

Tang Dynasty Stories



Panda Books



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Introduction

THE Chinese short story developed to a high degree in the Tang dynasty (618-907), when excellently constructed tales with vivid characterization were written. These tales were known as *Chuan Qi* (Strange Stories), and were considered a lower form of literature than the classical essays of contemporary scholars. Before the Tang dynasty, China had already produced beautiful and moving stories and legends. Judging from extant works, some of these seem to have been inseparable from ancient fables — that is to say, legends were used to explain a philosophy — while others were used by Taoists, Buddhists and other religious sects to propagate their religion. Other tales recorded good deeds or sayings, clever repartee or jokes. The well-known *Shi Shuo Xin Yu* (New Anecdotes of Social Talk) is a good example of these. There were many collections of fairy tales, ghost stories and even travel accounts. All these pre-Tang stories were short and simply written — skeleton stories with little flesh on their bones. Not until the Tang dynasty do we find highly imaginative stories with detailed descriptions and realistic characterization.

One of the earliest Tang stories is *An Old Mirror*, written by Wang Du (c. 580-640) who lived at the end of the Sui and the beginning of the Tang dynasty. By combining several anecdotes about the magic power of

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old mirrors into one well-constructed story, Wang Du improved on the simple tales of the past.

The White Monkey, by an unknown writer of the middle of the seventh century, describes a monkey with magic powers, who carried off many beautiful women but was finally killed by a general. Although a story about the supernatural, it is filled with human feeling.

More important is *The Fairies' Cavern* by Zhang Zhuo (c. 660-740), a story of nearly ten thousand words. With a wealth of vivid detail, he describes how one night he entered a fairy cavern, and feasted and talked with the beautiful girls there. Zhang Zhuo's use of poetic imagery and folk sayings in this story had a great influence on later writers.

After this, stories of romantic love had a great vogue. Some were tragedies of real life, others were marvellous tales which had both sad and happy endings. *The Wandering Soul*, written by Chen Xuanyou toward the end of the eighth century, describes the love between Wang Zhou and Zhang Qianniang. When Qianniang's father ordered her to marry another man, Wang was heart-broken and indignant. He left by boat for the capital. But he could not sleep, and he was tossing about at midnight when he heard someone running along the bank — it was Qianniang who had come to join him. They went to Sichuan, lived together for five years, and had two sons. Then they decided to go back to Qianniang's old home. To their amazement, they found another Qianniang there lying ill in bed. All of a sudden the two girls' bodies merged in one, with one set of clothes over the other and it was clear that it was Qianniang's wandering soul which had run away with Wang.

Ren the Fox Fairy, by Shen Jiji (c. 750-800), describes the love between a fox fairy and a young man named Zheng. It is a very vivid story. In the shape of a beautiful and charming girl, the fox shows herself loyal to her lover. Not even force can make her unfaithful to him. Later she is killed by a pack of hounds, but Zheng never forgets her.

The Dragon King's Daughter, written at the beginning of the ninth century by Li Chaowei, records the romance between a young man and the daughter of the dragon king of Dongting Lake. It is another story of the supernatural, full of human touches and with a well-constructed plot.

Even better than these, though, are *Prince Huo's Daughter* by Jiang Fang and *Story of a Singsong Girl* by Bai Xingjian, both of them based on real life. They give us a truthful and vivid picture of Tang society, while their pathos and power to keep us in suspense make them two of the finest examples of Tang stories.

Jiang Fang (c. 780-830) won fame as a poet early in his career, and held many high official posts. During the Chang Qing period (821-824), he was demoted to become Governor of Tingzhou. *Prince Huo's Daughter* describes the love between the famous poet Li Yi and a singsong girl called Huo Xiaoyu. He abandoned her to make a better match, and as she waited in vain for him to come back to her the girl fell ill. On her deathbed she saw Li Yi again and reproached him, then died of a broken heart. Readers cannot but share her indignation at the poet's heartlessness.

Bai Xingjian's *Story of a Singsong Girl* has a happy ending. The author was the younger brother of the famous poet Bai Juyi, and his works were popular

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with common folk. He wrote this story in AD 795 early in his career. The heroine of the story was a famous courtesan in the capital. The hero, Sheng, squandered all that he had for love of her, then became a beggar and suffered all kinds of hardships. Later the girl took him in again and encouraged him to study hard, so that finally he passed the civil service examination and became an official. This romantic story was extremely popular in its time.

The Story of Yingying by Yuan Zhen (779-831) exercised a great influence on later writers, and many poems and dramas were based on it, among them the famous opera *The Western Chamber*. Yuan Zhen was a poet who was almost as popular as his contemporary Bai Juyi. His poems were widely read and known even in the imperial palace, where he was considered a genius. He held important official posts, and has left over a hundred works. He was the best known of Tang short story writers. *The Story of Yingying* is a love story which ends in tragedy, since both the hero and heroine are forced to marry others. (The opera *The Western Chamber* substitutes a happy ending for this.) But the description of first love in this work is unforgettable.

The well-known *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* was written by Chen Hong, a friend of Bai Juyi who had written a poem with this title to describe the love of Emperor Ming of the Tang dynasty for the Lady Yang. Chen Hong wrote this story to be appended to the poem. It had a great influence on later writers, although it is simply written and not particularly moving.

There were a great number of love stories of this nature in the Tang dynasty, but most of them were of the types mentioned above.

Tang readers also enjoyed highly imaginative escapist stories which showed how wealth and fame could vanish like a dream. The incidents in these dream tales, however, were thoroughly realistic. Such stories show the discontent and aspirations of scholars under the Tang examination system, for while they satirize the pomp and splendour of high officials and show how often they came to a sad end, readers can detect an undercurrent of envy on the part of writers who had failed in their career. Examples of such stories are *The Story of the Pillow* by Shen Jiji, *Dream of Qin* by Shen Yazhi and *Governor of the Southern Tributary State* by Li Gongzuo — the last of these stories being the best.

Li Gongzuo was a good friend of Bai Xingjian, and they both wrote excellent stories. Like Bai's *Story of a Sing-song Girl*, Li's *Governor of the Southern Tributary State* was not only famous in its day, but also exercised a great influence on later writers, especially later dramatists. These two stories are totally different in atmosphere though. Li Gongzuo as a low-ranking official must have had a hard life, and in his story we sense a passive protest, for he resorts to escapism to disguise his discontent and unhappiness. The life of Chunyu Fen in the ant heap is the life of the greatest Tang officials, and this story is a true expression of the psychology of Tang bureaucrats. *The Story of the Pillow* and *Dream of Qin* have similar themes. Shen Yazhi (c. 790-850) was a friend of the poet Li He, who thought him a genius. He too was a petty official, whose works are still extant; but his *Dream of Qin* is much inferior to *Governor of the Southern Tributary State*.

In AD 755 An Lushan revolted, and the central power of the Tang empire began to decline, while local war-

lords grew stronger and controlled larger and larger areas. In order to consolidate their political power and extend their territory, these warlords exploited and enslaved the people cruelly. The common folk led a wretched life. In addition to paying heavy taxes, they had to serve as soldiers for the warlords who wanted to seize more land. The situation became more serious after the reign of Emperor Xuan Zong (806-821) until it led to the great rebellion headed by Huang Chao in AD 875. The warlords of this period kept knights and assassins, while the suffering people hoped that superhuman champions would come forward to right their wrongs and overthrow the tyrants. This accounts for the popularity of stories about superhuman champions or swordsmen.

The Man with the Curly Beard by Du Guangting belongs to this genre, differing from other stories of this type only in its loyalty to the Tang dynasty — Du Guangting maintains that the Tang emperors ruled by divine right and must not be overthrown. But the mysterious man with the curly beard in this story is one of the swordsmen of the time. Du Guangting, who lived at the beginning of the tenth century, was a Taoist priest. He went to Sichuan during a period of civil strife, and was made a minister by the local ruler. His stories are still read today, and the theme of *The Man with the Curly Beard* was borrowed by later dramatists.

Stories and Anecdotes of You Yang by Duan Chengshi (800?-863) contains many tales about gallants. *Red Thread*, from the anecdotes of Yuan Jiao written in the middle of the ninth century, is another good story of this type. Red Thread was a remarkably gifted girl who could travel very swiftly, and thanks to her skill

as a swordswoman she succeeded in stopping a war between two rival generals. This story later enjoyed great popularity. The stories of Pei Xing, written about the same time, are mostly of this type too, the best known being *The General's Daughter* and *The Kunlun Slave*. *The Kunlun Slave* is simply the story of a brave man, while *The General's Daughter* contains a supernatural element. The story of the general's daughter, a girl famed for her miraculous swordsmanship, was the forerunner of many tales of a similar type. Pei Xing served as secretary to Gao Bin, military governor of Qinghai during the Xian Tong period (860-873), and was later promoted to the post of vice governor of Chengdu and the position of Knight Adviser. Gao Bin was fond of the supernatural, and Pei Xing might have come under his influence in this respect. But although he wrote about supernatural beings and swordsmen, his stories give us a picture of the real social conditions of those troubled times.

Tang stories are obviously a great advance upon the simple stories and legends of earlier dynasties. They give delicate and detailed descriptions of both real and imaginary situations. A Song dynasty critic wrote: "We should study the Tang stories. Slight as they are, they possess exquisite pathos, and stand with Tang poetry as one of the glories of their age." This is a fair criticism. These stories exercised a great influence on later Chinese writers. Many story-tellers imitated their style, and they were a source of material for dramatists. Many operas of the Yuan and the Ming dynasties, like *The Western Chamber*, *Governor of the Southern Tributary State* and *The Embroidered Coat*, borrowed the themes of Tang stories. Thus their position in the history of

Chinese literature may be compared to that of the myths and legends of Greece. Chinese writers and artists cannot dispense with a good knowledge of these stories, and students of Chinese literature have to study them too, for it is impossible otherwise to understand the origin and development of the themes of many later works.

But these stories are worth reading for their own sake. Not only is their content enchanting, but they have achieved a high degree of artistic excellence.

Zheng Zhenduo

Ren the Fox Fairy

Shen Jiji

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 Tian Bao period (AD 750), 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:

Shen Jiji (c. 750-800) was a native of Suzhou and a good classical scholar and historian. He is the author of *The Story of the Pillow*.

"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 Leyuan 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 inquired 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 quarter 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, he asked, "When you turn east from here you come to a big gate — whose house is that?"

"It's 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, did 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 Xuan-ping quarter, another gentleman rode off on a white horse towards 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.