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THE BRIDGE OF HEAVEN

S. I. HSIUNG



外语教学与研究出版社
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS

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(英文版)

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Preface

By Frances Wood

Though a Chinese writer, S. I. Hsiung first made his name in England in the early 1930s with the production of his English-language version of a Peking opera, *Lady Precious Stream*. The play opened in London in 1934 and was a tremendous success, running for three years. Queen Mary went to see it, wearing a splendid embroidered Chinese coat. It was performed by different groups all over England and opened in New York in 1936 where Eleanor Roosevelt attended a performance with her children.

The significance of *Lady Precious Stream* was that it introduced Chinese culture to a wide audience. Arthur Waley's pioneering translations of Chinese poems, published in 1918, were influential but restricted in circulation whilst *Lady Precious Stream*, seen by thousands in the theatre, was adopted as school textbook in 1937, thus informing a whole generation of British school children. Though Hsiung had originally planned to be a straightforward writer of plays in the English language, he was now cast as a vital informant on Chinese culture in the Western world, a role that became ever more important as China was threatened with invasion by Japan. His next play, *The Professor from Peking*, published and performed in 1939, was criticised for its depiction of modern China in political and military crisis rather than the peony and porcelain world of *Lady Precious Stream*. This may have influenced his approach to his next project, a novel, *The Bridge of Heaven*, set some 50 to 60 years earlier but at a time when China was struggling between peonies and politics, between the old order and the new.

The novel opens with a collapsing bridge and ends with its reconstruction, "beautiful as well as strong". Though the bridge in question is constructed near Nanchang (Hsiung's home town), much of the central part of the novel is set near another "Bridge of Heaven" in Peking, a run-down and dangerous area of second-hand shops where public executions also took place. Through the decades described in the novel, from 1879 to 1912, like the bridge, China could be said to have collapsed and then recovered with the end of imperial rule, and the establishment of a Republic and a democracy, "beautiful" perhaps but not yet strong. As the next 40 years were to show, the new democracy was indeed fragile and easily threatened. Across China's vast and varied territory, news travelled, sometimes speedily by telegraph, sometimes slowly by river and canal, and the dramatic changes in the major cities seemed far away to the rural population. And whilst the speed of the telegraph hinted at China's position in an increasingly globalised world, such are the distances, such are the differences, between East and West China, between the seaboard and the interior deserts that as late as the 1960s jokes circulated about buses breaking down in remote rural villages where the peasants would ask about the health of the emperor, despite the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty 50 years earlier.

The drama of the change went deep. After the failure of the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, a series of unsuccessful rebellions culminated in the Wuchang Uprising of October 1911 which effectively overthrew the Ts'ing Dynasty. Suddenly the 13th day of the 11th moon of the old traditional lunar calendar became January 1st 1912 and such signs of the past as the hated hairstyle of shaven forehead and long plait, imposed on people by the Manchus of the imperial Ts'ing Dynasty, disappeared. Yet many old habits died hard.

How could the dramatic change from centuries—old traditions and beliefs to the new ideas of the 20th century be conveyed to a Western audience? S. I. Hsiung cleverly chose to write about the varied fortunes of three generations of an extended family. Though based in the countryside

near Nanchang, over the decades, family members travelled to Shanghai, Peking, Wuhan and Guangzhou. They embraced different ideals, some traditional, some modern, and they epitomised the political and cultural contradictions of the period. Hsiung introduced a wide variety of themes and events to inform Western audiences, not just about the political struggles of the time but about traditional Chinese practices around birth, marriage and death, involving superstition as well as Confucian respect for family ties and continuity and the importance of education. Whilst describing the educational progress of some of his characters, typical of the period when Western education in China meant missionary education, Hsiung also raised the question of mutual understanding between foreigners and Chinese. In his depiction of missionary activity, he depicted a range of types, from the ignorant educator to the radical visionary, the latter reflected in his references to Timothy Richard, a Welsh Baptist minister whose writings influenced the reformer Kang Yu-Wei (1858-1927), one of the leaders of the ultimately unsuccessful Hundred Days Reform Movement of 1898. It is a fascinating characteristic of *The Bridge of Heaven* that Hsiung mixed real historical figures in with his characters, subtly revealing a didactic ambition. Apart from Timothy Richard, he involved Yuan Shih-Kai (who employs Hsiung's main hero Ta Tung as a secretary) and Sun Wu, a leader of the Wuchang Uprising in which Ta Tung participates.

S. I. Hsiung himself, born in 1902, was too young to have taken part in the political activities he depicted in his novel. He died in 1991, in Peking, having lived through China's continuing struggles, through the May 4th Movement, the Anti-Japanese War and the Kuomintang and Communist Party struggles which culminated in the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Though set in an earlier period, the opinions and events depicted in *The Bridge of Heaven* anticipate much of China's subsequent history. It may be that, writing in the early 1940s when the outcome of War of Resistance against Japan and the Second World War as

well as the deepening civil war was uncertain, Hsiung felt safer describing an earlier period of uncertainty and dramatic change.

His novel starts in the countryside, not far from Nanchang and, apart from using the geographical setting of his own home village, Hsiung seems to have borrowed some aspects of his characters from his own experience and from family members. At the beginning of the novel, his two main protagonists are brothers, Li Ming and Li Kang. Throughout the novel, Hsiung employs a very distinctive and effective literary style, a sort of innocent irony, in his descriptions of characters. They are presented largely on their own terms, thus Li Ming, who paid for the re-building of a small bridge, is described as "a philanthropist by profession... He was generous by nature and never once refused to give free tea or rice to beggars who came to his door. He believed that Heaven would never let a good deed go unrewarded. Those who had a bowl of tea from him would water some of his plants and those who had his food were sure to leave some manure in his ricefields before they could get out of the bounds of his property." Thus we understand that Li Ming's philanthropy is self-interested and self-interest is equally evident in his mean treatment of the household servants. There is a characteristically spare and sarcastic passage about the servants' shabby clothing—"All his and his wife's old and worn garments which second-hand clothes dealers refused to buy had to be given to the servants"—and the twice-monthly dish of meat soup he felt obliged to give them which was known to the servants as "a pig in the East Lake" reflecting the relative lack of meat.

Whilst Li Ming is instantly recognisable as a hypocrite of the type that can be found in many of Charles Dickens' works, his younger brother Li Kang is unworldly in the extreme, and in his strange but honourable way, more of a stock Chinese character, of the sort one might meet in the classic Chinese novel *The Scholars* (《儒林外史》). Though he was finally persuaded to take the imperial examination, in the examination halls Li Kang handed his papers over to an old man who was suicidal at the thought of another

failure but who, thanks to Li Kang's generosity, finally achieved the title of "Cultivated Talent". Devoted to learning and honest to the point of rudeness, Li Kang has, however, something that his brother envies, a son, Ta Yu. It is in his quest for a son that Li Ming decides to repair the local bridge in the hope that this will "move Heaven" and give him an heir. However, his skimping on materials seems to have only moved heaven slightly, for though his wife does finally give birth to a son, it is still-born. Desperate to find a child with the same birth date, Li Ming rushes out into the stormy night and buys a newborn boy from a destitute fisherman, only to return to find that his wife was carrying twins and the second boy was born quite safely. This extraordinary event, carrying Confucian ancestral duty to the extreme, shapes the destiny of the second generation of the Li family and presages other extreme events.

The education of the second generation provides opportunities for Hsiung to develop his characters and also to raise the complex question of education in late imperial and early Republican China. Refusing money, Li Kang allows Li Ming's two "sons", the second twin Shiao Ming and the fisherman's baby Ta Tung, to join his own son Ta Yu in his schoolroom where he uses a variety of traditional and modern educational methods, explaining to Li Ming that "he taught his son the *Book of Odes* because he intended the boy to be a farmer. A farmer, he said, ought to know all the rural songs and ballads in that book." Shiao Ming, who was lazy and slow, was given the simple and easy *Book of Family-names* because Li Kang felt he was "best suited to be a merchant, therefore he ought to learn the surnames and other common subjects instead of the theoretical teachings of Confucius and Mencius which he thought would be ruinous if applied to business transactions." Li Ming had objected to the books which Ta Tung had read under Li Kang's tutelage and said "that words such as Europe, America, Napoleon, Columbus, sounded ridiculous" but Li Kang defended his methods saying that "Ta Tung was going to be a man of the world, therefore he ought to have a knowledge of the world."

38 The all-important theme of the importance of education derives from S. I. Hsiung's own educational experience. This began in the traditional way with his mother teaching him the Confucian classics at a very early age, but he subsequently studied in a modern school in Nanchang before going to study medicine at Tsinghua University in Peking. Though Hsiung's hero Li Kang's own background was strictly classical, he stresses the importance of a modern education, despite the fact that in late 19th and early 20th century China, this was almost inevitably a Christian missionary education. Though he is in constant correspondence with Timothy Richard over the need for reform and persuades him to sponsor his nephew Ta Tung at a missionary school, Li Kang denounces Christianity as "so aggressive ... ungracious." Indeed the first missionary school Ta Tung attends promotes an aggressive Christianity, insisting on baptism for all, and the unsubtle approach provides Hsiung with opportunities for highly amusing set pieces. He contrasts the intellectual Timothy Richard who "genuinely loved China" with the Reverend Ma-Ke-Lao (McLeod?) and his wife, who decorate their drawing room with pieces of embroidered silk hung over the chairs, unaware that these are ladies' undergarments and unaware of the inappropriateness of such interior decoration as they are unaware of so much of Chinese culture. Hsiung has Ta Tung's family show up the ignorance of the Ma-Ke-Lao's (McLeod?) by inviting them to visit and showing them into a carefully decorated reception room where "on the high backs of two chairs a pair of laced pink silk knickers and a corset were displayed in full view." And it was not only missionaries who misunderstood China, for Hsiung takes a well-deserved swipe at British colonial Hong Kong. "The British colonial pioneers in the East had one great quality: their self-centredness, in the broad and narrow sense of the word. It was this engaging quality of theirs that built the British Empire. They were what they were, and all the people of other races must take them as they were ... To them, China was a great nuisance... Chinese religions were pagan beliefs to them, and Chinese politics primitive struggles."

The hero of the second part of the book is Ta Tung. After a traditional wedding goes wrong and the bride's mother retires in shock to the Buddhist Nunnery of Sedate Intelligence, he and his cousin, Lotus Fragrance, leave the past, the bridge and the peonies and the porcelain, for modern Peking and the political excitement of the Hundred Days Reform Movement. Meeting Timothy Richard, Ta Tung loses faith in him for despite his belief in the need for change, Richard expressed the view that only with foreign advisors and officials could China progress, a view that was not so different from that of the European countries that wanted to divide China into "spheres of influence". Whilst studying with his uncle Li Kang, Ta Tung had already begun to understand the need for change in China but the need to be wary of foreign influence: he had "learned to study the map, and was grieved to see that Burma, Annam and the Liu Chiu Islands, which had all belonged to China, were now taken respectively by Britain, France and Japan". As the old Dowager Empress Tzu Hsi crushes the Hundred Days Reform and imprisons the Emperor, family jealousies and political manoeuvres lead to Ta Tung's imprisonment. Released, he decides to go to the south, to join Sun Yat-Sen's Association for the Rebirth of China and, eventually, participates in the bloody but historic Wuchang Uprising that marks the birth of modern China.

S. I. Hsiung takes his readers through a terrible and dramatic time in China's modern history, ending on a note of reconciliation and a more solid reconstruction of the Bridge of Heaven than Li Ming had ordered 30 years before. His insights into traditional family life, into the continuing significance of Confucian belief and family ties, his descriptions of birth, marriage and death rituals are as valid, enjoyable and informative as they were in 1943. It is still important that Western readers understand the drama of the end of the Ts'ing and the struggle for modernity in China and *The Bridge of Heaven* is a fine introduction.

On reading

THE BRIDGE OF HEAVEN

To Ta Tung, as a boy,
This hope gave gentle joy,
To plant, in some green close,
A plum-tree or white rose,
That, so, in Spring or June
The lamp of the full Moon
Might show to Man the flower
White, in its whitest hour,
That, those who came to seek,
Would whisper: "Will she speak
This Wonder? Will she bless
Our woes to nothingness?
Will she descend the green
Sweet sprays, and be our Queen?
Our Saviour Queen? O, still...
She moves... She will."

Then, growing-up, be found
No garden-close, no ground,
In all wide China's space
To be a planting-place.

Instead, an iron will
To learn to kill, and kill,
The tangle of the weeds
That thwart men's needs.

Thus is Man's youth today,
An April without May,
A May without a June,
Night without Moon.
But Hope from thwarted lives
In unquenched beauty strives
Slowly its glimmer breaks
The darkness of mistakes.
So many million flames
Will burn away the shames;
Ta Tung will surely find
His plot of Peace of Mind;
His blossomed plum will lift
White as the snow in drift,
Under a Moon of Peace
In skies like the still seas.

John Marefield

October 15th, 1942

PROLOGUE

"A melon seed will not bear weed,

Nor nettle, violet

If you sow deed of grace or greed,

Heaven will not forget."

The humble author is greatly honoured to begin his book by recording a deed of philanthropy. In the glaring sun on a hot day in the 7th moon in the 5th year of the reign of the Emperor Kwang Hsu (1879), a handful of men were sweating and groaning under their heavy task of rebuilding a little bridge across a small river—about 25 *li* (a *li* is roughly a third of a mile) south of the city Nanchang, the provincial seat of Kiangsi.

The public had no cause to thank these hard-working men; for they were paid for their work. And though they were working unusually hard because the job should have called for more hands, that was due to the miscalculation of their boss, the builder. He had undertaken the job for eighty taels of silver and he must abide by that bargain. He ought to have known from the very beginning that that was not enough, for he was a shrewd business man. Probably when he saw he couldn't get more, he thought it was better to accept rather than to displease his old customer. He told his men bluntly that even with the cheapest material in the market, he still had to find some other way to make up the loss. Naturally the workers had to make their contribution by working harder than ever.

The man whom the builder did not dare to offend was Li Ming. He was a philanthropist by profession, and because of his devotion to such excellent and praiseworthy work, Heaven had been very kind to him. He was now by far the richest man in the district. Practically all the ricefields for many scores

of *li* around were his property and with a few exceptions all the villagers were his tenants. He was generous by nature and never once refused to give free tea or rice to beggars who came to his door. He believed that Heaven would never let a good deed go unrewarded. Those who had a bowl of tea from him would water some of his plants and those who had his food were sure to leave some manure in his ricefields before they could get out of the bounds of his property.

Li Ming lived in a big mansion with vermilion gates about six *li* north of this bridge and the name of the place was called the Village of the Li Families. There were about five hundred households in the village and, except a few shopkeepers and traders, all the village people were farmers. Though he was not the headman of the Li clan, Li Ming considered himself much more important than this elderly leader of the village whose little cottage with mud walls and thatched roof was not fit to be Li Ming's stable. Strictly speaking our philanthropist was occupying only half of this impressive mansion. But it was only his half which was impressive, the other half, occupied by his good-for-nothing younger brother, Li Kang, being virtually unmentionable. Inside those beautiful lacquered gates there was a spacious courtyard which led to two pairs of secondary gates, and here started the marked difference of the two brothers' private households. While the gates on the right which belonged to Li Ming were kept brightly varnished and knockers polished, those on the left which belonged to Li Kang were in such bad repair that even when they were shut one could see the inside of the house through the crevices on the panels.

In spite of maintaining his house in such good order, Li Ming seldom spent a single piece of money on the decoration of the building. It was always when he gave a big contract to the builder for a job connected with some philanthropic purpose that he would ask the builder to repair some part of his house as part of the bargain. As years went by and the builder got to know him well, he never needed to mention such repairs himself. The

builder now thought it his duty to see that Li Ming's house was always kept in perfect condition. And then, there was a staff of six servants in the house. As Li Ming's household consisted of no one else beside himself and his wife, the domestics had ample time to take good care of the appearance of this magnificent mansion, or, to be more exact, half of the mansion.

For a country house like this a domestic staff of six would be considered extravagant. But Li Ming, though extremely generous by nature, would never countenance extravagance. The fact was that he actually spent almost nothing on the wages of these people. And for a great philanthropist, six servants were hardly sufficient. Because of his profession, he had to maintain social intercourse with influential people, such as the Magistrate of his district and even the Prefect of his county. He therefore must have a *ta-ya* (butler), an *erh-ya* (footman), a porter, a cook, a gardener, a couple of maids for the middle and bed chambers, and at least two bondmaids for housework and odd jobs. But under Li Ming's economical management, six servants—and two of them were under age—were more than enough to look after all the requirements of his household.

Old Wang, who first came to him looking for a job as a teacher, was a distant relative, well educated but incapable of earning a living. His handwriting was awful and he could never command the respect of his pupils. After several unsuccessful attempts, he at last consented to act as the honourable book-keeper for Li Ming's house in return for board and lodging. Li Ming assigned him the room inside the front gates and he found that he was obliged to answer the door and receive the visiting-card and carry it into the house whenever there was a caller. He understood perfectly well that Li Ming, who trusted nobody (including his wife) with money or accounts, had no need of a private book-keeper, and so he had to try to be useful in the house in other capacities. As long as he could maintain the wearing of the long gown, which was a clear indication that he was a literary man, he did not at all mind performing the duties of butler or porter, provided nobody called

him by such disagreeable titles.

Old Chang was engaged to be the cook at a very reasonable wage, but Li Ming saw no reason why he couldn't earn his own wages by cultivating the extensive flower garden on the other side of the house and turning it into a kitchen garden. While he undertook all the heavy work, Old Wang frequently gave a helping hand with lighter jobs. Indeed, this kitchen garden yielded more vegetables than the household could consume and Old Chang was able to sell in the early morning on market days those that they could spare. The takings from these sales covered more than Old Chang's wages. Of the two maids, Kao Ma was nearly sixty. She came to the house with her mistress as the bride's waiting-maid. She had nobody related to her, and so had no use for her wages. It was therefore arranged that her master should invest her wages for her until they became a lump sum, so as to buy her a good coffin and give her a decent funeral when she should die. Wen Ma, the younger maid, gave her services free in exchange for food and shelter because she was very grateful to Li Ming who had secured for her husband a small job in the Magistrate's Yamen. The two bondmaids, Double Blessing and Great Happiness, came into service when they were about twelve. By the time they could marry, their future husbands would have to pay Li Ming the expenses incurred in keeping them.

However, Li Ming was by no means satisfied with his servant problem. He often complained that it was a great burden to him. Their wages, he used to say, were of small consequence, but he was virtually giving the six of them their clothes, food and shelter. This made him remorseful. All his and his wife's old and worn garments which second-hand clothes dealers refused to buy had to be given to the servants. Though they might look a little shabby, they were still wearable, and he thought it wise to dress his domestics thus because this clearly indicated to his friends that he had made no money out of his philanthropy. As for the shelter, it was true that it did not cost him anything extra, but their food was the main problem. All of them were big

eat, and he was obliged to supply, according to the custom, a meat dish twice a month. This was called *Ya-chi* or "Sacrifice to teeth". On the 1st and 15th of every month he had to buy a catty (a catty equals 22 ounces) of pork to be boiled in a big boiler to make what was called a meat soup. Among the servants, however, it had a different name. They spoke of it as "a pig in the East Lake", which well illustrated how much meat and how much water there was in this dish. Unfortunately Kao Ma was a pious follower of some Buddhist principles. She strictly maintained her fast days which were the 1st and 15th of every month. Being all alone in this world, she took up this religious duty hoping that Heaven would give her a better life in her next existence. Therefore she had to be a vegetarian all the year round and the other five servants did their best to encourage her to keep on with this praiseworthy resolution of hers.

It is needless to say that the owner of the other half of the mansion had no servants. In fact, Li Kang could not have afforded them even if he had not been so dead against keeping servants. Although Li Ming and Li Kang were brothers, and lived so close to each other, no two persons were more different from each other. Since the death of their father, Li Ming, who proposed and executed the division of the family property, had been faring a thousand times better than Li Kang. As the elder son, Li Ming inherited a little more, but even then it was meagre. While Li Kang had been sitting there and eating up his estate (as the saying goes), Li Ming had been very active in managing his share. He had cut down his housekeeping expenses and, prompted by his generous nature, had allowed his hard-up tenants to go rent free for a whole year—on the single condition that all rents should be increased substantially as from the year following. It was in this way, and with the good fortune which Heaven gave him because of his philanthropic works, he was able to buy nearly all the real estate in the district.

Since he did so much for charity, Li Ming could easily have secured for himself a nice big house in the city at a bargain price. But their father, who