



WANG KUEI
AND
LI HSIANG-HSIANG

A Narrative Poem

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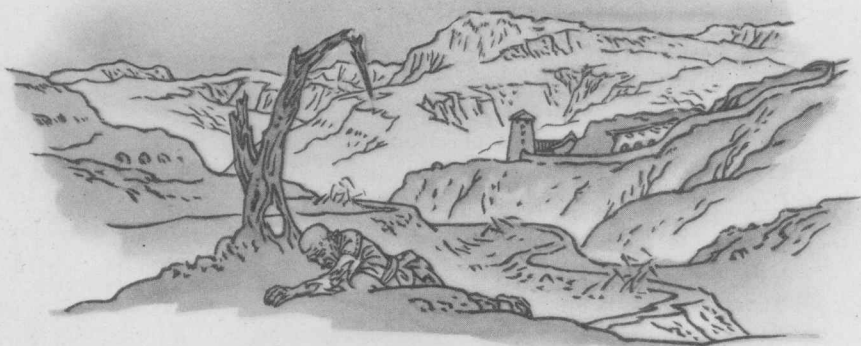
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Landlord Tsui Collects Rent

We start in 1930, when
A sad thing happened in Sanpien.*
Sanpien's three treasures all men knew,
With many poor, 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 their way with fear
Poor peasants dread a barren year.
In tail not head, lies Famine's sting,
So all men feared the coming spring;
Weeds gone, they searched for leaves and roots,
No sign was there 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.

To make coarse flour the bark was ground.
 Though March's dead in coffins lay,
 Unburied were the dead in May;
 When want had made so many die,
 The landlord's grain was piled up high.
 Like homeless dogs the starving poor,
 But Landlord Tsui cared not a straw.
 A gale makes big trees chant a song;
 His money soon made Tsui *pao chang*.*
 Abacus beads are ninety-one,
 To count Tsui's herds you'd never done;
 In ten miles' pasture, seven miles' sand,
 Each head of cattle bore his brand.
 A chimney's smoke curls way up high,
 So Tsui owned even half the sky;
 One whisper to the magistrate,
 The weather, too, 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;
 Because no grain starvation meant,
 And how could Tsui be paid his rent?
 For though a man can tighten his belt,
 Arrears in rent disaster spelt!
 Though Wang had starved for many a day,
 The landlord's bailiff bade him pay.
 His tongue wagged quickly in his head,
 As Wang said all that could be said:
 "Although I can't repay him now,
 In my next life I'll be his cow."
 "You owe us rent," came the reply,
 "You can't escape, tho' you may die!"
 To end each word there came a crack,
 His switches slashed the old man's back;
 The bailiff seemed a man possessed,
 Old Pock-marked Wang was sorely pressed.
 Blood poured from all his wounds like rain,
 He called out "Mother!" in his pain.

* Head of a hundred families, the basic unit under the reactionary Kuo-mintang government.

A lonely swan on the sand will fall:
His neighbours grieved for him one and all.
"You've furs in winter, you're well fed;
Though Wang owes rent, why beat him dead?
Though you cart all he owns away
Or kill the man, he still can't pay!"
A blind ass tramples its own stall;
That bailiff had no heart at all.
When one switch broke, the next he'd take;
To see the blood your heart would break.
At sunset Wang was not quite gone,
But on a dead corpse the moon shone.
In pulling grass Tsui took the root,
That landlord was a savage brute;
The father dead he seized the son,
Of all the family left not one!
No plants will grow in the winter cold,
And men ranked lower than beasts of old.



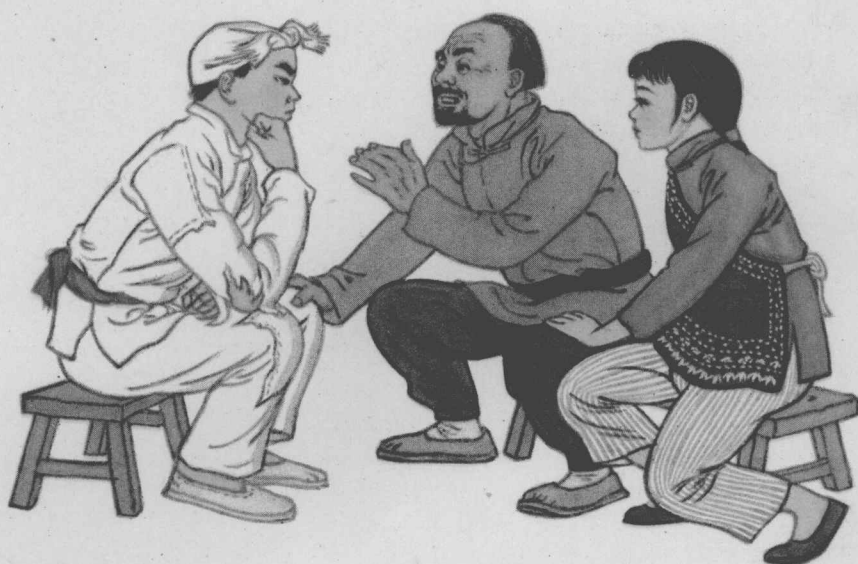


Wang Kuei Works for Tsui

Old Pock-marked Wang's son, young Wang Kuei,
Was but a lad when seized by Tsui.
The landlord's plan was really clever:
Wang Kuei should work for him for ever.
No friend to him would the landlord be,
He'd get the youngster's labour free.
A lamb bleats soon as it is born:
Wang Kuei was sharp as any thorn.
A beast may toil; at least it's fed;
Wang Kuei went hungry to his bed.
When New Year dainties filled the pan,
The lad still munched his hunk of bran.
His clothes were thin and worn and old,
No comfort when the winds blew cold,
In autumn crops he harvested,
Sworn at as slow, though both hands bled;

In winter when he herded goats,
He had no furs or padded coats.
Blood poured from his chapped hands and feet,
Frozen his food too hard to eat;
And in the snow all wood was damp:
He could not light a fire to camp.
When asters flowered one autumn day,
Wang Kuei had worked four years for Tsui.
Wheat grows well after winter's snow;
And like young wheat he seemed to grow.
That winter, in the snow and frost,
He missed the father he had lost;
A dead ox's place by a younger 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 flows with clear;
Rich families and poor lived here.
Beside a stream in Dead Goat Bay
There lived a poor man, Li Te-jui.
At fifty-eight his beard was white,
And in his home his one delight
Was Hsiang-hsiang, comfort of his life,
For sons he'd none, and dead his wife.
Like some small bird in winter's sleet,
No clothes to wear, no food to eat,

Though hard she laboured at sixteen,
Hungry and tired she'd always been.
In rough cloth sugar may be rolled:
Poor girls may have a heart of gold.
Round wholesome grains on maize you find,
Though Li was old, his heart was kind.
He took Wang's hand and said with tears:
"A bitter life you've known these years!
Of grief, my boy, you've had your share,
An orphan without parents' care;
But beggars sleep in temple doors,
Why don't you take our home as yours?"
When wind and storm drove all men home,
To chop them wood Wang Kuei would come.
With such a sister and a dad,
A home this homeless youngster had.





Gathering Wild Herbs

Sweet the red lilies in the glade:
Hsiang-hsiang became a lovely maid.
And sparkling were her great black eyes
Like dew that bright on meadows lies.
Rice must be husked two times or three;
A child, she loved the peasantry.
Hillside willows grow green and gay:
And straight and tall grew young Wang Kuei.
Six feet he stood, so sturdy too,
Two peasants' labour he could do.
Maize flowers when it is but half grown,
He 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,
As he drove goats up mountains high,
She looked for herbs in glens near by.
As Wang Kuei, singing, trudged along,
This was the burden of his song:
"Tired out, I toss the whole night through,
Can't sleep a wink for love of you."
He pauses now to listen, mute;
Below, a voice sounds like a lute:

"Wild lilies bloom on valley's brink:
 Be bold to tell me what you think!"
 "Magic herbs by the roadside grow:
 But none's your equal, that I know!"
 "Choosing a horse, one is better than another;
 Choosing a man, none's as good as Elder Brother!"
 "You've teeth like rice, lips cherry red;
 Don't start trying to turn my head!
 Marry a landlord: live in luxury —
 Why take a poor young man like me?"
 "Light from the stove the bed shines o'er;
 I shall never think you poor.
 I've loved peasants since I could see,
 Better than silver is honesty."
 "A green-skinned melon has seeds of red,
 I shall remember all you've said.
 Tangled as flax is all I'd say;
 But we must meet again today."
 "When the world is sleeping, then
 In my room we'll speak again.
 But there will be no moon or light,
 So don't trip over the dog tonight!"



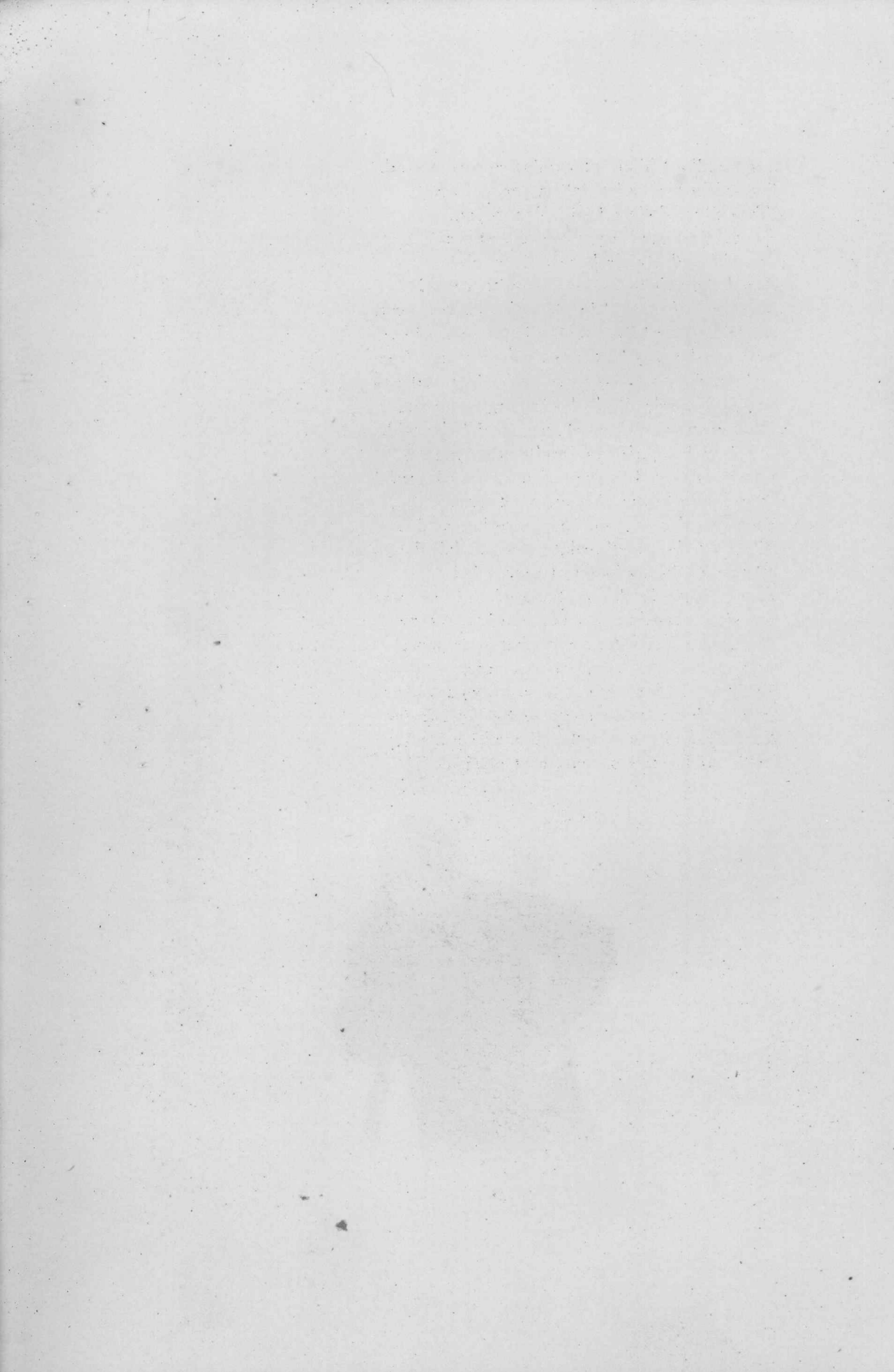


Two Silver Dollars

The evening sun was sinking bright and red,
When quickly to the well our Hsiang-hsiang sped.
The rope scarce reached the depths below,
And stooping down her cheeks were all aglow.
But here, in short black coat and silken shoes,
Comes Landlord Tsui, and close the girl pursues.
Like some old greasy bladder is his head,
With foxy eyes as narrow as a thread,
He bares his yellow teeth as if to smile,
And paws at Hsiang-hsiang, grinning all the while.
"Oh, let me help! This is too much for you;
To spoil those pretty hands will never do!"
"Now mind what you are doing, Landlord Tsui!
And take your dirty, clumsy hands away!"
"Proud little baggage, you had best go slow;
I swore an oath to have you long ago.
Rich mutton soup to eat with best white rice:
I always get whatever I think nice.
How rich you'll be, dear, wed to Mr. Tsui;
Food, clothes and jewels — anything you say."
Blushing and angry was the poor girl then,
As with her pail she started home again.

But Landlord Tsui, who followed fast behind,
Groped in his wallet dollars for to find.
"Two silver dollars I will give to you,
To make yourself a pretty dress or two."
The girl had always been a little wild,
Hated the rich since she was quite a child,
Because half starved her household often went,
While Landlord Tsui took all their grain in rent;
And for the way he treated young Wang Kuei,
Making the poor boy work both night and day.
Her two cheeks flushed a pomegranate red.
"You keep your filthy money, Tsui," she said.
"Confound it, girl! Be careful what you say.
You can't afford to cross rich Landlord Tsui!"
Then like a beaten dog away he went,
Though in his rage on vengeance he was bent.
"Once let the rope break, down will fall the pail;
I'll get you in my hands; I cannot fail.
To eat coarse food; you throw white flour away;
You don't want me, but will you have Wang Kuei?
Wang Kuei is young, maybe, but he is poor;
I may be old, but money I've a store.
Flour for the bin must first go through a sieve,
Only with my consent can Wang Kuei live.
A smoking chimney makes the rafters black,
He'll pay for this as soon as I get back!"







The Revolution

No trees and few stones had Sanpian,
The peasants' lot was bitter then.
No clouds above, below a drought,
They had to think of some way out.
With scarlet banner at their head,
Through North Shensi the army spread.
With Liu Chih-tan* to lead them, high

*Liu Chih-tan, organizer and leader of the Communist Party and the Red Army in North Shensi during the Second Revolutionary Civil War (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 sparks in hay big fires can spread,
The Red flag made all poor men Red.
The lightning's seen for miles around,
And communism soon gained ground.
Gladly the plough a roan ox draws,
All folk support a people's cause.
Plain peasants by the broad daylight
Become armed soldiery at night.
Open the forts, divide the lands!
Cattle and grain to the people's hands!
Youth Corps and Red Guards grow apace,
There lads of eighteen find a place;
And girls run out as swift as wind,
Their long hair cut in bobs behind.
A stream in spate will burst its banks:
By stealth Wang joined the Red Guards' ranks.
He grazed his herds when day was bright,
And off to meetings went at night.
There he remained until cocks crowed,
Then sped back down the homeward road.
During the day his goats he'd keep:
During the night no wink of sleep.
Tired as he was, his spirits high,
For revolution glad to die!
Five fingers are of different length,
His hate surpassed the rest in strength;
Though others' hate was mountain high,
That of Wang Kuei o'ertopped the sky.
Tsui flogged his father till he died,
And now he wished to steal Wang's bride!
Five years young Wang had toiled away,
Without a cent from Landlord Tsui.
Nothing too vile for Tsui to do,
He built forts, hired soldiers too.
Landlords were vicious, every one,
But Tsui had all the rest outdone!
Folks longed to tear him limb from limb;
The very dogs would bark at him.
"Oh, may the Reds come soon!" they'd pray.
"Make haste to capture Dead Goat Bay!"
Though beans are raw, starved folk can't wait;