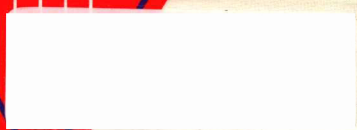


CHINESE LITERATURE

Stories from
Shaanxi

VOL. 1



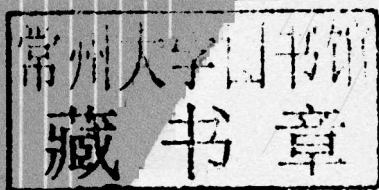
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My Elder Sister

Lu Yao

Lu Yao (1949-1992), is from Qingjian County, Shaanxi Province. He has been a member of the China Writers Association and vice-chairman of the Shaanxi Provincial Writers Association. His novellas *The Soul-stirring Scene* and *Life* were respectively awarded the First and the Second National Award for Best Novella. His novel *The Quotidian World* won the Third Mao Dun Literature Prize. His other published works include *Life*, *My Elder Sister's Love*, *The Selected Novels of Lu Yao* and the five-volume *Selected Works of Lu Yao*.

My elder sister is already 27 and should have been married long ago. In the countryside a girl of 27 still single is considered a disgrace. The villagers have been gossiping about her, and that is more humiliating than a slap in the face.

Since my mother passed away two years ago, my father has become more morose. He seems to care about nothing but the farm work. He is somewhat indifferent to my elder sister's marital status. As for me, I love my elder sister, who is gentle, kind-hearted and as pure as a cloud in the blue sky. She is known as a pretty girl.

It's true that my hometown is a remote and undeveloped place, but it does produce quite a lot of beautiful girls. They are as famous near and far as the local yellow flowers and red dates. Even the people in the far-off provincial capital know about them.

I'm not a braggart. My elder sister is a recognized beauty in the local villages. I'm a fine-art lover, so I know what beauty is. I'm proud of my pretty elder sister. My mum once told me that my elder sister was once selected by the provincial cultural and artistic troupe to be an actress. My parents hated to part with her due to her young age. She graduated from senior high school several years ago. She sat for the college entrance exam a couple of times, but failed. It was during the Cultural Revolu-

tion when she was in high school, so she didn't learn much. Now foreign languages are included as compulsory subjects, but she never learned any, and that made it harder for her in the exams. In the countryside, there is no official recruitment. Even if there were, my elder sister has no chance as we aren't related to any officials. So it seems that she has to be a farmer all her life. My sister, however, seems quite calm about that. She has been living in our poor mountain village all her life and can endure all kinds of hard and heavy work. She is known to be as hard-working as a man in our village.

Many matchmakers have tried to introduce men to my sister over the years. The men were mostly officials or workers in our county town or in other farther places. My sister, however, turned them all down. Many of the villagers felt puzzled about that: The girl has missed so many golden opportunities to marry a decent man. Why isn't a 27-year-old girl worried about getting married?

As a matter of fact, I'm the only one who knows my sister has found her Mr. Right. He was the last educated youth from the provincial capital who left our village, and his name is Gao Limin. It is said that his father used to be deputy governor of our province and his mother was a bureau director who were both arrested as soon as the Cultural Revolution started. They were said to be heads

of a spy group.

More than a dozen educated young men worked in our village. Most of them were later either recommended to become college students or became workers and left the village one after another. Gao Limin, however, couldn't leave, due to his parents. Even being a farmer couldn't bring him a calm life. He was called by the township or county leaders to be criticized from time to time. He lived quite a hard life in those days. Ordinary people considered spies even worse than counter-revolutionaries, so most of the villagers kept away from Gao, "the son of spies" in case they get into trouble. Gao was like a lonely lamb. He was usually dressed in dirty rags. He couldn't cook, and so often ate raw things. As a result, he would suffer from serious stomachache. He was frequently seen rolling in agony in the fields when working in the mountains.

As a kind-hearted girl, my sister often cooked meals for him, mended his clothes and washed his bedding. On special occasions, she invited him to our home and treated him to delicacies. I even thought my sister treated him better than she treated me!

My parents, kind people as they were, never scolded my sister for what she did. The villagers, however, gossiped that my sister had an abnormal relationship with

Gao Limin. I was still a small child at that time. People said bad words in front of me instead of in front of my parents and my sister. I was angry and often reacted, "My sister is so attached to Limin. Why are you saying they have an abnormal relationship?" What I said usually caused a big laugh.

Sometimes I also couldn't understand why my sister treated Limin so well. After all, he was the son of spies.

Once when my parents weren't there I said to my sister, "Gao Limin is the son of spies. All the others keep away from him. Why are you so concerned about him? Aren't you afraid of gossip? You know, they will probably say we are politically unsound and close to a class enemy."

My sister lovingly pressed my nose with her finger. She smiled. "Look at you! You're even more revolutionary than Director Liu! Limin is not a class enemy. We don't have to keep away from him. He is a poor guy. Dear, when our grandma was still alive, she often told us to help those in trouble; otherwise, we'll be severely punished by Heaven for our misdeeds. We have our families, but he has no relatives here and is now in difficulty. Can we watch him enduring hardships all his life? No matter what others say, we don't have to be afraid."

I agreed with my sister. Just as she said, she wasn't

afraid of gossip. When all the other educated young men returned to the city and Limin was the only one who remained, my sister treated him better than before. Once, when Limin was ill in bed, my sister stayed in his room for a whole day to take care of him. She also took from home fine flour, sesame and pickled chives and made fine noodles for him. At that time, the annual wheat quota for each person was only several kilograms and eating fine flour food was simply a luxury.

At dusk, Limin came down with a fever. My sister was still with him. At nightfall, my sister didn't come back home. My mum got anxious and went there to spend the night with my sister. What a close relationship it was between my sister and Limin! Why did people say they had an "abnormal" relationship? Soon after that, I learned what a so-called "abnormal" relationship meant.

It was one evening in late summer. The clouds in the west had turned from red to grey. It wasn't completely dark yet, and I was on my way to the river in front of our village. I was going to wash my clothes there, although they weren't so dirty. You know, I was a boy who loved to be clean and tidy.

When I passed by the village threshing floor, I heard two people whispering behind the haystack. Judging from the voices, I knew they were a boy and a girl.

Out of curiosity, I crept up to the haystack. I was so nervous that I shivered. And then I rushed away again. They turned out to be my sister and Limin. I happened to see Limin hugging my sister and kissing her face.

I stood on the path. I was so nervous that I could even hear my own heartbeat. I was just about to leave when I heard them whispering again. I stayed.

“Apricot, you’re so nice! I love you. I can’t leave you. I can’t live without you. Promise me, OK? Apricot, do you love me? Probably I don’t deserve to be loved... My parents have been in confinement for about seven years. Obviously, I’ll be the son of counter-revolutionaries for the rest of my life. You are probably afraid of...” said Limin.

“No, I’m not afraid. Even if you were put in confinement, I would wait for you,” said my sister. Then I heard Limin crying. After a while, he said again, “Apricot, I’ll give you all I have! I’ll always remember that when I am undergoing such a difficult time you give me your love. I had an easy childhood, and I can’t be a good farmer. You’ll live a hard life with me.”

I heard my sister said, “Don’t be afraid, Limin. As long as we love each other, I’ll stay with you even if you become a beggar!”

Then I heard Limin sobbing like a baby. And soon

after that I heard my sister crying. Her crying, however, sounded not sad at all.

Somehow I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I cried, too. With tears in my eyes, I quietly went to the river. I stood in the dusk and gazed at the misty mountains in the distance. For quite a long time I didn't know why I had burst into tears, but as time went by I seemed to understand. I was moved by my sister. What a nice sister I've got! Everybody tried to keep away from Limin to avoid possible trouble, but my sister had chosen to love such a man! As a child, I didn't know what love was. However, judging with a child's pure heart, I knew that my sister was doing a good thing!

That day, my sister took Limin home, and made dumplings for him. My parents were a thrifty couple, so they kept asking my sister: What's the occasion?

I guess my sister and Limin were probably chuckling. They didn't know I was chuckling, too.

Later, drastic changes took place. After the Gang of Four was overthrown, Limin's parents' grievances were redressed, and they were freed from prison. The next year my sister encouraged Limin to take the college entrance exam together with her. Limin was admitted to a university in Beijing, but my sister failed by only a few marks.

After Limin left, the villagers gossiped for many days.

They said things had changed. Limin had finally got out of his difficulties and was going to fly up to a new sky. My sister, however, was experiencing mixed feelings. She was happy about Limin's success, but at the same time she was sad about their coming separation. I was going to be a middle school student in two years, so I had some basic idea about love. I knew it would be a few years before my sister could see her lover again. She would have to endure loneliness and sadness. That must hurt. If that brought my sister sadness, it made me unhappy, too.

Fortunately, there was a good way to make up for it.

For quite a long time I was probably the only one in the whole village who knew that my sister would go all the way down the road to wait for the local postman, Uncle Li, to get letters from Beijing and then give him her letters to be sent to Beijing. I guess my sister must have reached an "agreement" to keep that a secret, so the other villagers knew nothing about the letters. But I saw everything.

After Limin left for the university the villagers stopped gossiping about my sister. I knew my sister was timid, and she didn't want others to know about the letters and make coarse jokes about her.

Dad seemed to know nothing about the matter, either. Farmland and crops were all he cared about. As for other

things, he seemed indifferent. Sometimes I also saw him staring at my sister from behind with sympathy and melancholy for a long time, sighing deeply but without saying a word.

I knew each time my sister received a letter from Limin, she would go behind the haystack (Whenever I think of that place I can't help feeling embarrassed) to read it.

Whenever she finished reading one of Limin's letters she would come home singing cheerfully. My sister has got a beautiful voice and she sings as well as anything I have heard on the radio. My dad, however, looked unhappy at such times. He would impatiently interrupt my sister's singing and plead with her, "Please stop singing. I've got a pain in my chest..."

Whenever that happened, I would secretly blame my dad for spoiling my sister's joyful moment. At the same time, I loved my dad and felt sympathetic with him. After my mum passed away, he deteriorated, and his hair turned completely grey. I felt happy for my sister, though. I pretended to know nothing about the letters, but I would also start to sing as soon as I was alone. To be honest, I only love painting. I am not a good singer, but I just wanted to sing for a while to express my happiness at my sister's good mood. Anyone who has an elder

sister surely shares the same feeling: He might have no comment on his sister's marriage, but he does care about her happiness.

New Year's Day was coming round again.

Generally speaking, it isn't celebrated in the countryside. We see it as a special occasion exclusive to the cities. We only consider Spring Festival to be New Year.

For ordinary people, special occasions mean good meals. On New Year's Day, however, people in our village just had simple meals as usual. Nobody seemed to care about such an occasion.

But in my home New Year's Day was celebrated just as in the city. My sister did all the preparations. After my mum died, my sister took care of all the housework. Dad didn't care about these things. As usual, he went to the mountains to cut firewood early every morning.

I knew my sister was happy. The day before, she had received another letter from Limin. I couldn't help saying to myself: Sister, you're overdoing it. Aren't you making a fuss over a single letter? You know, we don't have so much fine flour!

But I didn't say no to her making dumplings. I support all the things my sister loves to do.

Early in the morning my sister had fetched a lot of carrots from the cellar to make the fillings for the