor no longer. They had a special terminology for their "Meetings for the Liquidation of Injustices";

it was, to quote their more correct saying, "Digging up the Roots of Poverty". This phrase means what it says; the peasants wanted to dig up and liquidate the root-cause for their poverty once and for all. The strength of the peasants' revolution is increasing at a tremendous pace, and it cannot be stopped by any outside force while its own power is limitless. It is in the act of changing completely our village-life, as it has already upset the social structure of whole China. This is a great revolution of the present Chinese society, and it is changing Cathay to a New People's China.

The process of this great revolution in Chinese village-life has evoked great repercussions from contemporary art and literature. The writings of Comrade Chao Shu-li have to a certain extent illustrated this situation.

Chao Shu-li is a new comer in the literary world, but he is an author who has made a careful study of life and thoughts in all their aspects. He is an author who matured before he became famous, an original artist who has created a style of his own, and a writer who belongs to the people. His first story *Hsiao Erh-hei's Marriage* published in 1943, gained an instantaneous recognition from the broad masses, and in the single district of Tai Hang it sold thirty to forty thousand copies. His readers dramatised the story themselves and put it on the stage. Soon afterwards *Rhymes of Li Yu-tsai* was published. This book described truthfully and

vividly the peasants' struggle for better environment, and it was a masterpiece. Only recently the author published a novel on the same subject called *The Changes of Li's Village*.

We have now in front of us three miraculously beautiful but solemn paintings illustrating our great transformation.

*Hsiao Erh-hei's Marriage* tells of a village love story. Its plot is simple enough. Hsiao Erh-hei, a handsome young peasant and an excellent marksman, loved the beautiful village maiden Hsiao Chin. But Hsiao Erh-hei's father, Second Kung Ming, and Hsiao Chin's mother, Third Fairy-maid, the two 'holy people' of the village, were against the union of the two young lovers. Hsiao Erh-hei's father had an eight or nine-year-old child fiancée for his son, but Hsiao Erh-hei rebelled against his father's authority, and protested, "If you want to keep her, you can. I have nothing to do with her anyway". Hsiao Chin also refused to go through the marriage arranged for her by her mother. She threw her engagement-gifts on the floor and said to her mother: "I have nothing to do with these presents! The person who wants them can get married instead of me." So simple and definite were their refusals. When the village bullies, the Chin Wang brothers, imprisoned the enamoured couple and wronged them with false accusations, Hsiao Erh-hei showed not a sign of fear. He knew that justice was on his side, for he had got to know

from the comrades in the district government that marriage could be legalised at the district registry office, and only the agreement of the two young people was necessary for the ceremony; no other person could interfere with it. In the end, of course, victory belongs to Hsiao Erh-hei. Is the author here merely praising the victory of the freedom of love? No, he is telling us that our New Society is triumphant — only in this kind of society can the peasantry enjoy the right of freedom of love. The author sings the victory of the rural masses, who have begun to rule their own lives, and who now understand that they must fight for a still better life. He sings of the peasants' victory of enlightenment and progress over stupidity, backwardness and superstition, and lastly but most importantly, he sings of the peasants' victory over the feudalistic tyranny of the bullies. The author's characterisations of the Second Kung Ming and the Third Fairy-maid are satirical enough. But when we see these two 'holy people' defeated and put to shame on account of their two separate children, we actually begin to have pity for them. When in the end we see them begin gradually to change their outlook on life, we even begin to like them. So we do not until now discover that the real persons attacked by the author are not they but the Chin Wang brothers, those lawless tyrants of every rural district.

In *Rhymes of Li Yu-tsai*, the war between peasant and landlord is fully developed. The struggle centred on the twin questions of the changes of village administration and the reduction of land rents. Old Yen Heng-yuan, whom the author characterised as a typical sly and treacherous landlord, monopolised the village administration and manipulated the activities of the village Anti-Japanese Association. About him Li Yu-tsai has composed the following rhymes:

Yen Heng-yuan is a very strong mayor.  
Ever since we had one it was Yen.  
Ten years, every year we vote for a betrayer;  
Who do you think the mayor is then?  
I suggest a great big stamp made of wood  
That a voter should be pretty proud to hold.  
It would save a lot of trouble; it would last; it would  
be good  
To make a mayor every year till Yen is cold.

Li Yu-tsai, this gifted peasant songster, was a genius. He used his rhymes to broadcast what he knew concerning certain individuals and certain activities of his village, and by so doing showed us that the peasants had their own opinions about every individual and character around them. How truthful are these rhymes, how straight-forward and how sharp! It was exactly because they had so thoroughly pierced the false exteriors of people like Yen Heng-yuan, that Li Yu-tsai was chased out of the village by them. The progressive people of the village were attacked, disintegrated or bought

over. A young, enthusiastic but totally inexperienced cadre called Chang, poisoned by subjectivism and bureaucratism, was completely deceived by Yen Heng-yuan. He called the latter "one of the enlightened gentry", and the village "Model Village". But the peasants could see more clearly and they sang:

Whether "Model" or not, in our village  
The rich eat wheat cakes; and the poor, thin gruel.

So the struggle continued. When Little Yuan had become good for nothing, there soon sprang up many other enthusiastic progressives whose names began with "Little". Old uncle Yu-tsai had been chased away, but there still remained people who could compose songs; their lips could never be sealed. Then from the County Peasants' Union came Comrade Yang, a man who, brought up among the masses, knew what the masses wanted. Like a magnet he immediately attracted this crowd of progressive peasant youths, who united themselves around him. The real battle against oppression began. They could not help but win: the Peasants' Union was made efficient, the administration was reorganised, and the law for the reduction of land rents was carried out into effect. The author has here dealt with the subject of struggle in the villages with correctness and dexterity. He has described scrupulously all the uncertainties and complications that arise out of the struggle in the village, and he has portrayed

accurately all kinds of rural people. The chief characters from the book are the landlords; the peasants, who include the progressive ones, the backward ones, and those who are neither; and the two totally different types of cadres. The author simplifies neither characters nor events. He writes about difficulties as well as victories, and he shows us the dark side of life as well as the bright side. His pen is light and easy, full of humour and warmth, and yet at the same time solemn. But new and bright things are always the chief factors which govern the subjects dealt with in his works.

The theme of *The Changes of Li's Village* deals likewise with the war between landlord and peasant. Only now the area of the battle is bigger, the period longer, and the methods used more terrifying and cruel. The characteristic humour in the former two works is now replaced by a dark heavy atmosphere. The hero of the story Tieh-so had a much more determined character compared with "those people whose names began with Little". He was more experienced, and consequently his acts were more conscious of purpose. The story of the book develops with this character as its centre. Tieh-so's original home did not belong to Li's village. He was exploited and oppressed by overbearing local landlords, and however hard he tried to avoid them, he could not escape from their devilish grasp. Eventually at Taiyuan he accidentally made the acquaintance of

a young Communist by the name of Little Shang, and from the moment a new light dawned on his life. Little Shang happened to be sent on duty to Tieh-so's county. He came to work in the village in question, and here at once he heroically started organising a "League of Self-sacrifice". Under his guidance Tieh-so and other determined progressives, Leng Yuan and Pai Kou, became very active. At the same time, exploiting landlords like Li Ju-chen also tried to tighten their controls; they wanted to prevent the reduction of taxes and rents, and they wished to reduce the "League of Self-sacrifice" to impotency. When Kuomintang or Japanese troops came, they had their will and revenge. Little Shang was buried alive; but Tieh-so and Leng Yuan managed to escape and joined the Communist Eighth Route Army. When the Eighth Route Army liberated the village for a second time, the population of the village had been reduced to only half of what it was. The struggle was cruel and long-lasting. Any other author would have been satisfied with the celebration of victory as the end of his story. But our author insists on adding another scene of a great ceremony for celebrating the sending-off of the fighters to the war of self-defense. He reveals unambiguously this fact to his readers: "The struggle is still ahead." He fills his readers with the belief in victory and the determination to fight bravely and heroically to the end.

Although *The Changes of Li's Village* tells us only what happened in a single village, it annotates the political background of Shensi during the past ten years. It gives us a picture of the numerous important events that took place in wartime Shensi, and that had great historical significance with regard to the past and present. We can see that our author undertook a tremendous task, but in this respect his book does not seem to have completely realised his ambition — at least not such completed works as *Hsiao Erh-hei's Marriage* and *Rhymes of Li Yu-tsai* in their own spheres. Their contents seem to be better arranged, and their message better directed. But if we confine ourselves to the contents of *The Changes of Li's Village*, we must say that in this book there are things which the author never attempted with better success when writing his two previous masterpieces.

Now that we have examined carefully these three works of Comrade Chao Shu-li, I would like to say a few words on some of his characteristics that deserve careful study. I shall group them under two headings: firstly, his characterisation, and secondly, his language.

The first characteristic we notice in his characterisation is that all his characters have their parts to play in the struggle for better life, and only under such circumstances do each one's personality and activities unfold to the reader. Any mental or spiritual change of each character is determined by

the change of his position in the struggles, or by the change of his relationship with other people. The author has not drawn any characters who remain static or even passive.

Above all the author writes about progressive peasants and cadres, who are always in the front-line of struggles. The creation of positive characters is about the most difficult task in contemporary literature. The reasons are, firstly, in the past most of our better authors only dealt with the backwardness and negative aspect of the peasantry; secondly, the personality of the new types in the present society is still in the process of formation and growth. Although our author has not yet created any unforgettable, highly representative characters like Lu Shun's *Ah Q*, he has nevertheless succeeded in drawing distinctly the real faces of a new type of characters. We can regard those "people whose names began with Little" as the collective images of our new peasantry. How moving and lovable are these images! But they are not idealised by the author. They are but ordinary peasants; they are young, passionate, and sometimes even reckless. All their lives they have been oppressed and exploited by tyrannical landlords. They have been forced to follow the path of revolution. They have grown up among hard and struggling surroundings, and they have learned gradually the tactics and strategy of their struggle. They are not afraid to speak up, and their actions