

DRAGON BEARD DITCH A Play in Three Acts

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CHARACTERS

THE WANG FAMILY:

Mother Wang, a widow of about fifty. Her elder daughter is married. Earns her living together with her second daughter by soldering mirror-frames and sewing.

ERH-CHUN, MOTHER WANG'S second daughter, aged nineteen. Can read a few characters.

THE CHENG FAMILY:

MAD CHENG, in his early forties. Formerly a popular entertainer,* and is a good singer of ballads, especially "shu-lai-pao." ** Because he got into trouble

^{*}The expression translated as "popular entertainer" denotes a person who recites popular stories in verse or prose, a singer of popular songs, an actor who sings in folk opera, etc. There is a great variety of these traditional popular entertainments, many of which nearly died out before 1949. Since the establishment of the People's Government their high artistic value has been recognized, the entertainers have been encouraged to develop their art, and they have achieved wider popularity than ever before.

^{**}A kind of folk-ballad, the basic metre of which is A b A, A b A,

AbAbAbA.

^{(&}quot;A" representing a stressed syllable and "b" an unstressed one.) The number of lines may be varied, and the last line lengthened, to fit what the singer has to say. The last syllable of each line should rhyme. The shu-lai-pao is recited by the entertainer to the accompaniment of a pair of bamboo castanets.

with gangsters in the theatre world he could not get engagements, and so moved to live in the slums of Dragon Beard Ditch. Wears a long gown as if still in his former profession. Is a little queer, and so is called "MAD CHENG."

NIANG-TSE, wife of MAD CHENG, who always calls her "NIANG-TSE," though it is not really her name; everyone else does the same. In her middle thirties. Supports her husband and herself by sewing, and by doing a little business in the market.

("Niang" means "mother" or simply "woman"; "tse" is a common suffix in personal names, indicating affection or familiarity.)

THE TING FAMILY:

TING SZE, about thirty; a pedicab* driver.

("Sze" means "four"; he must have been the fourth child in his family.)

SZE-SAO, TING SZE'S wife. About thirty. Helps to support the family by sewing.

(As her husband is fourth in his family, she is addressed as "SZE-SAO," meaning "fourth elder sister-in-law." The styles "elder brother" and "elder sister-in-law" are used by relatives and friends on the husband's side who are younger, or for courtesy's sake regard themselves as younger.)

KA-TSE, the TINGS' son, aged twelve, but not at school. Goes out every day to pick cinders off the rubbish heaps for fuel, or just to play about.

LITTLE NIU, the TINGS' daughter, aged nine, also not at school; follows her brother around everywhere.

("Niu" is a northern Chinese word for "airl.")

OLD CHAO, a bricklayer, aged sixty; no family.

^{*}A tricycle rickshaw ridden by the driver in front, with the passenger seat behind.

POLICE SERGEANT LIU, over forty.

Dog Feng, aged twenty-five. The local gangster boss, Black Whirlwind (who does not appear), uses him to do his dirty work. Hence his nickname "Dog," a term commonly used for someone who does dishonest work for others.

PROPRIETOR LIU, over sixty; proprietor of a small teashop.

A Young Man.

Two Policemen.

A NUMBER OF LOCAL RESIDENTS.

A LOCAL BAD-HAT (only appears at side of stage, and does not speak).

ACT I

TIME: 1948, the year before the liberation of Peking.

A morning in early summer; it has rained during the night.

PLACE: Dragon Beard Ditch, a notorious ditch, east of the Bridge of Heaven.* The Ditch is full of muddy, slimy water, mixed with rubbish, rags, dead rats, dead cats, dead dogs and now and then dead children. The waste water from the nearby tannery and dyeworks flows into it and accumulations of nightsoil collect there to putrefy. The water in the Ditch is of various shades of red and green, and its stench makes people feel sick quite far away. Hence the district has earned the name of "Stinking Ditch Bank." On the two banks, closely packed together, there live labourers, handicraft workers—the multifarious toiling poor. Day in and day out, all the year round and all their lives, they struggle in this filthy environment. Their houses may tumble down at any moment; most of their yards have no lavatories, let alone kitchens. There is no running water: they drink bitter and rank-tasting well-water. Everywhere there are swarms of fleas, clouds of mosquitoes, countless bed-burns and black sheets of flies, all spreading disease. Whenever it rains, not

^{*}The centre of a crowded district in the southern part of Peking.

only do the streets become pools of mud, but water from the Ditch overflows into the yards and houses, which are lower than the street level, and thus floods everything.

Scene: A typical small "courtyard" of the district; it contains only four tumbledown mud huts. Doors and windows are fixed anyhow; one is an old and broken lattice window, one is altered from "foreign-style" window, another was probably originally a Japanese sliding door. Some have old and mouldy newspaper pasted on; others just have broken wooden boards or pieces of old and tattered matting nailed on. Even if there is a small piece of glass anywhere it is so covered with grime, soot and dust that it hardly lets any light through.

On the north side (i.e. the left hand side of the audience) is the WANG family's house. A large earthenware water-butt stands in front of the door, together with a few broken wooden boxes. There is an oblong table placed so that the sun, which is just breaking through the dark clouds, shines on it; a piece of cotton cloth used as a wrapper is spread out on the table to dry. Mother Wang is lighting the stove, which burns coal balls and is used both for soldering mirror-frames and for cooking.

On the east side there are two families, the TINGS and the CHENGS, occupying one room each. The room on the left is the TINGS' house; the roof leaks and half a piece of tattered rush matting is tied on top of it, with a few broken bricks to keep it down; an old tyre hangs under the eaves. A torn red curtain, covered with patches, hangs in the doorway. In front of the door there is hardly anything except a stove and a few broken pedicab parts. The room on the right is the CHENGS' house; an old bamboo

curtain with the lower part half torn off hangs in the doorway. There are many cigarette cards pasted on the window. A stunted date tree grows near the door; a small trellis is supported by the tree and on the trellis climbs a morning glory. Under the trellis, at the top right hand corner, is the wood-burning stove, built of mud and fixed to the ground. CHENG NIANG-TSE is lighting a fire with sticks which she has gathered. She is going to steam "wo-wo-tou"* for her husband's breakfast. (Most of the people in this district have only two meals a day.) The corner of the wall behind the stove has fallen down, and through this gap can be seen distant houses, a few electric supply poles, and the lowering sky.

On the south side is the main gate of this courtyard, very low and narrow, so that one has to bend down when passing through. Outside the gate is a narrow lane, on the opposite side of which stands a large dilapidated house, with a board lettered in gold "Pawnshop" hanging from its top corner. On the west side of the main gate there is a broken-down wall, at the end of which stands OLD CHAO'S house, consisting of a single room. The door is shut. In front of it lie a few of the bigger tools used by bricklayers. There are also a bench and a broken waterbutt upside down. Some rubbish and brickbats are piled up behind the water-butt, and on these NIANG-TSE is drying her cigarette tray, tea, and other odds and ends of wares.

Lines are strung across here and there on which the families have hung out their old and tattered clothes and bedding to dry. All is mud underfoot

^{*}A kind of unleavened and steamed bread made of flour ground from coarse grain (especially maize) which until recently was a staple food of the poor in North China.

except for patches where ashes, cinders, broken bricks or wooden boards have been laid down. The corners and the foot of the walls are mildewed and green with lichens. Overhead, dark clouds move slowly. The sun comes out one moment and goes in the next.

CURTAIN RISES: Outside the main gate are heard the cries of pedlars selling vegetables, pigs' blood, donkey meat, beancurd, the cries of barbers and of rag-andbone men, and the voices of housewives arguing over prices. Nearby, there are also the sounds of the blacksmith's hammering, of handlooms, and of tin kettles and pans being beaten by the tinsmith. CHENG NIANG-TSE is sitting on a small bench in front of the stove and putting more sticks on the fire. LITTLE NIU is moving broken bricks from the foot of the wall by the gate, so as to make a path in the courtyard. TING SZE-SAO is using a broken basin to bale out the water which has flooded their room. The sun has just risen and WANG ERH-CHUN comes out of their room with wet clothes in her arms, looks at the sky, and hangs them on the line. MOTHER WANG, having lit the stove, looks up at the sky, and carefully gathers up the large cotton wrapper from the table and is going to take it into their ERH-CHUN, on her way back into the room, takes it from her mother and goes in. MOTHER WANG picks up the kettle, and walks towards the water-butt, but, feeling uneasy about the wrapper having been taken by her daughter, turns round and looks at her. Then she ladles water into the kettle and puts it on the stove; she sits down and begins to work.

SZE-SAO [handing a basin of dirty water to LITTLE NIU]: Mind you look where you're going; if you drop the basin, see if I don't smack you!

LITTLE NIU: Why always me? Why don't you mind brother? He slips out early in the morning and doesn't do a thing!

Sze-sao: Him? You wait and see; I'll give him such a hiding when he gets back!

LITTLE NIU: How about Daddy? He doesn't come home at all!

SZE-SAO: Don't talk to me about him! If I don't settle with him when he comes back. . . .

MAD CHENG [inside the room, singing]:

My dear Sze-sao, you shouldn't rebuff him,

The day you wed him you promised to love him.

NIANG-TSE [putting the remains of last night's wo-wo-tow on the stage to engry and: Get up.] The room

tou on the stove to warm up]: Get up! The room is soaking wet; how can you go on lying there?

MAD CHENG:

You tell me to get up, so up I get, Respected Niang-tse, please don't fret.

LITTLE NIU: Mad Uncle, get up quick and come and play with me!

SZE-SAO: You dare go and play! Empty that basin quickly! I want to get on with my sewing; we've got nothing for our meal yet!

MAD CHENG [in a worn gown of coarse linen, holding a palm-leaf fan, fanning energetically as if to drive away the stench, walks out of their room, bows to everyone]: Good morning, Mother Wang! Good morning, Niang-tse! Good morning, young ladies!

LITTLE NIU [still not going to empty the basin]: Please sing, Uncle! I'll beat time for you!

Sze-sao [walking over]: You empty the water first! [LITTLE NIU goes out.]

NIANG-TSE: A grown man like you! Little Niu is more use. She helps. But you . . . !

MAD CHENG: Niang-tse, you are mistaken.

[Sings:]

I keep thinking, when I was on the stage,
Singing ballads and earning a wage,
Every day was happy as New Year's Day
Until they cheated me and took away my pay.
So now Ditch, people and all, stink till I choke,
And my breath comes out black, as foul as
smoke.

[He fetches water to wash his face with.]

NIANG-TSE: You! My whole life's been a mess because of you!

SZE-SAO: Don't talk like that. At least he's better than my old man. After all, he's not quite right here [pointing to her head]. There's nothing wrong with mine; he just won't work. When he can't get a fare he loafs around; if he does earn anything, he spends it on drink.

MAD CHENG [wiping his face]:

I've nothing wrong in my head, you know, It's the stink of the Ditch that has brought me low.

[The call of a beancurd pedlar is heard outside.]

There'll come a day when the Ditch won't stink,
and the water will be sweet,

Then our land will be great, the people happy, and the world at peace.

[Sits down to eat wo-wo-tou.]

LITTLE NIU [enters, imitating the sound of bamboo castanets in the shu-lai-pao rhythm]: Kua-chi, kua-chi, kua-chi kua.

NIANG-TSE [picking up her cigarette basket]: Mother Wang, Sze-sao, please look after him for me. I'm going to market.

MOTHER WANG: The streets are all mud. How can you put up the stall?

NIANG-TSE: I'm going to have a look. If I don't try and get some money in, how shall we get anything to eat? This is a hellish place. Whenever the sky is overcast I feel as if I had a pain in my heart. If July is going to be wet every day like this we can only look on and go hungry. [Walks towards gate, then stops.] Look! It's getting dark again.

LITTLE NIU: Ma! I want to go out with Auntie Niang-tse.

SZE-SAO: Now be a good girl and stay here; you're not going anywhere! [Starts to sweep the court-yard.]

LITTLE NIU: I want to go! I want to go!

NIANG-TSE [at the gate]: Little Niu, you stay here. I'm going to make some money and I'll bring you back something to eat. Be good! It's all muddy and slippery outside. You might fall into the Ditch! What should we do then?

MAD CHENG:

Niang-tse, my dear, won't you be nice, And bring me back a girdle-cake* about this size?

[He makes a gesture indicating the size of a rice-bowl.]

NIANG-TSE: You? Pooh! A girdle-cake! I won't even buy you a peanut! [Exit.]

LITTLE NIU: Mad Uncle, whenever Niang-tse scolds you, she always brings you back something nice to eat!

SZE-SAO: Oh! Niang-tse is really wonderful!

^{*}The word "shaoping" translated as "girdle-cake" denotes a round leavened cake made of wheat flour, generally about three inches across and half an inch thick, coated with sesame seeds.

MAD CHENG: Of course she is. It isn't that I don't want to help, but I can't. I feel so bad seeing her do everything, outside as well as at home. But . . . there's nothing I can say.

OLD CHAO [coming out of his room, groaning]: Give me a little water, someone!

MAD CHENG: Oh! You're up, Uncle Chao!

ERH-CHUN \ [run over to him]: How are you? How

LITTLE NIUJ do you feel?

MOTHER WANG: We've been so busy, we've forgotten the old man. Erh-chun, put some water on.

ERH-CHUN [running back]: I'll get the can. [Enters their room.]

SZE-SAO [sitting down on a stool and starting to sew]: Uncle Chao, do you want anything?

MAD CHENG:

Ting Sze-sao, you've no time,

And caring for the sick is just my line!

ERH-CHUN [bringing out the can, fills it from the kettle, puts it on the stove and then goes to look in the water-butt]: Ma! There's not much water left!

LITTLE NIU: I'll go and get some!

SZE-SAO: No, not you! It's too far and too muddy. Not you!

MAD CHENG: I'll go and get it.

[Sings:]

You don't have to tell me I'm not very bright, Brewing tea and pouring water I'm all right. For helping people I'm just the man, At that sort of work I'll do all I can.

MOTHER WANG [standing up]: Is it malaria then, Uncle Chao?

OLD CHAO [nodding]: Oh! Just now I was freezing, and now I'm all hot again!

MAD CHENG: Mother Wang, let me have the bucket.

MOTHER WANG: Sze-sao, let Little Niu help. Mad Cheng is so clumsy. Supposing he fell in the Ditch! Sze-sao [hesitates and then nods]: All right, Little Niu, you may go. But take care and don't go too fast!

LITTLE NIU: Mad Uncle, we'll carry a bucket between us; it's three-quarters of a mile there and back. We shan't be able to carry more than that. [Finds the pole.] You take the bucket.

ERH-CHUN [hands bucket to MAD CHENG]: Aren't you going to take off your gown? It'll get muddy.

MAD CHENG [taking the bucket]:

Under this gown I've nothing to wear,

I can't go about with my back all bare!

LITTLE NIU: Kua-chi, kua-chi, kua-chi kua. [Exit with MAD CHENG.]

MOTHER WANG: Uncle Chao, shall we get a doctor to look at you?

OLD CHAO: A doctor? Even if I had the money, I wouldn't spend it on getting a doctor. Huh! I have this every year, and always about this time; after the rains when houses tumble down; just the time when I should have plenty of work, I always go and get this malaria! After a few goes I feel like a wet rag. Terrible! Give me a drop of water, I'm thirsty!

MOTHER WANG: Erh-chun, fan the fire up! OLD CHAO: Yes, do, there's a kind girl!

SZE-SAO: Uncle Chao, you should go and burn incense to the god of medicine, and then the malaria devil might leave you alone!

ERH-CHUN: Sze-sao, malaria is due to mosquito bites. Look what swarms of mosquitoes we've got here!

MOTHER WANG: Young girls shouldn't talk so much. As if she didn't know better than you! [Sits down again.]

ERH-CHUN [pours boiling water into a coarse yellow bowl and brings it to the patient]: Drink it, Uncle Chao.

OLD CHAO: Oh! Good girl; good girl! This'll save my life! [Drinks.]

ERH-CHUN [seeing OLD CHAO driving flies away with his hand, barrows SZE-SAO'S palm-leaf fan and gives it to him]: Now I understand why my sister's never been back!

MOTHER WANG: Don't talk about her. That heartless girl. After all I've done for her, she's not been back to see me once since she got married! Don't you be like that and leave your mother with no one to look after her!

ERH-CHUN: You can't blame her, Ma; it's so filthy here, it drives you mad!

MOTHER WANG: It's dirty here, but there is work. You'll never find another place like this in Peking for getting a living. All round here, so many people, and only Mad Cheng out of a job. What use would a clean place be with nothing to eat? We'd starve.

ERH-CHUN: Yes, money's easy to get here, but it's easy to lose too. Whenever it rains the stalls can't be put up, you can't get out to work—you starve then too! Our rooms are flooded with stinking water; our things are soaked; they all cost money, don't they?

Sze-sao: That's right! Last night the bed* was soaked; I had to squat all night and hold these waist-coats on my head with an umbrella over them. It's

^{*}The word translated as "bed" is "kang," which in reality is a raised platform made of bricks or clay, in houses in northern China, which can be heated by means of flues running through it. It is used for sleeping on at night, and for sitting on by day.