

WANG KUEI
AND
LI HSIANG-HSIANG

LI CHI

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Landlord Tsui Collects Rent

*We start in 1930, when
A sad thing happened in Sanpien.*
Sanpien's three treasures all men knew,
But its poor were many, its rich were few.
On every side stretched yellow sand,
But all of it was rich men's land.
In '29 there'd been a drought
When all the farms were quite scorched out;
As blind men grope in the dark with fear
Poor people dread a barren year.
In its tail not its head, lies Famine's sting,
So all feared 1930's spring.
Weeds gone they searched for leaves and roots,
Not a sign to be seen of young green shoots;
When plants were gone, tree bark they found,*

* The name of a cluster of three towns—Anpien, Tingpien and Chingpien—near the Great Wall in North Shensi.

Into coarse flour the bark was ground.
 Though March's dead in coffins lay,
 No burial had those who died in May.
 The grain in the barns was rotting away,
 No end to the grain of Landlord Tsui.
 Like homeless dogs were the starving poor,
 But the landlord did not care a straw.
 A gale makes big trees break into song;
 Tsui had money and was made pao chang.*
 Abacus beads are ninety-one,
 Counting Tsui's livestock you'd never get done.
 Ten miles' pasture, seven miles' sand,
 Each herd of cattle carried his brand.
 Smoke from a chimney flies up high,
 Tsui owned even half the sky.
 One word from him to the magistrate,
 And even the weather he could dictate.
 The colder it gets the fiercer it blows,
 The richer a man the harder he grows.
 That year no crops were harvested,
 The peasants' hearts were filled with dread;
 For lack of grain starvation meant,
 And how could they pay Tsui his rent?
 A man can always tighten his belt,
 But arrears in rent disaster spelt!
 Old Wang had gone hungry many a day,
 But Tsui's bailiff came to force him to pay.
 His tongue wagged quickly in his head,
 As Wang said all that could be said:
 "There's always my life, though I can't pay now;
 In my next life I'll be his ox or cow."
 "You're behind with your rent," was the bailiff's reply,
 "Do you think you can scare us by threatening to die?"
 Each sentence followed by an angry glare,
 At each third sentence his whip cracked the air.
 The bailiff seemed by a devil possessed,
 Old Pock-marked Wang was sorely pressed.
 Blood from his body poured like rain,
 And he called for his mother in his pain.

* Head of a hundred families, the basic unit under the reactionary Kuomintang government.

*A lonely swan on the sand will fall,
His neighbours grieved for him one and all.
"You're furs in winter, you're well fed;
Though Wang owes rent, why beat him dead?
All that he owns you could carry away,
Or beat him to death, but he still couldn't pay!"
A blind ass tramples the hay in his stall;
That bailiff, it seems, had no heart at all.
When one stick was broken, another he'd start;
To see the blood flow would break any one's heart.
At sunset Wang was not quite gone,
But a dead corpse the moon shone on.
Pulling up grass Tsui went for the root,
That landlord was a cruel brute;
The old man dead he took the son,
Of all the family left not one!
No plants will grow in the winter cold,
Men ranked lower than beasts in the China of old.*



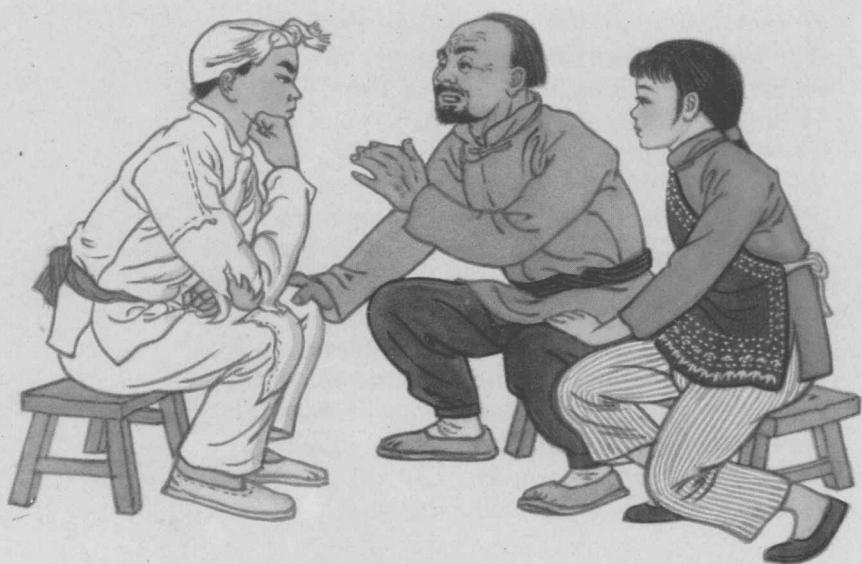


Wang Kuei Works for Tsui

*Pock-marked Wang's son, named Wang Kuei,
Was about thirteen when Tsui took him away.
The landlord's plan was really clever:
Wang Kuei should work for him forever.
No father to him would the landlord be,
But at least the lad's labour would be free.
A lamb bleats soon as it's dropped by its ewe;
Though young there was lots that Wang Kuei knew.
Cattle work hard but at least they're fed;
Wang Kuei always went hungry to bed.
When New Year dainties filled the pan,
Wang Kuei still munched his hunk of bran.
He'd clothes for the cold, for heat not a clout,
But in June wore his sheepskins inside out.
In autumn he gathered in crops from the land,
Cursed for his slowness though raw was his hand.*

*In winter when he herded goats,
He had no thick clothes, no warm coats.
Blood poured from his chapped hands and feet,
His food was frozen too hard to eat.
He wanted to light a fire in his camp,
But the wood in the snow was all too damp.
At the time when the aster in autumn appears,
Wang Kuei had worked for exactly four years.
Wheat grows well after a winter of snow;
Like young wheat he seemed to grow.
In the depth of winter, when it snowed like mad,
Wang Kuei started thinking of his dad.
A dead ox's place by a younger ox is filled,
A son must avenge a father killed.*





Li Hsiang-hsiang

*Skylark eggs the skylarks lay;
 Tsui's home was in Dead Goat Bay.
 In flood, foul water will mix with clear;
 Rich families and poor lived here.
 Beside a stream in Dead Goat Bay
 There lived a poor man, Li Te-jui.
 He was fifty-eight and his beard was white,
 In one flow'r of his home he took delight,
 His daughter Hsiang-hsiang, the joy of his life,
 For sons he had none, and dead was his wife.
 Like a moulting sparrow in winter's sleet,
 No clothes to wear, no food to eat,*

*Hsiang-hsiang at sixteen toiled hard all day,
But tired to death went hungry alway.
In a rough cloth sugar may be rolled,
A poor girl may have a heart of gold.
Fresh round grains on maize you find,
Li was old but his heart was kind.
He would take Wang's hand and say with tears:
"You've had a hard life of it all these years!
Though young, of troubles you've had your share,
An orphan left without parents' care.
Beggars may sleep within temple doors,
Why don't you look on our home as yours?"
When wind and storm drove all men home,
To chop them wood Wang Kuei would come.
With a younger sister and a dad,
A home this homeless youngster had.*





Gathering Wild Herbs

*Sweet the red lilies blow in the glade,
Hsiang-hsiang became a lovely maid.
She had a pair of great black eyes
Like dew that bright on the meadow lies.
Rice must be husked two times or three,
From childhood she loved the peasantry.
The hillside willow grows green and gay,
A proper youngster was Wang Kuei.
Nearly six feet tall, and hefty too,
The work of two peasants he could do.
Maize will flower when it's half grown,
He'd always wanted Hsiang-hsiang for his own.
Hard to start singing though the song is sweet,
Hard to grow cherries though they're good to eat.
Their hearts were given each to each,
But both were shy and slow of speech.
He drove goats up the mountain high,
She looked for herbs in the glen nearby.
Wang Kuei sang as he drove his goats along,
And this was the burden of his song:
"After a hard day I toss the night through,
Can't sleep a wink for thinking of you."
Halting his steps, he waited, mute;
And from the glen heard a voice soft as a lute:*

*"Wild lilies bloom on the valley's brink,
Don't be afraid to say what you think."*

*"Magic herbs by the roadside grow,
None's your equal, that I know!"*

*"Choosing a horse, one is better than another;
Choosing a man, who's as good as Elder Brother!"*

*"Teeth like rice, lips cherry red,
Don't start trying to turn my head!"*

*"Marry a rich man, and live in luxury;
Why should you suffer with a poor man like me?"*

*"Light from the stove shines half the bed o'er;
Measure rice in wine-cups, still I won't think you poor.
I've loved peasants since I could speak or see,
Better than silver are truth and honesty."*

*"A green-skinned melon has seeds that are red,
I shall remember all you have said.*

*Tangled as flax is all I want to say;
We must meet to talk again later in the day."*

*"When the world is sleeping, then
In my room we'll speak again.*

*There'll be many stars but no moon in the sky,
Don't trip over the dog when you come by!"*





Two Silver Dollars

*The sun was sinking bright and red,
As to the well our Hsiang-hsiang sped.
The rope scarce reached the water below,
And Hsiang-hsiang panted as she bent low.
In black jacket and silk shoes arrayed,
Landlord Tsui comes down the glade.
Like a potato is his head,
Foxy eyes narrow as a thread,
A wide grin discloses his yellow fangs,
And he paws at Hsiang-hsiang as over her he hangs.
"Let me help, if it is too much for you;
To spoil those pretty hands will never do!"
"Mind what you're doing, Landlord Tsui!
Take your clumsy hands away!"
"Proud little baggage, you'd better go slow;
I took a fancy to you long ago.
Mutton soup and the best white rice,
Long ago I thought you nice.
You can live in comfort if you marry Mr. Tsui;
Food, clothes, jewels — anything you say."
Angry and ashamed was Hsiang-hsiang then;
Picking up her bucket she started home again.*

• Landlord Tsui followed fast behind,
 Groping in his belt two dollars to find.
 "Two silver dollars I'll give to you,
 To make yourself a pretty dress or two."
 • Hsiang-hsiang had always been a little wild,
 And hated the rich since she was a child,
 First because her own home hungry went,
 While all their grain was given Landlord Tsui for rent;
 Next because Wang Kuei was treated like a slave,
 Working night and day no rest did he have.
 Red like the pomegranate floods her cheeks o'er:
 "What do I want your filthy money for!"
 • "You damn slave girl, be careful what you say,
 You can't afford to offend Mr. Tsui!"
 Cringing like a beaten dog away he went,
 But Tsui's rage had not found sufficient vent.
 "When the rope breaks then down falls the pail;
 You will fall into my hands without fail.
 To eat coarse food you throw white flour away;
 You won't have me, but you will have Wang Kuei?
 Wang Kuei's young, but he is poor;
 I may be old, but I've money galore.
 Flour for the bin goes through a sieve,
 Only if I wish it can Wang Kuei live.
 A smoking chimney makes the rafters black,
 I shall make him suffer two days when I go back!"





The Revolution

- No trees and few stones had Sanpien,
The peasants' lot was bitter then.
No clouds above, below a drought,
They had to think of some way out.
A flock of goats follows the goat at the head,
Through northern Shensi the Communists spread.
With Liu Chih-tan* to lead them, high*

* Liu Chih-tan, organizer and leader of the Communist Party and the Red Army in northern Shensi during the Second Revolutionary Civil War Period (1927-1936). In 1936, he fell in battle while resisting the Kuomintang forces who were attempting to prevent the Red Army from fighting the Japanese aggressors.

They raised the Red flag to the sky.
 From a spark in the hay a big fire can spread,
 Soon as the Red flag appeared the poor turned Red.
 Thunder's heard and lightning seen for miles around,
 Quick as thought Communism covered the ground.
 Willingly his plough a roan or draws,
 And all folk support a revolutionary cause.
 Still common peasants in broad daylight,
 They take guns to storm the garrison at night.
 When the forts are opened, they divide the grain;
 Land, sheep, cattle, are all disposed of then.
 The Youth Corps, and the Red Guard so keen,
 Consist of youngsters of eighteen or nineteen.
 Women on the road are like a gust of wind,
 Their long hair cut in a bob behind.
 The lower stream is muddied when the upper stream runs
 high,
 Wang Kuei joined the Red Guard secretly.
 Leading his cattle to the marsh when it was light,
 To revolutionary meetings he went at night.
 He would stay at the meeting until the cock crowed,
 And then hurry miles back along the homeward road.
 During the day his goats he had to keep,
 During the night not a wink of sleep.
 Tired as he was, his spirits were high,
 For the revolution he was ready to die.
 The fingers of one hand are not the same length,
 And Wang Kuei's longing surpassed the rest in strength;
 Other people's hatred was like a mountain high,
 But Wang Kuei's hatred was higher than the sky.
 Tsui had had his father beaten till he died,
 And now he wished to steal Wang Kuei's bride!
 Five years like a beast Wang had toiled away,
 Not paid a single cent by Landlord Tsui.
 Nothing was too crooked for Landlord Tsui to do,
 He built forts, bought horses, hired soldiers too.
 The landlords and gentry were vicious every one,
 But Landlord Tsui had the rest outdone!
 Peasants felt that his flesh they'd like to bite,
 Even the dogs barked at his sight.
 To the guerillas the people used to say,
 "Hurry up and capture Dead Goat Bay."

*Though beans are still raw, hungry people can't wait;
They fixed the twenty-third of December as the date.
At midnight they would arrest Landlord Tsui,
At dawn troops would enter Dead Goat Bay.
When the plan was made, they all felt stirred;
Only two more days to the twenty-third!*

