




Classics of Modern Chinese Literature

A Z hu Ziqing Reader

Translated by Jeffrey Yao et. al.

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Editor of Modern Chinese Literature

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Plashes and Lantern Light on the Qinhuai River



On one August evening in 1923, Pingbo and I cruised the Qinhuai River on a hired tour boat. It was Pingbo's first trip and my second to the river. We set off after sunset with a bright moon hanging in the sky. The sound of lapping water sent us reminiscing about the history of the Qinhuai River, as moonlight shimmered on its roseate surface.

The tour boats were better than those I had seen operating in the Wansheng Garden and Summer Palace in Beijing, on Hangzhou's West Lake or Yangzhou's Slender West Lake, which were too clumsy, crude or narrow to serve as a mood-switcher as these did. They generally fell into two categories: big or small, also known as "seven strakers".

The big boat had a spacious cabin for up to 30 passengers, festooned with calligraphy and paintings and equipped with shiny rosewood



furniture and marble topped tables. The lattice windows were delicately chased and fitted with red and blue windowpanes printed with exquisite patterns. Smaller in size though, the “seven straker”, with a roomy cabin and baby blue guardrails, was to my liking. An added attraction was the arched canopy on its foredeck, supported by railing on both sides. Under the awning sat two wicker recliner chairs for tourists to chat while admiring unblocked views ahead and buildings on both banks. Big boats also boasted this structure, but were not as sleek.

Colorful lanterns hung from the cabin’s eaves, but the number and brightness of the lanterns, and the texture and color of their tassels varied from boat to boat. Flickering on as night would fall, these lanterns were truly fascinating decorations. The yellow light passing through two layers of glass created a halo effect which reflected on the dim, rippling water. How could one not slip into a reverie, listening to the gentle, intermittent plash of oars amidst the thin mist and shimmering dimpled surface of the water?

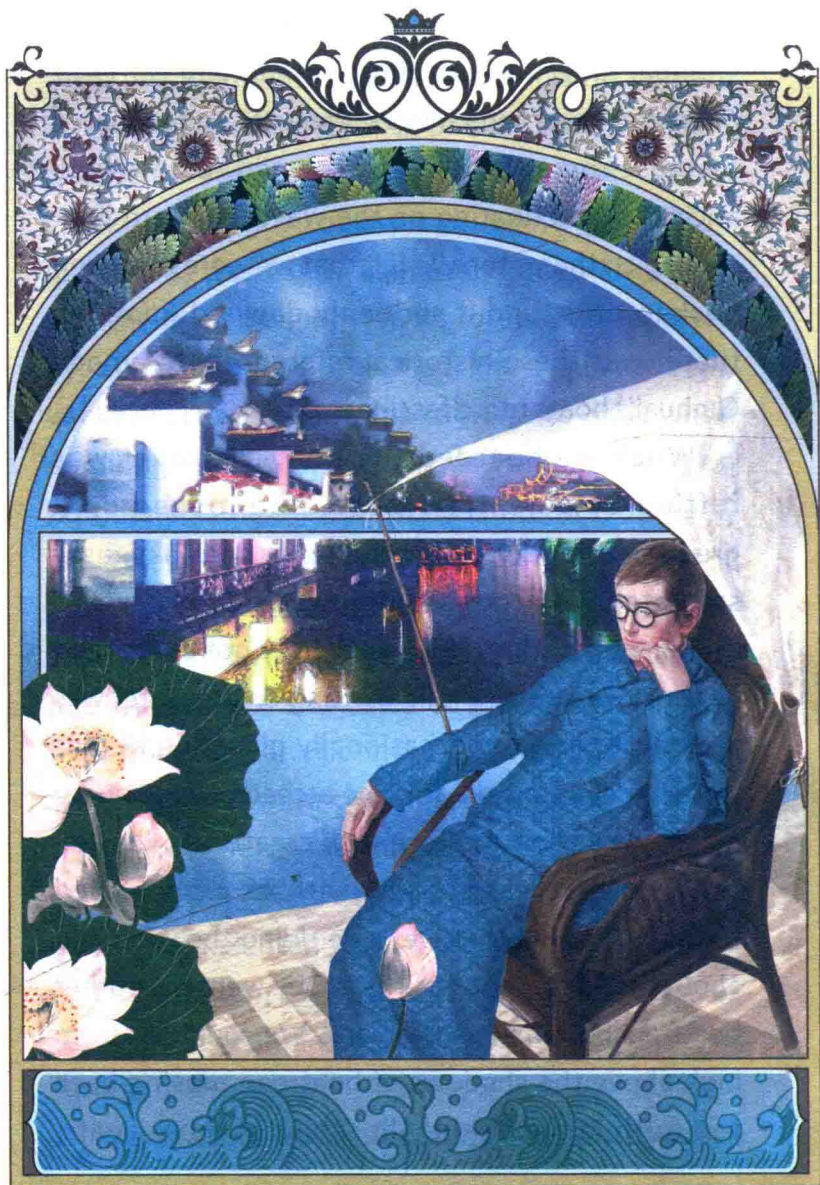
We chatted away about Early Qing Dynasty

romantic stories that include references to the Qinhui River – *Peach Blossom Fan* and *Notes at Plank Bridge*, among others. We were so fascinated by those romances that we seemed to be seeing ancient boats floating on the waves, lantern light shining on the water. We felt that we were travelling back in time, and it suddenly dawned upon me that it was these historical references that made Qinhui's boats more fascinating.

When we boarded the boat, the river was ruffled by a gentle breeze, and looked dark green and murky under the open dusk sky, as if saturated with rouge and powder. The view was simply intoxicating. Now, as the sky got darker and lanterns were lit, the halo dancing on the water was dreamlike, and the occasionally glittering ripples were like eyes in a dream. The arched awning under which we sat on the foredeck created an illusion that the boat was cruising with its prow turned upwards. We felt that we were riding the wind and about to soar up into the sky, as we went past other boats anchored along the bank. We could see from high above the shadows of boatmen moving back and forth in the brightly lit cabins of those boats,



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which soon appeared as a tiny garland of light in the distance.

After we passed through the Lishe Bridge, the Eastern Gate came into sight. From here onwards, intermittent songs wafted to our ears, some from the brothels along the banks, others from other boats on the river. No more than hackneyed lyrics sung by amateur throats though, these songs mixed with the summer breeze and splashes were pleasant whispers, by the time they reached our ears. They tugged at our heartstrings, and kept us indulged. After a turn at the Eastern Gate, we arrived at the Dazhong Bridge, with three giant gate-like arches easily accessible by our "seven straker". The bridge's dark brown bricks betrayed its long history. The fact that it remained intact to this day despite the elements made us marvel at its engineering ingenuity. It was lined with two rows of timbered buildings, and I guessed there must have been a street between them. The buildings looked dilapidated, blackened by smoke, and their original shine was lost to history. I could imagine that in the heyday of the Qinhuai River, these purpose-built houses on such a magnificent bridge must have



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been sumptuously painted, and ablaze with light at night. Now, only an expanse of darkness remained. But then again, we at least saw these buildings standing as a testament to the bridge's glorious past. After passing through the Dazhong Bridge, we came to the most vibrant and brightly illuminated section that made the Qinhuai River a household name.



The river suddenly opened up beyond the Dazhong Bridge, and it was quite a different sight on opposite banks: densely packed houses gave way to sparsely populated woods, and under the bright moon and pale grey sky, desolation and wildness reigned. Further ahead, boundless darkness engulfed the whole landscape. We could hardly believe it was still part of the busy Qinhuai River, if it were not for the flickering lantern lights, painted pleasure-

boats, and the lilting melodies of flutes and fiddles surrounding us on the water, now as green as capillary artemisia wine. The sky was much broader here, as if night fell later. We could see our reflections on the water surface under the moon. This was exactly what a typical night on the Qinhuai River was like. Further ahead, there was the Fucheng Bridge, which the boatman told



us was where our tour would turn around and head back, probably because it marked the end of the animated section of the river. I had recollections walking across the bridge at around thirteen, and I hadn't had a chance to see it on my previous boat tour. So near, and yet so far. I was going to miss it again.

Along the trip, the evening breeze had



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gradually cooled the midsummer heat. Now, in this unencumbered stretch of the river, it brushed against our cheeks, hands and clothes. The sun in Nanjing must be milder than that in Hangzhou. A summer's night on the West Lake could be swelteringly hot, and the water could seem to boil; but the water of the Qinhuai was always fresh and blue. Amid the endless bustle, the Qinhuai river always glided on stoically tranquil and blue under hazy veil of green. Barely half a third of a mile beyond the Dazhong Bridge, the boatman stopped to let the boat drift, now that we had reached what he saw as the mid-point between vibrancy and desolation. He squatted down quietly, signaling that we took our time admiring the view, with which he himself was so familiar, almost to the point of boredom. His insouciance, whether feigned or natural, was a fitting enough for the occasion.

Behind us, the river was alive with activity. The majority of boats were lying at anchor at the city side, while the rest wove through the crowded water channel, ours among them. The congestion on the city side greatly eased traffic on the other side, and we could make out the silhouette of

each passing boat, giving us a feel of space and tranquility.

Songs accompanied by the penetrating tones of bowed strings came flooding in from different directions, yet few were pleasant to the ear. Nonetheless, the shrill amateur sounding notes reminded us of carefree and insouciant youth, and that was exactly what we had come for. Besides, by leaving free reign to our imagination and curiosity from a distance, we found the songs extraordinarily appealing. The disorderly songs and the concomitant notes of different instruments generated a feel of musical harmony that left us completely speechless. We felt we were being carried away by a gust of wind. Our dull and insipid sensations were suddenly awoken after a long period of dormancy, and started to burst out of control.

The scene on the Qinhuai was one of featureless sameness. The figures we saw on boats anchored beside ours or on those passing before our eyes were a blurred and somewhat indistinct sight. We failed to detect anything different from the rest, even if we made a point to do so with eyes wide



open. And it was not hard to fathom why. The spot where our boat was moored was well lit, with many lanterns glowing yellow color and an aureole that was ballooning as more and more lanterns were lit. Now it seemed that the Qinhuai River was shrouded in a cocoon of light. Everything was reduced to an outline. The contours of faces were lost to the misty halo. Yet the halation of lanterns could not outshine the moonlight, which was bright and clear enough to pass through the hazy luminescence.

What a wonderful sight! Having waned a bit, the moon rose gracefully over the willow tree-tops like a heavily made up maiden ready for an evening party. The azure sky was like a broad expanse of limpid water, against which the moon appeared brighter and more majestic. There were a couple of weeping willows lining the bank, their reflections swaying in the water. Bathed in the moonlight, their tender twigs looked like the locked arms of slender girls or like the long loose hair of the moon. Occasionally the moon peeped at us through the space between the twigs, very much like a curious, shy little girl. There were also a few unknown old trees standing there with naked branches, like

hale and hearty seniors admiring the night sky. In the distance, quite close to the horizon, a few gray clouds fringed with silver moonlight glistened like pretty shells; beneath them were shadows of darkness, like a randomly drawn winding line. This sight gave us a dramatically different feel from that on the river, where the lantern light and moonlight mingled, making the moon more enchanting and the hazy halo more romantic. This was the very beauty of the Qinhuai bestowed by heaven, and we could not have asked for more.

But our good spirits were somewhat dampened by what happened next. Geisha girls would make a living by singing on the teahouse-shaped ships from one o'clock in the afternoon to I forget when, and the whole evening by the dim yellow lantern light. I had the opportunity to hear them sing during my previous trips to Nanjing with friends. But the crowd on board the teahouse-shaped ships spoiled my mood and ruined the experience. The year before last, I had heard that the geisha girls had been banned, which came to me as a surprise for reasons I could not explain. Before boarding this boat, I visited some of the teahouse ships to



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