



The BRIGHT FUTURE

BY OUYANG SHAN

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I

At the east end of Chaoyang Village not far from a shallow water bay lived two peasant brothers. The elder was called Liang Sung and the younger Liang Huai. Though born of the same parents, they were very different in nature. Liang Sung was upright and strong-minded. When he saw an unfair deed, he was willing to give his life to set it right, which was why the villagers sometimes called him Wu Sung, likening him to the legendary hero who fought a tiger all by himself. Liang Huai, on the contrary, was timid and meek. He accepted life as it was and lived with his arms enlacing his head, so to speak, as though he was in constant danger of getting his head bashed in.

Naturally, the brothers did not see eye to eye about things in general. Their father, at his death, left them 2.7 *mou** of land, which the brothers divided between them and set up separate households. Liang Sung took two small lots, together totalling 1.2 *mou*, for himself and gave his brother the bigger portion, which was also better land.

Now although Liang Sung gave his brother the bigger and better share of land, he found it difficult to be patient with him. He often scolded Liang Huai. "Just look at you," he would say. "You don't even dare make a murmur. When will you ever get anywhere?"

Liang Huai's response would be to stroke his face placidly. "Get anywhere?" He would repeat the last words and sink again into his customary silence. How-

*One *mou* equals about 1/6 of an acre.

ever, no really harsh words passed between them, and the brothers remained friendly but cool towards one another.

They lived their separate lives in their own ways. A dozen years or so after their father's death, it was easy to see how they had got on in life. The poor peasants in the village thought very highly of Liang Sung. Whether they had rice or only plain gruel they usually remembered to ask him over for a bite; when they steamed a cake or made sweet patties, they always sent him some. They would go to him to talk about their grievances and their sorrows.

The landlords felt differently. They praised the younger brother and expressed a dislike for the elder. They said Liang Sung was eccentric and didn't know his place. He was wilful and had neither tact nor sense. The poor in the village liked to say: "Now, if only Liang Sung could become master of the village how nice it would be for us." When the landlords heard this, they smiled complacently, but inwardly their hearts missed a beat. Not that they thought Liang Sung would ever become master, but they were uneasy at the mere suggestion. So, when Liang Sung came to borrow money, they asked for interest higher than usual; when he came to do odd work they gave him the dirtiest jobs they could think of, beside deducting this and that from his wages.

Thus life went on in the village. In 1937, the year the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression began, Liang Sung had lost every bit of the 1.2 *mou* of land he had inherited from his father. His hut had become ramshackle; the clothes on his back, shabby and held together with patches. His family ate meagrely, often going without a meal or two. His wife got ill but he had no money to get medical aid and she died. He was left with an eleven-year-old son called Liang Shu-chien.

The boy was lean and gaunt but strong and a good worker.

With younger brother Liang Huai, things had gone fairly well. He, too, had married, though his wife had borne him no children. He had increased his land from 1.5 to 2 *mou* and his hut and his clothes all showed that he had got on in the world. Liang Sung thought he could even detect a look of self-satisfaction in his brother's eyes.

One day Liang Sung felt that he wanted to say something to his son so he called the boy to him. "Shu-chien, you are getting older day by day," he began solemnly. "It's time you learned a little of the ways and meaning of life. Now, a man should live like a real man. He must be upright and just and do what he thinks is right; let the devil take care of what muddle-heads may say. He shouldn't be afraid to act even when the job is big and difficult and he may fail. He shouldn't go against his conscience for fear idlers may wag their sharp tongues. He mustn't be impressed by the powerful and rich and be servile to them. He mustn't deny the truth for fear of knocks and thrashings. If he lives thus, he can be proud of the way he has lived and no one can whisper and point at him behind his back. He will not have lived in vain. Now your Uncle Huai and I are different in the way we lead our lives. There are people who envy him, but I don't. As for the matter of wealth, let the lord of heaven take care of that."

He talked as if his son were already a grown man, and the trouble was he was unable to express himself clearly. Even had he been able to, his son was far too young to comprehend.

The boy sat mutely on the ground, his fingers idly tracing figures in the dark soil. He was too young to know what the future held in store for him and how he should live his life. One thing he did know, that he and his father were very poor. In spite of it all, he

loved his father dearly, more than anyone else on earth. His father was a remarkable man who knew a lot; he was a man who kept his word and whom people loved and respected.

Not long after this talk between father and son, tragedy came to Liang Sung. One day the son of landlord Liang the Eighth came running down the path after a young peasant girl. This young man usually lived in Canton, the provincial capital, and came home rarely. No one knew for sure what was his profession, but as he wore a uniform and carried a pistol, people took for granted that he was an officer of some sort. No one knew why he was pursuing the young girl that day; perhaps there was something between them, or perhaps he was merely teasing her. It was a lovely day. The transparent blue of the sky was unmarred by even a tiny fluff of cloud. The young girl tore down the foot-path like a startled hare fleeing from danger; she shrieked for help as she ran. Her hair came loose and fluttered behind her like a comet's tail.

Liang Sung, who was working in the fields, heard the commotion and, dropping his plough, dashed to the foot-path to see what it was all about. When the young man came up to Liang Sung he attempted to brush him aside, and shouted: "Out of the way!"

Liang Sung, according to family rules, was actually great-uncle to the young man, and he was furious both with the younger generation's immorality and lack of respect. "How dare you speak to me like that?" he said severely. "To whom do you think you're talking, you lout?"

That brought the young man to a standstill. When he saw he had addressed Liang Sung, he knew he should have minded his manners; but then he immediately remembered that he was the son of Liang the Eighth, and that made everything he did right. In any case he had always hated Liang Sung, who had not spared him with

scoldings when he was still a child. One word led to another, and a fight ensued. Liang Sung pushed the young man almost into the ditch whereupon the spoilt young pup in his rage pulled out his gun and shot Liang Sung.

Liang Sung was then thirty-seven years old. Before he breathed his last he told his son to fetch his brother, Liang Huai, to whom he entrusted the care of the eleven-year-old boy. Liang Huai, with bowed head, sat on a stool beside the door, quite a distance from his dying brother, a sign of his disapproval of the whole affair. Liang Sung expressed his last wishes, though there was little he had to say. When he noticed his brother's manner, he wanted to upbraid him and warn his son once more, but realizing that this was no time to deal with that, he merely said in a mild way: "We two brothers have moulded our lives differently, haven't we? We've each gone our different roads. At any rate we didn't get in one another's way."

"Yes," Liang Huai nodded. "We are different."

Liang Sung turned to his son. "Remember me, my boy," he said. "If you keep your father in mind, you'll know how to distinguish between men and snakes. Don't be satisfied with things just because the landlord masters give you a little taste of sweetness now and then. Snakes in the grass will always be snakes."

Liang Huai felt the sting in these words and frowned disapprovingly. "What you say, brother, may be true enough," he said to himself. "The trouble is, a person can't live according to these principles you talk about. What could one do?"

Meantime his brother was continuing to the boy: "I know you well, Shu-chien; you're a good boy. In future, when you live with your uncle you must love and respect him as you would your dad. If things don't turn out smoothly for you, you must not mind."

By then the boy was crying bitterly and, in the sound of his laments, Liang Sung closed his eyes for ever.

*

Liang Shu-chien went to make his home with his uncle and aunt who were good to him. He, on his part, treated his elders with filial respect and put his whole heart into his work. He did not mind what he was given to eat and wear, and people considered him a good lad who never complained. It was some time before his aunt, Huang Shun, discovered that the lad had an unusual trait in his character. He not only put his whole heart in the work he was doing for the family but he worked equally well when he helped others. She told her husband, and Liang Huai, after secretly observing his nephew, found that this was so. When the old and weak, the widowed and the orphaned among their poorer neighbours had odd jobs which a boy in his teens could do, Shu-chien always helped. He often delivered lunch for several households when he took food to the fields to his uncle, and he usually minded several buffaloes at the same time as he minded the family's one. When he had time, he'd even help people with weeding while he kept an eye on the grazing buffaloes. For all his pains he got nothing in return, except at best a few words of thanks. "You *are* a good boy, Shu-chien," the neighbours would say. "You are just like your dad." And he would be more than satisfied.

Although Liang Huai observed all this he thought nothing of it since the boy was obedient and worked well at home. His wife felt differently. "If Shu-chien wasn't so keen on helping others," said she, "he'd be able to do much more at home." Liang Huai thought the point a good one, so he called the boy to him and gave him a good talking to.

"You really are foolish, Shu-chien, my boy. You're just like your father. Who on earth helps others when he gets his food at home. When you have no clothes,

would other people make some for you? You have no wife, would others help you get one?"

Liang Shu-chien was young and knew very little about life. The neighbours told him that he was like his father, that he was good, while his uncle said he was like his father, that he was foolish. He knew instinctively who was right, and thereafter his heart was no longer with his uncle but more with the neighbours. Gradually he began to feel less and less keen about working for the family. As time went by he began to skip his meals at home; soon he wasn't returning home every night. Liang Huai sighed over this. "There's nothing one can do, nothing!" he said sadly. "He's another wild one, he simply can't be tamed. I can see he's going the same way as his father before him."

As the years slipped by, Liang Shu-chien grew into a strong young man, lean and gaunt still, but full of strength. By the time he was old enough to hire himself out he moved into the landlord's shed and became a farm labourer. The family saw less of him but a genuine affection remained. Uncle and aunt thought of him often and the nephew was fond of them in his own way. Yet they couldn't get down to talk about anything serious; they simply couldn't see eye to eye.

After the war came liberation, and after liberation the land reform. Mutual aid and co-operation followed on the heels of the land reform; stranger and stranger things were happening. Liang Huai felt he was losing his grip on life. He seemed to understand less and less of the happenings around him and in the world beyond the village; things were changing a bit too fast for him. He felt he simply could not catch up with them.

During the land reform, he saw that his nephew had suddenly become an important figure, though he couldn't see why everyone thought so highly of him. When he saw Liang Shu-chien struggling against the landlords with resolution and will, he told himself: "The land-

lords deserve it to be sure, but I'm afraid Shu-chien is being a bit too severe. There's nothing one can do about that, though. Shu-chien's got tiger's eyes: he sees only what's before his eyes."

When the fruits of the struggle, the land and houses confiscated from the landlords, were distributed, landless peasants were given full portions but Liang Huai, who had two *mou* of his own, was given just a fraction of a *mou* in addition. He was pleased enough with what he got, but also a little dissatisfied with his nephew for not showing him special favour. "Our Shu-chien boy," he grumbled, "is like the lantern on a flagpole. He lights up the far-off ones but not those near him." To his mind, since his nephew was influential, he could easily have mentioned his uncle, and people would have given him, Liang Huai, an extra *mou* of land.

Now, in the land reform, Liang Shu-chien himself got only one portion of land like the others. He did get himself a wife: he had fallen in love with a girl called Chen Tsuan-hao and married her in the new way without fuss and expense.

"Look!" Liang Huai remarked to his wife. "Besides getting himself a wife, Shu-chien got nothing out of it for himself. The portion of land he received he could have got any way as a landless peasant, even if he hadn't worked himself nearly to death but had sat with folded hands."

Before long the villagers began to think of an agricultural producers' co-operative. Liang Shu-chien came to ask his uncle's opinion. "We are thinking of setting up a co-operative, Uncle. Will you be joining? Why don't you come to a few meetings? Come and hear what it's all about."

The uncle smiled. "What makes you think I don't want to join?" he asked. "Don't think of me as so very backward. I never go against what everyone has decided to do."

Liang Huai joined the co-op. When the villagers elected Liang Shu-chien to be co-op chairman, Liang Huai, acting like the others, voted for his nephew, though in his heart he was very much against this, and after he had cast his vote, he was filled with remorse, afraid that he had helped to put his nephew in a difficult position.

II

In the year 1954 Liang Shu-chien became the chairman of the Glory Agricultural Producers' Co-operative in Chaoyang Village. Immediately he was bothered by three things. First, he noticed that not all the members of the co-op were equally keen about the collective enterprise. He had imagined at first that everyone felt like him and loved the co-op as much as his own home, but he soon realized his mistake. True, some worked wholeheartedly for the co-op and were eager to make it a success, but there were some who hesitated over this and that and made things difficult. Then there was his wife, Tsuan-hao, who now and again stung him to the quick with a biting, sarcastic remark. He had taken it for granted that she understood him and his work, but he saw that she neither understood the work he was doing in the co-op nor cared to take part herself in working for the co-op. She seemed to be suspicious of the co-op. Liang Shu-chien told himself: "It seems she's more Aunt Huang Shun's sort." Finally he was troubled by the threat of a food shortage in spring. This was not really unexpected. In the past, during the third and fourth months of the year — always the most hard-up time for the peasants — people were able to tide over by doing a little peddling or other side-line business. However, they couldn't do that this year.

One morning in late March Liang Shu-chien returned home after a meeting in the district centre. Having ex-

changed a few words with his wife, he picked up his three-year-old daughter Ah-yu for a kiss and went out again. He asked not a word about household matters nor whether they had enough rice, oil, salt and kindling. His wife shot him a look behind his back, muttered something under her breath, but failed to attract his attention.

He made his way to the co-op's still empty rice fields — there were five lots altogether — and looked them over. The ploughing had already been done and most of the fields had been raked five or six times. Spring rain was plentiful that year; the black soil was immersed in heavy glistening water. The sight cheered him. He greeted the few co-op members at work there, exchanged jokes with them and went to the nursery to look at the seedlings. Squatting down by the nursery patch he gazed with fascination at the seedlings ranked in neat rows. Swaying gently in the spring breeze, the tender young shoots, already four inches tall, looked firm and sturdy. His heart filled with gladness and he went off to look for Liang Man, the leader of the first production brigade, to find out whether they had prepared everything for transplanting.

Liang Man, a sun-tanned, short, sturdy Youth Leaguer, was standing by the pond. "I'm afraid things are going to be difficult," he said, leaning against his shovel as if it were a stick. "Quite a few of the people smiled into their sleeves when they heard we were going to plant fifty per cent of the fields in the small-clusters and close-rows method. They may keep mum in front of us but they've got plenty to say behind our backs."

"Are most of the members against the new method then?" asked Liang Shu-chien.

"No, I don't mean that," said the brigade leader, shaking his head. "Most are in favour; only a handful disapprove. But this handful can be troublesome."

Liang Shu-chien nodded but said nothing. Later he ran into Pan Yu, leader of the second brigade and vice-chairman of the co-op, and asked about things in the second brigade.

Pan Yu was a bachelor in his thirties. He was tall and broad and had a hooked nose. A good worker in the fields, he had great confidence in himself and imagined that everyone in his brigade hung on his words and obeyed him implicitly. At the moment he was carrying a load of lime to his field. He did not stop at Shu-chien's question. "Everything's fine," he answered airily, continuing on his way without a backward glance. "There's no problem at all. Our second brigade is a well-united team."

Shu-chien was far from satisfied with the answer. He rubbed his face with one hand and tried to say something, but the other was already out of hearing. He could only mutter under his breath: "No problem, eh? Well united, are you? I don't know any reason why you should blow your trumpet so." He stood by the roadside and stared dully at Pan Yu's retreating figure.

The sun lit up the water-covered fields and fell on the youthful face of twenty-eight-year-old Liang Shu-chien. It made him look particularly lean, and seemed to accentuate his long arms and legs and his slight stoop. His thin face with its pointed chin was flushed and his wide mouth was twisted in a wry expression as he peered into the distance. His face with its deep-set eyes and high cheekbones was typical of the inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta. One could see that here was a charming young man, brave, determined and full of life and vigour.

When Liang Shu-chien left home he did not tell his wife that he had to see about preparations for the transplanting of the early cropping rice. Tsuan-hao stared at his broad back as it disappeared gradually into the distance and a wave of tenderness swept over her. She

loved him so and her heart ached because he worked so hard and was always running hither and thither. Outwardly, she sat with composure on the low stool, her eyes on Ah-yu playing at her feet, but actually she saw nothing. Her mind was busy wondering why her husband must always be busy. She thought of the scraps of gossip which had passed from mouth to mouth in the village. There had been talk about a certain young woman, by the name of Li Chen, a Youth Leaguer who was deputy leader of the second brigade. She had reached marriageable age but was still single. People said that she was fond of good clothes, good food and a good joke with the men. They said she was a coquette and that she had once sworn to pick the best man in the village for a husband. The more vicious gossips even said that she and Liang Shu-chien had had intimate relations with each other. Having pondered for a while, Tsuan-hao told herself firmly: "No, it can't be. He's not that kind of man."

She took herself into the house; it was time to get breakfast going. Alas, when she went to the rice jar, there wasn't enough for a meal. She sighed when she remembered they had sold most of their grain in the winter to pay the doctor's bill when Ah-yu was ill. Though she knew there was nothing much in the way of food left in the house, she went through the motions of searching in all the pots and jars. The day was cool but little beads of perspiration appeared on her oval face. To have no food ready for her man was a thought she couldn't bear. In the end she managed to find some long-forgotten, dry taro chips and, breathing a sigh of relief, she put the remaining rice and the taro to boil. The room filled with acrid smoke from the burnt straw and brought tears to her eyes.

By the time the gruel was done, the smoke had dispersed and little Ah-yu was hungrily clamouring for

food. The young mother gave her a spoonful. A flash of the little red tongue and it was finished.

Ah-yu was not satisfied with a mere spoonful which her mother offered her. "No, Mummy," she said, "I want more, much more."

Now Ah-yu's lisping baby voice was as sweet to Tsuan-hao as the chirping of nestlings, but this day she had other things on her mind. She peered carefully into the pot to see how much gruel there was. Apparently there just was not enough for their family of three. This made her deaf to the charms of her baby's voice. However, she finally gave way to Ah-yu's clamour, and ladled a little gruel into her bowl. "That's all now," she said severely. "You won't get any more. No more."

Ah-yu ate busily and again the gruel was gone. Holding the empty bowl in her hands she begged for more.

Tsuan-hao didn't know what to do. Her own insides were rumbling but she knew she mustn't touch the pot of gruel. Taking the empty bowl from Ah-yu's hand, she said coaxingly: "Let's go find daddy and bring him home. Then we'll all eat together." To herself she muttered, "I never saw such a man! Look at the time and he's not hungry enough to come home!" Very much against her will, Ah-yu was taken away from the pot of gruel and, with little faltering steps, she reluctantly followed her mother out of the room.

Meanwhile Shu-chien continued slowly on his way. His encounter with the second brigade's leader had put him out of spirit and though he went on to see Li Tien, leader of the subsidiary work group, he merely asked offhandedly a few questions about the co-op's pigs. His stomach began to remind him that he was hungry, so he turned homewards. As he walked along he tried to figure out how the co-op stood in the matter of farm work, basing his calculations on what he had heard and seen that morning. Ever since the co-op management committee set the target of transplanting fifty per cent of

the early rice in the new way he had felt worried and on edge. He was aware that the people outside the co-op were sceptical and openly contemptuous about the new method and were waiting and watching the actions of the co-op. But he was not disturbed because of this. He was aware, too, that one or two in the first brigade were grumbling a bit, but their leader, Liang Man, was trying to explain and convince these sceptics. He could be trusted to do a good job. The situation in the second brigade, however, was much worse. According to Pan Yu, the brigade leader, there was no problem and they were well united. Shu-chien felt that his words carried no weight and were not to be trusted. For one thing, he himself knew that there was more than one person — his uncle Liang Huai for instance — who couldn't very well be considered as with no problems. He knew quite well that there were problems — very real problems. Perhaps at the moment people were reluctant to say anything; Liang Man had pointed this out. "But," Shu-chien told himself, "if we don't know the facts of the situation, it's going to be very risky. It'll be too late if it comes out when we actually start transplanting. Yes, too late." The early spring breeze was cool against his face but he felt parched in the throat and hot all over. In his mind's eye he seemed to see a thick layer of fog dropping down on the whole second brigade and, try as he might, he couldn't remove it or look through it to see the situation clearly. The dryness in his throat made him cough and, as he walked along, his fingers nervously undid all the buttons of his jacket.

He was still deep in thought when he got home. Sitting on the wooden bed, he crossed his legs and began to consider the people in the second brigade, counting them on his fingers one by one. "Now, there's Pan Hsi — he's probably all right. But the others? Li Yu, Liang Tung, Pan Hsiang — all are problems."