

Sowing the Clouds

A COLLECTION OF CHINESE SHORT STORIES



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by Chou Li-po, Li Chun and Others

**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1961**

CONTENTS

Lingkuan Gorge <i>Tu Peng-cheng</i>	I
Stubborn Ox Niu <i>Liu Shu-teh</i>	6
The Family on the Other Side of the Mountain <i>Chou Li-po</i>	26
Summer Nights <i>Wang Wen-shih</i>	34
The Care-Taker <i>Yang Hsu</i>	54
The First Lesson <i>Tang Keb-bsin</i>	70
A Promise Is Kept <i>Ju Chih-chuan</i>	78
Sowing the Clouds <i>Li Chun</i>	90
A Fighting Journey <i>Hsiao Mu</i>	127
The Road <i>Malchinbu</i>	136

LINGKUAN GORGE

Tu Peng-cheng

The snow, already more than half a foot deep, obliterated the line between earth and sky behind a hazy white curtain. I had been following the path of the future railway for forty kilometres. Although I could hear the roar of machinery further back in the hills, I had seen neither work sites nor workers.

Entering Lingkuan Gorge, my irritation increased. Even in clear weather, in this gorge the sun never shone. It didn't matter where you looked up along the twisting course—the most you could see of the sky was a patch no bigger than the palm of your hand. Now it was dusk, and the swirling snowflakes and the gale made every step a struggle.

Construction in the gorge was very busy. Everywhere people were at work. Generators, cement-mixers, air compressors shook the ground. Hundreds of light bulbs gleamed dim and yellow. Electric wires, criss-crossing like a giant spider web, were scarcely visible, but I could see the overhead cables and their pulley cars sliding back and forth loaded with materials.

Hungry, cold, I tripped and fell, scraping my hands. Enough! I'd find some place under a cliff, out of the wind, and rest a few hours. If I reached the materials depot tomorrow morning by ten o'clock, that still wouldn't be too late. Stumbling around in the dark like this, I was liable to fall into some deep ravine, and that would be the end of this Materials Department chief. I'd have to be put on the "used up" list!

I noticed a path leading to a cave in the cliffside. A door curtain hanging in the entrance way showed that the cave was

undoubtedly occupied by workers. Grasping branches along the steep path, I hauled myself up to the door and entered.

Strange! Seated on a small stool in the doorway was a little boy, seven or eight years old, elbows on his knees, supporting his face in his hands. His cheeks were red with cold. He had been peering at the opposite cliffside through a rent in the curtain. He glanced at me briefly as I came in, then went back to his observation.

The cave was large, but quite warm. It had a stove and eating utensils. On the wall above a bed was a coloured New-Year picture of "Chubby Children Pulling the Turnip." All the walls had been papered with old newspapers, now blackened by smoke from the stove.

"Why isn't anybody home?" I asked, shaking the snow from my coat and hat.

The little boy turned his head. His eyes flashed. "Aren't I anybody, uncle?" He rose and walked towards me, his hands behind his back, his chest extended, as if to say: Not only am I somebody, I'm a very grown-up somebody!

I cupped his round little face in my hands. "You're pretty sharp, young imp!"

He pushed my hands aside. Doubling up his fists, he cocked his head to one side and demanded: "Who are you calling imp! I have a name!" Pointing at the baby girl asleep on the bed, he informed me: "Her name is Pao-cheng, mine is Cheng-yu."

No doubt about it. These kids were like thousands of others I had met, born and raised on construction sites. The workers liked to name their children after the projects where they were born. Cheng-yu probably had first seen the light of day on the railway project between Chengtu and Chungking, also known as Yu. His baby sister Pao-cheng very likely had been born right here—the site of the future Paoki-Chengtu Railway.

I sat by the stove, smoking and rubbing the drying mud from my hands.

Cheng-yu crawled on to my lap and looked into my eyes. "Is it going to snow tomorrow, uncle?"

I pressed his icy red little nose. "As soon as we get our telephone line connected up with heaven, I'll ask for you. . . ."

Angrily, he leaped down and stood a metre away, scowling at me. "Quit your kidding! You've got a newspaper in your pocket. Why don't you look at the weather report?"

He resumed his seat in the doorway, clamped his elbows on his knees, rested his face in his hands, and peered out through the rent in the curtain. When I asked him where the kettle was, he ignored me. I certainly was sorry I had offended my small host!

"Why do you want to know about the snow, Cheng-yu?" I asked him. "Is it because you can't go out and play when it's snowing?"

He didn't even bother to look at me. "Papa says if it's still snowing tomorrow, we'll have to quit work."

"What does your pa do?"

"He opens up mountains!" the child replied proudly.

"Where?"

Cheng-yu pointed with pursed lips at the work site opposite.

I looked. All I could see was a searchlight beam, shining through the drifting snowflakes straight up into the heavens. In its light I could vaguely discern a few dozen men, who seemed pasted to the side of the towering cliff, drilling holes for dynamite charges. The holes were like the steps of a ladder to the sky.

"How can you tell which one is your father at this distance?" I asked.

"I can't see him plainly, but pa says he can see me. He says all he has to do is turn around. I often sit here so he can see me."

Ah, so that was it!

The icy snow melted from my boots. My numbed legs, thawing out, ached painfully. I stamped to help the circulation.

Cheng-yu waved his hand warningly. I understood. He was afraid I'd wake his baby sister.

"You really take good care of sister," I commended.

"Mama says my job is to look after her. When mama comes home, I can knock off."

"So. You're on the job every day?" I hugged him to me. "What does mama do?"

He pointed to the road below the cave.

I could see a person standing by a telephone pole beside the road. Covered with snow, she looked like a white stone image. Apparently she was directing traffic. The road, not very wide, had been blasted through the rock. Ordinarily, carts, mules, donkeys, people . . . no doubt streamed in both directions along that road twenty-four hours a day. Someone had to keep the traffic in order.

Today, because of the big snow, there weren't many people or vehicles on the road. She could very well have spent the day at home. But there she stood, and there she would remain, three months, five months, or three years, five years, if need be. Perhaps, from time to time, she raised her head to gaze up at her child, or at her husband—that husband scaling the cliffs between the mountains and the sky. When he paused to wipe the sweat from his brow, could he see the determined figure of his wife, or the tiny image of his little boy? Even though it was a snowy, windy night, even though the worker, his wife and children couldn't see one another clearly, I was sure they could feel a mutual loving encouragement and sense that each was looking forward to the moment of family reunion.

I glanced at Cheng-yu. The child had placed his hands in his sleeves and pulled his neck into his collar. He kept dozing off.

"You're liable to catch a chill. Better get into bed and go to sleep."

He looked at me dreamily for a moment, probably thinking that his parents had returned. When he realized who I was, he shook his head violently. "No. I won't!"

"Why not?"

He rubbed his eyes with his fists. "Papa and mama say a man should never leave his post."

I hugged him tightly and pressed my cheek against his. Then I rose, buttoned my coat, pulled my hat down firmly, left the cave, and walked down the path. Following the road that had been blasted through the rock, I pushed on. A job was waiting for me. I wanted to reach my destination without any further delay.

STUBBORN OX NIU

Liu Shu-teh

Look there, coming around the mountain! Isn't that old Stubbhorn Ox Niu who insisted on moving away from Dry Gulch? In the past three days, he's been to our commune three times. What can he be up to?

A shadowy figure on the mountain path winding through the trees, he came into sharper focus as he drew nearer. Tall and thin, dressed completely in black, his face a deep bronze colour, he was a peasant in his fifties, with tousled hair, and burning eyes flashing beneath heavy brows. He appeared agitated; his brows were tightly knit.

We have a saying, "An old lady walks with her head up, and an old man keeps his down." That was certainly the case with this old peasant, did you notice? Leaning slightly forward, head down, he kept his eyes on the path ahead, as if afraid that he might stumble. But he looked like the kind of fellow who kept going until he reached his destination.

His name was Niu Chin-chin. In the old society, he had always been desperately poor. As a young man he had been a lively comical fellow who sang with gusto arias from the local operas. They say his wife used to join him in duets. But after this carefree young man assumed the burdens of married life and worked as a tenant farmer for a few years, he stopped singing. Ten more years of tenant farming, and he turned irritable and stubborn.

One autumn, they had a bad harvest. Niu didn't even gather enough rice to feed his family through the winter. The landlord kept coming around for the rent. At first Niu explained and pleaded for an abatement. Then he began to stiffen.

"With soil like this, you couldn't bring in a good harvest?" scoffed the landlord. "Who can believe that!"

"With a fine concubine like yours, you couldn't produce a son?" retorted Niu. "Who can believe that!"

"I'll send you up to the county, you lout! You'll sit in gaol!"

"I was worried what I was going to do about food. In gaol at least I won't starve. Please get me committed quickly!"

"Impudent wretch! Is there nothing you fear on earth or above?"

"Even death doesn't scare me, Your Honour. Set your mind at ease!"

"You can't be budged by fire or water, you . . . you stubborn ox!"

"Thanks, Your Honour, for giving me that nickname," said Niu, bowing deeply.

When bluster couldn't frighten him, the landlord took harsher measures. He sent a gang to beat Niu up. Though bleeding and exhausted, Niu wouldn't beg for mercy. One soft word out of him might have made the gang let up a bit. But a sign of weakness from Niu — try and get it!

Having his harvests snatched by landlords year after year, Stubborn Ox Niu moved from village to village. He finally settled down for good in Dry Gulch. High and arid and with poor soil, Dry Gulch raised wet rice, although the sole source of water was the rain that fell from the sky. Only a man with the strength and stubbornness of an ox could stick it out there. Because local rents were slightly lower and it was possible to scrape through a year if you were lucky enough to get an early rainfall, Stubborn Ox Niu became the tenant of one of the nephews of the man whose "concubine . . . couldn't produce a son."

Niu, his wife and their half-grown son worked day and night, turning the ground into neat paddy fields. They ploughed deep and applied plenty of fertilizer. But because there was no rain in early spring, the rice shoots were transplanted late, and the yield was poor. Although rainfall may have been irregular, the

landlord never failed to call for his rent on time. He arrived as soon as the rice was gathered.

"When will you deliver my share of the harvest?"

"There isn't enough here for us to eat. We'll talk about the rent later."

"What tricks are you up to?"

"None. This is all the rice there is. You can look at it, but you can't take it."

"You're talking as if the land belonged to you!"

"It isn't mine, but I've worked it for you a couple of years. If you take our food away, you can till the land yourself!"

The landlord looked at Niu and he looked at the cleanly gleaned fields. He knew that Niu loved the soil and that he'd never get another tenant like him.

"All right then. See what you can do."

"If you're leaving it up to me, I'm going to fill my family's bellies first."

"You can't be budged by fire or water, you stubborn ox!"

After liberation, Stubborn Ox retained his nickname, but he gave no displays of his well-known trait. He showed so much initiative during the land reform that the comrade in charge of the land reform team was thinking of introducing him into membership in the Communist Party. But Niu wouldn't agree. "I've got the wrong temperament for a Communist," he said. "I'm too obstinate. When another fellow makes a mistake, he can admit it. But not me. Even when I know I'm wrong, and I feel so upset I could cry, I can't get myself to say it. That sort of Communist would only be a burden to the Party. Let's wait until I've improved myself."

Life became steadily better. Niu had no big worries, he was happy. In the ten years following liberation he gave vent to his stubbornness only twice.

Niu was a man who could break but wouldn't bend. He would never admit defeat, never bow his head to poverty and hardship, never speak meekly to the rich. When the reactionaries beat him viciously, he didn't plead for mercy. When his family was starving, he wouldn't go out to beg for food. Straight-

forward, sincere, generous, he never took the smallest advantage of any man.

When the elementary farming co-ops were formed, he joined with his share of land. He also took part in the higher type of co-ops when they were organized. In 1957, when a few members of the co-op alleged that they weren't getting enough grain, his stubborn streak flared up again.

Hsieh Lin, the vice-chairman of the co-op (he was later discovered to be a rightist), was inciting the members to demand a larger share of the grain harvest. At a meeting of the entire co-op, Wang Chang-hai, formerly a well-to-do middle peasant, brought a jug of pickled vegetables and set it down in the centre of the township government courtyard where the meeting was being held. Wang's wife wept and said that was all they had left to eat. A few people followed their lead and bemoaned their own "hardships."

A pall seemed to settle over the gathering. After the moaners had finished their complaints, Hsieh Lin turned to Niu and asked: "How much grain is your family short?"

His eyes bulging with suppressed rage, Niu pushed his way through the crowd and took his stand beside the jug of pickled vegetables.

"My family has enough to eat," he said. "We're not short of anything!"

"Oho, he's going to get obstinate again," people whispered.

"That's strange! Everybody else is short of grain, but your family —"

Niu didn't let him finish. Scowling, he cut in, "What's strange about it? If we're not short, we're not short! In this co-op, we're drawing four hundred catties per person. Everyone agreed to it. But some people are eating four meals a day and having another snack before going to bed! Some are selling grain to buy wine! That's why some people are short of grain. And you're a fine vice-chairman, Hsieh Lin! You don't investigate to see whether anyone's really short. You just take it for granted and want to know how much! All I can say is — you're barking up the wrong tree!"

Turning, with one kick he sent the jug rolling across the yard.

Hsieh Lin shook his finger at him and yelled, "You're trying to break up the meeting! You're preventing democratic discussion! Comrades! Are we going to let him get away with that?"

But none of the peasants rose to the vice-chairman's bait. In the silence that followed, Stubborn Ox angrily stamped out.

The next evening, he again attended the meeting. Hsieh Lin demanded that he publicly criticize himself. A handful of peasants (those who had been alleging that they were short of grain) sided with the vice-chairman. Frightened and weeping, Niu's wife tried to pull him back into the crowd, but he pushed forward and strode to the foot of the speaker's platform. Pointing at the vice-chairman, he shouted:

"So you want me to criticize myself, do you? Let me tell you, Hsieh Lin — you've picked the wrong man! I never gave in to the reactionaries, and now that the people have taken power, I certainly won't give in to bad behaviour! If I ever criticize myself, it won't be before you! In the future we'll see which one of us has to make the self-criticism!"

Standing off to one side, Niu's wife was trembling with fear. If her son, Niu Hsin, had raised such a row, she would have promptly slapped him. But what could she do with this obstinate old man?

Finally, she succeeded in dragging him from the meeting place.

The third night, he went again. People struggle for justice like a fish fights for water. Stubborn Ox wasn't the man to run from a battle. This time, he found the atmosphere quite different. Presiding over the meeting was the vice-secretary of the county Party committee. Looking very pale and deflated, Hsieh Lin sat with his head down, as if afraid to face anyone. The peasants who had made such a squawk about the grain two days before, now, also much subdued, hid themselves in the rear.

Speaking at the meeting this evening were people of a different type. They spoke truthfully and to the point, and every one of them mentioned him — Stubborn Ox Niu. They all said his view was correct.

The final opinion of the majority was — no shortage of grain.

The second time the old man got obstinate was after the Big Leap began in the countryside.

Stubborn Ox had a rich store of farming experience. But working all his life on poor soil, he had never had a chance to develop his talent fully, and this made him unhappy. Whenever he heard about other production brigades increasing their output, his whole body would burn. But try as he might, tilling the arid ground of Dry Gulch, he could never catch up.

In 1958, when the Big Leap began, a production goal was set of one thousand catties per *mou*. Old Niu thought and thought, and came to the conclusion that even if he worked himself to death, he couldn't squeeze a thousand catties out of a *mou* of Dry Gulch land. After struggling mentally for several days, he said to his son:

"We can't live here any longer. This soil is dead. No matter how you strive, it's all in vain."

His son was startled. "What do you want to do?"

"Actually, a thousand catties isn't much. But you can't get it here. If we can't keep up with the leap, it will be an awful loss of face! I was thinking, we ought to move over to your married sister's co-op. They've got good land, and they're short of people."

"How can we do that? She and we are in two different co-ops. Even if this one is willing to let us go, that one might not necessarily want us."

"They do. I've already asked."

"Suppose our co-op won't release us?"

"If they won't release us, we'll go anyway!"

"You're getting senile, old man," said his wife. "We've been living here twenty-five years. How can you have the heart to leave?"

"Why not! These past few days, there hasn't been enough water to give our ox a decent drink. In another few days, you'll be able to see the bottom of our well. Who wants to stay here!"

He went to see Li Ho-ping, Party secretary of the co-op.

The secretary was on the phone, making notes as he talked. He had bushy hair, a round face, a prominent nose and thick lips. He spoke in a slow unruffled manner.

"Ah, Uncle Niu. Not busy today?" the Party secretary asked, as he hung up the phone.

"Comrade Li, I have a request. I want to move."

"What? When did you get that idea?"

"Just recently." Niu coughed. "After the Big Leap started."

"Leave our little Dry Gulch? How could you bear it? Do you have any reason?"

"Only one: Dry Gulch has no water. It's impossible to leap forward here." The old man sat down on a stool opposite the secretary.

"We're planning to build a reservoir in the mountains. We'll have water here soon."

"Can't be done," the old man said positively. "It can't be done."

"Why not?"

"One co-op doesn't have enough manpower to undertake such a big project. Even if we could, we'd be spending an enormous sum to irrigate a small piece of ground. Anyhow, there are no springs in these mountains. The reservoir would be empty; we'd be a laughing-stock. . . . I'm fifty-three, but I've never had a year when everything went well on the land I was working. I'm getting on in years, and now we're having a Big Leap. I want to try some place else, some place where I can concentrate everything on raising a good crop. What's wrong with that?"

"Uncle, you're just making excuses for yourself."

"Am I? All I know is that even a god won't get a bumper rice harvest out of this ground! Ah, Comrade Secretary, that thousand catty target makes my mouth water. But when I look at our Dry Gulch land, all the strength goes out of me!" Stubborn Ox spread his hands and sighed.

"Where are you thinking of moving?"

"To my daughter's place. Their land is near a lake. If we use our heads, we'll harvest fifteen hundred to two thousand

catties per *mon*, easy!" He clenched his fists so tightly that his fingers cracked.

"But somebody has to till Dry Gulch too." Comrade Li's calm voice quickened a bit.

"Whoever wants to till it can go ahead! Not me! For twenty-five years I was ready to irrigate this land with my own spit — if that would have done any good. It's not easy for me to leave here, Comrade Secretary. . . ." There was a quaver in the old man's voice.

"You mustn't go. They're a co-op and so are we. If you leave, it will mean we'll be losing three able-bodied members! You mustn't go!"

"I only want to raise output. I don't care which co-op I do it in," Stubborn Ox retorted, his breath whistling through his nostrils — a sure sign he was working himself up. "Wherever I am, I work for a living. No one has to support me!"

Seeing that the old man was losing his temper, Comrade Li swallowed back his third "you mustn't go." He knew that once Niu decided to do anything, nine oxen and two tigers couldn't drag him back. The Party secretary thought that if he could delay him until after the spring planting, when the new production measures would be announced, perhaps he might change his mind.

"Moving to another co-op is an important step," he said. "We have to talk this over with your son. Unless he agrees, we won't be able to give our consent to your whole family leaving."

Niu Hsin was Niu's only son, and the old man loved him dearly. A Youth Leaguer, leader of a production team, the boy had been born and raised in Dry Gulch. He wouldn't want to go. If the son refused to move, who could tell — maybe the old man could be persuaded to stay.

"You want Niu Hsin to agree? That will be easy, very easy!" Niu rose to his feet. "Secretary Li, we're men of our word. Let's get this settled quickly. If Niu Hsin agrees, then we go. You've given your promise."

Comrade Li saw him to the door and watched the old man walk off, his head down. The Party secretary felt badly. "Why

does he want to move to another co-op?" he wondered. If it were anyone else, Li wouldn't have been so upset. The old man not only was a good honest person with determination and courage, he had a kind of ingrained loyalty to the Party and the cause of socialism. Usually a silent man, if anything concerning the Party or socialism was involved, he would rise and speak out fearlessly, criticizing anyone he thought wrong, regardless of position or rank. He had no formal understanding of political analysis or practice; he acted entirely on the basis of his class instincts. A true down-to-earth former poor peasant — how could the Party secretary let him go? Of course, old Niu knew nothing of what was going on in Comrade Li's mind.

Although Dry Gulch was arid and its productivity low, ever since the formation of the co-op old Niu had always been a model farmer. He was in his glory when enthusiastically toiling in the fields. In half a lifetime of scrabbling in the poor soil of Dry Gulch, he had come to understand it thoroughly. When to plough and plant, how to select seeds, dig irrigation ditches, control insect pests, fight drought, prevent floods, improve the soil — he had learned these things from his own personal experience. In the past few years, at every spring planting, at every autumn harvest, Comrade Li had sought his advice, treasuring him as a virtual living encyclopedia of agricultural lore. From the bottom of his heart he didn't want to let him go. Old Niu didn't know this either.

Leaving the township government office, the old man felt that matters were proceeding with unexpected smoothness. He hurried back to Dry Gulch and told his son what had happened.

"The Party secretary agrees?" exclaimed Niu Hsin. "That's mighty peculiar." Perplexed, he rubbed the soft young beard on his chin.

"What's peculiar about it? I haven't asked to turn bandit!"

"But why do you want to move? Ma won't want to leave either. We'd better have a family chat." Niu Hsin wanted to shift the burden of making the decision to his mother.

"She's already agreed. If you don't believe me, ask her."