

RHYMES OF LI YU-TSAI  
AND OTHER STORIES

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## RHYMES OF LI YU-TSAI

### I

IN THE VILLAGE OF YENCHIASHAN THERE WAS A MAN by the name of Li Yu-tsai, 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 *mou*\* of land which he inherited from his father. Afterwards it was foreclosed and taken over by Yen Heng-yuan. Yen was the head of the ranking family in the Yen 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 "Yen 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, were simply cave dwellings, about thirty

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\* One *mou* is equal to one-sixth of an acre.

in number. The terrain of the village itself was fairly level, but if you looked at the line made by the roofs of the houses, you would find 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 Yen. In the centre, however, while some bore the name of Yen, many others had different surnames. All were natives of the village. About half of the inhabitants of the eastern part were poor peasants, originally migrated from elsewhere. The other half were local people with various surnames, including three Yen 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 Yu-tsai, "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 Chin." 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 Yen Heng-yuan meant "Little Bin," but in his presence even the word "bin" became taboo. If you wanted to talk about a grain bin, you would have to use the word "granary."

But once you got to the Ash-tree Grove, the atmos-

phere 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. "Wan-chang" was chosen, and his given name was duly changed on the village register. The mayor saw the name "Chen Wan-chang" there and couldn't imagine who it was. When the registrar explained the situation, the mayor took up his pen and changed "Wan-chang" 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 Yu-tsai himself really should be considered a "Little," but because his parents came from Shantung where the children were not called "Little," he had always been known as "Yu-tsai."

Li Yu-tsai was the most popular man in the Ash-tree Grove. Every night, after supper, any gathering without him was generally 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 Yen Heng-yuan, who, year after year, got himself elected mayor of the village. When election time rolled round again, Li Yu-tsai wrote this:

*Oh, Yen Heng-yuan's our mayor, worse luck!  
Our mayor is always Yen!  
Ten years we've fallen in his snare . . .  
Are we going to, again?*

Each year we've voted, ten years now  
With so much blah and fuss.  
A new broom, so they say, sweeps clean,  
But Yen sweeps the floor with us!

Then why not make a rubber stamp  
With his name on for mayor?  
'Twould surely serve us just as well,  
And treat us just as fair!  
Just stamp—no need to write a word—  
As time for voting nears,  
And it'd last, as good as new,  
For years and years and years!

Yen had a son named Chia-hsiang, 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 a bulging forehead and receding chin. When he spoke, he would blink his eyes furiously. 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 Yutsai composed in his honour:

You'd take Yen Chia-hsiang for a village idiot:  
When he talks his little squinting eyes keep  
    blinking.  
His nose is flat as flat, and his jowls hang down,  
But all the time of cheating you he's thinking.  
Even if his case seems silly, still he'll floor you,  
    willy-nilly—  
His foul tricks make that a foregone consequence.

*If you do see through his wiles, he goes pale and  
blandly smiles  
With a blinking air of injured innocence!*

Li Yu-tsai 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 would call to see him every night after supper. Within a day, his latest rhymes would be known by everyone in the eastern part of the village. But their contents 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 Yenchiasan, and Li Yu-tsai 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 Yu-tsai created in an age of upheavals.

A man who writes poetry is a poet. But Li Yu-tsai'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 rhymmer. 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 Yu-tsai" to give it a little dignity.

## II

The cave in which Li Yu-tsai 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 *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 Yu-tsai 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 Yu-tsai drew people like a hot stove in the winter time. Whenever he returned from work, men of good fellowship would gather in his cave to joke and chat. After Yenchiasan had been liberated, on the evening of the twenty-fifth day of the first moon when Li Yu-tsai was finishing his supper, one of his young neighbours, Little Fu, called at the cave, accompanied by

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\* *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.



another boy in his late teens. Li Yu-tsai greeted them and lighted the oil lamp hanging on the wall.

"This is our Li Yu-tsai," said Little Fu in introduction.

Yu-tsai pushed back into the niche and invited them to sit on the warm *kang*.

"Where does our guest come from?" asked Li Yu-tsai.

"He's my cousin from Shihtzuwa," 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 'Chiao Kuang-pu' a couple of nights ago, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

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

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

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

"Chiao Kuang-pu, 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 Yu-tsai 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 Chi-chang's wife only gave her hired hand, Little Tan, 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.

"Chi-chang is all right," commented Yu-tsai, "but that wife of his is a terror!"

"Is that the Little Tan 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 Te-kuei's son."

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

"That goes without saying," Li Yu-tsai agreed.

"What's wrong with old Te-kuei?" Little Fu's cousin whispered.

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

*Chang Te-kuei is a nasty little flatterer,  
A toady and a lick-spittle, a crawler and a natterer.  
If Yen Heng-yuan says somewhere is a tidy way  
to go,  
Chang chips in quick with, "Yes, indeed, 'twill  
make you puff and blow."  
If Yen says "square," Chang chips in with, "You  
know, not really round";  
If Yen says, "Cock lay eggs," he swears he's seen  
'em, lying hound!  
He says he thinks things out and takes an  
independent view,  
But when the master tips the wink, he always  
knows his cue!*

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. Te-kuei 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. Te-kuei'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 Yen. 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 Chin, Little Yuan, Little Ming and Little Pao. As they came in the door, Little Yuan cried:

"Big news! Big news!"

"What's up?" asked Li Yu-tsai.

"The mayor Yen Hsi-fu has been kicked out!" (He was the nephew of landlord Yen 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 Yu-tsai. "I thought he was a permanent fixture. Who told you about it?"

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

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

"Listen to this," said Little Shun:

*Yen Hsi-fu is a tiger on the prowl  
And he knows how to batten on a kill.  
Opium or widows or a straying cow or fowl,  
He can snatch 'em, snatch 'em, sell 'em — oh  
what skill!  
Runs rackets, swindles; gambling dens, and fattens  
on the spoils;  
Lends money out at usury and gets you in his  
toils!  
No wonder folks are civil when they meet him  
on the level!  
They give in, or else he puts 'em through the  
mill!*

"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 Yen (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 ever 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 Yen 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 Yu-tsai quietly. .

"We still don't know," replied Little Pao. "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 Yu-tsai.

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

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.

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

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

"Quite a gathering!" said Te-kuei 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, "Yen Heng-yuan proffers the suggestion that we elect Liu Kuang-chu. Pass the word!" The words were barely out of his mouth, when he scurried out.

"Go and eat some cakes!" Little Shun shouted after him.

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

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

"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,' 'Yen Heng-yuan proffers the suggestion,' etc.?" Little Pao 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:

*Liu Kuang-chu looks so mild, but he's ambitious.  
He bows and scrapes to all round, intending for  
to dish us!*

*Sucks up to Yen, to everyone, impresses folks a  
lot,*

*And when anything is happening, it's he who  
knows what's what!*

*Here, there and everywhere he trots, in all his  
nose he sticks,*

*But he's only got one thing in mind: to rise in  
politics!*

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 Yu-tsai. "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 Yen's proffered suggestion," said Little Yuan. "Tomorrow we'll give them a surprise. We'll round up a big crowd and make sure that Kuang-chu is not elected!"

Old Chin shook his head.

"That's a bad business. Nobody in the Ash-tree Grove will risk offending old Yen the landlord. If he wants Kuang-chu to be elected, then we'd better elect him. What good will it do to provoke him?"

"You're afraid of your own shadow, old man!" snorted Little Yuan. "You've never dared speak up to him, and what's the result? Aren't you still working for him and shelling out money to him besides?"

Old Chin never argued with a young man. He sat silent and made no reply.

"I agree with Little Yuan," said Little Pao. "This time we've all really got to pitch in. If Kuang-chu is elected, we'll still be under the thumb of old man Yen. We people in the Ash-tree Grove have to make

a real effort. Even if we fail, it's better than just letting him kick us around!"

Everyone agreed to this; the question was whom to elect. Little Yuan favoured Little Pao. But his uncle, Old Chen, thought Little Ming would be best and could bring in more votes. Little Ming said Little Yuan was the best speech-maker.

The discussion went on for some time without arriving at any conclusion. Finally, Li Yu-tsai spoke.

"I want to look at this affair not from a personal point of view. There's no doubt that Little Ming can attract the most votes, but I'm afraid our old friend couldn't handle the job—he's too good, too honest—he couldn't cope with all the sneaky tricks that old Yen and his gang are sure to try. Little Pao was a shepherd—a manager of sheep. He's been around more. These past few years he's travelled much, and mixed with all kinds of people. He knows how to write and figure. He'd be a good man for the job. The only trouble is that five people in his family depend on him, and as mayor, he wouldn't earn enough to feed them. Why don't we do it this way—elect Little Yuan, and let Little Pao help him with the accounts and public documents. . . ."

This idea met with everyone's approval. Little Pao jumped to his feet:

"Let's get going and stir up some votes for Little Yuan!"

"Right! Spread the word around!" shouted Little Shun.

They went pouring out of the door. Old Chin was frantic, shouting after Little Fu: "Stop making a fool of yourself! Come home with me!"

Little Shun pulled Little Fu by the arm. "Keep going, keep going!" he urged, and turning his head,



he called back to Old Chin, "Don't worry! If you lose Little Fu, I'll get you a new son!" Together, the two young men dashed off into the dark.

### III

The next morning after breakfast, as Yu-tsai was going to pasture his cows on the mountain-side, Little Shun stopped him.

"Don't go, Uncle Li. Every vote counts! Maybe we can win today. We've got over forty votes promised to Little Yuan already."

"I'll be on time. I'll just put the cows out and come right back. At a time like this, I'm not going to worry about them getting into people's fields! Anyhow, when Comrade Chang holds a meeting, doesn't he talk all morning? I'll be there before the real business starts!"

"This isn't a meeting for speeches. It's an election meeting."

"I know it. But whatever kind of meeting it is, he's sure to say a few words first about its 'importance,' its 'significance and value,' and all that stuff. Even before that routine is finished, I'll be back!"

"All right, go ahead. But don't be late," said Little Shun, and went off to the temple.

The meeting was conducted along the usual lines. This time, however, the crowd was bigger than usual. They all wanted to see whether Hsi-fu, the ex-mayor, was still so pompous now that he had been kicked out.

Hsi-fu acted as chairman for the last time. Although he kept himself under control, his voice sounded a little unnatural. After speaking a few polite phrases, he invited Chang, political worker from Party