

VIII



Making Ends Meet

It's late afternoon and the living room of Liang Nan Tai's village house slowly darkens. His small son and granddaughter play on the floor beside him.

Like most village houses, the living room is crowded with tables, chairs, farm tools, and a bicycle. A bin filled with rice rests in the corner.

Pictures clipped from outdated calendars cover the wall. There are landscapes, portraits of beautiful women, and a collection of small family snapshots inside a glass frame. Chickens roam freely through the house.

Two bedrooms branch off from the living room. The rooms are dark and crowded with small windows covered with paper and cloth. Piles of clothes are scattered across the beds.

As you can see, he says, this house is old and I need to build a new one. I am building a new house not far from here that will cost about 10,000 yuan.

He says he saved about 7,000 yuan to build the house and will borrow the rest from relatives. His old house is so crowded that three of his sons must sleep every night at a neighbor's house, he says.

Liang Nan Tai says he has a big family: a wife, six sons (three are stepsons from his wife's first marriage), a daughter-in-law, and several granddaughters. He must provide shelter for all of them in a house with a living room, a small kitchen, and two bedrooms.

When his neighbors began to complain about his sons staying in their house too long, he had no choice but to build a new house. He is hoping that building it will also make it easier for him to find wives for at least some of his sons. One of his sons has a mental illness and won't be able to marry, he says.

He is always thinking about ways to earn more money. He says his son's wife is always complaining that the family doesn't have enough money.

Liang says he experiments with various schemes to bring in extra money, including filling a metal tank with frozen fruit pops, strapping the tank to the back of his bicycle, and traveling through the countryside to sell the pops to children. He says his business earns him about three yuan a day.

A good life means having three good meals a day, he says.

He points to the tall bin of rice in the corner and says that having it there is more important to him than anything else.

Every night when I come home, I look at it and feel happy that we have enough rice to eat, he says. He says his family eats mostly rice and sweet potatoes, but twice a week they also have meat or fish.

Still, he adds, village life is always precarious. In recent weeks the villagers have been worried about the drought that has hit Guangdong Province.

The sugarcane plants need a lot of rain in the early stages but there hasn't been much this month, he says. We don't know if we'll have a harvest in the fall because it hasn't rained for almost two months.

He says some of the sugarcane hasn't been planted yet because the farmers are afraid the land is too dry for it to grow.

He says the drought has created tension in the village. Farmers are arguing about the use of water from a village spring, arguing about who will take the

water first, he says. Sometimes there isn't enough water and people fight over it; even brother has been arguing with brother.

Money is the greatest cause of turmoil for families in the village, he says. People are always arguing about how the family will spend it, whether they have enough money to buy what they need, and who is to blame if there isn't enough to support the family.

Sometimes family members get upset if other families have something they don't have, he says. They immediately want what they have. It might be a TV; it might be new clothes.

He says he has a hard time satisfying his daughter-in-law, who constantly complains that the family doesn't have enough money.

To earn more money he recently tried to sell some of his sugarcane in Zhanjiang instead of Shuixi County. The Zhanjiang price is higher, but the government requires Long Wan farmers to take their sugarcane to Shuixi. The government officials caught him trying to take it to Zhanjiang and ordered him to take it to Shuixi instead.

It's not easy making money in the countryside, he says. His sons know this and want to find work outside the village. One son wanted to attend college but failed the college entrance exam. Attending college is one way to escape from the village, but most students don't do well enough in school to pass the exam.

If his son had passed the entrance exam, the government would have paid for his college education. If his son wants to go to college now he must pay for it himself.

It would cost 2,000 yuan a year for three years to send his son to college, he says. I could build another house with that much money.

Liang Nan Tai says that overall his life hasn't been a happy one. His mother died when he was eight years old, and his father died two years later. Soon after his parents died his oldest brother came down with the measles and died.

Orphaned at an early age, Liang was very young when he started working in the fields and looking after the animals. He never attended school and can neither read nor write.

He had four brothers but all of them have died. He feels very alone in Long Wan now. Life in the village is complex, he says. I don't have anyone to defend me. The other villagers look down on me. How can I be happy?













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