The Story of Yingying

“The Story of Yingying” is a prose work (purportedly a “true story” rather than “fiction” as such) written at the turn of the ninth century and collected into the late-ninth-century anthology Yi wen ji 异闻集 (A Collection of Remarkable Tales). This story is typical of the popular Tang genre of literature known as chuanqi 傳奇, or “Marvelous Tales,” and represents an early example of what we might call a genre of “romance” stories. “The Story of Yingying” is the original version of what probably is the best-known drama in all of Chinese literature, the fourteenth-century play Xixiang ji 西廂記 (Romance of the Western Chamber), which we are also reading this week.

This genre of romance followed a number of standard conventions. The romance itself invariably flouts certain social norms, and—equally invariably—involves a talented young man of high-born rank (though he has not yet proven his own individual worth through examination success) and a beautiful woman of more dubious social standing. Thus the stories become meditations on the conflict between public duty (especially devotion to family) and private desire. And of course the authors who write down these tales (“heard from so-and-so”) seek to extract a moral message from them.

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During the Zhenyuan period (785-804), there lived a young man named Zhang. He was agreeable and refined, and good looking, but firm and self-contained, and capable of no improper act. When his companions included him in one of their parties, the others could all be brawling as though they would never get enough, but Zhang would just watch tolerantly without ever taking part. In this way he had gotten to be twenty-three years old without ever having had relations with a woman. When asked by his friends, he explained, “Master Dengtu1 was no lover, but a lecher. I am the true lover—I just never happened to meet the right girl. How do I know that? It’s because things of outstanding beauty never fail to make a lasting impression on me. That shows that I am not without feelings.” His friends took note of what he said.

Not long afterward Zhang was traveling in Pu, northeast of the capital, where he lodged some ten leagues east of the city in a monastery called the Temple of Universal Salvation. It happened that a widowed lady named Cui had stopped there on her way back to Chang’an. She had been born into the Zheng family; Zhang’s mother had also been a Zheng, and when they worked out their common ancestry, this Madame Cui turned out to be a rather distant cousin once removed on his mother’s side.

In that same year the prefect of Pu, Hun Zhen, died, and the eunuch Ding Wenya proved unpopular with the troops, who took advantage of the mourning period to mutiny. They plundered the citizens of Pu, and Madame Cui, in a strange place with all her wealth and servants, was terrified, having no one to turn to. Before the mutiny Zhang had made friends with

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1 An archetypal lecher much mocked in earlier Chinese literature.
some of the officers in Pu, and now he requested a detachment of soldiers to protect the Cui family. As a result all escaped harm. In about ten days the imperial commissioner of inquiry, Du Que, came with full power from the throne and restored order among the troops.

Out of gratitude to Zhang for the favor he had done them, Madame Cui invited him to a banquet in the central hall. She addressed him: “Your widowed aunt with her helpless children would never have been able to escape alive from these rioting soldiers. It is no ordinary favor you have done us; it is rather as though you had given my son and daughter their lives, and I want to introduce them to you as their elder brother so that they can express their thanks.” She summoned her son Huanlang, a very attractive child of ten or so. Then she called her daughter: “Come out and pay your respects to your elder brother, who saved your life.” There was a delay; then word was brought that she was indisposed and asked to be excused. Her mother exclaimed in anger, “Your brother Zhang saved your life. You would have been abducted if it were not for him—how can you give yourself airs?”

After a while she appeared, wearing an everyday dress and no makeup on her smooth face, except for a remaining spot of rouge. Her hair coils straggled down to touch her eyebrows. Her beauty was extraordinary, so radiant it took the breath away. Startled, Zhang made her a deep bow as she sat down beside her mother. Because she had been forced to come out against her will, she looked angrily straight ahead, as though unable to endure the company. Zhang asked her age. Madame Cui replied, “From the seventh month of the fifth year of the reigning emperor to the present twenty-first year, it is just seventeen years.”

Zhang tried to make conservation with her, but she would not respond, and he had to leave after the meal was over. From this time on Zhang was infatuated but had no way to make his feelings known to her. She had a maid named Crimson with whom Zhang had managed to exchange greetings several times, and finally he took the occasion to tell her how he felt. Not surprisingly, the maid was alarmed and fled in embarrassment. Zhang was sorry he had said anything, and when she returned the next day he made shame-faced apologies without repeating his request. The maid said, “Sir, what you said is something I would not dare repeat to my mistress or let anyone else know about. But you know very well who Miss Cui’s relatives are; why don’t you ask for her hand in marriage, as you are entitled to do because of the favor you did them?”

“From my earliest years I have never been one to make any improper connections,” Zhang said. “Whenever I have found myself in the company of young women, I would not even look at them, and it never occurred to me that I would be trapped in any such way. But the other day at the dinner I was hardly able to control myself, and in the days since I walk without knowing where I am going and eat without hunger—I am afraid I cannot last another day. If I were to go through a regular matchmaker, taking three months or more for the exchange of betrothal presents and names and birthdates—to you might as well look for me among the dried fish in the shop. Can’t you tell me what to do?”

“Miss Cui is so very strict that not even her elders could suggest anything improper to her,” the maid replied. “It would be hard for someone in my position to say such a thing. But I have noticed she writes a lot. She is always reciting poetry to herself and is moved by it for a

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2 To determine an astrologically suitable date for a wedding.

3 An allusion to a parable of help that comes too late, from the early philosophical work Zhuangzi.
long time after. You might see if you can seduce her with a love poem. That is the only way I can think of.”

Zhang was delighted and on the spot composed two stanzas of spring verses which he handed over to her. That evening Crimson came back with a note on colored paper for him, saying, “By Miss Cui’s instructions.”

The title of her poem was “Bright Moon on the Night of the Fifteenth.”

*I await the moon in the western wing*  
*Where the breeze comes through the half-opened door.*  
*Sweeping the wall the flower shadows move:  
I imagine it is my lover who comes.*

Zhang understood the message: that day was the fourteenth of the second month, and an apricot tree was next to the wall east of the Cui courtyard. It would be possible to climb it.

On the night of the fifteenth Zhang used the tree as a ladder to get over the wall. When he came to the western wing, the door was ajar. Inside, Crimson was asleep on a bed. He awakened her, and she asked, frightened, “How did you get here?”

“Miss Cui’s letter told me to come,” he replied, not quite accurately. “You go tell her I am here.”

In a minute Crimson was back. “She’s coming! She’s coming!”

Zhang was so happy and nervous, convinced that success was his. Then Miss Cui appeared in formal dress, with a grave face, and began to upbraid him: “You did us a great kindness when you saved our lives, and that is why my mother entrusted my younger brother and myself to you. Why then did you get my silly maid to bring me that filthy poem? You began by doing a good deed in preserving me from the hands of ravishers, and you end by seeking to ravish me. You substitute seduction for rape—is there any great difference? My first impulse was to keep quiet about it, but that would have been to condone your wrongdoing and not right. If I told my mother, it would amount to ingratitude, and the consequences would be unfortunate. I thought of having a servant convey my disapproval, but feared she would not get it right. Then I thought of writing a short message to state my case, but was afraid it would only put you on your guard. So finally I composed those vulgar lines to make sure you would come here. It was an improper thing to do, and of course I feel ashamed. But I hope that you will keep within the bounds of decency and commit no outrage.”

As she finished speaking, she turned on her heel and left him. For some time Zhang stood, dumbfounded. Then he went back over the wall to his quarters, all hope gone.

A few nights later Zhang was sleeping alone by the veranda when someone shook him awake. Startled, he rose up, to see Crimson standing there, a coverlet and pillow in her arms. She patted him and said, “She is coming! She is coming! Why are you sleeping?” And she spread the quilt and put the pillow beside his. As she left, Zhang sat up straight and rubbed his eyes. For some time it seemed as though he were still dreaming, but nonetheless he waited dutifully. Then there was Crimson again, with Miss Cui leaning on her arm. She was shy and yielding, and appeared almost not to have the strength to move her limbs. The contrast with her stiff formality at their last encounter was complete.

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4 The fifteenth day of the lunar month was the night of the full moon.
This evening was the night of the eighteenth, and the slating rays of the moon cast a soft light over half the bed. Zhang felt a kind of floating lightness and wondered whether this was an immortal who visited him, not someone from the world of men. After a while the temple bell sounded. Daybreak was near. As Crimson urged her to leave, she wept softly and clung to him. Crimson helped her up, and they left. The whole time she had not spoken a single word. With the first light of dawn Zhang got up, wondering, was it a dream? But the perfume still lingered, and as it got lighter he could see on his arm traces of her makeup and the teardrops sparkling still on the mat.

For some ten days afterward there was no word from her. Zhang composed a poem of sixty lines on “An Encounter with an Immortal” which he had not yet completed when Crimson happened by, and he gave it to her for her mistress. After that she let him see her again, and for nearly a month he would join her in what her poem called “the western wing,” slipping out at dawn and returning stealthily at night. Zhang once asked what her mother thought about the situation. She said, “She knows there is nothing she can do about it, and so she hopes you will regularize things.”

Before long Zhang was about to go to Chang’an, and he let her know his intentions in a poem. Miss Cui made no objections at all, but the look of pain on her face was very touching. On the eve of his departure he was unable to see her again. Then Zhang went off to the west. A few months later he again made a trip to Pu and stayed several months with Miss Cui.

She was a very good calligrapher and wrote poetry, but for all that he kept begging to see her work, and she would never show it. Zhang wrote poems for her, challenging her to match them, but she paid them little attention. The thing that made her unusual was that, while she excelled in the arts, she always acted as though she were ignorant, and although she was quick and clever in speech, she would seldom indulge in repartee. She loved Zhang very much, but would never say so in words. At the time she was subject to moods of profound melancholy, but she never let on. She seldom showed on her face the emotions she felt. On one occasion she was playing her zither alone at night. She did not know Zhang was listening, and the music was full of sadness. As soon as he spoke, she stopped and would play no more. This made him all the more infatuated with her.

Sometime later Zhang had to go west again for the civil service examinations. It was the eve of his departure, and though he had said nothing about what it involved, he sat sighing unhappily at her side. Miss Cui had guessed that he was going to leave for good. Her manner was respectful, but she spoke deliberately and in a low voice. “To seduce someone and then abandon her is perfectly natural, and it would be presumptuous of me to resent it. It would be an act of charity on your part if, having first seduced me, you were to go through with it and fulfill your oath of lifelong devotion. But in either case, what is there to be so upset about in this trip? However, I see you are not happy and I have no way to cheer you up. You have praised my zither playing, and in the past I have been embarrassed to play for you. Now that you are going away, I shall do what you so often requested.”

She had them prepare her zither and started to play the prelude to the “Rainbow Robe and Feather Skirt.” After a few notes, her playing grew wild with grief until the piece was no longer recognizable. Everyone was reduced to tears, and Miss Cui abruptly stopped playing, put down

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5 Music introduced from India to China, where it became popular at the cosmopolitan Tang court in the eighth century.
the zither, and ran back to her mother’s room with tears streaming down her face. She did not come back.

The next morning Zhang went away. The following year he stayed on in the capital, having failed the examinations. He wrote a letter to Miss Cui to reassure her, and her reply read roughly as follows:

I have read your letter with its message of consolation and it filled my childish heart with mingled grief and joy. In addition you sent me a box of ornaments to adorn my hair and a stick of pomade to make my lips smooth. It was most kind of you, but for whom am I to make myself attractive? As I look at these presents my heart wells up with sorrow.

Your letter said that you will stay on in the capital to pursue your studies, and of course you need quiet and the facilities there to make progress. Still it is hard on the person left alone in this far-off place. But such is my fate, and I should not complain. Since last fall I have been listless and without hope. In company I can force myself to talk and smile, but come evening I always shed tears in the solitude of my own room. Even in my sleep I often sob, yearning for the absent one. Or I am in your arms for a moment as it used to be, but before the secret meeting is done I am awake and heartbroken. The bed seems still warm beside me, but the one I love is far away.

Since you said good-bye the new year has come. Chang'an is a city of pleasure with chances for love everywhere. I am truly fortunate that you have not forgotten me and that your affection is not worn out. Loving you as I do, I have no way of repaying you, except to be true to our vow of lifelong fidelity.

Our first meeting was at the banquet as cousins. Then you persuaded my maid to inform me of your love; and I was unable to keep my childish heart firm. You made advances, like that other poet Sima Xiangru.6 I failed to repulse them as the girl did who threw her shuttle.7 When I offered myself in your bed, you treated me with the greatest kindness, and I supposed, in my innocence, that I could always depend on you. How could I have foreseen that our encounter could not possibly lead to something definite, that having disgraced myself by coming to you, there was no further chance of serving you openly as a wife? To the end of my days this will be a lasting regret—I must hide my sighs and be silent. If you, out of kindness, would condescend to fulfill my selfish wish, though it came on my dying day it would seem to be a new lease on life. Loving you as I do, I have no way of repaying you, except to be true to our vow of lifelong fidelity.

This bracelet of mine is something I wore as a child; I send it to serve as a gentleman’s belt pendant. Like jade may you be invariably firm and resolute; like a

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6 An allusion to the Han dynasty poet, Sima Xiangru, who enticed the young widow Zhuo Wenjun to elope with his zither playing.

7 An allusion to the story of the lecherous Xie Kun (280-322), who sought to seduce a neighbor’s daughter named Gao. Gao repelled Xie’s advances by throwing her shuttle in his face, knocking out two teeth.
round bracelet may there be no break between what came before and what is to follow. Here are also a skein of multicolored thread and a tea roller of mottled bamboo. These things have no intrinsic value, but they are to signify that I want you to be true as jade, and your love to endure unbroken like a bracelet. The spots on the bamboo are like the marks of my tears, and my unhappy thoughts are as tangled as the thread; these objects are symbols of my feelings and tokens for all time of my love. Our hearts are close, though our bodies are far apart and there is not time I can expect to see you. But where the hidden desires are strong enough, there will be a meeting of spirits. Take care of yourself, a thousand times over. The springtime wind is often chill; eat well for your health’s sake. Be circumspect and careful, and do not think too often of my unworthy person.

Zhang showed the letter to his friends, and in this way word of the affair got around. One of them, Yang Juyuan, a skillful poet, wrote a quatrain on “Young Miss Cui”:

\begin{align*}
For clear purity jade cannot equal his complexion; \\
On the iris in the inner court snow begins to melt. \\
A romantic young man filled with thoughts of lover, \\
A letter from the “Xiao girl,” brokenhearted. \footnote{“Xiao girl” refers to women in general, but here means Yingying.}
\end{align*}

Yuan Zhen\footnote{Yuan Zhen (775-831) was one of the most famous poets of the day. Some scholars believe Yuan himself was the student Zhang of the story.} of Henan wrote a continuation of Zhang’s poem, “Encounter with an Immortal,” also in thirty couplets:

\begin{align*}
Faint moonbeams pierce the curtained window; \\
Fireflies glimmer across the blue sky. \\
The far horizon begins now to pale; \\
Dwarf trees gradually turn darker green. \\
A dragon song crosses the court bamboo; \\
A phoenix air brushes the well-side tree. \\
The silken robe trails through the thin mist; \\
The pendant circles tinkle in the light breeze. \\
The accredited envoy accompanies the Queen Mother of the West\footnote{The Queen Mother of the West figures in Chinese folklore as presiding over the paradise of the immortals in Mt. Kunlun, far to the west. Possibly an allusion here to Yingying’s mother.} \\
From the cloud’s center comes Jade Boy. \footnote{Possibly an allusion to Yingying’s brother.} \\
Late at night everyone is quiet; \\
At daybreak the rain drizzles. \\
Pearl radiance shines on her decorated sandals, \\
Flower glow shows off the embroidered skirt.
\end{align*}
Jasper hairpin: a walking colored phoenix;
Gauze shawl: embracing vermillion rainbow.
She says she comes from the Jasper Flower Bank
And is going to pay court at Green Jade Palace.
On an outing north of Luoyang’s wall,
By chance he came to Song Yu’s house.12
His dalliance she rejects a bit at first,
But her yielding love already is disclosed.
Lowered locks put in motion cicada shadows;
Returning steps raise jade dust.
Her face turns to let flow flower snow
As she climbs into bed, silk covers her arms.
Love birds in a neck-entwining dance;
Kingfishers in a conjugal cage.
Eyebrows, out of shyness, contracted;
Lip rough, from the warmth, melted.
Her breath is pure: fragrance of orchid buds;
Her skin is smooth: richness of jade flesh.
No strength, too limp to lift a wrist;
Many charms, she likes to draw herself together.
Sweat runs: pearls drop by drop;
Hair in disorder: black luxuriance.
Just as they rejoice in the meeting of a lifetime
They suddenly hear the night is over.
There is no time for lingering;
It is hard to give up the wish to embrace.
Her comely face shows the sorrow she feels;
With fragrant words they swear eternal love.
She gives him a bracelet to plight their troth;
He ties a lover’s knot as sign their hearts are one.
Tear-borne powder runs before the clear mirror;
Around the flickering lamp are nighttime insects.
Moonlight is still softly shining
As the rising sun gradually dawns.
Riding a wild goose she returns to the Lo River.13
Blowing a flute he ascends Mount Song.14
His clothes are fragrant still with musk perfume;
The pillow is slippery yet with red traces.
Thick, thick the grass grows on the dike;
Floating, floating, the tumbleweed yearns for the isle.

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12 In “The Lechery of Master Dengtu” the poet Song Yu tells about the beautiful girl next door to the east who climbed up the adjoining wall to flirt with him.

13 An allusion to the goddess of the Luo River.

14 One of the sacred mountains of China, located south of Luoyang.
Her plain zither plays the “Resentful Crane Song”;
In the clear Milky Way she looks for the returning wild goose.
The sea is broad and truly hard to cross;
The sky is high and not easy to traverse.
The moving cloud is nowhere to be found—
Xiao Shi stays in his chamber.15

All of Zhang’s friends who heard of the affair marveled at it, but Zhang had determined on his own course of action. Yuan Zhen was especially close to him and so was in a position to ask Zhang for an explanation. Zhang replied, “It is a general rule that those women endowed by Heaven with great beauty invariably either destroy themselves or destroy someone else. If this Cui woman were to meet someone with wealth and position, she would use the favor her charms gain her to be cloud and rain or dragon or monster—I can’t image what she might turn into. Of old, King Xin of Shang and King You of Zhou were brought low by women, in spite of the size of their kingdoms and the extent of their power.16 Their armies were scattered, their persons butchered, and down to the present day their names are objects of ridicule. I have no inner strength to withstand this evil influence. That is why I have resolutely suppressed my love.”

At this statement everyone present sighed deeply.

Over a year later Cui was married, and Zhang for his part had taken a wife. Happening to pass through the town where Cui was living, Zhang asked permission of her husband to see her, as a cousin. The husband spoke to her, but Cui refused to appear. Zhang’s feelings of hurt showed on his face, and she was told about it. She secretly sent him a poem:

Emaciated, I have lost my looks,
Tossing and turning, too wary to leave my bed.
It’s not because of others I am ashamed to rise,
For you I am haggard and before you ashamed.

She never did appear. Some days later, when Zhang was about to leave, she sent another poem of farewell:

Cast off and abandoned, what can I say now,
Whom you loved so briefly long ago?
Any love you had then for me
Will do for the one you have now.

After this he never heard any more about her. His contemporaries for the most part conceded that Zhang done well to rectify his mistake. I have often mentioned this among friends so that, forewarned, they might avoid doing such a thing, or if they did, they might not be led astray by it. In the ninth month of a year in the Zhenyuan period (785-804), when an official, Li Shen was passing the night in my house at the Pacification Quarter, the conversation touched on the

15 Xiao Shi was an immortal of the Spring and Autumn era of antiquity renowned for his lute playing.

16 King Xin, the notorious last ruler of Shang, whose downfall was attributed to his favorite concubine, Daji, and King You, whose excessive devotion to his mistress Baosi was said to have led to the fall of the Western Zhou in 771 BCE.
subject. Li found it most extraordinary and composed a “Song of Yingying” to commemorate the affair. Cui’s child-name was Yingying, and Li used it for his poem.