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THE QING DYNASTY: PERIOD INTRODUCTION Early in the seventeenth century, the Manchus, a Tungusic people, consolidated a small regional state beyond the northeastern frontiers of the Ming. They built a powerful army, drawing on the large Chinese population of the region as well as their own ethnic group. In 1644, after the rebel Li Zi-cheng had taken Beijing and the Ming emperor committed suicide, the Ming general Wu Sangui opened the passes to the Manchu army and joined with them to crush Li Zi-cheng's forces. The Manchus were poised for a conquest of China; but China was a very large country and not one to be easily swallowed by a small regional state, however professional its military machine. The conquest was aided by the incompetence, dissolution, or defection of numerous large Ming armies, and when Shi Ke-fa, one of the few Ming generals with any resolution, tried to hold the city of Yang-zhou with a small force, his quick defeat and the subsequent sack of that once prosperous city served well to intimidate others who contemplated resistance. Vigorous defenses were mounted in some regions, but the inability of Ming forces to coordinate resistance ensured their ineffectiveness, and all opposition was brutally suppressed. When the Qing armies descended on Nanjing, where a new Ming regime had been established under the Prince of Fu, the Ming "restoration" government simply dissolved.

The early decades of Qing rule required the elimination of a series of Ming pretenders and several resistance movements. The Qing showed a ruthlessness in establishing its authority that was comparable to that of the Ming in its own early years; and if the Manchu rulers never won the general love of their Chinese subjects, they eventually enforced a degree of intimidated docility. Male Chinese subjects were required to shave their heads except for a long pigtail or queue worn in the Manchu style. Although the queue appeared as one of the most striking characteristics of "Chinese" attire to early Western observers, it was to the Chinese an often-hated symbol of foreign domination.

Like other frontier peoples who had conquered China, the Manchus faced the problem of becoming absorbed into the general Chinese population. The Jurchen Jin of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries came from a people closely related to the Manchus, and they had disappeared into the population of North China leaving scarcely a trace. The Mongols, by contrast, had maintained their separateness, but had never been able to quite establish themselves as effective rulers. The Manchus found themselves as overlords of a multi-ethnic empire, including Mongols, Turks, and Tibetans as well as Chinese, and they sought to ensure a measure of ethnic separation. Manchus were supposed to marry only Manchus to preserve the integrity of the people. Blood was, however, a less powerful force than culture; within a few generations, the sinicization of the ruling Manchu elite was complete. Alarmed Qing emperors required the study of the Manchu language for Manchus in China, and encouraged young Manchus to spend time in Manchuria and experience the manly virtues of their forebears.

The Manchu state had never been entirely Manchu, even before the conquest of China proper. The Manchu military organization was composed of military units known as "banners," some of which were Manchu and some Chinese. The so-called bannermen and their descendants, Chinese and Manchu alike, were given preferential treatment in positions in the Qing government.

While trying desperately to protect their ethnic identity, the Manchu emperors, unlike their Mongol predecessors, set out to be exemplary Chinese rulers. They were, if anything, more puritanically Confucian than the Chinese, and they set a tone of pious propriety that had consequences in the civil service and in elite culture in general. Censors were ready to denounce not only any book that contained imagined ethnic slurs but also any book deemed "injurious to the public morals." The "literary inquisition" of the eighteenth century cast a pall of anxiety over writing, and the relative liberty of the late Ming, including the first decades of Qing rule, gave way to a general caution.

Although the Ming had been suffering from internal disturbances for decades, the overthrow of the dynasty and the establishment of the Qing within the course of a year profoundly shocked Chinese intellectuals. Many became monks or retired permanently to private life, either because they had previously served the Ming or out of a lingering sense of loyalty to the old dynasty. Coming to terms with the Ming's destruction remained a preoccupation of writers for decades after the conquest. The works of Zhang Dai (1597–1679) represent one form of homage to the fallen dynasty in dreamlike prose sketches of life in the Southern cities on the eve of the conquest.

Kong Shang-ren's play *Peach Blossom Fan* (1699) represents the culmination of attempts to represent the fate of the Ming. Written by a dramatist born in 1648, after the Qing conquest, *Peach Blossom Fan* tells the story of two lovers whose fate is intertwined with that of the "Southern Ming," the restoration regime in Nanjing that lasted only a year. The play generally avoids reference to the Qing and its armies, and when they are mentioned, it is usually in complimentary terms. The Southern Ming is depicted as destroying itself through incompetence, greed, and a preoccupation with domestic intrigue.

The early Qing saw a strong reaction against late Ming individualism and a fascination with the imagination on the part of some intellectuals. A new empiricism appeared in almost all branches of learning. Inspired interpretation was replaced by reasoning from evidence. One area of scholarly research with profound consequences was historical phonology—the study of the way in which the pronunciation of characters had changed over time. It was recognized that before the long process of standardizing the script in the Qin and Han, scribes had often chosen characters purely to represent sounds. Such characters are called "loan characters" and they occur throughout ancient texts. Armed with their new proto-science of historical phonology, scholars began making new guesses about loan characters in ancient texts and producing interpretations of the Confucian Classics that were very different from the received interpretations. Since the Confucian Classics had a scriptural authority in the constitution of the state and elite society, such excellent scholarship was inherently destabilizing and increased the gap between serious scholars and the still orthodox interpretations of the Southern Song Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi. A culture founded on ancient texts thus found itself no longer certain of the meaning of those texts.

"Literature" in the Qing was not conceived as a single category; rather, it was a large field of distinct genres, some coming down in an unbroken tradition from the Tang and Song, and others revived after a long period of relative neglect. Qing lit-

erature was, moreover, closely linked to scholarship on earlier literature and its republication. The Qing government sponsored numerous scholarly projects, such as the compilation of the *Complete Tang Poetry* (1705). Scholars, readers, and writers often specialized in one or more genres and styles. The "song lyric" of the Song, for example, was sometimes written as a purely literary form in the Ming—the old music had been long lost—but it was not popular. Yet the last decade of the Ming witnessed a major revival in the composition of song lyrics in the Song tradition, and this revival began a new and unbroken tradition of song lyric composition that continued well into the twentieth century. Some writers wrote in other forms, but many specialized only in the song lyric. It had its own history of contending schools in the Qing, with anthologies and an immense corpus of critical writing. Moreover, this history of Qing song lyric was inextricably linked to scholarship and criticism on the song lyric of the Song Dynasty. The Qing lyricist presumed that his or her readers would be thoroughly familiar with his Song predecessors and would recognize in his work how he positioned himself in relation to the history of song lyric. This is not to say that Qing lyrics were necessarily imitative—in fact, the Qing tradition of the genre is far richer in range and style than the Song—but Qing originality was founded upon a presumed body of learning and a familiarity with critical debate.

Similar specialties existed in the various periods of classical poetry, in "old style" prose and formal prose, in informal prose genres, in vernacular song lyric, in variety plays (which by this point had become a purely literary genre). The classical tale of the supernatural had a long history, stretching back to the period immediately following the Han. Despite the seventeenth-century vogue for vernacular short stories, the classical tale (ranging in scale from the anecdote to something approaching a novella) had been composed continuously. In the late seventeenth century, it reemerged to prominence in *Liao-zhai's Record of Wonders*, by Pu Song-ling (1640–1715). This large collection of supernatural tales was immensely popular, and it spawned renewed interest in the genre, taking the form of numerous versions of such tales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Pu Song-ling's collection of supernatural stories—like the editions of Tang poets, the anthologies of "old style" prose, famous plays, and all the major vernacular novels—was printed with extensive critical commentaries. Such commentaries might be printed in the margins, in between the lines, or after passages. Earlier works, such as the Tang poets or "old style" prose writers, usually had scholarly commentaries as well. Critical commentary was not an academic addition to works usually read without commentary; rather, it was almost impossible to find an edition of Pu Song-ling or the famous novels without a commentary. For Tang and Song writers, editions and anthologies without commentaries were the less popular, more scholarly forms. Commentaries indicated literary techniques, brought out hidden implications in passages, and in longer works called attention to the overall structure. Not until the twentieth century, in part following the Western model and in part seeking to break free of the habits of traditional criticism, would such works be printed without the critical commentaries.

The two outstanding novels of the eighteenth century represent a major transformation of the genre from its predecessors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The eighteenth-century novels are by known authors, and the rough exuber-

ance of vernacular Chinese in earlier long fiction has been supplanted by a much sharper and more refined vernacular. Both of these novels were not printed until decades after the deaths of their authors. The first is *The Scholars* (*Ru-jin wai-shi*), by Wu Jing-zi (1701–1754), first published in 1803. A medley of interlocking episodes, *The Scholars* is a savagely satirical portrait of late imperial society, its hypocrisy and the failure of its values. But probably the defining work of Qing literature is *Story of the Stone* (or *Dream of the Red Chamber*; *Hong-lou meng*), by Cao Xue-qin (1715–1763). Cao worked on versions of his novel over the course of about two decades, leaving it incomplete after eighty chapters. The first printed edition of 1791 was completed by the addition of another forty chapters by Gao E (ca. 1740–ca. 1815).

Story of the Stone quickly became more than a success: like Shakespeare in English or *Don Quixote* in Spanish, it won the utter devotion of readers soon after its publication and that devotion has not diminished to the present day. On one level it is the story of a magic piece of jade, destined to be born into the world and achieve enlightenment by experiencing the disillusionment of love. The novel tells the story of an adolescent boy, Bao-yu (“Precious Jade”), born into a powerful Qing household just passing from the height of its powers into decline. Bao-yu lives surrounded by women—maidservants, sisters, cousins, and the older women of the household. But his passion is reserved for his hypersensitive cousin Dai-yu (“Black Jade”). *Story of the Stone* is an extraordinarily rich novel in the physical and cultural details of life in eighteenth-century China; it is no less rich in the complexity of its vision of the society, with moments of everyday pettiness and tenderness framed in a larger and dangerous world of men and political power.

Story of the Stone was perhaps particularly moving because it represented the very end of traditional Chinese civilization as a world unto itself. During the nineteenth century, the Western powers made their presence felt in ways that would change China forever. The Jesuit missionaries of the Ming and early Qing had sought to cultivate China’s rulers and elite. Their technical knowledge and devices elicited the fascination of many Chinese intellectuals; but although the early missionaries won a select body of converts, their goal of the general conversion of China to a Christian country was not on the horizon. Church politics and other factors eventually led the Qing government to a general prohibition against Christianity in 1723.

In a little more than a century, Europe would return to China in full force. Opium, initially smoked with tobacco, increased in use in China through the course of the eighteenth century. By early in the nineteenth century, addiction had risen to a serious level and the subsequent drain on silver reserves led to an increase in commodity prices. By the 1830s, the problem had reached crisis proportions. A zealous reformer, Lin Ze-xu, was dispatched by the Qing government to Canton, the primary port of the Anglo-Chinese opium trade, where he destroyed all the existing opium stocks. This and other sources of friction between the English and the Chinese, including the understandable reluctance of the English to turn their nationals over to what they saw as the barbaric practices of the Chinese legal system, eventually led to the Opium War in 1840. After English fleets decisively defeated Qing naval forces and coastal defenses, the war was finally brought to an end by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, by which Hong Kong was annexed and the English were given ex-

traterritorial rights at five major Chinese ports; by these rights the English could live in their own compounds and were subject to English rather than Chinese law. Once England had exposed the helplessness of China in face of Western military technology, in the decades that followed other Western powers competed to enforce upon China their own treaties, with their own ports and the same rights as the English.

In the middle of the century, the Qing faced an even more devastating challenge. The period from 1850 through the early 1860s saw the rebellion of the *Tai-ping tian-guo*, the “Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace.” The *Tai-ping tian-guo* was a theocratic movement based on a syncretism of Christianity and native Chinese millenarianism. The Tai-pings held Central China, including the great city of Nanjing, and they defeated Qing armies again and again until Zeng Guo-fan (1811–1872), the Qing intellectual and general, at last suppressed them. In 1864, after a prolonged siege, Nanjing was at last taken and the city was sacked by Qing troops. While the war with the Tai-pings was under way, the Western powers were demanding legations in Beijing on a status of diplomatic equality, the right to travel in the interior of China, opening the country to missionaries, and more territorial concessions for trade. Negotiations broke down, and in 1860 a joint Anglo-French army invaded Beijing, sending the Qing court into flight to their Manchurian capital at Jehol. The resulting Treaty of Beijing gave France and England everything they had demanded. In 1885, after hostilities, the French claimed Vietnam; Russia and Germany, in the meantime, were also winning concessions under threat of force. In 1894, the Sino-Japanese War broke out, leading to yet another humiliation for the Qing and treaty concessions to the Japanese.

A half century of repeated military and political humiliation left both the Qing government and much of the Chinese populace with a deep hatred for Japan and the Western powers. Within the foreign concessions, governed by the laws of the foreign powers, Chinese were treated as second-class citizens with few rights, and they experienced Western racism. Western gunboats patrolled the coast and the Yangzi River, ready to suppress any threat to foreign nationals. Eventually, in 1899, the festering rage broke out in the Boxer Rebellion, a secret society sworn to rid China of all foreigners. All foreigners were attacked, especially missionaries, and in 1900 the foreign legations in Beijing were besieged. A relief force made up of detachments from Japan and the Western powers marched from Tian-jin to Beijing, and predictably the Qing government was forced to pay large sums in reparations.

The encounter with the West brought other changes as well. Western novels began to be translated, first freely recast in classical Chinese, but later translated accurately. Toward the end of the nineteenth century newspapers made their appearance, containing serialized novels that already showed Western influence. Students went off to Europe and the United States, and primarily to Japan, bringing back not only technical expertise but also Western literature and thought. As an East Asian nation that had successfully adapted to the encounter with the West, Japan was seen as a model of what China could become. In 1905, the old imperial civil service examinations were abolished, and at last, in 1911, the Qing was overthrown with remarkable ease and the Republic was established. China’s troubles were far from over, but the old imperial system was gone forever.

From the late Qing through the first decades of the Republic, classical literature continued to be written in the old forms; but a new literature was taking shape, a literature informed by Western and Japanese models. On May 4, 1919, a large student protest called for basic cultural reform, including the abandonment of classical Chinese in favor of the written vernacular. Literary and cultural traditions attenuate and transform slowly, but sometimes a single date can serve as a symbol of change. The May Fourth movement is generally understood as the beginning of modern Chinese literature.

Li Yu, *Silent Operas* (*Wu-sheng xi*)

Prior to the seventeenth century, Chinese fiction and drama usually embellished older stories rather than inventing new ones. Even when an author invented a story, literary convention demanded that it be presented as if it came from some outside source, either a contemporary or an earlier text. The dramatist and storyteller Li Yu (1611–1680) took great pride in telling readers that his stories were the products of his own fertile wit, and he rarely lets his readers forget his authorial presence.

Like many Qing writers, Li Yu failed the civil service examination and had to rely on his literary reputation to make a living. To support himself, he took the usual course of organizing a theatrical company and taking it on tour. As in the English theatrical companies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, Li Yu also wrote the material. Writing and publishing his plays was no less a business venture, and was as much to attract patronage as for direct income. Part of what Li Yu sold was an image of Epicurean pleasures and pastimes embodied in the essays entitled “Random Ventures in Idleness” (*Xian-qing ou-ji*). These include sections on gardening, eating and drinking, architecture, and health, as well as several on drama.

Li Yu wrote voluminously, turning out ten comedies of romantic intrigue, a pornographic novel, and several collections of stories. “An Actress Scorns Wealth and Honor . . .” is drawn from the first of the story collections, entitled *Silent Operas* (*Wu-sheng xi*). The story shows a preoccupation with theater that characterized both Li Yu and his age. The interplay of truth and feigned appearances moves back and forth across the boundaries of the stage, with Li Yu’s voice ever present in the background to draw conclusions for us. The intrusive narrator had long been a feature of Chinese stories, but Li Yu plays the role with an ironic and self-congratulating gusto that is his trademark.

“An Actress Scorns Wealth and Honor to Preserve Her Chastity” Translated by Patrick Hanan

Poem:

Beauty’s power to stir the heart
Is heightened by her acting art.
Though her singing make a thousand cry,
No tear will come to Beauty’s eye.

Lyric:

A pretty bawd with a singing voice—
 Charms, she has them all.
 Her constant smile will banish care,
 Till all men think she favours them,
 Their hearts in thrall.

They risk their lives to make her gifts,
 Not stopping till they die.
 They shower her with precious gems,
 And when they get no sweets in turn,¹
 They think—she's shy.

Both poem and lyric make the point that when it comes to charm, actresses are in a different class altogether from the ordinary run of prostitutes. Men lose their hearts to actresses, the strait-laced turning into romantics and the tight-fisted into big spenders. Why should this be? Because in training to become actresses, these women have practised those warbling, dulcet tones and that delicate, willowy grace of theirs to perfection. There is no need for them to affect such things in company, for they come naturally. When actresses are placed beside girls of good family, their impurity outshines the latter's purity; when put beside prostitutes, their naturalness highlights the others' affectedness. In addition, that carpet on the stage is a most peculiar thing, for it hurts the ugly woman as it helps the beauty. When an ugly woman comes on stage, she appears even uglier, but when a beautiful woman does so, her beauty is enhanced. It is common for a woman of middling attractiveness off-stage to look like the reincarnation of Xishi or Yang Guifei² as soon as she sets foot on stage and begins her performance, at which point even a perfect beauty cannot compare with her. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, actors and actresses are predestined for their trade and have a god, Erlang, who watches over them. And secondly, the impression they make is the result of long training, not something that can be produced by a mere act of will.

However that may be, the four lowliest classes in society consist of prostitutes, entertainers, lictors and slaves.³ Thus actresses, as both prostitutes and entertainers, combine two of the four classes. Why, then, should an actress be made the subject of a story? Because when a person from the lowest class of all performs the noblest deed of all, it is fully as remarkable as a magic mushroom growing out of a dunghill, and it deserves to be publicized.

¹The allusion is to the love song "Mugua" in the *Poetry Classic*: "She threw a tree-pear to me; / As requital I gave her a bright greenstone," etc. See Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 31.

²Of the Zhou and Tang dynasties, respectively, they came to personify ideals of beauty.

³Sons born to people in any of these occupations were excluded from the civil service examinations.

Whereas other stories relate an anecdote as a prologue to the story proper, this one will follow a different course. It has no need to play the host ushering in the guest, for it will generate the child from the mother. To begin with the dunghill and go on from there to tell of the magic mushroom—that is something entirely new in literary composition.

Let me tell how in Xi'an county of Quzhou prefecture in Zhejiang there was a township of moderate size named Yang Village in which all of the inhabitants, men as well as women, took up acting as a career. Now, actors are produced in every part of the country, not just this one, but actresses were the specialty of this area, because the singing and acting here were remarkably authentic. If geomancy was one factor, genetic inheritance was certainly another. Because an actress's parents were actor and actress themselves, they brought into play during the sexual act, before the seed was sown, the very same voices and movements that they employed on stage. Thus the essential ingredients of an acting career were already present in the father's semen and the mother's blood. Moreover, during the mother's pregnancy, she would continue to act full time. The ancients held the theory that a child's education begins *in utero*;⁴ thus the mother's dulcet tones and willowy grace would have been instilled in the child before birth. And once she was born, everything she saw or heard had to do with the theatre. Custom eventually turned into instinct, and she proved a natural performer. How could anyone who took up acting at a later stage even begin to compare with her? Which explains why this locality produced several outstanding actresses in every generation.

Actresses in other parts of the country, who began as prostitutes, would act during the day and entertain their clients by night, using their acting merely to attract custom. But these actresses, with their "three do's and three don't's," were quite different.

What were these do's and don't's of theirs?

Do let them look, but don't let them taste.

Do let them have the name, but don't let them have the reality.

Do let them plan, but don't let them succeed.

While they were on stage, the whole of their persons was visible to the audience, and even off-stage they were still playful and flirtatious. However, when it came to that goblet of aromatic wine they possessed, they would let men water at the mouth but not wet their lips. This was what was meant by "letting them look but not taste."

When young noblemen or rich merchants tried to use their power or money to get them into bed, the actresses never refused outright, but their consent was merely verbal. They would plead illness, claiming they could not make love at the moment, or else pretend that their husbands objected

⁴i.e., *taijiao*, by which the embryo is held to be morally influenced by the mother's behaviour.

and suggest that their admirers await some other opportunity. But the days would go by, and they would remain as unattainable as ever. This was what was meant by "letting them have the name but not the reality."

Even if they went to bed with their admirers and behaved so passionately that you would think them genuinely in love, in their eyes it was just a performance, as if they were playing a romantic scene or two with their leading men. While the play was on, they were utterly serious, but when they left the stage, they left their seriousness behind. Lovestruck young men would frequently offer large sums of money to buy them out, but although they consented, and let their admirers scheme away from dawn to dusk heedless of the costs of courtship, the plans would all end up as a spring dream, for the actresses could never bring themselves to marry. This was what was meant by "letting them plan but not succeed."

What was their motive for being so difficult? You must understand that their hearts were not set on preserving their chastity for their husbands' sake, but on making money for those husbands, and not small sums of money either, but large amounts. A man's true feeling for a woman does not arise from the bodily contact, but from the eye contact that precedes it. A gourmand at a feast will smell the aroma of the food before he sits down to dinner and start watering at the mouth, feeling he has never in all his life met with such delicacies; but after he gets the food into his mouth and has wolfed down a meal of it, if a second gourmet dinner is brought out, he will feel disgust rather than desire. Now, at the sight of a woman, a man is like the gourmand at the sight of food; you can allow him to smell the aroma but not to start eating, for once he does so, he will lose interest, and it will be impossible to set his mouth watering again. Therefore the actresses from this locality, who were well aware of the principle involved, did not enter lightly into liaisons, but made this tripartite formula of theirs a family heirloom. Mothers passed it down to daughters, and mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law, through scores of generations, until one day an unfilial daughter came along who rejected the formula outright and would let men do anything—taste as well as look, have the reality as well as the name, succeed as well as plan. As the proverb so aptly puts it: "Every case is a law unto itself." After years of this accommodating attitude, she had cooperated with her husband to earn a large sum of money—as well as a reputation for unconventional behaviour.

Her surname was Liu and her personal name Jiangxian, and she lived at the end of the Jiajing era.⁵ She was as pretty as a flower and as fair as jade, she had an excellent voice and a beautiful figure, and she was blessed with a sharp intelligence. Other actresses could play only one role, but she had an exceptional versatility and would play the heroine or the hero, a man or

a woman, as the manager wished. And she had another talent too, of a free, unfettered kind; after the main play was over, she would quickly put on a painted face and play the *jing* or *chou*.⁶ Her byplay was sparkingly original, and every word of it impressed her audience. They lost their hearts to her, and there was no man who did not wish to take her to bed. And she was exceptionally accommodating by nature, too. It was not absolutely necessary that you be endowed with Pan An's looks and Cao Zhi's talent;⁷ in fact, even if you could neither read nor write, and were as ugly as sin, she would go to bed with you just so long as you could put up a large enough sum of money.

From accepting the ugly as well as the handsome, she came to be patronised by the stupid as well as the intelligent, and before she was thirty she had amassed a large fortune and established her husband as a local worthy of some note. But although her business expanded, she never gave up her profession, and would entrust her property to others while she and her husband went on tour. Their hope was to have a child who would one day take over their responsibilities and allow them to retire.

But "when things reach one extreme, they turn back toward the other." After years of trying, this couple produced a daughter, another unfilial daughter, who scorned not only the traditional family code but her own mother's rules as well. In the end she created a true play out of a false play, one that would be performed for thousands of years to come.

Her childhood name was Miaogu, and she was as pretty as a flower and as fair as jade, a truly outstanding beauty whose charms were too numerous to mention. An old jingle sums her up:

One trace of powder—she'd be too pale;

One touch of rouge—she'd be too red;

One inch more—she'd be too tall;

One inch less—she'd be too short.

As for her voice, which "stopped the passing clouds and lingered among the roof-beams,"⁸ it was her forte and there is no need to speak of it. Not only did she cause thousands to applaud her extraordinary art, she was capable of suddenly driving the whole world crazy and leaving her audience hanging between life and death. How did this happen? Because when she came to a moving love scene, the audience's eyes would suddenly glaze over and their mouths drop open, as if the sight had driven them to their deaths. Then, just as suddenly, they would begin dancing with joy, as if the sight

⁶Conventional role-types of the traditional Chinese theatre that are distinguished by costume, make-up, and acting style. *Jing* generally portrayed warriors or villains; *chou* generally portrayed comic characters.

⁷Pan Yue or Pan An (247–300) and Cao Zhi (192–232), personifications of male beauty and intelligence respectively.

⁸A cliché for beautiful song derived from the *Lie Zi* ("Tang wen").

had restored them to life. As a result, they raved over her, saying: "What kind of woman is this, to hold the power of life and death over us?" Her troupe became famous simply because she was its lead actress.

But Heaven never makes one creature without making another to match it. It so happened that there was also a male lead of unprecedented quality, and when he came to be paired with Miaogu, theirs could truly be called a match made in Heaven. And there was another remarkable thing about this actor too; he did not start out as a male lead, but was promoted from the ranks of the *jing* and the *chou*. But in order to tell the story of this romance of theirs, it is necessary to begin at the beginning.

When Miaogu was eleven or twelve, before she was capable of acting in a full-length play, she would often join her mother in doing isolated scenes. There was a young student there at the time whose surname was Tan and whose personal name was Chuyun, and who came from Xiangyang prefecture in Huguang. His was an established family, but he had lost his mother as a child, and when his father went away to study, the little boy had been taken along. His father died while away from home, and the son was left with no one to depend on. He had drifted about from place to place in eastern Jiangsu and in Zhejiang, and was now sixteen years old. One glance at Miaogu was enough to convince him that she was a ravishing beauty, and he determined to get to know her now, while she was still a virgin. Using an interest in drama as a pretext, he made constant visits to the green-room. He hoped to declare his passion with his eyes and arouse thoughts of love in her; he would begin with the *apertura* and gradually work his way through to the *continuatio* and *exordium*.⁹ Alas for his hopes! Her parents exercised such strict control over her that, except in acting class, she was not allowed to talk to anyone outside the family. Although Tan spent months covertly watching her, he found no opening for his advances.

One day he heard that Miaogu's troupe was fully staffed except for a *jing* and that they were looking for some bright young man to study alongside her. Since Tan was at a loose end anyway, how could he pass up such an opportunity? He went at once to see Jiangxian and her husband and told them of his desire to join the troupe. They were delighted, and invited him to stay behind, make his bows to the teacher, and begin practising with Miaogu that very day. Needless to say, as an intelligent youth, he picked up the art very quickly. For her part, Miaogu, although still a child, was better educated than many an adult. Even before Tan joined the troupe, she had admired his looks and, noting how assiduously he attended the theatre, had realized that "the Old Tippler's mind was definitely on something other than his wine."¹⁰ When he joined the troupe, she realized that he had been driven by his passion for her into disregarding the lowly status of actors; he was using the drama class as a means of offering her his allegiance, even at the

⁹Names for the first three parts of the eight-part ("eight-legged") examination essay.

¹⁰Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) styled himself *Zuiweng*, "Old Tippler." The quotation is from his essay "Zuiweng ting ji."

cost of playing a "painted face."² He was obviously a romantic spirit, and she wished to entrust her heart to him.

Unfortunately their drama teacher proved even stricter than her father. He forbade all whispering when his pupils were reciting plays, and his main concern, when they were practising their movements, was that they should not touch. In effect, Tan was playing Liang Shanbo to Miaogu's Zhu Yingtai,³ for although they studied side by side, they never managed to exchange a single word of love. Their only hope was to wait until their next lives and then, like Liang and Zhu, turn into butterflies and go off together.

After some time, Tan began to regret his decision. "In acting," he thought, "the male lead is the only role to study, if you want to preserve a shred of gentility. Even if our love is not predestined and can never be fulfilled, on stage we'd at least have a 'pretext to expound the faith,' and could open our hearts to each other. If I called her wife, she would have to call me husband. Although it could never be a real marriage, why not seize those fleeting moments of love to consummate our desire and give meaning to my joining the troupe? This painted face role is beneath my dignity as a man! In any case, I'm depressed beyond words by the parts I have to play, which are all either bumpkins or menials. And how can I stand the bile that rises in me as I watch with starving eyes while she plays wife to another man?"

One day, when the teacher was out of the classroom and the pupils were all in their places reciting, Tan, who was sitting close to Miaogu, was tempted to take this chance to declare his love but feared that the others might overhear. Fortunately, apart from Miaogu and himself,⁴ no one else in the troupe knew any classical Chinese. If he spoke in the vernacular, they would understand, but if he sprinkled in a few classical expressions, they would be left in the dark. So while everyone was reciting, Tan kept his eyes on Miaogu and spoke to her, as if practising his part:

"O Mistress, Mistress, most intelligent creature as thou art, how canst thou not be aware of my purpose in coming?"

Miaogu replied, also as if reciting: "Man is not made of wood or stone, so how can he be unaware? It grieveth me that I cannot speak my love!"

Tan continued: "Madam watcheth closely, and the pedagogue is strict. How long must I wait ere I fulfill the desire of three lifetimes?"

"We can but give each other our hearts and await another day. Here, before the gaze of all, there is, i'faith, no chance of a tryst. Pray cease thy too, too sanguine hopes."

Tan continued in a low voice: "I am ashamed to go on playing painted faces, and I beseech thee to intercede with thy parents and have me promoted

²This refers to the *jing* role-type, in which the actors' faces are heavily made up, and sometimes also to the *chou*.

³A famous romantic legend. Dressed as a boy, Zhu Yingtai studies alongside Liang Shanbo. When he discovers her sex, he tries to marry her, but she is already betrothed. After his death, she is passing by his grave when it suddenly opens up for her. Their souls fly away together as butterflies.

⁴The text says "male and female leads," but Tan has not yet become the male lead.

to male lead, so that we can join in wedlock on the stage as an auspicious omen of future love. What sayest thou, milady?"

"Well said, forsooth, but if the suggestion issue from your humble servant, it will but arouse parental suspicion and close the very door we wish to open. Thou must needs use a stratagem."

"And what stratagem would that be, pray?"

"The troupe setreth great value upon thy services, and if thou wishest to leave, disdaining to play the painted face, nought will be denied thee. With Xiao He at the ruler's side, thou canst count on Han Xin's being summoned back to court."⁵

"I shall respectfully do thy bidding," said Tan, with a nod.

A few days later, following her suggestion, he went and took leave of his teacher and also of Jiangxian and her husband, saying that he wished to return home and resume his studies. Jiangxian and her husband were aghast.

"But you've just finished your training and are about to go on tour! Why give it all up so suddenly?" Together with the drama teacher, they probed the reason for his change of heart.

"'Even in poverty one must not give up one's aspirations,'" said Tan. "I did receive an education, but because of the decline in my family's fortunes, I had no choice but to enter this lowly profession. My intention, in donning an actor's garb, was to express the frustration I felt. I assumed that, as principal *jiang*, I would be playing either Guan Yunchang or the Hegemon of Chu,⁶ and that although I would have to apply some greasepaint, at least in the more stirring scenes I could be true to my nobler self. It never occurred to me that, in nine plays out of ten, I would be playing petty rogues, and that I would hardly ever have a chance to play a superior man. No true gentleman would put up with such a dishonourable role, and I am unwilling to do so any more."

"Since you regard a painted face as beneath you, by all means choose a role more to your liking. There's no need to be *inflexible!*"

Tan then offered his assessment of the various roles. "As for the secondary female roles, I'm afraid a man would be sacrificing his manhood if he stooped to play them. And in the case of the secondary male roles, I'm afraid a young man would be losing his youthful vigour if he played an old fellow. The only possibility would be the junior male lead, but he so often works through others, helping them make their names, that he fails to establish an identity of his own and present us with a nobler self, and that is why I wouldn't consider the role."

At this point the drama teacher remarked to Jiangxian and her husband: "From what he's saying, it's quite clear that he has set his heart on being the male lead. In my opinion, his looks and voice are of the right calibre. The only problem is that the male lead's part is longer than anyone else's, and we've

⁵Early in his career, the famous general Han Xin, feeling unappreciated, deserted. Xiao He, the prime minister, who believed strongly in Han, raced after him, brought him back, and persuaded the ruler to appoint him commander-in-chief.

⁶The warrior figures Guan Yu and Xiang Yu, of the Three Kingdoms and Qin dynasties, respectively.

already finished rehearsing and are about to go on tour. Even if we make him the male lead, how is he going to memorize all those scripts at once?"

Tan gave a laugh. "The only question is whether I'd *accept* the male lead. If I did, my memory would be more than a match for those few dozen old plays. At the rate of one a day, I'd be learning ten every ten days. If we delay the tour by a month, surely the thirty plays I'll have memorized by then will be enough for any repertoire!"

The drama teacher had been with Tan long enough to know his powers of memory, so he urged Jiangxian and her husband to appoint him male lead and make the present male lead a painted face. In fact Tan's memory was so good that he was able to recall his lines after a single reading. In less than a month, he had learned the thirty scripts, and he and Miaogu set off.

During his period of training, Tan had had to contend with her parents' protectiveness inside the house and the drama teacher's surveillance outside it, as well as with their classmates' constant presence, and he had failed to come up with any effective way of expressing his love. But he had assumed that, once they went on tour and the whole troupe was away from home, they would, as colleagues, have to start behaving like members of the same family—that is to say, there would be no segregation among them and no suspicion. While rubbing shoulders with Miaogu, he should not find it too difficult to inhale her warm fragrance and stroke her soft, translucent flesh.

To his dismay, he found that the rules of conduct in the green-room were twice as strict again as in the women's quarters. Every man in the world could make a play for the female lead—except her fellow actors! The rule was not of Jiangxian's or her husband's devising; there was a founding father of the acting profession, the god Erlang, and he it was who had established it. Byplay among the actors and actresses offended against morality as much as incest between brother and sister. On stage you might jest and banter to your heart's content, but as soon as you stepped off it, you had to treat the actresses with perfect decorum and refrain from the slightest jest. The merest hint of an affair was enough to offend against the god's taboo, and not only would business go into a decline, the whole troupe would fall ill. Thus after Miaogu went on tour, she had to endure not only her parents' protectiveness and her teacher's surveillance but also her fellow actors' scrutiny. When they saw her sitting beside Tan, they would sidle over to spy on them, fearing they might start an affair that would affect not only themselves but the entire troupe.

Pity these poor lovers, whose mouths were officially sealed, as it were, and who could no longer employ even the classical language to communicate! Their only recourse was to "use the past to express the present" on stage, and to try to guess each other's hidden meanings. Whereas other actors and actresses preferred being off-stage, because on stage they had to exert themselves and off-stage they could relax, Tan and Miaogu preferred the stage, because there they could play husband and wife, while off-stage they had to hold themselves above suspicion.

On stage, as male and female leads, they formed a dazzling couple, and

every man in the audience fell in love with her and every woman with him. Inevitably, because they took such delight in their acting, they threw themselves into every scene, and the same old plays, as performed by them, took on an entirely new guise. In the romantic parts, the passion of their courtship and lovemaking seemed to spring from the very marrow of their bones. None of this was present in the play, but it never failed to captivate the audience. In the tragic parts, their tirades against Heaven and Earth, their piteous lamentations, seemed to issue from the very depths of their being. None of this was in the printed text either, but it never failed to move the audience to tears. What was the reason? Because what other actors performed was the play, whereas they performed the truth. When a play is performed as a play, no matter how well it is done, the male lead remains the male lead and the female lead the female lead, and their spirits never join. Thus tragedy does not seem tragic, nor joy joyous. When a play is performed as a play, the audience looks on it as a play. But if it is performed as the truth, the female lead's spirit is fixed on the male lead while his soul is held in her hands, and they fuse into a single person who feels the joys and woes of each. Thus tragedy seems tragic and joy joyous. Tan and Miaogu acted their plays as if they were the truth, and the audiences looked upon them in the same light.

Their very presence in the troupe helped raise the position of their mediocre fellow actors. Other troupes earned no more than three to six taels per play, but this troupe charged twelve taels, exclusive of the female lead's gratuities. For a hundred miles around, whenever the rich and eminent were planning theatricals, they tried to engage the troupe. Those who succeeded were proud of the fact, while those who failed took it as a personal disgrace.

Because of the new troupe's success, Jiangxian handed over control of the old troupe to her husband so that she could accompany Miaogu. Her aim was to instruct her daughter in the feminine wiles needed to make a fortune. But Miaogu had given her heart irrevocably to Tan and refused to associate with other men. Whereas they thought her the apple of their eye, she thought them a thorn in her flesh. Get her to a party to accompany the guests in their drinking, and she would declare that she never drank and refuse to let the wine cup touch her lips. Say something personal to her, and her face would drop and she would find an excuse to leave. Rich young men squandered large sums of money to make her acquaintance, but they received not a smile nor a frown in return, let alone any other favours. If jewellery was created for her, she would wear it only once or twice, and then melt it down and use the silver. If any clothes were made for her, she would put them in the props trunk for the supporting actresses and not wear them herself. In her heart she was determined "not to take a second husband" and to remain chaste for Tan Chuyu, but she could tell no one of her resolve.

One day the troupe brought its plays to a place named Port X, in which there was an old temple called Lord Yan's Temple.⁷ Lord Yan was a deity

⁷Temples were built to Lord Yan during the Ming Dynasty. According to legend, he was a Song or

in charge of wind and wave who, enfeoffed as the Marquis Pacifier-of-Waves, had demonstrated striking magical powers. The temple was built beside a stream, where the god's birthday was celebrated on the third day of the tenth month with theatricals arranged by the temple's benefactors. In past years they had invited Jiangxian's troupe, but when they heard that the junior troupe was even better, they sealed up the booking fee and sent it off well in advance, which is how Jiangxian and her daughter came to be present.

In the past, the whole troupe, men as well as women, had arrived together, but this time there had been a misunderstanding, and Tan and Miaogu arrived before the others. They had been waiting years for this fleeting chance and were not about to let it slip. But the temple was hardly the place to make love, and they contented themselves with expressing their true feelings for each other, after which they knelt down before Lord Yan's image and swore an oath together: "Neither I, Tan Chuyu, nor I, Liu Miaogu, will ever accept another in marriage. If our parents deny our plea, we will join each other in death. We will never betray our love or reject our commitment. If either of us breaks this vow, let him or her be destroyed."

Just as they finished, they saw the other members of the troupe arriving. Fortunately they escaped in time, and their secret was safe. Otherwise, "suspicion would have seen ghosts in the dark,"⁸ and many ill-fated things might have happened. After that day's performance, they returned to their rented quarters for the night, and there I shall leave them.

Let me now tell of one of the temple's benefactors, a very rich man who had bought himself an official post and served a term in the capital. He was worth a good hundred thousand, and by now, approaching the age of fifty, he had eleven concubines to his name. When Jiangxian was younger, she, too, had come under his tutelage, but he now observed that Miaogu was ten times as beautiful as her mother, and he was prepared to put up a large sum to marry her and fill up his complement of "Twelve Golden Hairpins."⁹

Inviting both mother and daughter to stay, he treated them royally. Needless to say, he renewed his friendship with Jiangxian, offering her his tutelage once more. Then, at their moment of greatest intimacy, he expressed his earnest desire to marry her daughter. Jiangxian would have agreed, but for one consideration: that her daughter was a money-tree who, if she could only be straightened out, was capable of making many large sums far surpassing this one betrothal gift. On the other hand, Jiangxian would have declined, but for a second consideration: that her daughter was of a very stubborn nature and had refused to make money for her parents; rather than have her offend people with her sulking fits, it might be better to marry her off in exchange for ready money.

Yuan official who, after death, was deified and put in charge of calming storms. He is said to have received the title Marquis Pacifier-of-Waves at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty.

⁸A cliché derived from the *Lie Zi* ("Kouyi").

⁹A reference to one man's having twelve concubines.

Unable to decide the issue, Jiangxian was forced to hedge. "It's a most generous offer, which I dare not refuse. But my daughter is still very young, not yet fifteen. Moreover, we've hired a drama teacher to give her lessons. There'll be time enough for marriage after she's been working for a few years and has made some money for us. I really wouldn't presume to give my consent at this point."

"I see," said the rich man. "Well, this time next year we'll be holding our theatricals again, and I'll invite you over and ask you for an answer."

"Very well," said Jiangxian.

A few days later the performances came to an end and she took her leave. Her motive, in replying like this, was to observe her daughter closely over the course of the next year. If the girl were prepared to change her mind and make some money for her parents, she would be kept at home to work, but if she should prove incorrigible, Jiangxian would have this offer to fall back on. Therefore, after leaving the rich man, she took an entirely different attitude toward her daughter and opposed her at every turn. If the girl failed to obey, she would be screamed at, and if screaming produced no effect, she would be beaten. Miaogu's will, however, was as firm as iron or stone, and she yielded not an inch. When bullied beyond endurance, she would refuse to perform and even threaten suicide.

Next year, towards the end of the ninth month, the rich man sent a servant with an invitation for Jiangxian. On greeting her, he asked for her answer, and she, since her daughter was clearly not the stuff of which great fortunes are made, accepted with alacrity. He then weighed out a betrothal gift of a thousand taels and handed it over. The wedding was set for the evening of the third, just after the last performance.

All this while, Jiangxian, reluctant to bring the subject up, had been keeping Miaogu in the dark. Not until the evening of the second did she inform her.

"When I brought you into the world, I went to great trouble to give you a training, in the hope that you would cooperate with us and work hard to improve the family's position. But you've been wilful from the very start, and have actually turned against money. You don't know your place in society, you pout when you meet people, and one day you're going to find yourself in real trouble. This business is simply not for you, and you'd better pack up your costumes and get married as soon as you can. I know a gentleman who's very rich and who has served in office. If you became his wife, you'd be a lady of sorts, and what's more, you'd never want for anything the rest of your life. I've already accepted his betrothal gift and promised you to him as a concubine, and the wedding is set for tomorrow. Now don't start acting up, or you'll make your mother *very* cross."

At first Miaogu was shocked out of her wits. She stared wide-eyed at her mother.

"Mother, you've made a mistake," she said at last. "I'm already married, and a virtuous woman does not take a second husband. Remarriage is out of the question."

Jiangxian had no idea what her daughter was talking about. Her face hardened.

"Where is this husband of yours? Your father and I have had nothing to say about it. Surely you haven't taken it upon yourself to arrange a marriage?"

"Of course not! You can't arrange your own marriage! You and Daddy matched me with him when I was just a child. You know perfectly well the one I mean, you're just pretending not to understand."

"What an *extraordinary* thing to say! Well, won't you tell me who he is?"

"Tan Chuyu, the male lead, of course. Before he joined the troupe, he used to pay us constant visits, always on my account. Even when he joined, it was just an excuse to get a foot in the door and be closer to me. Then later on, when he refused to play the *jing* and insisted on changing to the male lead so that he could be paired with me, he did it because he wanted you to guess his intentions, since he couldn't declare them openly. You and Daddy have played the male and female leads, you've been in romantic plays together, so you *must* have guessed his intentions. If you didn't want me to marry him, you shouldn't have taken him on for training in the first place, but even if you did take him on, you certainly shouldn't have switched him to male lead. By letting him do both things, you made it quite clear that you guessed his intentions and approved of the marriage. Every day since we began our performances, he's been the husband and I the wife, as tens of thousands in our audiences can attest. Everyone says that ours is a match made in heaven. Yet now, after we've been husband and wife for years, you suddenly tell me to betray him! Impossible! You're so used to making such compromises in your own life, Mother, that they don't shock you any more. I may be an unfilial child, but my virtue is unsullied, and I'm not going to sully it now. I would *never* do anything so outrageous!"

Jiangxian gave an involuntary hoot of laughter, then spat out a reply, "You must be dreaming! Playing husband and wife on stage isn't to be taken seriously. Tell me: what do you think the word 'play' means? It's called a 'play,' so it's 'playful.' How can you take it as real? How many actresses have you noticed marrying their leading men?"

"Everything else in the world can be taken playfully except marriage. When I began acting with him, I was ignorant of moral principle and thought we were just acting in a play, so I readily called him husband. By now I'm in the habit and cannot correct myself. All I can do is make the best of my situation and recognize him as my husband. Other actresses, who are ignorant of moral principle or who have lost their chastity, are free not to marry their leading men. But I do understand moral principle, and I *have* preserved my chastity, and so *my* only course is to marry Tan Chuyu."

Jiangxian realized that no matter what was said, she and her daughter would still be at cross purposes, so she stopped trying to persuade her and, after a brief, angry outburst, took herself off to bed.

Next morning, when breakfast and lunch had passed and the time for

the performance had almost arrived, the rich man appeared in the theatre dressed in his finest clothes and began parading up and down in front of the stage, hoping to catch the audience's eye and make them sigh with envy: "He's going to get this unattainable beauty into his seraglio, where he'll enjoy himself at will." He would dearly have loved to emblazon the words "I've Won the Queen of the Flowers"¹ across his forehead and bask in the audience's applause.

Tan was furious at the sight. He expected that Miaoou would make a violent scene, refuse to go on, and eventually do so only after a beating from her mother. But the world is full of surprises. Although Miaoou had protested violently the night before, after a night's sleep, she seemed reconciled to her future. She looked perfectly happy, sitting there in the green-room without the trace of a pout. She even made an appeal to her fellow actors: "I shall soon be saying goodbye to you all. We've been together for years, but the play we do today will be the first real one we've ever done. The others were all make-believe. I'm asking all of you to back me up and do your level best."

Then she turned to Tan. "So far you've always played a make-believe hero, but this time you're going to play a real one. So do your very best to work with me."

"I don't know what you mean by doing my best. I wish you'd explain."

"Just watch me and do as I do. So long as we act in concert, you'll be doing your best."

Tan was deeply hurt, for what she was saying ran counter to everything he had come to expect. When the rich man came swaggering into the green-room to ask for the repertoire, Tan, in a bitter mood, watched closely for Miaoou's reaction, thinking that with her nemesis there before her, she would surely flush with anger. But she not only showed no anger, she seemed to beam with delight.

"Mother tells me," she said, standing up to address him, "that after the performance today I shall be going to your house."

"Just so."

"In that case, out of all the plays I've learned, today's is the only one I still have a chance to perform. After today the audience will never have another chance to see me. So you must let me put on my finest performance, both to demonstrate my abilities and also to take my leave of the audience. Would that be agreeable?"

"Of course it's agreeable."

"In that case, I shan't let you choose the play, I'll choose it myself. I'll

¹"Queen of Flowers" was a name given to Wang Meiniang, heroine of a Ming romantic story. The most famous courtesan of her time, she is won over by the devoted attentions of a humble oil seller. His winning of her is referred to, in the titles of both the Ming story and the Ming play based on it, as *Zhan huakui*, "Possessing (or Winning) the Queen of the Flowers."

do a play I'm familiar with, one that will let me do full justice to my talents."

"Quite right. You choose, by all means. But I wonder which one you'll pick?"

Miaoou took the repertoire, hesitated, then pointed to a title. "Let's do *The Thorn Hairpin*,"² she said.

The rich man thought for a moment, then began laughing. "You're not comparing me with Sun Ruquan, by doing *The Thorn Hairpin*? Oh, very well. So long as you're willing to marry me, it's no great hardship to be Sun Ruquan for a little while. And now that that's settled, let's have everybody on stage!"

Once the play was chosen, the cast dressed and took the stage, where they all put forth their best efforts, as Miaoou had asked. No words were dropped from the songs, no passages from the speech. Only Tan, sick at heart, failed to give of his best. Fortunately, Miaoou was there to cover for him; after he had sung the first word or two of a song, she would quickly join him in a duet, saving him from utter disgrace.

As for her performance, it was divine, superb throughout. In the first few scenes, however fine the acting, she failed to captivate the audience, but when she came to "Sending the Bride Away to Her Wedding,"³ the scene touched her own anguish and her performance became spellbinding, as she unconsciously bared her heart and soul. Each syllable was worth a piece of gold, each word produced a tear, until, in the most harrowing passage of all, not only was her face streaming with tears, there was not a dry eye in the audience of over a thousand. Then when she came to "Clasping a Rock and Plunging into the River,"⁴ her rendering seemed even more tragic. Not only did the audience shed tears, the very elements seemed to grieve; the sun went in and dark clouds covered the sky as with primeval gloom. Normally Qian Yulian expresses only her private anguish and does not denounce anyone. But the way Miaoou played the role was different; she inserted a new passage at the point where Yulian intends to throw herself into the river but has not yet clasped the rock to her bosom, and now Yulian cursed Sun Ruquan by name. The rich man happened to be sitting beside the stage. Miaoou stood facing him, and every time she spoke the words "False-hearted rogue" she pointed at him, and every time she said "Damned villain" she stared him in the eye.

He knew that her curses were meant for him, but he couldn't help feel-

²A Southern play of disputed authorship, written probably in the fourteenth century. Wang Shipeng marries Qian Yulian, then leaves for the capital to take the examination. A rival suitor, Sun Ruquan, forges a letter of divorce from him. Yulian throws herself into the river, from which she is rescued by an official's boat. Eventually, she and Wang rediscover each other when sacrificing at the same temple. The thorn hairpin, the humble engagement gift which was all his family could afford, serves to prove her identity.

³Scene 10 ("Bi jia").

⁴Scene 26 ("Tou jiang").

ing a twinge of conscience and tried hard to be fair-minded. Far from getting angry, he nodded his head and exclaimed in admiration: "Quite right!"

After a volley of curses, Miaogu clasped the rock to her bosom and went to throw herself into the river. Other actresses, in doing this scene, would jump from the back of the stage into the green-room, pretending to jump into the river but actually jumping on to dry land. But Miaogu's way of throwing herself into the river differed again. Here, too, she wrote a new script that was even more remarkable than the first.

The temple lay opposite a broad stream, and the stage had been erected outside the temple gate, with its back resting on the bank and its front extending out over the water. Clasp the rock, Miaogu went straight to the front of the stage, from which, as she concluded her song, she gave a mighty leap—right into the river. She had acted out a real play, just as she had promised.

Shocked almost to death, the audience clamoured for someone to rescue her. But before anyone could try, a second person had jumped in to join her. How did that come about? As Miaogu was about to jump, she had suddenly turned around and shouted in the direction of the green-room: "Husband, Wang Shipeng! Your wife can stand this persecution no longer and is going to throw herself into the river. How can you go on living without me?" Tan, who was sitting on the props trunk at the time, rushed on stage. When he saw Miaogu's leap, his one fear was that he might be too late to catch her up, so he flung himself like an arrow into the water. He hoped they would die in each other's arms, but he was far from sure that he would ever be able to find her.

By this time the whole audience knew that Miaogu had chosen *The Thorn Hairpin* with this outcome in mind. Her cursing of the rich man had been an incidental thing, to raise her spirits, not an attempt to get some verbal satisfaction before resigning herself to marriage. She had pleaded her case fully the night before and her mother had not relented, so she knew she would not be able to preserve her chastity after the day's performance. Rather than stab herself in her room and turn into a mute ghost, she preferred to die openly and forthrightly in front of others, providing people with a tale to tell for centuries to come.

That whole night she lay awake planning what to do, and composed this remarkable script. Her first stroke of brilliance was in keeping a smile on her face and betraying no resentment, which lulled people into complacency and allowed her to pursue her aim. Otherwise, she would never have been allowed to perform such a highly sensitive play. Her second stroke was in not leaving the choice of play to someone else, but choosing it herself, which gave her a pretext for expressing her feelings and venting her grievances. Had she chosen some other play, even if she had inserted a few clever remarks here and there, she could not have expressed her grievances as directly or as satisfyingly. The third stroke of brilliance was that she did not try to arrange the double suicide in secret, but publicly invited her lover to be her ghostly

companion, a move worthy of the maxim "An upright person does not do underhand things." If she had tried to arrange the suicide behind people's backs, she would probably have failed to kill herself on this occasion and been forced to wait until after her marriage to Sun Ruquan before emulating Qian Yulian.

Afterwards the poets all wrote elegies, one of which ran:

They swore to die before they'd break their vow.
Why call them mad? They'd promises to keep.
As one they leapt into the raging flood,
And turned to sole (soul) mates in the wat'ry deep.⁵

Let me now tell of the lovers after they leapt into the water. The skies had just cleared after heavy rain, and the mountain streams were raging torrents. This broad stream, with its steep banks, was different from others—"a mighty river spilling down for hundreds of miles."⁶ Within minutes after the lovers had leapt into the water, it had swept them away to another district altogether, far beyond any hope of rescue, which is why the audience, for all their shouting, did nothing to save them.

From the stage Jiangxian saw her daughter drown and began beating her breast and stamping her feet, weeping without pause. Two thoughts distressed her: firstly, she had lost her money-tree and had no one left to make her fortune, and secondly, now that her daughter was dead, she might have to return the betrothal gift, a case of "losing both the person and the purse in one fell swoop." But then, after weeping for a while, she made a sudden volte-face. Ignoring the relationship of mistress to patron, she charged the rich man with using his money to drive her daughter to her death and declared that she was going straight to the authorities to file a complaint.

The audience already envied the rich man because of the way he had flaunted himself. Now, on hearing that he had driven the girl to her death, they were positively gleeful and rose up in arms, ready to go before the prefect and lodge a petition. Fortunately for him, the rich man knew the ropes well enough to settle the case privately through an intermediary. He arranged a peaceful solution by letting Jiangxian keep the thousand-tael betrothal gift and distributing another thousand or more to buy the audience's silence. He had failed in his attempt to marry Qian Yulian, merely spending a couple of wasted hours as Sun Ruquan. His only consolation was the thought that a girl "flirts by cursing the one she fancies." He told himself that he had been personally cursed by the most beautiful girl in the world.

In Tonglu county of Yanzhou prefecture, there was a riverside hamlet by the name of Port Newtown which had very few inhabitants, all of whom were engaged in fishing. Among them was a man surnamed Mo, known as

⁵ *Bimuyu* are sole or flatfish. The male and female are said to be inseparable; hence, like butterflies and mandarin ducks, they symbolize devoted lovers. "Sole mates" is a pun on "soulmates."

⁶ A cliché, derived from the Song writer Chen Liang, which is most often applied to a forceful, majestic style.

Fisherman Mo, who lived with his wife in a tiny thatched hut that they had built beside the bank. On this particular day, expecting some large fish to be swept down by the flood waters, they set out their big net and took turns pulling it up.⁷ Then, a long way off, they made out amid the waves something that was heading downstream. Taking it to be a large fish, Mo waited until it came near and netted it at his first attempt. But, strangely enough, although it had been clearly visible on the surface, no sooner was it in the net than it suddenly fell back and tried to submerge. Mo pulled as hard as he could, but he was unable to budge the net. He had to get his wife to help him, and together, with the last ounce of their strength, they managed to pull it out of the water.

A shock awaited them when they raised their heads and looked into the net. It was no fish they had caught, but two bodies, face pressed against face, breast against breast, as if trussed up together. Filled with compassion for the dead, Mo wanted to give them a decent burial. He tied the rope to a tree, and he and his wife, with a great deal of effort, managed to lift them out of the net. On examining them closely, they found they were a man and a woman locked together in a tight embrace, as if they had been cast into the river in the act of love. Mo and his wife were puzzled. Then they looked closely at the faces and saw that the bodies were not quite dead. While the faces and feet were ice-cold, the nostrils retained a little warmth, even though all breathing seemed to have stopped.

"They can obviously be revived," said Mo. "We'd better give them mouth-to-mouth. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could save both lives—like building a fourteen-storey pagoda!"⁸

"Yes, indeed!" said his wife.

He put his mouth against the man's, and she put her mouth against the woman's, and they blew their warm breath down into the two bodies. Within minutes the pair had revived. They were helped into the hut and asked how they had come so close to drowning.

They poured out their hearts to their rescuers. The man proved to be Tan Chuyu and the woman Liu Miaogu. They had leapt into the water in turn, fearing they might never find each other. But it seemed as if someone amidst the waves were leading them together and preventing them from drifting apart. It seemed, too, as if a gigantic fish were carrying them on its back along the surface of the water, so that they didn't drown in the course of traveling a hundred miles. When the fish came near the net, it seemed to sense that there were rescuers at hand and, as if wishing to deliver its charges and return, it shook them off its back and swam away. That was why they were on the surface one moment and submerged the next. Fortunately the net was there to stop them from sinking to the bottom, and the mighty heave that

Mo and his wife gave on the rope brought them up. Tan and Miaogu knew that they owed their lives to Lord Yan's miraculous powers, and they kowtowed to the heavens before bowing in gratitude to their rescuers. When Mo and his wife learned they were a virtuous couple, they offered them their hospitality, insisting the pair stay in the hut and treating them generously. Then, as soon as Tan and Miaogu had recovered, they urged them to go further afield, because if the news of their rescue ever reached her parents, someone would be sent for them, and they would not be able to continue as husband and wife.

Tan discussed the problem with Miaogu. "Since I come from Huguang, why don't we go back there? My family doesn't own much land, but if we work it, we should be able to grow a little food for ourselves. Let me get back to my studies and put in a few years' hard work, and I'm sure I'll succeed."

"You're absolutely right, but it's such a long way to go. We have nothing to our name, so where is the money coming from?"

Mo could tell from Tan's face that the man was no loser, and he decided to offer him an examination loan. "How much will you need for the journey?" he asked.

"Anything would do. If we are very careful, ten taels should get us by."

"That's no problem. I've collected several purses from my fishing. I'll get the money together and lend it to you—on one condition. If you fail, I don't want a penny of it back. But if you study and succeed in the examinations, I must be repaid tenfold. Nothing less will do."

Han Xin received a single meal from the washerwoman and repaid her with a thousand taels.⁹ You've saved our lives—much more than a meal! I'd want to reward you handsomely anyway, even if you weren't offering us a loan, and all the more now that you're being so generous. If I should fail, never mind, but if I succeed, I assure you I shan't limit myself to a thousand taels, let alone a mere hundred."

Mo and his wife saw that he was eager to set off, and so they prepared a farewell feast. As might be expected, they provided delicacies from the seas and rivers rather than from the mountains, dishes such as shrimp, fish, crab, and turtle. There is no segregation of the sexes among poor folk, and the two couples sat down together and drank until they were merry. Then, after a night's sleep, they arose and Fisherman Mo gathered together ten taels in loose silver and gave it to the young couple, after which they took their leave. From hardship itself, of course, they did not take their leave, but suffered all the rigours of a hurried and difficult journey.

In less than a month they arrived. They fixed up a tumbledown house on the property, moved into it, and set about bringing the abandoned fields under cultivation in order to provide for themselves. Since Miaogu had been busy studying acting from childhood on, she was utterly ignorant of women's

⁷The illustration in the *Silent Operas, Combined Collection (Wusheng xi heji)*, an earlier anthology than *Priceless Jade*, shows a large basket-shaped net suspended from a stout wooden pole that can be raised or lowered with a rope.

⁸Pagodas are built with an odd number of storeys, to a maximum of thirteen.

⁹In Han Xin's *Shi ji* biography, the washerwoman feeds him for twenty or thirty days and he later rewards her with a thousand catties of gold.

skills. Even her slippers and leggings had been made for her by others. Now, as Tan's wife, she was studying these skills for the first time, but her quick intelligence proved equal to the task, and she learned at the first attempt. She spent her days weaving hemp and straw, and making shoes and stockings, all to bring in a little money and support her husband's studies. At first Tan would labour in the fields during the day and study by night, but Miaogu was so afraid the farmwork would distract him from his studies that she persuaded him to give it up and depend on her handiwork alone for their needs. Lest his studies be affected, she would not even let him go and buy provisions, but entrusted those chores to a neighbour.

After three years of study, Tan began taking the examinations. He hit the mark every time, no matter what the level of the examination. After entering the prefectural school, he passed the provincial and metropolitan examinations. Then, following the palace examination, he was appointed judge¹ of Dingzhou prefecture in Fujian. Since Fujian is adjacent to Huguang, he ought by rights to have travelled down the Yangzi and revisited his home en route, enacting a splendid "Returning Home in Triumph" scene.² But his desire to repay his benefactor was far stronger than any thought of basking in hometown glory, so he sent a servant to fetch his wife and bring her to Jingkou to join him. From there they travelled through Zhejiang to Quzhou and Yanzhou prefectures in order to worship Lord Yan and to repay and thank Fisherman Mo and his wife. Tan felt it would be embarrassing if his subordinates learned that he had begun life as an actor, so he sent the welcoming party back to wait for him at Pucheng, while he and his wife enjoyed the mountains and lakes alone.

Arriving in Port Newtown, they found Mo and his wife fishing and sent a servant over with a card to say that "the man they had rescued was now an official and on the way to his post. He was passing through and desired to wait on them." Overcome with joy, Mo and his wife hastily took off their bamboo hats and hemp coats, and without waiting for their visitors to come ashore, went on board to congratulate them. Tan and Miaogu begged them to take the place of honour while they bowed before them four times.

Tan appealed to Mo: "Fishing is such a hard life, and it brings in so little money. Why not throw your nets away and come with me to my post, where you'll be able to enjoy a little wealth and prestige?" While her husband was issuing his invitation, Miaogu, without waiting for their consent, told her servants to start packing up their belongings. But Mo stopped the servants from going ashore.

"Your Honour, My Lady," he began, shaking his head, "please forgive me, but my wife and I are incapable of enjoying that sort of wealth and prestige; in fact we're not even *willing* to accept it. Fishing may be a hard life

¹Jietu/ meant a prefectural judge in Song times.

²The title of a common scene in which the hero returns home after his triumph in the metropolitan and palace examinations.

and the earnings small, but it has its pleasures too. We fishermen are lucky enough to live among blue hills and green waters, and to enjoy the clear moonlight and the cool breeze. We need pay no money for good wine and meat, just catch a few fish and use them for barter. We send no cards to invite our friends, just eat with them whenever they come by. It's no idle boast to say that we're the only people in the world who enjoy such pleasures. There is some hardship, true, and the earnings are small, but at least they're reliable. If you lead an idle life, you'll constantly be dreaming of big sums of money. If fate is against you, you won't succeed anyway, but even if you should make money, you're bound to suffer trouble and anxiety before parting with it. You're proposing that I accompany you to your post, where all my needs will be met, a case of 'one man's windfall, shared with all,' which is fine. But I would never feel at ease there and I cannot accept your offer, I'm ashamed to say. Moreover, my wife and I are accustomed to our freedom. If we found ourselves penned up in an official residence, unable to move, our frustration would surely bring on an illness. You'd be over there in the courtroom trying cases and punishing tax evaders, but the sounds of the lash and the cries of the punished would drift into the residence, and how could we, tender-hearted as we are, bear the pain we'd feel on their account? For that reason I prefer to go on living in poverty and must decline to share in your wealth and prestige. Let me say, however, how much I appreciate the generous offer."

Tan's enthusiasm was distinctly chilled by this rendering of "Fisherman's Pride."³ "If that's the way you feel, I would never dream of trying to press you," he said. "The trouble is that I've only just passed the examinations and have not held office, so I still cannot repay that generous loan you gave me. However, as soon as I'm in office, I'll send for you and throw a few opportunities your way. When you've made some money, you can come back here, buy some land, and have enough over to live on for the rest of your days. At least you'll get *some* recompense for saving our lives. Now, don't turn this offer down, whatever you do."

Again Mo shook his head. "I'm still unwilling," he said. "Gratuities and commissions are not for unworldly folk like us. We leave that sort of thing to those medicine men who pass themselves off as recluses.⁴ I'm not smooth-tongued or thick-skinned enough for all the self-promotion and chicanery involved. The only thing I ask is that when you've been in office a year or so, you set aside a few taels you've honestly come by, either from your salary or your savings, and send them along to me so that my wife and I can pro-

³The title of a well-known aria type in the drama ("Yujia ao").

⁴The word *shamen*, recluses, came to refer also to self-styled recluses, especially writers and artists who made a living from itinerant patronage seeking, an increasingly common phenomenon from the mid-Ming on. As such, the term generally carried a derisory tone. Later in his life, Li Yu himself came to depend on this very activity.

vide for our funeral things. You'd be doing us a great favour. But I will never, ever go about asking for patronage, so don't send for me, whatever you do."

Tan's respect for Mo was all the greater because of this refusal. He now ordered a farewell feast prepared on board, but this time only mountain delicacies were served, not seafood, because the latter was local produce for Mo and his wife and Tan would not have dreamed of giving them ordinary fare. And although he was now a distinguished man himself, he chose to ignore the segregation of the sexes and had both couples sit and eat together. Because their friendship had been formed while he was still poor and unknown, he did not dare behave toward them as an official. Hosts and guests ate and drank the whole night through, until finally, at the fifth watch, they took leave of each other.

By the time Tan and Miaogu reached the scene of their suffering, it was the beginning of the eleventh month, a full month after Lord Yan's birthday. "What a pity we couldn't have been here a month earlier!" said Tan. "There'd still have been some actors in the temple, and we could have had a play performed. What a fine thing that would have been, to celebrate the god's birthday and express our thanks to him at the same time!"

"Just what I was thinking," said Miaogu, "but the birthday is long past, and I doubt that there are any actors to be found in such a rural area. We'll simply have to prepare the offerings and sacrifice in silence."

As they approached, however, they could see from a long way off that the stage was still standing in front of Lord Yan's Temple, and that the table and chairs were still on it, as if the performances were not over. Tan sent one of his servants off to inquire. It appeared that there had been several days of heavy rain at the beginning of the tenth month, and that there was no shelter for the audience. Now, people who put on ritual plays claim to be doing it for the god's benefit, but actually they do it for the audience. If the conditions don't suit the audience, the god will scarcely be allowed to enjoy the play on his own! So the benefactors cancelled the performances and arranged a make-up celebration for the third day of the following month. Tan and Miaogu had happened to arrive just as the performances concluded and the actors were about to be dismissed. Coincidence though this was, the power of the god may also have had something to do with it. Perhaps he wanted this romance, which began in the theatre, to end in the theatre, and so delayed the festival until their arrival, thus setting up a "Happy Reunion" finale.⁵

Tan sent a second servant off to find out which troupe was performing. The answer came back that it was the same troupe as before, except that the male and female leads were new. Jiangxian now played the male lead, and her daughter-in-law, Miaogu's sister-in-law, a girl of sixteen or seventeen, played the female lead. After Miaogu's death, there had been no one to take her place, and the daughter-in-law had been brought in as a substitute. Although neither could compare with Tan or Miaogu, they were so much bet-

ter than their competition that the temple's benefactors had continued to invite them.

When she heard that her mother was present, Miaogu was eager to summon her at once, but her husband resisted. "If we see her now, the finale will be very dull indeed. To create a little excitement, we'll have to do this—and-thus."⁶

"You're perfectly right," said Miaogu.

Tan told one of his stewards to draw twelve taels and write out a calling card, then give the following message to the temple benefactors: "My master is passing through here on the way to his post. He met with a typhoon on the river and made a pledge to the god that he would like to redeem at this temple. He also wishes to engage the actors for one play, in consideration of which he remits the normal booking fee in full."

The benefactors, presented with this opportunity both to do someone a favour as well as to see another play, were only too glad to accept. Tan told his servants to prepare a pig and a sheep in sacrifice and place them before the god's image. They were to explain that their master had caught a cold and could not go ashore, but that he would moor his boat alongside the temple, with the cabin door opposite the god's image, and that he and his wife would bow and give thanks from behind the curtain. Afterwards they would sit and enjoy a little wine as they watched the play.

Jiangxian now approached to show them the repertoire. "Your Honour, which play would you like us to perform?" she asked from outside the cabin.

Tan told a servant to reply for him: "The Mistress had a dream last night in which Lord Yan wanted to have *The Thorn Hairpin* performed, so please do that play." Jiangxian took back the repertoire and returned to the green-room, where she dressed as Wang Shipeng.

Gentle reader, why do you suppose Tan and his wife chose this play again? Were there no other good plays besides *The Thorn Hairpin*? You must understand that they were less interested in seeing the play than in testing Jiangxian's love for her daughter. It was *The Thorn Hairpin* that Miaogu had been performing when she leapt into the water, and their reason for choosing the same play was to force Jiangxian to relive the experience. If she wept a few genuine tears during the tragic scene, it would mean that she had repented, and they would invite her on board to meet them. But if she played the scenes routinely, without any sign of distress, there would be no need to meet with her, and they could slip quietly away. That was why they chose this play, of all plays. The choice was another example of Tan's shrewdness.

Jiangxian now appeared on stage as Wang Shipeng. During the first few scenes, she showed no distress. Only when she came to the scene in which her daughter-in-law, like Miaogu, played Yulian throwing herself into the river, did her conscience begin to trouble her. Despite herself, "the cruel cat

⁶The author wishes to hide the plan from the reader.

⁵The last scene of a Southern play ("Tuanyuan") is traditionally a reunion after all conflicts have been resolved.

suddenly began crying over the dead mouse." But it was clear from the way she cried that she was trying to keep the fact from the audience, because she fought back her sobs and kept dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. However, when she came to "Sacrificing to the River,"⁷ she could control herself no longer and burst into unrestrained sobbing. Whereas before she had cried out "Qian Yulian, wife, where are you?", she now, as she continued sobbing, forgot where she was and substituted the word "child" for "wife." The audience knew she was weeping for Miaogu, but not even Master Zhou⁸ would have had the heart to criticize her mistake.

When Miaogu noticed how heartbrokenly her mother was weeping, her own tears streamed down too, streaking her make-up. She told a maid to pull the curtain aside and cried out: "Mother! Don't cry! Your daughter didn't die! I'm here!"

Jiangxian stared wide-eyed at the boat and saw Tan Chuyu and her daughter sitting there side by side, wine cups in front of them, like a couple of wronged ghosts who had learned of the sacrifice being held on stage and had come to partake of it. Panic-stricken, she screamed at the actors in the green-room: "My daughter's ghost! Come quick!"

The troupe dashed on stage, and, looking intently at the boat, declared: "It's her ghost, all right. There's no doubt about it."

Hearing talk of ghosts, the audience panicked and turned to flee, at which point one of Tan's stewards, a resourceful fellow, stood up in the bow and shouted to them: "There's no cause for alarm. Those aren't ghosts you see in the boat, they're the real Master Tan and his lady. They were rescued after they leapt into the water, and then the master passed the examinations, and now he's been appointed prefect of Dingzhou. He's passing through here on the way to his post. He and his lady owe their lives to one of Lord Yan's miracles, and that's why they're giving thanks here today."

At this, the audience turned back again and, instead of fleeing, pressed forward to get a good look at this couple who had been saved from suicide, hoping to have an item of news to take home. The theatre became a heaving mass of humanity, and the very old and the very young were forced into the water or trampled underfoot. Tan saw the danger and hurriedly consulted with his wife: "We've already shown ourselves and can't hide any more. I suggest we go on stage together and let everyone take a good look at us. Otherwise someone will be crushed to death."

"Very well," she said.

They changed into their formal clothes, Tan putting on his crimson collar and Miaogu her phoenix hood and cloud mantilla. Under new bright-blue parasols they stepped ashore surrounded by servants and maids. First they went to the image of Lord Yan and bowed low four more times. Then

⁷Scene 30 ("Ji jiang"). Actually it is not Wang but his mother who sacrifices, and the words quoted do not appear in the play.

⁸Zhou Yu (175-210), who came to represent the expert critic of music.

they went on stage and paid their respects to Jiangxian. Finally, they called all their fellow actors and actresses over and greeted them one by one.

Jiangxian and the rest of the troupe asked how they had come to be rescued. Tan told of someone leading them through the water, of a great fish carrying them on its back, of the fish's sudden disappearance when it reached the net, and of their fortunate rescue by the fisherman and his wife. He told his story in a loud, ringing voice so that all those on and off the stage could hear it and learn to venerate the god all the more by knowing of his spiritual power.

Everyone was astounded. The benefactors came forward to offer their congratulations. The rich benefactor who had tried to marry Miaogu was afraid that Tan's and Miaogu's hatred would turn to thoughts of revenge, so he hastily prepared some lavish presents and begged the others to intercede for him.

But Tan would accept none of the presents. "Without the stimulus this gentleman provided, not only would our romance not have succeeded, I would still be an actor; I could never have risen to the position I hold. He is not an enemy of ours, quite the contrary. How could I even *think* of revenge?" The benefactors marvelled at him and praised his generosity.

Miaogu turned to her mother. "Now that your son-in-law is a national graduate and your daughter a lady, surely you won't want to go on with your acting? Pack up your things as quickly as you can and come and live with us, so that you won't have to make a spectacle of yourself any more."

Jiangxian was delighted that her daughter and son-in-law bore her no grudge. Handing the troupe's management over to her daughter-in-law, she went off with Miaogu to enjoy a life of wealth and prestige. But within a month of her arrival she came down with an illness that defied every attempt at cure, and in the end she had to get her daughter to send her back again. Once she was home, the illness vanished of its own accord, without further treatment. As soon as she recovered, she went on tour again, enjoyed excellent health, and suffered no further misfortune.

Why? In the first place, she had been destined for an actress's career by the eight characters of her birth⁹ and could not be away from the theatre for a day without incurring some mishap. Clearly, if someone has a lowly fate, not even her own child will be able to raise her to a higher status, let alone anyone else. Hence poor men should resign themselves to their lot, not hate the rich and eminent for failing to raise them up. Secondly, Jiangxian had grown accustomed to a frivolous life and could not suddenly switch to a serious one. Compare the case of a maidservant promoted to a wife, or a servant-boy adopted as a son; not only will their lowly destinies show in their faces, they will get no pleasure from their new status but instead will feel strain, which in turn will give rise to illness. Therefore prostitutes who reform and get married, like priests who leave the priesthood—unless they do

⁹The eight characters represent the year, month, day, and hour of birth.

so of their own volition and are not pressured into it—will not be able to persevere and will ultimately revert to their old professions.

Let me turn now to Tan, who, after serving six months in his new post, sent Mo five hundred taels with the promise of more to come, to a total of over a thousand. But Mo, a scrupulously honest man, kept only one hundred, as the tenfold repayment of his loan, and sent the rest back.

When his term of office was over, Tan set off for the capital and again passed through Quzhou, Yanzhou, and other towns. He renovated Lord Yan's Temple and also bought several acres of sacrificial land, which he handed over to the benefactors to fund future sacrifices and theatricals with. From there he went on to Port Newtown to visit Fisherman Mo.

Mo opened with a few disdainful remarks designed to chip away at Tan's evident vanity and love of luxury, then went on to speak of matters of gain and loss to attack his cupidity. Now, Tan already possessed a certain spiritual capacity. In his days as an actor, he had noted how high the excitement was as long as the play lasted—"one thousand in tears, ten thousand in love"—but that once it was over and the gongs and drums were silent, the audience would stream out of the theatre without a single backward glance, as if they were cutting him dead. Clearly, there was no play in the world that did not come to an end and no excitement that would last forever. Therefore he had never felt any very strong desire for wealth and prestige. Now, as he listened to Mo's enlightening talk, he felt as if he had been subjected to "a blow and a shout"¹ just at the moment he awakened from a dream, and he would never let himself be deluded again.

No longer did he have the slightest desire to seek promotion in the capital or enjoy his hometown glory. Instead, by the side of Two Mile Stream in Tonglu county, he bought an acre or two of hilly ground and built a thatched hut on it. He spent his days fishing, partly to follow the lofty example of Yan Ziling² and partly to receive Fisherman Mo's guidance. By Mo he was introduced to a circle of friends, ploughmen and woodcutters, men of noble character who possessed the talent, if not the desire, to succeed in public life. By spending his days with them, Tan learned something of fishing, woodcutting, and farming. Miaogu, too, had her circle of friends, introduced to her by Mo's wife, wise women who could have helped their husbands succeed in public life but chose not to press them. By spending her days with these women, she learned something of raising silkworms and spinning silk.

Both Tan and Miaogu lived on into their nineties. The only pity was that they had no son. This was partly because Miaogu's beauty was of the delicate type that is not conducive to bearing sons, and partly because Tan was so deeply devoted to his wife that he could not contemplate taking a concubine.

Critique

This romance has seven peculiar features, all of which fly in the face of common sense. One: an exceptionally wanton mother gives birth to a perfectly chaste daughter. Two: someone from the lowliest social level performs the noblest action. Three: whereas playwrights have always developed plays from real events, this story develops real events from a play. Four: whereas the *jing* and *chow* roles have always been something for the male lead to fall back on, here they serve as stepping-stones to his position. Five: since cults are established by the gods, Erlang, as the patron of the acting profession, ought to have been called upon to play the celestial matchmaker; instead he is left out, and it is Lord Yan, with no connection to acting, who takes his place. Six: in fiction it is the main character who, without exception, takes the subordinate characters away with him; when Tan Chuyu meets with sudden success, the normal thing would have been for him to take Fisherman Mo off to become wealthy and eminent, instead of which it is the peripheral Mo who takes Tan off to become a high-minded recluse. Seven: plays and stories have to end in an exciting finale to suit contemporary taste—without such an ending, they would be rejected by their audiences—and yet this story ends in rustic solitude.

One might well consider himself lucky if all of these unnatural and unreasonable things did not provoke the reader's irritation. How then, can one explain the fact that they cause the reader to start praising the story's novelty as soon as he opens the book and leave him dancing on air as he closes it? Impossible! All we can do is curse the author as a peculiar romancer who deals in peculiarities.

¹A Buddhist notion, it refers to a salutary shock administered by a religious mentor.

²Yan Guang, whose style was Ziling, of the Han Dynasty. Li Yu often used him as a symbol of the high-minded recluse who refused office.