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The Story of Criminal Li Tongzhong

The Great Leap Forward was a short but catastrophic period in Chinese history during which untold millions of people starved to death. It was China's attempt, under Mao, to expand its agriculture and industry while continuing the all-important to create a more socialist structure. Mao's belief that continuous growth could be sustained by mobilizing the masses in the service of society caused a dangerously optimistic spirit to emerge in the party—one that could not be contradicted, at the risk of being labeled as counter-revolutionary or Rightist [Spence 579]. This desire to validate Mao's beliefs resulted in rampant overinflation of productivity in reports given to Party officers. The disconnect between the actual welfare of the people and the Party's understanding of the people's welfare was so great that when a famine struck the country, many policy-makers believed that the people were not actually in need of additional help from the government, leading to many preventable deaths.

This unwavering support of Mao's ideals in the Great Leap Forward despite the harsh realities that the Chinese people actually faced during this time is the setting in which *The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong* takes place. The story was written by Zhang Yigong in 1980, long after the end of the Great Leap Forward, and centers around the Li Family Stockade, a fictional early commune formed in the Great Leap Forward. Whereas at the time this story's

publication many viewed the Great Leap Forward as a failure due to natural disaster, this story sheds light on the disconnect between the unrealistic, forced optimism for Mao's ideals and the suffering endured by the people. Indeed, shortly after this story's publication, views of the Great Leap Forward shifted from one that focused on natural disaster to one that criticized Party officials in Mao's regime [lecture notes], suggesting that this work likely influenced perceptions of this period in Chinese history. By exploring the relationship between Party officials, Party hopes and ideals, and the needs of the common people through the characters of Tian Zhenzhan, Yang Wenxiu, and Li Tongzhang, *The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong* illustrates the harsh realities faced by the Chinese people caused by the blind idealism of the Great Leap Forward.

The story begins by establishing the contrast between Li Tongzhang, the protagonist and personification of the spirit and needs of the people, and Yang Wenxiu, the party official who personifies the idealism of the Great Leap Forward. It is said that Li Tongzhang was “born in the flight of famine” (64)—the people's fight for survival was brought on by food shortage. He is a disabled veteran with a peg leg, which will become a recurring symbol representing the hardship faced by the people as the situation grows more dire. At the start of the story, his tone remains hopeful: the first time he embarks on his journey to check grain allocation, it seems his peg leg doesn't bother him at all. After all, he is at the beginning still full of hope that the Party will support them, and will fight through hardship to survive—as the text suggests, “there are many battles left in this veteran” (65). As the story progresses, these trips take an increasing physical toll on Li Tongzhang faces increasingly more physically

demanding and frequent trips to commune headquarters to ask for more grain, only for his requests to be repeatedly rejected.

What initially causes Li Tongzhang to struggle more than his peg leg is Yang Wenxiu, the antithesis of Li Tongzhang. Yang Wenxiu, the local Party Secretary, is the epitome of someone who moved up through the ranks of the organization quickly by showing his superiors what they wanted to hear. For example, when he hears of an ideology where one successful commune can become an example for others to follow, he becomes determined to bring his superiors consistent reports of sustained growth in order to support that worldview. One policy he implements is to force people to tend to the fields wearing costumes aspiring to traditional heroes—this policy, while conceivably capable of improving morale, is identified by Li as being purely for the purpose of putting on a “show aimed at his superiors” (67). Li points out that the people need to be productive, not waste time by “fooling around with stage gestures and fake weapons” (67). It is obvious, though, that Yang Wenxiu has been captured by the optimistic spirit that Mao cultivated at the time, and he does not see the real problems. In fact, he is described as having, “eyes so narrow that they looked like they had been cut into his face with a knife” (66), indicating that his pursuit of these ideological gestures in favor of tangible increases in productivity has clouded his vision. Whereas Li is pragmatic and seeks only to end the suffering of those in the Li Family Stockade, the story demonstrates that Yang’s priority is to seek out ideas that validate his (and his superiors’) view of society and push whatever policy serves that end, however detrimental those policies may be to the real situation faced by the people.

Li is first seen expressing disillusionment with Yang Wenxiu's prioritization of inappropriate attachment to the Maoist ideals when he makes the decision to kill and eat the commune's ox. Early in the story, Li expresses to Yang that many people in the commune feel they do not have enough grain to survive; Yang's response centers around how it must be the "upper-middle peasants" (69) who complain and that the opinions of these people ought not be valued. Yang's response indicates his focus on maintaining the belief that society is stratified and that those at the top should be struggled against in the name of achieving Communism, and completely fails to consider the possibility that people are starving and genuinely need extra help. He is blind to the pragmatic needs of the people and only sees the ideology of "opposing Rightism" (69) and his own need to please his superiors by strictly following the ideology. Later, Li "hobbles" (70) back to the commune office—a far cry from the confident march he displayed in his first trip—and has his pleas rejected once more. This time, Yang suggests eating turnips while the Commune waits for the superior officers to have their meeting. These turnips lacked the same nutritional value of grain, demonstrating that Yang Wenxiu believes in feeding the people promises and ideology in favor of real sustenance; it is a complete lack of recognition of the failures of this attempted implementation of socialism. Li completely collapses on his way home, indicating that the hardship and damage to the people's spirit symbolized by his peg leg has completely broken down. The desperation of the commune's situation is recognized by the author, who interjects, "Li Tongzhong, you have a remarkable capacity for endurance! But history proves there are limits to how much the stomach can bear" (70). Li's ultimate response to the situation is to kill and eat the commune's ox. This gravity of this moment is realized when Li's father states, "socialism is a cart, and we can rely on [the ox] to pull us through the first leg" (73), indicating

that Li has begun to give up on Yang Wenxiu's leadership and the Communist ideals which are not being realized successfully. Both the leaders and the ideals have failed the people.

Yang was so indoctrinated into Maoist ideology that he continued to turn a blind eye to the plight of his own people, believing that Opposing Rightism was enough to maintain their health. As the Li Family Stockade was inadequately subsisting on turnips while awaiting solutions from The Party, Yang Wenxiu mentions that they are "calling on all communes and brigades to make a big push for grain substitutes", and proudly proclaims that he "left the meeting early to conduct some experiments" (88). Indeed, once he knew what his superiors were thinking, he was consumed by his desire to validate those expectations and needed to hear no more, so he went home to show some grain substitutes to Li. The differences between Li's and Yang's reactions to these substitutes is very telling. Whereas Yang uses these substitutes to make the point that "the facts prove that Opposing Rightism can produce grain" (90), Li reacts with unbridled wonder as he hears news that might finally alleviate his people's suffering by giving them something to eat. The text is careful to note that Li "didn't catch the profundity of [the remark about Opposing Rightism]" (90), showing that he is not reassured by the Maoist beliefs but rather is only remaining hopeful for actually getting some food. Furthermore, it is implied by the text that Yang would likely be rewarded for this action, as his farcical creation of a non-nutritious food source simultaneously allowed him to make a report of increased food production on the part of the communes, thereby branding it as a victory for the continuing Revolution. Again, this situation has resulted in a terrible feed-back loop where the Party believes its ideals are working and good for the people, but the people actually continue to suffer terribly.

Yang Wenxiu sees his work crumble in the climax, though, where Party official Tian Zhenzhan, who previously had no idea the people were suffering, finally realizes the people are starving and steps in to save them. Tian's ignorance of the situation is foreshadowed early on in the story when Li issues an emergency report explaining the Stockade's dire situation and requests additional grain provisions, but receives no response. It then becomes clear that Li's ultimate purpose and only hope for keeping his people alive is to ensure the Party higher-ups learn the truth about the Great Leap Forward—that blind anti-Rightism isn't satisfying the pragmatic needs of the people. In the climax, as Li takes his final, painful steps towards Tian Zhenzhan, Zhang is careful to describe the how “the sounds of his slow and heavy footsteps echoed *ker-chunk ker-chunk* on the cement floor of the long corridor” (120). Li is about to explain to the Committee that the people need help, and the symbolic echoes of the peg leg indicate that the hardship of the people will finally be heard by the Party. When Tian learns from Liu Shitou about the lies he was told about grain substitutes' efficacy in order to avoid accusations of Rightism, he admits to the people that they are the victims of “poor leadership” since he was “too remote from you” (123-124), to the chagrin of Yang Wenxiu. Yang Wenxiu, ever the embodiment of Party ideals cultivated by Mao at the time, truly believed to the very end that the anti-Rightist ideology would be enough to carry the people through this time of hardship, as evidenced by his lament, “two years of work, all wasted, and it's because of that hothead Li Tongzhong and that troublemaker Liu Shitou!” (124). As Tian Zhenzhan steps in to right the wrongs of the Great Leap Forward, the hopes of the people are finally heard, and Li's purpose is realized, demonstrated by his collapse and subsequent death. The needs of the people were finally recognized when the party leaders recognized the failure of these decisions inspired by Party ideology and Maoist rhetoric.

The Story of Criminal Li Tongzhong accurately captured the suffering of the Chinese people at the hands of government officials who fed them nothing but Maoist ideology while receiving reports of sustained growth and prosperity from Party officers who felt compelled to support the ideology. The spirit of anti-Rightism pervasive throughout this story was characteristic of not only the Great Leap Forward, where naysayers were silenced using this Maoist rhetoric, but also the Cultural Revolution, where author Zhang Yigong was further silenced for his 'divergent thinking' until his eventual rehabilitation [Yuanqu de Yizhan]. By exploring the relationship between the characters Li Tongzhong, Yang Wenxiu, and Tian Zhenzhan, Zhang demonstrated the hardship experienced by the people as a result of blind prioritization of ideology over the pragmatic needs of the populace. The author's choice to include redeeming characters such as Tian Zhenzhan gives the reader hope that idealistic philosophies are not the problem, but rather the problem is in blindly following its intentions without appraisal and recognizing when there are failures that need redressing.

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Lecture Notes

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