

THE STORY OF CUI YINGYING

This short tale is one of the most famous romances in Chinese literary history. It was written by the late Tang writer Yuan Zhen (779-831), and some think it may be an autobiographical account, though Yuan himself appears towards the end of the tale as a friend of the protagonist, Scholar Zhang.

We will discuss this story in class. As you read, consider the study questions at the end of the story. Here is a list of the characters in the story:

Major Characters

Scholar Zhang
Mme. Zheng (Yingying's mother)
Cui Yingying
Hongniang (Yingying's maid)
Yuan Zhen

During the Zhenyuan period of the Tang Dynasty [785-805] there lived a man named Zhang. His nature was gentle and refined, and his person of great beauty. But his deeper feelings were held in absolute restraint, and he would indulge in no license. Sometimes his friends took him to a banquet and he would try to join their frolics; but when the rest were shouting and scuffling their hardest, Zhang only pretended to take part. In truth, he could never overcome his shyness. So it came about that although already twenty-three, he had not yet enjoyed a woman's beauty. To those who questioned him he answered, "It is not men such as Master Dengtu who are true lovers of beauty, for they are merely profligates. I consider myself a true lover of beauty, who happens never yet to have met with it. And I am of this opinion because I know that, in other things, whatever is beautiful casts its spell on me; thus it cannot be that I am merely devoid of feeling." His questioners marked this.

About this time, Zhang went to Puzhou. Some two miles east of the town there is a Buddhist monastery called the Pujiu Temple, and here he took up lodging.

Now it happened that at this time the widow of a certain Cui was returning to Chang'an. She passed through Puzhou on the way and stayed at the temple. This lady was born a member of the Zheng family, and Zhang's mother was also a Zheng. He unraveled their relationship and found that they were second-cousins.

During this year, General Hun Chan died at Puzhou. There was a certain Colonel Ding Wenya who had ill-treated the late general's troops, and the soldiers accordingly made Hun Zhan's funeral the occasion of a mutiny and began to plunder the town. The Cui family was traveling with much valuable property and many servants. Subjected to this sudden danger when far from home, they had no one from whom they could seek protection.

Now it happened that Zhang had been friendly with the political party to which the commander at Puzhou belonged. At his request a guard was sent to the temple and no disorder took place there. A few days afterward, the Civil Commissioner Du Que was ordered by the emperor to take over the command of the troops. The mutineers then laid down their arms.

The widow Zheng was very aware of the service that Zhang had rendered. She therefore ordered fine dishes and invited Zhang to join her in a banquet in the temple's central hall. When he arrived, she addressed him. "I, your aunt, am but a frail widow with young ones in my care. Had we fallen under the power of the soldiers I could never have saved them. Thus that my son and daughter are alive is entirely due to your protection. This is no ordinary favor! I shall now cause them to bow to you as their merciful elder kinsman in the hope that this may repay your grace."

First she sent for her son, Huanlang, who was then about ten years old, a handsome and gentle child. Then she sent for her daughter Yingying with the words, "Come bow to your cousin who has saved your life."

They waited for a long time. Finally the girl sent word that she was not well. Madame Zheng was furious. "Your elder cousin has saved your life!" she responded. "Had he not, you would now be a captive. How can you treat him with such coldness?"

At last the girl came in. She was dressed in everyday clothes with a look of deep unhappiness on her face. She had put on no ornaments. Her hair dangled in coils, her eyebrows were unplucked, her cheeks were not rouged. But her features were of an exquisite beauty and shone with a dazzling luster. Zhang bowed to her, amazed. She sat down by her mother's side and looked all the time towards here, turning from him with a fixed stare of aversion as though she was repelled by his person. Zhang asked how old she was. "She was born in the Year of the Rat during the reign of the present emperor. Now it is the year of the dragon, thus she is seventeen years old."

Zhang tried to engage the girl in conversation, but she would not answer, and soon the dinner was over. Zhang had fallen passionately in love with her, and from this time he wished to tell her of his feelings, but he could find no way.

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Now Yingying had a servant girl called Hongniang, whom Zhang would sometimes encounter at the temple, and he took to greeting her whenever they passed. Once he stopped her and began to tell her of his love for her mistress, but she became frightened and ran away. Then Zhang was sorry he had not kept silent.

The next day, he met Hongniang again, but was embarrassed and did not say what was on his mind. But this time, the maid herself broached the subject. "Master," she said, "I dare not tell her what you told me, or even hint at it. But since your mother was a kinswoman of the Cui family, why do you not use this goodwill to seek my mistress's hand."

Zhang replied, "Since I was a mere baby my nature has never allowed me to act unsuitably. In the past when in company of ladies draped in silks and gauze my gaze has never wandered to them. I never dreamed I would become obsessed as I have now. At the banquet the other night I could scarcely contain myself, and since then, when I walk I forget where I am going, and when I dine I forget to eat midway. I do not know how to endure the hours between dawn and dusk. If we were to marry properly through the agency of a matchmaker, and engage in the ritual steps of gift giving and genealogical inquiry, it would take many months. By that time you'd find me like a dried fish hung at market. What use is your advice to me?"

"My mistress clings to her chastity," said Hongniang. "She is steadfast. Even an equal could not lead her into lewd talk, much less can a servant like me do so. But she is very skilled in literary writing and often when she has composed or recited a poem or letter she is long after restless and longing. You should try to provoke her with a love poem. There is no other way."

Zhang was delighted and at once composed two "Poems to Spring" to send to her. Hongniang took them away and came back the same evening with a decorated writing tablet which she gave to Zhang. "This is from my mistress," she said. It bore the title, "The Bright Moon at the Full." The words ran:

Awaiting the moon in the western chamber
Greeting the wind, the door half ajar,
Brushing the wall, the blossom's shadow stirs,
Could this be my jade-like lover come at last?

Zhang could not doubt the meaning. That night was the fourth after the first decade of the second month; the next night would be the full moon. Beside the eastern wall of

Yingying's chamber there grew an apricot tree, and by climbing it, one could cross the wall. So on the morrow Zhang made the tree his ladder over the wall and went straight to the western chamber, where he found the door half open. Hongniang lay asleep on the bed. Zhang shook her awake and she cried in a frightened voice, "Master, what are you doing here?"

"Miss Cui's letter invited me to come," Zhang answered half-truthfully. "You must go tell her I am here!"

Hongniang soon returned, whispering, "She is coming! She is coming!" Zhang felt a surge of happiness and fear; surely his salvation was at hand!

At last Yingying arrived. Her dress was sober and correct; her face was stern. She began to speak in a scolding voice. "You, my elder cousin, did indeed provide a great service to my family, and in consequence my dear mother has depended upon you for the protection of her little boy and her young daughter. How could you then have sent me a lascivious poem by the hand of a worthless maidservant? You pretended to righteousness by protecting me from the license of others, but in the end you chase after me licentiously yourself. This is merely trading wickedness for wickedness – what's the difference between them!

"Truly, I wished I could simply hide your poem, but to preserve another's lewdness would be wrong. To reveal this to my mother would have been to turn my back on your past kindness, and this would have been ill-behaved. To entrust a response to a servant would have meant that my true feelings would not have been made fully clear to you. I composed a letter to express myself directly, but I feared that you would find it hard to understand. So instead I sent you these coarse verses, knowing that you would most surely come here. It is true that such an illicit action should be a cause for deep shame, but as I had no object other than to preserve my purity, I have done nothing wrong."

With these words, she whirled from him and was gone. Zhang stood for a time in utter confusion, then he climbed back over the wall and went back in despair.

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Several nights later, Zhang was lying asleep near the veranda when someone woke him suddenly. He rose with a startled cry and found that Hongniang was there, carrying bed-clothes under her arm and a pillow in her hand. She was shaking Zhang saying, "She is coming! She is coming! What are you doing asleep?" Then she laid out the bed-clothes and left.

Zhang sat up and rubbed his eyes. He thought it must have been a dream, but still, he sat waiting in posture of respect. Suddenly Hongniang returned, guiding her mistress with both hands. Yingying was languid and flushed, her body pliant and weak, as though scarcely strong enough to bear up her limbs. The stern severity of the time before was nowhere to be seen.

That night was the eighth of the second decade, three nights after the full moon. The crystal beams of the sinking moon glimmered darkly athwart their bed. Zhang felt he was flying in air, and wondered whether a spirit had not come to him rather than a mortal woman. At last, the gong of the temple bell announced the coming of dawn and Hongniang bustled into the chamber. Yingying tossed on the bed with a languorous cry and then let Hongniang guide her away, without having uttered a single word the whole night long.

Zhang saw that the sky was growing light and he got up. "Was that a dream?" he said to himself in perplexity. But as the light grew stronger, he saw her powder on his arm and he caught the smell of her perfume in his clothes, and the teardrops she had shed still glistened on the mattress.

For more than ten days afterwards Zhang did not see her again. During this time, he began to compose a poem in thirty couplets, titled "Meeting with a Fairy." Before he had finished it, he encountered Hongniang on the road, and he asked her to carry the poem to Yingying. After this, she allowed him to come to her, and for a month or more Zhang would creep out at dusk and return at dawn, the two of them sharing each night that western chamber of which Yingying had written. Zhang often asked her what her mother thought of him. "She knows she could do nothing to oppose us, and so she hopes for a formal match."

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Soon afterwards, Zhang had to go to the capital. Before starting out, he tenderly informed Yingying of his departure. She did not reproach him, but her distress was evident on her face. For the two nights prior to his departure, she did not allow Zhang to come to her.

After spending several months in the capital, Zhang traveled back to Puzhou and once more visited with the Cui household for many months. Yingying was always busy with calligraphic carvings or skillful compositions, but though Zhang asked to see them again and again, he was always refused. Zhang repeatedly tried to draw her out by sending her compositions of his own, but these she merely glanced at.

It was Yingying's way that in her arts she would reach the highest pitch without a sign showing on her countenance. Her conversation was intelligent and quick, but she

rarely responded to what others said. Though her anticipation of Zhang's attentions was very keen, she herself was never willing to send any message of encouragement. She was frequently tormented by despondent longings, but she revealed no sign outwardly; rarely did a shade of pleasure or dismay cross her features. One night Zhang crept up upon Yingying while she sat alone, playing her zither with sounds of passionate sorrow. But when he sought the reasons for her mournful playing, she merely put the zither aside and refused to play more. The incident only deepened Zhang's confused infatuation.

It came time for Zhang to participate in the metropolitan examinations at the capital, and he was obliged once more to travel west to the capital. The night before his departure, Zhang was sitting by Yingying's side. He did not speak again of his feelings, but Yingying seemed already to know what he wished to say to her, and with a gentle voice and submissive face she spoke softly to him. "Those a man leads astray he will in the end abandon. It is fitting, and I shall not reproach you. You have led me astray, and for you to bring this to a close would be a kindness. Your vows of faithfulness unto death, these too are ended. Why should you grieve so deeply at this parting? Yet I see that you are sad, and, alas, I have nothing to comfort you. You have often said that I play the zither well. In the past I have been embarrassed by my inability to live up to your praise, but now you are leaving, and I shall give you this token of my true feelings."

Thereupon she called for her zither and began to play a prelude to "Rainbow Skirts and Feather Jackets." But after a few notes, the wailing tones grew wild with torment, and the zither played an unknown melody. All who were there gasped as they listened to her play. Then she suddenly stopped, and throwing the zither aside began to weep until the tears trailed down. Then she ran off to her family's quarters and did not return.

The next morning, Zhang set off.

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The following year, having failed in his examinations, Zhang was obliged to remain in the capital. He sent a letter to Yingying to express his inmost thoughts. Her words in reply I will summarize here:

I have read your letter and I cherish it deeply. It has filled my heart, where sorrow and joy join together. It was gracious of you to send with your letter the gift of flower garlands in a box and sticks of rouge so that I may brighten my hair and lips. Your kindness is great, but for whom would I now wish to look beautiful? Gazing upon your gifts, I sigh with longing and miss you all the more.

Your news that you are prospering in the capital and progressing in your efforts is a comfort to me, though I do fear that you are more likely now to lose interest in me, living here in this far-off rustic place. But this is the working of fate; what use is there in speaking of it again?

Since last autumn I have lived in a daze, as though I had lost something I could not find. During the bustle of the days I may force myself to smiling conversation, but at night when I am alone I find myself weeping. When dreams come to me they are filled with choking throbs and the burden of separation; then somehow I am led back into old times and we are together again – but before our secret tryst reaches its end, I am suddenly startled awake and your phantom vanishes. Though your half of the quilt still seems warm, when I come to my senses I realize how far off you are. Since we parted only yesterday, a new year has suddenly taken the old one's place.

Chang'an is a city of pleasures and there are many traps there to ensnare your heart. How could I ever be lucky enough that you would not forget one in so lonely and insignificant a place? And were you to keep me first in your thoughts, what would someone so worthless as I have to repay you? As for the vow of eternal faith, that is unaltered in me.

Once, because we were relatives, we were brought together on the night of the feast. My maidservant was enticed and I responded with deep sincerity; but my heart could not stay steadfast to itself. Your temptations were like the melodies of the lute strings, and I could not bear to cut them off with the shuttle of my loom. Then we laid out our mat within one chamber, and our trust was strong and our feelings deep, and my heart was pledged and never can it change. How having seen at last the ruler of my heart could my passions fail to set themselves forever? And bearing now the shame of self-surrender, I am no longer fit to bear the towel and comb for another man. But of this lifelong remorse before me, I should stifle my sighs. What use are words?

When the heart of a man of goodness by chance lowers its gaze to one who is lowly and insignificant, this affection of his life remains fixed until his death. The ambitious man must be spare of affections; he must discard the small to follow the great. His former lover will appear to him a mere partner in vice, and the solemn vows he has sworn to her will seem made to be broken. Yet even after bones have turned to dust and the bodily form decayed, the heart's true faith does not melt away, but catches in the wind and falls with the dew, and so abides in the realm of the pure. Eternal sincerity – my words must stop here.

Each time I approach this page I am shaken by sobbing and I cannot tell you all that is in my heart. Oh, you must look after yourself well!

I am sending you this jade ring as a token. It was a plaything when I was a little girl, and I want you to wear it among the ornaments of your sash. My thought is of the unchangeability of the rock-hard jade and the unbrokenness of the eternal circuit. I am sending also a skein of thread and a tea-leaf mortar of patterned bamboo. There is no value in these few things. My thought is only that you be as true as jade, that your faith be as unending as the round ring, that the bamboo patterns are the tracks of my tears, and the tangled threads the strings of my cares. By these things may my true feelings reach you and may they be eternal tokens of goodness between us.

The heart is close but the body far; no date is marked for our next meeting. Yet souls filled with secret longings may join together over a thousand miles.

Look after yourself well. The spring wind can bring sickness with it; you must eat well and take care of yourself. Do not let your worthless handmaid burden your thoughts.

Zhang showed this letter to his friends and so the story became well known. Zhang's good friend Yang Juyuan, skilled at verse, likened them to people of the past in his poem "Miss Cui":

Young Pan gleams lustrous, a man more bright than jade;
Orchids light his inner yard as snows melt away.
Oh, the spring thoughts of youth with talent and free –
Heartbroken Miss Xiao, writing, writing . . .

When Zhang's friends heard about the circumstances of his affair, all recognized its extraordinary nature. Yet Zhang himself had resolved to break off the relationship.

I, Yuan Zhen, was especially close to Zhang, and so I asked him for an explanation. This is what he said: "Whatever is endowed by Heaven with special perfection either meets with an early destruction or is the cause of early destruction in others. Should Miss Cui encounter the life of wealth and high rank and find herself thus pampered and adored, she would be forever changing, as the clouds turn into rain, or as the water dragons of the depths become the flying dragons of the sky. I could never predict her transformations.

"In past times, Xin, king of the Shang, and You, king of the Zhou, ruled over kingdoms of many thousands of chariots. How great was their hold on the world! Yet each was brought down by a single woman, his armies scattered, his body butchered. To this day they are the

laughingstocks of the world. My character is not strong enough to withstand such spells, and it is for this reason that I suppress my passion.”

All who were seated listening to this speech sighed deeply.

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A little over a year passed. Yingying was married off to someone else; Zhang too had married. It happened that one day Zhang was traveling and found himself passing by the house where Yingying now lived. He decided to call upon her husband and asked him to send in word to Yingying to come out and see her cousin. The husband carried the message to her, but Yingying would not come. As he sat there, Zhang’s vexation showed clearly on his face. Yingying was told of this and quickly had this poem slipped to him:

I have wasted away, no gleam rests on my face,
Tossed and turned, too weak to leave my bed.
My husband sees, but I am not ashamed;
You are to blame – yet before you I feel shame.

Nor did she ever appear.

A few days later, as Zhang was getting ready to resume his travels, he sent Yingying a poem excusing his break:

Why do you speak of abandonment now?
Now you have one you should love.
Take instead the feelings from the past
To comfort the one at your side.

After that they never heard of one another again.

Zhang’s contemporaries praised the skill with which he had extricated himself from his unfortunate misstep. When in gatherings with friends I have heard his story discussed, again and again they say that had Zhang been wise, he never would have become involved, but having become involved, he acted thereafter with acumen.

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Study Questions

1. In what ways does Yingying behave in a "Confucian" way (following strict decorum, etc.), and in what ways does she behave in a "Daoist" way (acting spontaneously or in defiance of decorum, etc.)
2. Which aspects attract Zhang to Yingying? Which lead him to abandon her?
3. What attitude does the author, Yuan Zhen (who appears briefly in the story), seem to take towards Yingying when she conforms or rebels? (Judge, in part, by your own reactions to the characters and events he has invented.)
4. As a reader, do you feel that Zhang's decision to break off his relationship with Yingying was appropriate? With whom did you feel more sympathetic as you read the story - what passages drew your sympathies?