



Elephant Trunk Hill

Tales from Scenic Guilin



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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS BEIJING

First Edition 1984

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ISBN 0-8351-1163-6

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 China International Book Trading Corporation
(Guoji Shudian)
P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

Foreword

The Tang Dynasty poet Han Yu (768-824) compared the clear flowing Lijiang River to a "green silk ribbon" and the elegant shapely hills which nestle along its banks to "emerald hairpins". Throughout the centuries the strip of the river between Guilin, the beauties of which are "first under heaven", and Yangshuo, which "surpasses" Guilin, have been among the most inspiring sites for travelers in China. Carved into the bare rock faces of the limestone hills and hidden within the region's many caves survive no fewer than 2,000 stone carvings and inscriptions left by visitors and inhabitants from thousands of years ago. They include not only items of military, cultural, economic, political and religious importance, but a great number of lofty praises of the natural scenery. Today, foreign and Chinese visitors alike flock year round to Guilin, located in the northeast of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, to partake of the sights and to attempt to capture the area's overwhelming, but at the same time subtle, natural wonders on film. But as these tales suggest, viewing the hills and rivers with only their natural beauty in mind may be only half appreciating them.

Guilin's history snakes back through the centuries for over two thousand years. As early as 214 B.C. in the Qin Dynasty, the Ling Canal was constructed near Guilin on the orders of Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor of Qin,

(whose famous tomb is in present day Xi'an). One of the longest canals in the world, it connects the water systems of the Changjiang (Yangtze) and the Pearl rivers, and established Guilin as a center for north-south transportation and cultural exchange. From the Ming Dynasty until the early 1950s Guilin was the provincial capital of Guangxi, except for a short period of about two decades. During the Anti-Japanese War the city was a haven for cultural organizations and the arts until it was razed by the Japanese in 1944. After Liberation, in 1949, the city was rebuilt and again became an important regional center for industry, trade, the arts, and tourism. The more southern city of Nanning replaced it as capital in the early 1950s.

A quick glance around from the top of any of the prominent peaks in the city's center will soon reveal why hundreds of tales and legends have circulated for centuries among the laboring people of the city and the surrounding countryside. With a little imagination one can easily begin to see the shapes of the hills as camels, roosters, delicately carved pillars or stacks of folded brocade. Whole flocks of strange wild beasts, lonely old men, stony pagodas, and giant jade-like fruits and vegetables spot the landscape, literally creating an immense rock garden or mountain menagerie. At dusk it seems as if some of the hills nearly come alive, and it would be no surprise to the observing eye if Elephant Trunk Hill began to slowly raise its massive trunk out of the Lijiang River and send out a long wailing trumpet, or if Gamecock Hill suddenly flapped its stony wings up into the color-streaked sunset. The caves and rivers hold a kind of supernatural mystery in themselves, and it is easy to float back into history while drifting along the gently curv-

ing rivers to unexpectedly confront a towering peak at every bend or to come upon bright clusters of green bamboo that signal that a village will soon loom into view. The numerous caves, which can be found in so many of the hills have always been a source of awe and a spark to the curiosity of the local folk — and some of the most wonderful ones have remained secret nearly to the present day. Local people have come up with imaginative explanations for their existence or discovery.

It is almost true that every boulder, hill, cave, river, or stream has some sort of story explaining how it got there, or recalling a noteworthy event of long age. Though these tales are unique to the Guilin area and intimately tied up with its natural features, many of the characters in the stories, such as Nü Wa, the Dragon King, the Shark Girl, and of course the well loved Weaving Maiden and her Cowherd husband, are a part of the folklore of many regions of China and some figures are shared by many national minorities. By reading this short selection of a few of the more famous tales, taken from a work in Chinese by the same name, it is hoped that readers will be able to appreciate the hills and rivers not only for their own natural beauty, but also in somewhat the same way as generations of Chinese have appreciated them — that is, as part of both the natural world and the human world.

Mark Bender
Shi Kun
Guilin, 1982

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The Origin of the Hills

Long, long ago there was a powerful ruler who called himself "King of All Under Heaven". After winning several important battles he became arrogant and began to think of himself as invincible. One night he dreamed he was fighting with the Dragon King of the South Sea. Unexpectedly he was beaten. When he awoke, he was so angry that he gave orders that all men in the country, far and wide, were to be put to work filling up the South Sea with earth and stones taken from the mountains in the central south of China. Any man who dared resist this order would be killed, along with his whole family.

The suffering of the conscripted laborers was extreme. It was a long way from the mountains to the sea and the king's henchmen took delight in abusing the bent laborers with brutal kicks and whiplashes to make them work faster. Countless numbers of men fell by the roadside, wasted with exhaustion and malnutrition. But fresh supplies of forced labor arrived as soon as the old wore out.

One night a small group of these laborers were resting in a makeshift hut beside the road. As they rubbed their sore shoulders, bruised and swollen from the carrying poles and heavy baskets, they thought of their unplowed fields back home and of the fact that it was already well into spring planting time. It seemed absurd to try and fill in such a great sea. Tears streaked down their weary faces

as they realized there was no escape from their bitter fate.

Suddenly the door of the straw hut was pushed open and in crept a white-haired old granny with a walking stick in her hand. She politely announced that her family name was Guan, that she lived on Putuo Hill near the South Sea, and that she was searching for her only son who had been conscripted many months before.

When they told her no one was there by that name, she turned to go. But just as she was about to slip out the door, one of the men said to her, "It's already midnight. Why don't you stay here tonight? You can look for your son tomorrow." This and the welcoming smiles that appeared on the faces of the other men convinced her to stay.

Staring at the old woman, the men wondered if their own mothers were walking along lonely roads at midnight, searching for them, so many miles from home. As these thoughts played in their minds, the men began to regard the old woman as their own mother. They fetched water for her to bathe her feet and face and prepared a simple meal of coarse gruel for her. After she had washed and eaten, she sat down on the comfortable bed of straw they had made for her. Then the men questioned her closely about her son's looks and behavior so they might recognize him if they met him.

The old woman really said little about her son, but soon had the men pouring out their grievances to her. They talked of the shortage of food, the disease, the tortures wrought by their masters and the hardships of overwork. But, they said, the hardest thing to deal with was why they were forced to do this work in the first place.

When they showed the old woman their festering shoulders, she sighed in grief as if the shoulders were

those of her own son. Yet when she touched them, one by one, their shoulders were healed.

As she talked with the men she took out a wooden comb and combed her long gray hair. She then removed a clump of loosened hair from the comb and said to the men, "Here's something which will help your work go easier. Each of you take a hair, and tomorrow tie it to a rock. With just a gentle tug the rock will follow you."

The men politely accepted the hairs in order not to hurt the kind old woman. But the next morning, after she left, they put them aside and set about their work as usual, with ropes, baskets, and carrying poles.

Toward noon they stopped for a break. One of the younger men, with an unquenchable sense of humor, decided to tie a piece of the hair around a huge rock. The men's laughter soon turned to cries of astonishment as the rock followed him with the ease of a cloud floating across the sky.

As soon as they got over their amazement, they realized that the old woman had not been a little crazy, as they had suspected, but was instead some sort of supernatural creature sent to help them in their plight. Soon each man had tied a hair to a rock. In time they found that entire hills could be moved by a single hair.

Later, an official on a tour of inspection reined his horse to a stop some miles from where the men were supposed to be working. There he heard the sounds of singing coming over the hills. At first he thought this might be the signal for a rebellion, but as he listened more closely, he realized the songs were happy songs. He rode to within sight of the laborers and nearly fell off his horse when he saw them leading a great procession of hills along the road.

After whipping an explanation out of one of the laborers, the official hurried back to tell the king. The ruler, on the one hand, was happy that a more feasible way to fill up the sea had been found, but, on the other, he felt it unsafe to allow the workers to keep such powerful hairs in their possession. Therefore he decreed that all the men must hand over the hairs at the risk of losing their heads. After the hairs were turned in, the laborers were sent back to the north to build a city wall and the king decided to manage the moving of the hills by himself. Braiding all the hairs together, he made a whip that he named "The Hill Driving Whip".

When the Dragon King got word of this wonderful whip, he became worried. Up until this time he had only scoffed at the actions of the boastful king. But now the situation had changed, and this called for immediate action.

Calling together his many underlings, the Dragon King informed them of the predicament and demanded a solution. "Up to now that ridiculous king hardly stood a chance of filling even a corner of my vast kingdom," he said. "But with his acquisition of the Hill Driving Whip, it seems we are endangered. What have you to say for yourselves?"

At the Dragon King's fierce demands, Prime Minister Tortoise withdrew into his shell, Scholar Crab's face turned bright red, and General Carp simply swayed his tail anxiously. But none of them said a word. Finally, after being threatened with losing their heads, the three of them came up with the plan of publishing a circular calling on all citizens of the South Sea to suggest solutions to the dilemma.

As word of the imminent destruction of their watery realm was broadcast throughout the kingdom, fear rose like spines on a nettle fish's back and the sea boiled with anger.

Among the assorted and unlikely denizens of the deep there was a beautiful, talented, intelligent and brave young craftswoman, who was a skilled jade carver and whose tears formed into pearls. This, of course, was none other than the legendary Shark Girl recorded in the ancient books as being part human and part shark. When she heard of the threat to the kingdom, she went at once to the palace of the Dragon King and asked for an audience.

"The king is arrogant and aggressive simply because he possesses the powerful whip," said the Shark Girl. "If we can steal it from him, our kingdom will be saved."

The Dragon King nodded his approval. But suddenly a detachment of scouts burst in to report that the hills had been moved nearly to the Lijiang River in Guilin. They also reported that the whip was heavily guarded and in the hands of the king himself.

As the Dragon King paced back and forth rubbing his hands together, the Shark Girl spoke again, "My dear king, please let me go and steal the whip."

"What? Can a girl like you steal the whip? This is no time for joking!"

"But I have a good plan. Now listen. . . ." The Shark Girl drew her face close to the Dragon King's ear.

Later that evening, the Dragon King and the Shark Girl, disguised as peasants, left the Dragon Palace and headed for Guilin. On their arrival in this city, the Dragon King bribed several of the king's closest officers with pearls and jade and told them that he wanted to send

the Shark Girl as a tribute to "The King of All Under Heaven".

The sight of the hills, clustered together like so many sheep, frightened the Dragon King and he whispered to the Shark Girl, as he sent her on her mission, "My dear, the survival of our kingdom depends on you. Do your best to carry out the plan."

"Rest assured," replied the Shark Girl, and she disappeared into the night.

When the king laid his eyes on this wonderful "gift" of a girl, he was so enchanted by her beauty that at once he made her his imperial concubine and ordered the caravan to stop for three days to celebrate.

Afraid that the lovely young woman might be put off by his old age, the king gushed compliments over her as he escorted her into the bridal chamber. Sensing her indifference to the splendidly decorated room, the king tried to impress her by boasting, "I'm the ruler of all under heaven and I can even fill up the sea. Now everyone knows that beauty matches bravery. How can you feel disappointed in marrying such a great hero as me?"

"Fill up the sea?" sneered the Shark Girl. "The sea is thousands of miles wide and many fathoms deep. How could anyone ever fill it up?"

"My dear," boasted the king, "I can do what others cannot. That's why I'm so great. If you really wish to know, I have a magic whip that can drive the hills into the sea and fill it up in no time!"

The Shark Girl only smirked and let out a disbelieving laugh. Finally, the exasperated king, in a voice he could barely keep under control, said, "Well, if you don't believe me, come outside this instant and I'll prove to you the power of my whip."

The king and the Shark Girl followed a handmaiden carrying a small lantern out into a dark garden. In the flickering shadows, the rocks loomed in grotesque shapes, and the dim lit flowers glowed in soft clusters of white. Holding his whip and pointing it toward a towering boulder, the king bellowed, "Move!" Instantly, the great piece of rock began to edge forward.

The Shark Girl was aghast at the power of the whip, but managed to hold back her surprise. "What a delightful toy!" she cried. "My lord, let me have a try."

So enchanting was her smile that the king could not refuse her and he handed over the whip, stuttering, "Of course, of course, my beauty."

The Shark Girl took the whip in hand, moved forward a few steps and pretended to stumble. As she fell she grabbed at the sleeve of the handmaiden and knocked the lamp to the ground. By the time it was relit, both the Shark Girl and the whip were gone.

"Find her immediately, the little wench," cried the king as he stamped his feet and fumed. The attendants quickly began to organize a search party, but suddenly a voice came out of the darkness. "Look no further, the great King of All Under Heaven, I'm right up here, and so is your whip!"

The king raised his head toward the voice and saw above him, floating on the clouds, the Shark Girl. Beside her was the Dragon King, in all his finery, just as he was pictured in the king's dream. And now the whip was in the victor's hand!

The Shark Girl pointed her finger down at the crest-fallen king and shouted, "You despotic bag of wind. First you dare to think that you could conquer the Dragon King and then you impressed your own people to carry out your

mad scheme. Well, look what's become of it." With these words, she pointed around to the peaks of the circling hills, and with a scornful laugh both she and the Dragon King disappeared into the clouds.

Without the Hill Driving Whip, the king was now helpless and could do nothing but return in disgrace to his palace far to the north.

Later, the Shark Girl returned and did a bit of carving here and there on the hills using an ax borrowed from a giant deity. She also purified the Lijiang River with water from the vase of Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy of the South Sea.

And today the hills stand there, not having moved an inch for centuries, and not likely to move in the future.

The Lovesick River

Many, many years ago there were two villages about thirty kilometers from Guilin on the beautiful Weiluo Mountain. The village on the east side of the mountain was called the East Village and the one on the west side was called the West Village. The fields of the two villages bordered a small stream, which was their only supply of irrigation. The soil near the mountain was dry, and in summer the small stream was barely a trickle.

For many years the small water supply had been a bone of contention between the two villages, but the conflict was at first confined to only a little shouting and name calling. But, after several summers of drought in the region, open battles began to rage. It was as if the water was as precious as liquid silver.

Families of those killed or maimed in the first battle demanded revenge. The death toll from the ensuing skirmishes rose. When the fighting seemed to be solving nothing, the villagers turned to settling the question in court, but with no better success. Tempers were made even hotter because of the loss of some farmland to pay the court costs. The ugly result was a return to bloody fighting, which broke out most violently during the driest days of summer. A sort of unfarmed no man's land was eventually established along the border, further depleting each village's harvests. Anyone caught crossing this no man's land risked a beating or death.

Now the only daughter of the chief of the East Village was a lovely, willowy girl of seventeen, whose cheeks were red as peach blossoms and whose hair was as black and shiny as her intelligent, but merry, eyes. No other girl in the whole district could match her for beauty and personality. She was doted over by her parents and the East Villagers alike. She was the object of good-natured, but concerned, speculation, because it seemed there was no man in the East Village or neighboring friendly towns who might make her a suitable husband.

Spring brought the first of the year's two tea-picking seasons, and the women of the East Village were busy on the hillsides picking the tiny unfurled pairs of leaves of the sweet smelling early tea. One morning the chief's daughter, Jin Gu, along with the other village girls, climbed high onto the greening hillsides of the Weiluo Mountain with their picking baskets on their arms and songs on their lips.

The colorful sprays of fresh flowers, the grass shimmering in its night cloak of dew and the fleeting twitters of orioles and sharp winged swallows made the songs which all country dwellers in Guangxi love to sing flow from Jin Gu's mouth like threads of gold wrought satin. The other girls were silent as she sang, but broke into laughter at her teasing challenge to a yet unknown lover:

Fine tea is picked in earliest spring,
Grain is dried when the weather's clear;
Blacksmiths strike when the iron's hot,
Brother, come while Sister's near!

Though the tea gardens had once been so bountiful that any girl could fill her basket without moving farther than her hand could stretch, now because of the long drought and constant quarreling, the tea bushes were thin