Li Shunda Builds a House

THERE'S a saying among peasants of the older generation: "If you eat thin gruel for three years, you can save up enough to buy an ox." It sounds easy enough, but it's really not. Think about it: if you have to go so far as to water down your rice for three years, won't you be skimping on everything else already? What's more, it's empty reasoning—if you can't afford to eat rice in the first place, then what can you have that's worth saving?

Li Shunda used to be in just such a predicament, and so before Liberation he certainly never had any dreams about buying an ox. But after the land reform movement he began to have faith, and in the spirit of "eating thin gruel for three years to buy an ox," he decided to build a three-room house.

How many "three years of thin gruel" would it take to build a three-room house? He didn't know, but he believed that things were different since Liberation, and with a little scrimping and cutting corners it would be possible to accumulate some savings. This is why Li Shunda was full of confidence.

Li Shunda was 28 then, with closely-cropped thick black hair and a ruddy complexion. He was slightly above average height, and his broad shoulders and thick neck made him appear as sturdy as an iron pagoda. In his family of four (himself, his wife, son, and younger sister) there were three capable laborers, and they had received
6.8 mu of good fields. Li Shunda felt so full of energy that he could dig a hole right through the center of the earth, let alone build a mere three-room house! His steady, if not clever, eyes rested heavy and stickleback-like on a well-proportioned, broad nose above full lips; all these features clearly showed signs of his firm determination. Not even an ox could have pulled him off course.

Forget the ox: not even a train could have pulled him off course! Li Shunda's father, mother, and one-year-old brother had all died without owning a real home. They had come from generations of boat-dwellers who had fished the waters south of the Yangtze. After years of drifting far and wide, they had eventually lost all track of where their ancestral village was. By the time the family's wooden boat was handed down to Li Shunda's father, it was in terrible shape, with rusting nails and lots of holes. The reed covering was open to the sky. It was in no condition to weather a storm. It wasn't even good for fishing anymore, so the whole family was forced to find other work. Some managed by picking over leavings, some by exchanging sugar for rags, some by simply gathering snails; and all this work for just a few mouthfuls of gruel.

One cold day in the twelfth month of the winter of 1942, when Li Shunda was 19, the family's rundown boat pulled up along the banks of the river at Chen Family Village. The wind was blowing fiercely and the clouds looked ominous as Li Shunda and his 14-year-old sister went ashore, one to exchange sugar for rags and one to collect scraps. They walked over ten miles, and when they turned to head back at dusk they saw that the wind had died and the sky was slate-colored. In no time they were caught in a blinding snowstorm, hopelessly lost. Fortunately, they stumbled upon a rundown temple, and took shelter there for the night. At dawn they rushed back to Chen Family Village only to find that their boat had sunk under the weight of the snow, and their parents and baby brother had frozen on a peasant's doorstep. Evidently they had climbed ashore before the boat sank and gone from one door to another, pounding on them and calling for help. But in those times of chaos and war, with bandits everywhere, they had been mistaken for thieves and no one had dared open his door. Their cries had gone unheeded and they had frozen to death in the snow. Heaven has no eyes, the earth has no conscience, and the suffering of the poor is unthinkable... for lack of a house!

At the sight of the two children weeping and fainting over their parents' bodies, the poverty-stricken villagers were filled with remorse. They dredged up the sunken boat, using half of it for a coffin to bury the dead. The other half was turned over, belly up to the sky, and placed next to the graves. There it formed a shelter for Li Shunda and his sister, who lived on land from that day on.

When the war against the Japanese ended, the civil war began and with it came forced conscription into the Kuomintang army. No one wanted to go, but the village headman had a quota to fill, and Li Shunda was preferred because he was an outsider and had no dependents. So he was forced to become a soldier and paid three bags of grain in return for joining up. As he looked at their doorless shack, he feared his sister would be raped when he left her there alone, so he used the money from selling himself to put up a straw hut four paces long. Then, drying his tears, he set off for the war.

Although he'd sold his services to the army, he hadn't sold his life. So when he was moved to the front lines after three months, he immediately deserted and fled home. But the following year, the local officer made him sell
himself into service again. Altogether, Li Shunda sold himself three times. With the money from his second sale he bought the land that his straw hut was built on, and the land where his parents were buried was bought with the money from his third sale. Ah, it was clear that even if he were to sell himself three more times, the money would somehow all keep disappearing.

The straw hut eventually brought some luck, for it helped Li Shunda get a wife. While he was away in the army, his sister had welcomed a homeless beggar girl into the hut to keep her company. When Li Shunda returned, he made her his wife and within a year they had a fat baby boy — and quite as good as anyone else's son at that!

When the land reform came, Li Shunda was given land, but no house. There had only been one landlord in Chen Family Village and his house was in the city, so it could hardly be divided up among those in the village. Li Shunda would have to think of something himself. He roughly calculated the needs of his family — one room for him and his wife, one for his sister (which could be given to his son after his sister was married off), one room for cooking and eating, and space to raise pigs, sheep, and store firewood. It looked as though his family would need a three-room house at the very least.

This was the goal that Li Shunda set his heart on after Liberation.

2

One might think that a "liberated" pauper who sets his goal on building a three-room house is too short-sighted, or has insignificant aspirations. But as Li Shunda saw it, it was his faith in the Communist Party and the People's Government which allowed him to have what he thought was such a lofty goal, and the faith that it would really come true. He was ready and willing to follow the Party all the way. Everything he did was testimony to this fact. In his view, achieving socialism would mean "an upstairs and downstairs, electric lights and a telephone". Most important was having the house. Personally, Li Shunda felt that having a two-room, one-story house was better than having one upstairs room, so he would willingly forgo the "upstairs and downstairs" part. Yet he wasn't quite sure if it was considered socialist to want to build only a one-story building. He did approve of having electric lights, but felt that he could do just as well without a telephone — what use would it be since he had no relatives or friends to call him? Besides, his child would undoubtedly break it and then he'd have to spend money to fix it. In short, it would be a total waste. He spoke his mind freely on these matters in public and no one seemed to disagree with him.

None of the peasants in Chen Family Village looked down on his goal; on the contrary, some thought he was setting his sights too high. They warned him that, as the locals say, "ten mu of land and three rooms are tough enough to get anywhere in the world, let alone here." Others said, "You're going to have to sacrifice and suffer half your life to get this house built," or "Even though life is easier since Liberation, I'll bet it will still take you at least ten years of savings."

True as this was, looking at the houses to the east and west of the area called Benniu on the Shanghai-Nanjing railway, their structure varied widely. To the west, eighty percent of the homes were made of mud and straw; to the east almost all were of brick and tile. Chen Family Village was situated some 50 miles to the east of Benniu, and was
the only structure in the area made of straw. So although he was poor, Li Shunda had grown used to the sight of good housing after living amongst these surroundings. Ah, this honest man’s reach really exceeded his grasp: building a three-room brick and tile house wasn’t nearly as easy as it seemed!

When faced with others’ skepticism, Li Shunda would always laugh and say, “My task can’t be any harder than that of the foolish old man who moved the mountain!” When he spoke the movement of his thick lips pulled his ponderous nose into motion too, making it look as if speaking required great effort. So even when he spoke of simple matters, his expression gave people the impression that he meant what he said.

From then on, Li Shunda and his family began a tortuous struggle, striving with their meager resources to farm every morsel of food and save every penny that they could. The fruits of their daily labor were extremely small, but they held firmly to the belief that every little bit counts, and remained surprisingly optimistic in the face of such hardship. Sometimes the income of Li Shunda’s entire family was not enough to cover normal living expenses, and they would simply have to go a little hungry. Each person would reduce his daily intake of gruel by half a bowl each meal, considering the uneaten six bowls a “surplus”. If it rained or snowed so heavily that no one could work, they would lie in bed all day to conserve energy and therefore the need for food, eating only two meals instead of three. Then they would count the savings from the meals not eaten as their day’s “earnings.” When cooking, they added several soybeans to the pan instead of oil, for after all they reasoned, oil is pressed from soybeans. To prepare snails, they would add a spoonful of rice broth, eliminating the need to add wine, since wine is made from rice in the first place. For years they raised chickens without ever saving any eggs to eat, selling them all instead. They even saved the meat that they placed on their parents’ graves during the Qingming Festival to eat when transplanting began just before the Dragon Boat Festival in the fifth lunar month.

Whenever he had a free minute, Li Shunda would take up his old trade again; carrying sugar on a pole across his back and wandering through the village lanes trading it for rags, old newspapers, cotton wadding, worn-out shoes, and any other scraps he could get. Then he’d sort it all out and sell it to the purchasing station, often making a tidy profit. More often than not, he’d also be able to pick up cloth or shoes that his family could still use. When these had been worn out beyond repair, they would simply be put back in with the scraps to be sold. This practice saved the family more than a little money.

The sugar he traded came from malt that he bought and refined by himself very inexpensively. Although it cost him very little, his only son Xiaokang went for over seven years without even knowing what sugar tasted like, until finally one day some of the village boys goaded him into tasting a piece. He was caught in the act by his mother, who beat him like a thief until he cried for mercy, and made him swear never to do such a thing again. She kept repeating that he must never waste things, or he would destroy his parents’ plans for building a house, and then he’d never be able to get himself a wife because there would be no place for her to live.

Li Shunda’s younger sister, Li Shunzen, was especially worthy of respect. At the time of the land reform in 1951, she was already 23. The government had not yet begun to advocate late marriages, so according to custom she was of perfect marriage age. She was not only
hardworking, docile, and honest, but also exceptionally pretty. She looked a lot like her brother except that her nose was a little smaller and her lips a little thinner. These two slight differences, combined with her tall stature and oval face, gave her a delicate and attractive air. She had a number of suitors from neighboring villages, but paid no attention to any of them, regardless of their eligibility or wealth. She insisted that she was too young to be married. She was determined to repay her brother for bringing her up, and she knew that it would be hard for him to achieve his goal without her help: If she married she would deprive him of a needed worker and her 1.7 mu share of land. Of course this would indefinitely set back his plans to build a house, so she dedicated these years of her life, which could have been some of her best, to helping her brother. She waited to marry right up until the end of 1957, when Li Shunda had already bought all the brick and tile he'd need for the house. Then, already 29 years old, she married a 30-year-old fellow who had remained single in order to support his destitute, elderly parents and crippled sister. Thus, all that awaited Li Shunzhen in her new family was more hardship and poverty. But she was quite used to it by this time, and seemed not to mind at all.

By the time his sister’s marriage was all taken care of, time had already leapt forward into 1958. Li Shunda now lacked only the money to pay the carpenters and bricklayers’ fees, but he figured that he'd have enough for everything within a year. Besides, the coming of the communes would be beneficial for him. When all land became publicly owned, he could pick out the very best plot to build on. What more could one want?

Li Shunda was not what one would call a real revolutionary, but rather a good follower. He followed Chairman Mao’s teachings, did all he could to carry out Party directives, and considered anything that a Party member told him a direct order.

One morning, Li Shunda woke up to hear that the perfect society was about to be realized, and there would no longer be any distinctions between “yours” and “mine”. In the eight years since Liberation, the masses really had managed to accumulate some possessions—for instance, didn’t Li Shunda already have the materials to build a three-room house? So why not try pooling everyone's resources to speed up the progress of socialist construction? Our construction is for the benefit of all, so everyone should put all his energy into helping to achieve our goals. There is no more need for individual plans, for in the future everyone’s life will be equally wonderful. Individual possessions amount to so pitifully little, wouldn't it be more glorious to contribute them all to this magnificent undertaking? No need to worry, every last item will become public property, we’re all doing the same thing and no one will cheat you.

This theory was doubtlessly for the good of all. As Li Shunda thought about it, he felt suddenly enlightened, and lighthearted. Despite this, he couldn’t help shedding a few painful tears when his bricks were taken to make an iron-smelting furnace, his wood used for making barrows, and even his remaining tiles taken to roof the collective’s new pigsty. But he derived great comfort from thinking about the happiness the future would bring. Recent events had certainly changed his outlook on things. Now he felt that living in a multi-story apartment building would be superior to living in a one-story home.
Grain could be stored above ground level so it wouldn’t rot, and people living above the ground floor would be less prone to skin diseases from dampness. So it would be better to live in an assigned apartment, instead of asking for trouble by carrying the whole burden of a home on one’s own shoulders, like a snail.

Thus did Li Shunda’s thinking become totally liberated, and he happily gave the collective whatever they wanted. He wouldn’t even grudge them his bed should they ask, since neither he nor his wife had had the luxury of a bed when growing up. The truth was his wife, the former beggar, had more misgivings about this new situation than he did. But the political atmosphere overwhelmed personal doubts, let alone a woman’s misgivings. Her intuitions only brought her extra worry. She did, however, manage to hide away one thing — the family’s iron cooking pot — so that it wasn’t sent to the iron smelt for melting down. Therefore, when the communal dining hall system ultimately failed and was disbanded, their family alone was saved all the trouble of registering and standing in line to buy a new pot.

Finally, when there was no more money or capital left to throw around, people came back to their senses and made a new start at building socialism. Things had been done irresponsibly and sloppily, and there’s no use in saying any more about it. But Li Shunda could not forget completely, and before the scenes of past mistakes were all swept away he would often go look at them, and sob at the sight of the smelting furnace that had collapsed, and the barrows lying abandoned in the untilled earth. He thought of all the blood and sweat of the past six years, the grain he’d managed to save despite his hunger, the sugar snatched from his son’s hand, the waste of his sister’s best years ….

Of course, all of the people welcomed the government’s compensation policy. But the building materials taken away from Li Shunda had been used up by the collective rather than the state, and although the collective would also like to hand out compensation, they’d been left just as poor as anyone else. They had no materials left to return, nor even enough cash on hand to use as compensation. The cadres had no choice but to go out and do ideological work, raising the consciousness of people like Li Shunda, and urging them to accept only the tiniest compensation, in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Although Li Shunda’s losses had been substantial, his political consciousness was still able to be raised quite a bit. Until now, he’d never undergone such a serious and painstaking ideological education. The District Party Secretary, Comrade Liu Qing, a man of great integrity and prestige, came especially to see him and have a heart-to-heart talk. He explained that Li Shunda’s possessions had not been embezzled, nor had anyone harmed him intentionally. The government and the Party had had the best of intentions: they had simply wanted to speed up the establishment of socialism and bring its benefits to the people sooner. The state and collectives had contributed far more towards this goal than Li Shunda had, and of course their losses were inestimably greater. But despite such huge losses, the state and Party were still determined to give compensation to individuals for their losses. Only the Communist Party would act in such a selfless way — it was certainly unprecedented in history. Only the Party would be so concerned about the welfare of the peasants. Please try to understand the Party’s difficulties. They had to take care of the major losses for the moment, but they
had learned from the experience of the past few years, so from now on development was sure to be even faster. As soon as economic conditions improved for the state and collectives, they would be able to make better provision for individuals. Although it was impossible to build a three-room house right then, it could be quite possible in the future, so one shouldn’t lose hope. Finally, Comrade Liu Qing helped him make arrangements with the local supply and marketing cooperative, asking them to keep Li Shunda supplied with malt sugar to refine, so that he could continue to trade it for scraps and make a little extra money.

Li Shunda had always been an emotional fellow, and receiving guidance and concrete help from Comrade Liu Qing was enough to start the tears streaming down his face. Through his tears, he readily agreed to everything that had been said.

There was also the matter of Li Shunda’s 20,000 tiles, which had been used for the roof of the production team’s new seven-room pigsty. It would be ideal if they could be returned to him, but to do so at a time like this when new tiles were unavailable would leave the pigs out in the open. Besides the tiles were fragile, and many would be broken in the process of taking them down. After much discussion, both sides agreed that—considering each other’s difficulties—it would be better to leave the pigsty intact. But the production team would clean out two rooms of the pigsty for Li Shunda’s temporary use as a home, until he could build his own place. The pigsty would certainly be sturdier than his current thatched hut, and being ten paces wide it would be plenty spacious enough. The roof was almost four meters high, except towards the back where it was too low for a man to stand erect. But who needs to be able to go strutting around inside a house anyway? Besides, Li Shunda was used to crouching from having grown up hunched under the awning of the boat his family had owned.

So this was how the question of Li Shunda’s compensation was settled. Although he seemed perfectly content after receiving all this guidance from the cadres, he had also learned a rather unusual lesson from the whole experience. Previously, the sight of the rampant inflation in the old society had taught him—that paper money was unreliable, so he had always spent his money on goods as soon as possible. But since this latest experience, he felt that in the new society, on the contrary, it was goods that were unreliable and assets were safer kept in the form of money hidden under a pillow. To tell the truth, it was thoughts like these that enabled alert “leftists” to sniff out “anti-Party sentiments”, and would later get him in trouble.

From 1962 to 1965, thanks to the “Sixty Articles on Agriculture” and the care Comrade Liu Qing had taken to see that he was kept supplied with malt sugar, Li Shunda had once again saved up almost enough to build a three-room house. But this time he didn’t buy a thing, preferring to keep his assets in cash. He’d wait until he had everything needed to do the job from start to finish, then buy all the material and put up the house at once. This way he could avoid undue worry about making the same mistake as last time. Li Shunda was like many other peasants in this respect, very quick to learn from the lessons of the past. But spending too much time looking back makes one apt to stumble on unseen objects ahead. It’s really hard to help someone make any forward progress if he’s always looking back.

In those years goods were readily available and supplies practically limitless, but Li Shunda didn’t dare buy a
thing. Then suddenly the situation changed and things were again in short supply. Very few people were able to get hold of what they needed. Unfortunately, it was just around this time that Li Shunda finally had enough money to plunge ahead and buy everything, but it was too late. Once again he was left feeling like a fool. Yet it would be unfair to say that it was all his fault, for these days few people can be expected to have the wisdom of a wise man like Zhuge Liang.

Under ordinary circumstances, Li Shunda felt that he was quite a devoted follower—always honest and sincere, and possessing genuine emotions. But when the “cultural revolution” started, even he couldn’t keep up anymore. How could you keep up with a situation in which you were surrounded by people everywhere loudly proclaiming “Only I know the correct doctrine”? Who really knew who was right or wrong, good or bad, honest or insincere, red or black? Li Shunda got totally confused, and finally had to just squat down on his heels and give up trying to follow anyone.

The slogan “all men have a sense of right and wrong” was prominent at this time, but in truth it was too simplistic for the experience of the “cultural revolution”. One couldn’t simply believe what a man said in his speeches; it was necessary to keep track of his actions as well. “All men have a sense of good and bad” would have been far more appropriate.

Li Shunda’s desire to build a house was causing him to feel uneasy. He realized that the spirit of the times was even more unusual than it had been in 1958. Then, some things had been destroyed, but that was the end of it. Now it had become a question of destroying some people, and one’s involvement could really be a life or death matter. He certainly couldn’t build the house in times like these, with no idea what tomorrow might bring. He was disgusted by it all, but at the same time felt lucky to have moved to the pigsty in the center of town. If he’d still been living way out in his straw hut by the river bank, even the money under his pillow might have been stolen.

Li Shunda’s thinking was not progressive, but if the times had only been more enlightened, maybe such a barbaric tactic would not have been used on him: A big tough-guy in the rebel faction came to his house for a visit one day, with a handgun tucked in at his waist and a copy of a little red book under his arm, accompanied by the leader of the production team. He was chairman of the commune’s brick and tile factory, and he said, like a true friend, that he knew Li Shunda wanted to build a house but couldn’t get the bricks, and he’d come especially to help him. He cursed the capitalist-roader Liu Qing who hadn’t helped the poor and middle peasants. But luckily now the savior had come along to set things right, and if Li Shunda would kindly just hand over 217 yuan he’d take all the responsibility for seeing that 10,000 bricks were bought and delivered to him next month. He spoke so sweetly that it didn’t even sound suspicious. Li Shunda reasoned that, after all, they were members of the same brigade and although they weren’t on close terms they still saw each other often enough, and this fellow’s reputation wasn’t bad as far as he knew. Besides, in those days of revolutionary fervor, everyone was trying to do good, and people wouldn’t be apt to cheat others. What’s more, he had both a gun and a little red book, he’d come with the
leader of the production team, and he seemed the image of friendliness, conviction and authority. Even Li Shunda, who'd been cunning enough to escape from the army three times, couldn't stand up to such persuasive tactics, and before he knew it he'd handed over 217 yuan.

The following month, about the time when his bricks were supposed to arrive, Li Shunda's bad luck began. He was called to the commune's organ of dictatorship to answer a few questions, and things went something like this: "1. Where are you from and what's your family background? 2. We know you were a soldier for the reactionaries three separate times. Hand over your gun immediately. 3. You're known to have made reactionary statements (for example: 'a one-story house is better than a multi-story structure,' and 'it costs too much to fix a broken phone'). These are poisonous attacks on socialism."

What followed this needn't be elaborated, since it's known to all. Even when Li Shunda himself was let free he didn't have much to say about it. But two things were particularly characteristic. The first is that when he couldn't take it anymore and called out for help, it was the revolutionary chairman of the brick and tile factory who came to his rescue. In return for his help, Li Shunda privately agreed not to mention the missing 217 yuan to anyone again. The second is that the room he was held in was extremely well built, and for the first time in his life he made a concerted effort to study construction, to form a clear idea of how his own future home should be built.

When he was released he limped home on the arm of his already 19-year-old son. When his weeping wife and sister asked him why he had been locked up and if he'd suffered much, he only rasped in laconic confusion, "They are evil! My house!"

For a few years afterwards he wasn't able to work because of the pain in his lower back, and on overcast days his whole body ached miserably. One thought kept bothering him — although he'd never gone through such hard times before, his whole life had been pretty rough, stumbling along from one hardship to another... so why was he so delicate all of a sudden, not even well enough to work? Could it be that he really was a "revisionist"? The thought shocked him. As far as he was concerned, it would be easier to turn into a cow or a horse than into a revisionist. Being a revisionist meant being a black pot, one that was no longer good for cooking, a worthless object to be lugged around endlessly on one's back. A revisionist was a label that never died, but was handed down through generations like an unwanted family heirloom. His son was 19 already — how would he ever find a wife if he had to carry such a black pot around on his back too? And there was no family home either; nothing at all for him to attract a wife with.

When Li Shunda thought about all this, he became terror-stricken and superstitious. He remembered one of the many tales told to him as a child, about a man who could change into many different objects. The story-teller would whisper: "And then one night, he suddenly turned into a..." What's more, before each transformation he'd have a strange feeling, his whole body aching terribly all over, his flesh hot and dry... and so on. Therefore, whenever Li Shunda found himself in pain he would dread the approach of nightfall and sleep. He would lie awake with open staring eyes, trying to prevent himself from losing consciousness and being turned into a black pot. Because he was fully forewarned and cautious, he managed to ward off such a transformation.

During those sleepless nights, Li Shunda had to create
his own entertainment in order to dispel his pain. He had no radio, and even if he'd wanted to read he only knew a few characters and couldn't afford to waste the lamp oil anyway. So his only recourse was to recall stories he'd heard in his youth, lyrics from plays, and folk songs passed on from the old to the young. During the day, as soon as he felt better, he'd shoulder a load of sugar and go out again to trade for scraps, constantly singing a little ditty to amuse the children. He claimed to have recalled this ditty during one of those nights of self-enforced sleeplessness. From the words, one can get an idea of what was really on his mind. He would sing,

Strange strange really strange,
There's an old man confined to the cradle;
Strange strange really strange,
There's a huge table stuffed in your pocket;
Strange strange really strange,
Look at the rat biting the cat;
Strange strange really strange,
Look at the lion bullied by fleas;
Strange strange really strange,
The dog sends the yellow weasel to guard the chickens,
Strange strange really strange,
That toad's got a piece of swan meat in his mouth;
Strange strange really strange,
A big ship's sunk in a tiny rainpipe;
Strange strange really strange,
A tall man can act as a short man's ladder.
Ai Ya Ya! Watermelon rind makes a hat for your scabby head,
No pearls, just piss inside the clam,
No air, just farts inside the ball,

Nothing but mud fills the fierce, robed idol.
So strange, so strange, so really strange,
A deadly snake coils inside the Buddha's statue,
Smelling the incense and putting on airs.

Everyone recognized this old familiar song about truly strange events. Each person who sang it usually added his own personal color to it, throwing in whatever he felt to be most strange. But Li Shunda wouldn't admit to embellishing upon it at all. He was no writer — didn't even know how! — and anyway what would have been the point of giving others something to use against him by revealing his own feelings? Although he wasn't brainy, his past experiences had made him aware that there was a certain type of person — whether a rebel in power or a powerful rebel — who would do anything to reach his objective ... for example getting hold of his 217 yuan.

One day, while exchanging sugar for scraps and singing away in a neighboring village, he happened to bump into a capitalist-roader doing labor reform there — it turned out to be none other than the former District Party Secretary Liu Qing! Liu Qing asked Li Shunda to sing the "Strange Song" once more for him. Unsuspectingly, Li Shunda began to sing. The tragic, heavy, angry sound set even the air aquiver, and both men shed bitter tears.

A year passed and still he remained in poor health. Li Shunda began to feel disheartened and often wondered how much longer he had to live. Should he still trouble
himself with his plans to build a house? Even the proverbial foolish old man had left part of the task of moving the mountain to his descendants, so why must Li Shunda complete the house all by himself? Besides, he would still be remembered for things like the money he'd managed to save and all his hard labor. On the other hand, the human spirit is stubborn and hard to fathom. Li Shunda thought of his son, past twenty now. Without a house he'd never find himself a wife, for who on earth would be willing to move into a pigsty! Unfortunately, Li Shunda's son would not have the chance to marry a beggar girl as his father had. But without a daughter-in-law, where would Li Shunda get a grandson? And without a grandson, where would he get a great grandson? When the good life of Communism arrived, would he leave no descendants there to enjoy it? So it seemed he had no choice but to continue planning to build the house, and as quickly as possible too. At least there was some time left, since his son had to wait until he was older to get married, in accordance with government policy.

After this period of wavering, Li Shunda recovered his determination and immediately got to work. He took his large wicker basket for scraps and trudged slowly and unsteadily from village to village, covering almost every road and alley in the county seat without finding any building material for sale. By asking at shops he finally found out that before he could buy a single brick, he would need certificates from all three local levels of authority. There seemed to be no way he could get around this requirement. He realized that before wasting any more time he'd better apply for a certificate at the production team, brigade, and commune. Luckily the day wasn't totally wasted even though he hadn't found any building materials, because he'd managed to collect enough scraps to sell for over ten yuan.

His next step was obviously to get a certificate from the local cadres at the production team and brigade, but when they heard his request they just laughed at him and said: "What good will a certificate do, when there's so little building material around for people's use? Even with a certificate you won't be able to buy a thing." Li Shunda dared not believe them, thinking that they were just being obstructive. But he didn't dare argue either, for fear that he'd ruin his chances completely. So he waited impatiently, camped out on their doorstep. No one took further notice of him, until dinnertime when he was discovered still hanging around and was asked to leave so that the door could be locked. He had to leave then, but was back again the next day. And so it went for three days, until finally a cadre told him impatiently: "Since you won't listen to reason but insist on sitting here being a bother, I'll give you the certificate that you think will be such a big help." And sure enough Li Shunda was given his certificate and happily rushed off to the supply and marketing cooperative. The clerk took one look at his certificate and laughed just like the cadre at the brigade saying "Sorry, there's no material in stock."

"When will you get some?"
"Dunno" was the reply. "Stop by and check whenever you have free time."

From then on Li Shunda went there as faithfully as a pupil going to school, six days a week. But after six months of this, he still hadn't succeeded in buying even one brick. The clerk was actually good at heart, and although he pitied Li Shunda for his stupidity, he couldn't help admiring the man's stubborn spirit. Finally he whispered to him: "Why not save your energy and quit coming here. People have been making revolution fiercely
the past few years, and all the land is being ‘revolutionized’ along with it to the point where it’s almost gone. When a few supplies do become available, there isn’t even enough to go around for the cadres, let alone for you. If you were to get hold of something, it would be useless rubbish that no one else had any use for, and you’d have to pay full price for it too. You’d just be wasting your money. You’d be far better off to think of some other solution.”

This sincere advice was a terrible disappointment for Li Shunda, but he was extremely grateful nonetheless. He had no choice but to ask, “What other solution?”

“Well, do you have any relatives or good friends who are cadres?” the clerk asked hesitatingly.

“None,” Li Shunda replied heavily, “just my sister and brother-in-law, who are peasants.”

“Then you’re out of luck,” the clerk said sympathetically. “These days it’s not what you know that counts but who you know. No amount of official documents is worth as much as a few personal connections. If you don’t have influential friends and relatives, your only other choice would be to buy on the black market.”

Li Shunda took this advice very seriously, and began planning how to get materials from the black market right away. He never suspected that perhaps the clerk knew very little about the black market himself, and didn’t understand its complexities. The fixed price for 10,000 bricks was 217 yuan, but on the black market they would go for as high as 400 yuan, with payment required in advance. Then you had to wait at least six months for delivery, often to find that you’d simply been tricked. Li Shunda had made this mistake once and obviously wouldn’t part with his money so easily again. So instead he spent three years running from one place to another trying to talk his way into a good deal, but with no success.

In the end it was the clerk who agreed to help him out by buying him a ton of limestone at the state’s fixed price. This limestone had originally been scheduled for use in the silkworm house. But in recent years many mulberry fields had been enthusiastically replanted as rice paddies, and the few rotten mulberry trees left standing couldn’t raise enough silkworms to be ‘worthwhile. So the limestone was worthless and the supply clerk took advantage of this situation to sell it cheaply to Li Shunda.

As a token of thanks, Li Shunda wanted to buy the clerk a pack of high quality cigarettes, but they were often difficult to get. By chance he happened to run into the former revolutionary chairman of the commune’s brick and tile factory (who had risen to become a chairman of the factory revolutionary committee by this time). Li Shunda recalled that he always used to smoke good cigarettes, and reasoned that since he’d treated him so badly in the past he now owed him a favor, so why not ask him for some cigarettes? Li Shunda unashamedly asked for the favor, and the chairman’s reaction was equally straightforward: he took Li Shunda’s fifty cents and pulled an unopen pack of “Da Qianmen” from his bag. Then, just before he handed them over, he deliberately plucked one out for himself, adding, “This is my last pack; I wouldn’t do a favor like this for anyone but you.”

So Li Shunda took the remaining nineteen cigarettes and offered them to the clerk, who adamantly refused them. Finally he smoked one so Li Shunda wouldn’t lose face, but he insisted that he take the remaining eighteen cigarettes back with him.

On the way home, Li Shunda couldn’t help thinking of
how he’d done something wrong that day he’d never done before — he’d actually treated both a friend and an enemy to a cigarette. By dinner time he was really feeling angry, so he yelled at his son, a 25-year-old helpless good-for-nothing, who made his father do improper things on his account.

A number of years passed quickly, and although Li Shunda’s house wasn’t any closer to being built, its fame had become quite widespread. Still, no problem is so large that it can’t be overcome if one’s mind is set on it, and the plight of the unbuilt house had moved not only the clerk but the Lord as well. The Lord in this case turned up in the form of Li Shunda’s future daughter-in-law, Xinlai. Xinlai lived in a neighboring village and had been involved with Li Shunda’s good-for-nothing son Xiaokang for a long time. She was in love with him, and didn’t mind if the family had a house or not — if it wasn’t built until after their marriage, that was fine too. But her father was against the marriage; under no circumstances was he going to let his daughter be married off to live in a pigsty. He used his own life as a model example, pointing out that although he’d been poor, he’d still managed to build a two-room house before getting his son a wife. He cursed Li Shunda, calling him an incompetent fool. But Heaven likes to have her little joke, and teach those who talk too much a lesson. Within a year, most of the capitalist-roaders had been removed from power, and the new leaders were eager to literally “change the face of the earth”. They decided to start with an unsightly river whose course was as crooked as an old man’s back. They were set on using many thousands of laborers and tens of thousands of workdays to turn the river into a “model river” that flowed straight as an arrow, so that even the higher creatures in Mars would look down at earth and marvel at man’s greatness. But Xinlai’s family home was right smack in the path of the proposed new river bed, nor was their two-room house the only one, so they were forced to move. The commune paid them a compensation of 150 yuan per room. After borrowing another 300 yuan, they were able — with some difficulty — to build another one-and-a-half-room house. But in the process Xinlai’s father lost a lot of weight and his hair turned almost all white from the worry. He also had to listen to his daughter admonishing him to “learn from Uncle Li Shunda” who was both shrewd and patient, tucking away all his money safely under his pillow. He wouldn’t build a house until he knew the time was just right. To such arguments her father had no reply, and finally he had to admit defeat, agreeing to let his daughter make her own decisions about marriage. Li Shunda was overjoyed, for he not only got a daughter-in-law, but also a strong theoretical affirmation of his actions. So on the night of his son’s marriage he drank several glasses of wine and, feeling inspired, turned and spoke in riddles to Xinlai’s father:

“Now I hold the cards in my hands, and the weak have become better off than the strong. Your house went up too fast. And with such chaos everywhere, people would rather live in cowsheds anyway. Even though I had to feed 10,000 bricks to that bastard of a brickmaker, I’m still less worried than you.” He would have kept on talking but luckily his wife had a good warning instinct, and she piped up quickly: “The silly fool just blabs on whenever he’s had a few drinks. You’d think he’d remember the trouble he got into for talking too much before, and how it made his
bones ache!” She managed to turn the conversation around with that remark, much to everyone’s relief.

From then on, Li Shunda didn’t waste any more energy trying to figure out how to buy construction materials. Instead he shouldered his sugar buckets and wandered here and there collecting scraps to earn a little money. But strangely enough he saw quite a number of houses being built during his travels. He couldn’t help feeling jealous, and would always stop to ask what family was building the house and where they’d purchased their materials. The responses were extremely varied, and a separate book could have been written on the background of each house. But what everyone seemed to be covering up was the fact that they were all just cases of “High officials having things sent to the door, lesser officials making use of their influence, and ordinary folk pleading with others.” Some of those poor folk actually envied Li Shunda, saying that he was the lucky one for avoiding all this trouble—a true hero of the times. A friend finally blurted out angrily:

“Every brick and tile I have had to be purchased on the black market—to build these two rooms cost me the price of building a four-room house! The day we were putting on the roof, that brigade Party secretary—the one who relied on his involvement with the rebel faction to get power—invited himself over for a meal. Do you know he had the nerve to say that if it hadn’t been for the ‘cultural revolution’ I’d never have been able to build a house? That bastard! Does he think I got my house the same way that he got to the top—through beating down others?”

By this time Li Shunda figured he knew just about everything there was to know about housing construction. But wonders never cease, and unusual events just keep occurring—rolling in like waves on the Yangtze. Who can help but be interested? It’s understandable to skip over small matters, but it’s a real pity to do so when marvelous incidents are involved. For instance: It became known that a certain brigade was preparing to tear down everyone’s house in order to build a series of several-story apartments called “new village”. The material from the old houses was to be returned to the collective and the people would be paid for its value. Then whoever wanted to live in the new buildings could pay up and move in. Li Shunda felt greatly inspired when he heard of this, thinking that the ideal of “an upstairs and a downstairs” was finally coming true. He impatiently shouldered his sugar buckets and rushed to the village to see for himself what was going on.

Although Li Shunda had often passed through this area before, everything was completely different now. In every alley-way, people were tearing down their houses and bringing all the materials to the edge of the public road where the first apartment was going up in a large field. Those families tearing down their houses were all talking animatedly, some even becoming fiercely emotional, and all were in agreement that this was the greatest event since the creation of the world. Some people were crying, probably because they were overexcited. Some of the tiles from the dismantled roofs were still covered with ash from the kiln and had obviously never even been rained on; yet here they were being “emancipated” already. Seeing all this, Li Shunda felt that his twenty-nine years of vainly hoping for a house that had never been built had been a proper thing. Yet when he thought of these folks tearing down their houses, the fruit of so much labor, his own eyes began to brim over, and he sighed deeply, lowered his head, and began to walk away. Suddenly he heard someone call out: “Hey, sugar peddler!”
Looking up he saw an old man standing by the side of the road with a little girl in his arms, watching the construction. He looked very familiar but Li Shunda couldn’t quite place him. The old man chuckled and said, “What’s this: Don’t you recognize me?”

Suddenly Li Shunda recognized who it was and exclaimed quickly, “Party secretary, it’s you! Are you still doing labor reform?” He felt sad as he realized that the old Party secretary had aged beyond recognition in the few years since he’d last seen him. But surprisingly enough, the old Party secretary did seem to be in high spirits.

Laughing, the Party secretary answered, “I’m still doing labor, but I haven’t managed to reform yet. And you, have you come back collecting more material for your ‘Strange Song’?”

“Ai, you’re making fun of me, Secretary Liu,” Li Shunda protested self-consciously. “I came here to see the making of ‘new village’, ‘the upstairs and the downstairs’. I didn’t realize ’til today that the dividing line between old and new lies right here in these buildings, not in the question of whether or not to collectivize.”

Party Secretary Liu took a quiet breath and urged, “Say what you mean more clearly.”

“Of course it won’t really matter if I explain it to you,” Li Shunda laughed. “But then again, I don’t want to break the law knowingly. I used to say that living in a high-rise isn’t as good as having a one-story house, and later this was judged to be reactionary. But now, when I see things like this, I still want to say what I feel. I mean, what’s the point in tearing down perfectly good homes, some of them even brand-new, to build something else? Wouldn’t it be better to put all this energy into planting more fields? These are questions people don’t dare ask in broad daylight, but it sure keeps them awake at night!”

Hearing this “reactionary” talk, the Party secretary not only made no retort but even nodded his head in agreement, adding gravely: “‘What’s the point’ is a good question. You know, there are people who want to use all this as their ladder to self-advancement. As you well know, collectivization is the foundation of our new countryside. But some people, in their attempt to ‘restore the old order’, find the commune system easy to take advantage of. Open you eyes even wider. Just look at the situation — the poor and lower-middle peasants suffered for twenty years to build these small homes, and then the minute someone tells them to tear them down they have no choice but to do so. Nobody cares about what’s important to the masses anymore. And yet the commune is still called a commune!”

Li Shunda felt enlightened by this speech, although he couldn’t quite make sense of it all. He just stood there quietly, staring respectfully at this older man, with his mouth hanging open.

The old man gave an angry snort and stopped talking. He looked down at his little girl and pointed to Li Shunda, saying: “Say Hello, grandpa!”

The little girl did so, with warm affection. Li Shunda was greatly moved, and quickly broke off a piece of sugar and put it in her little hand, calling her a little darling. He was 54 years old now, an outsider who’d come to these parts in search of rags and scraps, and this was the first time that anyone had ever called him grandpa. It gave him great inspiration, and wiped out all other thoughts from his head.

From this time on, he and the old Party secretary became fast friends.
During the Spring Festival in 1977, when Li Shunda took several sugar candies to visit the old Party secretary, he first heard the news that Party Secretary Liu had been reinstated in his former post at the district office. Li Shunda was overjoyed at the unexpected good news, and after giving some candy to the little girl and eating some of the sweets her mother offered, he rushed off to the district office. He thought that maybe, with the current district Party secretary as his good friend, he might finally be able to get hold of that building material he needed for his house.

His old friend greeted him warmly. But as soon as Li Shunda raised the question of building materials, the Party secretary fell silent and coughed several times. Li Shunda trembled at the thought that this might be a bad sign. Then the old Party secretary said slowly, “My friend, I know all about your troubles. In the past when you sang your ‘Strange Song’, I agreed completely. So, now I don’t think you and I can do this same type of ‘strange thing’ ourselves, eh?”

Li Shunda blurted out, “But Secretary Liu, I wouldn’t do it if other people didn’t. With everyone doing such things, why should be the only one not to? That would be too hard on myself!”

Laughing, Secretary Liu explained, “After ten years of chaos, it’s not easy to change things. But now we must get to work and set things straight, or else the achievement of the state’s plan will be merely empty talk. We can’t do certain things just because other people do them. As the highest cadre in the district, I must be the first to set an example. As for the masses, let the singer of the ‘Strange Song’ be first to set an example — how about it? Is that reasonable or not?”

On hearing this, Li Shunda was filled with mixed emotions. On the one hand he felt it would be greatly satisfying to take the lead in a rectification movement alongside the Party secretary. But on the other hand, it would be such a disappointment to have a friend in a high position and not be able to take advantage of it. He had lived through the “cultural revolution” and didn’t want any more bitter lessons. After thinking a moment he spoke plausibly and at length:

“Secretary Liu, I’ll do whatever you say. But let me say this first: OK, I won’t do any ‘strange things’, just as you’ve asked. But don’t you waver either. Don’t go opening ‘back doors’ for closer friends than me or more important people than me. If you do, everyone will laugh at me for getting no profit out of our friendship, and I’ll have to turn against you then.”

The Party secretary laughed heartily and, taking out a pen and paper, he quickly wrote down Li Shunda’s words. “Listen while I read this,” he instructed, reading out an exact version of what Li Shunda had just said. Then he went on, “Please take this and have someone write it up into a big character poster and paste it up in my office.”

Li Shunda protested, “But I don’t want to embarrass you!”

Secretary Liu insisted, “Not at all. Actually, you’d be doing me a big favor. I’ve been dreading the time when high-ranking people will come and ask unsavory favors of me. If you put up this poster, you’ll save me a lot of trouble in getting out of such situations.”

Li Shunda went off happily to follow instructions.

When winter arrived, Li Shunda’s household suddenly began to bustle with activity. Party Secretary Liu Qing had done some “work” on that ex-revolutionary
chairman of the commune’s brick and tile factory and told him to make adequate compensation to Li Shunda for the 10,000 bricks. The commune revolutionary committee also approved Li Shunda’s request for eighteen concrete beams. And the good-hearted clerk at the supply and marketing cooperative informed Li Shunda that rafters were now readily available. This time it looked like Li Shunda’s house would really be built! But to transport all these things, Li Shunda’s family of four wasn’t enough, so he asked his sister’s family and daughter-in-law’s family to help. Everyone was pushing and pulling and rowing and having a great time. Even Xinlai’s father pitched in and worked up a merry sweat.

But there was one incident that spoiled part of this happiness. When it was time to transport the bricks from the factory, a surprising thing happened. Their boat was docked at the brick and tile factory, but no bricks were forthcoming. Instead, someone smiled insincerely and told Li Shunda, “Your beams haven’t been obtained yet so there’s no use in taking the bricks back with you now. Better wait a little longer.” Li Shunda argued furiously, saying that the order for the beams had been given long ago. But this fellow seemed to know Li Shunda better than Li Shunda knew himself, and he kept asserting that there were no beams. Luckily, Xinlai’s father rushed over and quietly informed him of what the fellow really meant when he said “beams”, as he’d learned from his own past experience with buying them. Li Shunda realized what was going on and went off immediately to the supply and marketing cooperative to buy two packs of the best cigarettes to give as gifts. Only then were things settled amicably and the bricks smoothly loaded. Later, when it came time to pick up the beams from the cement works, no one needed to give Li Shunda any more advice. He handed out a pack of quality cigarettes, in order to avoid being told that his rafters hadn’t been obtained yet.

Li Shunda was truly indignant at having to resort to such corrupt tactics, and wouldn’t have dared to tell the Party secretary about it. But he couldn’t get it off his mind completely, and sometimes he’d curse himself, saying, “Ai, I’ve really got to work on improving myself…”

Translated by Madelyn Ross