TWO CELEBRATED WORKS of fiction, written twenty years apart, present very different pictures of rural China in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was the time of the Great Leap Forward, the utopian scheme designed to catapult China into the ranks of the world’s leading military and industrial powers that instead precipitated the greatest famine of the twentieth century. Li Zhun’s short story “A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang,” of which the version translated here was published in 1960, shows the Great Leap Forward as it should have been, and was in the official press of the day: a time of hope, common purpose, and irrepressible energy that would liberate peasant women from drudgery into active participation in the life of the nation. By contrast, Zhang Yigong’s short novel The Story
of the Criminal Li Tongzhong, dating from 1980, was among the first works to show a markedly less triumphal side to the Great Leap, portraying it as a time of hunger and heartless mismanagement, when Communist Party officials were willing to sacrifice peasant lives in order to impress their superiors.

The authors of these two works, Li Zhun (1928–2000) and Zhang Yigong (1935–) were both born and raised in Henan, the central Chinese province where the most grandiose plans for increasing production in the Great Leap were supported by mendacious accounting and followed by draconian grain levies based on gross overestimates of crop yields that led to mass starvation. Their fictional works, taken together, give a picture of the Great Leap’s optimistic start and the tragedy that followed in one part of the country most terribly affected.

Each work is a superior example of the literary style of its time. “Li Shuangshuang” exhibits the “combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism” introduced in the late 1950s to replace the Soviet doctrine of socialist realism from which it was derived; the Chinese formulation was designed to portray the nation’s progress toward a glorious communist future in the most ideal terms, the world as it should be (from the point of view of the ruling Communist Party), and was about to become, rather than as it actually was. Fiction of the period offered images of heroic figures for a new age, young workers or peasants mastering new technologies and achieving prodigious increases in output, and (as in the present case) women emerging enthusiastically from the confines of the home to play a leading role in attaining the goals set by the national leadership. Li Tongzhong, written two decades later, is an example of the “Wounds” literature briefly prevalent in the years following the 1979 publication of the story from which the genre took its name. Wounds literature focused on tragedies and injustices suffered in the recent past (usually the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, but
INTRODUCTION

occasionally the Great Leap Forward as well), that had been brought about by factional division within the Communist Party and ultra-leftist policies zealously applied by misguided or malicious officials, but the authors invariably expressed confidence that the new Party leaders and those rehabilitated officials who had been disgraced and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, would right the wrongs committed by their predecessors. The most common central characters of Wounds fiction are virtuous Communist Party officials who sacrifice themselves to uphold the true values of the Party, which their superiors are bent on subverting or destroying; in Li Tongzhong’s case, he takes the law into his own hands and feeds the starving at the cost of his position and his life.

The Great Leap and the Famines

The Great Leap Forward was launched in 1958 on the initiative of Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong; it was his response to events both inside China and outside, principally in the Soviet Union. From the time Mao gained leadership of the Communist Party during the Long March in the mid-1930s until his death in 1976, his biography was inextricably linked with all the triumphs and disasters of the nation. Both those who, like the post-Mao rulers of China, regard Mao as a great leader who made serious errors and those who view him as a heartless tyrant can deploy the evidence of the Great Leap to support their cause.²

By the late 1950s the transformation of the system of ownership in the People’s Republic had been completed: land was owned by state-controlled collectives rather than by individuals or families, and industry and commerce had been nationalized, allowing for the same sort of centralized management of the economy that was practiced in the Soviet Union. An attempt to elicit greater support from China’s intellectuals for the development strategies of
the Communist Party, by allowing greater latitude for expression in the Hundred Flowers movement in mid-decade, had backfired when the intellectuals used their newfound freedom to criticize the rule of the Communist bureaucracy as autocratic and stultifying. Mao’s reaction was to launch the Anti-rightist campaign, which led to the condemnation and ostracization of hundreds of thousands of researchers, teachers, journalists, artists, and other intellectuals. The campaign reinforced the hostility many Party officials felt toward the intellectuals, and in addition the purges denied the state the expertise that might have argued against the more absurd projections and fantastic pseudoscience of the Great Leap. Beyond China’s borders, the relationship between the Communist parties of China and the Soviet Union was deteriorating following the condemnation by the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, of his predecessor Joseph Stalin. The two countries’ uneasy alliance transformed into a bitter enmity, coupled with a rivalry for influence in the developing world. Since Mao now viewed the Soviet Union as a potential military threat, he felt even greater urgency to make China an industrial and military power in the shortest possible time, by accelerating the production of steel and developing the technology for an atom bomb.

Khrushchev had pledged that the Soviet Union would overtake the United States in the production of steel, and Mao resolved that China should surpass the United Kingdom by the same marker; this required a massive investment in heavy industry. New factories were built, and rural residents were brought in to staff them, doubling the size of the urban proletariat; scientists and technicians were redeployed to work on the Chinese atom bomb. At the same time, however, China was paying for the assistance that the Soviet Union had provided in the early 1950s, and it was also committed to providing food aid to selected countries in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.
The burden of feeding the burgeoning proletariat, meeting the demand for food at home and overseas, and even providing raw material for the new steel mills fell on China’s peasants. The process of collectivization that had begun following the dispossession of the landlords and the redistribution of the land was completed with the establishment of the People’s Communes; the peasants had been transformed from farmers of their own land to agricultural laborers producing for the state. Public canteens were set up to free women from domestic duties and increase the labor force for agricultural production and for construction projects that included reservoirs and dams. To produce iron, villagers were required to mine for ore, to operate hastily built “backyard furnaces,” and even to give up whatever metal objects they owned; they also cut down trees to provide fuel to keep the furnaces burning. This expenditure of raw materials and human energy was unsustainable, but state and Party policies and quotas were rigorously enforced, with peasants being savagely punished by local officials if they failed to work the interminable hours demanded of them.

Those engaged in the production of grain were expected to achieve huge increases in harvests, based on the assumption that land could be made to yield as much as the grower dared to wish for. In pseudoscientific leaps of faith more extreme than those of Stalin’s peasant agronomist Lysenko, peasants were told that deep digging and close planting would result in unprecedented levels of production and so dug through fertile topsoil and squandered seed grain in labor-intensive, wasteful experimental plots. A leading proponent of these fantasies was Henan’s First Party Secretary Wu Zhipu, who claimed in 1958 that as a result of a philosophical leap forward on the part of the peasants of his province, rice paddies there had yielded seventy times as much as they had in the past. Communes were pressured into reporting incredible yields of grain, regardless of what was actually produced, and predicting even larger harvests.
to come. They were then taxed according to their inflated reports and false predictions, rather than the actual amount grown, which left them with little grain for food or seed. Mao appears to have allowed himself to be persuaded by the lies he was fed by Wu Zhipu and others, and by the staged demonstrations of bountiful harvests that he saw as he traveled the country on his private train. A plentiful supply of food seemed assured.

The famines began before the Great Leap’s first year was out. The demand for labor in iron production and at construction projects left too few people to gather the 1958 harvest, and there was neither seed grain nor a workforce for the fall planting. When the canteens ran out of food, the peasants had no private plots to fall back on or kitchen utensils with which to cook for themselves. Guards were placed at granaries and on the trains that transported grain away from the countryside to protect it from theft by the people who had grown it. China’s top leaders had to have known, from Party documents with an extremely limited circulation among the elite, of the suffering that the Great Leap was causing in the countryside, but they resolved to demand continued sacrifice rather than scale back on Mao’s plans for modernizing the Chinese state. Not until 1962, with tens of millions dead in the countryside and food shortages threatening social stability in the cities, was the Great Leap effectively abandoned. Exports of food were halted, relief grain was imported from France, Australia, and Canada, and millions of the workers brought to the city at the beginning of the Leap were sent back to their villages. In the countryside, communes were permitted to close the public canteens (which most had done already when supplies ran out), and peasants were allowed to cultivate private plots to feed themselves. To avoid embarrassment to Mao and the Party leadership, the failure of the Great Leap was not admitted or addressed for twenty years, and even fifty years later the topic remains politically sensitive.
Li Zhun: Creating the Great Leap New Woman

A chance encounter in the late 1950s at a Henan village office with a local peasant woman provided the young author Li Zhun with the starting point for his most famous character, Li Shuangshuang, the feisty young wife who demands to take part in the excitement of the Great Leap, finds fulfillment in collective labor, organizes a public canteen, invents a new kind of noodles, and wins the heart of her conservative and formerly abusive husband in the process. The young woman Li Zhun met that day had come to complain to Party officials about her husband, whom she felt was too timid to meet the challenges of the Great Leap; when her tirade was interrupted by the ringing of the office telephone, she started shouting at that as well. Amused by her innocence and boldness, Li Zhun used her as one model for his heroine. Shuangshuang’s name, and her habit of leaving notes around the house to celebrate her progression toward literacy, came from a source closer to the author: his wife. Dong Bing, whose childhood name was Shuangshuang, attended classes in the 1950s, because she feared that her more educated husband, whom she married by family arrangement, would tire of her if she remained illiterate. While these two real women provided inspiration, they were not the only sources for Li Shuangshuang’s forthright, humorous character: Li Zhun, who was far better read than his designation as a “village writer” implies, drew from earlier traditions as well. His heroine’s swift repartee derives from the medieval story of the strong-willed bride Li Cuilian, who on her wedding day insults her own and her husband’s parents, as well as others involved in the wedding, then threatens her husband with violence if he lays a finger on her, before she finally resolves to have nothing to do with any of them and goes to live as a nun. Li Shuangshuang’s tendency to sudden mirth recalls the charming fox fairy Yingning, the title character in a story in the eighteenth-century
collection of tales of the supernatural, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* by Pu Songling, who giggles uncontrollably in unlikely and inappropriate situations. Li Zhun did not admit these literary sources for more than thirty years after the story was written, because they might not have been thought suitable as models for a new socialist woman, but they add substance to the portrait of a woman who is resourceful, good-hearted, capable, and forceful — just the kind of woman the Communist Party needed to add to the labor pool for the Great Leap.

Li Shuangshuang, and the many works that bear her name, was the cultural success story of the Great Leap. The author believed that the story was reprinted over 400 times in numerous editions and read by 300 million people; in addition, the story was adapted as a comic strip and made into comic books, a film, and numerous local operatic forms. Throughout the many plot variations, the core of the story remained the same: the relationship between the spirited young peasant woman Li Shuangshuang and her much less progressive husband Sun Xiwang. Although the first version of the story was written in March 1959, the text translated here is the one that appeared in the premier literary journal, *People’s Literature*, the following year. In both, Shuangshuang proposes setting up a collective canteen to allow maximum participation in the Great Leap by young wives. She takes over the canteen’s management, to great acclaim, and invents a recipe for “Great Leap” noodles, made in part from sweet-potato flour, when wheat flour is in short supply. In the 1960 version of the story, the author has added Xiwang’s miraculous training of the pigs to come when he plays their music on his reed pipe. The film *Li Shuangshuang*, with Zhang Ruifang in the title role, was made in 1962, after the demise of the public canteens, and the plot shifted focus to the allocation of work points, especially to women, in the new commune system. The movie adds a subplot in which a young couple choose each
other as marriage partners despite the desire of the girl’s parents to marry her to someone with more status than a peasant, which complements the story of Shuangshuang and Xiwang falling in love after marriage.

“A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang” is a story by a male author about female empowerment, where a pioneering woman proves herself a man’s equal or superior in initiative, labor, and ideology and becomes more attractive in the process. Li Shuangshuang and her friends are capable of prodigious feats of labor, including entire nights of extra work, as well as social and technical innovation. The story is an affectionate portrait of both Shuangshuang and her husband Xiwang (whom the author claimed to have modeled in part on himself), peasants learning to be the kinds of people the new socialist society needed, and the author derives humor from their grappling with the new political vocabulary of the day. Now, almost half a century after the brief experiment with the canteens and the failure of the Great Leap, it is impossible to read the story without a sense of irony provided by knowledge of what awaited Shuangshuang and her neighbors in the future toward which she was rushing so blithely.

Zhang Yigong: Voicing the Donkey’s Complaint

During the process of collectivization in the 1950s, which took the Chinese peasantry from individual farming at the outset of the People’s Republic to the People’s Communes in the Great Leap Forward, the novelist Zhang Yigong was working as a cub reporter; his assignment was to report on praiseworthy examples of the implementation of Communist Party policy and outstanding individuals who could serve as models for his paper’s readers. His visits to villages where the collectivization policies were being implemented, however, told him that the peasants were not as enthusiastic about
the process as the official media reported. One winter’s night, after
the inhabitants of one village had been ordered to turn over their
privately owned livestock to the collective stock barn, Zhang was
invited to participate in a modest act of rebellion: members of one
family had decided to slaughter and eat their donkey rather than
see it leave their possession. By the time Zhang arrived at the house
where the feast was to take place, the carcass was already cooking
in a gigantic pot. The animal’s head was at the top, its jaws chatter-
ing together in the fiercely boiling water, in what Zhang imag-
ined as a litany of complaint at the fate that collectivization had
brought him. Zhang has never retold this incident in his fiction,
but it echoes in two places in The Story of the Criminal Li Tong-
zhong: first in the protest the central character infers from the last
bellow of an ox slaughtered to feed the hungry villagers, and then in
an absurd tale of animal dental hygiene the inventive village official
Zhang Shuangxi fabricates in an attempt to satisfy the leadership’s
insatiable appetite for good news. Through the novel, the donkey
finally speaks, adding its protest to those of the silenced peasants
who perished in the famine years.

Like Li Zhun’s heroine Li Shuangshuang, Zhang Yigong’s hero
Li Tongzhong is based in part on a real person: in the late 1950s,
Zhang heard the story of a demobilized veteran whose lungs were
damaged during the Korean War who was put in charge of a home
for the elderly and disabled; when there was nothing for his charges
to eat in the famine years, he arranged with the local peasants to
steal from a public granary. This was not the kind of heroic tale his
editors wished him to write, so Zhang simply noted it down. When
the time came to write his novel twenty years later, he changed the
disability from damaged lungs to a lost leg, and the position of the
veteran to that of a local Communist Party secretary, and so cre-
ated Li Tongzhong. Li Tongzhong is, like many central characters
in early post-Mao fiction, both hero and victim, the model of what
a Communist Party official should be who suffers for his virtue at a
time when the Party has lost its senses.

The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong reads at times like a
parody of the buoyant propaganda of the Great Leap period, includ-
ing “A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang.” The “Hot-shot” official,
Yang Wenxiu, who is determined to advance his career by meet-
ing the demands of his superiors whatever the cost to the peasants
he controls, is reminiscent of Henan Province’s First Party Secre-
tary, Wu Zhipu, who claimed that political directives could result in
massive increases in agricultural production. Wu’s formulation of
“The Philosophy of the Great Leap and a Great Leap in Philosophy”
is parroted by Yang Wenxiu. The public expressions of triumph,
including poetic eulogies, awards, parades, and public commendations,
so common in the writing of the Great Leap era, are a source
of bitter irony here, coming as they do while the majority of peas-
ants are starving. The communal kitchens lauded in “Li Shuang-
shuang” are portrayed in Li Tongzhong as a failure, and successes in
creating substitute foods from unlikely materials (like Li Shuang-
shuang’s sweet-potato-based “Great Leap” noodles) are fraudulent,
with the foodstuffs either made from the very materials they are
said to replace or devoid of any nutritional benefit. Zhang Yigong
loses few opportunities to mock the absurd claims made for the
Great Leap by its proponents, and the succession of campaigns and
public works projects that stretched the peasants to the limits of
their endurance. Comic, even farcical, as Li Tongzhong can be at
times, the overall tone is one of moral outrage and righteous anger.
And while the new political terminology is a source of gentle fun
in “Li Shuangshuang,” as the modestly educated peasants learn the
vocabulary of “leaping forward,” “blooming and contending,” and
“retrogressionism,” Zhang Yigong gives the words a sinister, even
Orwellian, tone in his novel, where the rhetoric of progress is used
to impoverish and punish the peasants.
Translating the Great Leap

The two translations here were made in collaboration with former students at the University of Victoria: “A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang” by two recent graduates, and The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong by a group of upper-level undergraduates. Partial translations of earlier versions of both works appear in a special edition of the translation journal Renditions (Fall 2007); these sections are reproduced with the kind permission of the journal’s editors, Anders Hansson and Bonnie S. McDougall, and include Bonnie McDougall’s translation of the doggerel proverb on married life in “Li Shuangshuang.” I am indebted to the authors Li Zhun and Zhang Yigong for talking to me about their work and answering questions about the texts translated here, and to Dong Bing and Li Kewei (Li Zhun’s widow and son) and Zhang Yigong for permitting their publication in translation. I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of my colleagues Lin Tsung-cheng, Tian Jun, Yvonne Walls, and Zhou Kefen with the translation; Michael Schoenhals for his comments on the glossary; and, for their generous and perceptive comments, the two anonymous readers invited by the University of Hawai‘i Press to review the manuscript. I believe that the fiction of the Great Leap, both the optimistic stories written at the time and the later, darker, reconstructions of the era, is an indispensable part of the record of the initial euphoria, and subsequent despair, of that extraordinary time.

Notes

1. Lu Xinhua’s story “Shanghen” (Wounds) was first published in the Shanghai newspaper Wenhuibao (Cultural gazette) on August 11, 1978, and was subsequently included in numerous anthologies. Two collections of translations of stories from this period are: Bennett Lee and Geremie Barmé, trans., The Wounded: New Stories of the Cultural Revolution (Hong Kong: Joint Pub-


3. I spoke to Li Zhun about his work in 1993, 1996, and 1998; much of the information about the writing of his story comes from those interviews.


5. For Yingning, see Denis C. Mair and Victor H. Mair, *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989), pp. 73–89.

6. Zhang Yigong provided this memory, and other material on the story, in a 2002 interview.