

# Sweet Li Jie (Excerpt)

David Dabydeen

Author

Wuhan Province, 1912

“My bicycle!” Sweet Li Jie cried in the second before toppling to the ground and hitting her head. Wind whipped up dew, road-side plants sneezed, were uprooted in the sudden dust storm. The second stretched, she saw her plums tossed in the air and scattering, dozens of plums, the day’s succour, two yuans. Two yuans for noodles, salt, pepper, even a piece of bone with some meat clinging to it, if Butcher Shen was drunk and his knife (perfected in the battlefield) failed to scrape off every shred. Butcher Shen... normally she would tremble when thinking of him but not in the second which seemed to stretch into a season as she fell. Neither Butcher Shen nor the loss of fruit and the day’s livelihood affected her. “My bicycle!” she cried before falling into unconsciousness. It had been nearly a year since the bicycle had become hers, a gift from Suitor Jia Yun whom she had spurned.

The ‘Sweet’ was her mother’s doing, to entice her out of despair, which was Sweet Li Jie’s sickness. “The girl’s head crawls with lice. They have put gu into her mind, can you rid her of poison?” Ma Hongniang pleaded. The village doctor, Du Fu, promised, in return for twenty-five yuans, paid over five months. “It will take months to purge her thoughts and bring her back to laughter,” Du Fu said, holding out a ball of herbs mixed in the gallbladder of a dog. “It is not just lice, but demons. Ordinary medicine can’t purge her on its own. She has to dream away demons. I will give you this special herb, boil it in salt water and give it to her at night, not to drink but to breathe in the vapours, and when the sun comes up, a different herb to make her daydream.”



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“Will you make her a child again, a sweet child? Will you take two yuans and some plums?” Ma Hongniang asked in a mournful voice. She knew Du Fu was a quack who demanded too much, too much, of the poor who comprised the village.. All except Rich-Beyond-Dreams Wang Changling, who was more cruel by far than Quack Du Fu, owning the land which they tilled for a sickly living, blood-rents drawn from them week after month after year. “I will cure her,” Quack Du Fu lied. The mother sensed the lie. He had taken so many yuans from so many from the time he had come to the village, and most of his remedies had failed. Ma Hongniang sensed the lie, but could not know for certain, since Quack Du Fu, on occasions, did bring health to the ailing, a limb healed, a stomach pacified; small acts but signs of hope which folk seized upon out of want. Quack Du Fu was better than nothing, so they gambled their yuans on his doubtful skill. “Two yuan! Two yuan!” Quack Du Fu said, sucking his teeth, hawking and spitting on the ground before Ma Hongniang’s feet, at the doorway, knowing that she would not step beyond the phlegm, such was her superstition and that of the villagers. Yellow phlegm, for he had been careful to chew dried mango, fennel seeds and burdock before his coming. Yellow as jaundice, as fever, as pus, which, if she walked over it, could afflict her with such.

“Can you make her dream happy things, after the demons go?” Ma Hongniang asked, wanting still to believe in Quack Du Fu. Her own dreams were unchanging, many a night the broken body of her husband descending upon her, but less frequently as time passed. Sweet Li Jie had not witnessed the killing but had heard the cries for mercy.

“I have proper herbs,” Quack Du Fu assured her. Ma Hongniang paused, then gave him a coin. Maybe her dream was a boulder too massive to be moved, but Sweet Li Jie was a mere girl, her mind lightly dusted, the demons making only faint footprints which might more easily be breathed away.

It was not lice that caused Sweet Li Jie’s face to crease with worry or made her clench her mouth to prevent smiling. “You’re fifteen years of age today, and in all the time I have sought your affection, you have not once shed your sorrow,” Suitor Jia Yun said, presenting her with his own bicycle and bestowing a doting look upon her. As usual her eyes were lowered, avoiding his, and she said nothing. “I’m going far, many years before I return,” he said. “Will you wait for my return? Will you run up to me as I approach with a sprig of bamboo?” Silence. A fretful look crossed her face.

Ma Hongniang, who was watching from afar, shouted to Sweet Li Jie. “Say words to comfort poor Suitor Jia Yun, can you not see how his eyes bleed? At least give thanks for his bicycle. Pick flowers for him, a bit of fragrance clings to the hand that gives flowers.” Sweet Li Jie shuddered as Suitor Jia Yun reached out for her hand. She wanted to rise, kick away the stool, run to the barn and hide herself in hay.

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Still, she let him caress her hand, stroking it as if to arouse sensitivity. She remained numb within, and deaf to her mother's entreaty. She looked to the bicycle and opened her eyes wide in a show of gratitude. "My burden, my curse," Ma Hongniang shouted. "To get her to smile... easier to cut water with a knife..." Afterwards, as she led Sutor Jia Yun out of the yard, Ma Hongniang consoled him with a hug. "She is a lonely angel inviting the night, she wants to be invisible but I will cure her before you return and I will keep her for matrimony. Come back with good health and good fortune. Come back with glitter and sackfuls. Take this vase, it will keep her close to you."

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A small house made of bamboo, with bare furnishing; a stone bed where Sweet Li Jie slept beside her mother; two cooking pots; a water bucket; a potter's wheel; an earthen stove with corn husks for fuel; a knife, and a whetstone to sharpen it; twigs for chopsticks. A few corncobs hung from a roof-beam, drying. Outside, a makeshift barn with hay for the goat and a cage for the three hens to shelter at night. Behind was a field of plum trees encircling similar houses. The field belonged to Rich-Beyond-Dreams Wang Changling. Each morning, when plum was in season, Sweet Li Jie would pick as many as she could fit into her baskets. She hoisted the *bian dan* onto her shoulder and walked the two miles to the neighbouring village to sell her stock or exchange them for onions and peppers. Her mother made pots and vases for special occasions — the Spring festival, the Pure Brightness festival, ceremonies to honour Chih-Nii and Ma-Ku, the goddesses who protected the trees from blight and the land from barrenness. The plain ones she gave away to the very poor, mostly widows who could not afford the expense of ceremonies. Some she painted, crushing the end of a twig and soaking it in saffron and purple from powders she ground from coloured stones harvested from the hills nearby. Three of these sold for a yuan. Plums, vases, pots, a patch of common land to grow corn, goat-milk, eggs and whatever vegetables could be harvested from their garden-plot, were all they were worth in the world.

The bicycle was a boon, multiplying their income many times over. Sweet Li Jie soon learned to steer it. She learned to balance two baskets on the handle, and one fastened behind the saddle. That way more plums could be taken to market and two trips could be made each morning. She could find space to fetch a few of the smaller pots, so her mother was able to increase production. And when she returned home, there was time to help dig the clay for her mother's pottery, scout the hills for coloured stones and prepare the kiln with freshly gathered firewood.

Ma Hongniang's purse swelled. She bought a necklace of cinnamon beads for Sweet Li Jie, but Sweet Li Jie cared nothing for ornaments, nothing for her appearance. She wore the same plain dress day after day. She shunned the village girls who wove hyacinth into their hair or dyed their cheeks. Ma Hongniang despaired of her daughter's solitude. But at least Sweet Li Jie was healthy to look at, plump enough to attract suitors, and with long lustrous hair which made her pale skin even more translucent. And her eyebrows were joined, adding to her value. And there was the gift of the bicycle, even though the suitor, Jia Yun, had gone away empty-handed. The bicycle portended more gifts to come from other suitors, Ma Hongniang hoped. The prospect of future wealth — a porcelain washbasin perhaps, even a sewing machine — gave her comfort and she left Sweet Li Jie to her odd ways.

Sweet Li Jie, though she showed no emotion, was grateful to be left alone. Nothing pleased her more than to wake up at first light, gather her plums and cycle to market. She grew to love the speed of the bicycle, and the skill of manoeuvring around stones and pot-holes to stay upright. The thrill of speed, of balance. And the spectacle of flowers! Before she walked for ages, yoked to baskets of plums, so fatiguing that there was neither time nor desire to raise her eyes to the flowers that dotted the road, blooming in lavender and red and purple. Now she could stop peddling, let the bicycle flow downhill on its own and she could look out to the fields, to the cork oak and maple trees from which birds burst out, startled by the noise of wheels and chain. There were dozens of butterflies, fierce in colour yet so dainty at the lips of flowers, opening and closing their wings as they sipped on dew. The excitement of birds, of butterfly wings, of trees courting the wind. She surrendered to such spectacle, but then, without warning, the air froze, her eyes froze. Fear made her hands tremble, she struggled to steady them on the handlebar. When she recovered she pedalled faster, faster, to reach market and the shelter of the crowd. Her goods disposed of, she hurried to reach home, focusing on the dirt road so as not to witness the features of the land.

Ma Hongniang took the money, noting how pale Sweet Li Jie's hands were. She said nothing: to question Sweet Li Jie, to seek to comfort her, would elicit no response. Best to leave Sweet Li Jie to live out her torment, as she, Ma Hongniang, had done. A soldier had shattered her husband's skull, but she had managed to escape the devils, escape through woods and over hills to this remote corner, where fruit trees were the main means of survival but with a pasture rich enough to support a few dozen goats, and common land for corn. Sweet Li Jie was old enough to remember how Ma Hongniang picked her way through the woods, finding a trail here and there; wading through streams with only floating logs and tree branches saving them from drowning; inching up hills, and then down again,

and when coming across a heap of dung - a leopard's or wildboar's-taking a different direction. Weeks later, they reached the safety of the village. Wild berries and tree-bark had been their diet, but they had survived.

"What storm has brought you, what shipwreck, to my house?" Wang Changling asked, moved by their condition.

He took them in, fattened them. The villagers were anxious to hear about the devils who had invaded their country and were spreading in all directions. News had not reached them, they doubted Ma Hongniang to begin with, but when she wept a storm in telling of her husband's murder they believed. The men continued to work the fields but instead of placing clay charms in the soil to call forth rain, they planted models of soldiers. At night they retreated to the caves in the surrounding hills which they camouflaged with branches. Only Landlord Wang Changling stayed in his house. He was educated. In his travels out of the village he had learnt of rebellions against the British occupation of northern provinces, led by the Imperial Court and its armies of kung fu warriors. The British put them all down. The rebels rose up again, were quelled again. Years of uprisings, years of defeat, until the rebels dwindled to a handful of peasants wielding shovels. The British kept order. They chopped down whoever blocked their way. After a while the Chinese did what they were told. The stillness was short-lived. A British soldier courted a local girl with shortbread. He made a special effort to learn Mandarin. He gained her parents' consent and walked openly with her through the town. He proposed when she fell pregnant. Her parents were now of elevated status, marrying into a superior race, white men with machines which could plough the fields rather than oxen and bare hands; machines which could harvest and store grain. Other machines could rattle off bullets to clear any crowd. Many townsfolk resented the prospect of marriage to a foreigner. They were accustomed to soldiers looting and raping — as they themselves did in their many clan battles — but marriage was intolerable. Marriage was another form of British occupation. They caught the soldier, bled him, fed him to the forest, to its wild pigs. A British contingent was dispatched to take revenge. Ma Hongniang's husband was killed, one among dozens. Order was restored. Wang Changling respected such order. For as long as he could remember, as a child of five, the peasants barely contained their hatred of him. They patted his head in friendly jest, especially when his parents were around, but at a safe distance they sucked their teeth and spat. He grew up listening to their complaints. Every ill — a flash flood that washed away their seeds or a hidden stone against which one stumped his toe — was blamed upon his parents. They died, he became the Landlord, the target of renewed malice. He knew that the peasants had buried effigies of him at the edge of the fields, but he cared not for their superstitions. His

two guns were sufficient to see off any attacks and he had two paid spies among the peasants. No, he was not fearful of the coming of the British. He could work with such strong people, and pay them sufficient tribute to be left alone with his kingdom of the village and its ancient fruit trees. And how could such an attitude be considered disloyal? Wang Changling grimaced at the word. Stupid! The British were only the latest conquerors, and they in turn would be hunted down with dogs. One dynasty had given away to another, warlords had come and gone, leaving behind ramparts, escarpments, walls which crumbled and were built back only to disappear again. There was barely a field in the country which, if dug deeply enough, did not reveal generations of bones. His own family had fled from a rebellion and settled in this forgotten space where the peasants could be cowed by the odd hanging, and easily bonded. His father had sent ahead a retinue of guards. He let them loose on the peasants and their master a week before he arrived. His father, though a warlord, was growing old, no longer caring much for the sight of blood or the screaming of victims. When he entered the village, all was calm. He immediately renamed the village after himself, The Domain of Wang Qian. He organized the work gangs and agreed with them the terms of their bondage. He dispensed with the guards, investing instead in paid spies, so during his reign there was little bloodshed, only a few beatings. Paid spies, and on occasions he provided food in addition to what they had reaped from the common land granted to them: such management limited unrest to secret cursing, hawking and spitting out of sight. The village endured, the goats multiplied, the fruit trees bloomed, the harvest of corn was regular. His father died a contented man, and his mother followed dutifully, starving herself to bring on weakness and death.

Professor Dabydeen, now Hon Fellow at Selwyn College, University of Cambridge and Director of the Ameena Gafoor Institute, formerly Guyana's Ambassador to China (2010-15) and Guyana's Ambassador to UNESCO (1997-2010), has honoured *Il Tolomeo* with an excerpt from his forthcoming novel, *Sweet Li Jie*, set in Wuhan Province, China, and Georgetown, British Guyana, on the eve of the First World War.

David Dabydeen, professor, novelist, poet and critic, can be best described as a Master of writing. From one genre to another, Dabydeen changes our perspective of what it means to master 'words'.

His language is well known to be hybrid, perfectly balancing Standard English and Guyanese Creole – a blend of French, Spanish, African dialects, Indian – creating his own language, a language that speaks to all of us.

In the introduction to his first book, *Slave Song* (1984), winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Dabydeen delves into the question of what language *is*, why language is the means to have power, how language can define who you are, and why the essential/basic feature of the language he used in the collection lies in its

brokenness, no doubt reflecting the brokenness and suffering of its original users – African slaves and East Indian indentured labourers. Its potential as a naturally tragic language is there, there in its brokenness and rawness which is like the rawness of a wound. (13-14)

The conflict between enslaved people and colonisers did not end with the end of slavery, since the detention of power has always been exercised through language: if you do not, or cannot use your own language, how can you break the mental chains that keep you captive?

So, Dabydeen's search for a new language that black writers could call 'their own' continues today in every work he writes, be it poetry, fiction or critical essays.

To write in creole was to validate the experience of black people against the contempt and dehumanizing dismissal by white people. Celebration of blackness necessitated celebration of black language, for how could black writers be true to their blackness using the language of their colonial masters. ("On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today" [1990]. *Pak's Britannica: Articles and Interviews with David Dabydeen*. Ed. by L. Macedo. Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2011, 31)

From the few pages that David Dabydeen offers to the readers of *Il Tolomeo*, we can certainly say that his search goes deeper, incorporating a cinematic style that vividly transforms every sentence into frames of a film. Sweet Li Jie's cry, the flying plums, the dust storm caused by her fall, and we are brought into the story of the young girl with the immediacy of a feature film, while the scenes that follow resound with the accent of the new language Dabydeen has been seeking.

Michela A. Calderaro

