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History of a Chinese Muslim Family

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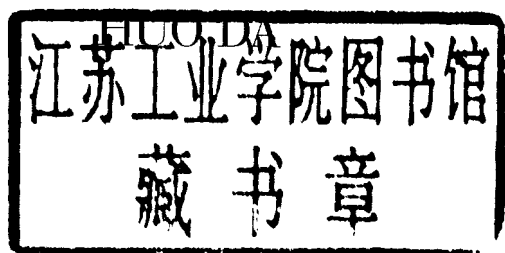
The Jade King is an exceptionally beautiful flower in the garden of flourishing Chinese literature. Its original style and moving plot have caused a great sensation, the depth and breadth of which every one else knows better than I, and I don't want to go into details here.

So far as I know, the novel, slightly abridged, is now being translated into many languages and distributed abroad. I am most happy to hear this. I hope that readers abroad will realize that amongst China's 56 ethnic groups, ten are believers in Islam, and among the 1.1 billion Chinese people there is a young Hui woman writer, who has written a book in Chinese about the life of the Hui people. Since its publication, the novel has received much favourable criticism, and been acclaimed for its excellence. As the Chinese proverb goes, "It is better to see once than hear a hundred times." I urge friends abroad to read for themselves this unique book by a Chinese Muslim writer.



THE JADE KING

History of a Chinese Muslim Family



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Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This "Panda Series" of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this "Panda Series." This publication of the "Panda Series" consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

Ah, Allah! Forgive thy servants, living and dead, present and absent, young and old, man and woman.

Ah, Allah! Whosoever among us thou wilt to live, let him live in Islam; whosoever thou wilt to die, let him die in faith.

Ah, Allah! Depriveth us not for the sake of compensating him; taketh us not for trial after him.

Prayer at the Muslim Funeral

Prologue Dreaming of the Moon

IT was early morning when she came.

Stepping out of a white taxi at an intersection, she stopped a moment to take a look around and then went on down the street and entered a lane, with the familiarity of a long-time resident.

Dressed in a pearl-grey suit and a cream-coloured blouse and wearing white wedge-heeled shoes, she appears tall and slim. Her complexion is fair and delicate, her face almond-shaped, her eyes limpid, her nose shapely, her lips, though without make-up, a pale red which, when tightly drawn, produce two fine curving creases at the corners of her mouth; her hair long and slightly wavy, hanging about the ears. No earrings, nor necklace, nor any other jewellery. Although her black hair is touched with silver at the temples, she gives no impression of aging; those who are unac-

quainted with her or have forgotten her are not able to picture how she could look younger.

She hurries on, carrying no luggage, nothing save a round white cardboard box. As she proceeds, she seems to be drifting out of some lingering reverie.

The little lane lies quiet and tranquil in the soft morning light. Overhead, silken wisps of smoke from kitchen-stoves are seen spiralling slowly skywards. A tall pagoda-like structure looms amid the one-storey houses, its ochre-coloured glazed tiles shimmering in the morning haze. It is the minaret of a mosque, whence five times a day comes a solemn admonition of a call: "Almighty is Allah! There is no god but Allah. Mohammed is the messenger of Allah. Come and pray now!"

This is a Muslim district where the followers of Allah reside, a world apart from the rest of the city. It is a small world. Of old Beijing's eight million inhabitants, only 180,000 are Muslims who either live here in this community or in places scattered throughout the city.

Far back in the seventh century, A.D., caravans of white-turbanned Arab merchants came east to the land of the Tangs, where they eventually became acclimatized, and propagated. Most of these immigrants later became soldiers, farmers and craftsmen, while a small number went into business or preached, and a few became mandarins. Very few ever returned to their ancestral land; most struck roots here and were entered in the official registers of the Yuan court as "Hui-hui." Thus a new nationality emerged in China. Due to inevitable racial interaction in the course of history, the "Hui-hui" eventually admitted into their community certain other ethnic elements, such as the Han, Mongolian, Uighur and Jewish nationalities, but

all along have retained their own ethnic identity, never permitting themselves to be assimilated by the Hans or the other races. In the wide expanse of China where the Hans had long lived and thrived, the "Hui-hui" could not, like the indigenous population, take possession of large tracts of land. As a minority race, they have had to be cautious, hardworking and tenacious in order to make a living and keep their religious faith.

She awakens from her reverie. With that familiar and long-yearned-for world within sight, it seems to her that time has regressed and nothing of that unpleasant past had actually happened. But, no! Time never flows backward. She is returning to this world, older and estranged. Time must have aged others too. She wonders if they got their just deserts, for good or bad. No, she has no desire to find out. She has never wanted to reward the kind or revenge herself upon the mean; all she wants is to remember that which is worth remembering and forget that which should be forgotten.

Another turn and she is in the lane of her dreams.

In front of her stands that ancient Chinese scholar-tree, a tree that has witnessed and undergone every vicissitude but is nevertheless still living, a tree that is gnarled with age but nevertheless luxuriant with foliage. In the old days, every spring it would be festooned with pendulous white blossoms and the entire lane would be permeated with their scent; and whenever there was a breeze, the white petals would flutter down upon her like snow flakes, all over her hair and shoulders, falling and falling so there was no brushing them off. Now the season of blossom is past; no more flowers remain. Scores of times has the tree blossomed and

then shed its blooms, waiting in vain for her return.

Now she is back at long last. She passes under the tree and stops before the gate of the house.

Night after night has she been dreaming of this house, its courtyard and the skies above, the moon in the nocturnal sky. And dreaming of that pair of never-to-be-forgotten eyes and of the heart-rending calls....

Chapter I The Jade Fiend

THIS is a traditional courtyard-house.

At one corner of its wall of polished grey bricks stands the gate under an arch, whose ridge is decorated at each end with an owl-head of simple yet graceful design, and over the rafters is a neat row of triangular drip-tiles. The gate itself is of heavy wood, painted a dark red. On each of the two panels is a brass door-knocker, the size of a rice bowl, with a ring hanging from it. Running down the middle of the panels are two lines of a couplet etched in gold, which read:

“Owner of the Priceless Pearl and the Precious Jade,*

* “The Priceless Pearl” refers to the pearl said to be presented to Prince Sui, a duke of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), by a boa he had rescued. The term has since become a synonym for rare treasure, especially in Chinese classic literature. Like the above, “the Precious Jade” is a classical synonym for anything of rare beauty. The term takes its origin from a piece of precious jade presented by a commoner to a king of Chu during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC).

Lover of Brilliant Moonlight and Gentle Breezes."

Inscribed on the two hexagonal protrusions on the door lintel are two characters *Bo* and *Ya*, one on each, meaning "broadness of knowledge and elegance in taste," which make up the name of the house — *Bo Ya* mansion. Unlike such trite phrases as "Longevity and Prosperity" and "Everlasting spring households fronting south/ Overflowing felicity in families doing good deeds", commonly seen on gates, the words *Bo* and *Ya* are a subtle revelation of the taste and interest of the owner. Flanking the gate are a pair of stone drums, and leading up to the raised threshold a series of five stone steps.

As a rule, the gate is tightly shut. Should the master of the house or any visitor come, he would first have to rap the door-knocker before the gate would be opened by a house-maid coming out from the apartment on the southside of the courtyard.

A few steps beyond the gate and directly opposite it stands a tile-roofed, brick-based spirit-screen, its wall white and bare of writing and painting, pristine as moonlight. At the base of the screen a wisteria of great age curls its way like a dragon up a bamboo trellis, its vines thick and luxuriant, its lush foliage forming a green canopy draping itself all the way to the ground. In spring and summer when the plant is in full bloom, its lavender flowers dangle like strings of gems.

Between the gate and the screen is a long and narrow courtyard, contiguous to the southern wall of which is a five-roomed structure generally known as the "lower apartment". Serving as the reception-room and servants' quarters, the building is to the west of the gate. Thus the gate archway is not in the middle

but at the southeastern corner of the courtyard, conforming with the architectural tradition of "house in *kan* (west), gate in *xun* (southeast)" * which is supposed to ensure good fortune.

At an oblique angle with the gate archway and on the axis of the premises is a second gate. Although merely a passageway between the outer and inner courtyards, this portal, popularly known as "the gate of overhanging floriation", is of no small import. Unlike the simple and sedate door to the street, it is elaborately and exquisitely adorned. Instead of being dark red in colour like its counterpart, it is painted vermillion and embellished with fine designs in white and gold, and has under its eaves an intricately carved and colourfully painted overhang similar to that of a sedan chair. The gate is a perfect specimen of the unsurpassed artistry of craftsmen of traditional architecture.

Beyond the second gate is another spirit-screen. But unlike the one in the front courtyard, it is not built of brick and tile, but carved of natural Chinese box-wood and consisting of four panels linked together in the manner of a folding parlour screen. On the panels are four landscapes done in relief — Mount Emei in moonlight, Suzhou under the midnight moon, Lugou (Marco Polo Bridge) in the dim morning moonglow, and surging sea in the moonshine. All four scenes depict the queen of heaven, but each has its own artistic appeal and evokes a different emotion.

* *Kan* and *xun* are two of the Ba-Gua (Eight Trigrams) signs, prescribed in the ancient *Book of Changes*. *Kan*, represented by the sign "☵", denotes west, and *xun* "☴", southeast. In other words, a house should have its gate built in the southeastern corner.

Behind the screen is the inner courtyard, along three sides of which are buildings — those on the east and west sides are three-roomed while that on the north, or the main apartment, five-roomed. These apartments are linked by a veranda that extends along the southern wall up to the inner gate, forming a square. Two brick-paved walks cross at right angle in the middle of the yard, leading to the gate and the doors of all three apartments. Flanking the main apartment are Chinese crabapple and pomegranate trees, which are a delight to the eye with their leafy boughs swaying in the wind from spring through until autumn.

Among Beijing's courtyard houses, Bo Ya Mansion is of medium size. There are larger ones that have three courtyards or side yards or gardens. But architecturally speaking, it is far above the average and, due to the part played by the owner in its designing, has a grace and tranquillity of its own. Moreover, being ideally located, neither amidst the din and bustle of the main thoroughfares nor too far from them, one can be secluded from the outside world by shutting the gate and yet still have easy access to various places in the city; thus its inmates may sally forth abroad or enjoy quietude at will, an arrangement most suitable for those who care for both social intercourse and peaceful solitude. Obviously the couplet on the gate, the carved landscapes on the wooden screen, and the plants in the courtyard were not randomly chosen.

The present owner of Bo Ya Mansion, however, was the head of the crime-squad of the local police station, who showed neither "broadness of knowledge" nor "elegance in taste", but wore a black police uniform, toted a handgun and dealt in chains and handcuffs.

It is said that before the house fell into his hands, the owner was a Qing-Dynasty scholar who, having fallen out of favour with the court, chose to live as a recluse, devoting himself to reading and painting, and taking pleasure in antiques and cultural relics, especially jades of ancient vintage, priding himself on "gentlemanly conduct chaste as jade." As a rule, he shut himself in and shunned company, but occasionally would go out to visit shops dealing in jades and other lapidaries, where, if he found any rare and precious artifacts, he would make a purchase at all costs, or, if the price was beyond his means, would linger until he had studied the piece and enjoyed its beauty to his heart's content. And if told a certain family had rare jades, he would make a visit there to have a look even though unacquainted with the owner. For his unconventional behaviour, the old gentleman was nicknamed "Jade Fiend", in which he took pride rather than offence. After his demise at the age of eighty, his descendants squandered away the estate and the house fell into the hands of the crime-squad leader. Nevertheless, the old gentleman's antiquarian style lingered on.

In the 24th year of the Republic (1935), the police officer suddenly took it into his head to sell the house and move away. For what reason no one knew, but it was conjectured that either he needed a new and larger house for the power and riches he had amassed, or he was hard pressed for money to meet the expenses incurred in his political dealings....

The news that Bo Ya Mansion was up for sale soon became a talking point everywhere. In the streets and marketplaces, in restaurants and tea-houses, people conversed about the sale with great interest, some eager to

know the price to see whether it was within their means, though most were just having fun and waiting to see who could afford it. So a number of real estate middlemen made so bold as to approach the crime-squad leader, an attempt to fleece the tiger, as it were. For such people the police officer had an instinctive aversion, as he himself was a profiteer and could not bear to have any one else put a finger into his pie. So he made it known "Whoever wants to buy the house, let him come to me himself. Brokers and middlemen had best keep their noses out!"

Having thus shooed away the go-betweens, the officer waited for prospective buyers to come to him. He also refused to go to the real estate exchange and look for customers. There was no doubt in his mind that the house could be sold, that those both in the know and with money would come to make their bids.

Then one day a man came knocking at the door. After showing him into the reception-room, the maid-servant went to her master to announce the visitor.

As the officer entered the reception-room, he cast a glance at the visitor. The man was thirtyish in age, dressed in a long gown of grey cotton, a bowler hat and black cloth shoes, and though tall in stature, was thin and frail. His complexion was darkish, forehead high, hair parted in the middle, eyebrows slightly arched, and eyes black, slightly sunken but flashing with animation, giving the impression that he was highly intelligent and competent. With years of experience in dealing with people of all types, the police officer could identify any one at a glance. Now he was almost certain that the man before him was a junior clerk or a teacher or, at best, an accountant, whom he surmised

was not a buyer but someone sent to pave the way for the deal. Annoyed at the thought, he asked the man coldly without bothering to use any term of address, "What do you want to see me for?"

"I was told," the visitor said, "that you're finding this house too small and wish to change it for a larger one." In deference to the owner, he used the word "change" for "sell".

"Ah, yes," the officer replied, somewhat surprised by the man's choice of words. Then turning to the maid, he ordered, "Tea for our visitor."

"No, thank you," the man said. "Let us get on to the subject of the house."

Another jolt for the officer. Why, the man was wasting no time or words in getting down to business! Why so eager? Actually he himself was anxious to get down to brass tacks too. Waving the maid away, he came to the point at once, "All right, let's not waste time and get down to business. On whose behalf are you coming to see the house? Why isn't he here himself?"

Smilingly the visitor remarked, "Am I not here myself?"

"Oh?" The officer was taken aback and wondered how he had failed to see this. Hell! The fellow doesn't look like someone who afford this house of mine, he thought to himself. But then, since he's said he wants to buy it, I can't but treat him as a prospective buyer. It was at this point that he remembered to ask the visitor his name and began to mind his manners.

"Your surname, sir?"

"Your humble servant is named Han," replied the man, rising slightly from his seat.

"Mr Han," the officer switched to the polite term