

The irony of the re-education system of communist china



Re-education, a practice in Communist China where city youths are sent to rural villages in order for them to get in touch with the way of their ancestors and create a larger working class, may seem like a harmless system.

However, re-education, to a degree, is pointless. In its irony, city youths going to rural villages in order to become one with the land ended up instilling their knowledge onto the villagers, the complete opposite of the goal of re-education. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie explains the irony of the re-education system in Communist China, as the two main characters, Luo and an unnamed narrator, end up changing the values of the villagers more than themselves. In the novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie, Luo and the narrator during the process of re-education change the villagers to become more civilized by manipulating them and introducing them to technology and western culture, expressing the irony of the re-education system.

During their re-education, the two boys manipulate the villagers to satisfy themselves, changing the villagers more than themselves and ironically destroying the core principle of re-education. When Luo and the narrator first come to their village, they bring along an alarm clock, which the headman then begins to use to tell time and tell the workers when to start their day and start working. However, Luo and the narrator sometimes do not want to work as early or late as usual, so they change the hands of the clock to manipulate the time. The narrator states, "in the end we had changed the position of the hands so many times that we had no idea what the time really was" (Sijie 15). The clock dictates the villagers' lives, as the headman would use it to determine when they start and stop working. When the narrator and

Luo manipulate the hands of the clock, which has become so integrated into the workers' lives, they're manipulating and changing the villagers to satisfy themselves. Working in rural villages is a part of the Communist ideal, so when the boys introduce this clock, which the villagers use, and then they manipulate it to control the working hours they do, they're expressing the irony of the Communist re-education system. Luo and the narrator manipulate the villagers and the work system to satisfy their own wants and needs, thus defeating the goal of the Communist China re-education system. Luo even expresses a desire to civilize the workers, specifically his girlfriend, the Little Chinese Seamstress. Luo, when talking to the narrator, explains how he wants to manipulate the Little Chinese Seamstress to become more civilized. He says, "with these books I shall transform the Little Seamstress. She'll never be a simple mountain girl again" (Sijie 100). Luo expresses a clear desire to manipulate the seamstress through books. By saying "she'll never be a simple mountain girl again," he explains how his main goal is to civilize the Little Chinese Seamstress, as he wants her to become more than just a mountain girl and he will achieve that by reading books, a symbol of modernity, to her, thus making her civilized. Luo is manipulating the seamstress to satisfy himself and reach his goal of civilizing her, showing the irony of the re-education system. The Little Chinese Seamstress is a picture perfect definition of the rural aspects of the mountain, so when Luo attempts, and succeeds, to civilize her, it is seen that the re-education system is pointlessly ironic, as a symbol of rural-ness is being manipulated to a city youth's satisfaction to become civilized. The villagers are, on top of being manipulated by the two boys, introduced to new technology, which led to the villagers changing more than the boys.

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Luo and the narrator also bring new and unfamiliar technologies and ideas to the village they are staying at, changing the villagers through introduction to innovation. Since the city youths are already exposed to these civilized things, they are not as impacted as the villagers. The narrator and particularly Luo have a gift for storytelling, and they bring civilized Western stories to the village by retelling the plots of movies. The headmaster enjoys these renditions and says, ““ I shall send you to see another film. You will be paid the same as if you had worked in the fields” (Sijie 20). Luo and the narrator consistently tell the stories of these movies, bringing new ideas to the villages. Considering the movies are urban works, and the two boys are bringing this piece of civilization to the village, the villagers are changed through this introduction to innovations. The fact that the headmaster says the boys will be paid the same as if they had worked in the fields shows the irony of the re-education system. Instead of working in the field and becoming accustomed to the land and the way of the ancestors, the boys are watching movies in a civilized town and bringing it to the villagers, the complete opposite of re-education. Also noteworthy is the fact that the headmaster is willing to send these boys to bring a piece of civilization to the rural village. The villagers seem eager to learn about urban technologies and ideas, which sparks the idea that people are always striving to learn and innovate, thus making civilization inevitable. The clock again, which symbolizes modernity, is a piece of technology that support this idea of the willingness of the rural villagers to learn about civilization, and in turn expressing the irony of the re-education system. When the narrator and Luo bring the clock to the village, they are “ surprised to see how the alarm clock seized the imagination of the peasants... Everyone came to consult the

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clock" (Sijie 14). The two boys are already exposed to this technology before they come to the village, and they bring this symbol of civilization with them. The villagers are exposed to new technologies, and they welcome it, the alarm clock seizing their imaginations, and they use it, as they all come to consult the clock. Luo and the narrator bring new civilized technology and in turn, through the villagers using these innovations, the villagers become more civilized themselves, adapting to the ways of civilized people rather than the city youths adapting to the way of the rural people. The goal of re-education is not for the villagers to become one with civilization, it is for city youths to become one with the land, which is the exact opposite of what happens to the narrator and Luo,. The villagers in this novel are exposed to new technologies because of the city youths, thus making them become more civilized and expressing the irony of the re-education system. In addition to the introduction of new technology, the boys also introduce Western culture.

When the narrator and Luo are opened to outlawed Western literature and culture during their re-education, they introduce the same thing to the villagers, changing the villagers through the introduction of Western culture. When the tailor of the mountain requests to stay in the narrator and Luo's house during his stay in their village, he asks for a bedtime story. The narrator, being recently exposed to Western novels, decides to retell the French story, *The Count of Monte Cristo* to the tailor. Eventually, the tailor starts to work French culture into the clothes he sews. The narrator says, "inevitably, some of the details he picked up from the French story started to have a discreet influence on the clothes he was making for the villagers"

(Sijie 127). The boys are introduced to Western literature, and thus, Western culture, and they end up bringing it to the village they reside in for their re-education. When they open this culture up to the tailor, he integrates it into the clothing he makes. This integration of culture changes the workers. Considering civilization is thought to be Western in Communist China, through bringing this Western culture into the rural village, the village is in turn becoming more civilized. Since the tailor integrates Western, or more specifically, French, influences into the clothes he makes for the workers, and the workers wear this changed style of clothes, the workers become more civilized and accustomed to Western culture. The boys bring this new culture to the peasants, changing them and making them become more civilized. Not only is it ironic that the boys are exposed to Western literature during their re-education, it is ironic that the boys end up changing the villagers to become more civilized rather than the other way around. Furthermore, this passage again shows how willing the villagers on the mountain are to learning and integrating Western culture into their lives. The fact that it is described as inevitable just further proves the point that the lust for innovation and the growth of civilization is, in fact, inevitable.

The narrator and Luo in Dai Sijie's novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* manipulate and introduce new technologies and cultures to the villagers during their re-education, changing them to become more civilized and in turn expressing the irony of the re-education system. There was no point to the re-education system in Communist China, as the re-educated people ended up diffusing their culture onto the rural people more-so than the other way around, as it was meant to be. It is quite possible that cultural

assimilation and technological advancement is inevitable, and while it was a valiant effort on Mao's part to keep China in a form of the Dark Ages, the inevitability of advancement prevailed. Perhaps communities are meant to become civilized and to constantly advance. In the novel, rural people are astounded by new technologies, such as the alarm clock, and they bring it into daily life, and they accept Western-style clothes with open arms, despite these "bourgeois" ideas being outlawed and suppressed. People are meant to evolve, as seen through the course of history, with technological advancements happening daily. There is no point to try and keep a community in dark, as human curiosity and the inevitability of advancement will always prevail.