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Man and Wife Learn to Read

By Ma Ke

translated by David Holm

Dramatis Personae
LIU ER, a young peasant   LIU'S WIFE

Enter Liu Er

LIU ER: [recites lianzizi: "patter-mouth"]
Talking 'bout change, change,
Making people's customs change,
Studying culture, learning to read.
I, Liu Er, used not to read.
In three days twice I'd look the fool.
I went to market in Qianzhuang,
Cotton my wife told me to buy.
A brand new thousand dollar note
I spent as a fifty. So . . .
The crowd did laugh,
My wife did scold,
You tell me I'm not a pumpkin-head,
You tell me I'm not a pumpkin-head!
This year we made output plans,
The public sent a man to help.
I speak up, he writes it down,
Once he's gone, I've forgotten it!
Other people's plans were set,
I thought a plan was too much sweat.
Black little words on paper white,
I could not make them out aright.
Other men did things to plan,
Output got on really grand.
I'd not a plan of any kind,
People said I'd got just one hand.
My output's faulty compared with them.
The crowd did laugh at me,
The wife she scolded me.
I went home and looked at the plan,
White paper, black words—what a drag.
I couldn't make them out aright.

The crowd did laugh at me,
The wife she scolded me.
You tell me I'm not a pumpkin-head,
You tell me I'm not a pumpkin-head!
Study culture! Study culture!
Be a word-blind man no longer!
Reading squads, newspaper squads,
Just give your name, participate!
Little boys, little girls,
Old men, women too,
You teach me, I'll teach him,
As happy and lively as one family.
[gradually faster]
Now that I've got culture in my belly,
Everyone says that's really jolly.
Now this word-blind man can see,
The world's getting wider in front of my eyes.
I can read the papers,
I can write letters,
I can reckons bills,
I can keep accounts.
[sings Yangge-tune: "Yangge tune"]

From now on, let's raise up our culture, a great fanshen,
Muddleheads, become clever men.
Of our food and clothes we've guarantee,
No man of us will suffer poverty.

My name's Liu Er. Tonight our village is electing its model
reading student. I'm going home to tell my wife to come to
the meeting.

[sings huyin gangdiao: "Ornamented gangdiao"]

I, Liu Er, walk along, feeling very fine.
I take out my reading book and read a few lines:
"Being a farmer's preferable to commercial trades,
For each seed in the ground, in the barn ten thousand laid.
Diligently plough and plant, make hay and store grain.
Three years plough, put one aside, prepare for lack of rain."

Exit

Enter Liu's Wife

LIU'S WIFE: [reading aloud]
"Produce, produce. Have food, have clothes. Study, study.
Read books, learn the script. In production be a model. In
Somebody’s asking who am I. I’m the wife of that Liu Er. Me and my man have made out a plan for learning to read. The two of us compete, and we’ve got to learn at least two characters a day. While I’ve been spinning thread I’ve also memorized these two characters—I wonder if he’s memorized his? Ah! Just let me quickly hang up the reading board. Then when he comes home, if he recognizes them well and good; if he doesn’t—hmmpf! I’ll see to it that he gets nothing to eat, gets no sleep, and spends the night kneeling on his knees till daybreak! Then we’ll see if he don’t pay attention.

Enter Liu Er

LIU’S WIFE: [coughs]

Heh! Speak of the devil, here he comes. Let’s pretend I haven’t noticed.

[sits on the ground and copies characters from the reading board]

LIU ER: [comes in; sees what his wife is doing; makes an ugly face; then comes up to her and gives her a shove]

Hey, look here when a body’s been out working all day, and he comes back home, you don’t raise your head, you don’t say a word . . . just a clay idol in a temple. Which god are you pretending to be?

LIU’S WIFE:

Ah! What are you playing at? Where’ve your eyes got to? Haven’t you noticed that somebody’s studying here?!

LIU ER:

Never mind your studying. I’m asking you, have you boiled up the pig-swill yet?

LIU’S WIFE:

Boiled it up long since.

LIU ER:

Have you fed the piglets?

LIU’S WIFE:

Fed ’em long since.

LIU ER:

Have you led the livestock in to their stalls?

LIU’S WIFE:

They’re led in.

LIU ER:

Have you brought the coverlet and blanket back into the cave?

LIU’S WIFE:

They’re brought in.

LIU ER:

Have you shut up the pigs and sheep?

LIU’S WIFE:

They’re shut up.

LIU ER:

Have you shoed the hens and ducks into their nests?

LIU’S WIFE:

They’re shoed in.

LIU ER:

Have you fetched the water?

LIU’S WIFE:

It’s fetched.

LIU ER:

Have you cooked the dinner?
LIU'S WIFE:
It's cooked.
LIU ER:
Well bring it in, then.

LIU'S WIFE:
Bring what in?
LIU ER:
The food.
LIU'S WIFE:
Oh you don't mean to say you want to eat?
LIU ER:
What is she playing at! A man that's been working hard all
day, why he'll just starve to death if he don't eat.

LIU'S WIFE:
So you want to eat?
[Pulls Liu Er down to the reading board]
LIU ER:
What're you doing?
LIU'S WIFE:
Learning to read.
LIU ER:
You can't eat learning to read!

LIU'S WIFE:
Don't act stupid. Just let me test you: have you forgotten
the two characters you memorized today?
LIU ER: [Aside]
Hai (sigh), I've taken her ... Look at my wife now,
studying culture. She's altogether enthusiastic! Let me
search her out a bit.
[towards Liu's Wife]
Well now, my baby's mother, you see I've been out working
all day, and when I got back I went to the mutual aid team
meeting. I haven't even had time to catch my breath, so
where would I get the time to learn characters?

LIU'S WIFE:
You haven't learned your characters?

LIU ER:
I haven't!

LIU'S WIFE:
That just won't do!

LIU ER:
Won't do? What're you going to do about it?

LIU'S WIFE:
Do about it? You learn those characters for me. Learn them
off, write them down. Write them down, memorize them. If
you can recognize them, well and good. But if you can't
recognize them, I'll see to it that you get nothing to eat, get
no sleep, and spend the night kneeling on your knees till
daybreak! Then we'll see if you don't pay attention!

LIU ER:
Very well now, wife of mine! Look, today I've worked all
day long. I'm dog-tired, and that's it for today. Tomorrow I
won't go out to the fields: I'll wrack my brains for you
learning characters at home.

LIU'S WIFE:
Eh?

LIU ER:
No, no. I'll learn characters for myself. I'll learn ten in the
morning, ten in the afternoon, and carry on at night and
learn another ten.

LIU'S WIFE:
That won't do, that won't do! You should do both
productive labour and learn to read. Then you won't get
into the red by learning to read. So be serious and squat
down there and learn those characters.

LIU ER: [Sigh!]
Just let me eat and then I'll learn the characters.

LIU'S WIFE:
Nope.

LIU ER:
Really no?

LIU'S WIFE:
Really no. I'm not fooling.

LIU ER:
Just let me ... [raises his fist and pretends to hit her]
(Sigh!) Alright I'll learn those characters for you.
[The two sing alternately xi quqian- "Playing on the Swing"]

LIU'S WIFE: [Sings]
Just as in the pitch-black sky ... 

LIU ER: [Sings]
Little stars appear,

LIU'S WIFE: [Sings]
Words on the blackboard ... 

LIU ER: [Sings]
Shed their light far and near.

LIU'S WIFE: [Sings]
Written words . . .

LIU ER: [Sings]
Shed their light.
The two words we've studied I've got quite clear.

LIU'S WIFE: [Sings]
Got quite clear,

LIU ER: [Sings]
Got quite clear,

LIU'S WIFE: [Sings]
You should explain their meaning here.
Why should a farmer man learn to read?

LIU ER: [Sings]
If he doesn't he won't know 'bout great events and deeds.
In the old days, we couldn't read.
Fumbling in the dark we'd be taken in.

LIU ER & LIU'S WIFE: [Sing in unison]
Now though we have all turned over,
Laborers have become householders.
As word-blind men how can we live?
At yo studying culture is most imperative en ai yo.

LIU ER:
Baby's Ma, have a look at these two characters: one of
them is the character xue, for study, and one's the character
xi, for practice. Isn't this right, would you say?

LIU'S WIFE:
You're just talking off the top of your head. If you have a
wild guess and happen to get it right, that doesn't count.

LIU ER:
Why doesn't it count?

LIU'S WIFE:
If you can remember them but can't explain them, it's as if
you hadn't remembered them. If you can explain them but
can't write them down, it's as if you hadn't explained them.
You've got to write them down as well.

LIU ER:
I've got to write them down as well.

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LIU’S WIFE:
That’s right, you’ve got to write them down as well.

LIU ER:
Very well, Baby’s Ma, I’ll write them down for you.

LIU’S WIFE:
O.K., you do it then.

LIU ER:
A dot . . . a line . . . a hook . . . a basin . . .
[pretending he can’t write the character, sneaks a look at the reading board]

LIU’S WIFE:
You mustn’t look, you mustn’t look!
[runs over and stands in front of the reading board]

LIU ER:
Who’s looking? A dot . . . a line . . . a hook . . . a basin . . . a hole-in-the-ground here . . . a fork there . . . Is this right or wrong would you say?

LIU’S WIFE:
It’s wrong.

LIU ER:
Which one is wrong?

LIU’S WIFE:
This character xue is wrong.

LIU ER:
How is it wrong?

LIU’S WIFE:
You have a look at that character xue on the reading board. Long strokes, short strokes, there’s bound to be ten-odd strokes in all. It’s not easy to write, for sure. Now this character xue of yours, it’s got the character xiao for “small” on top, it’s got the character si for “son” on the bottom: you’ve cheated on your contract and sold us short on the building materials, so it doesn’t look a bit like that character xue.

LIU ER:
Oh my aren’t you clever! The character written on the reading board is in longhand. The one I wrote is an abbreviated character. They’re the same.

LIU’S WIFE:
They’re the same?

LIU ER:
They’re the same.

[LIU’S Wife kneels on the ground and writes the character xue]

LIU ER: [aside]
Just look at that woman. She’s made me jump through hoops, now let me give her a test as well.
[to LIU’S Wife]
Hey, you’ve examined me, now I want to test you, too. Those two words we learned yesterday, have you forgotten them yet?

LIU’S WIFE:
Oh dear! Yesterday’s words I’m afraid I still haven’t got memorized into my bone-joints yet.

LIU ER:
If you can remember them, you read them out to me. If you read them out correctly, well and good. But if you don’t read them out correctly, I’ll see to it that you get nothing to eat, get no sleep, and spend the night kneeling on your knees till daybreak! Then we’ll see if you don’t pay attention!

[turns reading board around]

LIU’S WIFE:
Ah! “Zhu Bajie strikes them down with a single stroke of the rake,”! You haven’t been taken in at all! Alright, Baby’s Pa, you listen while I learn characters for you!
[sings xi qiuqian—“Playing on the Swing”]
This reading board of ours is like a lamp so bright.

LIU ER: [sings]
These words here on the board . . .

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
Let’s memorize by heart.

LIU ER: [sings]
Which words have you memorized by heart?

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
“Our-play” is what these two characters do spell.

LIU ER: [sings]
What does this word output mean?

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
Of ten thousand different things it’s the start.

LIU ER: [sings]
Men, do your cultivation in work teams,

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
Women, weave cloth and spin thread.

LIU ER: [sings]
Both feed pigs, and herd sheep,

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
Oxen and donkeys fill the pen.

LIU ER: [sings]
On sunny slopes . . .

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
. . . cotton grows,

LIU ER: [sings]
On field’s edge . . .

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
. . . peach trees, pear trees, apricots, date trees—plant them out, pot by pot.

LIU ER: [sings]
Wintertime’s the season slack,

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
Drive on the donkey,

LIU ER: [sings]
Gee-up, girl!

LIU’S WIFE: [sings]
Transport salt.

LIU ER & LIU’S WIFE: [sing in unison]
With well-set peasant household plans, “Plough three, leave one” is a great advance, Big stores are piled high and small stores full of grain, Pleased are we to have sufficient clothes and sustenance, Study culture—the reason’s plain, Ai-bai ai-yo study culture—the reason’s plain.

LIU’S WIFE:
Look, Baby’s Pa, this is the character sbeng, and this is the character cian. Put them together and it’s out-out-pu, put-pu-out, out-out-pu-put, put-pu-out—out—is this right or wrong would you say?

LIU ER:
Ha! The blind man recognizes the needle. It doesn’t count


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if you guess.
LIU'S WIFE:
Why doesn't it count?
LIU ER:
If you can remember them but can't explain them, it's as if you hadn't remembered them. If you can explain them but can't write them down, it's as if you hadn't explained them. You've got to write them down as well.
LIU'S WIFE:
I've got to write them down as well?
LIU ER:
That's right, you've got to write them down as well.
LIU'S WIFE:
You watch, Baby's Pa, I'll write them down for you.
LIU ER:
O.K., you do it then.
LIU'S WIFE:
A dot ... a line ... a hook ... a basin ... a hole-in-the-ground here ... a fork there ... Is this right or wrong would you say?
[Liu Er coughs]
LIU'S WIFE:
That doesn't count, that doesn't count!
[brusly rubs out the characters and writes them out afresh]
A dot ... a line ... a hook ... a basin ... a hole-in-the-ground here ... a fork there ... Is this right or wrong would you say?
LIU ER:
I'd say they're wrong.
[rub out the character sheng in the lower part of the character chan with his foot]
LIU'S WIFE:
Ai! It really was wrong.
LIU ER:
Ai! Yep, and you said you were able to do it! Let me be teacher for you: the character chan with this element sheng is read "chan," and if it don't have this element sheng it's still read "chan"—that's an abbreviated character again. They're the same.
LIU'S WIFE:
They're the same again?
LIU ER:
They're the same.
[Liu's Wife writes the characters on the ground]
LIU ER: [seeing what an active his wife is, smiles]
To look at her studying so enthusiastically, she has it in mind to be a Reading Hero. I'll even cast a vote for her at the meeting tonight.
[to Liu's Wife]
I've got some good news to tell you.
LIU'S WIFE:
What good news?
LIU ER:
Tonight the village government is holding a meeting to elect model reading students. Let's hurry up and get ready to go, and let's also send the whole village a challenge to compete with us.
LIU'S WIFE:
Right! Let's get ready to challenge and compete.
LIU ER:
I've got some more good news to tell you.
LIU'S WIFE:
What more good news?
LIU ER: [takes out his copy of "Farming Vocabulary"]
What do you think this is?
LIU'S WIFE:
That's a little book. Where did you get it? Give me it, give me it!
LIU ER:
I bought it in the co-op in the street market.
[imitates Liu's Wife]
"Give me it, give me it!" Do you know what book it is?
LIU'S WIFE:
What book is it?
LIU ER:
It's called "Farming Vocabulary." You listen and I'll read it for you.
LIU'S WIFE:
Alright, you read it then.
LIU ER: [sings "Ornamented gangdiao"]
"Being a farmer's preferable to commercial trades,"
LIU'S WIFE: [sings after him]
"Being a farmer's preferable ...
[to Liu Er]
What?
LIU ER: [sings]
"... to commercial trades,"
LIU'S WIFE: [sings]
"... to commercial trades,"
LIU ER: [sings]
"For each seed in the ground ...
[Liu's Wife gets ready to grab the book]
LIU ER: [sings]
... ai-ai "in the barn ten thousand laid."
LIU'S WIFE: [sings]
"For each seed in the ground, in the barn ten thousand laid."
LIU ER: [sings]
"Diligently plough and plant, make hay and store grain,"
LIU'S WIFE: [sings]
"Diligently plough and plant, make hay and store grain,"
LIU ER: [sings]
"Three years plough, put one aside, prepare for lack of rain."
LIU'S WIFE: [grabs book and walks off with it]
We women in the spinning and weaving squad are going to learn to read!
LIU ER:
Our mutual aid team is going to learn to read!
LIU'S WIFE: [pretends to throw the book far away]
There! I've thrown it away.
[runs off stage]
[Liu Er runs to the spot, finds it isn't there, and turns round and chases after her]

Finis

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Note: Musical Scores

The system of musical notation used in these scores is the tonic sol-fa system used in the original published version of *Man and Wife Learn to Read*. Tonic sol-fa notation was originally introduced into China by Christian missionaries, and because it was easy to teach and easy to print, it was adopted for use in the numerous song booklets (changbenr) and other musical materials published in the Border Regions during the war. This system is retained here for ease of printing.

In tonic sol-fa notation relative pitch in the major scale is indicated by number: 1 is do, 2 is re, 3 is mi, and so forth.

**Yangge diao** - "Yangko tune"

\[
\begin{array}{c}
X 0 X 0 | X 0 X \\
X X X X X X X | X X X X X \\
\end{array}
\]

From now on, let's raise up our culture, (a) great fanshen, Muddleheads, become clever men. (Of our) food and clothes we've guarantee, No man of us will suffer.

**Huayin gangdiao** - "Ornamented gangdiao"

Key of G

\[
\begin{array}{c}
6 6 1 6 5 | 6 1 3 | 5 1 6 3 | 5 | (1 1 1 6 5) \\
\end{array}
\]

I, Liu Er, walk along feeling very fine.

Being a farmer's prefer-able to com-mercial trades, (instrumental)

Di-li gently plough and plant make hay and store grain.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
2 2 2 5 | 2 2 1 1 | 2 \cdot 2 | 2 - ) | 2 2 2 5 | 6 1 3 |
\end{array}
\]

interlude)

I take out (my) reading book For each seed in the ground Three years plough (have) one to spare

\[
\begin{array}{c}
5 5 6 | 2 \cdot 5 | 1 | (3 3 2 2 3 | 5 \cdot 1 | 6 2 1 6 |
\end{array}
\]

(and) read a few lines in the barn ten thousand laid. (and) read a few lines in the barn ten thousand laid.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
5 | 5 - )
\end{array}
\]
In "Ornamented gangdiao" below, where the key of G is indicated 1 is G, 2 is A, and so forth. A dot above the number makes the note an octave higher; a dot below makes it an octave lower. O stands for a rest, while a horizontal bar indicates the prolongation of the note. X indicates percussion or speaking tone.

Lengbi is indicated by lines below the notes. No line below indicates a quarter-note, one line below an eighth note, two lines a sixteenth. The symbol ∅ with a number above it indicates a grace note.

Most other symbols are the same as those on staff notation. All the tunes below are in 2/4 time.

For further information on how to read music in tonic sol-fa notation, see Zenyang shi jianpu bianxiezu, ed., Zenyang shi jianpu (How to Read Simplified Scores, pub. Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1972).

\[ \text{Xi qiuqian - "Playing on the Swing"} \]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 2 & 1 & 6 & 5 & 6 & 5 & 4 & 2 \\
\hline
i & 6 & 5 & 4 & 2 & 5 & 1 & 5 & 4 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

Just as in the pitch-black sky, little stars appear, Words on the blackboard shed their light far and near. Written words shed their light.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
2 & 2 & b7 & 2 & 4 & 4 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\hline
2 & 2 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

(The) two words (we've) studied I've got quite clear. Got quite clear,

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
5 & 4 & 2 & 4 & 1 \\
\hline
5 & 4 & 1 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

got quite clear, You should explain their meaning here. Why should a farmer man

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
5 & 2 & 5 \\
\hline
5 & 4 & 2 & 4 & 1 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

learn to read? If he doesn't he won't know 'bout great events and deeds.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
5 & 2 & 5 \\
\hline
5 & 4 & 2 & 4 & 1 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

In the old (days) we couldn't read, Fumbling in the dark we'd be taken in.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 2 & 1 & 6 & 5 & 2 & 4 & 1 & 5 \\
\hline
1 & 7 & 5 & 4 & 1 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

Now though we have all turned over, Labourers have become householders.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
5 & 4 & 4 & 2 & 1 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\hline
5 & 4 & 2 & 4 & 1 & b7 & 1 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

As word-blind men how can we live? Ai - yo - studying culture

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\begin{array}{cccccc}
2 & 5 & 2 & 1 & 7 & 6 & 5 & 1 & 5 \\
\hline
2 & 5 & 2 & 1 & b7 & 1 \\
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

is most imperative en-ai-yo - .