

Locust Tree Village

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A Play in Five Acts

By Hu Ko

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ACT I



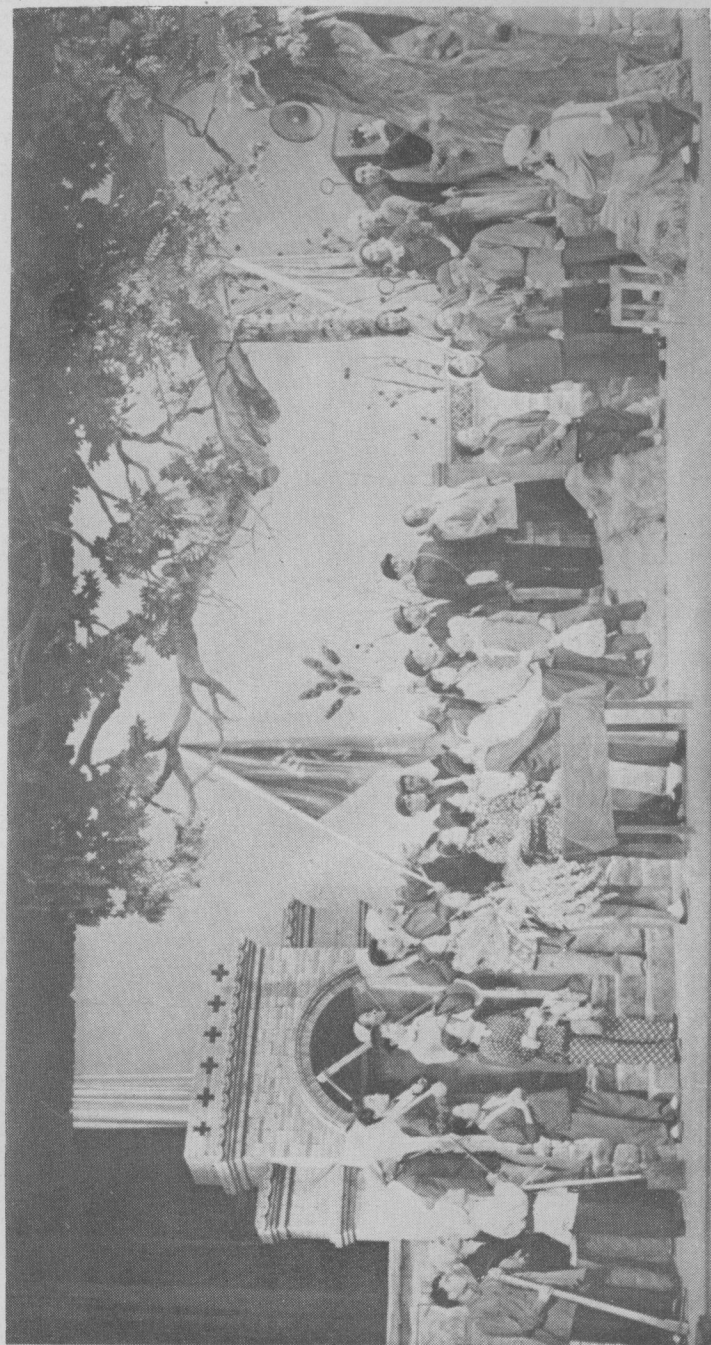
ACT II



ACT III



ACT IV



ACT V

CHARACTERS

MOTHER KUO: woman of a poor peasant family, 47 years old

KUO YUNG-LAI: Mother Kuo's son, 18 years old

HEI NI: an orphan girl, Yung-lai's fiancée, 16 years old

LIU LAO-CHENG: a poor peasant, 40 odd

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: Lao-cheng's wife, also 40 odd

LIU KEN-CHU: their son, 18 years old

CHIN-MEI: a girl of the neighbouring village, Ken-chu's fiancée, also 18

LI MAN-TSANG: a middle peasant, 35 years old

CHAO HO-SHANG: a poor peasant, 25 years old

LI LAO-KANG: a poor peasant, 50 odd

LAO TIEN: a local cadre, 27 years old

YOUNG KAO: a messenger of the People's Liberation Army, 18 years old

TSUI CHIH-KUO: chief of the purchasing section of a commercial enterprise, 25

TSUI LAO-KUN: a landlord, Tsui Chih-kuo's father, 50 odd

CHANG MEI-LI: Tsui Chih-kuo's wife, 24

CHIH-HUA'S WIFE: Tsui Chih-kuo's sister-in-law, also 24

COMRADE FENG: a writer collecting material, 30 odd

SUNDRY VILLAGE PEOPLE

(The above-given age and social status of all characters is as of the time of their first appearance on the stage.)

ACT I

A forenoon in the early winter of 1947.

A rather broad entrance to a road in a certain village of the liberated area of northern China. On the left of the stage is an old gateway with several stone steps leading up to the door beside which hangs a wooden sign reading "Locust Tree Village Poor Peasants' League." On one side of the door is a white-washed wall with several signs such as "The Outline Land Law" and "Peasants, Stand Up Completely" printed on it. A road in front of the door leads off stage through the left front wing. Rear stage is an earth mound which disappears off stage through the left rear wing; behind the mound can be seen the roofs of several village houses and distant mountains. The right end of the mound touches the back wall of a row of mud houses, and on the peeling mud plaster is scrawled "Beat Chiang Kai-shek at the Front, and Pull Out His Roots in the Rear." A road runs along the rear wall of the houses to the right rear wing, and on the right of the stage another road leads off through the right front wing. Near the centre of the stage stands an immense old locust tree, its gnarled roots protruding through the earth. Several large rocks lying under the tree have been worn smooth showing that this is a place of assembly and rest for the villagers.

The curtain rises. Confused voices are heard.

Chao Ho-shang wearing a torn cotton-padded jacket jumps out of the gateway, and strides towards the rear of the stage beating an old battered gong and shouting.

CHAO HO-SHANG (*calling out in a singsong voice*): Attention, you of the Poor Peasants' League! Gather on the big

threshing-ground at the southern end of the village! Poor Peasants' League assemble!

(*Women A and B carrying wicker dust-pans and brooms walk over.*)

CHAO HO-SHANG (*to Women A and B*): Hurry to the meeting!

WOMAN A: What's all the rush about?

CHAO HO-SHANG (*stops*): Didn't your group leader tell you? They considered the matter thoroughly at yesterday's meeting and decided to settle accounts with Tsui Lao-kun.

WOMAN A (*excitedly*): Is that right? (*To Woman B.*) Quick! Quick! We'd better leave off turning the mill until we get back!

WOMAN B (*grumbling*): We ought to have settled accounts with him long ago. By now he's probably hidden almost everything.

(*Li Man-tsang comes on stage from right rear wing.*)

LI MAN-TSANG (*greeting Chao Ho-shang*): Ho-shang! Ho-shang! Brother Ho-shang!

CHAO HO-SHANG: If you've got anything to say, say it; and if you've got to break wind, break it! (*To Women A and B.*) Don't go to turn the mill, hurry to the meeting!

WOMAN A: Right you are!

(*Women A and B leave the way they came.*)

LI MAN-TSANG (*ultra-politely*): If that's all it is, I think I'll go to the market. . . .

CHAO HO-SHANG (*impatiently*): That's none of our business! (*About to leave.*) They ask the Poor Peasants' League about everything.

LI MAN-TSANG: So you don't care if I go?

CHAO HO-SHANG: Are we to be in charge of what you do in the toilet too? On your way! You have my permission! But there's one thing you have to take heed of when you go to the market—no tricky deals allowed! (*Striking the gong.*) Poor Peasants' League assemble! (*Towards Women C and D who come on.*) On the big threshing-ground at the southern end of the village!

LI MAN-TSANG: I don't do anything against government policy. I'm thinking of buying a donkey. . . .

WOMAN C: Hello, Uncle Man-tsang. (*To Chao Ho-shang.*)
What's going on?

LI MAN-TSANG: I was thinking of going to buy a donkey. . . .

WOMAN C: I asked what we are assembling for!

WOMAN D: A meeting?

CHAO HO-SHANG: Today we're going to throw a landlord out!

WOMAN D (*excitedly*): Settle scores with Tsui Lao-kun?

WOMAN C: Come on, let's go! I've lived for all these years without even setting foot through the big black door of that house!

(*Liu Ken-chu runs on stage and Women C and D exit.*)

LIU KEN-CHU: Ho-shang! Ho-shang! Is it to settle accounts with the Tsui Lao-kun family?

CHAO HO-SHANG: Right! Go to the big south threshing-ground!

LI MAN-TSANG (*suggestively*): Don't forget to make him hand over his title-deeds.

CHAO HO-SHANG: How could anyone forget that!

LI MAN-TSANG: Brother Ho-shang! When the land is distributed, get the plot south of the village under the big poplar tree. Your father sold that to Tsui Lao-kun. And your family burial ground is in that field!

CHAO HO-SHANG: Don't say anything about that this time. First, on with the struggle!

LI MAN-TSANG: Do you think we could get them to change my land so that it would be all in one piece? Carrying fertilizer and things would be a bit more convenient then.

LIU KEN-CHU: A clever piece of brainwork!

CHAO HO-SHANG (*pointing at Li Man-tsang with the gong beater*): You'd better go and buy your donkey right now!

LI MAN-TSANG: Yes, of course! (*Starts to leave.*)

LIU KEN-CHU (*to Li Man-tsang*): Say, you've got a donkey, haven't you?

LI MAN-TSANG (*apologetically*): Oh! A couple of weeks ago I sold it.

CHAO HO-SHANG (*reprovingly*): What did you want to sell it for?

LI MAN-TSANG: Well, the way I figured, with land being shared out equally animals would be divided up too and I wouldn't be able to hold on to the donkey anyway, so I up and sold it. Afterwards when the government policy was announced, I regretted the sale and wanted to buy it back quickly. But the money I had received for it wouldn't even buy back a donkey colt!

LIU KEN-CHU: I'd say you asked for it!

LI MAN-TSANG (*holding out three fingers to audience*): You sell a donkey for *this*, and now when you want to buy one (*holding out five fingers*) you've got to pay *that*! If a fellow is out of luck. . . . (*Exits still talking.*)

CHAO HO-SHANG (*laughing up his sleeve*): The hell with him! (*Striking the gong.*) Donkey buyers assemble! (*To audience.*) Buy what donkeys? (*Changes tone of voice.*) Poor Peasants' League assemble! (*Exits beating gong loudly.*) (*At this time people walk on stage from different directions calling to each other and arguing.*)

MAN A: Where are we to meet?

LIU KEN-CHU: On the south threshing-ground.

WOMAN B: The Tsuis've hidden everything that's worth anything! Yesterday Lao Shou handed over two big bundles to the Poor Peasants' League! He doesn't want to hide things for a landlord!

HEI NI: Mother Kuo, hurry up!

MOTHER KUO (*walks down earth mound and faces Liu Ken-chu*): Ken-chu, aren't you militiamen coming along to keep our courage up?

LIU KEN-CHU: We're going to fall in right now! (*Runs off stage.*)

WOMAN A: Even without the militia I'm not afraid of him!

MOTHER KUO (*to Man A*): Had breakfast, Uncle?

MAN B: I'm not afraid of Tsui Lao-kun, but I'm afraid if that son of his comes back. . . .

MAN C: What are you talking about! Will he dare oppose land reform?

MOTHER KUO: He's joined the revolution, so he's standing on the same battle line as we are!

MAN C: Right! (*Jokingly.*) And also you're his foster-mother. Will he dare to oppose his foster-mother?

MOTHER KUO: What's all this foster-mother or foster-father business! I just wet-nursed him for a few months.

MAN A: One who gives milk is a mother.

HEI NI: Mother Kuo! Don't you be too soft-hearted today!

MOTHER KUO: Bah! As to the Tsui family, only for the one who joined the revolution do I have a little feeling. . . .

MAN C: That's to be expected.

HEI NI: Mother Kuo, I think you're too soft-hearted!

MAN A: My dear Sister-in-law, follow this prescription! If you feel yourself getting soft-hearted, think about the time in 1932 when Tsui Lao-kun took away your cooking pots and sealed up your house; think about the time Tsui Lao-kun lashed Brother Fu-shun with a whip. . . .

MOTHER KUO: That's enough! You people keep your eye on me a bit, please. . . .

(*With a background of shouting and muffled beating of gongs, the people file off stage.*)

(*Li Lao-kang, a thin shrivelled-up old man clad in rags, rushes on stage from left front wing trying to overtake the crowd.*)

LI LAO-KANG: Auntie Kuo! Auntie Kuo! Those quilts and that padded jacket . . . were they sent by you?

MOTHER KUO (*stopping*): They were given to you! The matter came up for consideration at a meeting of committee members. It was asked how you could get through the winter with only one old quilt and a whole house full of children! So the committee decided to let the Supplies Division first issue you two quilts. . . .

LI LAO-KANG (*breathing heavily with gratitude*): This . . . this. . . .

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG (*comes on stage talking loudly*):

Where's Ken-chu's father?

MOTHER KUO: I haven't seen him.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: He's been busy with his work all morning. He hasn't even taken time out to eat! (*To Li Lao-kang.*) Say! Why aren't you wearing that new padded jacket?

MOTHER KUO: That's just what we were talking about! Look at what he calls a padded jacket! Patches on patches and full of holes, doesn't keep the cold out, and yet it still can be worn?

LI LAO-KANG: Huh! Why can't it be worn? My father and my grandfather both wore this jacket!

MOTHER KUO: Change, please do! The padded gown for you is one which that old beast Tsui Lao-kun gave to Lao Shou to hide for him. But Lao Shou has political consciousness, and he turned it over to the Poor Peasants' League. After due deliberation we decided you should have it.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: That garment's sure costly!

LI LAO-KANG (*gratefully*): But dear Auntie Kuo, it's not yet the time to share things out!

MOTHER KUO: The weather is so cold we were afraid you couldn't stand it!

LI LAO-KANG: I can stand it. I've been going along like this for many years.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: Well, it's no good if you just put it aside. First wear it, and then when things are divided it can be deducted from your share.

MOTHER KUO: Hurry home and put it on! This is the decision of the majority.

LI LAO-KANG (*waving his fist*): I . . . I comply! I . . . I comply! (*Walking towards rear, gratefully.*) Chairman Mao! You are really too kind to me!

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG (*pointing to Li Lao-kang and addressing audience*): This man toiled for Tsui Lao-kun half a lifetime, and couldn't even manage to get clothes to wear!

MOTHER KUO (*commandingly*): Lao-kang, if you want to stand up, you must first have a change of heart! Don't you ever be afraid of him again!

LI LAO-KANG: Yes! (*Exits.*)

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: I'm not afraid of him! I've never been afraid of him, and today I'm going to take a stroll inside of that big black door of his. Mother! (*Lowering her voice.*) But today we'd better put a guard at the village entrance. We can't let people from other villages come in.

MOTHER KUO: The way I look at it, it doesn't make much difference whether we have a guard or not.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: Ha! (*Whispering.*) The Poor Peasants' League of Date Grove is trying hard to get a share of our things. If they know we're going to settle accounts with Tsui Lao-kun today, they'll surely come!

MOTHER KUO: If they do come, we shouldn't have any quarrels! Date Grove is a poor village, and they used to be Tsui Lao-kun's tenants. It seems to me they ought to have some share in the fruits of our victory. . . .

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: Goodness gracious! Why do you have to be so truthful!

(*Liu Lao-cheng and Lao Tien, wearing an army overcoat, come on stage talking together.*)

LIU LAO-CHENG: You've never been to our village before, have you?

LAO TIEN: No, I haven't.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: There's not even enough to divide amongst ourselves.

LIU LAO-CHENG: What are you jabbering about! (*To Mother Kuo.*) My dear Sister-in-law! This is Comrade Lao Tien, sent by the higher authorities to lead us in carrying out land reform. (*Introducing her to Lao Tien.*) This is one of our local Party comrades.

MOTHER KUO: We've been hoping you'd come, Comrade Lao Tien. (*Shakes hands.*)

LIU LAO-CHENG: The key cadres have all gone with the militia to help at the front. Now all village matters are

entrusted to us, a few Poor Peasants' League committee-men, and we haven't any experience.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: You, a committee-man! Don't you feel a bit hungry? The meal I cooked for you has all gotten cold!

LIU LAO-CHENG: There you go shooting off your mouth again! Comrade Lao Tien, have you had breakfast yet?

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: Come to our house and have a bite!

LAO TIEN: I've eaten already, thank you. (*Gazing at the big locust tree with interest.*)

LIU LAO-CHENG (*informatively*): That tree's several hundred years old.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: Then I won't wait for you. (*To Mother Kuo.*) Let's hurry to the meeting. (*Starts to leave, then comes back.*) By the way, I almost forgot! We must put a guard at the village entrance. We can't let the Date Grovers in!

LIU LAO-CHENG: Fine! Fine! Go quickly! The quicker you go, the better.

AUNTIE LAO-CHENG: I'll go and tell the militia! (*Walks off.*)

MOTHER KUO (*calling after Auntie Lao-cheng*): Tell them that peasants are all one big family, and that they shouldn't start any quarrels with the good people of Date Grove!

LIU LAO-CHENG: We manage things according to the policy of the higher authorities. My dear Sister-in-law, Comrade Lao Tien has just told me that the volunteers from our village must muster in today. . . .

MOTHER KUO: Muster in today?

LAO TIEN: Yes, muster in and report to the District.

LIU LAO-CHENG (*scratching his head*): This business is going to be a bit troublesome. I didn't mention it in front of Ken-chu's mother, because she doesn't know yet that our Ken-chu has joined the army. Let's do it this way, Sister-in-law. You tell Lao Tien about conditions in the village,

and I'll go and notify the recruits. And about a place for Comrade Lao Tien to live. . . .

LAO TIEN: Anywhere will do.

LIU LAO-CHENG: But we must find a reliable household. . . .

MOTHER KUO: Stay at my place.

LIU LAO-CHENG (*smiling*): That's certainly reliable. Comrade Lao Tien, I must apologize. My house was burned down by the Japanese, but now I have hopes of being assigned a couple of rooms. If you come back again in a few years, please live with me.

MOTHER KUO (*to Lao Tien*): Let's go inside and talk.

LIU LAO-CHENG: Yes, go on in. This is our office.

LAO TIEN (*looking at the gateway*): Say, this courtyard was once a liaison station, wasn't it?

LIU LAO-CHENG: Yes! You talk as if you've been to our village before.

LAO TIEN: Not only been here, I know someone in your village.

LIU LAO-CHENG: Who?

LAO TIEN: A mother named Kuo.

(*Liu Lao-cheng and Mother Kuo look at each other and burst out laughing.*)

MOTHER KUO (*placidly*): You know her?

LAO TIEN: Of course I know her.

MOTHER KUO (*holding back her laughter*): I don't think you know her for certain.

LAO TIEN (*seriously*): No, I'm sure I know her. (*Reminiscently*). In 1941 during the fighting against the Japanese mopping-up operations, I was wounded. That day it was snowing hard, and she carried me on her back all the way from the open fields to this place. And right at this liaison station, she looked after me all night; washed my wound, cooked food for me, treated me like her own son. . . .

MOTHER KUO (*listening, slowly a joyful light appears in her eyes*): You . . . and you are that comrade?

LAO TIEN: Yes. (*Peering at Mother Kuo closely, he suddenly bursts out.*) Ah! It's you! Mother; It's you!

(*The two immediately grasp each other's hands and rock back and forth happily.*)

LAO TIEN: How are you, Mother Kuo?

MOTHER KUO: Fine, thank you. And that leg of yours?

LAO TIEN: OK, now. It left me with a bit of a limp, and so I've been transferred to work in the local area.

MOTHER KUO: I thought your face was familiar. . . .

LIU LAO-CHENG (*elatedly*): Well, it looks like we're all old acquaintances!

LAO TIEN: That's a fact! Mother! You've put on some weight since that time.

MOTHER KUO: Living standards have gone up.

(*Hei Ni runs on stage.*)

HEI NI: Mother Kuo, Mother Kuo! What's keeping you? (*Goes to Mother Kuo's side and says unconcernedly.*) Who's that?

MOTHER KUO (*nods towards Hei Ni and asks Lao Tien*): Do you recognize her?

LAO TIEN (*looking at Hei Ni*): No, I don't.

MOTHER KUO: Think back, someone called Hei Ni came to make a fire for you. . . .

LAO TIEN (*thinking*): And couldn't get it started, filled the room with smoke. . . .

MOTHER KUO: Right!

LAO TIEN: Is that her? . . . As I remember it, that was a child.

MOTHER KUO: Well, that was a long time ago. Doesn't a child grow up? She's almost seventeen. This is an ill-fated lass. Her father and mother both died at the hands of the Japanese.

HEI NI: Always talking about those things. Never talk about anything cheerful.

MOTHER KUO: So, talk a little more cheerfully. (*To Lao Tien, informatively.*) This little minx, it looks like sooner or later she's going to have to be my daughter-in-law!