

“ DATE ORCHARD ”
By Hao Ran

Introduction

It is important to remember that, for almost thirty years, when China was in its most revolutionary period (1949-1976), it was quite isolated from the rest of the world. The culture and society of China during the 1950s and 1960s were very different from anything we have known in North America and Western Europe and also very different from China today. Millions of people earnestly dedicated their lives, day in and day out, to building the “new China.” The personal and collective sacrifices they made for what was at that time seen as the “greater good” is likely to seem incredible to us today. The fiction of this period provides the ideal window into the texture of human experience under the ideology and restrictions of life in revolutionary China. The stories of Hao Ran (pronounced “How Rawn”) are most representative of this genre.

Hao Ran (pen name of Liang Jinguang, 1932-2008) was probably the most popular author in the People’s Republic of China during the Cultural Revolution period. He is the leader of his generation of writers, a generation born in the 1930s and 1940s of proletarian backgrounds who wrote for the Communist Party throughout their careers. His hundreds of stories and several novels, which have sold millions of copies, had mass appeal, for they glorify the socialist revolution by depicting proletarian heroes who serve the state with self-sacrificing dedication. They are written in a lyrical style that romanticizes peasant life and values. The ideals Hao Ran illustrates are clear-cut and easy for students to grasp. Since his fiction is highly representative of official Cultural Revolution attitudes, it provides a graphic vehicle for classroom discussion of this controversial period. This type of literature was popular until 1976, when the Dissent Literature began to appear.

Selected Document with Questions

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Arriving at the date orchard, I was back in my home village, Chisu, after an absence of years.

The dates were ripening. The orchard, stretching for miles around, reminded me of a bride in her wedding clothes smiling bashfully as she waited to be fetched to her husband’s home. The interlaced boughs, just beginning to lose their green leaves, were bent under thick clusters of fruit. Under the afternoon sun the dates glowed with colour: agate-red, jade-green or a mottled green and russet. The whole orchard was as pretty as a picture.

Stooping, I made my way under the dense, low-hanging boughs which seemed to be stretching out to catch at my jacket, their leaves shimmying and rustling as if in welcome. I was intoxicated by the beauty around me.

I kept on until, in a clearing ahead, I caught sight of a whitewashed adobe wall. It was my uncle’s home, the only cottage in the date orchard and, to me, a dear, familiar sight. It was

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here that my mother had brought me as a child to avoid the Japs' "mopping up" campaigns. Here that I and my comrades had held meetings and spent the night when I was old enough to join the resistance. At that time, this thatched cottage housed the provincial district office and guerrilla headquarters. The dates served as fine nourishment for the partisans, the owner of the cottage as their guard. Here many wounded fighters recovered their strength.

Crossing a ditch overgrown with wild flowers and grass, I saw once again the wicket gate half hidden behind thick foliage. It was ajar. My uncle was sitting under the big spreading date tree in the middle of his yard. We had met at the bus station the previous day and arranged for my visit today. While waiting for me, with the deftness of long practice, he was weaving a wicker basket. My uncle was known in these parts as a champion date-grower and a warmhearted fellow always willing to help others with pruning or grafting. Old though he now was, his hands had lost none of their skill.

"Well, uncle, here I am!" I called, stepping in.

"So you came on foot, not by bike, eh?" He turned slowly towards me, a smile on his wrinkled face. "Come on in. Or maybe you'd rather sit outside where it's brighter while I go and make you some tea." With that he stood up, brushed the dust off his trousers and walked stiffly but steadily into the north room.

In his absence I looked eagerly round the quiet, secluded courtyard. A regular date-land, this was. The courtyard was shaded by date trees; strings of dates hung from the eaves of the new tiled house; windfalls were sunning in baskets and on mats on the ground. Unbuttoning my coat, I sat down on a block of date-wood in front of the old date tree. Without warning, a commotion broke out above me and big ruddy dates beat down on my head like hailstones. I jumped to my feet. Before I could raise my head a fresh lot of dates rained down. As I retreated hastily to the gateway, a mocking peal of laughter ran out from the tree.

I looked up in annoyance. Perched there was a girl in black cloth shoes, blue trousers rolled up to her knees and a snowy white blouse, one corner of which had caught on a branch. Her plaits, tied with pink silk bows, were swaying from side to side. But her face was hidden from me by the dense branches.

Who was this cheeky girl? She was still laughing uncontrollably. The situation was saved by my uncle's return with a pot of tea and some bowls.

"Come down, minx! Quick!" he shouted up at her, smiling.

Only then did the laughter stop. "I've been treating our visitor to dates," the girl called back cheerfully. The next second she had scrambled to the ground.

She was a girl in her teens with fine arched eyebrows who surveyed me through narrowed eyes, her nose slightly turned up. As she compressed her lips to hold back her laughter, two big dimples appeared in her rosy cheeks glowing with health. She was energetically rubbing her plump hands, perhaps because she had scraped them while climbing the tree.

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Now, with a pert toss of her head she asked, "Why are you staring like that? Don't you recognize me?"

Her naiveté made me laugh. Still looking steadily at her I replied, "To tell the truth, I don't." Chisu Village was not large, and I knew most of the youngsters of her age. I thought it possible she might be here on a visit. But she certainly didn't behave like a visitor. I glanced doubtfully at my uncle.

The girl guessed what I wanted. "Don't tell him!" she ordered, tossing her head again and darting round to lean against the old man's back.

Uncle put down the tea pot, scolding, "Look out! Do you want to scald me?" Then he straightened up, tugged at his short moustache, and simply smiled but said nothing.

"Who is she, uncle?" I asked.

"Don't tell him!" The girl clapped one hand over his mouth.

Uncle pushed her hand away, announcing loudly: "A wild-date tree, that's what she is. That's what makes her so prickly."

As if embarrassed, the girl dodged behind his back, peeping out at me with her bright mischievous eyes. Then, in a flash, I recognized her. She was still the child I'd known so long ago. As I sized her up, my boyhood came back to me.

It was war-time. 1945. The date trees were in full flower when a pregnant woman mounted on a donkey came to the orchard. The third night after her arrival, she gave birth to a plump baby girl in my uncle's cottage.

At that time the Japanese invaders, growing desperate, were frantically seizing grain and killing villagers on the north China plain. Both at the front and in the rear the situation was tense. This woman, who was a district head, wanted to go back to fight when her baby was just two weeks old. She told my uncle: "I leave my child to you, old comrade. I hope you will bring her up to carry on the torch of revolution."

Three months later, sad news came to the date orchard. We learned that the child's mother had given her life for the cause.

So my uncle adopted the child, to whom he gave the resounding name Red Treasure. To her, he was father and mother, both. She passed a happy childhood in the date orchard. When her mother first left, my uncle used to wrap the baby in his cotton-padded coat and carry her to the village to find women to nurse her. And the village women lavished such care on her that she never went short of milk, not even if their own babies had to go hungry. So the little girl was brought up by the whole village. Later on, when our children's corps met in the orchard, we often saw her tagging after my uncle. Because he doted on her and the villages too considered her as someone special, she could do whatever she wanted. She became very self-willed, with a sharp tongue. Then the other kids gave her the nickname "wild-date tree". Several years after Liberation, my uncle managed to find out the whereabouts of Red Treasure's father, who in 1955 took her to the provincial capital to study. For six or seven years I had seen nothing of her.

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By now, Red Treasure had got the better of her giggles.

"How time flies! You've certainly shot up," I remarked.

"Not fast enough to suit me!" She shook her head. Squatting down to pick up the dates on the ground she asked, "When will you be leaving, brother?"

"Want to come with me?"

"Why ever should I?" She broke into laughter again. "Nowhere else is a patch on this date orchard of ours. Where else could you find dates as sweet as our Chisu dates?"

These were my feelings exactly. In all my travels I had yet to see a place as beautiful as this orchard. Of all the dates I had eaten, none could compare with those of my own village. Was it our local soil or water which gave them their incomparable sweetness?

"She finished middle school last summer," the old man cut in proudly. "She could have lived in a big storied building and got herself a fine job in town, but no — she needs must come back to this orchard." He turned to the girl. "Where did you learn such odd ways?"

"From you, of course!" she crowed.

Uncle beamed all over his face, his heart warmed by her answer. The Japs and diehards had smashed his pots and pans and burnt his cottage not once but many times, yet failed to drive him away. Some well-meaning villagers advised him, "Move in with us. It's far too risky out here."

"I can't leave the date trees," Uncle explained. "In these hard times, dates can save lives." Every year, indeed, loads of dates were shipped out of the orchard. Not a fighter in the gullies and plain but had eaten our big Chisu dates. After Liberation, Red Treasure's father urged him to go and live with them in the city. He firmly declined, explaining, "I have my roots here. This is where I'm happy. I'm doing fine now, and while I still have some strength I must do my bit for the revolution."

Red Treasure, her pocket bulging with dates, straightened up now and said to me: "Don't be in a hurry to leave, brother. We've a Youth League meeting in a couple of days and I want you to give us a talk. I hear you've been to Shantung. How are the dates there? Do they have many? Do they taste as good as ours?" Emptying the dates from her pocket on to the mat, she inquired seriously: "What do they do with their old trees? This is a big problem. I can't find a solution for it in any of the books I've read. When the old trees stop bearing they have to be dug up. It's like digging out our own hearts. Have you come across any good method of making the old trees bear, brother?"

The girl had rattled off these questions so fast that no one else could get a word in edgeways. Did she expect an answer or not? I grinned.

Between sips of date-blossom tea, Uncle advised, "You can drop that idea. It won't get you anywhere. How can you turn an old tree young again?"

"Why not? You're too conservative," she retorted.

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"Hear that?" Uncle asked me, chortling. "This wild-date's needling me again. Can it be done, or can't it?"

"Of course it can!" Red Treasure snorted. "If not, how come those seven old trees bore so many dates this year?"

"They bore dates, I grant you that. But why? Let's hear you explain the reason. If you can make the other old trees start bearing too, I'll say you're a smart lassie ..."

For some reason or other, Red Treasure clamped her lips together. Not another word would she utter. Uncle, as if aware that he had been tactless, immediately changed the subject.

I couldn't understand why old trees were such a sensitive subject. Not liking to pry, I held my tongue.

"Technician, technician!" came shouting from the orchard. As the voices approached, a group of girls, all more or less the same age, appeared at the gate. They lined up there, giggling, and asked Red Treasure, "Hey! Why didn't you answer us?"

Without moving or looking up she retorted crossly, "How was I to know whom you wanted? Here's our master. You can't call me a technician."

The girls exchanged winks and chorused, "Comrade Wild-date, do come!"

Red Treasure rounded on them, raising her fist. "May your tongues drop out if you call me that again!"

The girls scattered, laughing, then surged back to surround her and carry her off.

Uncle and I sipped tea and ate dates while we chatted. The courtyard was quiet now that Red Treasure had left. All we could hear was the occasional plop of ripe dates as the light wind blew them down.

We talked about the change in our village these years, the expansion of the orchard and the experience old hands had acquired in raising dates. When I spoke of training the younger generation and passing on his experience, Uncle looked thoughtful. He took another sip of tea, looked up, and rubbing his chin remarked, "I've worked in this orchard for sixty years and can't say that I've no experience. The trouble is I can't read or write. I've my own ideas, mind you, but I can't get them out. When County Head Ma was staying here, we used to sit up at night talking and he urged me to sum up my experience. There's nothing I'd like better than to pass on the dodges I've learned. I don't want to carry them to the grave with me! But I only know a few characters, and when it comes to writing I'm stumped. All I can do is give on-the-spot demonstrations."

"Now that Red Treasure's back, let her do the writing for you," I suggested.

His face lit up and he slapped his knee. "That's right. It's a good thing she's back. Though it made no sense to me, at first, her coming."

He told me then what had happened.

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When Red Treasure alighted that day at the long-distance bus station, several miles away, there was nobody there to meet her. She slung her bedding-roll over her shoulder and hurried back as fast as she could to the orchard.

Uncle asked her, "Which college have you got into, Red Treasure?"

"Date Orchard College — to learn from you to be a peasant."

This wasn't the future Uncle had planned for her. "Your mother left you in my care," he said. "I brought you up and handed you over to your dad, hoping you'd turn out someone useful. Otherwise, I'd be letting down my comrades-in-arms as well as those who died for the revolution."

Red Treasure stepped forward, eyes flashing, and shot back: "What sort of people are useful? Aren't you useful? If I learn to be like you, won't my dad be pleased? Could my mother have asked anything better?"

Uncle was floored.

So the girl who had grown up here returned to the date orchard. And her presence there was like a breath of spring. Whatever the hour or season, in the mist of dawn, the blaze of noon or the fading splendour of sunset, clear laughter could be heard ringing from the orchard and a girlish figure could be seen dancing through it. She followed in her master's steps, digging trenches, pruning branches and catching insects; and all the time she worked she asked endless questions, some of which he was hard put to it to answer. There seemed no end to the girl's thirst for knowledge. She made a mental note of all the old man said and every evening, after a hasty supper, she would write it down in her notebook. If the room was too hot, she would move a table outside to the courtyard. What she wrote Uncle didn't know. He supposed all educated people were fond of writing.

The days slipped away until three months had passed. It was the rainy season at the end of August. One wet day, Uncle and Red Treasure took time to make some dumplings. After the meal, she produced a red-covered notebook and said: "Shall I read you something?"

The old man nodded. Red Treasure began to read. The more he heard, the more excited he grew. It was all about raising date trees, just what he would have said himself if he could have found the words.

"Where did you get hold of this wonderful material, lass?" he asked.

"From you!" she twinkled.

"From me? Nonsense!"

"I did too. I've been writing down every evening what you told me during work. You must tell me if there's anything wrong, and I'll change it. Then I'd send a copy to the county head ..."

The old man beamed as he finished this account. For me, it had conjured up an enchanting scene: A summer night, hazy moonlight, with not a breath of wind to stir the trees, the silence unbroken by voices or the shrill of insects. A girl, bent over a small table, was writing

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intently under an oil lamp. From time to time she paused, frowning thoughtfully, then took up her pen again. Beads of sweat from her heart-shaped face dripped on her hand as she transcribed the experience the old man had amassed in sixty years of hard work, transmuted by her own ardent enthusiasm.

"Let me show you something," said Uncle, standing up and going towards the house.

I heard the sound of a cupboard being opened. Then the old man came out with a package which he was unwrapping. It was a notebook. Patting it with his calloused hand he said, "One notebook's already full. She's started another."

I took the notebook. It was small yet seemed heavy. I opened it and found it filled with writing in a neat vigorous hand. The words seemed to be dancing for joy. A slip of paper fluttered to the ground. Picking it up I read:

Compact

Forty-nine old date trees are to be left this year. If no way of reviving them has been found by next year, they can then be cut down or dug up.

Brigade leader Yang Tse

Technician Red Treasure

Observing my bewilderment, Uncle chuckled. "It's very strange," he said. "Those forty-nine date trees were planted before my time. They're so old that for seven or eight years now they've been barren. This spring the brigade leader came to see me about them. I said: better uproot them to make room for new trees. So he sent seven men to do the job. They had just started digging when Red Treasure came back from a meeting. Hearing what was happening, she dashed there to stop them. She begged the brigade leader to keep the old trees while she tried to find a way to make them bear fruit. She kept on at him till he agreed to that compact."

This intriguing episode reminded me of their odd behavior earlier on when talking about the old date trees.

"Has she found a way yet?" I asked.

He pounded a fist on the table. "That's what's so strange. She hasn't, yet those few trees which the men started digging up all produced a good crop of dates again this year." He paused reflectively. "Red Treasure doesn't know the reason herself. She gave the other trees plenty of water as well as fertilizer. I'd tried that before myself, but it was no use." He broke off then, but presently urged me not to bring this question up in front of Red Treasure. For she was very worked up these days, trying to figure out why those barren trees had started bearing again.

Uncle and I spent the whole afternoon talking, first in the courtyard and then in the orchard where we went for a stroll. We did not come back till sunset had crimsoned the western sky.

I had not seen Red Treasure since lunch. But now she suddenly darted out from the courtyard.

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Standing at the gate, she called: "Hey! Time for supper."

"I haven't got it ready yet," boomed Uncle. He rolled up his sleeves.

Red Treasure barred the way to the northern room. "Don't you stir. Try my cooking today."

"Fine, fine. Let's see what sort of cook you are." Uncle beamed. Seating himself at the table he said to me, "This child wants to learn everything: date-raising, farming, needlework, and now cooking."

Young people are resilient: they soon forget their troubles. Now Red Treasure was once more as carefree and lively as at the time of my arrival. She danced out with a basin in her hands.

The basin was filled with lentil and millet porridge garnished with dates. She gave each of us a big bowlful, but only ladled half a bowl for herself, squatting by the small table to eat. Then, abruptly, her mood changed again. She seemed downcast, restless. No matter how Uncle praised her cooking and tried to humour her, she said not a word.

At last he lost patience and bellowed: "Don't bolt your food!"

"I've something to do." She put down the bowl, took a mattock and hurried away.

I wanted to call her back, but Uncle signed to me not to. When she was out of earshot he explained, "The child's gone to see those old date trees. These days she's got them so much on her mind that she's lost her appetite. If you call me crazy about trees, she's worse. But you have to give yourself heart and soul to a job to make a go of it. Red Treasure's a girl in a thousand - there's no stopping her."

After supper, I went out alone to look for these old date trees and Red Treasure. I saw a group of girls coming towards me through the orchard. They were neither talking nor laughing, but looked as if they had something on their minds. Before I could greet them they called to me from a distance: "Go and fetch Red Treasure home. We can't budge her. It's getting dark and it's no use her sitting there."

I walked in the direction they indicated. After crossing a ditch I caught sight of Red Treasure seated on a heap of freshly dug soil, a book and the mattock beside her. Her fine brows were knitted and, chin in hand, she was staring at the ground.

Suddenly she jumped to her feet and started digging round another old date tree. The branches of the tree shook as she swung her mattock. After working for a while she mopped her perspiring face, then squatted down to eve the hole she had made.

I wondered whether I should call her or not.

Just then she let out a cry: "Aha! Got you at last!" She leapt for joy as if she had discovered some treasure. Then, snatching up mattock and book, she started racing back. The mattock grazed some branches; data cascaded down. She was too excited to notice. And when she spotted me she could only gasp out, "Brother!!"

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"What's up?"

"For months, I've been racking my brains. Now I've found the answer."

"Answer to what?"

Laying down the book and mattock, she led me back to the tree where she had been digging. Its branches were so loaded with dates that they were sagging. Pointing to it she said: "Look here! This tree had no dates for seven years. Some of its roots were cut this spring, but I stopped them from digging it up, and fresh roots have since grown. Now look at that tree." She pulled me over to another tree with sparse foliage and no fruit, the roots of which she had also exposed. "This tree wasn't touched this spring, so it still has the same old, bald roots. The difference between the two trees made everything clear!"

"It's not clear to me." I shook my head.

"Don't be so dense! Haven't you ever studied natural science? Plants, like people, need nourishment which they imbibe through their roots. The more roots they have the more nourishment they get and the better they grow. See this tree. Its roots were cut back in spring, there covered with soil, and a whole lot of new roots have grown from the places cut ..."

"I get it!" I cried, clapping.

"This is the method of rejuvenation," she went on, her face radiant. "We can try it out in future on all our old date trees. Prune the old roots, apply fertilizer, then water them to make fresh root-hairs grow." While speaking, she picked a few of the biggest dates. "Know what these are?"

"Dates!" I grinned.

"Comrade, it's a staple food," she corrected me. "Increasing the output of dates means increasing our country's food output. Understand?" She put the dates in my hand. "These are fruits of victory, taste them. Aren't they sweet?"

I popped a date in my mouth and started munching. Sweet? It was sweeter than any date I had ever tasted.

[Translated by Marsha Wagner]

Questions:

1. What ideals is the author communicating to his readers in this story?
2. Why should Red Treasure have wanted to return to the countryside?
3. What generational differences do you see in the story?
4. What aspects of the story appeal most to you or are easiest to identify with? What aspects seem the most alien to you? Why?