

# CHINESE LITERATURE

**Fiction**      **Poetry**      **Art**



## **Classics**

Excerpts from *Flowers in the Mirror*

## **Culture**

The Former Imperial Palace of Prince Gong  
Two Amazing Classics of Ancient China

## **Art**

Murals from the Kizil Buddhist Grottoes



# CHINESE LITERATURE

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## To Our Readers



**A**utumn is the ideal season for travel in China. With recent economic development, people have started enjoying vacations and discovering the joys of traveling, as well as receiving growing numbers of visitors from around the world.

Historically, the Chinese people had long discovered the delights of travel since ancient times (in this issue, *Biography of King Mu*), and started to explore the natural secrets of our land (in this issue, *The Book of Mountains and Seas*). The literati of China on their journeys found not only relaxation but also inspirational aesthetic enjoyment, shaping their characters and broadening their minds amidst the beauties and rigors of mountains and rivers. All the literary works in this issue are the fruit of the culture of travel in China.

In the beginning of this issue are a series of prose works about western China which will bring you to the high Tibetan Plateau, the vast Tianshan Mountains, ageless sand dunes, a miraculous Hidden Spring, and Xinjiang's exquisite Kizil Grottoes — China's second Dunhuang. These are written by renowned contemporary Chinese prose writers, Wang Zengqi, Ma Lihua, Yu Qiuyu, and the poet Zhou Tao.

Qualities of painting are found in classical Chinese landscape poetry, and vice versa. Some of Xie Tiao, Wang Wei, Li Bai and Du Fu's most loved masterpieces will transport you to China's "mountains and rivers." Likewise inspiring are imaginative flights to the "Land of Women" in excerpts from *Flowers in the Mirror*, an *Odyssey*-like Qing-dynasty novel by Li Ruzhen.

In this special issue on travel, we'll also introduce you to more scenic sites: the Qing-dynasty Imperial Palace of Prince Gong in Beijing, and Lijiang City, where the ancient Naxi and Dongba culture lives on.

Finally, our new Sinology feature continues presenting the achievements of Sinologists from different countries.

Happy Autumn travels!



CLASSICS

《镜花缘》选  
李汝珍

Excerpts from *Flowers in the Mirror*  
*Li Ruzhen*





## Editor's Note

**F**lowers in the Mirror (镜花缘), a 20-volume novel in 100 chapters, was written in vernacular Chinese and published in the Qing Dynasty. It is a legend set during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century. The novel gives detailed descriptions of some talented women who passed the examination set by the Empress and amazed people with their ingenious abilities. The following excerpts start with Tang Ao, after being deprived of his scholarly honors, deciding to go with his brother-in-law Lin Zhiyang on a long voyage to do trading overseas. They passed through many countries, encountered many people with bizarre customs, along with miraculous plants and beasts.

Tang Ao's adventures across the seas are what make this novel brilliant. They are actually based on scattered tales from The Book of Mountains and Seas. The author connected these tales, created characters and wrote this fascinating novel. "The Land of Courtesy" depicts an ideal society where people are unselfish and polite — a tiller is ready to give up his land; a pedestrian always yields to others. "The Land of White People" and the "Land of Erudites" satirizes some Confucian scholars who were good at talking but had no practical skills. In the "Land of Two-faced People," people are born with two faces — one kind and smiling towards the well-dressed, the other mean and scowling towards the shabbily dressed. The inhabitants of the "Land of Pierced Hearts" are all narrowminded and wicked, while those in the "Land of Congealed Hearts" have all developed large tumors on their chests because they were too lazy to work. Through descriptions of different peoples in those magical lands, the author expressed his enlightened ideas.

What was notable about this novel is the author's recognition of women's position in society and criticism of male chauvinism and feudal ethics through his descriptions of the talents of various women. The latter excerpts published here are chosen from Chapters 32 to 36, depicting Tang Ao's experiences in the "Land of Women." A man, taken as a prospective bride here, pays a high price for being a "woman." The story thus satirizes, with humor and wit, the cruel oppression of women by the feudal autocracy.

The author, Li Ruzhen (李汝珍), also known as Song Shi, was a native of Daxing (present-day Beijing), and a scholar of the Qing Dynasty. Unfortunately the time of his birth as well as his death are unknown.



*According to some records, he was believed to have lived from 1763 to 1830. Since he was not so proficient at the standard essay, a must for rising up the social ladder then, he was appointed, at his highest, an assistant to a county magistrate. He lived in poverty and often suffered from starvation. Yet Li was immensely talented, and possessed a vast range of knowledge. Apart from poetry and prose, he was an expert in phonology. He was also very good at calligraphy, painting, astrology and weiqi (chess), among other things. Apart from Flowers in the Mirror, his other works that have been handed down include Phonologic Study of Li Ruzhen (李氏音鉴) and The Manual of Weiqi (围棋谱).*

## A Journey into Strange Lands

...Once there was a licentiate\* named Tang Ao of the county of Heyuan in Lingnan, who had lost his first wife and married another from the Lin family. Though he was eager to pass the higher examinations and become an official, Tang liked nothing better than roaming the country. And since he spent the better part of each year in travel, giving only half his mind to his studies, even though he took the provincial examination repeatedly he never succeeded in passing.

One year he tried again, and finally passed the provincial examinations and came second in the palace test. But one of the censors slandered him to the empress, saying that Tang Ao had been in league with traitors and was not a loyal subject, that if he was given an appointment he would certainly form a faction, and that it would be better to degrade him to the status of a common citizen as a warning to all those in league with evil men. As a result of this report, Tang was demoted to his old rank of licentiate.

This threw him into such a frenzy that he could think of nothing else, and he became determined to leave the world of dust. Sending his manservant home and traveling light, he roamed the country trying to forget his sorrows. He scaled all the mountains in his path and sailed on all the lakes and rivers, until six months had passed and spring was at hand.

At last he reached that part of Lingnan where his wife's brother Lin Zhiyang lived. This was less than thirty *li* from his own home, yet close

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\*A scholar who had passed the prefectural examination, one of the lowest examinations taken by those who wanted to enter the civil service.



though it was he did not want to go back to face his own brother and wife. He decided to make another trip instead, but could not think of where to go. In low spirits, he ordered his boat to be moored and went ashore. He had not taken many steps when he saw an old building in the distance, and upon going nearer discovered that it was a temple to the God of Dreams.

"I have turned fifty," reflected Tang with a sigh. "If I think back, the past is just like a dream. Good dreams and bad — I've had both. Now that I have seen through worldly vanities, I had better find some immortal to teach me the Truth. I have not consulted any oracle yet — why not ask this god for guidance?"

Going into the shrine he offered a silent prayer, bowed before the image and sat down beside it. Then he saw approaching a boy with a shaved crown.

"My master invites you to come in, Sir," said this lad. "He has something to say to you."

Tang followed the boy into the inner hall, where an old man came out to greet him. He promptly stepped forward and bowed, and they sat down in the places of host and guest.

"May I know your illustrious name?" inquired Tang. "What may I have the honor of doing for you?"

"My name is Meng, and I have been living in Rushi Temple," replied the old man. "I took the liberty of asking you here because you were thinking of finding an immortal and seeking the Truth. May I ask you, Sir, what grounds you have for making such a request? What arts can you command? How do you mean to go about this business?"

"I have no special grounds," answered Tang. "I am looking for an immortal because I want to leave the world of dust, renounce the seven passions and six desires. As my whole mind is set on a life of contemplation, I shall surely be able to gain immortality."

"You make it sound easy, Sir!" The old man laughed. "But when you speak of purifying your heart and doing away with desire, this is simply an attempt to prolong your life and rid yourself of illness. Ge Xian the saint was right when he said: 'A man who would become an immortal must start with the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence and faithfulness. Unless he has led a virtuous life, it is no use his seeking the Truth. To become an earthly immortal he must do three hundred good deeds, to become a heavenly immortal one thousand three hundred.' Now you, Sir, have no great achievements, no writings and no good deeds to your credit. You are wasting your time seeking immortality when you have nothing to build on. That is like



trying to catch fish up a tree."

"I am a poor simpleton," rejoined Tang. "Now that I have had the benefit of your instructions I shall do good deeds in the hope of finding the Truth. I used to long for advancement, to restore the imperial house of Tang and deliver the people from their sorrows by good government. But as soon as I passed the examinations I met with unexpected misfortune, and did not know what I could do. What is your advice, Father?"

"I am sorry you have had this disappointment, Sir. But it may prove a blessing in disguise. If you abandon all vanities and make a search elsewhere, you will win the Fairy Isles and the ranks of the Immortals. You are destined for such a fate, Sir. Go boldly ahead, and your desire may be granted when you least expect it. Since you condescended to consult me, I have told you what is needed — the rest is up to you."

Before Tang could ask further questions the old man disappeared. Hastily rubbing his eyes and staring around, he found himself still sitting beside the shrine, and realized he had been dreaming. When he stood up and looked at the image, he recognized the old man of his dream. He kowtowed again before returning to his boat and setting sail.

Soon his boat was moored before the house of his brother-in-law, Lin Zhiyang. Loads of merchandise were being carried out and, judging by the commotion, they were about to embark on a long journey. Lin came from the province of Hebei, but had spent most of his life in Lingnan and was a sea-trader. He had lost his parents many years before this, and his wife, a daughter of the Lu family, generally accompanied him on his voyages. He had now prepared for another trip, entrusting his household to his mother-in-law, and was just on the point of leaving when Tang arrived. After greeting him, Lin took his brother-in-law in to see his wife.

"We have not met for many years, Brother," said Tang. "I was hoping to have a good talk with you, but I find your household in a rare commotion. Am I right in thinking you are about to head off on a voyage?"

"I have not been abroad for several years on account of illness," replied Lin. "Now I am glad to say my health is better, and I mean to venture abroad, taking a few trifles overseas. That is better than sitting at home eating up my estate. It is my old trade, and I must resign myself to its hardships again."

Here was the very chance Tang was looking for.

"I have traveled every year, till now I have seen nearly all there is to be seen," he said. "And since last leaving the capital I have felt out of sorts and depressed. I was just wishing I could make an ocean voyage to forget my



troubles by exploring the islands. And here you are setting out — what a happy coincidence! Will you take me with you? I have several hundred taels of silver with me as traveling expenses, so I can promise not to be a burden to you. And I shall fall in with any wishes you may have regarding payment for my board and passage.”

“Why, Brother, we are close kinsmen,” protested Lin. “How can you speak of paying for your board and passage? Wife!” He turned to her. “Did you hear what your brother-in-law said?”

“Ours is a large, sea-worthy junk,” she told him. “One extra passenger will make no difference, and your board is not worth mentioning. But the ocean is not like our inland rivers and lakes. We are used to it and think nothing of it, but a faint-hearted traveler is terrified by his first taste of the wind and waves at sea. You scholars like to sip tea from morning till night, and must wash and bathe every day. Once on board, though, a bath is out of the question — everything is rough-and-ready. There’s barely enough fresh water to wet your gullet, let alone drink your fill. You’re used to comfort, Brother. You could never put up with such hardships.”

“Out at sea we are at the mercy of the wind,” continued Lin. “I’d think twice about it, Brother, if I were you. If you ruin your career because of a passing whim, won’t you later hold it against us?”

“Your sister has often told me that because seawater is too salty you take a supply of fresh water and have to eke it out,” said Tang. “But luckily I don’t care for tea at all. I can do without baths, too. As for the danger of storms at sea, I have traveled enough on the Yangtze and the great lakes for them not to worry me. You say there is no knowing when we may be back, and you are afraid of holding up my advancement by making me miss the next examination. But I’ve given up all thought of an official career. The longer we are away, the better I shall like it. What could I hold against you?”

“If you are sure, I won’t try to stop you,” said Lin. “But when you left home, did you tell my sister your plans?”

“More or less. But to set your mind at rest I will write another letter home and tell her the date on which we shall be leaving. How about that?”

When Lin saw that Tang’s mind was made up and that there was no gainsaying him, he had to agree.

Soon all was ready, and they went by skiffs to the harbor. When the sailors had loaded the cargo they took sampans to the ship, and set sail at once as the wind lay in the right quarter.

It was now the middle of the first month, and the weather was fine and



clear. After sailing for several days they reached the open sea, and Tang gazed about him with exhilaration. Fitting is the proverb that says: One who has seen the ocean thinks nothing of inland waters. He was in raptures. After sailing for many days they rounded Mount Portal and scudded along a tail wind, uncertain how far they had gone.

Very soon a mountain range came into sight.

"That is the most imposing island we have come across," remarked Tang. "May I ask you its name, Brother?"

"It is called East Gate Mountain, and is the first great range of the Eastern Sea," Lin told him. "The scenery is said to be magnificent, but though I have passed this way several times I have never been ashore. If you care to, we can anchor here awhile and explore the place together."

The name East Gate sounded familiar to Tang.

"If this is East Gate Mountain," he observed, "aren't we near the Land of Courtesy and the Kingdom of the Great?"

"We are," replied Lin. "East of this mountain lies the Land of Courtesy, the north border of which adjoins the Kingdom of the Great. How did you know that, Brother?"

"I heard that beyond the sea lay East Gate Mountain and the Land of Courtesy, where all men dress most decorously and defer to one another. To its north, I was told, lay the Kingdom of the Great, where men cannot walk but travel about on clouds. Is that a fact?"

"I have been to the Kingdom of the Great," answered Lin. "All the people there have clouds attached to their feet and float comfortably along. Every soul without exception in the Land of Courtesy is a paragon of politeness. Beyond these two countries lies Black Tooth Kingdom, whose inhabitants are black from head to foot. There are weird-shaped creatures too in the lands of the Restless and the Childless, as you shall see for yourself when we get there, Brother."

By now the ship had moored at the foot of the mountain, and the two of them went ashore and began to climb, Lin armed with a musket, Tang with a sword. They made their way up by a zigzagging path across the foremost crag, and found a magnificent view stretching to the far horizon.

On a distant peak appeared a strange beast something like a huge boar. It was six feet long and four feet high, dark gray in color, with two great ears and four long tusks like an elephant's.

"One seldom sees a beast with such long tusks," marveled Tang. "Do you know what it is, Brother?"