THE COURTESAN'S JEWEL BOX

CHINESE STORIES OF THE Xth – XVIIth CENTURIES

THE COURTESAN'S JEWEL BOX

Chinese Stories of the Xth-XVIIth Centuries

TRANSLATED BY
YANG XIANYI and GLADYS YANG

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
BEIJING

First Edition 1981

Published by the Foreign Languages Press
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Printed by the Foreign Languages Printing House
19 West Chegongzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Distributed by Guoji Shudian (China Publications Centre)
P. O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

Introduction

YAN DUNYI[1]

The development in China of short stories written in the language of everyday speech was closely related to a form of folk literature deeply rooted among the people — the art of story-telling.

Professional story-tellers in the market-places would improve on historical or traditional tales until these came to possess a high literary value. Later these stories were transcribed and these texts, known as *hua ben* 话本, were the scripts used and handed down by story-tellers. As time went on they became more and more widely known, found their way into the hands of men outside the profession, and were compiled as written stories. But in China they are usually referred to as *hua ben* or "story-tellers' scripts," to indicate their origin.

Stories written in the vernacular during the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) Dynasties developed from these early story-tellers' scripts. This accounts for their popularity among the common people of that time, and for the fact that both in form and content they differ from the earlier stories in the classical language.

The classical tales of the third to tenth centuries deal for the most part with supernatural beings, ghosts and miraculous events, or with love and separation; but since they were written in the classical language, they could not be widely read and were known to a limited circle only. From the Tang Dynasty (618-907) onwards there was a great development of mercantile

[1] A deceased editor of classical literature in the People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.

economy in China, large towns grew up, handicraft industries prospered, and a considerable urban population appeared. Since few townsmen were well versed in the literary language and the contents of the classical stories were remote from their everyday life, they were greatly attracted by the tales of the story-tellers which developed to meet their demands.

After the establishment of the Song Dynasty there was a further expansion of agriculture, commerce and handicrafts, and the towns became increasingly prosperous. The two great cities of Bianliang (present-day Kaifeng) and Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou) were centres for the development of the story-tellers' art. These stories have a characteristic form. They usually open with quotations from poems which have little or nothing to do with the plot; and the main story is often preceded by an anecdote known as the introductory story, which has a similar theme or some relationship to the main topic. These features developed to meet specific needs, to fill up the time while the listeners gathered round and settled down, or to lengthen the duration of the recital. Often the story itself is also interspersed with verses and concludes with a verse or certain set phrases. The language is lively and fluent, being the vivid, highly expressive vernacular of that time, and comments and questions are frequently addressed directly to the readers. All these characteristics of the oral narrative have been retained in the written scripts.

The contents of these tales were also enriched by the use of material from many sources. Thus we find love stories challenging the feudal conventions, accounts of the revolts of peasants and townsfolk against the ruling class, tales of the supernatural, satires which ridicule not only the ruling class but even kings and emperors, as well as stories of trials and detection which demonstrate the people's wisdom, and chronicles of happenings in real life. During the troubled years of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) these stories also described the people's sufferings and the cruelty of the invaders, laying stress on certain victories against the aggressors in order to inspire and

encourage the people. Almost all these tales without exception were created by folk artists, who produced these written scripts on the basis of their own experience and artistic gifts from stories approved by many listeners and revised by a succession of story-tellers. Hence this was truly anonymous folk literature. Of course, these stories may have been improved upon by members of the writers' groups organized by educated men of the time to transcribe and polish scripts for folk artists; but undoubtedly the oral versions were kept substantially unchanged, these scripts being in fact the written records of this oral literature. They enjoyed a much greater popularity than general accounts of past history, for they gave a fuller picture of real society and real life, and the listeners could understand clearly the events described and sympathize completely with the characters in the stories.

Another characteristic of the Song Dynasty tales was the extent to which they reflected contemporary life and expressed the ideas, interests and wishes of the urban class. Since the makers of these stories were townsfolk themselves, their likes and dislikes, joys and sorrows, were the same as those of the urban class as a whole, as can be seen in their development of plots and characterization.

During the Mongol invasion of China little progress was made in this form of literature, which did not recover till after the establishment of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), when production and agriculture were restored, mercantile capital expanded, many large and small towns sprang up, and a brisk trade was carried on with other countries. By the middle of the sixteenth century, therefore, these stories had revived to meet the needs and demands of a greater urban population, and similar short stories were being written by the literati themselves. Such stories, which existed as literature to be read instead of transcriptions of oral narrations, are known as "stories modelled on *hua ben*." Composed by writers, they may in a sense be considered as modern short stories, though they

retain the form and distinctive style of the earlier story-tellers' scripts.

During the Ming Dynasty, stories modelled on *hua ben* took the place of the old scripts transcribed from oral narrations; and this fact naturally led to changes in content. Although the stories written during the Ming Dynasty continue to reflect contemporary life, sometimes even more penetratingly than the earlier *hua ben,* while the construction of the plot and the language also show a certain improvement, these tales are often moralistic and attach undue importance to outward form and strange incidents. Such tendencies were inevitable in the transformation of these stories from pure folk art to the work of the literati, and they are most marked towards the end of the dynasty. Later these tales declined, becoming lifeless, decadent and unrealistic. Thus when we speak of this form of literature, we refer to the stories written before the end of the Ming Dynasty.

Probably even in the Song and Yuan Dynasties there were printed texts recorded from early oral narratives, which were doubtless polished and revised at the time; but hitherto we have found no text which we can affirm with certainty was first printed in the Song Dynasty. The earliest existing collections are Song stories edited and compiled in the Ming Dynasty. Ming scholars collected, edited and published old stories while writing new ones themselves, taking the opportunity of including in the collections of old tales certain new ones which had never been used as scripts by story-tellers.

The most important collection is the well-known one edited by Feng Menglong, which is divided into three books of forty stories each: *Stories to Teach Men* 喻世明言, *Stories to Warn Men* 警世通言, and *Stories to Awaken Men* 醒世恒言. Feng Menglong was a dramatist, collector of folk literature, and writer of stories and novels who lived at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century. Some of the stories in his collection can be assigned definitely to the Song and Yuan Dynasties, others to the middle of the Ming Dynasty,

and some are by Feng himself. He must also have polished or rewritten some of the old stories, for in certain places one can detect his style. These three books provide our most important material for the study of this type of literature.

After Feng Menglong another dramatist, Lin Mengchu, published another collection of stories modelled on the *hua ben* known as *Astonishing and Miraculous Tales* 拍案惊奇, containing seventy-nine stories in all, forty in the first volume, thirty-nine in the second. But whereas Feng's are mainly earlier tales re-edited and published with some of the editor's own stories, the *Astonishing and Miraculous Tales* are entirely the work of Lin Mengchu.

At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) there appeared a popular collection containing forty stories, known as *Strange Stories Past and Present* 今古奇观. Nearly all the tales in this come from Feng and Lin's works. A number of them are somewhat moralistic, others are excellent stories. Since there were very few printed editions of Feng's works, for a time this later book became the most popular collection.

The twenty stories presented in this selection have been chosen from Feng and Lin's collections. Written between the tenth and seventeenth centuries, they are some of the most representative tales of the heyday of *hua ben* literature and the period of its revival. Of these, "The Jade Worker," "Fifteen Strings of Cash," "The Monk's Billet-Doux," "The Foxes' Revenge" and "The Honest Clerk" probably date from the Song Dynasty. The dates of "The Oil Vendor and the Courtesan" and "The Old Gardener" are uncertain. The remaining thirteen belong to the Ming Dynasty.

These stories are of different types and have different themes. Most of the categories of short stories mentioned earlier can be found here. These tales were selected for their positive message, their high artistic qualities, and their truthfulness to life. With great realism they reflect the social conditions of the time and the people's ideals and struggles. While portraying

what was progressive in the outlook of the townsmen of those days, they satirize feudal morality and feudal society.

These tales are far removed, of course, from modern short stories; but if we compare them with earlier tales and anecdotes in our classical literature, they seem relatively close to us. And they form an important part of our literary heritage.

In this English edition some of the verses and introductory anecdotes, which are unrelated to the main story or would require copious footnotes, have been cut.

The twenty-two illustrations in this book are reproduced from Ming Dynasty editions of the early seventeenth century. These photographs were supplied by the deceased Professor Wang Gulu of Beijing Normal University.

CONTENTS

The Jade Worker

碾玉观音

During the Shao Xing period (1131-1162) there lived in Hangzhou, the southern capital, a certain Prince of Xian'an, who was a native of Yan'an and the military governor of three garrison areas. One day, seeing that spring was nearly over, he took some of his womenfolk out to enjoy the scenery. On their way back in the evening, they had passed through Qiantang Gate and the women's sedan-chairs had just crossed Carriage Bridge when the prince, whose chair brought up the rear, heard someone call from a shop by the bridge:

"Come out, lass, and look at the prince."

A girl came out, at sight of whom the prince exclaimed to his bodyguard: "This is just the girl I have been looking for! See that you bring her to the palace tomorrow."

The bodyguard assented, and immediately set about carrying out the prince's orders. There was a house beside the bridge with a signboard on which was written: The House of Qu, Ancient and Modern Paintings Mounted. And it was out of this shop that an old man had come, leading a girl.

What was she like, this girl?

Her cloudlike hair was lighter than cicada's wing;
Her mothlike eyebrows fairer than hills in spring;
Her lips were cherry-red, her teeth like jade,
And sweeter than an oriole she could sing.

Such was the girl who had come out to see the prince's sedan-chair.

The bodyguard sat down in a tea-house opposite, and when an old woman brought him tea he said: "May I trouble you

to ask Mr. Qu from the mounting shop across the street to step over to have a word with me?"

The woman fetched Old Qu; and after the men had exchanged greetings they sat down.

"What can I do for you?" asked Old Qu.

"It is nothing — just an idle question. Is the girl you called out to watch the prince's sedan-chair your daughter?"

"She is. We have only the one child."

"How old is she?"

"Eighteen."

"Do you intend to marry her to someone or to present her to some official?"

"I'm a poor man. Where would I get the money to marry her off? I shall have to send her to serve in some official's house."

"What accomplishments has your daughter?"

Then Old Qu told him, in the words of the song:

As days grow longer, in her quiet room
The girl embroiders many a flower in bloom,
And rivals Nature with her needle now
To stitch bright blossoms on a slanting bough,
With tender leaves, soft buds and tendrils rife,
In all but scent completely true to life;
So many a roving butterfly and bee
Fly in to light on her embroidery.

"Just now," said the bodyguard, "the prince noticed from his sedan-chair the embroidered apron your daughter is wearing. We are looking for a girl to do embroidery in the palace. Why don't you present your daughter to the prince?"

The old man went home and talked it over with his wife; and the next day he drew up a petition and took the girl to the palace. The prince paid for the girl, and gave her the name Xiuxiu.

Some time later, when the emperor presented the prince with a flower-embroidered battle dress, Xiuxiu immediately made

another exactly like it. The prince was pleased, and said: "His Majesty has given me this embroidered battle dress. What rare gift can I give him in return?"

He found a piece of fine, translucent white jade in his treasury, and calling for his jade workers asked them: "What can you make out of this piece of jade?"

"A set of wine cups," said one.

"That would be a pity," said the prince. "How can we use such a fine piece of jade to make wine cups!"

"This piece is pointed on top and round at the bottom," said another. "It can be made into the kind of doll women use when they pray for children."

"That type of figurine is only used on the seventh of the seventh month," objected the prince. "It would be useless at other times."

There was a young craftsman in the group whose name was Cui Ning, a native of Jiankang in Shengzhou. He was twenty-five years old and had served the prince for several years. Now he stepped forward with clasped hands and said: "Your Highness, this pear shape is no good. All it can be carved into is a Guanyin."

"Good!" exclaimed the prince. "The very thing!" He ordered Cui to start on the job.

In less than two months, the jade Guanyin was finished; and when the prince sent it with a petition to the imperial palace, the emperor was delighted with it. Cui's pay was increased, and he continued to serve the prince.

Time passed, until it was spring again. One day, on his way back from a pleasure trip, Cui went with three or four friends into a wineshop just inside Qiantang Gate. They had drunk a few cups only when he heard a great hubbub in the street, and throwing open the window to look out he heard people shouting: "There's a fire at Jingting Bridge!"

Not stopping to finish his wine, he and his companions ran downstairs and out into the street, where they saw a great fire:

First smouldering like glowworm's light,
It soon flared up like torches bright,
Outshone a thousand candles' glare
And made a blaze that filled the air,
As if whole mountains had been burned,
Or Heaven's furnace overturned!

So fierce was the fire!

"That's not far from our palace!" exclaimed Cui.

He ran back to the palace, only to find that everything had been moved out and the whole place was deserted. Unable to find a soul, he was heading down the left corridor in the bright glare of the fire, when a woman reeled out from the hall, muttering to herself, and collided with him. Recognizing Xiuxiu, Cui stepped back and murmured an apology.

The prince had formerly promised Cui: "When Xiuxiu has served her term, I shall marry her to you." The attendants had urged him on several times, saying: "You will make a fine couple!" And Cui had thanked them for their encouragement. He was a bachelor and had taken a fancy to the girl, while he was such a fine young man that Xiuxiu wanted him for her husband too.

Now, during this confusion, here was Xiuxiu coming down the left corridor with a handkerchief full of gold and jewels in her hand. When she bumped into Cui, she said: "Master Cui, I've been left behind! All the maids have run off, so there is no one to look after me. You must find me some place to stay."

Cui accompanied her out of the palace, and they walked along the river bank until they came to Lime Bridge. Then the girl said: "Oh, Master Cui, my feet do hurt so! I can't go any further."

Cui pointed to a nearby house and said: "My home is only a few steps from here. You can rest there." So they went into his house and sat down.

"I am ever so hungry," said Xiuxiu again. "Do buy me

some cakes to eat. And, after the fright I've had, a little wine would do me a world of good."

Cui thereupon bought some wine, and they drank a few cups together. And:

After the girl three cups of wine had drained,
Her downy cheeks two crimson blossoms stained.

As the proverb says: Spring is the time for flowers, and wine is the handmaid of love!

Xiuxiu asked Cui: "Do you remember that day when we were watching the moon on the tower, when the prince promised to marry me to you, and you thanked him. Do you remember that?"

Cui put his hands together respectfully and muttered: "Yes."

"That day," said Xiuxiu, "everybody cheered you and said what a fine couple we would make. How could you have forgotten?"

Once more, Cui simply mumbled: "Yes."

"Why should we go on waiting? Why not become husband and wife tonight? What do you think?"

"I dare not."

"If you refuse," she threatened, "I shall call out and get you into trouble. What did you bring me to your house for, anyway? I shall go and tell them at the palace tomorrow."

"Very well, miss," said Cui. "We can be husband and wife if you like. But on one condition: we must go away. We can take advantage of this fire and confusion to slip away tonight."

"Since I am your wife now," said Xiuxiu, "I'll do as you think best."

That night they became husband and wife; and before dawn they left, carrying their money and possessions with them. Stopping for meals on the way, resting at night and travelling by day, they finally came to Quzhou.

"There are five highways out of this town," said Cui. "Which way shall we take? Suppose we go to Xinzhou? I am a jade worker and I have friends in that city, so we may be able to

settle down there." Accordingly they took the road to Xinzhou.

After they had been a few days in Xinzhou, however, Cui said: "Many people travel to and fro between here and the capital, and if anyone tells the prince that we are here, he will certainly send men to arrest us. We aren't safe here. We had better go somewhere else." Then they set out again for Tanzhou.

After some time they reached Tanzhou, which was a long way from the capital. They rented a house in the marketplace, and put up a signboard on which was written: Cui, the Jade Worker from the Capital.

"We are nearly a thousand miles from the capital now," Cui told Xiuxiu. "I think we should be all right. We can set our minds at ease and live the rest of our lives as husband and wife."

There were some officials in Tanzhou, and, when they found that Cui was a skilled worker from the capital, they gave him work from time to time.

Cui made secret inquiries about the Prince of Xian'an, and learned from someone who had been to the capital that during the fire that night a maid had disappeared from the palace; a reward had been offered for her discovery and a search had been made for several days, but she had never been found. No one knew that Cui had gone off with her, nor that they were living in Tanzhou.

Time sped as swiftly as an arrow, until more than a year had passed.

One morning when Cui opened his shop, two men in footmen's black liveries came in, sat down and told him: "Our master has heard that there is a worker named Cui here from the capital, and he wants you to come to do some work for him."

Telling his wife where he was going, Cui left with the two men for Xiangtan County. They took him to a house where he met the official, agreed to undertake the work and then started home again. On his way home he passed a traveller. This man was wearing a bamboo fibre hat, a cloth jacket with a white

collar, black and white puttees and sandals, and he was carrying two bundles hanging from a long shoulder pole. When they came face to face, the traveller looked closely at Cui. Cui paid no attention to him, but this stranger had recognized the jade worker and he proceeded to walk briskly after him.

Well might we say:

What mischievous boy sounds the clapper today,
To make the love-birds fly away?

II

On bamboo fence the morning glories bloom,
The moon casts chequered shade on my thatched room;
My crystal goblets filled with country wine,
And country dainties in jade dishes fine,
I should at last have cast all cares away,
To spend my time in mirth and laughter gay;
Though all my friends are far away or dead,
A hundred thousand soldiers I once led.

This poem was written by General Liu Qi of the Xiongwu Army Area in Qinzhou. After the Battle of Shunchang in 1140, General Liu had retired to live in Xiangtan County in Tanzhou. A famous general who had never attempted to amass wealth, he was in fact very poor. He often went to village inns to drink, and the villagers who did not know him sometimes made rowdy jokes at his expense. "I held a million barbarian troops as nothing," remarked the general once. "But now these country folk treat me with contempt!"

So he wrote this poem which became known in the capital.

When the Prince of Yanghe, then Commander of the Imperial Guards, saw this poem he was very moved. "To think that General Liu should become so poor!" he exclaimed. He ordered officers to send money to him. And when Cui's former master, the Prince of Xian'an, heard of the general's poverty,