

Spring 2015

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Morgan Brown

Morgan.Brown@Colorado.EDU

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Recommended Citation

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Bai Xianyong in Translation: Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream

Morgan Brown

Asian Languages and Civilizations Departmental Honors Thesis

University of Colorado at Boulder

April 7, 2015

Thesis Advisor

Andrew Stuckey, Asian Languages and Civilizations

Committee Members

Dimitri Nakassis, Classics

Andrew Stuckey, Asian Languages and Civilizations

Matthias L. Richter, Asian Languages and Civilizations

Introduction:

Bai Xianyong, the author of “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream” is known today as one of Taiwan’s most prominent modernist short story writers. He was born during 1937 in Mainland China’s Guilin to a Nationalist family, his father a high-ranking general in the Nationalist army as well as defense minister for a brief time. Bai was later forced to move to Taiwan in 1952 with his family, reuniting with his father after the Nationalist army’s forced retreat. He spent the remainder of his childhood with his family in Taiwan, finally entering National Taiwan University’s Foreign Language Department where he began his writing career. Most notably, during his years at university, Bai Xianyong, along with several literarily inclined classmates, established the bimonthly literary journal *Xiandai Wenxue (Modern Literature)*, for the purpose of introducing Taiwan to Western modernist writers such as Kafka, Faulkner, and Woolf as well as publishing up-and-coming Taiwanese writers interested in the modernist style. Apart from his role in editing *Xiandai Wenxue*, Bai also published many of his short stories during these four years leading to the eventual publication of his larger collections of short stories including *People of Taipei* in 1973, a collection of stories, of which “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream” is a part, which is widely considered to be his masterpiece.¹ After graduating from National Taiwan University, Bai moved to the United States to continue his study of creative writing where he finished both his studies and his career, attending the University of Iowa to finish his masters and later accepting a teaching position at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he remained until his retirement in 1994.²

As can be seen in the subject matter of many of his stories, Bai Xianyong was born during a time of intense conflict and change in Mainland China. During the year of his birth, in

¹ Li-hua Ying, *Historical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2010) 6-7.

² Helmut Martin, et al., *Modern Chinese Writers: Self-portrayals* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1992) 181-182.

1937, the Sino-Japanese War broke out between Japan and China continuing until his eighth year, in 1945, at which time the Civil War of China, fought between the Nationalist and Communist armies for control over China, resumed. This conflict continued until 1949 when the fighting was finally ended with the takeover of Mainland China by the Communist party as well as the exile of the Nationalist army, of which his father was a part, along with their sympathizers to Taiwan. This affected Bai dramatically as his father was driven to Taiwan with the Nationalist army in 1949, and his family, after moving several times, eventually went to join their father in Taiwan several years later.³ Although this exile was originally intended to be a temporary setback for the Nationalist army, providing the resources and time to regroup and launch a counterattack against the Communist party, this illusion slowly faded for the new people of Taiwan as the years continued to pass by. Former Mainlanders came to the realization that Taiwan would be their permanent home.⁴ As Bai not only witnessed this realization by his parent's generation, but was also forced to accept this reality himself, it is not surprising that this became the focus of many of his literary works.

The subject matter of Bai's collection of stories, *People of Taipei*, focuses on just this: depicting the effects the realization that Taiwan would be a permanent home had on the new residents of Taiwan, either subconsciously or not. These stories describe the lives of former Mainlanders of varying social classes ten or so years after the exile of the Nationalist army to Taiwan, depicting the common feelings of loss and alienation shared by these people, despite their varying social classes. The stories in the collection lean heavily on Western modernist techniques of writing to express the inner thoughts of their characters, as Bai employs techniques

³ Ying 7-9.

⁴ Andrew Stuckey, *Old Stories Retold: Narrative and Vanishing Past in Modern China* (Boulder: Lexington, 2010) 105-112.

such as stream of consciousness, free association, and interior monologue to depict the states of alienation and loss felt by many of the characters of his stories as a result of their perceived entrapment in Taiwan.⁵ “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream” is no exception. Bai depicts the protagonist, Madam Qian, as she struggles to reconcile the gap between her past in Nanjing and her present in Taiwan. In this story, told from the point of view of Madam Qian, Bai uses stream of consciousness to delve into her psychological state as she recalls events from her time on the Mainland interspersed with the events occurring around her in the present. Although the dichotomy between Madam Qian’s life in the Mainland and Taiwan is primarily depicted through the personal events linked in the commonalities of the party she attends during the story’s present and a similar party from her past in Nanjing, “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream” can be seen as depicting much more than just the superficial feelings of loss of one person, instead becoming an allegory for the displacement of individuals from a national identity that was felt by thousands of Mainlanders in their exile to Taiwan.

However, despite Bai’s success in writing, he maintains that although his career is writing short stories, his passion is Kun Opera. This is obvious to the readers of *People of Taipei* as his stories, including “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream,” are filled with allusions to classical texts—primarily of Kun Operas. This is clearly the case throughout “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream” as references to classical operas can be found not only in the story itself, but in the title of the story: a reference to *Peony Pavilion*, considered one of the classic Kun Operas, as well as the first Kun Opera Bai Xianyong attended, when he attended a performance by Mei Lanfang and Yu Zhenfei at the age of nine.⁶ An understanding of these classical texts, although not imperative, is important to understanding

⁵ Paul E. Schellinger, et al., *Encyclopedia of the Novel* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998) 971.

⁶ Lu Liu, “Pai Hsien-ung: Lifelong Pursuit of Kunqu Opera,” *PKU News* 10 Apr. 2011.

Bai's stories as they serve to reflect the events and meanings of the stories as the actions and feelings of the characters in his stories mirror the actions or feeling of the classical text's characters. His stories also reflect the aesthetic importance of Kun Opera and visual performance as he describes the scenery of his stories in an extremely vivid manner, immersing the reader in the world he has created, just as Kun Opera is able to captivate the audience from the first moments of a performance through their visual aspects.

Note on Translation:

Before translating a piece of literature there are many considerations that must be taken into account—two of which are discussed extensively throughout Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator": is a piece of work meant for readers who do not understand the language of the original, and whether the piece of work is translatable in itself. Benjamin is firm in his opinion that a piece of literature—and in following, its translation, if it is to remain true to the original (which he makes very clear should be the case)—is never for the benefit of readers. Literature is artwork that has value and meaning in itself. Therefore, according to Benjamin's theory of translation, it is dependent on the work of literature itself whether it has the quality of translatability and is not dependent on a list of qualities a work can possess, not even on qualities mankind can necessarily understand, but on some ephemeral quality that allows the translation to serve the work of the original while not owing its existence to it.⁷ Although I agree that literature is in itself a work of art and has inherent value, I do not believe it is true that literature and translations do not, and should not, take into consideration their readers, or that readers are not important to fulfilling the purpose of literature. If literature's value was placed solely in itself

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 69-82.

there would be no need to publish it, and it would remain, like pieces of art, something to be shown in galleries to the few who are willing to exert the effort to see and read it. However this is not how literature is viewed in modern society, nor, do I believe, would it have as much value if it were viewed solely in this manner. Literature is a form of art that contains an author's feelings, ideas, and exploration into a subject matter; ideas that he or she is able to express to an audience, the readers, to open some sort of awareness of dialogue on the subject matter. It is my belief that these dialogues are valuable to every person no matter their original language or cultural understanding and so I do not believe that any piece of literature possesses a higher quality of translatability than another. Of course some subject matters or languages will be easier or more difficult to translate and render digestible to other languages and cultures, however this is never an insurmountable task.

Theorists such as Benjamin have stated that once a translation has been determined to be necessary it is the task of the translator to create as exact a translation as possible to the original; however, I believe that Jakobson is correct in stating that a translation cannot ever be an exact equivalent of an original work of literature. There are difficulties in languages and their transmutability that do not allow this to be the case. For instance, in most cases, there is no truly equivalent translation for a word into another language. The connotation of every synonym of a word differs as well as in the specific types of things it includes, which is nearly impossible to find an exact duplicate in every regard from one language to another. Because this is the case, the task of the translator is not to translate a piece of literature in exactness from one word to the next but to instead understand that literature is a conveyer of a "message." It is the job of a translator to both understand and interpret the "message" of one text in order to obtain the same "message" in another language, though the path—the words and their structure—to that message

may be different than in the original.⁸ It is my belief, unlike that of Benjamin, that every piece of literature has the quality of translatability and although exact synonym may not be available in the target language of translation, there is always a way to explain a word that will be understandable to readers of the new language. For example, in Chinese there is a phrase 随便 (*suíbiàn*), generally indicating to the person it is spoken to that they can behave freely or with their own desires, which I would argue does not have a direct translation to English. This phrase, however, can be translated differently in different situation to express this idea to speakers of English such as “help yourself” while eating or “sit wherever” when deciding which seat to take at a table.

However it is important to note that the art of translation has changed in the more globally connected world of today, as it is not difficult for readers to find the meaning of a difficult word to translate or a word for which circumlocution would be necessary to fully express on the internet. Due to this new ability of readers, it is now practical for a translator to occasionally use the original language of a word or object in their translation where it is unnecessary for the reader to have a complete understanding of the word’s definition. In my own translation I have found it more suitable to occasionally use the Chinese word for objects where circumlocution would be necessary, leaving it either to the reader’s imagination if they do not wish to understand the clinical definition of the object, or giving the possibility of searching the internet for a definition or picture if they do. In my translation of “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream,” this technique can be seen in my choice to not translate the name of several objects not found in Western society, such as *qipao*. To give a speaker of English an

⁸ Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000) 113-18.

accurate description of the word *qipao* a definition such as “a Chinese styled dress that is fitted tight on the body and is often made from silk,” would need to be used. However all this description is piled into the term *qipao*, and by choosing to maintain this word in the translation, I, as the translator, have given the reader the option to find this further detail in the story if they choose to, without distracting from the message and direction of the translation itself.

In this translation of “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream,” I have attempted to provide an accurate translation of the text while staying true to the aesthetic feel and “message” of the piece. This short story places a heavy emphasis on the rhythm and flow of the narrative which I have attempted to mirror, and for this purpose I have changed the sentence structure to one that is standard in modern English. However, there are idiosyncrasies of the Chinese language that are not readily transferable to English, and in these cases I have chosen to translate them in a manner that I believe will best transfer their intended meaning to English speakers while maintaining the spirit of the Chinese text. This was most often the case with names and polite manners of addressing people, which may be unfamiliar to non-Chinese speakers. Among families and friends it is common for forms of address to change from personal names to familial titles such as brother and sister for friends of a similar age to oneself which is often present in this piece. This piece also explores the common form of address for opera performers in China as they have three differing forms of address: their given name—which I have left in the Romanization of the Chinese pronunciation, their stage name—a more aesthetic name which I have chosen to translate into its English meaning, as well as their numeric rank at the theater where they performed—a number given to the performers based on the order in which they came to the theater (similar to the Chinese practice of giving a number to the children of a family based on their order of birth delineating “rank”). Furthermore, as discussed earlier, I have

chosen to leave the specific names of items only found in China in pinyin—the Romanized form of Chinese words—in order to not distract from the piece. For further description of these items the reader should consult Google Images.

Classical Allusions:

In “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream,” there are allusions to three different Kun Operas: *Peony Pavilion*, *The Drunken Beauty*, and *Goddess of the Luo River*, all of which, although it is not explicit, reflect the thoughts of the main character, Madam Qian, throughout the events of the story, and so are useful to understanding its content. The following are brief summaries of these operas for the benefit of the reader:

Goddess of the Luo River (n.d)— a Kun Opera based on the Wei dynasty poem, written in 223 AD, by Cao Zhi depicting his encounter with the goddess of the Luo River and the brief romance between the two on his journey away from the capitol.⁹ This poem has often been considered a veiled reference to a similar encounter Cao Zhi had with the Empress of China, his older brother’s wife.¹⁰

The Drunken Beauty (17--) — a Beijing Opera depicting the events in a day of concubine Yang Yuhuan’s life during the Tang Dynasty. In this opera the Emperor arranges to meet with Yang Yuhuan, his favorite concubine, in the imperial gardens after he has finished his duties for the day. She prepares a banquet for him there, among the flowers, and awaits his arrival to no avail as she is later informed that he has gone instead to meet with another of his concubines. In her

⁹ John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002) 314-318.

¹⁰ Stuckey 105-112.

depression Yang Yuhuan finished the banquet alone, becoming drunk to forget her unhappiness before retiring to her chambers.¹¹

Peony Pavilion, Scene Ten (1598) – This scene of the Kun Opera, *Peony Pavilion* depicts Du Liniang, the daughter of a government official, as she visits a garden in her father's official building. She is overcome by the abundance of flowers and their beauty in the garden and is soon lulled to sleep, where she dreams of a romantic encounter with Liu Mengmei, a young examination candidate, before she is startled awake by the entrance of her mother.¹²

¹¹ Ruru Zhou, "The Drunken Concubine," *China Highlights*, 22 Jan. 2013.

¹² Stuckey 105-112.

Wandering through a Garden, Waking From a Dream

When Madam Qian arrived at the Dou mansion in the Taipei suburb of Tainmu, both sides of the entrance were already packed with lines of cars, most the small black sedans owned by government officials. As the taxi she was seated in pulled up to the entrance, she ordered the driver to stop. The Dou mansion's two iron doors were opened wide, and the door lanterns were brightly burning. Guards stood at either side of the entrance and there was a man dressed as an attendant busily taking care of guest's chauffeurs. As Madam Qian stepped out of the car, the attendant quickly welcomed her. He was wearing a deep blue serge tunic and trousers, his temples greyed. Madam Qian took out a calling card from her leather purse and handed it to him. The attendant took the calling card and quickly bowed to her. Speaking in a Subei accent, his entire face covered in a smile he said:

“Madam Qian, I am Adjutant Liu. The Madam surely doesn't remember me?”

“Adjutant Liu?” Madam Qian considered him for a moment, and slightly stunned said: “Yes, that time in Nanjing. I came to the Dou's Dabeixiang residence and met you. It's good to see you, Adjutant Liu.”

“Wishing the Madam good fortune.” Adjutant Liu deeply bowed again, and then hurriedly invited Madam Qian to enter. He then rushed to use a flashlight to illuminate the path ahead, guiding Madam Qian to walk on a cement driveway, going around a flower garden towards the main house.

“Madam, is this okay?” Adjutant Liu turned his head to smile at Madam Qian, leading the way.

“It’s fine, thank you” replied Madam Qian, “Are your commanding officer and his wife both well? I haven’t seen them in many years.”

“The Madam is well, though lately the commanding officer has been busy with public affairs,” Adjutant Liu answered.

The Dou mansion’s flower garden was extremely lush. Madam Qian examined it for a while. The full garden was indistinct, all trees and plants. Densely grown coconut trees lined the compound wall. The bright post-autumn moon had already risen over the large coconut trees. Madam Qian and Adjutant Liu wound around several clumps of palm trees. The Dou mansion, a two-storied house, emerged in front of their eyes. The entire building, from top to bottom, was brightly lit, so bright it seemed as if it was burning. A flight of wide, open stone steps stretched up the arced terrace at the front of the building. On the edge of the terrace’s stone railing were neatly placed ten pots of sweet-scented osmanthus in a row. As soon as Madam Qian stepped on to the terrace a waft of the osmanthus fragrance assaulted her senses. At the building’s front, the main doors were opened wide, servants scurrying back and forth inside. Adjutant Liu stopped at the entrance, and breathing, he gestured with his hands and respectfully said:

“Please come in.”

As Madam Qian walked through the door into the front hall, Adjutant Liu said to a female servant:

“Quickly go and inform the Madam: General Qian’s wife has arrived.”

The front hall was arranged with a set of exquisite red lacquered wood chairs, and on a table was placed a collection of cloisonné enamel vases. Inside a Guanyin vase was placed several slanted Japanese lilies. A goose egg-shaped full-length mirror was set on the room’s right

wall. Madam Qian walked in front of the mirror, and removed her deeply colored fall overcoat. A female servant quickly stepped forward to take it. Madam Qian glanced in the mirror, and quickly smoothed a lock of limp hair at her right temple. At 6 o'clock this afternoon she had gone to the Ximending district's Red Rose to have her hair done, and just now coming through the garden and being blown about by the wind, her hair was messy. Madam Qian took a step towards the mirror, looking at the green and black Hangzhou silk qipao on her body. She thought the color was slightly wrong. She had remembered that this kind of silk shined under the lantern light, like the boundless depths of green jade. Surely this front room didn't have enough light. In the mirror it looked blacker than she expected. Could it be the material was old? This Hangzhou silk was also brought from Nanjing, and all these years she had not been willing to wear it. She had finally taken it from the bottom of her trunk and had it tailored for this specific occasion. If she had known it would look like this, it would have been better to go the silk and satin village in Hongxiang to buy a new one. But she always thought Taiwan's dress materials were too crude, their luster garish, especially the silk. How could it reach the same kind of exquisite results, as soft and comfortable, as could be found on the mainland?

"Fifth sister is here at last." Madam Dou walked out accompanied by the sound of footsteps and smiled, taking Madam Qian's hand.

"Third sister," Madam Qian, also smiling, called out: "I'm late. I've caused you all to wait."

"Oh stop, you're exactly on time. We were just about to take our seats," Madam Dou said as she pulled Madam Qian towards the main hall.

In the corridor, Madam Qian examined Madam Dou several times out of the corner of her eye. Her heart couldn't help but beat harder as she noticed that sure enough, Osmanthus Fragrance hadn't aged a bit. Madam Qian clearly remembered, in the year they left Nanjing, she had hosted Osmanthus Fragrance's thirtieth birthday party in her mansion at the New Plum Village district. Nearly all the sisters from the stage had been present – including Osmanthus Fragrance's little sister, number thirteen, Chili Pepper, who had later been given to Chairman Ren, Ren Ziju, as a concubine, as well as Madam Qian's own blood-sister, number seventeen, Always Fortunate. These people had all come together, in the western fashion, to have a thirteen-inch double layered birthday cake made for Osmanthus Fragrance, and on the cake's top were inserted no less than thirty red wax candles. Now she was surely more than forty years old? Madam Qian looked at Madam Dou again: she was wearing a silvery-grey cloth qipao sprinkled with vermilion dots. On her feet were matched a pair of silver-grey glittering high-heels, and on her right ring finger she wore a diamond ring bigger than a lotus seed. Her right wrist was covered by a set of platinum bracelets inlaid with small diamonds and she had a coral crescent moon hairpin inserted in her hair. A pair of inch long purple crystal earrings could be seen hanging outside the bottom of her hair, lining her lush, white face, causing it to look even more graceful. When they were in Nanjing, Osmanthus Fragrance had never been so stylish. Madam Qian remembered that at that time, Osmanthus Fragrance was still a concubine, and Dou Ruisheng was no more than a vice-minister. Today, he was in a high position and Osmanthus Fragrance had been raised to the status of his wife. It was quite a job she endured those years, but in the end she had made it through.

“Ruisheng is in the south for a meeting. He heard you were coming tonight and told me specially to send his regards,” Madam Dou said turning her head to the side towards Madam Qian.

“Oh, that’s very kind of Brother Dou,” replied Madam Qian. As they approached the main hall a burst of speech and loud laughter emerged, and as Madam Dou stopped at the entrance she clasped Madam Qian’s hands again and said:

“Fifth sister, you must move to Taipei soon. I am always so concerned. Aren’t you lonely living alone in the south? No matter what, the party couldn’t go on tonight without you – thirteenth sister also came.”

“She’s also here?” Madam Qian asked.

“You know, once Ren Ziju died, she moved out of the Ren family home,” Madam Dou said, moving close to Madam Qian’s ears, “Ren Ziju had several properties and thirteenth sister is finally passing her time comfortably. Tonight she’s causing quite a commotion. It’s also her first time here since coming to Taiwan. She’s brought several friends from the Happy Moods and Pleasurable Things Theater, everything including gongs, drums, horns, and pipes. They are also looking forward to seeing you step onto the stage.”

“Stop, stop, who thought of this scheme?” Madam Qian, waving her hands and smiling, hastily dismissed Madam Dou’s comment.

“There’s no need to be polite, Fifth sister, if even you, Field of Blue Jade, say you can’t, who would dare sing?” Madam Dou said, and not waiting for Madam Qian to reply, pulled her towards the main hall.

The east and west of the main hall, like a bright and beautifully embroidered crowd, was already filled with colorfully dressed guests. The hall was extremely spacious, in the shape of a rectangle with a protruding section towards back forming a sort-of attached square, and was decorated in a combination of both eastern and western styles. In the left half of the room was a set of soft cushioned sofas and in the right half was a set of red sandalwood tables and chairs. On the floor in between the two sides was laying a two inch thick carpet, decorated with two dragons clutching a pearl. The sofas were placed two long and four wide, divided into two halves, their black velvet bases sprinkled with crimson crabapple leaves. Between them was a low rectangular table and on it was placed a light blue, thin porcelain vase, with a flourishing cluster of golden bud and red pulped dragon beard chrysanthemums placed inside. On the right half, the red sandalwood chairs were completely encircling an old fashioned table with a stone tabletop inlaid with veins. The table was already set full of every kind of sweet boxes and tea sets. The hall's protruding section was also arranged with six redwood chairs of the same style, separated into three and three, forming a semi-circle. In the middle gap stood an ebony framed screen inlaid with drifting clouds and a bat made out of mica. Madam Qian could see that cymbals and string instruments were placed on those chairs, and in front of the chairs were two wooden stands: on one stood a drum, and on the other was neatly placed a line of wind instruments. The hall's lamplight was brilliant, with floor lamps on both sides casting slanting rays of light, illuminating a gong to one side sparkling in the golden light.

Madam Dou guided Madam Qian to the hall's left side and then walked to a couch across from a woman around the age of fifty wearing a pearl-grey qipao and a piece of jade and said:

“Madam Lai, this is Madam Qian. Surely you two have met before?”

Madam Qian remembered that she was the wife of Lai Xiangyun. Before, when they were in Nanjing, they had met on several occasions at social outings. At that time, Lai Xiangyun was certainly a Commander. When he came to Taiwan, you would often see his name in the newspaper.

“This surely is Qian Penggong’s widow?” said Madam Lai. She had originally been speaking with a gentleman to her side, but now she shifted towards them and considered Madam Qian for a long time, before slowly standing up to speak. She shook Madam Qian’s hand and simultaneously straightened her hair and said:

“I should say! Very familiar!”

Then turning towards the dark-red faced, portly statured balding man to her side wearing a sapphire blue silk traditional robe, she said:

“Just now I was wondering with Colonel Yu what Mei Lanfang sang on the first stage of the Orange Osmanthus Theater the third time he came south to Shanghai. I can’t remember what show it was anymore. You see, my memory!”

Colonel Yu, having stood up earlier, happily saluted Madam Qian and said:

“Madam, it’s been a long time. That year in Nanjing the Determination Society went in mass to enjoy your elegant performance. I still remember your performance of ‘Wandering in a Garden, Waking from a Dream’ that day!

“Oh yes,” joined Madam Lai, “I’ve always heard of the famous reputation of Madam Qian. Tonight I finally have the good fortune to hear you.”

Madam Qian was quick to humbly thank Colonel Yu. She remembered when they were in Nanjing he had once come to her mansion, but she also seemed to remember that after he had violated some law he was removed from his position and forced to retire. After that, Madam Dou led her away again and introduced her to all the seated guests. She didn't recognize any of the wives – they were quite young—presumably becoming popular after coming to Taiwan.

“Let's go over there, thirteenth sister and some connoisseurs are there.”

As Madam Dou was speaking, she led Madam Qian to the hall's right side. As the two came over, a guest in a red qipao got up to welcome them in wobbling steps. She hooked her arm in Madam Qian's, and her whole body shook with laughter as she said:

“Fifth sister, just now third sister told me you were also coming and I happily said: ‘Wonderful! Tonight we can enjoy a true performance!’”

Madam Qian only then heard Madam Dou say that Heaven's Chili Pepper, Jiang Biyue, was also there, and she hesitated for a moment, not knowing Heaven's Chili Pepper these years as a married woman. It could be that now she had no restraint whatsoever. At the time when they were all singing opera at the Nanjing Confucius Temple's stage, Heaven's Chili Pepper was always the first to resort to sharpness, twisting the teachers so they would choose the arias she desired. Once she had appeared on stage, no matter the customs of singing opera, she faced those who praised her, her pair of eyes like fishhooks, extending off the stage. Although they have the same mother, their personalities are completely different. Her sister, Osmanthus Fragrance, was the epitome of someone who understands the ways of the world and having tolerance. But Heaven's Chili Pepper had used up Osmanthus Fragrance's forbearance. Even though Ren Zijiu had already settled on Chili Pepper's older sister's betrothal gift, Heaven's Chili Pepper skillfully

took him away. Fortunately, Osmanthus Fragrance had self-restraint, and after several years of waiting finally became Dou Ruisheng's concubine. It's no wonder Osmanthus Fragrance, sighing, always says: It was my own younger sister who chose to trample me underfoot! Madam Qian looked at Heaven's Chili Pepper, Jiang Biyue, again. She was wearing a fire red satin qipao, and on her two wrists, tinkling, were eight twisting flower golden silk bracelets. Her face looked extremely fashionable with eye shadow applied on her eyelids and ink on the outer corner of her eyes. At the same time, her hair was disheveled like a birds nest, with brushed on smart-looking crescent moon lines on her temples. Once Ren Ziju died, Heaven's Chili Pepper had restored signs of strength she had not had previously, recovering her frivolous expressions. Unexpectedly, not a trace of these years' turmoil could be found on her.

"You all wait and see. Madam Qian is a real female Mei Lanfang!" Jiang Biyue said as she introduced Madam Qian to several seated guests she had pulled her towards. Several of the male guests hurriedly stood up to greet Madam Qian.

"Biyue, don't talk nonsense, it will make these experts laugh,"

Madam Qian replied, in part being polite and in part gently rebuking her.

"Actually, Biyue isn't wrong," cut in Madam Dou. "The style of your Kun opera is directly descended from Mei Lanfan's technique."

"Third sister –"

Madam Qian vaguely called out, wanting to dispute. But when Kun opera was discussed even Qian Pengzhi used to say to her:

“Five, I’ve heard all the performers from north to south, and your “Kun Melodies” are extraordinary.”

He had said that when he had returned to Shanghai after hearing her performance of “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream” on the Nanjing stage, he had thought about it day and night. His heart was unable to put it aside, and so he had resolved to return and marry her. He had told her if he could have her by his side, singing “Kun Melodies” and bringing him joy, then for the second half of his life he would ask for nothing else. At that time she had just begun flourishing on the stage, her “Kun Melodies” gaining acclaim in the whole Confucius Temple, causing the stage master to consider Field of Blue Jade’s singing to be exceptional.

“We were just talking, Fifth sister. Come see. Director Xu’s wife is also an expert in Kun opera,” Jiang Biyue pulled Madam Qian in front of an extremely dressed up young woman wearing a black qipao, then smiling, said to Madam Dou: “Third sister! Later we should ask Mrs. Xu to sing ‘Wandering through a Garden’ and Madam Qian to sing ‘Waking from a Dream,’ these two Kun opera experts having a contest while giving us the opportunity to hear their beautiful performances.”

Mrs. Xu immediately stood up saying she wouldn’t dare. Madam Qian was also quick to modestly decline with a few words, rebuking Heaven’s Chili Pepper in her thoughts for being too rash. Among the guests here tonight, there was likely not one who didn’t understand opera and Madam Qian feared that Director Xu’s wife was simply being a good actress right now and later she really would perform for them, and so Madam Qian could not be negligent. It would not do to bore these people. It’s just that she had been in the south for so long now, and she hadn’t put her voice through its paces. She wasn’t sure how it would sound. Furthermore Tailor Fu had said: In Taipei it was out of fashion to wear long qipaos. Presently, even including the thick skinned,

wrinkled Madam Lai's, every qipao was hemmed to above the knee, exposing more than half the leg. When they had been in Nanjing, what lady's qipao wasn't long enough to be hanging just above their feet? She regretted not heeding her tailor's advice, and wearing this long qipao to go out, not knowing if it was still fashionable. Getting up on stage and striking a pose is the most important part of a performance. At that time in Nanjing when she had entertained guests by singing opera in the New Plum Village district, every time she stood up, before she opened her mouth, she already had the guest under her control.

“Colonel Cheng, I'm handing Madam Qian over to you. If you don't replace me as a good host, tomorrow I'll punish you by forcing you to pay for dinner.”

Madam Dou led Madam Qian in front of a thirty or so year old officer and then turning, spoke to Madam Qian in a low voice: “Fifth sister, you stay here and talk, Colonel Cheng is extremely knowledgeable in opera. I have to go take care of the banquet.”

“Madam Qian, I've been looking forward to meeting you.”

Colonel Cheng was facing Madam Qian, standing up straight, and then bowed to her, performing a military salute. He was wearing a tan military uniform, two shining plum blossoms fastened to his collar, marking him as a lieutenant colonel, and a pair of short leather boots, polished and smooth. Madam Qian saw that when he smiled he flashed a mouthful of clean white teeth. He had a long face, his chin shaved clean, with slender eyes that aligned with his eyebrows that raised towards his temples. The bridge of his nose was like a green onion, the tip of his nose sloped slightly downward and he had a head of thick black hair. He was appropriately groomed in all respects. His body was tall and he wore his uniform brilliantly. Despite all this, Madam Qian thought his greeting was rather gentle and kind, without the least bit of military roughness.

“Madam, please sit.”

Colonel Cheng pulled out his chair and straightened the chair cushion, inviting Madam Qian to sit. He then immediately walked to the old fashioned table and carried over a glass of jasmine tea as well as a box of sweets. Madam Qian was about to stretch out her hand to receive the pomegranate red china cup, when smiling, he said in a low voice:

“Be careful not to burn your hand, Madam.”

He then opened the painted black box of sweets traced with gold and stooped his body down, holding up the box in front of her. Smiling, he watched Madam Qian and waited for her to select. She grabbed a pine nut, but he hurriedly stopped her, saying: “Madam, this sweet will injure your throat. Why doesn’t the Madam try a candied date instead, which will moisten your throat?”

After speaking, Colonel Cheng picked up a toothpick and skewered a candied date, handing it to Madam Qian. She thanked him, taking the candied date, and placed it in her mouth, a burst of honey flavor emerging. Sure enough it was extremely sweet. Then, Colonel Cheng moved a chair and sat down to Madam Qian’s right.

“Has the Madam seen an opera lately?” he asked after sitting down. When he spoke his body always leaned over slightly, seemingly extremely focused on her. Madam Qian saw his white clean teeth under the light, shining like lustrous jade.

“I haven’t for quite a while,” she answered, lowering her head to delicately drink a mouthful of the Jasmine tea in her hand. “Living in the south, we rarely have good operas.”

“For the past few days Zhang Aiyun has been performing *Goddess of the Luo River* at the National Light Theater, Madam.”

“Really?” Madam Qian responded, continuously bowing her head to drink her tea, muttering to herself for a long time before saying, “I also saw her perform that opera at the Heaven Moon stage in Shanghai – that was a long time ago.”

“Her workmanship is still there, she really is worthy of being called an ‘Opera Professional.’ She was really able to establish Concubine Mi and Caozhi’s affection for each other. The performance was absolutely exquisite.”

Madam Qian lifted her head, meeting Colonel Cheng’s gaze, and immediately turned her head away. His tall, slender eyes seemed to cover everything.

“Who performed this exquisitely?” Heaven’s Chili Pepper, Jiang Biyue, interjected as she came over, smiling. Colonel Cheng hurriedly stood up, asking her to sit. Jiang Biyue grabbed a Chaoyang melon seed, lifting her foot to crack it and said: “Colonel Cheng, everyone says you’re a connoisseur of opera and Madam Qian is certainly opera’s ‘Great Founder.’ I see you came here as soon as possible to show off your skill.”

“I was just discussing Zhang Aiyun’s *Goddess of the Luo River* with Madam Qian, consulting her,” he replied to Jiang Biyue, his eyes glancing towards Madam Qian.

“Oh, you were actually discussing Zhang Aiyun?” Jiang Biyue laughed all of a sudden, “She only teaches opera in Taiwan, and now she’s unexpectedly singing *Goddess of the Luo River*, playing the part of Concubine Mi! Last Saturday I finally went to the National Light Theater, and bought back row seats. I couldn’t see her mouth moving, and couldn’t hear her

voice. Halfway through the opera as she was still singing, her throat became hoarse and then disappeared – Aiyo, Third Sister has come to invite us to the banquet.”

A serving girl pulled open the mahogany door engraved with a Buddhist symbol that lead from the living room to the dining room which Madam Dou had already walked out of. The entire dining hall was decorated in silver and white, shining like a cave of snow. On top of two banquet tables were placed scarlet muslin table cloths, set entirely with silver chopsticks and soup bowls. After the guests entered, it was all politeness: “No please” and “You first,” since no one was willing to take the lead sitting down.

“Well I suppose I can take the lead, and set the precedent. We’ll never eat with all this excessive politeness, and that will ruin our host’s plans!”

Madam Lai walked to the head seat of the first table and sat down, calling out to Colonel Yu:

“Colonel Yu, come sit next to me. We haven’t finished discussing Mei Lanfang’s show.”

Colonel Yu clapped his hands together and laughing, said: “As you command.” The guests all boisterously laughed and followed suite, taking their seats. At the second table, everyone declined to sit at the head of the table, and Madam Lai called to Madam Qian from between the tables:

“Madam Qian, follow my lead.”

Madam Dou came over and putting her arm around Madam Qian walked to the head of the second table, speaking in a low voice next to her ear:

“Fifth sister, please sit. If you don’t take the lead, the other guests won’t feel comfortable sitting down.”

Madam Qian looked around; the second table’s guests were all standing looking at her with smiles on their faces. She hurried to vaguely protest with a few sentences before sitting down, her heart jumping and her face a little flushed. It wasn’t that she had never dealt with this kind of situation, but she had gone a long time without these social niceties and had actually grown unaccustomed to them. Before, when Qian Pengzhi was alive, most of the time she was expected to take the lead, sitting at the head seat. The wife of Qian Pengzhi naturally held the seat of honor, and she had never needed to be pushed. Even if several could now surpass the authority Madam Qian once possessed, those women from Nanjing who had now been raised to the status of wives, couldn’t be considered exceptional. Really, Madam Qian couldn’t be compared to the officer’s concubines, as Qian Pengzhi, a widower, had openly welcomed her as his wife. It was pitiable that at that time, Osmanthus Fragrance did not once treat guests to dinner, even her birthday party was thrown for her by Madam Qian. Only after she arrived in Taiwan, did Osmanthus Fragrance dare to come forward and arrange gatherings, but by that time she was already twenty and Madam Qian, a young opera singer, had already become the wife of a general in the span of a night. How much discussion does the marriage of a singer from a poor family generate, let alone one becoming a member of a high official’s house? Even her blood-sister number seventeen, Always Fortunate, had spoken harsh words to her: Sister, you should cut off your braid, tomorrow you and General Qian will be tied together. If you don’t, people will think you are his granddaughter! When Qian Pengzhi had married her, he was already around sixty, but no matter what people said, she was still his lawful wife. She understood her status as a lawful wife, as opposed to a concubine, and she treasured it. In the ten or so years she had spent

with Qian Pengzhi, how many times had she dealt with the situation properly, from before the banquet to after the wine, no matter how big the situation, without being held in a cold sweat? When she had walked in front of people it was like a magnificent whirling dance. Who had dared to comment that she was Field of Blue Jade from the Qin Huai River Stage?

“Pardon me, Five.”

He had often caressed her cheek and spoken like this. Now, whenever she heard this, her heart would ache, though most of the time she was at a loss as to why. Could it be that she still blamed him? Marrying him had been something she was delighted to do. When Qian Pengzhi had married her he had spoken to her clearly: it was in order to hear her “Wandering through a Garden, Waking from a Dream,” and so she would accompany him during his later years. But what of her sister, Always Fortunate’s words? He could have been her grandfather, but what more could she have hoped for? The end had confirmed the blind stage Master’s blunt words: Five, your kind of person can only marry an older man, and be cherished half as a daughter. How reliable can young men be? But the blind Master had unexpectedly clasped Madam Qian’s hand and blinking her blind eyes said: It is certain you will enjoy high position and great wealth, Field of Blue Jade, it’s only a pity you have a bone out of place from your previous life’s sin. If it wasn’t her sin, what could it be? Except for plucking the moon from the sky, he had given her all the world’s treasures, fearful of losing her, to beg for her favor. She had understood his despair. He had feared she would be discouraged and timid in front of the high officials because of her humble background, and so he had always encouraged her in every possible way. As far as extravagance and shows of style, he was afraid the New Plumb Village’s Madam Qian’s style of entertaining guests wouldn’t topple all of Nanjing, and so the Qian Mansion’s silver coins were spent extravagantly on banquets. For Osmanthus Fragrance’s birthday party, ten stages had been

arranged in the New Plumb Village's mansion with the best flautist from both sides of the Yangzi River, the Rainbow Society's Wu Shanghao, playing. They had spent ten silver yuan on the head chef, bringing him in especially from the Peach Leaf Ferry's Green Leaf Restaurant.

"Madam Dou, where does your chef come from? This is the first time I've eaten such exquisite shark fin since I arrived in Taiwan," said Madam Lai.

"Huang Qin was originally Minister Huang's family chef in Shanghai, and after he came to Taiwan he came to us," replied Madam Dou.

"No wonder," joined in Colonel Yu, "Huang Qingong is a famous gourmet!"

"When can we borrow him to cook a fin, so we can entertain guests in such style?" Madam Lai said.

"That shouldn't be too difficult! I would only be too glad to go eat a free meal!" replied Madam Dou, causing all the guests to laugh.

"Madam Qian, have a bowl of fin." Colonel Cheng filled a bowl with soy sauce braised shark fin, adding a spoonful of vinegar, and placed it in front of Madam Qian, saying in a low voice:

"This dish is our residence's famous dish."

Madam Qian still hadn't tasted the shark fin when Madam Dou walked over from the neighboring table offering the first round of wine, asking Colonel Yu to take over filling for her, before walking over to Madam Qian's side, squeezing her shoulder and smiling:

"Fifth Sister, we haven't toasted together in a long time."

She tapped her glass against Madam Qian's and finished her drink in one swallow as Madam Qian also carefully finished her drink. When she left the table she spoke to Colonel Cheng again:

“Colonel Cheng, do a good job replacing me in urging people to drink! Your senior officer isn't here so you must replace him as the host of this table.”

Colonel Cheng stood up, and grasping a silver wine flask bent over to pour wine into Madam Qian's cup, before she hurriedly stopped him saying:

“Colonel Cheng, pour for the others. My tolerance for alcohol is limited.”

He stood motionlessly looking at her as he smiled, saying:

“Madam, Shaoxing wine is unlike other wine, it is the easiest to dispel from your body. I know the Madam will be using your voice later, and this wine will warm you up just enough. Drinking a little won't hurt your throat.”

“Madam Qian has a tolerance as big as the sea, don't excuse her!”

Jiang Biyue, who had been sitting across from Madam Qian, walked over and filled a cup for herself holding it in front of Madam Qian, saying:

“Fifth Sister, it has also been a long time since I drank a glass of wine with you.”

Madam Qian pushed away her hand, lightly sighing as she said:

“Biyue, drinking like this will get me drunk.”

“If you really won't give me the honor, I will drink both of our cups. If I'm drunk later, at worst they will have to carry me home.”

She raised her head and finished a cup. Colonel Cheng quickly offered her another cup which she also took and drank in one go, taking her silver wine glass and setting it upside down in front of Madam Qian. The guests all clapped, shouting:

“Biyue is always filled with spirit!”

Madam Qian could only raise her glass, slowly finishing the Shaoxing wine. Contrary to their words, the wine filled her with burning heat. All of a sudden her throat was a hot current, her whole body wandering away. But Taiwan’s Shaoxing wine certainly fell short of the mainland’s richness. Drinking it had hurt her throat a bit after all. Although Shaoxing wine is easily dispelled, when drunk quickly, its after effects are fierce. She hadn’t expected wine that was really made in Shaoxing to hurt her. That night it certainly had affected their speech! Didn’t everyone say, a few glasses of Shaoxing wine can make the voice hoarse? Days like Osmanthus Fragrance’s wedding day were rare, often the sisters didn’t know when they would be able to gather together. If the host is not content, how can the guests enjoy themselves? Even Always Fortunate, Seventeen, had pushed next to Madam Qian, crying: Sister, we should also toast and be close to each other! She had been wearing a gold and crimson satin qipao, colorful like a parrot, her eyes like a falcon’s, cleverly using the water light to catch fish. Sister won’t do me the honor, she said, sister surely won’t do me the honor, she had said. Flaunting her strength and gathering her advantage, she had hurried to make her sarcastic remarks. It’s no wonder Osmanthus Fragrance had sighed: It was my own younger sister who chose to trample me underfoot! Always Fortunate – Madam Qian had considered her young and unable to fully comprehend things, but Zheng Yiqing shouldn’t have toyed with her. He had also offered Madam Qian a filled glass of wine, showing a mouthful of snow white teeth as he said: Madam, I have also come to offer you a glass. His cheeks had been red, eyes burning like two dark fires,

his spurred riding boots making a sound as they came together. He had bent down and softly said:
Madam -- --

“This time you should toast with me, Madam” Colonel Cheng said as he stood up, raising his wine glass.

“I really can’t, Colonel Cheng,” Madam Qian muttered, slightly bowing her head.

“Then I will drink three glasses of wine first to show you my respect, if it pleases you.”

He drank three glasses in a row, a wine glow emerging on his entire face. His forehead gleamed, the tip of his nose covered in beads of sweat. Madam Qian held up her wine glass and slightly wet her lips. He then picked up a chicken wing for Madam Qian, holding a chicken head for himself as he brought over more wine.

“Aiyō, what wine are you toasting with?”

Jiang Biyue called out in a shrill voice, standing up from across the table, and stretching her neck to smell the glass of wine in Colonel Yu’s hand. He was carrying an unusual gold chicken shaped glass to toast with Jiang Biyue.

“Ms. Jiang, this is ‘All Night Wine!’” Colonel Yu said, laughing. His dark red face was already the color of a pig’s liver.

“Yayacui! Who would stay the night with you!” she responded as if in an opera, waving her hand.

“Ms. Jiang, all kinds of flower pavilions have yet to be arranged. But first, you must ‘be drunk,’” laughed Madam Lai, standing between the two tables. The guest all roared with laughter. Madam Dou stood up and said to the guests:

“We should also go on stage. Why doesn’t everyone go to the living room and relax.”

The guests all stood up and followed Madam Lai into the living room and sat down. Several of the male guests walked to the redwood chairs in front of the screen and sat down, adjusting their bow strings. There were six men: one that played the huqin, one the erhu, one the yueqin, and one that was in charge of the side drum and clappers. The other two were standing: one holding a pair of cymbals and the other a large gong suspended from his hands.

“Madam, Mr. Yang is excellent with the huqin, and there isn’t another person in Taiwan as masterful with the bamboo flute. Later you will hear his playing and see what I mean.”

Colonel Cheng pointed at Mr. Yang holding the huqin as he spoke next to Madam Qian’s ear. Madam Qian was slightly leaned back in a single-person lounge chair while Colonel Cheng sat on a leather padded round stool at her side. He steeped another cup of jasmine tea for her and she sipped it while following his pointed hand to look at Mr. Yang. Mr. Yang was about fifty and was wearing a long silk robe that was colored with bronze emerging from its dark embroidery. His features were extremely thin and on his hands were slender fingers, spotlessly white, like ten pieces of white jade. He pulled his huqin out of a cloth bag and placed a green cloth on top of his legs, setting the huqin on top along with his stringed bow, carefully tuning it. He slightly bent his head, raised a hand, and suddenly the sound of the huqin began, like the movement of a thrown string. He played “Deep Night” extremely melodiously and as soon as the song had finished Colonel Cheng was the first to jump up and call out: “Wonderfully played!” as the guests all applauded. Then the gongs and drums rang out together, playing *The General’s Order’s* trademark song and Madam Dou invited the guests one by one to go on stage to sing. Just as all the guests had declined, Colonel Yu, with his arm around Jiang Biyue walked up next to the huqin and adopting the accent used in comedic opera, he called out:

“Mistress Qi, here are the numerous kinds of flower pavilions.”

Jiang Biyue covered her mouth with her hands as she shook with laughter, the golden twisting flower bracelets clanking together on her wrists. The guests all cheered as the huqin began to play *The Drunken Beauty's* Siping melody. Without turning her body, Jiang Biyue began to sing, her face towards the audience. When she had sung to the orchestral interlude, Colonel Yu ran out holding a tray of vermillion tea with the golden chicken shaped glass on top. He held his robe off the ground as he half kneeled in front of her, and imitating a strong man called out:

“Mistress Qi, your servant proposes a toast.”

Jiang Biyue, pretending to be drunk, swayed to both sides before falling to the ground and striking all kinds of stage poses, one of which imitated a fish lying on the ground as she bent her lower half, using her mouth to pick up the glass of wine. She then tossed the glass to the ground with a metal clank, singing:

Life is like a spring dream,

And so I will drink to my heart's content.

Amid the group of laughing guests, Madam Dou laughed until it was painful, clearing her throat to call to Madam Lai:

“I think our Jiang Biyue is actually drunk tonight!”

Madam Lai, while using a handkerchief to wipe her tears of laughter, called back:

“Her drunken fall isn't very serious, as long as no one copies Yang Yuhuan and becomes jealous, she should be fine.”

The guests were all loudly demanding Jiang Biyue to continue singing as she walked down from the stage, swaying all the while, and brought Mrs. Xu onto the stage, announcing to the guests:

“This performer from the Happy Moods and Pleasurable Things Theater will be singing ‘Wandering through a Garden’ for us, and later we will invite a different Kun Opera performer from the tradition of the Mei Lanfang school—Madam Qian, to sing ‘Waking from a Dream!’”

Madam Qian quickly raised her head and placed the tea cup in her hands on the low table to her right. She saw that Mrs. Xu was already standing in front of the screen; her body partially turned away, a hand resting on the screen’s ebony frame. She was wearing an all-black velvet qipao with her hair loosely pulled into a sophisticated bun. Her face was turned slightly out showing her pearl white earlobe on which was hung a green-blue earring. In the living room, several lamps were shining like innumerable paths, delicately projecting Mrs. Xu’s graceful silhouette onto the Mica screen.

“Fifth Sister, listen carefully and see if any parts of Mrs. Xu’s performance of ‘Wandering through a Garden’ are better than yours.”

Jiang Biyue walked over and sat down at Colonel Cheng’s side, speaking quietly as she turned her head and clasped Madam Qian’s shoulder.

“Madam Qian, at long last I have the opportunity to see your performance of Kun Opera.”

Colonel Cheng turned his head to look at Madam Qian, smiling as he spoke. Madam Qian looked at the golden twisting flower bracelets on Jiang Biyue’s wrists, scattering light, and suddenly felt slightly dazed. A tipsy feeling seemed to bubble into her head, and the poured glasses of Shaoxing wine seemed to gradually increase in strength. She thought her eyes were

giving off heat and her vision became a little blurred. Jiang Biyue's red qipao was like a ball of fire. All of a sudden the gleaming heat reached Colonel Cheng and the small metal plum blossoms on his collar were like sparks of flame, leaping about. Jiang Biyue's eyes were like pools of dark mercury sliding around her crimson face. Colonel Cheng's eyes narrowed into a seam, warding off the threatening beams of light, the two faces facing her, flashing their even white teeth, smiling at her, their two red, gleaming faces gradually drawing close, pooling together, flashing their white teeth, smiling at her. The horizontal and vertical bamboo flutes both cried out, their sounds like running water, the submerged sounds of the vertical bamboo flute emerging again, beginning in the middle of "Wandering Through a Garden's" "Black Silk Gown."

Once beautiful flowers bloomed everywhere

Holding up the dilapidated wells and crumbling walls,

What's to be done on a day when everything is lovely

But happy moods and pleasurable things in someone's courtyard –

This Kun melody sung by Du Liniang is considered to be one of the epitomes of Kun Opera. Even Wu Shenghao had said: Madam Qian, even Mei Lanfang could not surpass your performance of "Black Silk Gown." But unfortunately Wu Shenghao's bamboo flute had played too high (Master Wu, tonight have them play more, my voice is unreliable, change the flute's key a little lower). Wu Shenghao had said experienced vocalists must first abstain from alcohol; but Seventeen, Always Fortunate, had carried that glass of Shaoxing wine over and said: Sister, we should also toast. She had been wearing a gold and crimson qipao and had said: Sister, you won't do me the honor. Don't talk like that, sister, it isn't that I don't want to give you the honor.

Actually it's because he is the sin of my life. Hadn't the blind Master said: high position and great wealth – Field of Blue Jade, it's a pity you have a bone out of place. Sin. Isn't he just the sin of sister's life? Do you understand? Little sister, sin. But then he had also come over carrying a glass of wine and said: Madam. He had worn a slanted leather belt and a bright metal collar badge, his waist straight. His tall, spurred riding boots, polished smooth, had made a noise as they snapped together. Peach blossoms floated on his eyelids from the drink and he had said: Madam. Who doesn't know the New Plum Village of Nanjing's Madam Qian? Qian Penggong, General Qian's wife. Qian Pengzhi's wife. Qian Pengzhi's attending Staff Officer. General Qian's wife, General Qian's Staff Officer. Pardon me, Five. Qian Pengzhi had said: it's a pity you're still so young. But how can young people be conscientious? The blind Master had said, your kind of person, only an older man can understand tenderness. High position and great wealth – it's only a pity you have a bone out of place. Do you understand? Little sister, he is my life's sin. General Qian's wife. General Qian's attending Staff Officer. General's wife. Attending Staff Officer. Sin, I said. Sin, I said. (Master Wu, play the bamboo flute a little lower, my voice isn't okay. Oh, "A Hillside Goat").

In my confused heart the stirrings of love are difficult to dispel

O how suddenly the heart becomes discontent.

I was born an elegant child and so

Must choose a family of equal fame, even immortal, to marry into.

For what opportune marriage is this springtime love thrown away,

Who will witness my sleeping passion – –

Those circles of red fire raged again, burning those two raised eyebrows, giving off the gleam of black moist sweat. Those two crimson faces gradually drew close, flashing their white teeth and laughing. On the bamboo flute those jade-like fingers leapt up and down. The graceful silhouette on the lilac mica screen flickered along with the lamp light. The sound of the flute became deeper and deeper, colder and colder, as if it were willed by Du Liniang's feelings of resentment. Soon Du Liniang fell asleep and Liu Mengmei must appear on the stage. But Wu Shenghao had said, "Waking from a Dream's" lover's rendezvous is, at the most, thinly veiled. (Master Wu, play a little lower, I drank too much wine tonight). And then he had unexpectedly come over holding a glass of wine and said: Madam. His smooth, polished riding boots had made a sound as they snapped together, his copper spurs hurting the eyes. His drunken eyelids had been like floating peach blossoms, yet still he had said: Madam. I have come to help you get on the horse, Madam, he said. His riding pants were stretched around his slender legs as they clamped around the horse's back like pincers. His horse was white, and he was white, the tree trunks were white, and his white horse gleamed under the rays of the fierce sun. They had said: both sides of the road to Sun Yat-sen's Mausoleum are filled with white birch trees. In the birch grove his white horse began to run, like a white rabbit clumsily fleeing in a wheat field. The sun reflected on the horse's back, giving off wisps of white smoke. A white horse. A black horse – both horses were dripping sweat. His body was covered in horse sweat. His eyebrows became greenish blue, his eyes like black circles of burning fire, the beads of sweat continuously dripping from his forehead to his bright red cheeks. The sun, I said. The sun was shining so brightly a person couldn't open their eyes. Those tree trunks, fair white and smooth, layer after layer of bark removed exposing the delicate flesh inside. They had said: that road is filled with white birch trees. The sun, I said, the sun is shooting directly into people's eyes. And as a result,

he had softly said: Madam. General Qian's wife. General Qian's attending Staff Officer. General Qian's – Five, Qian Pengzhi called out, his voice already suppressing sobs. Five, he yelled, mutedly, take good care of yourself. His hair was disheveled like a thicket of dried white sogon grass, his eyes like two black holes. He extended his thin dark hands from under the white bed sheet and said, take good care of yourself, Five. He opened that jewel box, inlaid with gold, trembling. This is emerald, he took out the first drawer. This is cat's eye. This is a jade leaf. Take good care of yourself, Five. His bruised mouth trembled, it's a pity you're still so young. High position and great wealth – It's only a pity you have a bone out of place. Sin, sister, he is my life's forbidden love. Listen to me, sister, sin. High position and great wealth – but I only lived like that once. Do you understand? Sister, listen to what I'm saying, sister. Sister won't do me the honor, Always Fortunate had said as she came over carrying a glass of wine, her eyes shining like leftover water. In the end, sister won't do me the honor. She had been wearing a gold and crimson qipao, like a circle of fire and had sat by his side (Master Wu, I drank too much Shaoxing wine).

Lingering, in what words can I show this heart's desires

Suffering, apart from begging heaven, what is left of my wretched life?

In that moment, her wretched life – – in that moment, she had sat at his side, her body gold and crimson, just in that moment, those two crimson faces gradually coming together, in that moment, I saw their eyes: her eyes, his eyes. It's over, I had known, in that moment, apart from begging heaven – – (Master Wu, my voice). It's over, my throat, feel my throat, is it trembling? It's over, is it trembling? Heaven – – (Master Wu, I can't sing.) Heaven – – it's over, high position and great wealth – – but I only lived once – – sin, sin, sin – – heaven – (Master Wu, my voice.) – – In that moment: in that moment, it's gone – – heaven – – heaven – – heaven – –

“Fifth Sister, it’s time for your performance of ‘Waking from a Dream,’” Jiang Biyue stood up and said to Madam Qian, laughing, as she walked in front of her, extending her arm covered in those twisting flower golden bracelets.

“Madam—” Staff Officer Cheng stood up and lightly called, standing in front of Madam Qian, slightly bent at the waist.

“Fifth Sister, please go onto the stage,” Madam Dou walked over and said extending her hand towards Madam Qian.

The gongs, drums, and wind instruments all cried out, playing the signature theme of “Ten Thousand Joyous Years.” The guests all suddenly left their seats and Madam Qian saw the whole living room was clapping, their hands like crashing waves, encircling Mrs. Xu in the middle of the living room. The reed-pipe and vertical bamboo flute played with even more insistence, the gong lifting up, knocking the golden light around in flashing disorder.

“I can’t sing,” muttered Madam Qian, staring at Jiang Biyue and slightly shaking her head.

“That won’t do,” Jiang Biyue grabbed Madam Qian’s hands, “Fifth Sister, tonight, no matter what, such a well-known performer can’t escape performing.”

“My voice is hoarse,” Madam Qian said in a rasping voice, suddenly summoning her strength to break free from Jiang Biyue’s hands. She felt like all her body’s blood had suddenly rushed to her head. Her cheeks were boiling hot, and her throat felt like it had been suddenly cut by a razor blade, wave after wave of stabbing pain rising inside of her. She heard Madam Dou interject:

“Fifth Sister doesn’t plan on singing— Colonel Yu, I think tonight your painted face will have to be the closing act.”

“Yes, yes,” Madam Lai immediately interjected: “I haven’t heard Colonel Yu’s ‘Eight Large Hammers’ in a long time.”

As she spoke she pushed him next to the gongs and drums. As soon as he was on stage, he clasped his hands in front of his chest, and said to the guests below: “I guess I’ll make a fool of myself.” The guests all roared with laughter as he started singing a section of “Dots of Crimson Lips” in the towering metal technique; at the same time singing and lifting up his robe to assume a mounting horse posture, encircling the living room’s middle in stomping horse steps. His thick, fat crimson face swelled purplish red, his eyes opened wide, and his eyebrows raised up as the huqin cried out several times, strings all pressed down. Madam Lai, bent over laughing, ran up and slapped Colonel Yu on the back. Jiang Biyue immediately went up to join their procession, incessantly calling out in a shrill voice: “Excellent performance! Excellent performance!” Several other female guests went up to cheer with them, walking around him in a circle, resulting in the living room’s laughter rising suddenly, every burst louder than the last. As Colonel Yu finished singing, several maids dressed in white tops and black pants had already brought in bowl after bowl of red date and longan fruit soup for the guests to moisten their throats with.

As Madam Dou guided the guests outside to the terrace, the outside air had already been filled with wind and dew, so the guests all put on their overcoats; Madam Dou wore a white silk shawl. She walked to the bottom of the steps. Madam Qian stood next to the terrace’s stone railing looking up at the sky. She saw that the autumn moon had risen to exactly the middle of the sky, the trees and path steps in the flower garden shining, covered by a layer of frost. The

fragrance of the ten or so pots of osmanthus flowers on the terrace were even stronger than before, like a cloud of fog suddenly covering her.

“General Lai’s wife’s car has arrived!”

Adjutant Liu announced each family’s car in a loud voice, standing below the terrace. The first vehicle drove up, Madam Lai’s black Lincoln, and a uniformed chauffeur hurriedly jumped out of the car, opened the car door, and waited, bowing respectfully. Madam Lai walked down the flight of stairs and said goodbye to Madam Dou, bringing Colonel Yu into the car. After they were seated inside, she stretched out her head and smiling, said to Madam Dou:

“Madam Dou, the night’s performances at your home couldn’t have been surpassed in the years of Mei Lanfang and Jin Shaoshan.”

“It certainly was,” Madam Dou responded, “Colonel Yu’s painted face really did surpass Jin Bawang.”

The guests standing on the terrace all laughed, waving farewell to Madam Lai. The second car pulled up, Madam Dou’s own small limousine, there to send off several of the guests. Next Colonel Cheng drove up in a military Jeep, and Jiang Biyue immediately walked down holding up her qipao to step into the car. He hurried over to help her into the seat next to the driver’s, and she turned her body half around and said:

“This Jeep doesn’t even have doors! I’m afraid that later I won’t be able to hold on and will be thrown onto the road!”

“Be careful turning it on, Colonel.” Madam Dou said, calling him over and whispering a few words into his ear. Colonel Cheng continuously nodded his head and then responded:

“Don’t worry, Madam.”

He then faced Madam Qian and stood at attention before deeply bowing, raising his head to smile:

“Madam Qian, I will take my leave first.”

Once he had finished speaking he swiftly leaped into the car, started the engine, and began to move away.

“Goodbye Third Sister! Goodbye Fifth Sister!”

Jiang Biyue extended her hand from the car door and incessantly waved. Madam Qian saw the strand of twisting flower bracelets on her arm, like gold circles in the sky.

“Where is Madam Qian’s car?” Madam Dou said to Adjutant Liu once the guest had quickly departed, standing under the terrace.

“Madam, General Qian’s wife took a taxi here.” Adjutant Liu answered, standing at attention.

“Third Sister –” Madam Qian called out from the terrace. She had wanted to tell Madam Dou a long time ago to call a taxi to come, but just now with so many guests, she had felt a bit stifled.

“In that case, once my car has returned, have it brought out to take Madam Qian,” Madam Dou immediately replied.

“Certainly, Madam.” Adjutant Liu withdrew, having received his orders.

Madam Dou turned her body and walked up to the terrace. Madam Qian looked at the white shawl on her body, like a group of clouds escorting her in the moonlight. A gust of wind swept past, rustling the surrounding coconut trees. The shawl on Madam Dou's body was blown slowly up, and Madam Qian quickly used her hand to pull up her coat collar as she shivered. Her cheeks, burning hot before, were now pressed by the cool breeze, her hair spread in the wind.

“Let's go in, Fifth Sister.” Madam Dou extended her hand, putting her arm around Madam Qian's shoulders and walking towards the house, “I'll call for a pot of steeped tea to be brought. We two can have a chance to catch up -- -- you haven't come in so long. Have you found Taipei has changed much?”

Madam Qian muttered for a while and then turning her head to the side, responded:

“It has changed a lot.”

When they had walked into the house's entrance, she lightly added:

“It has changed so much, soon I won't recognize it -- -- So many new high buildings and large mansions have been built.”

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