

CHINESE CLASSICS

THE PEONY PAVILION

Tang Xianzu ● Retold by Teng Jianmin



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

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CHAPTER I





The story happened in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) that covers regions south of the Yangtze River after the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty. With its capital in Lin'an (now Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province) and nine emperors reigning for 153 years, this dynasty was economically strong, technologically developed and more accessible to the outside world. However, its military was weak and its leaders incompetent. Since its establishment, the Southern Song had been under the constant threat of the Jin Dynasty (1157-1234) which was founded by the Jurchens in Manchuria in the northeastern part of China.

Du Bao, the magistrate of Nan'an Prefecture, Jiangxi province and his wife had a baby daughter, their only child. They named her Du Liniang. The girl grew into an intelligent beauty. In the daddy's mind, the daughter is a smart girl from an eminent family and she should have a good knowledge of Chinese classics beyond needlework. Only in this way could she communicate better with a young scholar when the time came for her to marry him. Furthermore, they would feel greatly honored if their daughter is regarded as being well-educated and reasonable by her husband's family. So, having consulted with his wife, the magistrate planned to hire a tutor for their daughter.

Having heard the news, young scholars rushed to the girl's house one after another for interviews but the father didn't feel comfortable with any of the applicants. He did not want to see those young lads whirling round his beautiful daughter who's coming of marriageable age, fearing that should anything unexpected happens, it would not only hurt his daughter's reputation but also his family's fame. So her would-be tutor has to be experienced and prudent. Having turned down all the young male applicants, he eventually hired Chen Zuiliang, an old scholar

in his late 50'.

Son of a doctor, the man had been a talented boy raised in the traditional Confucianism, who had read through the Chinese classics, could write beautiful essays and passed the imperial examination at county level at age 12. But his luck stopped here. No matter how hard he studied, his good luck never came back. He had taken totally 15 examinations at provincial level, once in every 3 years but he had failed them all. 40 some years passed, he had never earned any scholarly official rank. He inherited a drugstore from his father, surviving on the small sum of money that brought in. The younger scholars mocked this ill-fated old man and nicknamed him Chen, the No-food. Since he knew a little about medicine, augury and geomancy, he was also called Chen, the Knowledgeable. Another round of county-level examination was approaching, but he really felt that he was getting too old to pass it for this time, so he decided against taking it. When he heard that the magistrate wanted to hire a tutor he decided to join the crowd for fun without any expectation. Unexpectedly, this old and pedantic scholar was indeed selected by the Du family for two simple reasons. First of all, this old scholar was knowledgeable enough to teach his daughter, and secondly, since Du had only one child and felt lonely all the time, he hoped that this scholar could spare some time chitchatting or playing chess with him after his daughter's class.

Now that the tutor has been selected, coming next will be choosing a lucky day for the daughter to pay her respect to her tutor. On that occasion, the tutor will be told that Chunxiang (literally Spring Fragrance), the private servant girl will accompany the daughter to study.

"My daughter is all my pride and joy. I love her very much. As I have no son, I raised her like a boy", Du told the scholar.

"She is a smart girl and has already read through quite a few classics from my family library, including the Four Books (The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Analects of Confucius and The Words of Mencius), I would suggest that you teach her the Five Classics (The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Book of Changes, The Book of Rites and The Spring and Autumn Annals), since the Book of Changes is about yin, yang and the Eight Diagrams which are too abstruse to understand, and the Book of History is about managing state affairs, which is unrelated to a girl's life. Same is true about the Book of Rites and the Spring and Autumn Annals. Why don't you start from the Book of Songs and teach her the poems with rhyme and stories about the virtues of the queen and concubines, as part of her orthodox education? Chen was also informed that Chunxiang would accompany Liniang in her classes.

The old scholar dared not to neglect the satrap's request and also felt it reasonable. To start with, he decided to teach the girl a poem selected from the Book of Songs as per the request of the magistrate.

One beautiful spring day, after he washed and had breakfast, the tutor sat up in the study waiting for the girl to come to his class. After several hours, his back began to ache and still nobody showed up. The tutor could not help but lament with sighs about the spoiled girl. He got so impatient and annoyed that he sent the maid to fetch Liniang.

The girl did not want any tutor and was frustrated with the old-fashioned teaching. When her maid came to tell her that the tutor was waiting, she reluctantly went with her to the study session.

Having received the girl's curtsy, the old tutor told the Liniang that a girl should get up before dawn and pay respect to



her parents tight after she washes and dresses up. After sunrise, she should do things she is told to do. Now you are supposed to study in class, so you must get up early and come to class on time.

Knowing she is in the wrong, she said tamely to the tutor that she would never be late.

"We understand," the maid chimed in. "We will not go to sleep tonight. Why don't you come to teach us at midnight?"

The old tutor glared at the maid, opened the Book of Songs and began his teachings in sad earnest.

Chunxiang was a naughty and playful little girl of only 14 or 15 years old. Accompanying the young lady of the family to learn is like putting her in shackles. How could she possibly sit still and keep quiet? So, she would butt in occasionally while the old tutor taught.

The poem the old tutor decided to teach first was one in the Book of Songs.

*Ospreys are chirping for love at the shoal, and
Slim and beautiful ladies are good partners for gentlemen*

He explained to the young lady that the osprey in the poem is a type of bird with beautiful songs.

"What do they sound like?" asked the maid.

To the girls' surprise, the old tutor began chirping like an osprey. Chunxiang couldn't help but began imitating him.

Ignoring her, the old tutor continued to explain that ospreys are relatively quiet birds that live on the shoal.

"Right", the main interrupted again. "There was a turtle dove in our mansion this year or last, I am not too sure. The young lady master set it free and it flew to the State Governor's house."^[1]

[1] The words "Shoal" and "State Governor" are homophones.

"Nonsense", irritated by the maid's constant interruptions, the old tutor said angrily. "This is simply a qixing in the poem, a stimulant that inspire poet's train of thoughts".

"What's a qixing, again?" the maid asked.

"It's something that inspires the verses that follows. In this case, the sentence 'the slim and beautiful ladies are good partners for gentlemen' implies that a quiet and docile lady will be courted by a gentleman. Chen answered her question but, trying to avoid the subject of courting men and women, he said it with a deliberate equivocation.

"Why does the gentleman court her?" The piquant maid probed.

"You ask too many questions". Chen scolded, his face growing red.

"Teacher, we can try to understand the annotations of the verse by themselves. Why don't you tell us more about the general ideas of the poem," Du Liniang hurriedly interjected, trying to ease the tension.

At that, the old tutor solemnly started his teaching. This is in fact a popular love poem which has been extorted by many literati to the works that praises the virtues of the concubines in the royal court. The old tutor would naturally explain the meanings of the poem from the orthodox viewpoint, from the virtuous and open-minded ladies to their appearance and bearing. All the old-fashioned moralizations!

When the class was over, Du Liniang became sleepy. After the truism, the old tutor asked her to practice calligraphy. He got upset when he found that the writing brushes, ink sticks, paper and ink stones which he sent the maid to fetch were not right. However, he was greatly impressed by Du Liniang's handwritings. How can such a gentle and frail-looking girl handwrite such