

小井胡同

Small Well Lane

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Small Well Lane

A Contemporary Chinese Play
and Oral History

by Li Longyun

*Translated and edited by
Hong Jiang and Timothy Cheek*

Ann Arbor

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The people's revolution was inspired by sacred beliefs. Because the revolution was great and victorious, the people were uplifted, and worshiped it. But those who threw their lives into revolution—especially the young—received nothing but inexplicable persecution and retaliation, carried out against them in the name of revolution. Was this an absurd tragedy? Was this an experiment that could not be avoided? Was this a universal law of history? Was this worthwhile, or was it a total waste?

—Wang Meng, *Bolshevik Salute*

Translators' Note

Small Well Lane (*Xiaojing hutong*, 小井胡同) was first published in *Drama* (*Juben*) in 1981 and published again in 1985 in the journal *Bell Mountain* (*Zhongshan*), with some revisions in order to accommodate political criticism. Later the play was included in the book *Debates on Small Well Lane* (*Xiaojing fengbo lu*) (Harbin: Heilongjiang Publishing House, 1987). The play was permitted to run for three performances to invited guests only in 1983 and was finally brought to the public in 1985 after several revisions. The play was then cordially welcomed by Beijing audiences and ran consistently for more than one hundred performances to full houses. In 1998 *Small Well Lane* was adapted into a twenty-nine-episode television series for Shanghai TV. The text for this translation, however, is the first version of the play published in *Drama* in 1981. We feel it best reflects the author's intentions. The title carries the many layers of meaning in even the simple things of everyday life. The character *jing* (井) generally means a well, as in a water well. Yet in colloquial usage *jing* also can mean a courtyard (as in *tian jing* 天井) in a traditional four-sided family compound (see "Sense of Place" in the introduction). Since *Xiaojing hutong* has already been discussed in English-language studies as *Small Well Lane*, we have maintained that translation.

Small Well Lane is not Li Longyun's 李龙云 first play, but it is the one by which he has earned his literary prominence. Li Longyun was born in 1948 in Beijing. In 1968, like many urban youth of his generation, he was sent down to a military farm in the Great Northern Wilderness of outer Manchuria to accept reeducation from farmers and soldiers during the Cultural Revolution. He worked there in manual labor for ten years. In 1978, at age thirty, he passed the college

entrance exam and entered the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Heilongjiang University. He studied there for only one year, took the graduate exam, and became a graduate student of Chen Baichen 陈白尘, a well-known playwright and scholar at Nanjing University. He received his master's degree in Dramatic Literature from Nanjing University in 1981 and has been working at Beijing People's Art Theater as a professional playwright since then.

Li Longyun's first literary effort, the poem "A Song in Winds and Rains," appeared in *Chinese Literature (Zhongguo wenxue)* in 1972. Since then he has published four one-act plays (*Wash Three Times*, *The Fan*, *Profane Society*, and *A Collection of Li Longyun's Humor*), five multi-act plays (*There Is a Small Courtyard*, *Small Well Lane*, *Not Far from the Old Summer Palace*, *Wilderness and Man*, and *Under the Red Banner*), and one television series (*Small Well Lane*). Among them *Wilderness and Man* is another influential work, which has been translated into German and Japanese. His publications also include three novels and some essays on dramatic theories. For a list of Li's works in Chinese, see the bibliography.

We would like to thank all those who have helped us bring this project to fruition. We owe a special thanks to Haiping Yan for encouraging us to undertake this translation. Readers of this play will benefit from reading Professor Yan's introduction and the plays translated in her collection *Theater and Society: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998). She and Mark Selden pushed us to do our best work. We are also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for the press. Their detailed comments and suggestions have improved what you now see. Our gratitude goes as well to Michigan's perspicacious editors, Ingrid Erickson and Marcia LaBrenz. Finally, we thank Li Longyun for his permission to publish this translation and for his assistance with the photographs.

H.J. and T.C.

Preface to the English Edition

Li Longyun

I grew up in the southern part of the old downtown area of Beijing. The little alley where we lived had a rather civilized name, “the small well.” Small well lane was old and crumbling, but in my heart and in my memories it is forever lively, warm, and filled with tenderness. Like a mother, it offered me a gentle breast to rest upon and a strong hand to guide my first steps. . . . I believe that every writer has a piece of land that his heart calls home, and every hometown has its own unique smell, color, taste, and song. I never stop dreaming of the old arch over the gate made of green brick and the worn down couplets on either side of the gate. I still can hear my grandma’s singing, “Little boy, in front of the gate: crying and yelling for a little ‘wife,’” and all the beautiful folktales she told me in those summer nights when I slept under the moon and stars. I still remember hiding behind grapevines to wait quietly for the moment when Niu Lang would meet Zhi Nü under the moon when I was five years old. . . . It is upon such a hometown that a writer’s life depends and by which he defies death.

I experienced the historical and political vicissitudes of this lane and shared its happiness and bitterness. I had taught my neighborhood aunties to sing revolutionary songs and helped the uncles to make steel for building our dreamed-for communist paradise. Like many of my childhood friends, I joined the Red Guards to destroy cultural treasures while thinking that we were fighting for the nation and Party.

But no matter how difficult it is to explain our history (perhaps it will never be understood) and how coldly that history used our

innocence and faith for various political goals and personal power-plays in the name of revolution, still the common folk of Small Well Lane are the participants and evaluators of history, of its success and its failures. When the nation turns over its old page and begins its new tasks, the people of Small Well Lane are the ones who will again faithfully join that task and run to that new ideal, even though they have been deeply hurt in the past. They are the backbone of the nation! Therefore, I wrote about them and tell their stories. I want everyone to know that there is a Small Well Lane in the southern part of Beijing and that the people who live there have pure and golden hearts.

I have always believed that the people in Small Well Lane understand me, just as I understand them. Thus, there will have to be more stories—the second, third, fourth Small Well Lane. . . . I am glad to see that American readers are going to meet my friends in Small Well Lane and to listen to their own stories.

Beijing

September 2000