

It is very hard to read "Ying-ying's Story," below, without taking sides, or without at least deciding which side the story really takes. Some, accepting that this is an autobiographical work by Yuan Zhen, argue that, in the context of the public Confucian values of the period, Zhang's behavior is justified. However, such an interpretation ignores the values of the Tang love story, which were as powerful or more powerful than the Confucian pieties by which Zhang excuses his actions at the end of "Ying-ying's Story." "Huo Xiao-yu's Story" bears witness to such values. The most chilling possibility is that "Ying-ying's Story" is indeed an autobiographical work, an attempt by the author to exculpate himself, and that some peculiar blindness on the part of the author, having convinced himself by his own rationalizations, prevents him from seeing the shabbiness of his actions.

In the end, nothing survives unsullied in this story: neither Zhang nor Ying-ying, neither Tang images of love nor Confucian virtues. Poetry seems false; formal prose is ludicrous; and the articulation of social virtues seems something too conveniently deployed for private motives. Some modern Chinese critics, looking for a pleasant love story, are appalled by the tale. But even though its numerous retellings smoothed over everything that makes the story uncomfortable, it remains one of the most compelling and influential narratives in the Chinese tradition.

Ying-ying's letter, quoted in full (though the author purports to give only the gist of it), is a remarkable piece of prose, with the most complicated twists and turns of the heart working at cross purposes with the Tang delight in formal eloquence. Ying-ying the stylist sits uncomfortably beside Ying-ying the woman driven to distraction. In the same way, the Ying-ying who wants to show the self-effacing concern of a model wife is in conflict with another Ying-ying who is both desperate and enraged. If this is not a real document, it is a recreation with a psychological verisimilitude unparalleled in the period. We should note that Zhang's letter to Ying-ying was not included. From Ying-ying's reply, it is clear that this letter again declared his love for her, which makes his behavior on receiving her letter all the more questionable.

Yuan Zhen (779–831), "Ying-ying's Story"

In the Zhen-yuan Reign (785–804) there was a certain man named Zhang, of a gentle nature and handsome appearance. He held steadfastly to his personal principles and refused to become involved in anything improper.

Sometimes a group of friends would go off to a party and behave riotously. While the others tried to outdo one another in wanton and unbridled recklessness, Zhang would remain utterly composed, and they could never get him to act in an intemperate manner. At this time he was twenty-three and had never been intimate with a woman. When a close friend questioned him about this, Zhang excused himself, saying, "The famous lecher of antiquity, Deng Tu-zi, was not a man of passionate desire; his were the actions of a brute. I am someone who is truly capable of passionate desire, but simply have not encountered it. How can I say this? Things of the most bewitching beauty never fail to leave a lasting impression on my heart, and this tells me that I am not one of those free of passion." And the one who had questioned him acknowledged this in him.

Not long afterward, Zhang visited Pu-zhou. About a dozen leagues east of the city there was a residence for monks known as the Temple of Universal Salvation, where Zhang took up lodgings. It happened that a widow, one Madam Cui, was on her way to Chang-an; and since her journey took her through Pu-zhou, she too stopped over at this temple. Madam Cui had been born a Zheng, and Zhang's mother had also been a Zheng. When they traced the family connection, it turned out that she was his maternal aunt at several removes.

That year Hun Zhen, the Military Governor, passed away in Pu-zhou, and Ding Wen-ya, the court officer left in charge, was not liked by the troops. After the funeral, they rioted and pillaged widely in Pu-zhou. Madam Cui had a great wealth of household goods as well as many servants. The hostel was frantic with alarm, and they did not know where to turn for help. Zhang had earlier developed friendly relations with the circle around the commandant of Pu-zhou, and he asked for guards to protect Madam Cui. As a result, no harm came to her. About a dozen days later, the Investigator Du Que arrived with an imperial commission to take charge of the troops, and he issued commands to the army, after which the disturbance ceased.

Madam Cui was exceedingly grateful for Zhang's kindness, so she had a feast prepared in his honor. As they dined in the central hall, she said to Zhang, "Your widowed aunt lives on, carrying her young children with her. I have had the misfortune of a close call with a major outbreak of violence among the troops, and I truly could not have protected these children's lives. Thus it is as if my young son and daughter owe their lives to you. What you have done for us cannot be compared to an ordinary kindness. I would now insist that they greet you with all the courtesies due to an elder brother, in the hope that this might be a way to repay your kindness." Then she gave this order to her son. His name was Huan-lang, a gentle and handsome boy somewhat over ten years old. Next she gave the order to her daughter: "Come out and pay your respects to your elder brother; you are alive because of him." A long time passed, and then the girl declined on the excuse that she wasn't feeling well. Madam Cui said angrily, "Mr. Zhang protected

your life. Otherwise you would have been taken captive. How can you still keep such a wary distance from him!" After another long wait, the daughter came in. She wore everyday clothes and had a disheveled appearance, without having dressed up specially for the occasion. Tresses from the coils of her hair hung down to her eyebrows and her two cheeks were suffused with rosy color. Her complexion was rare and alluring, with a glow that stirred a man. Zhang was startled as she paid him the proper courtesies. Then she sat down beside her mother. Since her mother had forced her to meet Zhang, she stared fixedly away in intense resentment, as if she couldn't bear it. When he asked her age, Madam Cui said, "From September 784, the first year of the emperor's reign, until the present year, 800, makes her seventeen years old." Zhang tried to draw her into conversation, but she wouldn't answer him.

Finally the party ended. Zhang was, of course, infatuated with her, and he wanted to express his feelings but had no way. The Cuis had a maidservant named Hong-niang. Zhang greeted her courteously a number of times and then seized an opportunity to tell her what he felt. The maid was scandalized and fled in embarrassment, at which Zhang regretted what he had said. When the maid came the next day, Zhang was abashed and apologized, saying nothing more about what he wanted. But then the maid said to Zhang, "What you said is something you should not have dared to say and something you should not dare allow to get out. However, you know the kinship ties of the Cuis in some detail. Given the gratitude Madam Cui feels toward you, why don't you ask for her hand in marriage?"

Zhang replied, "Ever since I was a child I have by nature avoided unseemly associations. When I have been around women, I would never even give them suggestive glances. I never would have thought that a time would come when I found myself so overwhelmed by desire. The other day at the party, I could scarcely control myself. For the past few days I walk without knowing where I am going and eat without thinking of whether I am full or not. I'm afraid I won't last another day. If I had to employ a matchmaker to ask for her hand marriage, with the sending of betrothal tokens and formal inquiries about names, it would be another three months, and I would be a fish so long out of the water that you would have to look for me in a dried fish store. What do you think I should do?" The maid replied, "Miss Cui is virtuous and guards herself scrupulously. Even someone she held in the highest regard could not lead her into misconduct by improper words; plans laid by lesser folk will be even harder to carry through. She does, however, like to compose poems and is always mulling over passages, spending a long time on pieces of wronged love and admiration. You should try to seduce her by composing poems that express your love indirectly. Otherwise there will be no way."

Zhang was overjoyed and immediately composed two "Spring Verses" to give to her. That evening Hong-niang came again and handed over a piece of colored notepaper to Zhang, saying, "Miss Cui has instructed me to give

you this." The piece was entitled "The Bright Moon of the Fifteenth." It went:

I await the moon on the western porch,
my door half ajar, facing the breeze.
Flower shadows stir, brushing the wall—
I wonder if this is my lover coming.

Zhang understood the subtle message implied. That night was April 14. There was an apricot tree on the eastern side of her apartments, and by climbing it, he could get into her quarters. On the following evening, the fifteenth, when the moon was full, Zhang climbed the tree and got into her quarters. When he reached the western porch, the door was indeed half ajar. Hong-niang was lying there asleep in her bed, and Zhang roused her. Hong-niang was startled: "How did you get in here?" Zhang lied to her, "Ying-ying's note summoned me. Now go tell her that I'm here." Soon afterward Hong-niang returned, saying over and over again, "She's here! She's here!" Zhang was overjoyed and surprised, certain that he would succeed in this enterprise. But when Ying-ying did arrive, she was in proper attire with a stern expression on her face. She proceeded to take Zhang to task item by item: "By your kindness you saved our family, and that was indeed generous. For this reason my sweet mother entrusted you with the care of her young son and daughter. But how could you use this wicked maid to deliver such wanton verses to me? I first understood your saving us from molestation as virtue, but now you have taken advantage of that to make your own demands. How much difference is there between one form of molestation and the other? I had truly wanted to simply ignore your verses, but it would not have been right to condone such lecherousness in a person. I would have revealed them to my mother, but it would have been unlucky to so turn one's back on a person's kindness. I was going to have my maid give you a message, but I was afraid she would not correctly convey how I truly feel. Then I planned to use a short letter to set this out before you, but I was afraid you would take it ill. So I used those frivolous and coy verses to make you come here. Can you avoid feeling shame at such improper actions? I want most of all that you conduct yourself properly and not sink to the point where you molest people!" When she finished her speech, she whirled about and went off. Zhang stood there in a daze for a long time. Then he went back out the way he had come in, by that point having lost all hope.

A few nights later, Zhang was sleeping alone by the balcony when all of a sudden someone woke him up. He rose in a flash, startled, and found that it was Hong-niang, who had come carrying bedding and a pillow. She patted Zhang, saying, "She's here! She's here! What are you doing sleeping!" Then she put the pillow and bedding beside his and left. Zhang rubbed his eyes and sat up straight for a long time, wondering whether he might not still be dreaming. Nevertheless, he assumed a respectful manner and waited for her. In a little while Hong-niang reappeared, helping Ying-ying along.

When she came in, she was charming in her shyness and melting with desire, not strong enough even to move her limbs. There was no more of the prim severity she had shown previously. The evening was the eighteenth of the month, and the crystalline rays of the moon slanting past his chamber cast a pale glow over half the bed. Zhang's head was spinning, and he wondered if she might not be one of those goddesses or fairy princesses, for he could not believe that she came from this mortal world. After a while the temple bell rang and day was about to break. Hong-niang urged her to leave, but Ying-ying wept sweetly and clung to him until Hong-niang again helped her away. She had not said a word the entire night.

Zhang got up as the daylight first brought colors to the scene, and he wondered to himself, "Could that have been a dream?" In the light there was nothing left but the sight of some make-up on his arm, her scent on his clothes, and the sparkles of her teardrops still glistening on the bedding. A dozen or so days later it seemed so remote that he was no longer sure. Zhang was composing a poem called "Meeting the Holy One" in sixty lines. He had not quite finished when Hong-niang happened to come by. He then handed it to her to present to Ying-ying.

From that point on, she allowed him to come to her. He would go out secretly at dawn and enter secretly in the evening. For almost a month they shared happiness in what had earlier been referred to as the "western porch." Zhang constantly asked about how Madame Zheng felt, and she would say, "I can't do anything about it." And she wanted him to proceed to regularize the relationship. Not long afterward Zhang was to go off to Chang-an, and before he went he consoled her by telling her of his love. Ying-ying seemed to raise no complaints, but the sad expression of reproach on her face was very moving. Two evenings before he was to travel, she refused to see him again.

Zhang subsequently went west to Chang-an. After several months he again visited Pu-zhou, and this time his meetings with Ying-ying lasted a series of months. Ying-ying was quite skilled at letterwriting and a fine stylist. He repeatedly asked to see things she had written, but she would never show him anything. Even when Zhang repeatedly tried to prompt her by giving her things he himself had written, he still hardly ever got to look over anything of hers. In general, whenever Ying-ying did show something to someone else, it was always the height of grace and polish; but she appeared unaware of it. Her speech was intelligent and well reasoned, yet she seldom wrote answering pieces in response to what he sent her. Although she treated Zhang with the greatest kindness, she still never picked up his verses in a poetic exchange. There were times when her melancholy voluptuousness took on a remoteness and abstraction, yet she continually seemed not to recognize this. At such times, expressions of either joy or misery seldom showed on her face. On another occasion she was alone at night playing the harp, a melancholy and despairing melody. Zhang listened to her surreptitiously, for had he asked her to play, she would not have played any more. With this Zhang became even more infatuated with her.

Soon afterward Zhang had to again go west to Chang-an, to be there in time for the literary examination. This time, on the evening before he was to leave, he said nothing of his feelings, but instead sighed sadly by Ying-ying's side. Ying-ying had already guessed that this was to be farewell. With a dignified expression and a calm voice, she said gently to Zhang, "It is quite proper that when a man seduces a woman, he finally abandons her. I don't dare protest. It was inevitable that having seduced me, you would end it—all this is by your grace. And with this, our lifelong vows are indeed ended. Why be deeply troubled by this journey? Nevertheless, you have become unhappy, and there is no way I can ease your heart. You have always claimed that I am good at playing the harp, but I have always been so shy that I couldn't bring myself to play for you. Now that you are going to leave, I will fulfill this heartfelt wish of yours." Thereupon she brushed her fingers over the harp, playing the prelude to "Coats of Feathers, Rainbow Skirts." But after only a few notes, the sad notes became so unsettled by bitter pain that the melody could no longer be recognized. All present were sobbing, and Ying-ying abruptly stopped and threw down the harp, tears streaming down her face. She hurried back to her mother's house and did not come back.

The next morning at dawn, Zhang set out. The following year, not having been successful in the literary competition, Zhang stayed in the capital. He then sent a letter to Ying-ying to set her mind to rest. The lines Ying-ying sent in reply are roughly recorded here:

I received what you sent, asking after me. The comforting love you show is all too deep. In the feelings between man and woman, joys and sorrows mingle. You were also kind to send the box of flower cutouts and the five-inch stick of liprouge—ornaments that will make my hair resplendent and my lips shine. But though I receive such exceptional fondness from you, for whom will I now make myself beautiful? Catching sight of these things increases my cares, and nothing but sad sighs well within me. From your letter I am given to understand that you are occupied by the pursuit of your studies in the capital. The path to progress in studies does indeed depend on not being disturbed. Yet I feel some resentment that I, a person of so small account, have been left behind forever in a far place. Such is fate. What more is there to say?

Since last autumn I have been in a daze as though I did not know where I was. In the chatter of merry gatherings I sometimes make myself laugh and join in the conversation, but when I am alone in the still of night, tears never fail to fall. And when I come to dream, my thoughts usually are of the misery of separation, which stirs me until I am choked with sobbing. When we are twined together, absorbed in our passion, for a brief while it is as it once used to be; but then, before our secret encounter comes to its culmination, the soul is startled awake and finds itself Sundered from you. Although half of the covers seem warm, yet my thoughts are on someone far, far away.

Just yesterday you said goodbye, and now in but an instant the old year has been left behind. Chang-an is a place of many amusements, which can catch a man's fancy and draw his feelings. How fortunate I am that you have not for-

gotten me, negligible and secluded as I am, and that you were not too weary of me to let me occupy your thoughts for at least a moment. My humble intentions have no means to repay this. But when it comes to my vow to love you forever, that is steadfast and unwavering.

Long ago, connected to you as a cousin, I happened to be together with you at a banquet. Having inveigled my maidservant, you consequently expressed your private feelings. Young people are unable to maintain a firmness of heart. You, sir, stirred me as Si-ma Xiang-ru stirred Zhuo Wen-jun, by playing the harp. Yet I did not resist, as did Xie Kun's neighbor by throwing her shuttle when he approached her. When I brought my bedding to your side, your love and honor were deep. In the folly of my passion I thought that I would remain in your care forever. How could I have foreseen that, "once having seen my lord," it would be impossible to plight our troth? Since I suffer the shame of having offered myself to you, I may no longer serve you openly as a wife. This will be a source of bitter regret that will last until my dying day. I repress my sighs, for what more can be said? If by chance in the goodness of your heart you would condescend to fulfill my secret hope, then even if it were on the day of my death, it would be for me like being reborn. But, perchance, the successful scholar holds love to be but of little account and sets it aside as a lesser thing in order to pursue things of greater importance, considering his previous mating to have been a vile action, his having taken enforced vows as something one may well betray. If this be so, then my form will melt away and my bones will dissolve, yet my glowing faith will not perish. My petals, borne by the wind and trailing in the dew, will still entrust themselves to the pure dust beneath your feet. Of my sincerity unto death, what words can say is all said here. I sob over this paper and cannot fully express my love. Please, please take care of yourself.

This jade ring is a thing that I had about me since I was an infant. I send it to you to wear among the ornaments that hang at your waist. From the jade is to be drawn the lesson of what is firm and lustrous, thus unsullied. From the ring is to be drawn the lesson of what continues on forever, never breaking. Also I send a single strand of tangled silken floss and a tea grinder of speckled bamboo. These several things are not valuable in themselves. My message is that I would have you, sir, be as pure as the jade, that my own poor aspirations are as unbroken as the ring, that my tearstains are on the bamboo, and that my melancholy sentiments are like this twisting and tangled thread. Through these things I convey what I feel, and will love you always. The heart is close, though our bodies are far. There is no time set for us to meet. Yet when secret ardor accumulates, spirits can join even across a thousand leagues. Please take care of yourself. The spring breeze is often sharp, and it would be a good idea to force yourself to eat more. Be careful of what you say and guard yourself. And do not long for me too intensely.

Zhang showed her letter to his friends, and as a result many people at the time heard of the affair. One good friend, Yang Ju-yuan, was fond of composing verses and wrote a quatrain entitled "Miss Cui":

Pure luster of this young Pan Yue—
even the jade cannot compare;
sweet clover grows in courtyard
as snows first melt away.
The amorous young talent
is filled with spring desires—
poor Miss Xiao, her broken heart
in a letter of just one page.

I, Yuan Zhen of He-nan, completed Zhang's "Meeting the Holy One" in sixty lines.

Pale moonlight breaks in above curtains,
fireflies flash through the sapphire air.
The distant skies begin to grow dim,
and below, trees have grown leafy and full.
Past the yard's bamboo come notes of dragon flutes,
the well-side beech is brushed by phoenix song.

Her filmy gauze hangs like a thin haze,
soft breezes resound with her waist-hung rings.
Crimson standards follow the Goddess of the West,
the heart of clouds proffers the Lad of Jade.
As night's hours deepen, people grow still,
or meeting at dawn in the drizzling rain.
Pearl-glow lights up her patterned shoes,
blossoms' brilliance hidden by embroidered dragon.
Jade hairpin, its colored phoenix in motion,
gauze cape that covers red rainbows.
He says that from this Jasper Flower Beach
he must go to dawn court at Green Jade Palace.

By his roaming north of the city of Luo
he chanced on Song Yu's eastern neighbor.
When he flirted, at first she gently refused,
but in secret soft passions already conveyed.
From her lowered coils the tresses' shadows stirred,
her circling steps obscured in jade white dust.
Face turned, glances flowed like flowers and snow,
she mounted the bed, bunched satins born in arms.
Mated ducks, their necks twined in dance,
kingfishers encaged in passion's embrace.
Her black brows knit in modesty,
her carmine lips, warming, grew softer.
Breath pure as the fragrance of orchids,
her skin glossy, her marble flesh full.

Worn out, too tired to move her wrist,
so charming, she loved to curl up.
Her sweat flowed in beads, drop by drop,
her tangled tresses thick and black.

No sooner made glad by this millennial meeting,
she suddenly heard night's hours end.
At that moment resentful, she lingered on,
clinging with passion, desire unspent.
A sad expression on languid cheeks,
in sweet lines she vowed the depths of love.
Her ring-gift revealed a union fated,
a love-knot left showed hearts were the same.
Cheeks' powder in tears flowed on night's mirror,
lamp's last flickering, insects far in the dark.
As the sparkling rays still dwindled away,
the sun at dawn grew gradually bright.

She rode her cygnet back to the Luo;
he played his pipes as he climbed Mount Song.
Her musk still imbued the scent of his clothes,
his pillow oily, still flecked with her rouge.

Thick grow the grasses beside the pool,
wind-tossed, the tumbleweed longs for the isle.
Her pale harp rings with the crane's lament,
she looks toward the stars for the swan's return.

The sea is so vast, truly hard to cross;
and the sky is high, not easy to reach.
Goddess moving in cloud, nowhere now to be found;
and Xiao-shi is there in his high chamber.

Every one of Zhang's friends who heard of the affair was stirred to amazement. Nevertheless, Zhang had already made up his mind. I was on particularly good terms with Zhang and asked him to explain. Zhang then said, "All such creatures ordained by Heaven to possess bewitching beauty will inevitably cast a curse on others if they don't do the same to themselves. Had Cui Ying-ying made a match with someone of wealth and power, she would have taken advantage of those charms that win favor from a man; and if she were not the clouds and the rain of sexual pleasure, then she would have been a serpent or a fierce dragon—I do not know what she would have transformed into. Long ago King Shou-xin of Yin and King You of Zhou controlled domains that mustered a million chariots, and their power was very great. Nevertheless, in both cases a woman destroyed them. Their hosts were scattered, they themselves were slain, and even today their ignominy has made them laughingstocks for all the world. My own virtue is inadequate to triumph over such cursed wickedness, and for this reason I hardened my heart against her." At the time all those present were deeply moved.

Somewhat more than a year later, Ying-ying married another, and Zhang too took a wife. He happened to pass through the place where she was living and asked her husband to speak to her, wanting to see her as a maternal cousin. Her husband did speak to her, but Ying-ying refused to come out. The fact of Zhang's pain at such a rebuff showed on his face. Ying-ying found out about this and secretly composed a piece whose verses went:

Ever since I have wasted to gauntness
and the glow of my face has gone,
I toss and turn thousands of times,
too weary to get out of bed.
Not because of him at my side
that I am ashamed to rise—
grown haggard on your account, I'd be
ashamed in front of you.

And she never did see him. A few days later, Zhang was ready to go and she composed another poem to say a final farewell.

Rejected, what more can be said?—
yet you were my love back then.
Take what you felt in times gone by
and love well the person before your eyes.

From that point on, he knew nothing further of her.

People at the time generally accepted that Zhang was someone who knew how to amend his errors. At parties, I have often brought up this notion. One would have those who know not do such things, but those that have done such things should not become carried away by them.

In a November in the Zhen-yuan Reign, my good friend Li Shen was staying over with me in the Jing-an Quarter. Our conversations touched on this affair, and Li Shen made particular comment on how remarkable it was. He consequently composed "Ying-ying's Song" to make it more widely known. Cui's childhood name was Ying-ying, and he used this in the title.