BUILDERS OF A NEW LIFE

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Socialism, which is something new, can come into being only through severe struggles against what is old. At one time, one section of society is very stubborn in adhering to its old ways. At another, these very people may change their attitude and favour the new.

— Mao Tsetung

Prelude

1929 was one of the worst years in Shensi Province's long history of famines. During the first snowfall in November, famine victims, moving down from the plain north of the Wei River, filled the streets of Hsiapao Village. The temple, the clan halls, the grain mills, the grinding sheds were jammed with refugees, men and women crowded together, all speaking in rough up-country accents. For several days after the snow stopped falling, villagers had to go out every morning with spades and mattocks and bury the nameless sufferers who had died by the roadside during the night.

Tillers! In those years, whenever there was a drought they were like blades of grass stricken by frost. They simply had no resistance.

Hsiapao was a fine place. It lay south of the Wei River in the fertile rice paddy area that runs for hundreds of *li** along the foot of the Chinling Mountains. Opposite Hsiapao, in the distance, rose the darkly menacing Mount Chungnan. To the rear of the village was a bluff where a high plateau of yellow soil ended abruptly.

About eight hundred families occupied Hsiapao's thatched cottages and tile-roofed houses, strung out in neat lines on the north bank of the green Tang Stream. The villagers had gather-

* One *li* is equal to half a kilometre or roughly one-third of a mile.

ed little from the dry land on the northern side. But in the paddy fields on the southern shore that summer they had cut barley. In the autumn they had crossed narrow foot-bridges all along the stream with load after load of rice, the bound stalks dangling heavily from the ends of their shoulder poles. It was this modest harvest which attracted the droves of famine sufferers.

Every day from morning till night, tattered refugees, shoulders hunched, huddled in gateways of the village compounds. Each held a stick beneath his arm — a weapon against wild dogs, made of a branch he had pulled down from some tree along the road. The refugees told essentially the same tragic story, and all pleaded to be saved. Some, large hot tears rolling down their wizened faces, asked whether anyone wanted to adopt a small child. It made the villagers very unhappy. Many tried to avoid the famine victims. People who heard their plaints felt so badly that they were unable to eat when they got home.

But Liang the Third,* a former tenant-peasant who lived on the paddy land south of the Tang Stream, was a man of tougher fibre. All day long, carrying a short pipe without a mouthpiece — he couldn't afford one — Liang wandered in and out among the refugees. He seemed to be looking for someone. A large powerful fellow about forty, Liang wore an old cotton-padded jacket that hadn't been washed in years. It was a mass of rent cloth with strings of dirty cotton hanging from the sleeves. On his head was a towel cloth that looked as if it had been picked out of a cinder heap, it was so black. But in spite of his appearance, from his lively step and alert manner you could see at a glance that the big fellow was seething with energy. The people of Hsiapao began to get suspicious.

A few days later, they observed that his activities followed a regular pattern: He sought out only women in their thirties, with or without small children. Some of the villagers wondered whether Liang, who had lived alone for so many years, could be intending anything improper? But he behaved with complete

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* Meaning here the third child born in his family.

propriety, listening to the tales of misfortune of the women refugees, meditating on their words and nodding sympathetically.

Then one day, when Liang again came across from the southern side of the Tang Stream, he was a changed man. His head was freshly shaven, the stubble was gone from his face. A round skull-cap borrowed from his brother, Liang the Eldest, who ordinarily wore it only when visiting relatives, replaced his dirty towel-cloth headgear. His old padded jacket obviously had been mended and patched. People hardly recognized him. Grinning broadly, Liang the Third tenderly wrapped in his brawny arms a three-year-old boy who was standing in the snow dressed in a torn padded jacket left to him by his deceased father. Then Liang turned to a widow in her thirties whose ragged garments were nothing but patches, and led her to live with him in his thatched cottage on the southern side of the Tang Stream.

Liang's dwelling was across the stream from Hsiapao Village at the eastern end of a small settlement of thatched cottages. There were no villages in the paddy area, only scattered groups of four or five families, people whom poverty had driven from neighbouring villages. Forced to take up their abode here, they eked out a bare existence on rented paddy fields. A few of the lucky ones prospered. Their family fortunes grew; they built homes and compounds. But the paddy fields as a whole, from where the Tang Stream flowed out of Mount Chungnan to where it joined the Lu River on the northern plain — an area, roughly thirty *li* long by three *li* wide — were an impoverished region known as "Frog Flat". On summer nights the thrumming of frogs in paddy fields could be heard on the plain a dozen *li* away.

When his grandfather brought him to this land of frogs, seated in a wicker basket suspended from one end of a carrying pole, Liang the Third was only a little tyke. His father, as physically powerful a man as Liang the Third later became, had been one of the most "reliable" tenants of the wealthy Landlord Yang of Hsiapao Village. He actually managed to build

a three-room house beside the thatched cottage they had originally settled in, and found Liang the Third a wife. Having expended his last bit of strength, and full of hope that Liang the Third would continue to improve the family fortunes, he left the world of men, quite satisfied.

But Liang's luck was bad. Two draught oxen perished in succession. Then his wife died in child-birth, and the baby with her. Not only could he no longer rent paddy fields, he was forced to dismantle the three-room house his father had erected so laboriously and sell the timbers and tiles. He himself went back to living in the old thatched cottage. The elm tree which had grown up on the spot where the house used to stand was higher than the crumbling earthen compound wall and as thick as his thumb.

After the death of his wife, how desolate and lonely the compound was! Facing west, the thatched cottage squatted there like a doddering old man. Part of the earthen compound wall had been eaten away by autumn rain, but the lone occupant had no desire to repair it. He kept no pigs or poultry. What did he care if marauding wolves or weasels decided to pay a call in the night? Weeds in the courtyard grew as high as the window-sill, but Liang didn't bother to cut them down. He never had any visitors anyhow.

But now that he had brought a woman home, the breath of life returned to his compound. The men of a neighbouring family named Jen had already helped him clear out the weeds; the women gave his low-roofed narrow shack a thorough cleaning. Everyone laughed and said that from this day forward Liang's table and little cupboard would no longer be covered by a perpetual layer of dust.

Forty-year-old Liang the Third was like a child. He couldn't conceal his joy. He gave the up-country woman some old garments his dead wife had left, insisting that she wear them and convert one of them immediately into a pair of padded trousers for her little boy. The child's bare legs, thin as hemp stalks, trembled with cold beneath his over-sized old padded jacket.

Liang boasted to the up-country woman before his neighbours that he was strong. He would go deep into Mount Chungnan and fell timber, burn charcoal, cut brushwood. With the earnings from their sale he would again buy a draught ox, rent some paddy land, improve the compound. He would raise the little boy as his own son. Together they would build up the family property. . . .

"I never lie, Little Treasure's Ma. Do you believe me?"

"I . . . believe you." The up-country woman looked at her new husband's powerful frame, saw his enthusiastic expression. Embarrassed by this emotional outburst in the presence of neighbours she had only recently met, she lowered her head. Probably because she had endured hunger and privation for so long, her thin waxen face was unable to register happiness.

Liang was disappointed by her reaction. "Well, you'll know me better as time goes on."

Although he guessed that the woman's feelings were complicated, at the moment he couldn't very well say much to her. All the affection he felt for her, he lavished on the child. When Little Treasure first entered this strange thatched cottage, he sat stiff and constrained on the *kang** and gazed timidly around. It was also new to him. His eyes avoided the troupe of kids who had gathered at the edge of the bed and were curiously examining their new neighbour.

"Little Treasure," said Liang warmly, walking over to him, "when your ma finishes that pair of pants, you'll be able to go out and play with them." He indicated the other children.

"I don't want to," Little Treasure replied in a low voice, head down, looking at his fingers.

"Why not? In the paddy field ditches there are cranes and blue storks and herons. Wild-geese, too. Did you have those in your old home north of the Wei?" Liang asked laughingly. He was doing his utmost to give the mother and child a good impression of the place, to make them feel at home.

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* A brick platform, heated in winter from underneath, and used as a bed and for other purposes in a northerner's household.

"I won't go," the little boy replied stubbornly. "I'm scared."

"Scared of what? Water fowl never hurt anyone, silly."

"I'm scared of dogs. . . ."

Liang burst out laughing. "In good clothes, what dog would bite you?"

With a big thick hand that was as roughly calloused as the bark of a tree, he fondly patted the small head resting on the spindly neck. Liang the Third loved the child like a father. Because the boy's face was so thin and sallow, his brows seemed particularly dark and his eyes especially large; they fairly flashed with intelligence. As the old saying goes: "In a child of three, at one glance you can see what the adult will be." Liang was very pleased with the boy.

For the first few days neighbours, men and women, dropped into Liang's shack frequently to see the new arrivals. These naturally included his brother, Liang the Eldest, a beancurd pedlar, and his nearest neighbours, the Jens. Even friends living much further away came. When this one left, that one called. Finally, there were so many people that they overflowed on to the threshing ground outside the compound gate, chatting and laughing. The men could not repress their animation. Several of them teased Liang with broad remarks. Of course this was rather disrespectful, but his freshly shaven face wore a proud smile that seemed to say: "So you thought Liang the Third was finished, eh? I'm still going to build a family."

After a few more days passed, there was no sign of Liang in daylight hours, either in Hsiapao Village or in Frog Flat. But on the sunny side of compound walls that enclosed thatched cottages, on street corners, wherever people gathered, peasants were discussing with interest Liang's up-country woman.

"Ah, now there's a wife for you," some cried approvingly. "Slow to speak but a fast worker. She's a woman who knows her mind. Her parents died in the famine, her brother and sister-in-law ran away from it. With her husband dead, she had no one to turn to. She set out alone with the child from

north of the Wei and came all the way down here, the foot of the southern mountains. It wasn't easy."

"Liang and she must have been fated to marry, so the Old Lord of the Sky drove her down to the banks of the Tang Stream. Does she have only this one child?"

"They say she had a little girl also, but the cold and hunger were too much for her, and she died on the road."

"Oh! The poor woman. How her heart must ache. How old is she?"

"She says she's thirty-two, but she looks at least forty."

"What are you gabbling about? She's so thin, and all those days on the road in the wind and sun — naturally it put ten years on her. Wait until she's fattened up a bit and gained her strength back, then you'll see."

"I hear she's wearing Liang's big padded pants. Is that right?"

"Sure. Maybe they're big, but what of it? That padded jacket she came in is so torn, it's pitiful. That's why Liang keeps going up to Mount Chungnan. That mother and son aren't pictures you can hang on the wall. They've got to be fed and clothed."

All of Hsiapao became involved in a debate as to whether Liang should have picked the woman up the way he did. Some said that although fate had bowled Liang over, he had struggled to his feet. Maybe he could build up the family fortunes again. In a few years the boy would be old enough to help him. If the up-country woman could bear him another couple of kids in his old thatched cottage, his chances of recovery would be even better.

But others didn't believe that you got anything so cheaply in this world. Who ever heard of getting a wife without spending a single copper? They were willing to stake their heads on it: After the New Year the woman's brothers would come for her and take her home, or someone from her former husband's family would demand the child, or the woman herself would become moody and demand to go back to her village north of

the River Wei. In a word, Liang's thatched cottage would never know peace.

"Wait and see," was the advice of the holders of both points of view.

Making the rounds of Hsiapao every day with trays of bean-curd hanging from the ends of his carrying pole, pedlar Liang the Eldest was quite concerned over people's opinions of his younger brother. His big ears took in every word. Late one night, Liang the Third came back from Mount Chungnan with a load of charcoal. He burned charcoal in the mountains and sold it in the city, rising at cock's crow and returning long after dark. Liang the Eldest went furtively to his brother's compound gate and called him out. Then the two walked through the darkness down a path dotted with grass roots in the direction of the paddy fields.

The next day, Liang the Third did not go into the city with his charcoal. First thing in the morning he set out for Huang-pao Town, five *li* upstream. When the peasants paused in their morning's labour for breakfast, someone saw Liang returning home, a basket of bean sprouts, cabbage and bean noodles in one hand, and a jug that must have contained at least a catty of wine in the other. All morning, Liang bustled about the village streets. One moment he was here, the next moment he was there, his big agile body practically flying. He looked very busy, very tense, and very mysterious. When someone called to him, wanting to ask how the up-country woman was faring, he shouted over his shoulder:

"I'm in a hurry. Some other time."

Night fell. On the gravel and round stones of a bank of the Tang Stream, a lantern flame no bigger than a bean gleamed eerily. Five men, one woman, and a small child, shivering with cold, were gathered around the lantern.

Liang the Third carefully proffered in hands as rough as bark the foot of machine-made red cloth he had bought in town that morning. In a moved voice he said:

"Fellow villagers, for our sake you're suffering cold and chill."

"It's nothing. Say no more. What's a little cold?"

"We hope that you two will live together till you're old and grey. That's all we neighbours want."

"That's it exactly. Right. You've said it right," cried Liang. "All the stars are out. Let's get started."

Then the poor scholar, who was busy all winter writing deeds for people who had to sell their land, put on his spectacles. He spread the red cloth on a flat rock as large as a millstone. According to local superstition not even grass would grow on a spot where a contract for the remarriage of a widow was written. That was why the sandy bank of the stream, already barren, was chosen for this ceremony. Liang the Third cautiously held the lamp while the other men squatted down in a circle, their eyes fixed on the brush pen moving over the red cloth.

After the brush pen was capped in its slim bronze tube, the bespectacled scholar solemnly raised the red cloth with both hands and read slowly the words he had inscribed:

> The contractor of this marriage covenant, née Wang, was a native of Liu Village south of Fuping. Because her first husband died and her village was stricken by famine, mother and son were forced to wander from home, with no means of support. Today, plagued by hunger and cold and in danger of losing her life, she is willing to remarry and become the wife of her benefactor, Liang Yung-ching. She makes this contract of her own free will, with no obligations to any third party, and will never revoke it. The male child she has brought with her, known by the infancy name of Little Treasure, also a famine refugee, shall use the surname of his step-father when he grows up. Word of mouth being unreliable, this covenant is made as written proof of the marriage.

As these final words were intoned, all eyes turned to the long thin face of Little Treasure's Ma, who was listening carefully.

"Agreed?" asked the scribe.

"Agreed," she said quietly, in her up-country accent.

Her thin hands tenderly stroked the head of Little Treasure. The boy was standing in front of her, very close. She looked at the freshly-shaven seamed face of Liang the Third, goodness, devotion and determination shining in her eyes.

"This is a starvation year, Little Treasure's uncle. Why must you go to this expense? As long as you're good to my son, it'll

be the same whether we have a marriage contract or not. No matter how hard our life is together, if my son can grow up . . . become a man. . . ."

She broke down and sobbed. Catching her sleeve in withered fingers, she wiped her eyes. The others sadly lowered their heads. They didn't have the heart to view her stricken countenance.

Masculine valour surged up in Liang's bosom. Standing before the widow and her son, he suddenly felt that he was one of the strongest men in the world.

"Our son," he corrected her decisively. "Let's have no more talk of 'your son' and 'my son' after this. He must call me 'pa', not 'uncle'. That's all I have to say."

After the parties to the marriage, the witnesses and the scribe each put an "X" beneath the place where his or her name was written on the red machine-made cloth, everyone went to Liang the Third's thatched cottage where they ate a meatless meal the beancurd pedlar Liang the Eldest had been preparing the whole day, and spoke many auspicious words. Then the guests departed.

The following spring, the famine victims who had spread out in the paddy region along the Tang Stream all disappeared in a few days, like a flock of seasonal birds. People kept an eye on Liang the Third's woman to see whether she would begin gazing off into the distance in the direction of the northern plain. Women neighbours, bringing their sewing, called on her in Liang's thatched cottage. They chatted with her, probing for any remark that might indicate she still thought of her old home north of the River Wei.

But, no. Unless it was necessary, the woman seldom left the compound gate. She sat at home, mending the torn cloth shoes and socks of her man, who was working all day in the mountains. Liang was very poor. Even including the paths and what used to be the threshing field outside his gate and which he now planted with vegetables, he had just one and one-fifth *mou** of

* One *mou* is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare or roughly one-sixth of an acre.

ground. Only by strenuous labour could he make ends meet.

In the spring, when the city dwellers stopped burning charcoal for warmth but while the paths that went into the mountains were still too icy to permit Liang to go in and fell timber, he cut brushwood on the slopes and sold it as fuel for kitchen stoves in the city or in Huangpao Town. Often the woman would have to wait for him to bring home grain before she could cook. But she didn't mind his poverty. She liked him because he was warm-hearted, because he loved her child, because his neck was iron-stiff and refused to bend under the weight of hardship.

The couple neither quarrelled nor sulked. Hard-working, patient, they reposed all their hopes in the future. Their neighbours, the Jens, often strolled outside Liang's compound wall after the evening meal, cocking an inquisitive ear when they passed the tiny rear window, blocked with dried branches, of Liang's thatched cottage. But except for Liang's weary sighs, all they heard was husband and wife discussing how they must build up the family fortunes, come what may, for the sake of Little Treasure and for their own old age.

Ten years passed.

On the site of the razed three-room house, the elm was as thick as a rice bowl. Its leaves and branches interlaced dozens of feet above the ground with the foliage of trees which Liang the Third's father and grandfather had planted outside the earthen compound wall. Liang's courtyard, like the tree-lined dwellings of his neighbours, had also become cool and shady. But the family's progress was far behind the development of its natural surroundings. Within the compound walls, the only dwelling was still the dejected-looking old thatched cottage.

The family fortunes had not improved.

Liang the Third was past fifty and his back was bent. Where his neck met his shoulder, years of heavy carrying poles had formed a callous as thick as a fist. Liang had also developed a chronic cough which came back every winter and

spring. He no longer had the strength to wrest an income from long treks into Mount Chungnan.

At thirteen Little Treasure had a ruddy face, dark brows and large eyes. He was a good height, and you could see at a glance that he was going to make a fine sturdy peasant. After having been sufficiently instructed by his mother and stepfather on how a person should behave, the thirteen-year-old boy confidently began to work. He took a job as a half-pay hired hand for a wealthy landlord named Lu, in Hsiapao Village.

Little Treasure started on the twelfth day of the first lunar month. On the fifteenth at dusk, crossing the stream, he returned to the thatched cottage. Without a word, he flung himself sobbing on the *kang*.

His mother, now in her forties, patted him gently on the shoulder.

"What's wrong, Little Treasure?"

The boy only sobbed more bitterly.

"Don't cry, child." His mother stroked the towel cloth that covered his head. "Tell ma, don't you want to be a hired hand? If you've changed your mind, your pa can call it off. In another year or two —"

Still weeping, the boy sat up and shook his head.

"What happened? Was the landlord bad to you?"

"I was . . . in the courtyard . . . eating. . . ." Little Treasure sobbed.

"Speak up. Stop crying."

"The landlord's son . . . crept up . . . and took a handful of dirt. . . ."

"What about the handful of dirt?"

"He threw it . . . in my rice bowl."

"Why? Did you tease him?"

"I . . . no. . . . That rich kid . . . picks on people."

Liang who had been listening to all this, his face dark as iron, asked angrily: "And your bowl of rice? What happened to that?"

"The landlord . . . dumped it . . . in the pigs' trough."

"What did he do to his son?"