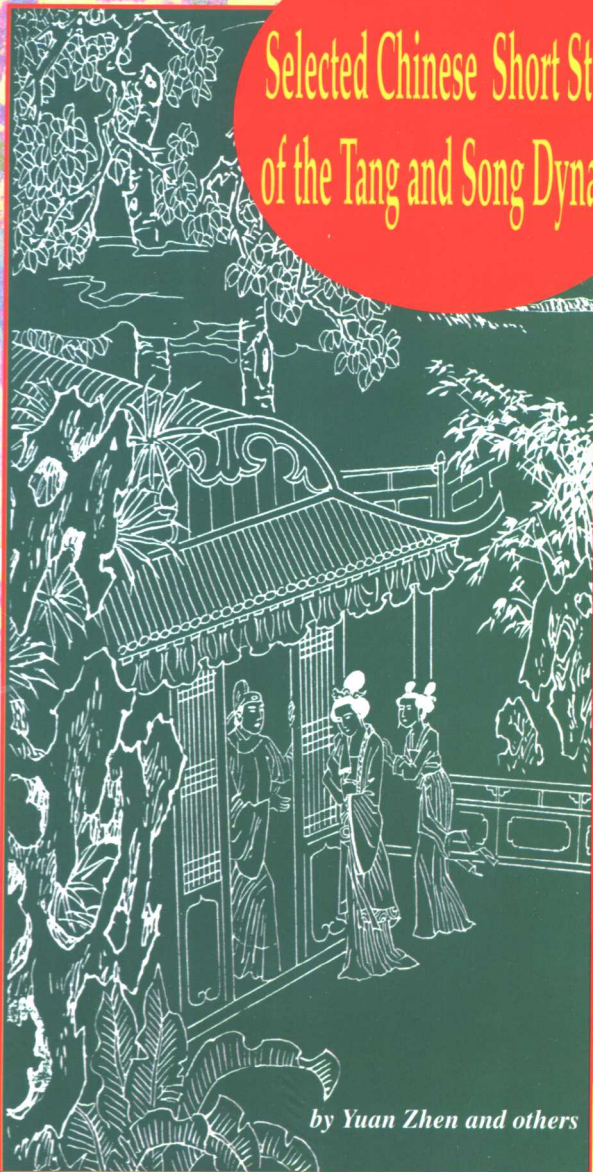


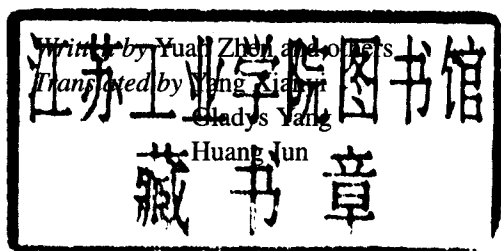
# Selected Chinese Short Stories of the Tang and Song Dynasties



*by Yuan Zhen and others*

Foreign Languages Press Beijing

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## Foreword

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) and the Song (960-1279) witnessed the flourishing of short stories in China. The short story can be found in embryo form in China during the Six Dynasties Period (220-589), when a number of interesting anecdotes and weird tales appeared. While tales in the Six Dynasties Period were all stories of ghosts and spirits or fragmentary narrations of events, short stories in the Tang and Song dynasties differed from them in drawing their themes from people and events of the times, in being highly imaginative, having closely knit plots, a wealth of detail and clear-cut images of the characters. It is no exaggeration to say that the emergence of Tang and Song short stories showed that writers in China had begun to write stories consciously and also marked the coming of age of story writing in China.

The 22 short stories, 14 of the Tang Dynasty and eight of the Song, in this collection are a fair sample of earlier short stories in China. Short stories of this kind often involve supernatural events, adventures, political themes, Buddhist or Taoist preachments, or

love between men and women. They reflect the thoughts and aspirations of the common people and are, in fact, consummate works of art imbued with all the vitality of their times.

# 1. The Runaway Spirit of Qian Niang

Chen Xuanyou

*Having a limited knowledge of science, ancient people in China believed that there was a spirit separable from the body it controlled, and so tales of the spirit detached from its body, and acting independently were passed down from the dawn of civilization. It was not until the Tang Dynasty, however, that intricate stories like "The Runaway Spirit of Qian Niang" appeared in writing. Qian Niang (Elegant Girl) and Wang Zhou have been in love with each other since childhood but, despite earlier promises, Zhang Yi, the girl's father, decides to have her marry a more promising suitor. Qian Niang's spirit left her body to join her sweetheart Wang Zhou, but could not help missing her own parents and finally returned to her body at home.*

*Although the story is just fantasy, the description of the conflict between Qian Niang's pure love for Wang Zhou and her affection for her own parents is quite touching. Later, The Runaway Spirit of the Elegant Girl, an opera by Zheng Guangzu in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), was derived from this*

*story, and legends like The Peony Pavilion by Tang Xianzu in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) were clearly variants of this strain.*

*The story first appeared as Chapter 358 in Taiping Miscellany. Nothing is known about the author's life, but we can tell from his work that he must live at the time of Emperors Daizong (762-779) and Dezong (780-805) of the Tang Dynasty.*

In the third year (692) of the Tianshou period, Zhang Yi of Qinghe Prefecture moved with his family to Hengzhou to become a magistrate there. He was not a very outgoing man, and had few close friends. He had no son but two daughters. The elder died young, while the younger, Qian Niang, blossomed into a serene beauty. Zhang had a nephew called Wang Zhou, from Taiyuan City, living in the house. Clever and handsome, the boy behaved so well that Zhang said on more than one occasion that at some time in the future he would give his daughter to him in marriage.

When the boy and girl grew up, they fell secretly in love with each other. However, when a promising young man who was a candidate for a new office asked Zhang Yi for his daughter's hand, Zhang consented. Qian Niang was mortified and Wang Zhou in a rage. The young man decided to leave for the capital on the excuse of an official transfer. Zhang Yi had no reason to stop him, and sent him off with many gifts.



With untold grief and indignation, Wang Zhou bade Zhang and his darling farewell and boarded a boat. In the twilight, the boat travelled some distance from the valley. Wang was tossing in bed when suddenly he heard someone tottering along the shore and boarding his boat. To his great surprise, he found Qian Niang barefoot, her shoes and stockings having been lost on the way. Joyfully taking her hand, Wang asked her how she had come.

"Darling, you have always loved me so much that I dream of you every night in my sleep. Now my father has shattered my dreams, but I know that your heart will always remain true, and so I have risked my life to come and join you," the girl said. Beside himself with joy, Wang Zhou hid the girl in the boat and vanished in the dark. Within a few months, they were in Sichuan.

During the next five years, they had two sons, and had no communication with Zhang Yi at all. However, Qian Niang could not help missing her parents. One day she said sobbing to her husband, "To be loyal to you, I desperately left my parents to join you. It has been five years now since I turned my back on them. How could I go on living like this for ever?"

"All right, my darling, let's go back then. Don't grieve any more," Wang said. And they returned together to Hengzhou.

On arrival, Wang Zhou went alone to Zhang

Yi's house, to apologize for eloping with Zhang's daughter without his blessing. "What nonsense. Qian Niang has been lying ill in bed ever since you left," Zhang exclaimed.

"But she is in the boat!" Wang said.

Astounded, Zhang sent a servant to the boat to check for him. Sure enough, the servant found Qian Niang in the boat. On seeing the servant Qian Niang, radiant with a smile, asked, "How's Father and Mother?"

Dumbfounded, the servant hurried home to report this to his master. In the meantime, the sick Qian Niang lying in bed sat up, dressed herself and without a word came out smiling to meet her other self. In a flash, the two Qian Niangs merged, dresses and all. Too bizzare a family tale to tell, the Zhangs kept it a secret, telling only a few relatives.

Forty years later the couple died. Both their sons passed the civil examination and became a vice county magistrate and county garrison commander respectively.

I have heard the story since my childhood although in widely different versions, and always regarded it as mere fiction. But in the last year of the Dali period (766-779), I met the Laiwu County Magistrate Zhang Zhonggui, who told me the story again in detail. Since he was Zhang Yi's own nephew and the details of the story he told were convincing, I have recorded it faithfully as it was told to me.

## 2. Ren the Fox Fairy

*Shen Jiji*

*Among the legends of the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589), many fox-fairy tales emerged. "Ren the Fox Fairy" marked a great advance in the Tang Dynasty, not only in writing technique but also in character depiction.*

*Except for not making her own clothes, Ren appears to be a normal of flesh and blood, deeply devoted to her lover until she is bitten to death by hounds and reveals her true form. From the time she and Zheng Liu first meet, she remains loyal to him until she gives up her own life for him. The author laments that she should "resist violation and remain chaste and faithful to her lord till death, while few women nowadays are equal to this!" And this is perhaps his reason for writing the story. Nevertheless, we cannot agree with the author in having her arrange other girls to please the playboy Wei Yin as an act of gratitude.*

*The story uses exaggeration and contrast to describe Ren's beauty, while actions and details reveal her nature and personality. This style can be*

*found in many later fox-fairy tales, such as Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio.*

*Some say that Shen Jiji was a native of Wuxian County, Jiangsu Province, others, that he came from Wukang County, Zhejiang Province. During the Dezong reign of the Tang Dynasty, he worked first as Left Advisor and then as an editor and compiler of history and folklore, and in the second year (781 A.D.) of the Jianzhong period was demoted to the position of revenue manager in the army in Chuzhou, Zhejiang, where he worked his way up to become a vice bureau director in the Ministry of Rites. He is the author of the ten-volume Chronicles of Jianzhong.*

Wei Yin, ninth son of the daughter of the Prince of Xinan, was a somewhat wild young lord and a heavy drinker. His cousin's husband, Zheng, whose personal name is not known but who was the sixth child of his family, had studied the military arts and was also fond of drinking and women. Since he was poor and had no home of his own, he lived with his wife's family. Zheng and Wei became inseparable. In the sixth month of the ninth year of the Tianbao period (750 A.D.), they were walking together through the capital on their way to a drinking party in the Xinchang quarter, when Zheng, who had some private business, left Wei south of the Xuanping quarter, saying he would join him later at the feast. Then Wei headed east on his white horse,

while Zheng rode south on his donkey through the north gate of the Shengping quarter.

On the road Zheng came upon three girls, one of whom, dressed in a white gown, was exceedingly lovely. Pleasantly surprised, he whipped up his donkey to circle round them, but lacked the courage to accost them. Since the girl in white kept glancing at him in what seemed an encouraging way, he asked jokingly:

"Why should such beautiful girls as you travel on foot?"

The girl in white countered with a smile: "If men with mounts aren't polite enough to offer us a lift, what else can we do?"

"My poor donkey is not good enough for such lovely ladies as you," protested Zheng. "But it is at your disposal, and I shall be glad to follow you on foot."

He and the girl looked at each other and laughed, and with her two maids teasing them they were soon on familiar terms. He went east with these young women to Leyou Park, and dusk had fallen by the time they reached a magnificent mansion with massive walls and an imposing gate. The girl in white went in, calling back over her shoulder, "Wait a little!" One of her maids stayed at the gate and asked Zheng his name. Having told her, he enquired the name of the girl and learned that her surname was Ren and that she was the twentieth child in the family.

Presently Zheng was invited in. He had just tethered his donkey at the gate and placed his hat on the saddle, when the girl's sister—a woman of thirty or thereabouts—came out to greet him. Candles were set out, the table spread, and they had drunk several cups of wine when the girl, who had changed her dress, joined them. Then they drank a great deal and made merry, and late at night they went to bed together. Her coquetry and charm, the way she sang and laughed and moved—it was all exquisite and something out of this world. Just before dawn Ren said, "You had better go now. My brother is a member of the royal conservatory of music and serves in the royal guards. He'll be home at daybreak and he mustn't see you." Having arranged to come again, Zheng left.

When he reached the end of the street, the gate of that quartet was still bolted. But there was a foreign bread shop there where a light was burning and the stove had been lit. Sitting under the awning, waiting for the morning drum, Zheng began chatting with the shopkeeper. Pointing to where he had spent the night, asked, "When you turn east from here you come to a big gate—whose house is that?"

"Its all in ruins," said the shopkeeper. "There's no house left."

"But I was there," insisted Zheng. "How can you say there is no house?"

The shopkeeper understood in a flash what

had happened. "Ah, now I see it!" he exclaimed. "There's a fox fairy there, who often tempts men to spend the night with her. She has been seen three times. So you met her too, didn't you?"

Ashamed to admit the truth, Zheng denied this. When it was light he looked at the place again, and found the walls and the gate still there, but only waste land and a deserted garden behind.

After reaching home he was blamed by Wei for not joining him the previous day; but instead of telling the truth, Zheng made up an excuse. He was still bewitched by the fairy's beauty, however, and longed to see her again, unable to drive her image from his heart. About a fortnight later, in a clothes shop in the West Market, he once more came upon her accompanied by her maids. When he called out to her, she tried to slip into the crowd to avoid him; but he called her name repeatedly and pushed forward. Then, with her back to him and her fan behind her, she said: "You know who I am. Why do you follow me?"

"What if I do?" asked Zheng.

"I feel ashamed to face you," she replied.

"I love you so much, how could you leave me?" he protested.

"I don't want to leave you; I'm only afraid you must hate me."

When Zheng swore that he still loved her and became more insistent in his request, the girl turned round and let fall the fan, appearing as dazzlingly

beautiful as ever.

"There are many fox fairies about," she told the young man. "It's just that you don't know them for what they are. You needn't think it strange."

Zheng begged her to come back to him and she said, "Fox fairies have a bad name because they often harm men; but that is not my way. If I have not lost your favour, I would like to serve you all my life." Asked where they could live, she suggested. "East of here you'll come to a house with a big tree towering above its roof. It's in a quiet part of town—why not rent it? The other day when I first met you south of the Xuanping quarter, another gentleman rode off on a white horse toward the east. Wasn't he your brother-in-law? There's a lot of furniture in his house you can borrow."

It so happened, indeed, that Wei's uncles, absent on official duty, had stored away their furniture with him. Acting on Ren's advice, Zheng went to Wei and asked to borrow it. Asked the reason, he said, "I have just got a beautiful mistress and rented a house for her. I want to borrow the furniture for her use."

"A beauty, indeed!" retorted Wei with a laugh. "Judging by your own looks, you must have found some monstrosity!"

None the less his friend lent him curtains, bed and bedding, dispatching an intelligent servant with him to have a look at the girl. Presently the servant



ran back, out of breath and sweating. "Well?" asked Wei, stepping forward. "Have you seen her? What's she like?"

"Marvellous! I've never seen anyone so lovely!"

Wei, who had many relations and had seen many beauties in the course of his numerous adventures, asked whether Zheng's mistress was a match for one of these.

"No comparison!" exclaimed the servant. Wei mentioned four or five other names, but still received a negative reply. His sister-in-law, sixth daughter of the Prince of Wu, was a peerless beauty, as lovely as a fairy. "How does she compare with the sixth daughter of the Prince of Wu?" he asked.

But again his man declared that there was no comparison.

"Is that possible?" Wei exclaimed, clasping his hands in amazement. Then he hastily asked for water to wash his neck, put on a new cap, rouged his lips and went to call on Zheng.

It happened that Zheng was out and Wei, entering, found a young servant sweeping and a maid at the door, but no one else. He questioned the boy, who told him with a laugh that there was no one at home. But making a search of the rooms, Wei saw a red skirt behind a door and going closer discovered Ren hiding there. Dragged out from the dark corner, she was even more beautiful than he had been told. Mad with passion, he took her in his