

How xiangzi could have played his hand

[Literature](#), [Biography](#)



“ Goodness turns a man bad.” If an uneducated and impoverished young man from rural China has come to this conclusion after only a couple years of working as a rickshaw puller in the city, who is to say that the majority of other laborers will not reach this conclusion sooner or later?

Throughout *Rickshaw Boy*, Xiangzi’s values fluctuate, usually due to short term hardships or even good fortunes, but the combination of the multiple struggles and “ revelations” about life that he experiences eventually transform him into what he had originally resented. It could be said that this proves not only that society needed change but also that even our noblest and most resilient members of society can fall, essentially as a result of one bad day. One bad day, that is after countless days of unfulfillment, is all that it takes to change a man’s perspective from hopeful to apathetic, regardless of his age. Since the first of our species emerged into this world, there have been societal groups, some equal in value and others superior. We like to say in today’s society that everyone is equal and are told as children that we can accomplish anything we wish. But the harsh reality is that this is not and never has been the truth. The entire truth that is. Before the development of capitalist societies, people took pride in their work and looked forward to it each day. The emotions they experienced coming home from work versus arriving at work did not drastically contrast. As a carpenter, hunter, or rickshaw puller, laborers had the ability to find a passion and then work hard without having to worry about that passion dying out. They saw themselves in their work, unconcerned with whether or not they were making an impact on the world. People knew their purposes. The explosion of capitalism prioritized job specialization which, while being hundreds of times more

efficient, left factory workers deep in self-thought and personal analysis. They wonder to themselves “ How am I working to make the world different from how it was before I was born if there are thousands of replacements, clones, toiling alongside me every day?”

Karl Marx recognized this problem with capitalism, believing that this type of separation between work and one’s individualism was a debilitating symptom of capitalism that he called “ alienation.” Alienation from the rest of the world and alienation from one’s true self. The disconnection between daily work, which most people used to cherish, and individual aspirations poses a problem. Xiangzi was not only “ fine” with being a rickshaw puller but it seemed that he loved it. He was an athlete that loved being the best at what he did, competing with himself and others to earn what he got. The problem lied in the hand of cards he had been dealt, not necessarily in his position in society. He subconsciously was aware, from the beginning, that he needed to apply his talents at the physical labor involved in pulling a rickshaw to solely benefit himself, not a capitalist-type figure on the top of the pyramid .

Xiangzi’s entrepreneurial spirit is one of the qualities that seemed to set him apart from the other rickshaw pullers at Harmony Shed. The reader is left wondering why the others do not appear to, like Xiangzi, wish to work hard and save for a couple years to buy their own rickshaw. The reason, as we ultimately discovered when Xiangzi fell victim to the same fate, is essentially that, although they see that working hard can lead to a better life, it is not a life that is much better than their current situation. Due to the capitalistic

structure, the best case scenario for a rickshaw puller seems to be pulling his own rickshaw. And the knowledge of this reality not only disheartens the laborers around Xiangzi but also “wisens” them in a way. Throughout the book, Xiangzi’s ambitions are clear but very limited. For some reason, he never explores the concept of making it out of the rat race and perhaps that there are more levels up after buying your own rickshaw. Towards the end of the novel, Xiangzi begins to refer to himself as “experienced,” as a way to excuse hard work or other less easy options, knowing that they will probably end up doing more harm than good.

Communism, in the sense that Marx originally envisioned, would be an extremely attractive concept to someone like Xiangzi who cannot seem to separate hard work and leisure. Xiangzi believes that you either toil endlessly or fall victim to worldly desires, such as alcohol. The sad fact is that, if Xiangzi were more educated, he would be a perfect candidate to lift himself out of mud and make smarter choices. An example of this is when he sold his four camels for only 30 yuan instead of waiting to get back to Beijing to sell them at a greater price. While it is true that Liu suggested a slaughterhouse, looking back that would have been a favorable option to the hardships that befell Xiangzi after his return. He would have been able to almost immediately buy another rickshaw. The ideas vocalized in The Communist Manifesto would have opened Xiangzi’s eyes to what is really going on behind closed doors and that if he focused his efforts to work smarter and not harder, he would be less poor. Ironically, Capitalism is what funded the beginnings of Communism, for without money most ideas are unable to get off the ground. While it is true that Capitalism, like

Communism, has its faults, it is also true that it benefits many at the same time. If Xiangzi had been less ignorant to his surroundings and what they offered him, perhaps he could have risen up in society and taken hold of the benefits that Capitalism offered. While Xiangzi portrays a powerful character, towering over his associates, it can also be surmised that deep down he is ultimately a country boy who is still scared. Scared of the city, failure, and most importantly being forgotten. His parents died at a young age leaving him to fend for himself earlier than most people would have to, resulting in him becoming a quiet man that only cared for his goals and not socializing with the other rickshaw pullers. But as the novel progresses we see very clearly that Xiangzi's insecurities have come to the surface, as he subtly longs for friendship and comradeship. Marx writes in his manifesto that another of the many problems that he sees in Capitalism is the disposability of workers. Workers recognize how easily they could be replaced, either by machines or other workers, and a constant fear of abandonment sets in. Trust amongst people declines, leaving already insecure people, like Xiangzi, unraveling at the first signs of trouble. Communism, on the other hand, bases itself on the the idea of " free love," which as a result would lead to less work for everyone in the Communist society. These promises could lead to less anxiety and fear amongst the working class, perhaps resulting in less people committing suicide like Fuzi. A hard worker like Xiangzi would not have such a " hit or miss life," so to say, in that if he lost a rickshaw, for example, it would not be the end of the world. Another luxury that Communism promised is that of free education. While this might not have been of interest to Xiangzi in the timeline that this novel was written in,

perhaps it would have been relevant if he had access to free education while growing up. As mentioned earlier, a large majority of Xiangzi's problems stem from his apparent lack of knowledge of things outside his comfort zone. For example, his life would have gone a different way if he was not insistent on sticking in his ways when Gao Ma came to him with an idea for an investors club, he could have potentially made another forty yuan to add to the thirty that Fourth Master Liu was already holding for him. However, his fears and naivety prevented him from taking such a "risk," proving that he does indeed struggle with trust issues and did not learn from his first ordeal that relying solely on being a hard worker does not always result in success.

In The Communist Manifesto, Marx bemoans the concept of marriage in a Capitalist society, as more a matter of business than love. This is another apparent "trap" of Capitalism that Xiangzi falls victim to in marrying Huniu whom he not only did not love, but despised. Xiangzi's intelligence is yet again brought into question when he blindly trusts everything Huniu says, about being pregnant, for weeks and then still stays with her after it is revealed that she was tricking him, like she had in the beginning by seducing him. As someone who had not trusted Gao Ma on financial advice only a few days before, it seemed strange for Xiangzi to be so blind in falling into Huniu's trap. When Xiangzi finally understands what it feels like to love someone, Fuzi, it is already too late.

It is clear that Xiangzi, among the other characters in the story, have very specific needs in life, needs that in most cases Communism would appear to solve. The most obvious of these needs would be education, a means to live

a more healthy and disease-free lifestyle, greater opportunities to marry for love rather than monetary gain, and even the abolition of inherited wealth or property. All of these issues, that are referred to throughout the story, could have been solved by some aspects of Communism as originally described by Karl Marx. A hard worker like Xiangzi would actually be more likely to rise up in society if these needs were met as he was one of the few that actually enjoyed hard work.

On the distribution of labor, Marx said that a problem in a Capitalist society is that a man, like Xiangzi for example, must remain in his trade exclusively and must “ remain” there with no way to escape. If Xiangzi had perhaps had the opportunity to receive a free education he might have explored other career opportunities that he could have pursued. Marx notes that in contrast to this, in a Communist society, a man is not confined to one trade exclusively and can “...hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.”

The problems that Xiangzi faced, how Capitalism had the potential to be both a good and bad thing for him, and the possible solutions that Communism (as Marx had originally envisioned it that is) could have presented, reminded me of today’s society in many ways. The newest generation, largely to no fault of their own, has become lost in many ways. Growing up we were told that we could achieve our goals if we worked hard, as Xiangzi also foolishly believed. While he fall victim to sexual desires, alcoholism, and tobacco, modern youth also struggles with a certain type of over-stimulation and

instant gratification, not unlike the pleasures that Xiangzi seeks towards the end of Rickshaw Boy. Technology limits social interaction and access to dopamine producing things like food, receiving text messages, and even finding romantic partners comes with no work whatsoever. The adjustment to a life in which things are just handed to someone results in short term joy, but long term depression, as we see in many of the characters in this novel. Xiangzi ultimately becomes a man who does not seek love but visits whorehouses, a man who no longer gets rushes of happiness through running as fast as he can but through alcohol and cigarettes, and who gets money through swindling rather than working hard. In contrast to all the points for Communism that Xiangzi could benefit from, this is a fault. Constant access to leisure and “ free time” to do as one pleases ultimately results in dissatisfaction in one’s life, as we saw in Fourth Master Liu, who on paper was a rags to riches story but ultimately hated his life.

Reflecting on the hardships that life brings, Xiangzi comes to a conclusion that “ Even for a man of steel there is no way out of the net we’re all caught in. Good intentions? A waste of time.” Now while this is a very negative outlook on life that does not have to be true in the slightest, for some people it seems that way even today. A recurring theme in this book is the inherent capacity for evil or darkness that apparently resides within most people. It is revealed in Xiangzi’s decline, Mr. Cao’s ordeal with the law, and notably comes out when Ruan Ming is being paraded around town while everyone watches with “ cruel enjoyment.”

With all of these problems at the root of Xiangzi's society, it appears that Communism would indeed have been very attractive to someone like him, and those around him. While Communism has been used in many negative ways, it seems as though most of what Marx believed was for the "greater good" of humanity. Regardless of political systems however, it is largely up to the individual to decide for himself what path he chooses to take. The conclusion to how Xiangzi's situation is related in many ways to solutions that Communism could offer him is still unclear, even today. The words inscribed upon Karl Marx's grave sum up his hope that change is a very real possibility, in this lifetime, or the next. "Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it." More often than not, we would fold the cards in life we have been dealt if we could. Change can happen, but not until it is realized that "success," however an individual chooses to define it, is not about the cards you are dealt but how you play the hand.