

# Ballad of the Huang River

and other stories

by Jing Shi

translated by Keith Dede and Susan Su

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**Front Cover:** Huangyuan countryside and Sun Moon Mountains in Summer. June 2012. Photograph by Zhao Zimo.

**Back Cover:** Left to right: Jing Shi, his grand-nephew, and younger brother, in Nalong Village, Huangyuan County. June 2011. Photograph by Keith Dede.

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## INTRODUCTION

A round face, framed by longish, slightly unruly bangs and chubby cheeks, is pulled wide by a somewhat cock-eyed grin that forces into prominence a pair of protruding front teeth. His eyes are drawn into narrow slits from the strength of that smile. The roundness of his head and face extends to his chest and belly, which are covered in a brightly colored polo shirt that may hang a bit long, but fits tightly elsewhere. He is laughing, or singing, or relating an amusing anecdote. He flirts, pleads, plays for laughs, listens, corrects, explains, argues a bit, but mostly he is trying to entertain while also enlighten.

Whether seeing him on a television broadcast or sitting across from him at a banquet table, this is most people's first impression of Jing Shi. He was born Sun Shengnian (his four-year-old granddaughter told me in June 2011 that when he is in front of the computer he is 'Jing Shi,' but otherwise he is 'Grandpa Sun') in September 1953, at his family's home in the village of Nalong, a few miles west of the county seat of Huangyuan County in northeastern Qinghai Province. Educated through primary school in the village, he left home to attend junior middle school in the county town. After middle school he enrolled in the Qinghai Academy of Public Health, from which he graduated in 1973. Because this period of early education was during the 'Maoist years', he admittedly didn't get much out of it. The way he puts it, the leaders had decided that the old textbooks were not sufficiently revolutionary, so they were discarded, but the leaders never bothered to find new materials, so there wasn't much to do in school. Instead, he enjoyed reading stories on his own time, mostly traditional Chinese stories, such as *Journey to the West* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*. He fondly recounts how as a child, before he could really read, his mother would have his older brother read aloud a chapter from one of those stories at night while she did her sewing. When his brother went away to school, she made Jing Shi

read the chapter aloud. Even though he couldn't read every word, he knew enough of the characters on the page for the story to make sense, and then he would make up the rest.

While at the Qinghai Academy of Public Health, he was selected to join an elite group of students who were trained to detect radiation poisoning and, when he graduated, he was assigned to a work station in western Qinghai. His job was to test plants, soil, and livestock (mostly sheep) for traces of radioactive iodine after atmospheric nuclear tests were carried out in Xinjiang. As he relates it, China was poor back then, so there weren't tests very often, meaning he had a lot of free time to do whatever he wanted. Free time meant he had time to visit local herding families, chat, listen to stories, and drink. But mostly it was free time for reading.

While still working as a nuclear fallout data-gatherer, he began editorial work for a local literary journal, *Desert Tide* (*Han hai chao*). The first issue in 1979 included his very first short story, 'The Unfinished Lab Report' (Meiyou xiewan de shiyanjilu).

When China announced that it would end atmospheric nuclear testing in 1980, he basically lost his day job. Rather than follow the rest of his work unit into the job of testing radioactive levels among health workers (radiologists and such), he dropped his scientific career to pursue life as a writer. His editorial duties exposed him to a wider range of Chinese writers, and as China opened up to the outside world in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he began to read the works of foreign authors.

And yet, as much as this broad taste in reading influenced his writing, it was always the stories he heard in his home village that inspired him. Though he left the village at a relatively young age, the village never left him, and its hold on his imagination was rejuvenated through frequent visits home to see his family, to visit relatives, and to listen to the stories of village elders. One story, about how folks from the village traveled to western Qinghai to dig for gold and discovered a piece of gold shaped like a bottle-gourd, forms the basis of the second novella in this collection, 'Old Man

Zhang Pans for Gold' (Zhang baye taojinji). Similarly, most of Jing Shi's fiction, from his early short stories to his last novel, *The Gold Dream Disaster* (*Jin meng jie*),<sup>1</sup> involve the lives, loves, joys, and tragedies of the peasants that reside in rural Qinghai Province.

The first story in this collection, 'The Ballad of the Huang River' (Huangshui yao), is also based on rural life, specifically that of a woman, widowed at a young age, struggling with the strictures of traditional beliefs and practices. Elements of the story's structure, however, were inspired by Mario Vargas Llosa's *La Casa Verde* (*The Green House*),<sup>2</sup> and it is by far the most experimental form Jing Shi has tried. It shifts frames and perspectives, narrating multiple events from different historical eras with few overt signals to mark the shifts. This structure radically challenges the reader to make sense of the entirety of the heroine's experience before the experience is fully related, while reinforcing the story's theme of the force of history and tradition in the present lives and consciousness of villagers. This experimental form only appears in this one story, however, because as Jing Shi said, "It's just too difficult," by which I think he meant it was difficult to write.

His other stories, such as 'Old Man Zhang', included here, are relatively straightforward narratives. The popularity of his work is explained in part by the fact that most of his fiction doesn't require the reader to do mental gymnastics. He is a practiced, professional storyteller, formally giving the readers more or less what they expect. The real appeal of his stories, at least for readers familiar with the stories' settings, lies in his characterization and language.

Jing Shi's characters are well-wrought, three-dimensional portraits of rural people his readers can identify with. Whether it's that uncle from the village behind the mountain, or the busybody who lives around the corner, his readers identify with them

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<sup>1</sup> 2001. Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe [Qinghai People's Press].

<sup>2</sup> 1966. Barcelona: Seix Barral.

because they resemble people his readers know. The image of Old Man Zhang, wearing a tall, round hat with ear-flaps, a man who explodes in curses when he is angry, is based on Jing Shi's recollections of his own father, who was known around the village as Old Man Sun. The portrayal of Old Man Zhang's wife, Old Lady Zhang, is based on one of Jing Shi's neighbors who wore an old yellow headscarf whenever she came outside the house. These details of portraiture, derived from intimate familiarity with the people of rural Qinghai, enhance the realism of Jing Shi's narratives and his readers' identification with them.

The language Jing Shi's characters speak, the Chinese dialect of northeast Qinghai Province, is the most immediately recognizable detail identifying them as rural Qinghai folk. Jing Shi's manipulation of this language within his stories has evolved over time. In his earlier stories, such as 'The Ballad of the Huang River', it is mostly used in dialogue, while the narration is primarily in Standard Chinese. In 'Old Man Zhang', Qinghai dialect infiltrates the narrator's voice in a limited way. In such later stories as 'The Fantastic Tale of the Golden Phoenix Egg' (Jinfengdan chuanqi), included here, the infiltration has proceeded to the point where it dominates the narrative. While use of dialect for dialogue adds to the descriptive fullness of a character's portraiture, its use in the narrator's voice allows the writer to signal when the narrator is slipping into the perspective of the character, a technique commonly referred to as *free indirect discourse*. The narrator's ability to shift from an omniscient, outside perspective to an interior, biased one draws the reader more intimately into the story and into the emotional state of the main characters.

For local readers, the language is relatively easy to understand and strikes a note of intimacy and comfort, again adding to their ability to identify with the characters. For readers of Standard Chinese who do not speak Qinghai Chinese, there are terms, adages, and idioms that might not be completely comprehensible, but which nonetheless serve the purpose of providing colorful, rural depth to the stories' realism. In English

translation, of course, much of this color and intimacy is lost, though we have made some attempt to capture the language's rustic flavor and occasional coarseness.

Readers familiar with Chinese fiction will recognize common features of *xiangtu* literature in these characteristics of Jing Shi's fiction: rural characters, rural settings, and description of local cultural practices. Like other examples of the genre, Jing Shi's stories are a complex mix of emotional reactions to village life, rather than simple, nostalgic paeans to a bucolic ideal. While the stories reflect a certain longing for a perceived honest simplicity and natural beauty, that nostalgia is coupled with a critical representation of the setting's inherent challenges, and the binds that traditional culture can wrap around rural inhabitants. The heroine of 'The Ballad of the Huang River', He Zhenlian, is clearly caught in a struggle between a basic human desire to be able to choose a new life partner after the death of her husband, and the restrictions paternalistic village society puts on her behavior. Old Man Zhang, on the other hand, is squeezed by cultural requirements to provide his son with a wife and his inability to navigate the new value system unleashed by the monetization of village life and human relationships. Jing Fengshan, the hero of 'The Fantastic Tale', struggles with the twin binds of poverty and an unusual family structure as he tries to fulfill his life-long dream. Jing Shi doesn't pass judgment on these characters, but his provocatively straightforward description reflects his depth of understanding of the charms and challenges of the countryside.

The stories also include references to features of northeastern Qinghai culture, particularly the culture of the Han Chinese. For example, *hua'er* – a type of local folk song traditionally sung as part of young lovers' courtship – plays an important role in the first two stories. The songs sometimes expressed naked sexual desire, and thus were forbidden within the village and in the presence of elders. Nowadays, the songs are

much tamer and primarily serve as a powerful signifier of local identity.

There are numerous allusions to Han literary culture reaching beyond Qinghai. Sun Wukong, the simian hero of the traditional Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, is perhaps best known to English readers through Arthur Waley's abridged translation, *Monkey*.<sup>3</sup> Sun Wukong is famous for his impetuosity and superhuman powers, which include the ability to change appearance and size in an instant, and so he is compared to the changeable weather of the Huang River Valley. Qu Yuan (339 BCE-278 BCE) is one of China's most famous poets. Legend holds that he was so distraught over politics that he killed himself by jumping into a river. The local fishermen, who greatly admired him, raced into the river on their boats to try to save him. This legend is what underlies the famous dragon boat races on the Double Fifth Festival, which plays a central role in 'The Ballad of the Huang River', although the local practices of that holiday are highlighted in the story. These literary characters are so well known that even the uneducated among Jing Shi's readers would understand the allusion.

References to the upheavals of the first decades of Communist Party rule in China occur in all the stories in this collection. For example, members of the 'four bad elements' *sileifenzi*, are assigned tasks in 'The Ballad of the Huang River'. The term is a catchall for landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, and troublemakers who became the marginalized members of the people's communes, established in the collectivization campaigns of 1956. The 'communal canteens' mentioned in 'The Fantastic Tale' were established during the Great Leap Forward in 1957, when the country set out on a foolhardy experiment in economic expansion. These ideological extremes serve as a backdrop to the stage on which these stories are set, reminding readers of the absurdities they suffered through.

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<sup>3</sup> 1943. New York: Grove Press.

There are several references to Han folk religious practices, particularly the ones around the New Year holiday. *Laba* porridge, *labazhou*, is eaten on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month throughout China, serving as a kind of marker of the beginning of the holiday-preparation season. The rituals related to seeing off the Kitchen God and Goddess on the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth lunar month also vary across the country. The rituals usually include making sticky cakes (to keep the Goddess's mouth closed so she cannot spread gossip around the Jade Emperor's court) and toy horses (so the couple can ride to the Jade Emperor's abode). These traditions are in decline, so referencing the Qinghai variations on these traditions in 'The Fantastic Tale', for example, invokes nostalgia for simpler times while also locating the stories in a familiar place.

The most significant cultural activity during the Han New Year in Qinghai is performing *shehuo* – an elaborate, community-wide ceremony and celebration that takes place around the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. The celebration involves elaborate costumes, characters, singing, and dancing, and the organizing is done by the Fire God Committee, a non-governmental group consisting of the village male elders. An interesting analogy may be drawn with Mardi Gras, the traditional pre-Lenten festival of the Catholic calendar. In 'Old Man Zhang' we find the protagonist, depressed about his son's marriage prospects, unwilling to fulfill his household's responsibilities for the performance. His frustration and sorrow are in stark contrast to the usual joyous revelry associated with *shehuo*.

Most interesting are the stories' allusions to Tibetan culture. For example, King Gesar's name appears frequently in 'Old Man Zhang'. King Gesar is a legendary hero about whom episodic tales are told throughout the Tibetan-speaking world. Numerous features of the landscape in Qinghai are identified with this hero, and so in 'Old Man Zhang' we are told of a rock pillar that is the place where King Gesar hitched his horse. In 'The Fantastic Tale' we are told the sand coolies want to visit Kumbum to watch a Buddhist ritual,



thus delaying their departure for the gold fields. Kumbum, associated with the birth of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, is arguably the holiest religious site in all of eastern Tibet. The incorporation of certain aspects of Tibetan culture is certainly one of the unique features of the Han culture of northeast Qinghai. Their reference in these stories is part of the realism that local readers find so appealing.

The wide appeal of Jing Shi's fiction is certainly something he welcomes. As he sees it, literature, at one level, should be entertaining. Stories are a way for people to derive pleasure, enjoy a laugh, and while away some time. But stories are also about communication, about communicating ideas concerning the ironies of life and the trajectory of the human condition. Jing Shi thinks deeply about the people of rural Qinghai, their culture, their predicaments, their hopes, and their tragedies, and his stories communicate his thoughts about these things, but also his deep affection for the people and culture that raised him.

The editions of the three stories translated here are from *Lords of Old Town (Gubao de zhurenmen)*,<sup>4</sup> a collection of the author's nine *zhongpian xiaoshuo* (medium-length fiction, or novellas). The stories appeared first in literary journals published in Qinghai. 'The Ballad of the Huang River' first appeared in *Modern Man (Xiandai ren)*,<sup>5</sup> 'Old Man Zhang Pans for Gold' first appeared in *Qinghai Lake (Qinghai hu)*,<sup>6</sup> and 'The Fantastic Tale of the Golden Phoenix Egg' first appeared in *Qinghai Lake*.<sup>7</sup> The earlier editions and the 2006 editions of 'Ballad' and 'The Fantastic Tale' are virtually unchanged.

'Old Man Zhang' went through some revisions, primarily of two kinds – additions and reordering. The additions included supplementation of existing material and addition of entirely new

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<sup>4</sup> 2006. Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe [Literary Federation of China Press].

<sup>5</sup> 1987. 3:103-123.

<sup>6</sup> 1991. 3:2-23.

<sup>7</sup> 1993. 4:25-48.

material. The supplementations are relatively minor adjustments to some of the dialogue and descriptions. For example, in the first section of both versions, Old Man Zhang tells the story of his first adventure in the gold fields of western Qinghai. In the first edition, Old Man Zhang tells his story uninterrupted. In the revised version, there are comments and questions from the village folks listening to the story, which adds liveliness to the scene.

The addition of new material is entirely in section four of the revised edition, when Old Man Zhang and his son Shanshenbao are at the gold fields. The added material includes their initial run-in with gold-field toughs who tell them to move on, Old Man Zhang's attempt to talk Liu Quanxi into allowing him to work on his claim, and the scene where Mr. Pi comes to talk to Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao as they sit discouraged by King Gesar's hitching post. All three of these vignettes serve to exemplify one of the novel's themes, that is, how greed disrupts human interactions and turns them into fraught encounters.

The reordering in the revised edition of 'Old Man Zhang' is also entirely in section four, and was done to accommodate the three added scenes just described. The revised version is a longer work, but we chose it for our translation because it is a better reflection of the author's mature ideas of the story.

The circumstances surrounding the translations of these stories are unusual. The 'Old Man Zhang' translation was a class project for the Fall 2010, CHIN 410: Advanced Chinese class at Lewis & Clark College. The members of the class, Matthew Hess, Anna Holmes, Emily Janzer, Kelsey Ostenaar, Benjamin Moseley, John Roberts, Megan Sadler, Susan Su, and Ian Wollman, all contributed significant portions. I assisted in that translation and edited their contributions. Susan Su and I translated 'Ballad' and 'The Fantastic Tale'.

Translation is inherently difficult, but the cultural and linguistic distance involved in translating literature from Qinghai Chinese into English entails an extra layer of difficulty. There are a number of terms left un-translated, such as *kang* (a brick bed which

is warmed by a stove underneath, common in Northern China), *li* (a measure of distance equivalent to half a kilometer), *mu* (a measure of area equivalent to one-fifteenth of a hectare), and *yuan* (the basic monetary unit). These terms are un-translated in many works, because they generally don't inhibit the English reader's understanding.

As a post-script to this volume we have added an edited version of an interview Susan Su and I conducted with Jing Shi on 13 June 2011. His reflections on the creative process, the meanings of his stories, and the role of literature are insightful and shed light on many of the stories' details.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Mellon Foundation whose generous support for Lewis & Clark College allowed Susan Su and me to complete this manuscript. I thank my students and colleagues for their assistance throughout this project. The editors of this journal, whose diligence and attention to detail are unparalleled among publishers today, have improved this volume tremendously. Mostly, I thank Jing Shi for his generosity, patience, and sense of humor. It must be odd for him to have his work translated into a language he can't understand. I thank him for trusting me to do it.

Keith Dede  
Xining, Qinghai  
July 2011

## BALLAD OF THE HUANG RIVER

1

Gut-wrenching thunder exploding in the deepest recesses of her mind awoke Granny Li's collapsing consciousness from a stupor. She pulled out her arm and disgustedly shrugged off the inky black hand of the God of Death brazenly pulling at her. With difficulty, she lifted the great weights of her eyelids.

Where's the thunder? The rain? Those thick clouds enveloping the sky?

A golden resplendence appeared before her eyes. Slowly, from among this resplendent yellow, there metamorphosed layer upon layer of multicolored rings of light.

These rings of light sublimated before her eyes, expanding, like a pebble in a pond dyed red by the setting sun.

*Hua – hua – hua.*

Is that the sound of the Huang River? The Huang River! It still flows! It won't stiffen its legs and die like me. It still flows day and night, flowing into the Yellow River. But I will die. And once I die I'll be buried in the yellow earth... Humans eat a lifetime of dirt, and in the end the dirt swallows them whole. Wouldn't it be nice to float away? Float away in a big flood that collapses this house and washes me into the river, washes me down to the Yellow River...

Something piping hot covered her face, dispersing the multicolored rings of light dancing before her eyes.

"Ma, I'll wipe your face." It was her daughter-in-law, Yufen.

A hot towel, like a soft flatiron, gently rubbed her face, pressing open the blocked and congealed capillaries. Her whole body's dammed up blood, like a small gurgling stream, began to course through her. She could almost hear it flow.

The towel came off.

A snowy gleam exploded in front of her eyes. Snowy white walls. Snowy white ceiling. Snowy white window. Snowy white air.

She felt the heavy oppression of snow.

*Hua – hua – hua.*

That isn't the sound of the Huang River. No. It's the carpenters in the courtyard working their planes. They're planing the coffin boards! They're making the coffin I'll be buried in!

She was extremely sorrowful, full of despair. A cold shiver shook her whole body. An inexpressible feeling, like a cold, hairy, maggot full of claws, wormed its way into her mind. She wanted to scream with all her might, but barely had the strength to pry open her eyelids.

Like an ox that had pulled a plowshare all day, she felt every joint in her body collapsing, exhausted.

"Shouye's Mum, can you see who I am?"

A pock-marked face, like it had been burned by beans just out of the cooker, extended towards her.

Who else could it be? Aren't you Pock-marked Auntie who, with eyes as big as coins, kept watch on me my whole life, like you were guarding against thieves? Pitiful old Auntie, what did you wind up guarding? Do you remember that thunderstorm nineteen years ago? Do you know I floated nineteen 'linked-hearts' aromatic amulets down the Huang River for nineteen years after that storm? You don't know, you don't know, nobody knows...

She nodded toward Auntie and closed her heavy eyelids.

"Oh, she's leaving again! What torture!"

She heard Pock-marked Auntie's tremulous cries.

"She's been drifting back and forth between the land of light and the world of darkness for three days now. What else could be pulling on her heart-strings so that she can't rest in peace?"

Pock-marked Auntie wiped the old tears running down her pockmarked face and in a low voice addressed her question to

fellow villagers who had come to see the old woman on the verge of death.

"She's waiting for the coffin to be completed. Those three carpenters have been struggling with it for three days, how come it's not done yet?"

"They're making a complete inner and outer coffin set. There are a lot of particulars to it, and they're making it according to the old rules. Those three carpenters said they'd done it before, but I heard they've only seen a complete one – never done one themselves. They're inexperienced at it, so they're figuring it out as they go."

"Granny is a lucky lady! Been around all these generations, but whose ancestral burial ground has ever had a complete inner and outer coffin placed in it? Used to be if anyone had a couple of thin boards nailed together, everyone figured the family was well-off. Back in '61, when Old Man Lushan of Nalong Village passed away, didn't they just cut the legs off of his flour bin and bury him stuffed in that?"

"Yeah, she hasn't had it easy either. She's been a chaste widow for thirty years, which isn't something you just wake up one morning and decide you're gonna do. Thirty years of climbing into that cold *kang* alone, and not once did she stray. She brought up Shouye all by herself, one handful of shit and one handful of piss, making sure the Li Family cemetery has another generation to look after it. That's a lot of credit she's earned!"

"That's right! And her effort raising Shouye wasn't wasted. No, he got to drivin' a truck to make money on the side and was the first to put up one of these two-story brick houses. He moved his mum in upstairs and even bought a color TV for her to watch. If it were that good-for-nothing lout of a son I have, well, forget about it!"

"Ey, she's suffered a lot her whole life. Only lately has she had a few good days of comfort, and then her body just gave out. Not even sixty years old, so how can she get liver cancer, lung

cancer, esophageal cancer... How'd all those cancers just come up together?"

• • •

The old folks tittered-and-tattered in hushed tones beside her like mosquitos buzzing near her ear one instant, and then floating off the next.

A subconscious realization suddenly arose in her muddled mind.

I won't go in the coffin! I won't go into the earth! I won't! I won't! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!

A twisting pain rose in her chest and small beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

The God of Death was torturing her, hastening her, threatening her. Nothing in the world is as devilish as the God of Death.

With difficulty she leaned her head in the direction of the window, abandoning the God of Death in the cold darkness. Those two heavy eyelids covering her hollowed out eye sockets once again painfully opened up into narrow slits.

Lying on the top floor of the very first two-story brick building built in the history of Camel Bend, she couldn't see the carpenters who were working on her coffin in the courtyard. She could only hear the hard chewing sound of metal eating through lumber.

She saw the mountains in the distance. She saw the mountains on which the overturned autumn stubble had seemingly already covered every trace of her footsteps.

The seeds buried in the mountain fields in the spring had been harvested long ago. Those mountains, green through spring and summer then brown by mid-autumn, now appeared like a bald man's scabbed head, slouching there, sadly waiting for the snows to come cover them.

Nearby was one house after another. Tall, tamped dry-earth walls twenty-eight boards high were of a motley, chopped appearance. The top of one wall was eroded by wind and snow,



like gums missing their teeth. On the side of the wall she saw a string of big circles the size of wheat baskets. She remembered they were dug out in 1958 and a character was written in each. Later, every couple of years, members of the 'four bad elements' of the village would come by and scrape or dig it out, slap on some whitewash, and write another character. Later, they would slop whitewash right atop the old character and write over it. Now, there were eight to ten layers of characters in each of the circles and nobody could figure out what they said. All anybody knew was that when the 'four bad elements' came by to write in the circles, the world would get turned upside down again. And every time the world got turned upside down, there'd be fewer noodles in everyone's bowl. She remembered there was a saying going around the village, "If your bowl is full of noodles, don't change the characters on the wall."

A pointed-leaf willow that had dropped all but a few of its butterfly-like leaves stood sorrowfully just outside the window.

The Huang River isn't on this side of the house. The Huang River is on the other side.

There's no window in the back of the house. You can't see the Huang River.

Only in the dead of night can you hear the cries, laughs, and footsteps of the Huang River.

Oh, Son! You built me this house, but why didn't you think to leave even a window the size of my palm in the back of the house so I could see the Huang River? The Huang River that pulls on my heart and pinches my throat!

Trembling and shaking, her hand felt around beside the *kang*.

She found a small bundle.

She opened her hand and squeezed her palm around the bundle.

It was a red cloth-wrapped bundle, inside of which were three 'linked-hearts' aromatic amulets and a shirt button.

Three years! I haven't been to the riverbank for three years. Will I never go again? No, I must go! I'll go. I promised to give him a 'linked-hearts' amulet every year. But I haven't given him one for three years. He's been waiting beside the Yellow River, waiting in vain for three years. I can't die like this. Old Man in Heaven! Let me go to the riverbank one more time! Let me float these three linked-hearts for him! He's waited for three years!

But why hasn't he come to see me? You haven't been back for twenty-two years. You can't forget me. I've torn my heart up over you for twenty-two years! For twenty-two years I've pulled on my heartstrings and racked my brain thinking of you!

"River... river...!" she called out from the depths of her heart.

2

As frightened as a hopeless doe, He Zhenlian lay atop her husband's corpse, and with an ear-piercing screech she fainted.

The God of Fate cruelly pushed her toward the crossroads of life.

Two roads stretched out before her like an open pair of scissors, but she could and must choose only one.

She could put on white mourning clothes for her husband, mourn him for a hundred days or half a year, then leave and marry again. But she would have to break the bond with her son and leave her husband's sole offspring on the Li Family doorstep to continue burning incense for that family.

Or she could wear hemp mourning clothes for her husband and live as a chaste widow til the end of her days. She would have to support the Li Family in life and the Li Ancestors in death and, with a pure heart and diminished desires, bring up the next generation for her husband, for the Li Family.

Her son was the flesh from the very tip of her heart, how could she cut a bond just like that? Unable to abandon her son, she

must live as a chaste widow for a lifetime. A lifetime! Never again touch a man! Never again pass the days resting her head on a man's shoulder!

Her mum and Pock-marked Auntie pressed toward her. She must make a decision immediately!

"Zhenlian, think carefully about this. Hemp mourning clothes or white ones?"

"Hemp... clothes..."

"You sure you can keep your word? This isn't as simple as just saying it. There are more days in the future than leaves on a tree. If you can't keep your word, if you bring cats and dogs into the house and have wild men climbing the walls in the middle of the night, you'll break the Li Family's customs and defy our morals... The Li Family can't be toyed with like putting up a metal pole or melting a pile of snow. Even if the Li Family closed its eyes and didn't care, other villagers would dig up the Li Family ancestral graves. Think about it carefully!" Pock-marked Auntie snorted loudly through her nose and sternly cautioned her nephew's wife, who had melted into a puddle of tears.

"Zhenlian, leave Shouye behind, OK?" her mother cried. "Being a chaste widow isn't a role for a human, OK? Pick another path! Children are pimples on a woman's body, they go away and come right back. Are you really afraid you can't raise another one? Put on white mourning clothes, OK? Zhenlian, listen to your mum. No good will come from being a widow. You're only twenty-four years old, just a young sprout. Don't be muddled for a moment and regret it your whole life! Oh, my poor unlucky Zhenlian!"

The words that came sobbing out of her mother pinched her heart, squeezed her liver, twisted her lungs. She clenched her jaw and ground her teeth.

"No! I want my son, I want my son! Old Man in Heaven, you can't separate me and Shouye! Waaah! Put on the hemp mourning clothes! Hemp clothes! Hemp clothes!"

"You sure you can bear it?"

Zhenlian nodded vigorously.

"Kowtow to your husband three times if you can bear it. If you can't bear it, then don't."

Zhenlian scrambled upright and began kowtowing.

Her mum, like a mother wolf, sprang forward to hold her back.

The daughter, more like a bear, gave her a shove and pushed her mum so that she ended up like a squatting dog.

One... two...

Right after the third kowtow, she fell to the ground, eyes rolling into the back of her head, and her body stiffening.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry up and pinch her lips!"

"Oh... my... god... wahahaha..."

"Commence... mourning..."

With the funeral director's yell, shawms blared in the courtyard.

Zhenlian was dragged up by two thick-waisted women and carried, like a criminal about to receive the death penalty, to kneel in front of her husband's bier.

The funeral director brought over the mourning tray.

Then, two more women wrapped, tied, and knotted her head, waist, and legs with hemp cloth, a hemp belt, and hemp rope.

A strand of cloudy tears rolled out from the corners of her eyes.

She tried to wipe away these memories that had been branded into every wrinkle of her forehead. How painful this memory is! Even now, as soon as she thought of this, her entire body trembled.

"River..."

She opened her mouth, unconsciously spitting out a poorly pronounced word.

"What'd you say? Ma, what is it you want?" her daughter-in-law, Yufen, ran over and asked urgently, cupping her face with both hands.

"Your mum said, 'drink', Yufen. Open a can and feed your mum a few mouthfuls of canned juice. Her heart's on fire."

Pock-marked Auntie spoke while stroking her head.

The spoon full of canned orange juice nudged at the side of her mouth.

"Granny, open your mouth, this is orange..."

She painfully turned her head. Ice-cold orange juice dripped down her neck.

Yufen hurriedly set down the spoon and grabbed a towel to wipe her clean.

She heard her daughter-in-law's crying.

She could only turn her head back and open her mouth halfway.

A spoonful of sweet, refreshing orange juice flowed into her mouth. She instinctively swallowed, but her throat was stopped up so tight that not even a drop would go down. She could only hold it in her mouth.

Outside the building, autumn winds were tormenting the withered branches and leaves. The entire world seemed unbearably pitiful.

The people who had come to see her left in bunches and came in again in bunches.

Seeing this old dying person, no one in the entire village could imagine how Zhenlian, as beautiful as an iris in her day, endured these thirty years of endless spring nights and transformed into the Granny Li of today, looking like wormwood in autumn, paralyzed on the *kang*, with one foot in the grave.

She kept her word for over thirty years!

Who can compare with her? What does Mancang's wife add up to? She only lived as a widow for two and a half years, then completely humiliated the people of Camel Bend!

Shameless cow!

Zhenlian turned into a robot after taking her vow of chastity. She awoke at daybreak and began to work. She worked straight through until dark when she was so exhausted she fell asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Of course she felt lonely, but she still didn't feel the least bit grieved. Her son, Shouye, was her everything. A mother who has her child has the whole world.

Pock-marked Auntie lived in an alley not far from her. Wobbling on those half-bound 'Liberation' feet, she was like a hunting dog with a keen sense of smell. Without any regular pattern, she shuttled back and forth between her own home and that of her nephew's chaste widow.

"Zhenlian! You're exhausted from working all day, go to bed early. Your light was on past midnight last night, what were you doing up so late?"

"Shouye's Mum, lock the main gate a bit earlier, eh? It's dark already and the gate is half open. You're not worried about a thief sneaking in?"

"..."

To help Pock-marked Auntie put her mind at ease, Zhenlian didn't drop in on neighbors for visits, and didn't dawdle in alleys chatting with folks. The route she took was directly from her home to the fields, and then back from the fields to her home. If she had free time at home she'd invite Pock-marked Auntie to come over to sit with her while she did her sewing.

She felt no antipathy toward Pock-marked Auntie for those frequently issued warnings and nit-picking glares. Just the opposite. She liked that her aunt was like that.

It was much better that she racked her brain to come up with schemes that amounted to nothing, rather than having her sit at home and create wild rumors about her nephew's wife.

Sitting on the *kang* at night, she held her son's hand and lightly sang in harmony with the grinding of the ancient water mill on the Huang River:

Oh, the jasmine flower so fine!  
Oh, the jasmine flower so fine,  
A garden full of blooms, all of them outshined,  
Picking a bloom to wear is what I have in mind,  
I only fear the scolds the bloom viewers will  
assign....

This isn't the 'Jasmine Flower Song' of the people of south China. This is the 'Jasmine Flower Song' of the villagers living in tamped-earth walled compounds on the terraces along the Yellow and Huang river valleys in the Loess Plateau of northwest China.

None of them had ever seen a jasmine flower. Jasmine flowers don't grow on the terraced lands of the Yellow and Huang river valleys. But they still like to sing the song. They sing it when they're happy, when they're sad, in boisterous settings, and when all alone. They've been singing like this for generations. Like the water mill that was brought into the terraced lands beside the Yellow and Huang rivers during the Han Dynasty, following that mode, that sound, crushing and grinding, it's been spinning around for thousands of years.

The sound of footsteps rapidly ascended the stairs. It was her son, Shouye, who entered the room with swollen red eyes.

"Has the coffin been completed?" Pock-marked Auntie asked in a hushed tone.

"Yes, Granny. But the painter hasn't shown up yet. I'm thinking I'll run over to Houshan and invite the painter. I'm just scared. Ma... is she still OK?"

"Seems like you've been run ragged these last couple of days. Sit here with your mother for a bit. I'll send your uncle to Houshan to hurry the painter."



To her ears, this conversation between a grandma and grandson was on another planet, but she was still able to make out the general content of the conversation.

Shouye came over, knelt before her, and like a child preparing to breast-feed, he laid his head on her chest. Huge tears rolled from his swollen red eyes.

With effort she lifted her arm. She rested her kindling-dry hand on her son's broad, sturdy back.

You're worried that you won't finish the coffin before I stiffen my legs and stop breathing. My dear son, how can I stop breathing? I don't want to die. I don't want to be buried in that yellow earth. I've been treading over the yellow earth of Camel Bend my whole life. I've had enough. I want... I want... My heart is filled with so many things I want to say, but how can I tell you? I can't. I can't tell you, so I can't stop breathing...

She again thought of the 'Jasmine Flower Song'. She recalled each spring night that accompanied the sound of this song, each star in the lonely sky, and that ancient water mill grinding alone under a melancholy moon.

How many sighs? How much sadness? How much despair? How much suffering? How much heart-breaking nostalgia? Others don't know. Even more, my son doesn't know.

A large field, no one turns it over,  
With an ox, who will till it?  
Stomach lumps turn into an ulcer,  
When wronged, to whom can I tell it?

Yes, every yearly cycle through the seasons is another thick layer of rotten dirt pressing down on her spirit. How many layers press down? How thick are they? How heavy is it?

"Oh, river! River..."

She contemplated in pain.

The Huang River is the pulsing artery of this stretch of terraced lands.

The fifth and sixth months of the lunar calendar are the period of its greatest bloodflow.

The weather fluctuates widely on both sides of the Huang River. The warm winds whistle through white poplars and the willows dance beside the irrigation ditches. The golden tundra-roses are yellow, the irises bloom blue, and the anemones spread like white dust across the ground.

On the warm waves of air rising from the wheat fields, there is the full smell of greenness. The straw hats wrapped with white cloth scarves worn by young wives weeding the fields, like rotating full moons, float above the green clouds of wheat shoots like floating immortals.

The men with bare feet roll their pant legs high. Their calves are splattered with yellow mud filled with butterfly bush and wormwood. Carrying big shovels on their shoulders, they stride into the irrigation ditches and along the banks, sinking deep into the mud. They irrigate the fields of young wheat that have already been weeded.

Scattered in the ditches are glittering pieces of glass and porcelain shards. On occasion, a piece of plain terra-cotta or one with irregular painted markings turns up.

When the mood strikes them, the men standing on the bank of the irrigation ditch wink at the women working in the fields and sing a *hua'er* folk song:

Planting white beans in the field,  
 Along the edge I make a path,  
 A row of weeding women revealed,  
 Which of them to me will yield?

The women hear this song and giggle. Lowering their heads, they nudge each other until one of the naughtier of them jumps up and responds:

Planting white beans in the field,  
Along the edge, a patch of chives,  
Oh, in this group a girl will yield,  
So take her if you've got the drive!

The melody is either high, level, and sharp, or twisting, turning, and clear, while the tremolo coda extends at length. A cloying tender sweetness infuses the lyrics' racy sentiments, and like the buzzing, platinum wings of honey bees, they fiddle with people until their hearts jump, their spirits soar, and they are unable to contain their emotions.

*Hua'er* folk songs are the fermented alcohol that the boys and girls who live on this terraced yellow earth brew from their own unceasing passion, mixed with the waters of the Huang River. Its aroma wafts in all directions, making the singers drunk and the listeners drunk, too.

Zhenlian also wanted to sing. She has a voice that is clear as a bell and clean as a mountain spring – sweet, wet, and crisp.

But she didn't sing, even though her throat was itching to.

From the day she promised to remain a chaste widow she never sang again. Or, strictly speaking, she never sang out loud.

Because she knows she is a chaste widow. Widows aren't like other folks. Once a widow sings, other peoples' spines straighten and they curse her, saying she's gone into heat, wanting to get her hooks into some wild man.

This secluded terraced land has its own abnormal, unusual customs. A married man and a married woman can turn their backs on their spouses and find their own 'sweethearts'. When that spring spirit becomes irresistible, they find a place where no one goes, in a mountain gully full of wild flowers, or in the deepest recesses of the cultivated fields, and carry out their tryst in the wilds.

There are sayings on the lips of folks of this region that would make an upright gentleman stammer and gawk. "There are no real fathers and there are no fake mothers." "The ox runs wild in the mountains, but the calf is born in the home." Folks are accustomed to this, and nobody jumps out and crusades against it, nobody calls it disgusting behavior violating all proper custom.

But, once a woman becomes a chaste widow, then folks' harsh criticism becomes like an iron ball and chain tying her down. On the chance that someone truly has affection for her and expresses it, all she can do is distance herself from him, that is, if she wants to stay an 'upright' person and wants to continue living in her village with the identity of a chaste widow.

He Zhenlian had made her decision. For her son, she wanted to stay a chaste widow, so she could show up Pock-marked Auntie who scrutinized her like a hunting dog. She wanted to show up all the people of Camel Bend, old and young, who observed and discussed her every action with those same eyes and mindset.

So, when men provoke her, she ignores them. When women egg her on, she shakes her head. She keeps her head down, swings her trowel, and continues her weeding, leaving those angels of love and laughter far outside her mind.

The men are full of pity:

Rapeseed flower yellow as gold,  
Clear water will shower it,  
The maiden's heart is icy and cold,  
Burning coal couldn't melt it.

After finishing her work, she walks home alone and shoots a vicious glare at those men who made such an effort on her behalf. She stares at them until the amorous men's lips tremble in fear and their heads hang like defeated roosters'.

In such situations, Zhenlian was the victor. But, her heart couldn't generate the pride and satisfaction that a victor should

feel. Rather, she felt like she had drunk the wrong medicine. That flavor... nobody can describe it.

Even now, with the God of Death approaching, when all her innards tear at her painfully and she's lying on the *kang* semi-conscious, too exhausted to open her eyes, she hears those words of Pock-marked Auntie in her ear with uncanny clarity.

"Shouye's Mum, if any of those shameless randy louts bother you again, just slap their donkey faces with a pair of bloody pants!"

From when did she start to feel that unbearably empty sadness and distress that forces tears from your eyes?

Five years later? Ten years later? Fifteen?

She couldn't remember clearly. But, she couldn't forget the day she suddenly heard the sound that drifted into her heart from an unseen world.

A woman, with only a child, is not complete. The Old Man in Heaven's plan for her includes men, men, men!

Nothing can replace them, nothing!

Men!

5

Half a blue sky, half a cloud,  
Half is burning red, oh,  
Half a mind, half a heart,  
Half is torn by whom, oh?

6

*Bang-da-bang-bang, bang-da-bang-bang, bang-da-bang-bang.*

It's the sound of the peddler's drum.

She immediately opened her eyes, twisted her head toward the window, and tried to sit up.

She opened her eyelids extraordinarily wide, and those eyes secretly revealed a timidity and unease. The thin layer of skin wrapped tightly around the bones of her face also revealed a touch of red.

Yufen ran over, held her mother-in-law in her arms, and gently supported her.

A man in tattered clothes was standing outside the window by the gate. He put down a ratty paper box in the doorway and rattled a drum as he stood there.

"Ma, what do you want to look at? There's nothing in the loads of those Gangu peddlers but ratty cut-price goods..."

Her head hung listlessly back down. The God of Death stabbed her with the pointed knife of despair, poking into the deepest parts of her heart.

She suddenly felt as if the whole room had begun to spin.

Yufen gently supported her as she lay back down.

"Tell that peddler to get going. He's disturbing your mother-in-law," Pock-marked Auntie instructed Yufen.

Yufen went downstairs.

The sound of the drum receded farther and farther into the distance. He was following the banks of the Huang River.

Peddler man, peddler man, hauls his wares,  
Take out eggs to trade for thread,  
I would like candy instead,  
But my Ma just spanks my bottom...

Shouye and a group of bare-assed boys just like him followed along behind the peddler man, singing as they ran. The dark-faced man was enjoying himself. He changed the rhythm of his drumming to match his dancing feet.

*Bang-da-da-bang, bang-da-da-bang, bang-da-da-bang....*

Finally, he twisted his face in a grimace toward the mischievous boys following him and sang a Henan *bangzi* folk song:

I, the peddler man, haul my wares to town,  
Tell the women and ladies to come 'round,  
My needles, thread, buttons, and belts set down,  
The buttons I sell with colors abound...

He sang as he walked, and he walked right into the alley. He put his load down in front of He Zhenlian's home, opened his trunk of merchandise, and stuck a bamboo pole horizontally across it. He took out black thread, white thread, and various belts to hang across the pole. He laid a white cloth on top of the trunk and arranged the multicolored buttons and thread on it. He made it look like a peony flower, so enticing that bees and butterflies danced around it.

Women heard the sound and came carrying their baskets of eggs, pinching their money in their hands, selecting what they needed and swapping for what they wanted.

Zhenlian was in the courtyard chopping vegetables for pig feed when Shouye pushed open the gate and ran in.

"Ma! The peddler man, the peddler..."

She smiled at Shouye, put down the cleaver, and wiped the vegetable pieces from her hands. She went inside to get the small bark box containing ten eggs, and she then led Shouye by the hand out the gate.

"You damned peddler, can't put your ratty old load anywhere else? Huh? There's a big area at the end of the alley that's empty, why did you...?! Git, git, git! Put it at the side!"

Zhenlian came out and saw Pock-marked Auntie with her back to her family's gate in front of the peddler. With spittle flying in all directions, she was telling the man to move to another place.

"Hey, hey, dear lady! The sun is as hot as an oven, but isn't it nice and shady here? I'm not blocking your gate, so what are you so angry about? Heh-heh, what's the matter?" The peddler grinned and offered an explanation while he picked out goods for folks.

"Ma!" Zhenlian shouted unhappily.



The wives of the Huang River terraced lands all call women of their mother's generation, "Ma."

Pock-marked Auntie turned and saw her nephew's wife. Embarrassed, she coughed twice, glared at the peddler, and walked off.

Several young wives stole a giggle.

The peddler sensed that the atmosphere wasn't quite right and looked at Zhenlian befuddled.

Zhenlian felt awkward all over. She squatted down, found a level spot, and carefully put down her bark box. She then looked into the peddler's trunk.

"Ma, I want candy!" Shouye demanded while sucking in spittle.

"Sir, why don't you give him a piece?"

"Yes ma'am."

Shouye impatiently grabbed the candy from the man's hand, turned, and ran off to find his pals.

"Ma'am, what else would you like?"

"Hmm. One thimble, a pack of small needles, three spools of white thread, and three spools of black thread."

"OK!"

The peddler put each item individually into her palm, then counted the eggs in the bark box.

"Still need to add three more."

"I'll send them out for you."

"Ah, ma'am, forget it, how about you bring out a bowl of water and some bread? I've been worried I wouldn't find a place to get a bite to eat."

"Uhhh..."

Zhenlian was embarrassed. She thought of Pock-marked Auntie and she thought of the young wives who had stolen a giggle just now.

"C'mon ma'am, how 'bout it? Some bread and a bowl of water to make up for three eggs! It's a great deal."

A woman standing nearby urged her to do it.

Zhenlian couldn't put him off anymore. She smiled and nodded toward the women and cautiously took out the eggs one at a time from the bark box. She placed the eggs in the peddler's egg basket, picked up her empty bark box, and walked into her house.

She poured a bowl of water, took out a piece of bread, and was just about to go back outside when her eyes fell on the gateway and she stopped cold.

She didn't know when the peddler had slipped in, but now he was sitting in the doorway with his back to the house.

The midday sun was baking hot. The peddler wore a white shirt that was so soaked with sweat that it was almost yellow. A large hole was worn through the shoulder, revealing glistening dark muscle.

Her heart skipped a beat. This image was so much like Shouye's father! When that man was still alive he also liked to sit in the gateway with his back to the house and chat with passersby in the alley while smoking. She always told him not to do that. The gateway was in the shade and she worried he'd catch cold.

Men are all the same, she thought. She didn't go forward, but turned around and went back into the room. She carried out the bed table and put it under the eaves in a cool, shady spot. She brought out a wooden stool, put it beside the table, and carried out the plate with the bread.

"Sir, come in and eat."

"Forget it, ma'am. I'll just eat right here." The peddler stood up and laughed.

"We don't have a custom here where guests eat in the doorway." Zhenlian picked up the kettle and topped off the bowl of water.

The peddler could only close his basket, wipe the dust off the seat of his pants, and walk in.

The peddler sat on the stool and picked up a hunk of barley bread. He didn't break off a piece, but took a big beautiful bite out of it. Chewing a couple of times, he then lifted the bowl and gulped down a mouthful of hot water.

Zhenlian walked over to the gate. With the gate open, the chickens would try to escape. But, she couldn't shut the gate for fear of gossip. All she could do was stand at the gate blocking the chickens' exit while she patched shoe soles.

This was the first time a strange man had been in her house since her husband died. And, she gave him food and drink.

She felt uncomfortable all over. She wanted to invite Pock-marked Auntie to sit with her, but a contrarian impulse strangely came over her and she abandoned that idea.

These traveling folk spend the whole year on the road. They've got it difficult, too, she thought. That big hole worn through the shoulder of his shirt made his shoulder muscles turn dark under the sun.

Who would mend it for him? He's so far from home. These people from other parts of the country... His wife must have to put her mind at ease and not worry that her husband would run into trouble. Fixing that worn out patch with a couple of stitches would be nice, too.

Subconsciously she stopped working with her hands. In a daze she watched him eat and drink.

This peddler, even when he was eating and drinking, was just like her husband. Look at him. A bite of bread, a gulp of water sucked down his throat, like an ox crazed by thirst.

In those days, she would stand beside her husband who had just finished working and continuously refresh his bowl with tea and shove bread into his hand. Lovingly she'd watch her husband eat his fill and wouldn't relax until he let out a loud burp...

The peddler stopped eating. He raised his head and noticed the way Zhenlian gazed at him.

"Ma'am. Look. I. Eh. I ate a couple of pieces of bread, but I didn't count...." He awkwardly explained with a sheepish expression, like a child who had caused trouble and been caught by his mother.

"What are you talking about? Who's counting bread? Just eat until you're full..." Zhenlian spoke disconnectedly then lowered her head and went back to patching shoes.

"So, I'll pick out a couple of more things for you." The peddler spoke as he rubbed the dark muscles on his shoulder exposed by the hole in his shirt.

"We may be poor here, but we've never had a rule about asking money from guests for a meal."

The peddler began eating again.

"Your shirt is torn." Zhenlian finally couldn't stop herself from pointing this out.

"Worn out by the pole."

"I'll... Why don't I mend it for you?"

"Forget it. I'm a traveler – what do I care?"

"It's no trouble. Take it off and I'll patch it with a few stitches."

As Zhenlian spoke, she walked into the room, found some white cloth and thread, and came back out.

"Take it off. You're a traveler out in the world, what are you so bashful about?"

Touched by her kindness, the peddler looked at Zhenlian, took off his shirt, and handed it to her.

The sour smell of sweat and smoke filled her nose.

Zhenlian began patching. Her actions were swift and sure.

"So, you spend all your time on the road?"

"I grew this mouth that needs to eat, so I've got to work my legs til they break. If I'm not on the road, how can I make a living?"

"Your folks at home must miss you."

"Eh, my wife was unlucky, passed away in 1960. Just the one son. He lives with his grandma."

Zhenlian's heart jumped. She raised her head to look at him. The peddler's face was covered with a cloud of sorrow as he smoked with his gaze lowered. The smell of the smoke was irritating.

Her hand began to shake. Several times her needle couldn't hit the spot it should have.

"Then, you never took another?"

"I worried that the boy would suffer for it. Besides, I'm away from home all year."

"Oh..."

A wave of grief washed over her heart.

"Ma'am, the chickens. Your chickens are running away!"

Surprised, Zhenlian poked her finger with the needle. She put down the shirt and ran toward the door. With some trouble she managed to force the chickens back through the gateway. But she still didn't dare shut the gate, so all she could do was herd the chickens into the coop and lock them up.

"These damn chickens, they're like bandits. They take off once that gate opens. I don't know how many eggs they lay, but they drive me crazy."

"Just raising hens ain't good enough. You need a rooster, too."

"Rooster? They don't lay eggs – all they do is eat. I ain't raising roosters."

"How much could a rooster eat? Without a rooster, the hens aren't at ease. A hen without a rooster is like a woman without a husband." The peddler spoke without thinking.

Zhenlian was stunned and flushed red down to the base of her neck. With a couple of perfunctory motions she finished mending the shirt and tossed it back to the peddler.

"Ma, Ma! I want a gun!"

Shouye, somehow worked into a frenzy, ran right into his mother's bosom like a wild calf, sending her reeling.

"Look at this kid, like he's not even human."

"But I want a gun! That kid, Jihuanbao, got one, so I want one, too!"

The peddler walked over, took both of Shouye's hands in his and looked at them carefully. His eyes shone with a different light.

"OK, call me 'Uncle' and I'll give you a gun."

"Uncle." Shouye imitated the words the peddler said a bit awkwardly.

"Hey! Well done! Good boy! C'mon, Uncle will get you a gun."

"Shouye! Get back here. We don't want anything from folks. Don't you know your mum doesn't have any money?"

Zhenlian yanked Shouye back with one hand.

"You..."

The peddler stopped short. He moved his jaw as if to speak, but then said nothing. He turned around and went out the gate to his basket. He took out a plastic water pistol from inside the basket, came back through the gate, and put it in Shouye's hands.

"Ma'am, let me speak frankly. Seeing you, seeing your son, it reminds me of my wife, and it reminds me of my son," he said as he ran his hand over the patch on the shoulder of his shirt. He turned around again and took out a handful of hemp from his basket, walked back into the courtyard, and put it in Zhenlian's hand. "Use this bunch of hemp thread to make some shoes for the boy. You're a good-hearted person. I'll remember your kindness."

The peddler's eyes grew wet. He smiled at Zhenlian and caressed Shouye's face. He turned and was just about to walk out the gate when Pock-marked Auntie came swinging those half-bound 'Liberation' feet like a ferocious deity storming toward Zhenlian's house.

"You sneaky peddler, how'd you wheedle you're way into someone's house? Huh?"

He Zhenlian, with her hands full of hemp, didn't know what to do. She quickly stuffed the hemp into Shouye's hands and said, "Put it down. It's just a handful of hemp. What's so strange about it?"

The peddler stared at Pock-marked Auntie a moment, then went out the gate, picked up his load, and slowly walked away.

Pock-marked Auntie cursed as she pointed at the peddler.

"He simply exchanges eggs for thread, and only because people are willing to. He doesn't steal or rob, so why are you being so mean?"

"You... you're too trusting!"

*Cluck-cluck, cluck-cluck, cluck-cluck.*

The chickens in the coop clucked grievously.

Zhenlian walked over, opened the door to the coop, and said, "These chickens are just troublemakers, clucking so much it's annoying."

"If a chicken doesn't cluck, isn't it a dead chicken?" Pock-marked Auntie pointed out.

7

The painter arrived.

Shouye's uncle ran upstairs, wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and reported the news, panting.

"Hurry up and start painting. We can't delay any longer."

Pock-marked Auntie listened for a moment with her ear up against her chest, "She's got one breath left, just waiting to give the coffin a look."

A sorrow more hopeless than death bore down on her and chewed away at her heart like the saw in the hands of the carpenter in the courtyard, blood splattering the saw cuts.

*Cockadoodledoo!*

Already after midday, somebody's rooster called out. The sound was extremely pleasing to the ear.

"A hen without a rooster is just like a woman without a husband."

The words of the peddler once again rang in her ears.

That was a big, sturdy Dominique rooster. Shortly after the peddler left, she brought it back from her mother's home.

The rooster commanded his loving harem, wandering around the courtyard playing, looking for food. And, naturally,

those shameless hens no longer ran away, but stuck close to the rooster.

*Cluck-cluck, cluck-cluck, cluck-cluck.*

The rooster found a bean and called his loving concubines to come eat it with sharp clucks.

An inexplicable jealousy flooded out of Zhenlian's heart. She despised the handsome rooster. She despised these shameless hens.

She lowered her head and tried to focus on her sewing. But she couldn't keep her attention on the work in her hands. The crazy muddled ideas in her head brazenly and shamelessly provoked her, making her feel helpless.

Just as she was about to go inside, the rooster jumped on the back of one of the hens right in front of her. He bit down on the hen's crest with his beak, and the hen's tail feathers opened up like a peacock. Flapping its wings, the tail of the rooster that had been raised high suddenly contracted...

*Pow!*

Zhenlian threw the scissors from her hand.

"You beast!" she cursed through gritted teeth.

Those deadly scissors didn't land anywhere else but directly in the head of that rooster who was amid the throes of passion. The rooster rolled over and lay on the ground, breast facing toward the sky. His wings flapped a couple of times, his legs jerked a couple of times, and in the midst of bliss he met a violent death.

*Gaw-gaw-gaw, gaw-gaw-gaw...*

The hen, who had been in the fog of passion, was scared out of her wits by this sudden attack. She flew running toward the gate and ran smack into Pock-marked Auntie as she entered. Pock-marked Auntie staggered back from the collision and instinctively closed her arms, catching the hen.

The hen, frightened and confused, unable to express the vast injustice she had suffered, could only sit with mouth agape, fluttering her round little eyes.



"You... why did you kill that rooster?" Pock-marked Auntie asked in surprise.

"He, uh... he, he was eating grain."

Zhenlian's face was so hot it felt about to catch fire. Her heart, too, turned into a frenzied rabbit.

"Ey... look at you! You've been out of sorts these past couple of days, and now the rooster eats a couple of grains and you go and beat him to death!?"

"I... I'm upset. I've got a headache."

"Headache? Just 'cause you have a headache you go around killing chickens? Get on the *kang* and get some rest. Have you taken any medicine?"

"No."

"I'll go look for some medicine for you. Oh, that poor rooster. I'll take it and make a broth. It'll be good for you."

Pock-marked Auntie nattered on, picked up the dead rooster, and walked out the gate. She turned back a step and closed the gate door tightly.

Zhenlian turned her head and raced into the room, shutting the door behind her. She laid her head on the *kang*, pulled the quilt over her head, opened her mouth, and began crying. She wept like a child who had a grievance as big as the sky. She bawled openly and loudly.

The walls of her compound were high, and with the gate and the doors shut tight, nobody could hear the sounds of her crying.

• • •

A large field, no one turns it over,  
With an ox, who will till it?  
Stomach lumps turn into an ulcer,  
When wronged, to whom can I tell it?

She began to have trouble sleeping at night.

*Bang-da-bang-bang, bang-da-bang-bang.*

The sound of the peddler's drum constantly resounded in her ears.

A kind of indescribable sense of loss began tormenting her. Wild, crazy ideas that she didn't want to consider came to her.

She remembered the peddler, and she remembered that patch she put on the shoulder of his shirt.

He doesn't have a wife. His eating and drinking were so much like Shouye's dad. He had that stubble of a beard. That stubble would certainly hurt... Damned fool, what're you thinking!?

His back is so broad! She should've washed that shirt for him. That irritating smoke. That irritating smell of man's sweat. Where will he spend the night tonight? These travelers never get to sleep on a warm *kang* all year long.

For a moment she felt that the *kang* she was sleeping on was too big, too empty. Like she was sleeping on a huge threshing ground.

Her son was a bit older now and was unwilling to tunnel in under her quilt, and even more unwilling to allow her to hug him. He slept alone on a bed.

Her bedding was so empty, so cold, never warming up through the whole night.

She might as well not sleep. She got up, lit an oil lamp, stuck out a leg, and began spinning the hemp into rope.

He left behind so much good hemp. This is really good hemp. He told me to spin it into rope to make shoes for Shouye. He said his wife was unlucky and passed away in 1960. He said he has a son.

She stopped working and looked for a long time at her sleeping son.

After looking at Shouye for a while, the shape of his face began to change. It grew larger and a stubble beard grew on his face.

The neighbor's cat was in heat and letting out wretched howls on the roof – crying, pleading, howling like a hungry child.

*Bang-da-bang-bang, bang-da-bang-bang.*

A rock rolled off the roof. The cat was scared away.

He Zhenlian, surprised for a moment, thought this was another wild man 'tossing a rock to test the waters'. She held her breath and her whole body shivered. With a puff she blew out the lamp and dove under the quilt.

Silence.

The sound of footsteps receded dejectedly into the distance.

She suddenly realized the sound of heavy tiptoeing was none other than a man from the village nicknamed 'Mute Donkey'.

That beast! Day and night he's always trying to get his hands on women.

"That Mute Donkey isn't even human! He forced me into a dark gully one day and nearly got my pants off! I got mad, so I grabbed him good in the crotch, made him squeal like a pig before he finally let go of me. Hahaha..." Mancang told her one day when she dropped in for a visit.

Mancang had become a chaste widow the spring before last. Originally, she'd planned to walk away, but some family members on her mother's side took a liking to her husband's property, which was nothing more than an old five-room house. So, they wouldn't let her walk away from it. With no other alternative, she put on the hemp mourning clothes.

But she wasn't a woman who took well to being alone. Without regard for her own situation, she laughed and joked with others as before, ignoring the village's 'rites and customs'. It got to be that all the men floated around her like bees circling a flower, and then cursed her viciously behind her back.

"You need to be careful, too. People's mouths... they're like deadly knives. We're not like other folks. We... our lives are tough. We've got to be patient..." She stutteringly tried to persuade Mancang.

"Bullshit! I don't care. Let them talk with their shit-filled mouths. They can curse with their piss-bucket faces and try to upset me. To hell with them!"

• • •

Night, so quiet it makes you agitated and gives you wild thoughts.

That lustful cat once again began wailing on the rooftop, wailing so much it made you ill at ease.

The house is so empty. The *kang* is so big. The quilts are so cold.

This night will probably not pass. It's going to be this dark for a year, ten years, a lifetime!

"A hen without a rooster is like a woman without a husband."

That damned peddler, in fact, was like a jab in the flesh.

*Bang-da-bang-bang, bang-da-bang-bang.*

He'll probably be back in a couple of days.

A kind of hazy, murky thirst emerged in her subconscious.

At this moment, the sense of loss that flooded her mind was replaced by an insatiable craving that flushed her face, made her heart jump. This craving grew increasingly intense, torturing her until she almost convulsed.

Mancang again appeared in her mind.

This woman who's fearless! She's so good, afraid of nothing, following her own nature. I want to be like her...

No, that's no good. This woman, sooner or later, will offend all of Camel Bend!

This damned place! Even the King of Hell resents it!

Heaven! Are you really still not light yet?

8

Dusk.

The crippled sun, wearied by a full day of wind and clouds, got stuck between those two toothy crags like camel humps in the mountains west of Camel Bend. It seemed as if it lacked energy to extricate itself, fading and listless, like a softened oil pancake reheated in a steamer.

The Huang River, drifts of golden waves, splashed golden droplets as it raced toward the east, like a young wife anxious to return to her mother's home.

The breaches in the top of the compound walls, eroded by wind and rain into the shape of battlements, under the crippled sun, cast heavy shadows on the ground, like an exhausted farmer sprawled on the yellow earth.

The white poplars, leaves completely fallen, cried audibly as they made their final farewell under the setting sun.

The inside and outside of the courtyard of Shouye's house were full of people standing around. They had come to see Granny Li's 'Complete Inner and Outer Coffin'.

Four young men lifted a bed plank, one at each corner, while daughter-in-law Yufen and Shouye supported Mum lying on the plank. Step after careful step, slowly descending the narrow steps, they placed her under the eaves of the house facing the courtyard.

A thick heavy coffin pressed down on two long benches in the middle of the courtyard. With a red lacquer base, the 'Red Phoenix Faces the Sun' was painted in gold on the sides. At the head of the coffin on both sides, standing in service of the 'final resting place', was the 'Golden Boy and Jade Girl'.

"Shouye's Mum, open your eyes and look – can you see it? This is the coffin that your filial son and daughter-in-law prepared for you."

Pock-marked Auntie first extended her old hooked finger in front of her eyes, waved it left and right several times, and then slowly moved it away, drawing her gaze in the direction of the coffin in the courtyard.

Her eyes opened.

Her heart filled with trepidation when she saw it.

The coffin crouched in front of her like a giant, red-haired malevolent spirit. Dark and uncanny, it seemed capable of pouncing on her at any moment and tearing her to shreds.

The muscles on her face twitched a couple of times and a wrenching pain rose in her chest.

Now this is an honorable coffin! For an old person, one who will ascend to Heaven, can you simply nail together six boards and call it a coffin? That's a wooden drawer! But for your coffin, Shouye and Yufen spent hard-earned money to buy good cedar timber, and they invited the old carpenter from Houshan to make it. Every mortise and each tenon was made according to the old customs, not the least bit slipshod in workmanship. Shouye's Mum, look! This old man is a true craftsman.

The old craftsman sat under the eaves in the antique wooden chair especially prepared for him. He drank tea from a large bowl inlaid with gold. Under the gaze of the curious onlookers surrounding him, his expression was unhurried and contented, as mighty as the court ministers of old.

"Dear sir, we farmers live way back in the mountain hollows. Our eye sockets are deep, so we have a limited view of the world, and our legs are short, so we have few chances to get around. We haven't much experience in the ways of the world. But today, thanks to the good fortune of Granny Li, we can experience this. Will you, dear sir, today explain the details of this coffin to us so that we may learn..." requested an old person humbly.

"Yes, of course, of course."

The old craftsman nodded, took a sip of strong tea, stroked his long beard, and slowly rose to his feet. He walked over to the coffin and once he opened his toothless mouth, drops of spittle spattered out.

"In making a coffin the most important detail is the dimensions. Look – this coffin cover is three-point-six inches thick, in reference to the thirty-six celestial stars. The lower block is seven-point-two inches tall, an oblique reference to the seventy-two earthly devils. The two-point-four inch thick sides speak to the twenty-four tales of filial piety, and the coffin bottom is one-point-eight inches thick, corresponding to the eighteen levels of Hell..."

"Oooh!"

"Aaah!"

"Look again. Within the coffin is another coffin. This is called the golden drawer. There is a crescent moon on the lid of the golden drawer, referred to as the crescent moon cover. The base is the seven-star base, with seven holes aligned with the seven stars of the Little Dipper. Metal, wood, water, fire, earth. Heaven, earth, sun, moon, stars. The basis of all things..."

"Master, how come we haven't seen you show the outer coffin?" An impertinent little brat suddenly interrupted the craftsman's speech. He had come to see the outer coffin, and all he could see now was the inner coffin.

The old craftsman turned his head and rolled his eyes in the direction of the insolent kid. "What do you foolish kids know?" He mysteriously lowered his voice, "Before reaching the burial ground, the outer coffin mustn't be seen! Why can't you simply wait until we carry out the deceased and bring out the outer coffin?"

The youngster regretted his impudence. He stretched out his neck and stuck out his tongue in embarrassment.

"Take another look. We use willow wood for the bottom of the coffin. Why? There are two explanations. First, 'willow base' is a pun on 'leave behind descendants'. This means we hope the deceased's descendants will be as numerous as leaves on a willow. Second, willow wood rots quickly and, because it does, the coffin base will quickly give way, allowing the deceased to return to the earth sooner. The earlier the deceased returns to the ground, the earlier she can draw on the geomantic powers of the earth, and the sooner her descendants can get rich and become a wealthy household. Golden lid, silver sides, and bean-curd base, the explanation for which is..."

It had been a long time since she'd been downstairs. Although the air was a bit chilly, she felt completely comfortable at that moment. The women-folk surrounded her like stars supporting the moon. Some of them tucked in her quilt, some

helped prop her up, and others quietly wiped away tears of sadness from her face.

Whatever the old craftsman was saying, she didn't hear it, and she didn't want to hear it. She simply struggled to keep her eyelids open and greedily looked far into the distance.

She noticed an earthen cliff face on the shady side of a slope, above a broken mound blackened by smoke, which the setting sun had painted gold. If you glanced at it just right, it resembled a golden phoenix rising and dancing, so striking to the eyes, gold and jade in glorious splendor.

"Mancang has jumped in the river!"

She unexpectedly heard a voice. Her whole body shook like a sifter and the teeth in her jaw clinched tight. The corners of her mouth were pulled to one side as if some unseen person had hooked them with his finger.

"Hurry and move her inside! You good-for-nothing shit-eating nappy-headed kids!" Pock-marked Auntie, flustered, yelled instructions at the young men carrying the bed plank, spurring them into action.

The old craftsman was abandoned just as he was about to reach the high point of his lecture. Faced with this chaotic scene, he was full of regret.

"Mancang jumped in the river! Mancang jumped in the river! Mancang jumped in the river! ..."

The whole time they struggled to get Granny Li back onto the *kang* this sound exploded in her ears like thunder. Pock-marked Auntie used her bent-hook fingers to massage her chest. The sound became louder and louder...

One early spring morning a high-pitched sound full of surprise and fear wafted over from the men beside Camel Bend Bridge.

"Mancang has jumped in the river!"

Somebody fired a rifle into the air. The sound was sharp and crisp.



He Zhenlian, sweeping in the courtyard, was so scared by the shouting and gunfire that goose bumps rose all over her body. Her scalp tingled as if electrified and her legs went weak.

A sense of sorrow produced in response to some kind of inauspicious omen washed over her heart.

Throwing aside the broom she ran out the door and followed the crowd to the bridge.

The early spring morning was heart-piercingly cold. The leaves continued to hide inside the bodies of the trees, not daring to poke out their heads. The color of the tree bark, although bravely striding ahead, had changed from ash-gray to a light green, but because the leaves had not come out to encourage it, the bark still appeared lonely and sad, crying in the wind of the early spring morning.

Those who had discovered that Mancang had jumped in the river were none other than those gun-toting civilian militiamen who had spent the whole night in the early spring wind preparing to capture the lascivious woman with a cheating man.

According to militiaman Mute Donkey's report, a man slipped into Mancang's home when night fell.

"She jumped off the roof from the back of the house. She never came out the front gate! By the time we'd figured out we'd been duped and gave chase, the river water had already pulled her under without a trace," Mute Donkey reported with a trace of regret.

"The man must have jumped off the back and escaped, too."

"..."

Mancang's corpse was fished out of the Huang River at a bend downstream. It was carried to the side of the Camel Bend Bridge and placed by a thick-barked, leafless elm.

What a corpse it was!

The waters of the Huang River had washed every part of her body, making her milky white flesh even more clean, hallowed, and dignified.

Her chest was bare. Two rich, springy, and fleshy breasts, like two bejeweled pagodas that would make any hardened man kneel on the ground and bow his head in prayer, fearlessly stood erect in the cold spring morning under the deep blue, nearly cloudless sky. Eyes slightly closed and mouth slightly open, one hand was placed on her full-figured thigh, while the other hand was wrapped in her disheveled black hair. Truly a picture of 'The Village Girl Lying Drunk in Early Spring!'

"Camel Bend will lose its reputation over this! That randy ass!"

"She had no business being a chaste widow! She went around in rut wearing her ancestor's hemp mourning clothes! Only two and a half years and she couldn't hold out! What a beast!"

"And she wanted to set up a commemorative plaque while being a prostitute!"

The women cursed her.

The men cursed her.

The elders cursed her.

"Burn her! Burying her in Camel Bend will pollute our environment!"

Mute Donkey strode to the front with a 762 rifle pointed down. He stuck the rifle into her breast and pushed hard on it. Gritting his teeth he said, "Right, tie her up with leather belts and burn her under Dark Cliff!"

Zhenlian almost fainted. Her mind felt as if someone had stirred it up with a pig-slopping stick. She bit her lower lip, wiped tears from her eyes, and turned to leave, when somebody grabbed her by the arm.

It was Pock-marked Auntie.

"Shouye's Mum, don't leave. We've got to see how this shameless hussy comes to her end! A person living in the world of light has to be right and proper in others' eyes. But her? Bah!"

Pock-marked Auntie pushed her into the inner circle of onlookers.

Leather belts, like poisonous snakes, unfeelingly bound Mancang's two lofty bejeweled pagoda breasts. They bound her full-figured thighs. Her soft-as-silk body was transformed into a lump of flesh.

The men hoisted Mancang's corpse on a pole and carried it on their shoulders to Dark Cliff, where they put it down. They built a fire pit, dug out a furnace door for adding kindling, and then placed Mancang on the kindling pile in the pit.

Several elders, attaching much importance to the matter, poured out pure, homemade barley liquor from a plastic jug. They made an offering to Heaven, earth, and the mountain gods, and then each of them raised their head back and gulped down eight mouthfuls. They poured the rest of the liquor over Mancang's body.

Mute Donkey struck a match and tossed it on the kindling. Blue smoke rose up as Mancang was engulfed in flames, starting with her long, elegant hair.

The goddess in the flames wasn't yielding from the struggle. The flames began licking her eyelids. Her eyes grew larger as she stared, unbendingly staring at the people destroying her flesh.

The onlookers turned their heads away one after the other, and their bodies felt as though they were infested with countless red ants.

The women sobbed. Zhenlian, on the other hand, was like a chicken that had been knocked silly with a club. She stood dumbly to one side, her face as white as a starched sheet.

"Yeah! Add more kindling and pour on more kerosene! This shameless hussy will still be a randy ass in the afterlife!" Pock-marked Auntie, filled with righteous anger, cursed the 'tempering' Mancang.

The fire broke through the leather belts binding Mancang. Unexpectedly, her charred leg suddenly kicked with tremendous force, breaking the earthen beam between the fire-pit and the furnace door. Clumps of earth and embers flew into the air and

crashed onto the heads, faces, and necks of the unsuspecting onlookers.

After folks let out very short, but extremely sharp, screams, they scattered in all directions like a stampeding herd of cattle. Some fell into the ditch and brayed like mules.

Only one person didn't run.

Standing before Mancang, who in life and death implacably resisted convention, Zhenlian evinced not a bit of fear. She slowly knelt before her.

She began to cry. She cried piteously, tears falling like raindrops onto the yellow earth, oozing and melding into a puddle.

She crawled on the ground, her hands ferociously scratching at the hard earth until the mud-filled blood from her fingertips was dark red.

Her wails became longer and longer.

She cried until she was mute.

The cliff wall gradually blackened from the smoke. From a distance it seemed like a huge, black wordless sign. Moreover, it looked like a gigantic, warning-filled judgment.

All of Camel Bend was enveloped in a dark cloud that day, suffused with the thick odor of roasted flesh.

He Zhenlian became sick.

Pock-marked Auntie tended her with great care for a long time, but all she could hear was the shouting and yelling from her dreams...

"Mancang has jumped in the river!"

Granny Li spoke softly, vaguely.

"What? Huh? Mancang?"

Yufen was surprised. She didn't know who Mancang was.

"Huh? Why's she suddenly thinking about Mancang? She's been dead for well over a dozen years..." Pock-marked Auntie spoke as she turned her head toward the window.

The setting sun had already dropped behind the mountain. The golden light on Dark Cliff had long ago vanished as the whole cliff was gradually engulfed in night.

Half a blue sky, half a cloud,  
 Half is burning red, oh;  
 Half a mind, half a heart,  
 Half is torn by whom, oh?

On the festival held on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, the Double Fifth, they had rare good weather.

The sky was a deep blue, several light clouds drifted idly, wandering aimlessly about the sky.

This is the day to get reeling drunk in the terraced lands of the Huang River.

Swallows, like tiny missiles, rise into the air, chirping and singing. They fly straight into the heights of the sky and then dive headlong toward the earth. Then, just before they hit the ground, they again soar into the sky in a hanging curve.

The men go out early in the morning and cut willow branches from the forests, which they put on the eaves of the house and above the door lintels. Then, they grab from what their wives prepared either a bowl of noodles, or a couple of eggs, or a bottle of oil, or several stalks of chives or coriander, and stuff a bottle of liquor in their pocket. They go down to the Huang River bank among the willows in groups of three or five and set up a 'three-stones and a pot' campfire where they begin to cook noodles. After they eat they begin drinking. They have straight barley liquor, without any snacks to eat while they drink. They gulp it down with the bottle directly to their lips as if blowing a horn.

Once they're drunk they lie on their backs in the grass and sing 'Little Man'. They sing 'Fifth Brother Ma'. They sing 'Cutting Chives'. Once they tire of singing they sleep. They sleep so soundly that biting insects, buzzing bees, chirping cicadas, and

singing birds don't bother them. They sleep until their wives and kids pull a cart down to haul the 'household head' back home.

Women aren't allowed to participate in this picnic.

In the morning, once they've sent off their husbands, the women prepare food for celebrating the Double Fifth. The terraced lands of the Huang River valley don't produce glutinous rice, and the women don't know about southerners' custom of eating *zongzi* on the Double Fifth. So, they prepare cold noodles, cold bean jellies, wheat-gluten jellies, and oily cakes stuffed with chives. Once they're done with these preparations, they feed them to the kids. They don't throw food into the river like southerners. The farmers around here have never heard of the old man Qu Yuan who jumped into the Yangluo River on this day. They've only heard old folks say that you should not drink water from the river on the Double Fifth, because frogs bathe in the river on this day and dirty the water.

Hehuang region women embroider aromatic amulets on the Double Fifth. Adults and kids wear these colorful amulets to show their joy in celebrating the holiday.

Embroidering amulets requires a skilled hand. Clever, nimble women and young wives, using scraps of colored cloth and thread, embroider animals of the zodiac, radishes, tobacco pouches, and linked-hearts amulets in various colors and shapes. From as small as a thumb to as large as a tea bowl, they fill them with herbs picked from crags in cliffs, so the amulets are both pretty and fragrant, with lively figures and an arresting scent.

Amulets are also exchanged among young people of this region as tokens of affection.

The women dress in colorful clothes and walk the alleys with spring breezes in their hair. The alleys and pathways become a world of women's laughter and fun. The colorful amulets in their hands are shown off, stolen, grabbed, and evaluated, like an opera on a stage, an ancient opera that's been sung for centuries.

He Zhenlian closed her gate tight. She had no interest in mixing with these women.

There were no willow branches on the eaves of her house and no greenery to be found on the lintels of her doors. Her husband was dead. As a chaste widow she had no interest in all that.

Her son was a bit older and unwilling to stick close to her all the time. He had his own world. Her mother had arrived a couple of days earlier and Shouye was led away by his grandmother.

Pock-marked Auntie had also been invited away by her daughter. She was taken away riding a donkey. Her daughter said she missed her mother and wanted her mother to come stay with her for a couple of weeks.

She felt increasingly alone with her son and Pock-marked Auntie away. A feeling of irritation that couldn't be dispelled blocked up her heart. She couldn't swallow it, and she couldn't spit it out.

The hens that had lost their rooster clucked uneasily. They had little interest in scratching around for food.

I shouldn't have killed that rooster, she thought mournfully. How could those scissors be so accurate? Just like that, he fell right over, kicked his legs a couple of times, and died.

They're just like me now.

A woman without a husband is like a hen without a rooster.

I'll get another rooster. I'll get a big, strong, beautiful rooster, and never hit it again. She thought she'd do it, so she'd do it. Just as long as the hens aren't lonely.

She almost cried.

She again thought of that peddler who had encouraged her to get a rooster.

It's been more than a year, a full year, and he hasn't shown his face in Camel Bend once.

Maybe that patch on his shoulder has been worn through again by the pole? Men without wives have it tough, too. No one in their hearts, nothing to look forward to. If he has a headache or a

fever there's no one to give him a bowl of water or an extra blanket.

The 'white rabbit clutching a radish' amulet she would give Shouye was already embroidered. She added a couple of long red fringes. It was really nice.

I'll take it to him at Mum's house in a couple of days, she thought.

There was still a small piece of silk fabric in her hand. What else should I embroider? A linked-hearts amulet? Huh – to give to whom? Linked-hearts amulets are for giving to sweethearts. Sweetheart?

Her heart was so empty. Ever since her husband died this empty heart of hers had never been filled by anyone.

He's dead. He got off easy. If I miss him, he won't come back to life. If I pine for him, he won't even visit me in my dreams.

She'd heard there are two holes in a woman's heart. One is for her sons and daughters, and one is for her husband. When there is no more husband, that hole is left empty. But that hole will never fill. It's still empty. Who am I waiting for?

There are so many people watching the gate to that hole, guarding it, who would dare try to enter?

She thought of Mancang again, and that Dark Cliff blackened by smoke.

She remembered Pock-marked Auntie.

A cold shiver shook her body.

She was stunned. Linked-hearts! While not even aware of it she had embroidered a blood-red linked-hearts amulet!

You rotten woman, who do you think you're giving that to? Her face flushed and her heart jumped, forcing her to curse herself...

The weather in the Huang River valley is like the face of Sun Wukong – it changes in a flash.

Toward the evening of the Double Fifth, dark black clouds like a band of malevolent bandits suddenly pressed down from one side of the mountains.



The suffocating rumble of thunder shook the ground.

Raindrops the size of fingertips fell scattered across the soil. Once they hit the warm yellow earth they immediately mixed together into puddles the size of coins.

The elders understood as soon as they saw it. A bout of evil rain was brewing in the clouds. A disaster could fall on the heads of the folks of Camel Bend at any moment.

The drunken men immediately sobered up and stared round-eyed at the sky and then at the crops.

"Rains are coming!!!"

The elders, having realized it first, ran up the small mountain west of the village and screamed as loudly as they could.

The village men sprang into action one after the other. From a small earthen room in the hilltop they rolled out an old, rusted-red cannon left behind from the Qing Dynasty. Two men supported the barrel of the cannon, adjusting the angle. Another man found a pouch of gunpowder, and from a black cow horn inlaid with copper and bound in leather he poured an ample amount of gunpowder into the cannon and pounded it even. They then stuffed in a shell the size of a pigeon covered in sticky mud as red as the blood of a woman's menses or that of a white dog. They lit the wormwood fuse and pointed the canon at the clouds. The cannon went off with an earth-shattering "*Ka-boom!*"

For so many years now they've battled the sky with this old cannon. On a number of occasions they've driven back the Old Man in Heaven's malevolent advances.

But today it only made him angrier. His fiery tongue stuck out and a bolt of lightning knocked over the several-hundred-year-old 'spirit willow' covered in red ribbons at the village gate.

Black smoke billowed from the trunk of the 'spirit willow'. A couple of crows that had hidden in its hollows fell to the ground like chunks of charcoal.

Everyone was stunned.

"Should we keep fighting?" the timid ones asked the elders.

The wispy goatees on the elders' faces began trembling. They didn't know what to do.

"Fight!" Mute Donkey suddenly shouted.

"Right, right! Put in more shells and add more powder!" the men shouted in unison.

Again the sound of the cannon went off, shaking the earth, which began sliding down the mountain.

Heaven began its counter-attack. Hail the size of eggs crashed down, smashing leaves from the trees. The crows hiding in the branches, hit by the crossfire, fell to the ground one after another.

"*Ka-boom!*" The men gritted their teeth and continued battling the dark clouds.

The elders, faces as red as the earth, retreated into the earthen room. Facing west, they dropped to their knees and began chanting and kowtowing like they were pounding garlic.

The cannon was finally silenced.

In every alley and path, white pellets jumped along the ground.

Like a mouse trapped in a blind alley by a cat, He Zhenlian watched the hail crash into the ground and listened to the exploding thunder that was about to split Camel Bend, no, the whole world, into two halves.

She crouched beside one of the house's pillars as her body shivered from cold. Her eyes were filled with fear as her teeth rattled against each other.

Wouldn't it be nice if her son were by her now? If there were a man here, there'd be nothing to be afraid of.

But she was alone in this big courtyard. Nobody to give her solace, even to say, "Don't be afraid, I'm here!" No one.

Suddenly the gate was thrown open and a person charged in like a mad cow.

"Heavens!" she screeched in an odd voice and jumped to her feet.

"Ma'am...."

"You... What are you doing here?"

"Me? Don't you recognize me? A year ago..."

His whole body was soaking wet. His hair was stuck to his head as if a cow had licked it. Beads of water rolled off his face one after the other like beans.

"It's... you..."

"Yeah, it's me."

A flash of lightning lit up the whole of Camel Bend, including the suddenly ghostly white face of Zhenlian.

She suddenly recalled this very scene twenty years later on the morning Shouye married, when the new bride, Yufen, walked through the gate to the sound of deafening firecrackers. But every time she recalled this event, facing the peddler who had suddenly burst into her courtyard like an apparition and stood before her eyes, she could never figure out exactly what it was that flashed across her mind then.

"Yufen, where are your mother-in-law's burial clothes?"

"In the cabinet."

"Take them out and put them on her."

"Now? Put them on her now?"

"Yes, it'd be best to put them on now. The old folks have a custom that they should put on their coffin clothes while they're still alive. Otherwise, if they wait until they've already ascended to Heaven, then it would be a waste to put them on."

"OK. Grandma, I'll go get them."

Granny Li was conscious of the fact that this grandma and granddaughter-in-law would once again turn her over. They would put the burial clothes on her.

11

"You... how did you get in here?"

"They said I was skimming off the top, they didn't confiscate my goods, they just locked me up inside the commune..."

"You... stole ladies' tops?"

"No, I didn't steal tops, they accused me of speculative profiteering..."

Zhenlian was terrified. Her heart bashed against her chest like a wild rabbit trapped inside a cage trying to smash its way out.

"But, the world is such a big place, why did you run to my house? Ah? You... you don't know me..."

"I've been to your house before, I know you're a good person, a good woman. I swear to god, I've never done anything bad before. I'm a good person relying on my own two legs to make a living. I... I've been running for three days now, hiding in the mountains, sleeping in fields. I'm starving, ma'am. Let me get out of the rain and let me have a bite to eat. I've got to go back home, I have a son at home, he... he's waiting for me, if I... ma'am... I beg you, I... I'll get down on my knees..."

With a plop, the peddler actually knelt in front of her. In the darkened doorway, Zhenlian could only see the smoldering, pleading gaze radiating from his sunken eyes.

"Sir... you... why are you acting like this, a full-grown man, why are you..."

She rushed toward him and swiftly grabbed the peddler's ice-cold, yet fiery-hot arms.

The peddler lay there as if he were dead. She only just realized that the peddler's head had dropped to his chest, his entire body was collapsing like a snowman on a hot day.

"You... my god! You're sick!"

"I... I didn't forget your great kindness, your great virtue..."

"You... can you walk? I'll support you. Come inside."

The peddler didn't so much stand as was lifted up by Zhenlian with all of her strength.

"Oh no! Water... water got inside the house!"

Zhenlian suddenly realized she had stepped into water up to her calves.

In fact, the water had already reached the porch. If it wasn't for the doorstep it would've flooded the house already. In all the chaos, she hadn't even noticed – the drain was stopped up!

The hail had stopped already, but the torrential downpour was just picking up.

Zhenlian became anxious. If the water got inside, the whole house would collapse! She let go of the peddler and was just about to dive into the courtyard when the peddler grabbed her.

Propping himself up on the pillar, the peddler asked, "The drain, where is it?"

"East, in the northeastern corner under the rock slab..."

The peddler forcefully pulled Zhenlian over, vigorously shook his head a few times, and stumbled toward the courtyard ditch.

"You're sick, don't go!" Zhenlian chased after the peddler to stop him.

The peddler's arm was so strong. With a slight push, he almost shoved Zhenlian down into the water, "This work ain't for women."

She staggered a little but regained her balance. She felt her strength returning.

"Toss the hoe over."

Zhenlian, having recouped her senses, wiped away the rainwater covering her face, and hurriedly ran into the thatched storeroom. She grabbed a hoe and waded back through the water.

The peddler took the hoe. Piece by piece, he pried open the mud-covered rock slabs over the drain. Finally, he found the place it was blocked and fished out a clump of muddy grass.

The water level immediately began to lower when the drain cleared.

Oppressive thunder rolled across the edge of the sky.

Raindrops splashed on the ground.

The world had once again returned to the time of the great prehistoric flood. But this time, that careless Noah hadn't thought to prepare a second ark to save all living creatures.

The peddler used both hands to prop himself on the hoe, braced his legs, and stood steady next to the drain like the Great Yu, tamer of floods.

"This drain hasn't been cleared in years, where's your husband? What's he doing? If the water makes the house collapse, it... could... kill... someone."

He spat out a few words with trembling lips.

"Husband? My husband, he..."

All of a sudden, the peddler's body, which had been standing firm, bent over like an overstuffed woolen satchel, and he fell heavily into the mud in the courtyard.

Zhenlian rushed over to pull him up, but he only strained to help her a few times, then stopped moving entirely.

Only his gasping, loud and heavy gasping, proved he wasn't dead. His hunger, high fever, and exhaustion had caused him to faint.

Many years afterward, every time she remembered this, she always wondered how she had so much strength that night that she could drag a big tall man into the house. She suspected that there was some spiritual force helping her, because normally she couldn't even carry a bag of wheat.

The downpour pushed the last rays of light under the horizon.

The house was pitch-black inside.

She laid the peddler down on the floor of the main room and felt around on top of the flour cabinet for a match. Her shaking hands snapped half the pack of matches before she clumsily lit the ink-bottle kerosene lamp.

The room lit up.

Mud from the peddler's body mixed with the mud from hers and soaked into the floor, turning it into a swamp.

A loving motherly instinct took hold of every nerve in her body. She forgot that an unfamiliar man from another village, a fugitive, was lying on her floor.

She treated him like her own child, one who had misbehaved and accidentally jumped into a puddle of mud. Holding a dry towel, she first wiped clean the peddler's face, which was covered with a black stubbly beard, and then she wiped his neck, which had been forged into a copper color by the sun, wind, and rain. Next, she exerted her strength to lift him into a sitting position, and while squatting on the ground with his head resting on her leg, she unbuttoned his shirt, which stuck to his body like a wet rag. She peeled it off as if peeling a scallion. She wiped his body dry, then stuck her hands under the peddler's arms, and like hauling a dead pig, she dragged him into her bedroom and rested the top half of his body on the *kang*. The mud on his legs continued to drip down the edge of the *kang*.

She unbuckled the peddler's belt.

Just at this moment, the two lumps of flesh sticking out of her chest began to pulse. Her face turned bright red.

She clenched her jaw, closed her eyes, and using her two shaking hands, yanked forcefully, and the peddler's entire body was stripped bare.

The peddler instinctively stirred, but quickly stopped moving. His mouth was half open and the expression on his face was like Christ suffering on the cross.

Zhenlian really wanted to sob. Men... men are so ugly, yet in the middle of her life as a chaste widow, this man appears and reveals all of his ugliness for her to see, for her to touch. How can this be!?

She moved. She cleaned, and she did so very attentively.

Finally, she lifted the peddler's legs and got the naked man onto her *kang*, gave him a pillow and pulled the covers over him, even covering his head, like a corpse.

She didn't allow herself any extra thoughts, self-pity, or rationalizations of her own feelings. She only thought, "The

peddler has a high fever, the *kang* has to be hot so he can sweat it out."

She ran out of the house, picked up an armful of straw and stuffed it into the *kang* furnace. After she lit the straw, she carried out a full bag of wheat chaff and stuffed that into the furnace, too. Thick black smoke rising from the furnace choked her so badly she coughed relentlessly. She covered her nose and went inside to feel the *kang*. It was already hot.

She then realized her entire body was exhausted and weak, limp as a drooping willow bough.

A person's strength has its limits, and what's more, she was a woman. In this short period of time, she had overtaxed her own strength, energy, and self-control.

Yet, this was just the beginning. There were still many things she needed to do. For example, she needed to change into some dry clothes.

She took out a set of clothes from the cabinet, walked out of the main room, and closed the curtains on the door. In the dark, she wiped herself clean and changed clothes. In the light, she ran her hands through her messy hair to straighten it. She brought the kerosene lamp into the kitchen, found the powdered raw ginger, poured out a thermos of hot water, picked up a bowl, and went to the bedroom.

She poured out a bowl of hot water and left it on the *kang* table to cool, then used a spoon to stir while blowing on it, until it would no longer burn the mouth. Only then did she pull back the quilt covering the peddler's head.

The peddler groaned with his mouth agape, a few dry, bloody scabs sticking up from his lips. The teeth he never brushed had assumed the color of rust.

She half-knelt on the *kang*, lifted the peddler with difficulty, rested his head on her body, brought over the blue-rimmed terra-cotta bowl, and gave him some water to drink.

The dazed peddler drank a few big gulps. She put down the bowl and shook his head with her hand, "Are you feeling better?"



The peddler silently opened his mouth.

"Don't worry, eat some powdered ginger, sweat it out, the fever will break."

She picked up the powdered ginger and carefully poured some into the peddler's mouth. She then brought over the bowl of water, and when she poured the water into his mouth, he swallowed.

Zhenlian placed the peddler's head back on the pillow, pulled the quilt over his head, stood up, retrieved another quilt from the top of the cabinet, and pulled it over the peddler.

The heavy thunder, like an enormous stone roller, rolled over the flat, thin wood-frame roof. The house beams groaned.

Another bolt of lightning flashed toward her window like a sword of light. The room became deathly pale.

Zhenlian felt shivers run through her body. A kind of indescribable dread stole into each of her pores like a thief. Along with this extreme dread, an ominous premonition crept into her head.

"Mancang has jumped in the river!"

She heard a menacing sound emanating from Hell.

She felt as if every little wooden square in her window had a pair of malicious, prying eyes.

Mute Donkey's upside-down gun jabbed her breasts.

Her lips were uncomfortably dry. Kerosene had been poured down her throat and lit ablaze, the flames surged out of her mouth.

She leapt up and closed the curtains tight. However, the curtains still kept moving, as if someone was trying to lift them up.

It's the wind! It's the goddamned wind! She encouraged herself. She turned her head away and no longer looked at the window.

He'll be better after he's sweated it out, right? Old Man in Heaven, please let him get better, please let him leave. I'm a chaste widow, yet I let a man from another village sleep naked in my bed in the middle of the night! If he doesn't get up when it gets light

tomorrow morning, what will I do? If the neighbors see, then even jumping into the Huang River won't wash me clean!

Idiot, what ghost muddled your thoughts? Why didn't you just push him out and close the door? You... what did you do while you were all mixed up? Who is he? Why do you care for him so much?

She began weeping, tears pouring from her eyes like rain outside the window.

At that moment, she really wanted to raise her fists and mindlessly beat him, beat that damned peddler awake from his daze, drive him out without explanation, drive him out of the main gate... who cares if he lives or dies!

The two quilts on the peddler's body began to shake, harder and harder, like a flag flying in the wind.

He feels cold!

With the shaking, the peddler's gasping became increasingly pronounced. His labored breathing was like that of an old ox that had stepped into a swamp and couldn't pull himself out.

The sound of Zhenlian's weeping was overtaken by the sound of shaking. She took down all the heavy things from the top of the cabinet and put them on the peddler's body to press him down, but he was still shaking, still gasping. She became anxious and threw herself on top of him too.

The gasping subsided, the peddler's body stopped shaking.

"Hot..." Not even fifteen minutes later, the peddler started groaning again.

Zhenlian then took off each of the things she had put on the peddler, leaving only the two quilts. The peddler said it was still hot, so Zhenlian pulled off one of the quilts also. The peddler still wouldn't lie calmly. He flailed his arms and kicked his legs, trying to throw off the last quilt.

When Zhenlian went to force his leg down, his arm sprang up, and when she pressed down on his arm, his legs kicked up again.

She grew anxious, and with a flip, she landed on him as if riding a donkey, her two knees pinning down the peddler's legs, her two hands holding down his arms.

"Can't you keep calm for a while? When you've sweated it out, then it'll be OK. You'll feel better soon, OK?"

The peddler didn't have any more energy to struggle and quieted down. His breathing gradually calmed, too.

She let out a long sigh.

When Zhenlian was just about to get up, she inadvertently discovered the position she was in and felt embarrassed. Even worse, she couldn't remember when the peddler had gripped her two delicate hands in his own sweaty, rough ones.

That sudden, primitive impulse that all people can understand caused Zhenlian to shake as if she also had a high fever. The man's irresistible breath almost made this woman, who had been cut off from men for more than ten years, faint.

Fantasy, "Don't be afraid, he's your husband!"

Reason, "No, your husband is dead, you're a chaste widow!"

The peddler stirred. In surprise, Zhenlian quickly pulled her hands back and rolled off his body.

She cursed herself, silencing her wild imagination.

She carried the blue-rimmed terra-cotta bowl over and drank the now-cold water that the peddler had left. She calmed her emotions.

"His fever should've broken," she thought. She involuntarily stretched out her hand and felt his forehead. Sure enough, that drenched forehead had begun to cool.

"Ay – people all turned into demons, and I was a wild rabbit, and they were chasing me all over the place. Good people can't have happy lives in this world..."

The peddler had finally awoken from his daze. When Zhenlian realized this, he had already lifted up the quilt.

The peddler stared at her in shock, as terrified as if he'd seen a dead man come back to life.

"I... what happened to me?"

He tried to sit up as he spoke. Zhenlian pushed him back down.

"Don't move. You've just sweated out a fever. If you catch cold again, you could die."

"I... how come I don't remember anything?"

"You had a high fever and became confused."

"But how come it's just you? Where's your husband?"

"He died a long time ago."

"You're a widow... you live alone?"

"Mmhm."

"Ohhh..."

Beads of sweat reappeared on the peddler's head. Speechless and embarrassed, he felt around his own naked body. He was as frantic as a black bear caught in a trap.

"I... I didn't know, ma'am, I didn't do it on purpose, I really didn't know! This... I... I should be struck down by lightning!"

"Ay – What're you saying all that for? Under the circumstances, if you're feeling better, then that's all that matters."

"But you... my clothes..."

"They were soaked. I... helped you... take them off..."

Zhenlian lowered her head in embarrassment. She couldn't find a suitable place to put her hands and her gaze was like the light of a kerosene lamp, drifting nearer and farther, never settling on one thing.

"This isn't good. Give me my clothes. I have to leave. I can't do anything that'll go against my conscience." The peddler wanted to get up.

"Do you feel any better?"

"Yes, much better."

"I'll go make some food for you. After you eat, you'll have some strength."

"I'm putting you through so much trouble."

"Don't worry."

Zhenlian sat up and tucked the peddler in under the quilt again.

She went to the kitchen and made a batch of noodles with eggs for the stranger. She used the little bit of flour she had left and the few eggs she had hoped to exchange for salt.

The peddler wolfed down three big bowls in bed. Anyone who saw the way he ate would be envious.

"You don't want any more?"

"My stomach's already swollen into a drum. I haven't eaten for three days. If I eat too much, I'm afraid I'll burst."

Zhenlian cleaned up the bowl and chopsticks.

"I've thought about it for a while. I can't stay at your house anymore, if someone sees... how can we explain it?"

"It's all the same whatever they say."

"That would ruin you! I can't hurt you!"

"And I can't let a person as sick as you run off into the night while it's still raining."

"Good woman, let me put on my clothes and leave."

Zhenlian was at the end of her wits.

If he leaves while it's still dark outside and anything happens, none of it would be my fault. I helped him as best I could, I didn't let him down.

No, he's still sick, if by chance something bad happened...

Tears escaped from the peddler's eyes. She couldn't help but wipe them. The peddler clasped both of her hands tightly.

A warm current flowed into her body in the opposite direction.

Death, life, this is the way it is!

Zhenlian stepped onto the *kang*.

"Don't be afraid, I'm a woman and I've already thrown caution to the wind. As a man, what are you afraid of? Go ahead and sleep, and if the sky collapses, I'm here to hold it up!"

The rain stopped.

Only the clouds remained in the sky like a thick layer of cotton wadding, wet and heavy.

On this night, the entire world had been jumbled up by the thunder and the rain.

When Granny Li recalled this fugitive peddler and her extraordinary actions of that stormy night, she was always struck by how true it is that sometimes a person is such a coward they are scared by a mouse, but other times they're so courageous they don't fear the sky falling or the earth splitting open. At that time, it was like she had the courage of a tiger. She hid that peddler in her house for three entire days!

The gods didn't know, the ghosts didn't know, and Pock-marked Auntie couldn't have dreamt it.

Those three days! In Zhenlian's entire life, it was only in those three days that she really experienced the sweet, sour, bitter, spicy flavors of life.

In those three days that were as long as three years and as short as the blink of an eye, the defensive walls this woman had painstakingly constructed fell apart completely. She allowed the peddler to walk into the hole in her heart that had been empty for so long. She entirely forgot about Mancang.

She experienced the joys of a short-lived affair.

On the last night, the moon, already less round, was so bright that it seemed like your heart had frosted over.

Tens of thousands of emotions tied her together with the peddler.

The peddler's chest is so sturdy! It's a wall obstructing cold and blocking heat, a furnace that melts ice and snow, the Heaven in a woman's heart!

She truly wanted to drop into this sturdy chest and pull closer this limitless and inseparable love for the rest of her life.

"Come with me, bring your son, we can run away together, run to my old village..."

"I can't. My god, I can't. My son is part of the Li Family. If I run away with him and they catch me they'll surely cut me into tiny pieces!"

"Then leave your son with them. There'll be opportunities in the future to come back and see him."

"Are you trying to rip out my heart? I'm a mother! Besides, when he grows up, how could I face him?"

"Ay – "

"I have a bad fate. I can't keep a husband by my side, my fate is to be a widow..."

"You... you really are a good-hearted woman, a kind woman... you're so unfortunate!"

"If you go... will you come back again?"

"I'll come back... just wait. When this passes and no more people are trying to catch me, I'll come. I'll come see you..."

"Your home... is it far?"

"Yeah. If you walk along this river running through your village, it would take ten days to half a month to get there. My house is just next to the river. Oh, right, when the Huang River flows south, and keeps flowing, it flows into the Yellow River. The Yellow River passes right in front of the door to our house..."

"Then, if I toss something into the river, will it float all the way to your house?"

"It certainly could."

"Then, if I jump... If I jump into the river, I could also... I could also float into the Yellow River and to your house?"

"You... how can you think like that? Don't think like that. No matter how hard the days are, you should stay in the world of the living..."

The peddler lifted Zhenlian's tear-covered face, which was resting on his chest.

"The days are so hard, so hard. I can't bear the wind. I can't bear the rain. I don't have any skills... my heart's so empty a horse could race in it..."

"Ay – consider me begging you this once, live for your son. When he grows up, he'll repay you, and as long as you live, I'll come back and repay you too. I'll come every year to see you."

"No, no you can't! You... don't you dare come back. You have no idea... the people here are vicious. If they knew what happened between you and me, they'd beat you to death, they'd... they'd burn me, my... my god... don't you dare come back!"

"But I... I can't forget you. I'll go crazy thinking about you. You're a good woman, better than a good woman..."

Zhenlian thought of the blood-red linked-hearts amulet she made on the morning of the Double Fifth Festival. She pulled herself from between the peddler's arms, opened the cabinet, and took out the linked-hearts.

"You made it?"

"Mmhm."

"For who?"

"For you."

"You're lying."

"Why would I lie to you? To tell the truth, I've kept you in my heart ever since that year you first came to my house. I always thought you'd come back, and then you did."

"I... I've felt the same. Ever since I saw you, I remembered you. But back then, I didn't know you lived alone."

Zhenlian carefully hung the linked-hearts on the peddler's chest.

"But I... I'm a fugitive, I don't have anything..."

Zhenlian smiled dolefully, pursed her lips, and bit off a button from the peddler's shirt.

She spat the button into her palm and stared at it for a long time, then clutched it tightly in her hand.

"As long as this comes with me, I... I'll have everything I want... From now on, every single year... every single Double Fifth Festival, you go wait on the side of the river and I'll send you a linked-hearts amulet. I'll float it down the Huang River. As long as I'm still living in this world, every single year, each and every year, I'll send you a linked-heart...."

She began weeping and sobbing.



*Cockadoodledoo*. The village resounded with the rooster's crow.

"My god!"

Zhenlian stuck her head back into the peddler's embrace.

The village's ancient grindstone continued its laborious rotation.

12

Half a blue sky, half a cloud,  
Half is burning red, oh;  
Half a liver, half a heart,  
Half is torn by whom, oh?

13

Dawn broke.

The God of Snow had already stretched his feet out from Heaven and stepped on the mountain peak outside Camel Bend.

Granny Li snapped into consciousness. She was more aware than ever before.

She felt the coffin clothes she was wearing. A desire to flee slipped into her mind. Having traveled such a long, painful road, she had now arrived at the doorstep of Hell.

This was the opportunity for a final farewell to the world of the living, approved for her by the King of Hell.

Late autumn sunshine crawled through the window lattice, shining on her mottled gray hair.

The world of light is so nice. An intense feeling of reluctance to leave the living occupied the entirety of her consciousness for a moment. She turned her head to the side and set her gaze on the bright autumn sunshine outside the window.

She noticed the heavy, imposing outer coffin set up in the middle of the courtyard. The coffin sat in menacing silence, its blood-red color piercing her eyes in the glaring sunlight.

She turned her head away in disgust. Her mood turned sour.

She felt the heavy coffin had already covered her head. Suddenly plunged into darkness without a ray of light poking through, she felt suffocated.

She vacantly raised her head and gazed at the snow-white wall opposite her. A New Year painting of a large rooster was hanging on the wall. A large purplish-red rooster peremptorily dominated the entirety of the picture, stepping high and looking proud as he crowed.

She lowered her eyelids mournfully. A mere second later her eyes opened wide again. She saw the television.

"Yufen, Yufen..."

Her daughter-in-law was sleeping by her side. She lovingly caressed her daughter-in-law's tousled hair. She noticed that Yufen had become much thinner these past couple of days. Who said people no longer dutifully tend the sick and elderly? These past few days have been torture for her. She didn't call her name again, but just let her sleep a while longer. That early morning sleep is the sweetest...

She again lightly caressed Yufen's red cheeks.

"Ma, you... are you feeling better?"

Yufen woke up surprised. She looked at her mother-in-law, whose spirits had become so hale and hearty, and suspected she was still dreaming.

Mother-in-law smiled compassionately and nodded.

"You... would you like something to drink?"

"Turn on the TV, I want to watch."

"OK, I'll turn it on. Ma, you've gotten so much better!"

Yufen jumped off the *kang*, slipped on one shoe, and hopped over to turn on the TV.

A hand appeared on the screen. It was writing on a blackboard.

"They're teaching school on TV now."

"Turn it on, I want to watch it," she said insistently.

"Ma, why don't you eat something, I mean, I'll go make you something to eat."

Yufen sat on the *kang* and put on her other shoe.

"Ah – I can't swallow anything. If I could swallow, I'd want to eat some crispy-skinned potatoes."

"Potatoes? Ma! You've been eating potatoes your whole life, and you still want to eat potatoes?"

"Farmers... we're destined to eat potatoes."

"Well then, I'll go roast some for you."

Her daughter-in-law ran downstairs.

Her eyes didn't leave the TV screen. One last desire lingered in her heart. Before she died she wanted to see the Yellow River on TV.

He said that his house was right by the Yellow River. The Huang River by her house flows downstream for ten days or half a month and then flows into the Yellow River.

In the previous nineteen years she had put nineteen linked-hearts amulets in the Huang River. Every year on the Double Fifth, she'd put one in the river and it would spring and leap and seemingly impatiently run with the current, running very fast.

Every time, she wanted to jump in the river and follow the linked-hearts downstream. But her son was waiting for her. She was a mother.

Granny Li went to the vegetable garden to cut some fresh chives the year before last. When she went to climb over the two-foot-high granite rock wall surrounding the garden, her heart suddenly felt painful and, losing her balance, she stumbled into the irrigation ditch.

Only then did she realize that she had lost feeling in the lower half of her body. She'd become paralyzed.

Her Pock-marked Auntie, who was ten years older than her, but whose body was as strong and solid as the female general, She Taijun, lay on her stomach across her paralyzed legs like a child.

She wailed and sobbed and made a glorious evaluation of her maintaining her chastity for more than thirty years.

"Shouye's Mum! You became a chaste widow at only twenty-four years old! For more than thirty years I feared you wouldn't be able to bear it, that you would soil the Li Family reputation. I've protected you like I was guarding against thieves! Shouye's Mum! You've made a great contribution to the Li Family legacy! Setting up commemorative stelae is out of fashion now, but if it weren't, I'd set up ten for you. You deserve even more than that!"

In the face of Pock-marked Auntie's complete, tear-filled surrender, she had a desire for exacting a kind of malicious revenge. She wanted to pull her up and tell her about the night of thunder and lightning, tell her about the nineteen linked-hearts amulets floating downstream, tell her of the three days and three nights she spent with the peddler, stuck together like glue.

She felt that her life was pitiable, but that Pock-marked Auntie's was even more so.

She calmed and, one lonely night after another, felt that all her sadness was because her legs couldn't forcefully, violently kick at the customs of the world like the dead and burning legs of Mancang. Even more, from this point on, she'd never again be able to move the legs that carried her for so long to the Huang River on the Double Fifth and float a linked-hearts amulet downstream for that man on the edge of the world. Never again!

Her son had made money driving a truck and built her a two-story brick house. He brought in a color TV and put it on the table in her room facing her and her paralyzed legs on the *kang*.

But how can all these things, wondrous in the eyes of others, reconcile so much painful longing and tortuous despair?

Bright and flashy things came on the TV, but she had no interest in watching. She always closed her eyes and let her mind drift a thousand miles away. On several occasions she asked Yufen to take the TV to her room. She said it was annoying. Let her lie here peacefully.

In fact, she wanted to be able to hear the gurgling and bubbling of the Huang River behind the house.

Her daughter-in-law never agreed. She continually talked about what was on the TV screen while lingering by the *kang*.

"Ma, look! The Yellow River! The water is so high!" Yufen cried out. Her mind jumped. She immediately raised her eyes to look, but there was only the yellow splash of water on the TV screen, and then it was gone, nothing.

That night she silently wiped tears from her eyes.

She hadn't realized the Yellow River could appear on TV. She hated herself for closing her eyes and not watching.

You blind old fool! She gritted her teeth and cursed.

After that, she wanted her daughter-in-law to turn on the TV and let her watch it all day long. This confused her daughter-in-law to no end.

But the Yellow River never again appeared on the screen. Never. But she held firm to her faith that it would, it surely would.

From underneath the felt pad on the *kang*, she felt around, found the small red package and slowly opened it up. Inside were three identical linked-hearts amulets and a small black button.

She had been paralyzed for three years. For three years she hadn't gone to the banks of the Huang River. Through three Double Fifts she'd lain paralyzed on the *kang*. She became so anxious her eyes burned.

She wanted so badly to have her son or daughter-in-law take her out in the truck and stop for a moment by the Huang River, just for a moment, to release those three amulets she'd saved for three years. But once her thoughts went to this place, her heart raced and her flesh twitched, her face flushed and her ears burned, fearing the secret she had buried so deep in her heart would be pried open.

She regretted not agreeing to the peddler's request to come see her again. If she had agreed, how nice that would have been. The peddler would never forget that night of thunder and lightning,

she thought. She'd left behind such deep teeth marks in his chest!  
That heart-piercing token would never be rubbed off.

That teacher on the TV was still lecturing, still writing.

There was no Yellow River.

A large field that no one turns over, with an ox who will till it? Stomach lumps turn into an ulcer, when wronged to whom can I tell it?

She wiped away tears. Carefully she re-wrapped the linked-hearts and the button in the cloth and clutched it in her hand.

Unintentionally she looked at that coffin lying like a red-haired monster in the courtyard. With covetous eyes, it treacherously displayed its strength in front of her.

The rebellious idea that had originally lain hiding in her thoughts now rose closer to the surface. More and more forcefully it provoked her reason.

Like a speckled hen, you've scraped at the earth of Camel Bend your entire life. Having closed your eyes and passed on, you'll still let others bury you in that land? Having crawled in the coffin and closed that lid, must they also secure it with such a heavy outer box?

Premier Zhou lived a full life, flying all around the world... what didn't he experience? Having passed on, he didn't want to be stuck under the ground. His ashes were scattered in the river, so he could travel throughout the world. But what've you seen? You're destined to be born in dirt, to grow up in dirt, and be swallowed by dirt in the end! You haven't even had the good fortune to lay your eyes on the Yellow River!

No, I will not get in that coffin! I will not go under the earth!

Her son Shouye ran into the room flustered, followed by Pock-marked Auntie breathing irregularly.

She stuffed the red bundle clutched in her hand into the quilt, her heart panicked for a moment.

"Shouye's Mum!" Pock-marked Auntie walked over and looked at her with the eyes of a surveyor. "Shouye's Mum. Look,

you've been sick for all these days and it's been torture for the kids. What else do you have to say to them? Huh?"

Pock-marked Auntie knew that once a person appeared to have the last radiance of the setting sun, then the end was near. She wanted her grand-nephew to listen to his mother's last words.

"I... I want, Shouye, put me in the wheelchair, push me around the whole village. I want to take a look outside..."

She didn't dare mention the river. If her son agreed to take her around the whole village, then they'd cross over the bridge...

"Shouye's Mum, it's cold and windy outside, all the leaves are off the trees, all the grass is brown and cracking, there's nothing to see. Wait until you've recovered and let Shouye drive you to Xining City for a holiday."

She gently shook her head. At the same time she felt as if her trachea was stuffed with a wad of cotton. Her throat blocked up and she opened her mouth wide.

The God of Death, smiling hideously, had lodged himself in her throat.

She began to, haltingly and with great struggle, gasp for breath.

A large field that no one turns over, with an ox who will till it? Stomach lumps turn into an ulcer, when wronged to whom can I tell it? To whom? To whom...

Pock-marked Auntie nervously began stroking her chest with both hands, trying to help her breathe, while asking, "Shouye's Mum, are you feeling better?"

"I... I'm not... OK..." she struggled to yell, "Shouye! I beg you, beg you! If... you... care for... me... take me... to the... county... to... burn... burn me. Spread... my... ashes into the river. I... don't... want... coffin... no yellow... earth. Don't... bury... me. I beg you... beg you... Ohhh... Son! Listen... to me... Listen to this one... word. OK?"

Her voice became weaker and weaker. The red cloth package in her hand became soaked with sweat and swelled in her hand.

She stopped talking, stopped yelling. She saw the hand on the TV screen change, change into the Yellow River, as if she were seeing the Yellow River itself.

Her eyes stared blankly at the TV.

Pock-marked Auntie's and Shouye's faces changed immediately. Their hearts tingled and were filled with fear, as if they had heard the sound of an alien from outer space.

She's not going in the yellow earth? She's not going in the coffin? She wants to be cremated? What the hell does that mean?

"Shouye's Mum, you rest easy. How could we cremate you? You saw for yourself, your son and daughter-in-law made a complete coffin set for you. Keep talking like this, and you'll make them lose a bundle. Shouye is a loyal, filial son. It goes against his conscience to toss his own mother into a furnace. Rest easy. I'm here, OK?"

"River! River..."

She summoned all her strength to scream these words. Two tears rolled out from the deepest corners of her eyes, as her breathing became more and more constricted and her mouth opened wider and wider.

"Ma, look, the potatoes you wanted..."

*Crash!*

*Wahhhh!*

"Ma! Ma! Ma!"

Her breathing ceased at the extremity of despair.

Two eyes stared widely, deathly at the TV.

That teacher on the TV was still slowly, calmly talking and writing on the blackboard.

Half a blue sky, half a cloud,  
Half is burning red, oh,  
Half a liver, half a heart,



Half is torn by whom, oh?  
Ay —— Yo ——  
Half a liver, half a heart!  
(Brother sweet as Prince's-feather fruit,  
Your beloved left today, left today  
A heart empty and bare, icy and cold)  
Half is torn by whom, oh? Half torn by whom, oh?  
Torn —— by —— whom —— oh....

15

Granny Li's burial was the grandest in the history of Camel Bend.

The funeral announcement in black characters on white paper was posted on the village's earthen wall near the spirit elm that had been split by lightning.

The unfilial son, Li Shouye, because of his accumulation of serious sins, brought disaster to his own mother who was wracked by illness for several years, and though she was treated for a long time, in the end it was to no avail. On 27 February 1985, riding the crane to the west in penance for the sins of her son...

That heavy blood-red coffin was carried out of the main gate and placed in a broad open area. Everyone came to admire it during the ceremony of extolling the coffin for three days.

Religious ceremonies helping the departed spirit find peace are grand performances requiring Buddhists and Daoists. Chime stones resounded, wooden fish reverberated, drums and instruments intoned in unison. The sound of recited scriptures and chanted texts rose for a moment, then descended again. It sounded like a stick had been poked into a hornet's nest.

Four musicians faced the sky, and with both hands clutching shawms, expanded their stomachs like four toads that

had dog-tail grass stalks stuffed in their butts by naughty little boys. Opening their eyes wide, and puffing out their cheeks, they blew sorrowful, wailing tunes. They played 'Crying over the Great Wall'. They played 'Crossing the River'. Choking voices and swallowed tones, like crying and complaining at the same time.

The mourning scrolls and elegiac couplets sent by villagers filled the eaves of the house, the walls, and the temporary crosshair of wires pulled across the middle of the courtyard. They rustled noisily, flapping in the autumn breeze.

Women's lamentations emanating from in front of the spirit tablet were full of the flavor of song. They even improvised their own words of mourning, which added to the extemporaneous display and inspired the spirit before the spirit tablet. Melodically, rhythmically, the sound emanated on the eye-stinging smoke of burning paper money and cedar branches, floated into the air, and sluggishly entwined the air of Camel Bend, causing even distant travelers to become sadly over-wrought.

The elders, pulling and pushing, finally dragged out Mayor Zhang who had come to Camel Bend to inspect the households engaged in raising long-haired rabbits. They said he was just like an appointed official from the imperial court, a person with an official rank. They insisted that he write an 'inscribed brocade' at the head of the coffin.

Mayor Zhang couldn't really write with a brush, but he had to. So he wrote crooked, bent characters, and after he finished, he fished out a five-*yuan* bill and insisted that it be a sacrificial offering, dramatically increasing the grandness of the funeral atmosphere.

When the time came to lay the body of the deceased in the coffin, Pock-marked Auntie discovered that the deceased seemed to be clutching something in the sleeve of her coffin clothes.

She tried to pry open the hand to have a look at it, but the fingers were as stiff as steel rods. She simply couldn't budge them.

She asked Yufen what her mother-in-law was holding, but Yufen, crying and wailing simply shook her head.

What was she holding?

Nobody could guess, and nobody could pry her hand open.

"Forget it, don't pull on it anymore. If the deceased won't give it up, then just let her hold on to it..." Pock-marked Auntie declared reluctantly.

Everybody gave up and the encoffining ritual began.

Early the next morning, just after the rooster crowed several times, four Daoists began mournfully playing 'Crying over the Great Wall'.

Hearing the shawm's call for the burial, all the men of Camel Bend sprang into action and came to bury Granny Li.

"Kneel down!"

The funeral director and several elders conferred and allowed Shouye to wear the hemp mourning clothes and kneel before the coffin.

"Raise the coffin!"

Among the sounds of drums and instruments, eight young men lifted the coffin poles. Somebody stamped twice and immediately kicked over the benches the coffin had been resting on, so as to prevent more deaths in Camel Bend.

"Forward march!"

The head of the coffin was raised high and lifted over the head of the kneeling Shouye. This was the highest honor for a filial son mourning a parent.

After the coffin passed over Shouye's head, somebody helped him to his feet, and made him carry the 'Soul-Leading Banner' while walking in front of the coffin.

The sound of crying and wailing was deafening.

Piles of wheat stalks were burned every place the bier went. The sparks and embers danced in the wind, flying around until they burned out.

The red 'Soul-Leading Banner' that Shouye carried hung from a long pole like a flag. It struggled for all it was worth, popping and snapping in the autumn wind.

Granny Li's grave was deeper and wider than usual. Its position had been determined only after hiring the crippled Daoist priest from Liuwan Village for a steep price. He surveyed it and evaluated it again and again. There was no doubt the site occupied a 'proper acupoint on a dragon's vein'. Because the outer coffin couldn't be seen beforehand, it had been dragged out to the cemetery earlier and placed next to the grave.

The son in mourning climbed into the grave and stained himself with dirt. Then he climbed out. The inner coffin went in. The position was fixed. The outer coffin covered it. The son in mourning tossed in three shovel-fulls of dirt. Important village elders approached in turn, and each put three shovelfulls of dirt in the grave.

The crowd rushed forward and the sound of shovels clanging into each other resounded. As fast as five minus three is two, a tall grave mound rose above the ground.

The crowd retreated. An elder came forward, knelt in front of the tomb, and lit a stack of paper. Holding the mourning baton in his hand, he prayed, "Granny Li! As you saw today, all the Camel Bend villagers raised you high this morning! We buried you deep! A burial mound as high as a mountain has been raised! When you were alive you were a soulful mortal, receiving the honor and respect of the old and young throughout the village! Now you've passed on, becoming an efficacious spirit, receiving the sacrifices of everyone in the village! Your spirit must continue going forward, don't look back. Everyone in your family wants you to rest in peace! The old and the young of Camel Bend want you to rest in peace! We pray that you take away with you the monsters and evil spirits in Camel Bend! Protect, protect, protect us! Ensure that rain and wind reach Camel Bend in due measure and that the five grains attain a bountiful harvest!"

Shouye had been in a state of extreme mourning over the last several days. He cried and knelt. He could neither eat nor drink. His head was spinning and stars appeared before his eyes.

He carried the 'Soul-Leading Banner' over the bridge on the road back to the house. A rock under his foot caused him to stumble and he fell right on the bridge.

The 'Soul-Leading Banner' fell fluttering into the river at just that moment. In the water of the Huang River it spun like a dragon and danced in the river's waves. Following the current it went downstream.

Everyone's scalp went numb. A nameless fear ascended from their spine to the base of their skulls, causing them to fall into stunned paleness, as dumb as wooden chickens.

*Whoosh.*

Carrying along withered branches and leaves, the Huang River flowed happily, streaming, the red spirit banner drifted farther and farther away.



## OLD MAN ZHANG PANS FOR GOLD

There wasn't a single person in Nalong Village who didn't know the story of when Old Man Zhang went to the gold fields to be a sand coolie in the thirty-seventh year of the Republic of China (1949).

The warlord Ma Bufang forcibly enlisted able-bodied men three times that year and conscripted laborers on four occasions to stop the Communists at Lanzhou City. Old Man Zhang, then only eighteen years old, ran away one night to avoid conscription. He stumbled upon a gold boss, Hanyibula, who was rounding up sand coolies to take to the gold fields. Old Man Zhang accepted Hanyibula's eighty *yuan* of local scrip (the currency then restricted to Qinghai) and joined the ranks of sand coolies entering the grassland.

A year later, when Old Man Zhang, naked but for a torn sheepskin draped around his shoulders, crawled into Nalong Village, there wasn't a single villager who recognized him.

Every time Old Man Zhang mentioned this experience decades later, he always began his story the same way, "When you walk into the gold fields, you meet the King of Hell." He said that ridges of flesh rose on the sand coolies' backs with each crack of the whip from the hand of Hanyibula's 'foreman'. He said that the flour they ate was mostly black millet with some ground husks of highland barley tossed in. They didn't even remove the husks, let alone the bran, and they used this flour to make 'chicken-head pimples' roughly the size of matchboxes, stuck full of tiny oat slivers. When you forced one down your throat, swallowing was so painful that you couldn't drink water afterward. He said that when you carried the baskets full of sand on your back, it made you hunch over so far neither your head nor rear pointed up, and it created callused ridges as thick as a finger on your back and shoulders...

"People say that when you go into the gold fields, you meet the King of Hell, and that's the truth. That damn gold boss wasn't raised by humans, and that damn gold wasn't dug out by people..."

He repeated this line as he finished his story.

Of course, when he recalled this experience, he talked about the 'bitter black work' that, even to this day, made the rims of his eyes red when he thought about it (the local people called performing this kind of unbearable conscript labor 'enduring bitter black work'). But he also told funny anecdotes. Like when the gold boss left his tent in the middle of the night because he had diarrhea and the sand coolies pretended to be wolves. They howled and frightened him so badly that he hiked up his pants and took off with runny shit filling the crotch of his trousers. Or another time, in the middle of the night, they stealthily felt their way into the tent of the foreman who routinely thrashed the coolies to slake his thirst for blood. They used a quilt to cover his head and began beating him. After that, each of them pissed on his bedding, dropped the beaten and bruised foreman, and disappeared into the darkness.

But what satisfied the people's appetites the most was when Old Man Zhang talked about the day they dug up a golden colt!

"... when Ma Cunfu of Hejiatai swung his spade into the ground, the golden colt jumped out. A golden light flashed and the sand coolies all stared at it. Holy shit! This golden colt was as big as a brick and stood with its four legs spread atop the sand pile, its head raised high, tail sticking up into the air, lively and alert, looking like it could take off running at any second."

"Wow! Then what?" said the people of Nalong, awestruck.

"Right then, most of 'em didn't do anything. The foreman, like a toad with a broken leg, took one step and tripped. Rolling around crawling on the ground, he howled and shouted for Hanyibula. When Hanyibula saw the golden colt, his face flushed eggplant-purple, and he looked like an idiot. All he could do was run in circles around the golden colt. After a few circles, he knelt down with a plop in front of the golden colt and yelled, 'Allah!' then loudly kowtowed eighteen times. Then he jumped to his feet



like a hungry eagle that's spotted a chick, grabbed the golden colt, and tucked it under his belt."

"Wow! And then?" the people asked, mouths agape.

"And then, and then, and then, for Pete's sake! People in mining believe in superstitions; to come across this kind of treasure is called 'to strike it rich'. It's said that after striking it rich, you'll be struck by a bolt of lightning if you don't immediately leave the gold mine.

"That goddamn Hanyibula hugged the golden colt to his chest and fled without a trace later that night. Like fish on a plate left to dry in the sun, he abandoned those hundred-odd sand coolies that he'd hired and dragged out to Angsai Beach. Left 'em without a goddamn soul to help 'em."

"Then?"

"And then, well, then... it's a full forty day's trek from Angsai Beach to the Sun Moon Mountains, so the sand coolies pushed one step at a time toward home with no one to help 'em. Their food was used up, and every day some fell over and didn't get back up, folks whose legs stiffened as they drew their last breath. The living ones cut the flesh off the bodies of their fallen comrades and ate it, picking the bodies cleaner than wolves."

To hear of men eating men made some people so nauseous that they felt as though they were about to vomit, so they covered their mouths.

"Did you eat people too?"

"Ma Cunfu from Hejiatai and I were companions. We didn't eat 'em, but we dug out live pikas and ate I don't know how many. After walking for forty days to the Sun Moon Mountains, we climbed the mountain peak until Ma Cunfu couldn't climb any more. He cursed, 'Goddamn Hanyibula, I dug the golden colt from the ground, and you took it away! May you burn in Hell!' After he finished cursing, he took his last breath and died."

"Oh no!" some people gasped.

But at this point, most people's attention was still focused on the golden colt, so someone always asked, "What about the golden colt?"

"That goddamn Hanyibula took the golden colt to Lanzhou City and sold it to Westerners. I heard that a Westerner took it to America!" Old Man Zhang said indignantly.

"Oh no – he really was a sonofabitch!"

"After he sold the golden colt, Ma Bufang could no longer rest easy on his throne. No more than a couple of days later, the Communists cleaned him right out of his home, pots, pans, and all!" said Old Man Zhang.

"You're just making stuff up. The golden colt was a golden colt, Ma Bufang was Ma Bufang – what did they have to do with each other?" The young folks shook their heads and chuckled at Old Man Zhang.

"Who says they have nothing to do with each other? That golden colt was a part of the Ma Family's treasure that secured this land. His family relied on the treasure to maintain rule over this damn territory. Hanyibula sold off the family's treasure to a Westerner, and the Ma Family's fortunes had run dry – how could they not be finished?" Old Man Zhang asked rhetorically.

"So what you're saying is, if Hanyibula hadn't sold off this golden colt, the CCP wouldn't have been able to shake Ma Bufang, and Qinghai wouldn't have been liberated, eh?"

"Yeah right! The way you say it, the liberation of Qinghai wasn't the CCP's doing, it was all Hanyibula's?"

The young folks deliberately forced Old Man Zhang into a corner.

"Your mum's so full of shit she's like a putrid pig! That's nonsense! The CCP occupies the whole world – it's Heaven's Mandate. Ma Bufang and Hanyibula are bandits that smashed their own thieving den. It was one pirate killing another – it was fate!"

"Ha ha ha, Old Man Zhang, you really are a good talker!"

"That was a national treasure – for defiling a national treasure, a bolt of lightning will come down from Heaven and split

you in two!" The elders always supported Old Man Zhang's position.

"That's exactly right. Otherwise, why was Hanyibula put on trial by the CCP? He ate twelve bullets in a row at his execution – shot his chest through like a sieve. Served him right, the sonofabitch..."

Every time Old Man Zhang got to this point in the story, he felt the anger well up.

"There's a chance that there's still treasure out there, Gramps. Do you still know the way?" The young folks changed the subject.

"How could I not know? Pass through the Sun Moon Mountains, then walk for forty days. Pass through Wild Horse Beach, E'Bao Ridge, cross Chahan Ridge, come out at Ye Niu Valley. Then you see a river, called the Zhaqu River. Its water is so clear you can see your reflection. Cross the Zhaqu River and you find Angsai Beach, an open plain overgrown with feather grass. It extends in every direction for several miles without a mountain in sight, except for one sandstone pillar several dozen feet high and the size of a three-room house. Tibetans call it King Gesar's horse-hitching post..."

"You should take us there so we can get rich too!" The young folks' interest was piqued.

"Humph! When you walk into the gold fields, you meet the King of Hell. Even if all the stones on Angsai Beach turned to gold, I wouldn't go back!" Old Man Zhang shook his head like a rattle-drum.

"Why not?" The young folks didn't understand.

"A man can't endure suffering like that. I crawled back from the gold fields that year and kowtowed at the Zhang Family cemetery. I swore that from then on, even if the Zhang Family was to die of starvation, I'd never go into the gold fields again!"

"You won't even let your son, Shanshenbao, go?"

"No fucking way he's going!"

Old Man Zhang spoke sharply, and a flurry of spittle flew out of his mouth.

2

After eating *laba* porridge on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month, the farmers busily ran back and forth. They had to see the gods off to Heaven, sweep out their houses, slaughter the New Year's pig, prepare food for the New Year celebration... As the saying goes, "Busy during the twelfth month, idle during the first month."

The chimneys in the walls of the peasant families' homes in the Huang River Valley billowed smoke from morning until evening every day when this time of year came around. The smoke curled gently upward in strips and bands, twisting around the mountains. The chilly Huang River Valley became enveloped in this soft, fragrant atmosphere.

The sun was about to set when Old Man Zhang walked the six *li* back to Nalong from the county seat. In one hand he carried Old Lady Zhang's ragged pale yellow headscarf, in which he had wrapped several pounds of dry bean noodles. He wore a small ocelot-fur hat that was missing all but a few hairs. It was stuffed with some rolled-up red, green, and white colored paper for pasting in window frames. His head bobbed in rhythm with every step he took, making him look like a woodpecker.

Old Man Zhang had arrived at the county seat at first light and only just got home as the sky turned dark. But he hadn't gone all that way for the sake of a few pounds of dry bean noodles and some sheets of window paper. His main purpose was to visit the home of his sister-in-law's husband to borrow money.

Old Man Zhang and Old Lady Zhang had three daughters and one son. By then the three daughters had all been married off to new homes, but the son, Shanshenbao, was twenty-five years

old and still hadn't taken a wife. And there was only one reason for that – he had no money!

Now, while a bride-price of twenty to thirty thousand *yuan* was on the expensive side, a cheap price was still eight or nine thousand. Finding this much money wasn't like sweeping up leaves after autumn – you can't just go pick it up. Year after year, Shanshenbao left the village to do migrant labor, but in the end he never earned more than pocket change.

The year before, Old Man Zhang had entrusted people to negotiate an engagement for Shanshenbao. When Shanshenbao went to meet the family, he took one look at the girl's apple cheeks and big eyes, then heard her soft speech, and he was head-over-heels. Neither of them objected to the match.

The in-laws had also liked Shanshenbao. The future father-in-law was frank and straightforward, so he didn't start the negotiations at a high price of twenty to thirty thousand. He only asked for a gift of 9,990 *yuan*, saying that they wanted to receive the luck of the 'long nines'.

Negotiating for a wife isn't like buying a horse, so Old Man Zhang wasn't about to start haggling. He simply clenched his jaw and accepted it. They agreed to present the bridal gift on the second day of the second month, and the whole business would then be concluded.

When he returned home, Old Man Zhang asked Old Lady Zhang to take Shanshenbao's migrant work money from his worn-out cotton trousers. They counted again and again, but there was only 4,500 *yuan*.

There was a farmer in the village named Yang Canglin. He had spent the whole year outside the village felling trees and had earned a lot of money dealing with various merchants and labor contractors. So Old Man Zhang sought out Master Yang to ask him to find seasonal work for his son.

Yang Canglin was warm-hearted and without hesitation introduced Shanshenbao to a Sichuanese labor contractor who built houses in Yushu. They agreed that a day's wage would be thirty

*yuan*. Shanshenbao would start in the fourth month and finish in the twelfth month, working for nine months altogether. In one month he'd earn 900  *yuan*. Nine nines are eighty-one, so the account was all figured out – he'd make 8,100  *yuan*.

Old Man Zhang was honestly happy for a spell. 4,500 plus 8,100 is 12,600. After presenting the bridal price of 9,990, there would be more than 2,000 left over. With his family's own flour and pig, he'd be able to bring a daughter-in-law into the family.

But two days before Old Man Zhang walked to the county seat, Shanshenbao returned, and burst into tears as soon as he laid eyes on his parents.

Only after Old Man Zhang questioned him for a long time did Shanshenbao spit out all the details.

Shanshenbao and that labor contractor had agreed on a contract for a building in Yushu, but the contractor had skimped on the work and used cheap materials. Because the building was of such low quality, holes as big as the palm of a hand opened up in the brick walls and the building's floor slabs broke clean in two! Afraid of a lawsuit, the labor contractor turned tail and vanished without a trace. The money that had been promised to the seasonal workers disappeared into the sky like a handful of wheat chaff. The workers had no money even to pay for the trip home. Shanshenbao got home by hitching a ride with a part-time tractor driver from the village who had also been out doing seasonal work.

Old Man Zhang got so angry his stomach hurt! He rolled his eyes and jumped around cursing the Sichuanese labor contractor – that "traitorous, thieving sonofabitch". He cursed the labor contractor's ancestors until dark smoke rose from their ancestral graves.

Old Man Zhang cursed until he foamed at the corners of his mouth, but still there was no money.

Just as sure as the twelfth month passes, the first month begins. As soon as the first month is over, the second day of the second month arrives, and that was the day Old Man Zhang had promised to deliver the bridal gift. Building a dam stops up water,

and deciding on a day binds you to your word. How was Old Man Zhang supposed to tell the in-laws there was no money?

Steeling himself, Old Man Zhang summoned the courage to go into town to find his sister-in-law's husband, who he knew had a contract with a metal shop to produce stoves that burn cow and sheep dung, which he sold in herding areas. The cash in his hands couldn't have been less than eighty to a hundred thousand *yuan*, so borrowing 10,000 on Old Man Zhang's honor shouldn't have been a problem.

But Old Man Zhang was an old horse who'd lost its way, or a Daoist priest who had misjudged a divination. At his sister-in-law's husband's house, before he had finished one cup of green tea or had even opened his mouth, his sister-in-law's husband, as fast as two and two becomes four, said the metal shop was bankrupt. This stopped up Old Man Zhang's money-begging mouth like a dam, angering Old Man Zhang so much that everything in front of him turned as black as black can be. He could hardly find the door to leave.

For every three paces Old Man Zhang walked on the road back home, he stopped for two. He felt as though his calves had been filled with lead, and his whole body was as soft as if someone had pulled out his tendons. Old Man Zhang rolled around on his *kang* that evening like a stone roller on the threshing grounds – he couldn't get a wink of sleep.

Old Man Zhang sighed.

Old Lady Zhang sighed, too.

"What am I supposed to tell the in-laws?"

"Maybe you could head back to Hougou again? Shanshenbao's uncle in Hougou is dealing in sheep wool this year, and I heard they've made a lot of money..."

"How can they not make money? They take the good wool they've gathered, lay it out, spray it with rapeseed oil, and then mix it with sand. Then they take a stone roller and roll it over the wool again three or four times, which turns fifty pounds of wool into a

hundred. How can he not make a profit? That's dirty money, and we're not taking it!"

"What's it matter if it's dirty or not? Borrow it, use it, then return it. It's not like you're hawking stolen goods..."

"Forget it. That crooked-mouthed brother of yours! Two years ago, I borrowed fifty pounds of his wheat seed and it was like cutting flesh from his thigh. Even before it was harvest time – the wheat was still growing in the ground – he had run back and forth five times with that ratty burlap sack. He said he was coming to visit his older sister, but really he was worried we'd mill all the wheat and not pay back the debt. Forget it, forget it! Hougou folks are so stingy they'd shave iron off the end of a needle. Hell, they'd harvest oil from the armpit of a flea."

Old Man Zhang looked at the moonlight outside the window as he spoke.

"Fine, don't borrow it. It's not like Hougou folks came here and ate your lunch, so stop talking about my family!"

Old Lady Zhang angrily turned away.

"Ay – money is a sonofabitch, you either have it or you don't. When you don't have any in your hands anymore and there's none in this world either, you can look to relatives, and you can rely on neighbors, but you still wind up hanging from a tree with a bent neck. I figure I've got a pretty good grasp on the way this world works!"

It was hard to tell whether Old Man Zhang was talking to his wife or to himself.

Old Man Zhang looked at the frost-like moonlight spreading across the window-paper. He sat up and began to smoke a long pipe full of tobacco.

The Kitchen Goddess is sent to Heaven on the twenty-third day of the twelfth month; on the twenty-fourth day, the house is cleaned; and on the twenty-fifth day, a pig is slaughtered. Old Man Zhang told Shanshenbao to go find a butcher early on the morning of the twenty-fifth. He looked at the pig inside the pen and said,



"Slaughter it. Boil the head and hooves – we'll eat those, and sell the meat."

Just as Shanshenbao was about to leave, Old Man Zhang shouted, "How could you go out with empty hands? Take the wheelbarrow with you and pick up a cauldron to boil the pig."

Shanshenbao went to leave again, this time pushing the wheelbarrow.

Then Old Man Zhang spoke again, "Forget it, forget it. Don't get the butcher. Money's too tight. Paying a butcher would be just like burning our cash. We can't slaughter a pig and eat the boiled parts. We'll sell the live pig – the more parts we sell the more money we'll get."

Shanshenbao had been sent back and forth by Old Man Zhang so many times that he just glared at him. He pushed aside the wheelbarrow and turned to leave through the gate.

"Who are you glaring at? Ain't I doing this for you? You, you rotten kid..." Old Man Zhang chased after him for a couple of steps and began cursing.

Old Lady Zhang came over carrying a bucket of pig slop. "It never stops with you! Your voice is always the loudest. I must have not burned incense in my previous life to get stuck with a damned old coot like you!"

"Shut your stupid mouth and feed the pigs."

Old Man Zhang tipped his head back, put his hands behind his back, and then walked out the gate.

He needed to visit Liu Ersheng.

Liu Ersheng's second oldest son was a pork dealer, and Old Man Zhang wanted to sell him some. The peasants in this village negotiated a price while weighing the goods, so they always had a number in mind when they began haggling.

He reckoned that the hog the old lady raised weighed more than 200 pounds, but even if they sold it for six *yuan* a pound, they would only be able to get 1,200. Add that to what they already had, toss in six feet of machine-woven cloth, and they were still far short of the money they needed for the bridal gifts.

He sighed and sat on the stone bridge in Nalong.

"Pa! Liu Quanxi and Guo Galai are both back from the gold fields!"

Raising his head, Old Man Zhang saw his son Shanshenbao standing in front of him, face flushed and brow sweaty.

"Oh!" Old Man Zhang straightened up.

"There and back in a month! Everyone dug up a half a pound of gold sand, and sold it for 10,000 *yuan* each." His son, beaming with joy, looked as though he had personally dug up a half-pound of gold sand.

"Oh! What gold field did they go to?" asked Old Man Zhang.

"They said they went to Hongjin Rock first, but the gold boss there had set up a machine gun on the rock, so they couldn't climb up. There was nothing they could do but turn around, and then they ended up at Angsai Beach..."

"Angsai Beach? They reached Angsai Beach?" Old Man Zhang's eyes lit up with a strange glow. "Then, they also crossed the Zhaqu River?"

"That's right."

"That's right, that's right. After crossing the Zhaqu River you reach Angsai Beach. You don't see mountains for ten miles around, and everywhere the feather grass grows half as tall as a man, and all you can see is a sandstone pillar the size of a three-room house, which the locals call King Gesar's hitching post..."

"Pa! Liu Quanxi said they're going back to Angsai Beach after the New Year. Should I go, too?"

"What? What'd you say?" asked Old Man Zhang as his face suddenly became grave.

"I... I want to go to Angsai Beach too." Shanshenbao watched his father's face change, and he immediately lowered his voice.

"You go fry your little farts in a wok and eat them!" screamed Old Man Zhang. "You listen to me, son, I promised our ancestors. I kowtowed to them and swore an oath that the Zhang

Family wouldn't go to the gold fields! I'm tellin' you, even if all the stones in Angsai Beach turned into gold, I still wouldn't let you go! When you go to the gold fields, you meet the King of Hell! That work ain't fit for humans!"

"Things now ain't like how they were for you then..."

"Oh yeah!? What's it like now? And how were we then? How many steamed buns have you eaten? How many bridges have you crossed? You still gotta have a rich man's fate to get rich! If you're only supposed to have three pints in your life, you're never gonna be able to eat eight quarts!

"Liu Quanxi and Guo Galai ain't the adopted sons of the God of Wealth. How'd they dig up their gold then, huh?"

"Humph! Don't be pig-headed with me, boy. If I say don't go, then I'm ordering you not to go! You can talk until the Nalong River runs dry, but it's not gonna do you any fucking good!"

Old Man Zhang turned away and left Shanshenbao behind. He started walking straight towards the alley by Liu Ersheng's house.

At the New Year Festival that year, it's not enough to say Old Man Zhang's family wasn't joyful. It was more like they had come down with a disease.

On New Year's Eve, those two guys who had just recently struck it rich, Liu Quanxi and Guo Galai, set off a half a bag of firecrackers to welcome the gods. On the fifteenth day of the first month, people gathered to celebrate the New Year *shehuo*. Old Man Zhang watched as the two families gave the Fire God Committee donations of 100 *yuan* each! The villagers were so startled by this sum that their tongues hung outside their mouths!

A resentful voice from deep inside Old Man Zhang's heart said, "They're such show-offs! Just like you can't keep two ounces of butter in a dog's stomach, they can't keep their cash in their pockets. Like you can't keep sheep lungs at the bottom of a soup pot, they just bubble up to the surface. They're as ridiculous as a bunch of ants trying to weigh themselves on a scale. What a bunch of fucking show-offs!" Old Man Zhang turned and went home,

closing the door behind him to sulk. He even reneged on his 'contract' of ten-odd years to perform the 'Bachelors Carrying Grannies' role at the New Year *shehuo*. The Fire God Committee sent several messages asking him to return to the festival, but he told them his legs were hurting and there was no way for him to perform. Despite the deafening sounds of the drums and gongs playing outside for the dragon and the lion dances, he lay motionless on his *kang* as if he were dead.

But there was still another person! Old Man Zhang's precious son, Shanshenbao, simply stayed in his room and read martial arts novels, not leaving his bed except to eat. He didn't even acknowledge Old Man Zhang when he walked past. Old Man Zhang was so angry his liver hurt, but there was nothing he could do.

Driven to the point of despair, Old Man Zhang recalled the idea Old Lady Zhang had mentioned. That's right – he would go to Hougou and ask Shanshenbao's uncle for money!

Old Man Zhang steeled his heart, "I'll give him another chance, 'cause I doubt the old man in Heaven isn't keeping an eye on him!"

Just then there was a knock at the gate.

Old Man Zhang peered through the crack in the window. Hey! Speak of the devil, and the devil comes. His very own Uncle Crooked Mouth from Hougou had arrived.

Old Man Zhang leapt off of his bed and welcomed him at the door barefoot.

"My, my, my! My very own brother-in-law has come. Quick, come in, come in."

"Brother, how was your New Year? I've come to wish you a Happy New Year."

"Great, great, great!"

Old Man Zhang urged his brother-in-law to sit on the *kang*, and then told Old Lady Zhang to make some food.

Old Lady Zhang was naturally very happy to see that her brother had come from her hometown to see her. In a short time

she brought out two plates and placed them on the table – one was pickled cabbage with stir-fried pork, and the other was bean noodles with stir-fried pork. The pork was cut into large chunks, and she hadn't added soy sauce, so the pork, glimmering white, trembled on the plate together with the bean noodles.

This is among the finest of dishes when farmers celebrate the New Year.

Old Man Zhang warmed up a pot of homemade Nalong barley liquor and gave Uncle Crooked Mouth four toasts for the New Year. Afterward, Old Man Zhang and his brother-in-law ate huge mouthfuls of fatty pork while playing a finger-guessing drinking game. They chatted about everything, their conversation wandering here and there. They finally ended up on the subject of Shanshenbao's wife.

Sitting off to one side, Old Lady Zhang interjected, tearfully asking her brother, "Brother, do you still care about your nephew?"

"Of course I care! If you're an uncle, how can you not care about your nephew? A nephew is an uncle's own flesh and blood – even if the bones are broken, the ligaments stay connected. If I don't care for him, who will? Elder Sister, tell me, how should I care for him? Eh?" With several cups of barley liquor in his stomach, Uncle had warmed up. He used his hand to wipe the pork grease from his face, and twisting his mouth, smiled at his sister.

Old Man Zhang, seeing his brother-in-law liven up, immediately raised up the pot of liquor, topped off the cups and said, "Great, brother-in-law! Let's make a long story short – your nephew wants to take a wife, and a gift of 9,990 is the asking price. Shanshenbao was originally going to do seasonal work for a year, and that money would have been enough. Who could have thought that this kid wasn't fated for money-making? Hardship after hardship came, and he didn't earn a thing. He was cheated by a low-class thief of a contractor! The second day of the second month came, and he still couldn't scrape together the 10,000 *yuan*. We've heard you've earned money dealing wool this year – lend us

10,000, and after Shanshenbao's wife marries into our house, we'll bust our asses to pay it back." Old Man Zhang concluded his speech and brought a cup below his brother-in-law's crooked mouth.

Uncle Crooked Mouth took the cup and sipped. He suddenly straightened up and asked, "Brother-in-law, you're saying 'borrow' – borrow how much? 10,000?"

"That's it, 10,000."

"Great! Brother-in-law, your words really are the royal edicts of an emperor. I have 10,000 *yuan* right now and originally planned to give it to Old Man Ma from Gan'gou at thirty percent monthly interest. At the end of the year he'd return 13,600 *yuan* of interest and capital. Now, since you said the word, this 10,000 *yuan* won't go to Old Man Ma – instead I'll give it to you, my dear brother-in-law!"

"Uncle, you mean... you'll lend me 10,000 *yuan*, but at thirty percent monthly interest, so after a year I'll owe you 13,600 *yuan*?" Old Man Zhang asked.

"Hey! Brother-in-law, what do you take me for? We're brothers-in-law, genuine relatives! How could I stoop to that level with my own sister's husband? Just twenty percent would be fine!"

"Come again?" Old Man Zhang raised a cup of liquor.

"Brother-in-law, out of respect for my older sister, I'll lower it to ten percent for you!" said Uncle Crooked Mouth loudly.

*Pow!* Uncle Crooked Mouth still hadn't understood what happened when a cup of warm liquor, thrown by Old Man Zhang, hit him in the face.

Old Lady Zhang's brother screwed his eyes shut and vigorously shook his head, flinging drops of liquor in all directions.

"Fuck off, you blood-eating piece of shit! I thought you would just cheat other folks to get rich, but I never thought you'd cheat your older sister! You're just a monkey squatting on the altar table that I mistook for the benevolent Guanyin Buddha! You're a shit-stirring stick stuck on the side of the road that I mistook for a

shady tree! I didn't realize that money had turned into a dog and eaten through your heart. Get the fuck out of here!"

"Hey, brother-in-law, what are you talking about? Family is family, money is money! It's not like I stole all my money..."

"Your money isn't any better than if you'd fucking stolen it! Fuck off! Get the hell out of here! Whichever family's demon you are, go pester that family – our family doesn't have you as an uncle! From now on, our families are like bread that's been broken in two – neither side will see the other!"

Old Lady Zhang still hadn't regained her senses when Old Man Zhang, pushing and shoving, forced Uncle Crooked Mouth out the front gate, and with a *clang*, slammed the gate shut. Old Man Zhang ran inside the living room again, picked up the two packages of bread that Uncle Crooked Mouth had brought, went outside, and threw them over the courtyard walls.

"Ohhh! You wicked old devil! If you had any sense, you wouldn't beat up a guest! No matter how bad he is, he's still my brother. You stupid old coot! Even if a wild dog came in, you wouldn't have driven it out the way you just did! You're so callous you can even look a donkey in the face while eating its meat!"

Old Lady Zhang stood next to the pillar, stamping her half-bound feet and cursing him.

"Him!? That twisted thing from Hougou, he's not even as good as a dog! I don't believe mustard wouldn't grow apart from that pile of dog shit! In a couple of days I'll go talk with the in-laws. I'll push back the date for sending the bride price to the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. We'll settle the whole 9,990 then!"

"Then why don't you just pick up an axe and rob a bank?" Old Lady Zhang said maliciously.

"Hell! Rob a bank and break the law? I'm goin' to Angsai Beach!"

Old Man Zhang punched the doorframe.

"What? Y-y-you want to go to the gold fields?" Old Lady Zhang's eyeballs grew as round as brass altar lamps. "You're crazy!"

Do you have a death wish!? Didn't you swear on our ancestors' graves that the Zhang Family would never be sand coolies again?"

"Who said I'd be a sand coolie? If you're hired to go to the gold fields to suffer, then you're a sand coolie. The two of us, father and son, we'll be our own bosses. Nobody's hiring us, so how can we be called sand coolies?"

"Wh-wh-what? You want to drag Shanshenbao along, too? My god, you may not care about your own life, but I want to keep my son alive! You've forgotten in 1949 you went to work in the gold fields and almost lost your life, and now..."

"You old cow! How can you compare then to now? Liu Quanxi and Guo Galai went to Angsai Beach, and each of them brought back 10,000 *yuan* apiece. These past couple of days they've been going around like big shots."

"Those guys have a wealthy fate, but look at you! You crawled back from the gold fields the year of Liberation, bare-assed, without even a pair of pants, nothing but an old sheepskin draped over you! You embarrassed your ancestors to death!"

"You!" Old Man Zhang was suddenly anxious. He extended his hand palm-up and hopped, but his hand remained motionless in midair.

He saw Shanshenbao looking at him and laughing.

"Pa! Are you agreeing to let me go to Angsai Beach?"

Old Man Zhang scratched his head. "Let's go! Let's just fucking go! Even a strong man can be tortured by money. I'm going too."

After Old Man Zhang was done talking, he planted his butt on the doorstep.

"Pa, if anyone's going, I'll go. You're an old man..."

"What about me? I've gotten older, so I shouldn't go to Angsai Beach? I'll damn well make another trip. I can see clearly now I'm bound to Angsai Beach by fate!"

"Aaaaaahhhh! You damned old man, you're tangling with the Dog-head God now! Heavens! Open your eyes..."

Old Lady Zhang took a stand and let out a pitiful howl.



"You damned old woman, me and the boy aren't about to go jump in the river! What dried old corpse are you howling over in the middle of the festival!? You're just looking forward to a death in the Zhang Family, aren't you?" Old Man Zhang pointed at Old Lady Zhang with his pipe and cursed.

Old Lady Zhang's weeping suddenly stopped.

3

Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao sat together atop Liu Quanxi's tractor as it sped down the Qinghai-Tibet Highway in high gear.

In the second month of the lunar calendar, the ice on the river had yet to melt. Shanshenbao protected his head with a thick cotton hat. The trees on the north slope of Medicine Water Gorge were bare of leaves or any other sign of vitality.

The frigid wind drilled straight into the stubble of hair on their scalps. Both father and son pulled their heads into the collars of their fur-lined coats like a pair of frightened tortoises.

On the twentieth day of the first month, Old Man Zhang brought wrapped tea leaves to give to the parents of his daughter-to-be as a New Year gift. With a blushing face, he told them how his son hadn't earned any money, how the father and son were preparing to go to the gold fields, and how the in-laws, on their son-in-law's honor, had to be merciful and push back the day of exchanging wedding gifts. They should do a 'one-fell swoop' kind of wedding on the fifth day of the fifth month. The in-laws' manner had been rather relaxed all along, so with a nod of the head they agreed.

However, the bride's father also said to Old Man Zhang, "My dear in-law, we hear the people in Nalong say that you are such an upstanding man that when you get hit on the head, the whole ground shakes beneath your feet. And you are so trustworthy that when you speak one word, it bores a hole in the ground. On the fifth day of the fifth month, I'm gonna slaughter a

sheep, buy two bottles of Huzhu barley liquor, and wait for you. Once we're done exchanging wedding gifts, you choose the day to pick up the bride. But if I wait for you on the fifth day and you don't arrive, just get on with your life, and don't even think about drinking my booze again!"

Old Man Zhang said, "In-law, my word is as dependable as a dam holding water. I count the words coming out of my mouth. After all, I ain't a monkey-trainer puttin' on a show, full of tricks and lies. I'm not the kind of guy who boasts and brags while digging a hole he can never get out of. Put your mind at ease. On the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, my dear friend, we'll play the finger-guessing drinking game, and then we'll see who outdoes who!"

"OK, in-law, as the saying goes, there's not a whole lot to say, so I'll get to the point. You're a respectable person and I'm an honorable man. How much liquor can you drink? We'll have a few rounds today, just the two of us, and find out! Come on, let's play this finger-guessing drinking game!"

It was difficult to wait until the second lunar month when the dragon raises its head and brings rain. Having sowed the seed and run the first round of irrigation water, Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao, father and son, prepared to set out on their journey.

Before setting out, Old Man Zhang dragged his son down to the family ancestral cemetery to burn paper and kowtow. Old Man Zhang started to pray, "Ancestors, on account of the fact that Shanshenbao still hasn't obtained a bride, protect me and my son as we take this trip to Angsai Beach to dig for gold to marry that bride, so that following generations ensure that the ritual of burning offerings doesn't stop at the Zhang Family cemetery..."

Shanshenbao went to negotiate with Liu Quanxi over riding his tractor back into Angsai Beach. Liu told them it would be 300  *yuan* for the father, son, tools and luggage all on his vehicle. Any less and the deal would be off. There were lots of folks going to the gold fields, so anybody from another village would be charged 350.

"300 it is then," said Old Man Zhang.

They also bought a plain, white-cloth, horse-spine tent that cost 200 *yuan*. A set of gold-panning tools, over a hundred *yuan*. Through the help of an intermediary they bought two gold-mining permits from a crew leader, for 2,000 *yuan*.

Old Lady Zhang, wiping the tears from her eyes, said as they set off, "Since you're splurging on this trip anyway, take this 300 *yuan* with you, just in case of an emergency..."

Old Man Zhang took the cash and stuffed it in his chest-pocket. He thought for a second, and then reached back into his chest-pocket, removed twenty, and stuffed it in Old Lady Zhang's hands. "Maybe you should set some aside."

The old lady wouldn't accept it, "Why should I? In a few days the hens will lay eggs, and I can scrape together a few *yuan*. Just as long as you two are safe and sound..."

At that moment, Old Man Zhang suddenly felt a tingling in his nose and turned his head away. He said to Liu Quanxi, "Let's go, Quanxi!" Then he turned his head back and said to the old lady, "The Bao Nian family's cow had a calf a couple of days ago. Have his wife, Fenlan, pour a bowl of milk for you once a day. Make note of the cost and I'll pay it off when I get back."

Once the tractor started, Old Lady Zhang pulled off the ragged yellow cloth that was matted to her head, and ran inside the gate covering her face.

All the chaotic thoughts that cluttered Old Man Zhang's head suddenly disappeared as the tractor passed the Sun Moon Mountains. He sat up straight and stared resolutely at his hometown, but his eyes were fuzzy and vague.

He suddenly had a premonition that his decision was as stupid as a pig's. If he came away from this trip empty-handed, he'd be completely bankrupt, and he might even lose his life out there.

He wanted to tell Liu Quanxi to stop, but before he could open his mouth, the tractor had already begun to descend the other side of the mountain.

Suddenly, the scene from forty years before, when he crawled along the ground to catch pikas to eat with his bare hands, appeared in Old Man Zhang's mind.

"Old people say that the road you don't take, you walk three times, and they're right," Old Man Zhang couldn't help saying out loud.

"Gramps, what road did you take back then? Nowadays it ain't like it was before. It's all paved, and we're riding a tractor. Going to the gold fields is just like driving down the street," Liu Quanxi said loudly as he drove the tractor.

"That's true, that's true. Back in '49, we crossed the Sun Moon Mountains and trekked toward Angsai Beach, walking for forty days. After walking that long, there was blood coming out our heels and pus festering in our toes. Our calves swelled to the size of rafters and our thighs swelled to the size of roof beams. The foreman rode a horse with a whip in his hand, herding us like sheep the whole way... Oh, back in my day..."

Old Man Zhang closed his eyes, and returned again to forty years before.

The strange thing was that what appeared in his mind was the Zhaqu River, clear as a mirror, and the open land of Angsai Beach, covered in feather grass half as tall as a man, with the warbling sounds of bird cries boring into the sky, and a grey eagle perched high atop the hitching post where King Gesar had tied his horse...

4

Eight days later.

Liu Quanxi stopped the tractor at the top of Chahan Ridge, pointed to the meandering river at the end of the Ye Niu Valley, and said to Old Man Zhang, "Gramps, look – the Zhaqu River! And farther off, there's the sandstone pillar you talked about, 'King Gesar's hitching post!'"

Old Man Zhang lifted his head, looked at it for a long time, and said, "You're right. We're here." He sat up, pulled out his tobacco pipe, and packed it full of tobacco. But his trembling hands couldn't strike a match. Shanshenbao sidled over, lit his pipe for him, and said, "Quanxi, let's go."

The tractor began to descend in the direction of Ye Niu Valley.

The tractor was just making its way through Ye Niu Valley to the banks of the Zhaqu River as the sun reached its peak, but it suddenly pattered out a few dozen meters from the riverbank.

"What happened?" Shanshenbao asked.

"It's the gas. The gas line's probably blocked. This piece of crap! If the dig goes well this time, I'm gettin' rid of it." Liu Quanxi pulled off the gas tube and started blowing into it.

Old Man Zhang couldn't wait. In a burst of excitement he jumped down from the tractor as if he were a much younger man. But, because he was almost sixty, his feet didn't land well and he almost took a tumble. Shanshenbao was so frightened he jumped down to help him up, but Old Man Zhang pushed him away.

It had been more than forty years. He thought that he would live the rest of his life without seeing the Zhaqu River and Angsai Beach again but, today, as if in a dream, the Heavens had brought him back. He still remembered the clear water of the Zhaqu River, and how you could taste wild chrysanthemums when you drank a mouthful.

Back then, they would lie on their stomachs on the riverbanks many times a day, gulping down water to chase away summer's blistering heat. After drinking, they would face their hometown and sing a *hua'er* folk song, a song he still remembered to this day:

Gesar at Angsai hitched his horse,  
Oh, Zhaqu River!  
Water leaps and splashes gaily.

Miss my lover full of remorse,  
Oh, flesh doth quiver!  
Ere you're here, I'll miss you daily.

This was sung by Ma Cunfu of Hejiatai. Old Man Zhang remembered clearly how when Ma Cunfu sang this song tears rolled down his face like a broken string of pearls. He hurried toward the bank of the Zhaqu River. He wanted to kneel beside the river, freely gulp mouthfuls of water, and then wash his face clean. The water of the Zhaqu River was clear spring water that didn't freeze all year.

He finally reached the riverbank.

As if he'd been stung by something he suddenly began screaming, "Damn! This... is this the Zhaqu River?"

Cloudy water snaked in front of his eyes like a gigantic grey serpent.

Startled for a second and unable to regain his senses, he stared at the opposite bank with a puzzled gaze. Angsai Beach, which had once been covered in feather grass half the height of a man, now seemed to have returned to the primeval chaos at the time of Nüwa. The uneven terrain, rising and falling, half pits and half mounds, was now nothing but bone-white stones. Tent after tent, tightly packed together, stood atop the naked exposed sand, while people swarmed black over the ground like ants.

The only thing that had not changed was the post where King Gesar had tied his horse. It resembled a titan, stern and silent, just as in the past.

"Gramps, what're you staring at? Get on, we're crossin' the river!"

"This place, what the hell happened to it? When I was here, back in '49, the water of the Zhaqu River was so clear a person could see their reflection in it. The feather grass on Angsai Beach grew half as tall as a man, and the local people herded sheep! Just across the other side of that mountain ridge was a village of a

hundred households, and the prayer poles in front of the tents were eighty feet high. What the hell happened?"

"Obviously it's been dug up by gold-panners. How many people were here back in your day? Nowadays, just look how many tents there are! The sand here has already been turned upside down and tossed around lotsa times! C'mon, let's go, Gramps!"

"Damn! What the hell happened? These people, they're locusts!" Old Man Zhang shook his head as he pulled himself onto the tractor.

"Pa, if folks have dug this place over so much, can we still find gold here?" Shanshenbao asked anxiously.

Old Man Zhang let out a sigh without uttering a word. The scene before him caused him to feel a weariness he had never felt before, like the top of his throat was stopped up with phlegm that he could neither spit nor swallow.

"Gramps, you two get off the tractor on the other side of the river. We set up our camp when we came last year, and we can't add people to it, so there's no way we can take you into our camp. Gramps, you're an old pro at panning gold, so there's no need to worry about not finding a good camp. After a couple of months, when I'm on my way out, if I see you here and you want a ride back on my tractor, I'll give you a ride." Liu Quanxi patted Shanshenbao's shoulder. "Anyhow, for the return fare, I don't want cash, I want to see gold!"

Liu Quanxi hopped on the tractor, put it in gear, and released the clutch. The tractor drove into the muddy water of the Zhaqu River, and chugged toward the other shore.

All of a sudden, it seemed like a swarm of bees had bored into Old Man Zhang's ear, making a buzzing sound. Whatever Liu Quanxi just said, he hadn't heard a word.

Liu Quanxi's tractor came to a stop on a slope after crossing the river.

"Gramps, I can only take you guys this far. Unload your stuff."

"Here?"

"I can only take you guys this far. I can't take you no farther." Liu Quanxi hopped off the tractor.

Old Man Zhang had a notion to curry favor with this kid again. He hoped to get him to take them to his camp and give him and his son a place to dig.

Old Man Zhang hadn't even opened his mouth when Liu Quanxi repeated what he'd said before they had crossed the river. His meaning was clear – he could not bring the old man and his son to their 'base of operations'.

"Gramps, there are rules in the gold fields, you know that. If I wanted to take you two with me, then there wouldn't be a share for me to work. Can't do nothin' about it," Liu Quanxi said, started his tractor, and drove off.

At this time, like a copper mirror that had rusted in the ground for a thousand years, the sun hung slanted in the western sky without giving off even a bit of heat. In the near distance, the heavy shadow of King Gesar's hitching post pressed down over the wasteland.

Shanshenbao also fixed his eyes on the tents of Angsai Beach that were scattered like stars in the sky, and on the collectively bobbing heads of the people swinging picks and digging sand in the 'camps' they each occupied. The anxious feeling in his heart burned like an iron furnace.

"Pa, where we goin'?"

"There are people everywhere. There's no place for us to even set a foot down."

"Should we set up the tent here first and then see how it goes?" Shanshenbao asked for his father's thoughts.

Old Man Zhang didn't say anything and started to unpack their gear.

Shanshenbao spat a mouthful of saliva into the palm of his hand, repeatedly rubbing it in between his palms. He lowered his head and chose a place to dig. While taking in a deep breath he whirled his pick-axe around. He screamed "Hai!" exerting his strength as he swung the pick. The head of the pick smashed into



the frozen ground, sending a numbing shiver up his hands and arms.

He had wanted to go to Gajiuer's blacksmith shop to get several smooth metal tent stakes before leaving home. But he was scolded by his father, who said he treated money like it was rocks to be thrown around, not knowing where it would come to rest. So, he had to hide from forest guards and sneak into the blackthorn woods in the dark of night. He chopped down several blackthorn branches, took them home, and whittled them into tent stakes. Blackthorn wood is hard, but compared to this frozen ground, it was like trying to use a blade of grass as a sewing needle – it got nowhere.

Shanshenbao kept digging, hoping to dig out a trench to bury the stakes.

"What're you two doing?"

Old Man Zhang raised his head to look. Standing in front of his eyes were four men with their hands grasping metal shovels.

"Puttin' up a tent," Shanshenbao said with a smile.

"Puttin' up a tent! You didn't ask whose camp this is and just started to put up a tent?" one of the bald thugs said, pointing at Shanshenbao.

"Wouldn't you be pissed if I built a tent in the courtyard of your house?" Another one, with a scarred face, said with even more derision.

"What proof do you have that this is your camp?" Shanshenbao was not willing to back down.

"The proof is the shovel in our hands!"

"Would you dare?" Shanshenbao's anger rose.

"We wouldn't dare? Fuck your mother! If you dare to dig here again, we'd dare to split your head in two and make it into a ladle to scoop out foot-washing water!" The bald guy was even more eager to fight than Shanshenbao.

"Hey hey hey, you guys, we just got here and don't know the rules. If we offended you, be gracious, raise your hand high in mercy this time, everyone here's a fellow traveler..." As soon as

Old Man Zhang saw that the situation had taken a turn for the worse, he pulled Shanshenbao aside, rushed to seem agreeable, and put on a smiling face.

"Forget it, forget it, just tell 'em to leave," an older one said. "This poor old guy. In order to claim this space, we didn't get to go home over the New Year. You all leave. If we start fighting, nobody wins."

Old Man Zhang sighed and said to his son, "Pack up, take the things and tie 'em up, we're gonna look for another place."

"I figured you'd be tactful. You two watch 'em leave, we'll go dig," the older one said while pulling one of the younger ones away with him. The other two were still gazing at them as intently as tigers.

All they could do was put their things on their backs and go.

Every place they went, people raised their heads in suspicion and looked at them, and as soon as they stopped, people shouted maliciously, "What do you think you're doing? Leave!"

What was scariest was that many people, afraid of having their territory taken, had packed their belts with hand grenades and explosives, like in the movies when Communist Party members wanted to fight the enemy to the bitter end.

If those who were unafraid to die really fought, both sides would demonstrate courage to live or die for the piece of land that had given them hope. It's not as though this type of thing had never happened before in this gold field.

Old Man Zhang and his son had nowhere to go.

There wasn't even a place to stop and rest.

Old Man Zhang looked up at King Gesar's hitching post again.

The hitching post was the local herdsmen's altar to the gods, the top of which was completely covered in multi-colored prayer flags and Tibetan ceremonial scarves. On certain days, monks from a distant monastery came to hold a Buddhist religious assembly. People said that King Gesar's hitching post had magical

powers, and anyone who dared disturb it would die a horrible death. Even the fiercest of the gold bosses wouldn't send people up there, and that's why it was the last piece of undisturbed land on Angsai Beach.

Old Man Zhang's eyes brightened. "Let's settle by the hitching post," he thought.

They had finally found a place to stay, for now.

A couple of crows flew past the heads of the father and son and screeched maliciously.

"*Caw! Caw! Caw!*"

Old Man Zhang fiercely spat in the direction the crows flew, and an inauspicious premonition immediately bubbled through his veins. He deeply regretted his own impulsive decision to return to Angsai Beach. His nose twitched and tears almost leaked out. In his head he said to his son, "On this trip, the two of us, father and son, probably won't even see any gold."

The sun set and a stretch of fiery clouds burned in the western sky. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

They didn't dare set up their tent in this sacred place, and didn't dare prop up a pot with rocks to cook dinner. They merely ate a few pieces of steamed bread, took out a quilt, covered themselves with it, and lay down, thinking, "Is there really no place for us to plant our feet?" The father and son didn't understand. Angsai Beach was so huge. Forget digging for gold, there wasn't even a place to pitch a tent.

"We'll go find Liu Quanxi's camp early tomorrow morning. We're all from the same village, I can't believe they won't give me a little respect..." Old Man Zhang said without conviction.

Before the sky had brightened, Old Man Zhang got up and walked far away from King Gesar's hitching post and peed. He shivered as he walked back. From inside the pouch he took out a couple of pieces of hardtack and stuffed them in his shirt. Then he shook Shanshenbao, who was sleeping soundly, waking him up, and said, "You look after the stuff. I'm going to look for Liu Quanxi. I'll come get you after I find him and talk it over."

Shanshenbao sat up. "Pa, I should go!"

"You can't. On a beach this large, you won't be able to find the place. Besides, at my age, no matter how stiff they might be, they'll have to show me a little respect. It's still early. You should keep resting for a little while."

Old Man Zhang left.

By the time Old Man Zhang reached Liu Quanxi's camp it was almost noon.

He looked into the distance. It appeared that Liu Quanxi was crouched on top of a sandpit along the riverside, fiddling with an old-fashioned water pump while someone else spared no effort tossing out sand from inside the pit.

Old Man Zhang knew gold diggers thought the worst taboo was a person who wasn't in their group crossing into their camp. So he stood where he was and yelled for Quanxi.

Quanxi got up and looked. Standing there yelling at him was Old Man Zhang. He knew why he had come, so he spoke for a moment with the person in the pit. He tossed aside the wrench in his hand and walked over toward Old Man Zhang.

"Oh hey! Gramps, have you set up your camp? I knew you were an old pro at..."

"Quanxi, if your Gramps didn't have trouble, he wouldn't call on you." Old Man Zhang squatted beside a stone, his face showing that he felt wronged.

"How? Did you forget to bring somethin' from home?" Quanxi took out a cigarette and squeezed it into Old Man Zhang's hand. "That's easy to deal with. If you need somethin', just say so, we've got it here. If we can lend it to you, we'll do that. We're neighbors from the same village after all! Sooner or later we're all gonna drink out of the same spring. I haven't made things difficult for you, have I?"

"No, Quanxi. I didn't know how many people were here at Angsai Beach. The whole basin's filled up! At this point we haven't even found a place to put our feet down..."

"Oh, it's like that... this is hard."

"I was thinking... maybe your pit can add some people?"

"Gramps, look, I told you on the road, we weren't the first to set down our stakes here. It was already occupied by some other folks and they let me join in. Otherwise, I can't really say. Should I call the boss over?"

"What's up!? Quanxi, you fixed your water pump yet?"

A man, tall as an ox and big as a horse, stood in front of Old Man Zhang.

"Brother Tian, this elderly man is from my village. He just got here and has no camp. Do you think our camp can add him on? One more man means more manpower. I feel that there ain't no harm in havin' more men."

"I say, Quanxi, in order to grab hold of a place as big as this, I, Tian Laowu, just about lost a leg. Didn't you know that?"

"Of course I knew that. You and that guy from Machangtai, Commander Hu... you put your legs on rocks at the same time, and agreed to use shovels to chop at your own leg. Whoever drew blood first, this camp would belong to him. So with one 'chop!' your shovel came down..."

Old Man Zhang's heart quivered and he shut his eyes.

"Never mind, forget it, don't bring it up. It seems to me like you've always got some sort of problem, like you're not a real gold digger. How about this, I'll settle up with you. You can go find another place to get rich and that'll be the end of it."

Hearing this, Old Man Zhang nervously said, "Hey, hey, hey, I say, boss, I was just joking around. You don't want to take this seriously. This kid, Quanxi, he understands machines and he's hardworking. You can't do without someone like him working for you. Quanxi, you get going and do what you need to do. I won't bother you anymore!" Old Man Zhang then hurriedly passed the cigarette Quanxi had given him to Tian Laowu and said, "Boss, you make your fortune and I'll leave and be on my way. But in all honesty, you can't get rid of Quanxi."

Old Man Zhang finished speaking, then turned and left. He walked away, but when he looked back again, he saw those two

kids laughing in his direction. Gramps then figured out that Quanxi and Tian Laowu were duping him with a 'good cop, bad cop' routine. He was so angry that his stomach started gurgling wildly.

"Bah! Treacherous ingrates!" Old Man Zhang viciously cursed them.

Old Man Zhang walked to King Gesar's hitching post, sat his ass on the ground, and smoked some tobacco. His face was so gloomy that it looked like a rainstorm over the southern mountains.

Shanshenbao carried a large cup of spring water to his father and carefully asked, "Pa, Quanxi, he..."

Old Man Zhang took the cup and after he drank several mouthfuls put the cup on the ground. "From now on, you'd better not talk to that treacherous ingrate too much. Fuck his mother, that nappy-headed little pissant, how dare he toy with me like I'm some kind of rag doll!"

Shanshenbao sat down dispiritedly.

Someone was walking over toward them. They weren't paying him any attention at first, until he walked right up and was standing in front of them. Only then did they realize that he had come specifically to find them.

"Hey! Are you two gold diggers?" the person asked.

Old Man Zhang, too lazy to move, simply nodded his head.

"But you two are sitting under this hitching post... I thought you'd come to pay your respects."

As the person spoke, he walked up beside them. When Shanshenbao looked, he saw that this person had a kind and benign countenance, with delicate white skin, like a teacher from some private village school.

"We came too late. All the places have already been claimed," said Old Man Zhang.

"When did you two come?" the person asked.

"Yesterday, yesterday evening," said Shanshenbao.

"Ha ha ha, that's like seeing off the kitchen spirits on the fifteenth day of the first month. You're late by twenty days!"

"Ay – what's there to say? We didn't know this damn place had even more people than Xining City."

"Actually, I have a place over there."

"Oh?"

"I bought it myself. I saw you two sitting here, and figured that you had no place of your own. If you two want to dig, you can come over to my pit."

"Really?" Shanshenbao's eyes lit up.

"I don't cheat folks, it's just that you have to pay a little money."

"How much?" Old Man Zhang asked.

"2,000."

"2,000?"

"Right. 2,000 *yuan* is worth it, and if you guys are good, you could dig that amount of money out of the ground in a couple of weeks."

"How 'bout we first give you 300, maybe 500, then you watch us dig and whatever gold that comes out of the ground makes up the money we're short?"

"That's no good. If you don't have 2,000 *yuan*, it would be OK if you gave me a thousand first. But 300 to 500 isn't good enough."

"We don't have that kind of cash on hand."

"Go borrow some! There isn't one person you know in a gold field this big? Gold is also good, according to the current price. Take a good look! I live over there. That's right, the place with big piles of sand. Once you borrow some money, come on over. I've got a lot to do, so I'm not going to sit around chatting with you. Oh, my surname is 'Pi', as in 'cowhide and sheepskin'. Over there, if you say 'Old Pi', everyone will know it's me."

Old Pi left whistling.

"Seems to me, his surname's more like 'flesh-eating!'" Shanshenbao said through gritted teeth.

And this is how the day passed. When the sun was in the west, a sudden fit of wails and howls rose in the air above Angsai Beach.

Lying beneath King Gesar's hitching post, the distressed father and son quickly rolled over. They saw two troops of men in the north and south raising spades and pick-axes, rushing forward, shouting and yelling. All at once the clanging crash of spade and pick-axe resounded through the air. The setting sun shone on the metal tools that filled the sky, reflecting rays of light into the sky like a clear mirror.

A horrible shriek that could rip through a person's conscience told him that there would be a battle of even greater scale here – those who had not dug any gold had flushed red with anger, formed a gang, and started using brute force to occupy other places to dig!

Angsai Beach immediately looked as chaotic as if someone had stirred up a beehive. Those who had just been digging gold looked like a swarm of rats or a herd of stupefied sheep. Either way they were completely at a loss. Shouts, tragic cries, and the sounds of clashing metal turned Angsai Beach into an ancient battlefield from King Gesar's time.

Shanshenbao was dumbstruck.

While that child was growing up into a young man, he never would have seen such a scene! He just stared blankly at the battle of naked swords that had suddenly appeared before him. His hands and feet shook as though he were receiving an electric shock.

"Why are you still staring!? Why aren't you moving!? Pack up the tent, quilt, and hardtack on your back. The other stuff we'll abandon. Quick, run behind King Gesar's hitching post!" Old Man Zhang shouted while he ran past, carrying a quilt and hardtack pouch on his back, grabbing a shovel on his way. His son grabbed the tent and pick-axe. The father and son darted behind King Gesar's hitching post like a couple of rabbits escaping from under a hunter's gun.



Their newly purchased gold panning trays, basins, and various tools were left where they were. Neither of them paid them any attention.

On the other side of the towering hitching post of King Gesar, Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao, like two oxen who had just finished a full day's plowing, lay on the ground and inhaled huge mouthfuls of air.

The shouts and cries gradually drifted off in the opposite direction.

"Do you know who's fighting who?" Shanshenbao asked Old Man Zhang, still gasping for air.

"Who else could it be? They're all farmers, and they're all bent on money. Ay – whatever it is that drives you, you have to struggle with it, and if you're driven by money, well there's just nothing you can do. Still, their wives and kids at home wait for them to dig some gold and come back. But now, who knows how many men are injured, with snapped legs and missing arms... Money, money, money... it's a motherfucker. Kid, look for a vehicle, we're heading home! If we're not careful, this mess will cost us our lives. Then your mum will be all alone, and she'll go nuts. This is all your old man's fault. I'd originally made a promise on the grave of our ancestors. Oh, the older I get the more useless I am!"

"Pa! Weren't you just doing all this for me?"

"Son!"

"Pa!"

Shanshenbao rushed into his old man's embrace and broke into tears.

Old Man Zhang also burst into tears.

"Pa, tomorrow morning, let's stop a car going back home. I'll stay a bachelor my whole life before I'll let you suffer like this anymore!"

Then there was no shouting and no sound of metallic clashing. Angsai Beach regained its tranquility.

The wind picked up.

A muddled yellow color appeared in the western sky. Soon, the fierce wind rolled past the camel brush and leapt past them, wailing like ghosts and howling like wolves. It almost blew away their gear.

"Let's get some rocks and use 'em to hold down our gear!" shouted the old man.

His son began to carry over rocks. He used them to hold down the blanket, and then returned to get more.

Shanshenbao discovered a rectangular stone, stuck in the ground like a stake. He used his hands to try and move it, but it didn't budge. He took his pick-axe and inserted it into a crack in the stone and used his strength to pry it out.

"The ground is covered in rocks, why are you working on that one! You're wasting your energy," said Old Man Zhang as he came over.

"It's already moved a bit. This is a good rock." His son continued prying.

Old Man Zhang came over to help him and the two men lifted up the rock with all their strength. This rock was indeed quite nice.

Shanshenbao rolled the rock onto its side, bent over at the waist and lifted it up in his arms, exerting all of his strength. However, he did not expect the ground under his feet to loosen, making him lose his balance. As Old Man Zhang shouted, "Be careful," as Shanshenbao fell to the ground.

"Are you hurt?" asked Old Man Zhang.

His son lay on the ground and didn't make a noise.

"I told you not to lift it! You insisted on lifting it! What's the matter? Are you hurt?" asked Old Man Zhang. His son still did not move, nor did he make a sound.

Old Man Zhang grew anxious and ran up beside his son and grabbing his shoulders with his hands he lifted him up, "Ancestors, speak to me!"

Suddenly, his son hoisted up something shaped like a bottle gourd the size of a boy's fist, "Pa, look at this. What is it?"

The old man grabbed the thing with his hand, and as soon as he fixed his eyes on it, an explosion went off in his mind, like he'd been struck by five bolts of lightning.

"My god! Gold!"

Old Man Zhang shouted, his eyes gazed straight ahead, and he began to froth at the mouth. He fell to the ground and lost consciousness. His two big calloused hands held that golden bottle gourd tightly like the sharp claws of an eagle.

Shanshenbao grew worried. He first pinched his father's upper lip, but didn't get a response. Ever resourceful in an emergency, he untied the belt to his trousers and, as a last resort, pissed on his father.

This trick proved effective. Old Man Zhang gave out a long donkey-like cry from deep within his chest and slowly began to catch his breath.

Shanshenbao quickly tied up the belt to his trousers, squatted in front of his father, and used his sleeve to wipe the urine off his father's face.

"Son, we're rich, hmmm, ancestors, we're rich, hmmm, Heaven, we bow down before you, hmmm..."

Old Man Zhang got up, and banging his head on the ground, kowtowed resonantly in the direction of King Gesar's hitching post. Then like a child that had lost its mother, he clutched the golden gourd and started crying.

This unexpected gain made Old Man Zhang and his son act like two stupid monkeys. The two of them knelt down on the ground face to face and began to shake like flour sifters from head to toe.

Like a herd of strange beasts the wind made all kinds of sounds and continued to cause sand to fly about and stones to hurtle through the air.

Old Man Zhang held the golden bottle gourd tightly in his two hands. He held it close against his chest, as though it would simply vanish if he were to loosen his grip.

This was indeed a rare object, forged by a heavenly axe and divine craftsmanship.

The upper part of the golden gourd was small, while the bottom part was big. The thin waist seemed to be about to break, and then continued to connect to the crooked mouth of the gourd, which was like the pout of a naughty child. The entire body of the bottle gourd emitted a golden light and it was impossible to find even the slightest blemish.

"Shanshenbao, quick, take off your red undershirt," said Old Man Zhang suddenly. This was the first full sentence he had spoken since after he saw the rare beauty Heaven bestowed upon him almost a full hour ago.

Shanshenbao did not understand what his father wanted to do with his red undershirt, but he immediately took off his cotton jacket and his shirt. Then he peeled off the red undershirt he had bought just before he left home.

"Tear it off, tear off a strip!" Old Man Zhang ordered again.

Shanshenbao didn't say another word and tore off a strip of red cloth, handing it to his father.

Old Man Zhang folded the strip of red cloth in half and tied it around the waist of the golden gourd, making a pretty bow.

"After I tie this, golden gourd, you belong to our Zhang Family!"

Old Man Zhang clasped the golden gourd and rubbed it back and forth on his old face. After he had rubbed it enough, he spread out the torn piece of red shirt and gently put the golden gourd on top, and carefully wrapped it up.

While Old Man Zhang was doing all of this, Shanshenbao could only laugh stupidly, his cotton jacket draped slantingly over his bare arms. His skin was so cold it had turned purple, yet he still didn't think to put his jacket on.

Suddenly, Shanshenbao said with a changed tone of voice, "Pa, I'm going back to dig, there might be more!"

He scooped up the pick-axe and started sprinting back toward the place where the golden gourd was discovered.

"Get back here!"

Old Man Zhang bellowed so harshly that Shanshenbao slipped and fell in surprise.

He turned his head back and in confusion looked at his father. "Son, we've struck it rich. Because the old man in Heaven pities us, he gave us this. We'll take as much as he gives. But we can't be greedy, 'cause if we get greedy, we'll run into disaster. So don't go back there!"

These remarks made Shanshenbao's scalp tingle. He immediately turned around, tossed aside the pick-axe, and didn't dare move again.

"Quick, put your clothes on and bring over the pouch of hardtack. We'll eat and hit the road before the night's over!"

"Leave? Tonight?"

"What, you think this place is your grandmother's house? You didn't see that battle a moment ago? They were swinging spades and shovels at people's heads! That gang ran away, but you think that means they're finished? No! Tomorrow morning when it gets light, you just watch! It'd be a wonder if they don't fight until the sky turns black. It's such a long road to get here, and who among them didn't come to get gold? This place isn't a Xining City park! Ay, forced into this pickle, and this place is so awful that even an uncle would turn on a nephew. Take out the hardtack, we'll eat a bite and go. Put on what you need to wear, sling the quilt and hardtack pouch on your back, and bring a shovel. Whatever's left, just leave it. As long as the two of us get home safely, the rest of this stuff is just grass blowing in the wind."

Even though Old Man Zhang said that, his eyes still lingered over each item: the tent they hadn't used even once; the pick-axe, which had good steel attached to it; and even those gold mining tools, now all thrown away... to farmers, these things are pieces of their lives. Which tool isn't close to their hearts! He'd spent money to buy 'em all, spent money to drag 'em all to Angsai Beach, and now they hadn't even used 'em and they were gonna just throw 'em all away in this wilderness!

Old Man Zhang's heart ached at the thought. But if they didn't throw 'em all away, then what? Luckily they had stumbled upon undeserved fortune. He clutched the golden gourd that the Heavens had bestowed upon them. If they hadn't dug up a cent of gold and returned home empty-handed, Old Man Zhang would have carried these things home on his back, including the gold mining tools that were discarded when they were running for their lives...

5

By the time the curtain of night shrouded all of Angsai Beach, and tiny spots of lantern lights began to appear, the father and son had already reached the banks of the Zhaqu River.

Someone was singing folk songs in the dark of night. The sound of the man's rich and muddy bass, the notes drawn out long and deep, made you think of a wailing son, lying prone in his ancestral cemetery.

Old Man Zhang could tell it was the 'Longing for the Mountains Tune' from among the *hua'er* folk songs. 'Longing for the Mountains' was a term for the extreme homesickness among those who had left home to find their fortunes.

At that moment, Old Man Zhang thought of Ma Cunfu, who had squatted at the bank of the Zhaqu River and sung folk songs over forty years ago. It was as clear to him as if it had all happened yesterday...

"Pa, the river is so wide, how we gonna cross?"

Shanshenbao broke Old Man Zhang's train of thought. Old Man Zhang listened to the murmuring of the Zhaqu River. He stroked the golden gourd pressed against his chest, and pulling on his belt forcefully he said, "Take off your cotton pants and carry them around your neck. Stuff your shoes and socks against your chest. Hurry up."

"Bare-assed?" asked the son, embarrassed.

"Do you want to *not* take off your pants? The water in the middle of the river will be up to our knees. Your wet pants will freeze stiffer than iron and you won't even be able to walk. Take 'em off. C'mon, you're not a woman, why are you so embarrassed?"

Shanshenbao took off his pants and draped them over his shoulder. Then he took off his shoes, stuffed his socks inside them, and tucked them under his waistband. He said, "After I carry these things over on my back, I'll come back and get you."

"No, you carry the quilt and hardtack on your back, and give me the shovel."

The night was very dark, and the father and son could only see each other's silhouettes.

Shanshenbao went into the river first, and Old Man Zhang followed, using the shovel as a walking stick. The bone-piercing cold of the water made the father and son shiver at the same time. Barefoot, they slipped and slid across the egg-shaped rocks on the riverbed. By the time they'd waded to the deepest point, their legs had long ago become numb with cold.

"Walk steady, Pa," the son said.

"I know."

Those two words "I know" had just fallen from Old Man Zhang's mouth when all of a sudden his leg cramped. First he tried putting both hands on the shovel to support himself, setting his center of gravity over the shovel, and using all of his strength to lift the cramped leg forward. But then the leg muscle cramped up tighter and tighter, and as soon as Old Man Zhang began to panic, he slipped off balance and toppled into the river.

"Son... hurry! I... I'm not gonna make it..."

Shanshenbao heard his father's cry for help, quickly turned around, and flung himself at his dad. He pulled him with one hand from under the water and dragged him toward the other shore.

Shanshenbao had used every last ounce of his strength, but had finally gotten his dad to the riverbank.

"Quick, Pa, put your pants on."

"Pants... uh, my pants washed away," Old Man Zhang said gloomily, the golden gourd tightly pressed to his chest.

Surprised, Shanshenbao hurriedly patted his body with his hands. Damn! In saving his old man, he had lost everything he'd had on him. The quilt, the food, the pants... all vanished. In that moment of haste, he had completely forgotten about those things!

"Ahhhh..."

The Zhaqu River smiled mischievously in the darkness.

The bone-piercing wind sliced knife-like into the naked legs and buttocks of the father and son, and their jaws chattered as their teeth gnashed in battle against each other.

"What do we do, what do we do, what do we do!?" The son was so anxious he gnawed at the back of his hand, his voice brimming with despair.

"What do we do? Get to the road! Put your shoes on, and before daybreak, we'll hurry towards the Chahan Ridge Road and stop a car. Heaven gave you a golden gourd, and it also left you bare-ass naked. This is Heaven's will, testing whether my son and I are destined to enjoy this golden gourd. If it's destined, we'll return home and live. If not, then we'll be dead in the weeds by the river. Son, since ancient times money has been linked to destiny. Heaven has a heart of compassion for humans, but also a mean streak. There's nothing to be done about it, so take off your undershirt and wrap it around your butt."

The father and son didn't speak anymore, but took off their jackets and shirts and tied their shirts around their waists like skirts. Then they put on their jackets and shoes, cinched tight their belts, and hand in hand vanished into the darkness.

As the night grew deeper and darker, the blackness closed in and thickened.

Like a spirit on night patrol, the wind blew an eerie, shrill whistle as it rapidly shuttled back and forth through Ye Niu Valley.

Periodically, wild animal howls, as horrifying as burst lungs, came rolling in from far away.



A shooting star cut open the inky curtain of night like a lightning bolt, but in a flash the curtain of night returned as before.

Horrors of the night, horrors of the wilderness.

Bare-assed Old Man Zhang and bare-assed Shanshenbao, hand in hand, advanced haltingly through the desolate night wilderness.

The lower parts of their jackets, soaked by the river, had frozen as hard as metal, and the sound of rattling accompanied the sound of their footsteps.

Old Man Zhang, with one hand cupped to his chest, clutching the golden gourd that was more precious than his life, forgot what it meant to be tired, what it meant to be cold.

"Son."

"Yeah."

"Are you scared?"

"No."

"That's bullshit. I'm scared. Why don't you sing?"

"Sing what?"

"Sing a *hua'er*."

"Uh..."

"Hey! This is Ye Niu Valley, not the village. It's just our two bare asses walking here, why are you still so shy? What's the point of keeping your behavior proper when we're out on this empty road? Sing! You sing, and I'll sing with you, or else we'll never make it through the night."

"OK then, I'll sing a song."

"The songs you young folks sing have no soul, but *hua'er*... *hua'er* are the songs of us farmers. Sing – sing loud."

"All right."

Hi-hey; hi-ho—

He led a colt to the willow forest ground,

My dear silly brother!

But what grass in willow forests can be found?

A-shouting and singing he went out the gate

My dear silly brother!

But what good can come from leaving here so late?

"Hmmm, your voice is pretty good, but you're not really letting go. Back in '49, we sang *hua'er* right here. I was barely eighteen, and my voice was as bright as a copper flute. You don't know this, but the year I was seventeen, I got engaged to Zaojie from Hougou – your mother. I'd never seen her before. The day our families arranged for us to be married was the day we first met. You didn't know this, but at that time your mother was also seventeen, and she was as pretty as a water scallion. On the day we met, your mother gave me a pair of embroidered socks, and on the bottom of the socks she embroidered a pair of pomegranates... she was so talented. When I ran away to avoid conscription the next year, I brought almost nothing with me. All I had were two bean-flour hardtack biscuits and those socks. When I reached Angsai Beach, all day long I thought about nothing but your mother. It's really strange, after meeting someone once, to miss her so terribly. I've never talked about this to anyone else before, it's so strange, but I'm telling you all this tonight. After that goddamn Hanyibula ran away with the golden colt we dug up, we walked home, eating live pikas along the way. This is something I'm not ashamed to tell you – if it weren't for your mother's socks, I would've died in that God-forsaken place. When we entered the village I wore nothing but the coat that clung to my skin, so worn that it'd become a sieve. But I clung to that pair of socks, and that broken sheepskin draped around my naked shoulders. The day after I arrived home, I put on the socks and ran to Hougou to see your mother... I'm not talking anymore. Sing another one."

"Me – I can't, my throat is all choked up. The sound won't come out."

"Then I'll sing. Yeah, I'll sing the *hua'er* that I sang forty years ago on Angsai Beach..."

The sun's set, oh, yes it's fallen.

Oh, my brother's flesh!  
Beside the cliffs the snake crawls on;  
His fingernails peel back with skin.  
Oh, my brother's flesh!  
He cuts his live flesh for eatin'...

"This is painful to listen to, Pa."

"Fine, then I won't sing anymore. Shanshenbao, feel this, the golden gourd is warming me up."

Old Man Zhang pulled his son's hand to his chest.

Shanshenbao squeezed the golden gourd. A sensation of warmth washed over his whole body. He reluctantly removed his hand from the warmth of the old man's chest.

"Take it, press it against your chest, hold it for a while," Old Man Zhang said.

"Mmm," his son answered, taking the golden gourd and holding it against his chest. "Pa, how much do you think this golden gourd will go for?"

"This is a treasure, there's nothing else like it under the sun. It'll make us a very rich family!"

"Is it as valuable as the golden colt that Hanyibula sold to the Westerners?"

"Yup."

"So when we go back, what'll we do with it? Sell it to the bank, or sell it to gold dealers?"

"We'll sell it to whoever offers us the most."

"The bank will definitely offer us a lower price than a gold dealer would."

"Then we'll sell it to a dealer."

"I don't want to part with it."

"Look, kid, I don't want to either, but if we don't sell it, how'll you marry your wife!"

"I won't marry! I'll stay a bachelor!"

"A bachelor!? This golden gourd can't replace a wife! Would you have this gourd break off the Zhang Family line?"

In the east, the sun appeared like a white fish belly.

"Pa, the sun's rising. Look up ahead – it looks like a mountain."

"Chahan Ridge! Son, we'll be on the road soon." As he spoke, Old Man Zhang rubbed his butt, but he didn't feel a thing.

Both Zhangs, father and son, squeezed tightly into a cave on the side of Chahan Ridge Road.

The cave wasn't deep, but it blocked the wind, and it was much warmer than outside.

The sky brightened as the God of Light stumbled into the mortal world and caught sight of the father and son huddled in the cave.

The cave's mouth faced east. When the bright light shone inside the cave, Old Man Zhang caught a glimpse of some camel brush that the wind had blown into a pile underneath a nearby cliff.

"Shanshenbao, you fetch that pile of brush. We can burn it and warm up a bit."

Shanshenbao, full of shame, looked at his father who was as bare-assed as he was. Then he crawled out of the cave, jogged down to the foot of the cliff, and brought back an armful of brush. As he walked back, the dry, brittle sticks scratched his thighs, drawing blood.

He piled up the camel brush in front of the cave and squatted off to one side. He was again too embarrassed to make his way into the cave.

Inside the cave Old Man Zhang felt around for a match, found one, struck it, and put it on the brush pile. The brush started to explode and pop, louder than firecrackers, as it caught fire.

With one inside the cave and one outside, the father and son warmed up in the fire's heat.

The warmth from the brushfire caused the blood to start flowing through both father and son, who had walked bare-assed throughout the entirety of a night in the dead of winter.

A gust blew at them head-on, and the smoke that had been wafting into the sky blew into the cave.

Old Man Zhang jumped out of the cave like a pika smoked from its hole. Hand pressed against his chest, bent at the waist, he coughed desperately. After he was done coughing he used the backs of his hands to wipe tears from his eyes. After he wiped the tears, he opened his eyes, and his face turned red. It turned out that when he had jumped out of the cave to cough, he had forgotten his own dignity, and the shirt on his butt had shifted to one side, leaving his family jewels out to dry in the open air.

Shanshenbao wrenched his head to the side as if he'd drunk the wrong medicine. Old Man Zhang pulled his shirt over to cover his privates and awkwardly turned his head away.

His stomach growled. They had no hardtack. It had all been swallowed by the Zhaqu River as they crossed.

Old Man Zhang recalled the scene of forty years ago when he and Ma Cunfu had caught pikas to eat.

Absent-mindedly, he looked around in every direction, but didn't see any pika holes. A bird let out a high-pitched chirp, whizzed by his head like a stray bullet, and disappeared.

Old Man Zhang, using all his strength, swallowed a mouthful of saliva.

The sun rose higher.

The warm sunshine shone on the father and son, and on their bare asses, too.

Old Man Zhang stuffed his hand into his jacket, and from within he pulled out the 300 *yuan* that he'd gotten for selling the pig, and which Old Lady Zhang had pressed into his hand before they left. He said to his son, "You hold onto the money. Give me the golden gourd, I'll carry it. At this point there's likely to be a car coming by, so we'll walk alongside the road."

"How can we stand to face anyone looking like this? How can we stop traffic?" Shanshenbao said, taking the money and placing the golden gourd into Old Man Zhang's hands.

"We've already come this far. Staying alive is a lot more important than feeling ashamed. Let's go," Old Man Zhang said. He stood and walked off with Shanshenbao following close behind.

Heaven does not forsake those without a way forward.

Just when the Zhangs, father and son, crouched bare-assed by the side of the road, and were so hungry that the sky was whirling and the earth was spinning, the sound of an engine reached their ears.

"Car! Quick, Shanshenbao, go stand in the middle of the road, don't let it drive away!"

As he said this, Old Man Zhang jumped up and ran into the middle of the road.

An old, run-down Liberation truck approached. Old Man Zhang steeled his heart and stood perfectly upright in the center of the road.

The driver pounded on the horn for all he was worth, but Old Man Zhang, as though he had been nailed to the ground, didn't move a muscle. The driver was forced to slam on the brakes and stop.

The door opened, and the driver stuck out his head to have a look. "You idiot, are you crazy?" After cursing them, the driver cracked a huge grin. "You... how'd you wind up looking like this!? A couple of bare asses, ha ha ha..."

The two Zhangs, father and son, ignored the driver's mockery and asked pitifully, "Sir, can we hitch a ride?"

"But, what about your pants? Ha ha ha!" The driver jumped down from the truck, and pointing at their raw, bare legs, doubled over with laughter.

"My son and I went to Angsai Beach to dig for gold, and we haven't seen a speck of the stuff. Then the miners began fighting over territory and we got scared of being beaten to death. So last night we fled, crossing the Zhaqu River, and our pants washed away..." Old Man Zhang said, lowering his head.

"They washed away! Ha ha ha! A couple of bare asses! Ha ha ha..." The driver continued laughing so hard he rocked back and forth.

Shanshenbao clenched his jaw. He was seriously considering picking up a rock and bashing the driver's face in.

"Sir, for Heaven's sake, give us a ride, and we'll remember your great kindness." Old Man Zhang continued to plead.

"Give you a ride?" The driver was no longer smiling. He stood up and said, "Got any money?"

"Yeah, we do," Old Man Zhang anxiously replied.

"How much?"

"Three hundred, we got 300."

"Both of you for 300?"

"Yeah."

"Are you kidding me? Get lost! Two bare asses want to ride in my truck? No way!"

"Oh dear Heaven!"

Old Man Zhang threw himself down on his knees in front of the driver, "Here is 300, I have nothing else. Sir, think of it as charity. I'm nothing but an old bag of bones. We're all fellow travelers at this point, sir, take pity, take pity..."

"Ugh... fine! Three hundred it is, hand it over!" The driver stretched out his hand.

Shanshenbao put the money in the palm of the driver's hand.

The driver looked it over and stuffed it into his coat pocket. "Get in the truck!" With this command, he started to climb in through the cabin door with Old Man Zhang following on his heels.

The driver pointed at the cabin, "Go get in the back. You bare asses really think you're going to sit in the cabin? Bah!"

Old Man Zhang retreated, waited for the driver to get into the cabin, and took advantage of the opportunity to ask, "Sir, we have gone a day and night without even a bite to eat, do you have a bit of food that you can give us?"

"Hey, today I ran into a couple of bare-assed buffoons, and they want a ride. Sure. Now they want food. OK, on account of the fact that you two aren't wearing pants, I'll give you these two pieces of hardtack. Take 'em and eat 'em." The driver took out two pieces of white flour hardtack and stuffed them in Old Man Zhang's hand. "Hurry up and get in the back, I need to get going!"

Old Man Zhang and his son both struggled to climb into the cargo compartment. Looking around they found that the truck was half loaded with sheepskins!

Sleepy, they found pillows. The two of them pulled up sheepskins to prepare beds for themselves, and then the father and son, sticking close together, sat among them and pulled over several more sheepskins with the wool facing down to cover themselves.

Old Man Zhang put a piece of hardtack in Shanshenbao's hand. "Eat, and when you've finished eating, sleep!"

The two of them, like wind sweeping up the clouds, scarfed down the two pieces of hardtack, leaving not a crumb.

The truck raced along the borderless wasteland. The engine's loud rumble wrapped around the dust kicked high in the air, and both went straight up the noses and into the ears of the father and son.

The sheepskin's thick wool dispelled the cold from their bodies like a warm quilt. Shanshenbao's mood improved. Looking around in the truck that was speeding toward home, he ate another piece of hardtack and completely forgot the teasing and humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the driver.

He remembered the golden gourd, and his heart was tickled. "Pa."

Old Man Zhang turned his head around, "Yeah?"

Shanshenbao pointed his finger at Old Man Zhang's belly. "I want to look at it."

Old Man Zhang smiled at his son, and took the golden gourd wrapped in the red undershirt from his bosom. Looking back toward the driving compartment, he carefully opened the red



undershirt. Before the eyes of Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao appeared that rare beauty bred of Heaven's spirit and the earth's blood.

They took turns gently rubbing the golden gourd with their coarse hands, and their hearts felt sweeter than honey.

"Pa, let me hold it. I wanna feel the weight."

As he spoke, he took the golden gourd in his palm. Old Man Zhang said, "It's at least a half a pound!"

The son nodded in agreement.

"Ooh la la! A lump of gold!"

A sharp voice suddenly came from behind the heads of Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao, scaring the living daylight out of both them. When they hurried to look around, they saw a head sticking out from a pile of sheepskins behind them. The head had disheveled hair, a dirty face, and two large, round eyes, like a pair of glass balls, staring at them.

Old Man Zhang grabbed the golden gourd from his son's hand and tucked it against his chest. It was as if a huge bomb had exploded in his head.

Shanshenbao, like a well-trained warrior, leapt to his feet and faced the head with his two fists clenched in front of his chest.

"Hey, ain't you Shanshenbao?"

That head cried out in surprise, then tunneled out from the bundled sheepskins and turned into a person.

The father and son both looked at the man more carefully. It turned out the person who had emerged from the sheepskins was none other than Uncle Crooked Mouth from Hougou!

"Uncle, how'd you end up in this truck?" Old Man Zhang had not yet recovered from his panicked state.

"Collectin' sheepskins! Look, I collected this half-truckload of sheepskins from Longwu. I originally planned to get a whole truckful, uh... but I ran into a couple of speculators who squeezed me dry... but the two of you... Oh, that's right, you two went to dig gold, and you struck it rich! That lump of gold..."

"Keep your voice down! What the hell are you making a fuss for?"

"OK, OK, OK. But how come the two of you aren't wearing pants?"

"Ay – it's a long story, but last night we crossed the Zhaqu River, and they got washed away..."

"Worth it! It's worth it! For that lump you got, it'd be worth it to drop two legs into the river, let alone two pairs of pants!" Uncle Crooked Mouth cracked a wry smile and saliva dribbled from his mouth. "When'd you get on the truck? How come I didn't know?" he asked suddenly.

"We been here for most of the day. We didn't know you were here," Shanshenbao said.

"Oh oh oh. I was sleepin'! It's cold, so I buried myself under a lotta sheepskins," Uncle Crooked Mouth said, picking a couple of small pellets of sheep dung from behind his neck and tossing them off the truck. "The driver didn't want money from you?"

"How could he not?" said Shanshenbao.

"How much?"

"300!"

"Bah! That bastard. On his way out, he delivered merchandise to the Longwu Supply and Marketing Cooperative. He originally planned to go back to Huangzhong with an empty truck, but once I suggested that he haul my sheepskins he started by demandin' 1,000 *yuan*. That motherfucker – I gathered up all the money in my pockets, but just pooled about 960, short by forty *yuan*. But he wouldn't go for it. So finally we agreed once we got to my house, he'd get to choose two fine sheepskins! That motherfucker, now he's got your money, too. This damn truck, sooner or later I'm gonna smash this sonofabitch!"

The words had just fallen from his mouth when the truck suddenly jolted violently, causing Uncle Crooked Mouth's head to hit the side of the truck.

"You're saying, you hired this truck to take you to your place in Hougou?" asked Old Man Zhang.

"Yeah. Otherwise, there's too many sheepskins..."

"OK, OK, OK. Little Uncle, I'm gonna ask you for a favor. When the time comes, turn at the bend and tell the driver to first head to our house and let us off. You can see the two of us are bare-assed and our balls are hanging out. We can't go walking back. What do you say?"

Old Man Zhang used the most cordial tone he could muster to talk with Uncle Crooked Mouth. He seemed to have completely forgotten that business about how he had chased Uncle out of his home and vowed that he would break the family like a loaf of bread, and they'd never see each other again.

"Listen to you, asking like it's some big deal – isn't it just a matter of a simple word? Brother-in-law, the thing in your jacket... let me take a look?" Uncle Crooked Mouth asked for a favor, too.

Old Man Zhang looked to Shanshenbao for advice. Shanshenbao said, "Uncle ain't no outsider, let him take a look."

Old Man Zhang reluctantly took the golden gourd from his jacket, and placed it in Uncle Crooked Mouth's hands.

Uncle Crooked Mouth held the golden gourd with both hands, and his already crooked mouth became even more crooked, stretching all the way to his ears.

6

Although the truck was a decrepit old bucket of bolts, in the end it was much faster than a tractor. Three days later, at noon, Uncle Crooked Mouth paid the driver a fine sheepskin to drive his truck into Nalong Village.

The truck drove to the entrance of the alley by Old Man Zhang's house and stopped. The alley was too narrow, and the truck could not fit.

"Hey! You two get out double-time! I need to get going!" the driver shouted as he hopped out of the truck.

"Sir, why don't you come inside, catch your breath, eat a bite, and then go?" said Uncle Crooked Mouth.

"Let's get to your house and then eat! I still gotta get on the road tonight. Get out, quick!" the driver said in a manner that brooked no discussion.

Old Man Zhang and his son looked at their bare lower halves and were embarrassed.

During those three days, other than getting out to relieve themselves, they never left the truck. Fortunately, Uncle Crooked Mouth had a half bag of mixed flour hardtack. When the driver went into a restaurant to eat, Uncle even bought them two bowls of stir-fried noodles. As he was raising the bowl of noodles to his mouth, Old Man Zhang realized that running Uncle from their home that day had been just too inconsiderate.

They had arrived home, but how would they get out of the truck?

"Brother-in-law, you two each wrap up in a sheepskin. What are you afraid of?" Uncle Crooked Mouth came up with an idea.

Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao, each wrapped in a sheepskin, were just about to get out of the truck when Uncle Crooked Mouth put his mouth beside Old Man Zhang's ear and said, "Brother-in-law, what you're holding should absolutely not leave your hands. After a few days, I'll introduce you to a buyer – he's an old veteran in Dongguan, and he'll be ready to give you a good price, eh?"

Because Uncle Crooked Mouth had looked out for Old Man Zhang on this journey, the feeling of loathing Old Man Zhang had felt before had reduced significantly. Besides, he wasn't like Uncle Crooked Mouth in that he didn't run around here and there buying and selling things, so he wasn't familiar with those wheeler-dealers. As soon as he heard that Uncle Crooked Mouth had a good buyer in mind, he agreed on the spot.

The truck drove off as soon as they got out.

The villagers crowded around when they saw it was Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao who had emerged from the truck.

They looked at the father and son whose faces seemed somehow familiar and whose legs were bare and wrapped in a sheepskin. Surprised, they said, "Old Man Zhang, didn't you two leave to go dig gold? You're back after only ten days, what the hell happened?"

"Ay – it's been bad all around. They're fighting over camps at Angsai Beach, several thousand people swinging spades and hacking everywhere. If we hadn't run for our lives, we woulda come to an early end out there. Even worse, when we were crossing the Zhaqu River, our pants got washed away..."

"What about Quanxi? Didn't he go to Angsai Beach, too?"

"He had a good camp and didn't talk with us much. I haven't seen him since."

"Ay – "

Swinging her half-bound 'Liberation' feet, Old Lady Zhang ran out from the alley. As soon as she saw the state the two were in, she was stunned.

"Heavens! How'd you wind up like this!? I told you not to go to the gold field, but you just had to go! I knew there was no good to come from it! Goodness gracious! Forty years ago you came back with a sheepskin wrapped around your bare ass, and today you two are once again bare asses wrapped in sheepskin. God!"

"We didn't die at Angsai Beach! What damn funeral are you wailing over!? Go home!"

Old Lady Zhang's crying suddenly stopped. She took off the light yellow scarf covering her head, wiped her tears, turned towards the house, and walked away.

After Old Man Zhang returned home, nobody saw him for three days, but the entire village knew that they had recently gained unexpected wealth by finding a golden bottle gourd.

It turns out Old Lady Zhang had gotten carried away with her happiness. The first breath of rumor had leaked from her mouth.

As a result, Old Man Zhang's courtyard became as crowded as a marketplace, as villagers came to visit one after another. Old Man Zhang was so angry that he almost slapped Old Lady Zhang across the face.

His fellow villagers' repeated and detailed questioning forced Old Man Zhang to tell how after arriving at Angsai Beach he was unable to set up camp, how he slept under King Gesar's hitching post, how he made Shanshenbao trip and then pick up the golden gourd, and how the camp-looters frightened them so much that they both dropped their stuff and ran. He also told in minute detail the story of how he ended up losing his pants. What they heard made the villagers wag their tongues in awe.

"Gramps, this golden gourd... did you dig it up at the same place that you dug up the golden colt forty years ago?" asked a kid.

"On the same gold field, not the same spot," Old Man Zhang corrected.

"Then why didn't you keep digging? There's probably more stuff there!" another kid said.

"I wanted to keep digging, but Pa said that since we struck it rich we shouldn't root around in the same place again or we'd dig up some misfortune, so I didn't dare dig anymore," Shanshenbao said with a smile.

"Wow! There might be more!"

"So where exactly was this spot?"

"It's by King Gesar's hitching post. You can turn over all Angsai Beach, but nobody dares move that hitching post," said Shanshenbao.

"That's right. That's a place of spirit sacrifices. Who'd dare touch it?" said Old Man Zhang.

"There's no need to argue! There's definitely still treasure under there!"

"Maybe there's a big nest of gold!"

This golden gourd was like a wicked bottle with endless charm. It was apparent that the gourd immediately evoked the villager's intense desire for money and their wild yearnings to get rich. It sent a shockwave that bowled over towns in the west, villages in the east, townships in the south, and camps in the north. Each and every person was driven to distraction, and their hunger and thirst became hard to endure...

When the shockwave reverberated back to their village, even Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao were unable to clearly understand what it meant. Those words that came from quiet chats on a *kang* in Old Man Zhang's house coursed through people's imaginations and became a myth, "Underneath King Gesar's hitching post are the King's precious treasures. There are golden calves, golden sheep, golden horses, golden dogs, golden birds, golden gourds, golden bowls, golden chopsticks, golden gold gold... if you can find the door to his treasure trove, and you hit it just right..."

Folks throughout the region were so carried away by the treasures of their own creation that they simply didn't bother to consider the altar to the spirits. Carrying explosives and detonators on hired tractors, trucks, Beijing Jeeps, and Nissans, they all anxiously raced toward Angsai Beach, or more precisely, they raced toward King Gesar's hitching post.

Nalong villagers refused to be left behind. Despite Old Man Zhang and his son's repeated, well-intentioned explanations, one after another, their eyes would start to turn red as they set out on their own journeys.

Then one day, just as Shanshenbao was about to take the donkey to the river to drink, a Beijing Jeep pulled up in front of him. The car door opened and the person who stepped out of the car was none other than his good childhood friend, Zhao Manku.

"Shanshenbao, I've come to pick you up," said Manku.

"Where to?" asked Shanshenbao.

"Where else would we go? The place where you dug up the golden gourd."

"To Angsai Beach? I just got back! I'm not going there again."

"Ah, my friend, you got rich and now you don't care about your brothers? I took sick leave from the factory for a month just to come and pick you up. Just one word – riches. It can't be done without you. If we come home empty-handed, then I'll take out one hundred *yuan* from my salary for you as payment every day. You only have one job – to lead the way. I already stole the metal detector from the factory – it'll guarantee that we strike it big. How about it, Brother? I'm covering all the expenses, ain't that enough?"

Zhao Manku looked very smart and handsome in a cowboy shirt and jeans.

"But that's just from other people's bullshit stories. There's nothing precious there at all," Shanshenbao said, explaining the real situation.

"Don't worry about whether anything's there or not. Your job is just to lead us to where you and your father dug up that golden gourd. Point us in the right direction and your job's done!" said Zhao Manku.

"But..."

"Ah! I'm gonna go work on the old man. You get ready to go!"

When Zhao Manku finished what he was saying, he let himself in through the front gate of Old Man Zhang's house.

"Then I'm gonna go take the donkey out for a drink and deal with you later," Shanshenbao called out towards the house as he pulled the donkey toward the river.

Zhao Manku grew impatient waiting for Shanshenbao to finish watering the donkey. "Hurry up! The old man agreed!"

Shanshenbao got pushed into the Beijing Jeep by Zhao Manku, and merely waved a hand to his Ma and Pa, who had come to see him off. The Jeep rushed out onto the road.



One morning, after half a month had passed, Uncle Crooked Mouth brought two people to Old Man Zhang. One of the men was about fifty years old and the other about forty. Both spoke with a city accent.

At one glance, Old Man Zhang quickly understood the buyers had come. He asked his brother-in-law and it turned out to be true.

Old Lady Zhang poured the two buyers some tea, and the older one said, "Sir, show us the goods. We don't have much time."

Old Man Zhang pulled out the golden gourd from his cabinet. The two dealers took one look and immediately their eyes began to shine.

The two of them thoroughly examined the golden gourd, weighing it back and forth between their hands. Then they exchanged looks that were undetected by the others, placed the gourd on the table, and said, "We're going to go outside for a bit. Just for a few minutes."

The two gold dealers mysteriously exited the main gate.

"What are they doing? Don't they want it?" Old Man Zhang worriedly asked Uncle Crooked Mouth.

"A businessman has a businessman's standards. Just wait," Uncle Crooked Mouth said with complete confidence.

Sure enough, before there was even enough time to smoke a pipeful of tobacco, the two gold dealers came back in.

"So, we'll weigh it?"

Old Man Zhang said, "First let's discuss the price."

"Three-six," said the older one.

'Three-six' is gold dealer jargon meaning the price of one ounce of gold, as weighed by the old scales of sixteen ounces to a pound, was 3,600 *yuan*.

"You think you're fooling some idiot kid? I already heard the black market rate is three-eight," said Old Man Zhang.

"Three-eight? If it's three-eight, old friend, then I'll just give you everything I have," said the young one.

"Then never mind. I ain't sellin'," Old Man Zhang said, about to put away the golden gourd.

"Three-seven!" the old one said.

"No," Old Man Zhang said.

"Three-seven-five!"

"I ain't sellin'. This is a golden gourd. It's a national treasure!"

"OK, OK, OK! Three-eight then! Weigh it."

The young one and the old one glanced at each other again, revealed the trace of a knowing smile, and took out an extraordinarily refined copper scale.

Old Man Zhang took off the strip of red cloth tied around the waist of the golden gourd and put the gourd on the copper scale.

"Twelve point four ounces," the young one said while weighing it on the scale.

"Weigh it again, lemme see." Old Man Zhang moved in for a closer look. After looking for a while, he said, "It's clearly twelve point five ounces!"

"OK, OK, OK, we'll just count it as twelve point five. Ten ounces is 38,000, two ounces is 7,600, and half an ounce is 1,900. 38,000 plus 7,600 is 45,600, then plus 1,900 and the total is 47,500 even. Old friend, you add it again and see if it's right."

"It's right, it's right." Old Man Zhang was so overwhelmed by this huge figure that he couldn't even catch his breath.

"Then we'll turn over the goods with one hand and the money with the other."

As soon as the older buyer waved his hand, the younger buyer unzipped his leather jacket, took it off, and undid the buttons of his leather vest. He put it on the *kang* with the inside unfolded and facing out.

Old Man Zhang was startled when he saw it. The vest was actually a giant purse.

The younger buyer drew out four big piles of one hundred *yuan* notes and put them on the bedside table, saying, "Count it, each pile is 10,000." After he finished speaking, he drew out another big pile, counted it, and took back twenty-five bills from the middle. "This is 7,500."

"OK, OK, OK." Old Man Zhang used his quivering hands to count while he used his trembling mouth to speak.

"Enough?" the older one asked after he saw that Old Man Zhang had finished counting.

"It's enough, it's enough."

"Good, this golden gourd belongs to us then."

"Lemme see it again." Old Man Zhang snatched it back, caressing and stroking it. "This is a national treasure."

Suddenly, he lifted his head and asked the two customers, "What are you buying this for? Why are you willing to pay such a high price?"

"To resell it. We resell these for a living."

"Resell to who?"

"Southerners, people from Guangdong."

"What do Guangdong people want it for?"

"To resell again."

"Resell to the government?"

"Hah! They'd go broke selling to the government!"

"Then resell to who?"

"Foreigners."

"Who are foreigners? What kind of business do they do?"

"Foreigners means people from outside the country, Westerners!" Crooked Mouth explained, laughing.

"What!? Westerners!?" Old Man Zhang was stunned.

He vigorously shook his head a few times, opened his eyes wide and stared at the two buyers. He immediately recalled the golden colt and Hanyibula, who had been shot twelve times.

"After reselling this golden gourd back and forth, it's gonna end up in the hands of a Westerner?" he asked again. He was afraid his ears had made a mistake.

"Heh heh, old friend, other than Westerners, who can afford it? Westerners are the real rich people."

"I – I – I ain't gonna sell it!" Old Man Zhang stuffed the golden gourd back into his jacket pocket as fast as lightning. "The money's all on the table. You guys take it and get outta here!" In one fell swoop he turned, stood up and jumped to the foot of the *kang*. "Uncle, hurry, take 'em outta here, I ain't sellin' the golden gourd. Even if you beat me to death, I ain't sellin'."

"Old friend, what do you mean? These banknotes are totally real! If you don't believe me, go to the bank and get 'em authenticated." The two gold buyers were growing anxious.

"It doesn't matter, I ain't sellin' it."

"We'll give you more money!"

"Even if you give me more money, I still ain't sellin'!"

"Why not?"

"This is a national treasure – a national treasure! Once a national treasure goes overseas, then I'm doomed! Forty years ago, Hanyibula took that golden colt and sold it to a foreigner, and he wound up eatin' twelve bullets. His chest was shot up like a sieve. I know that's retribution, but in all honesty, members of the Zhang Family don't do things that'll get us killed. You guys go, get outta here..."

"Brother-in-law, Hanyibula was executed 'cause dozens of sand coolies died at his hand. He had blood on his hands. It had nothing to do with the golden colt."

"Why don't you fart your own farts, I know a lot more than you. Granny, go and call the production brigade party secretary..."

The two gold dealers never expected the deal to abruptly turn so sour. When they also heard Old Man Zhang say he was going to call the local authorities, they knew that if this was blown out of proportion, it would be bad for them. They just said, "No, really, just forget about it. If you're not going to sell, then forget about it. We're going now. Old friend, you ought to think it over, and some time later we can talk business again."

The two gold dealers promptly tidied away their money and turned around. Just as they were about to leave they were pulled back by Crooked Mouth.

"What are you doing?" one of the gold dealers said. "We agreed we'd give you 2,000 if you closed the deal. The deal never closed, but now you still want the money!?! Not on your life!"

The two gold dealers, frustrated and flustered, pushed aside Crooked Mouth, opened the main gate, got on their motorcycles, and left Nalong Village in a cloud of smoke.

"Brother-in-law, you're a goddamn meathead!"

"Fuck off! You crooked fucking profiteer!"

"Fine, I'll fuck off. Bring me my three sheepskins!"

"It's just two, where'd three sheepskins come from?"

"Bah! To get the driver to go to your house that day he took another one off me, and now you're tryin' to get out of it?"

"Fine! There's one hanging on the end of that roof beam. Take it and fuck off!"

Crooked Mouth went out the door, pulled down the sheepskin from the end of the roof beam, rolled it up under his arm with the other two skins, and slammed the door as he left.

Old Man Zhang breathed a long sigh and melted onto the *kang* like a puddle of mud.

8

There isn't a wall in the world that doesn't leak air.

The story of Old Man Zhang refusing to sell the golden gourd to the gold dealers passed from one person to ten, and then from ten to hundreds. It spread near and far and eventually reached the ears of a reporter for the county newspaper, who was in the countryside investigating a different story.

The county news reporter, relying on his keen ability to sniff out a story, realized what an explosive sensation he could create locally, provincially, even nationally, by reporting this news.

He immediately jumped on his bike, carrying his tape-recorder and camera on his back. He abandoned the first half of the piece he had written about local enterprises producing iron silicates and headed straight for Nalong Village.

The reporter's abrupt visit frightened Old Man Zhang. It didn't matter that the reporter with a beaming smile had a wealth of interview experience. Old Man Zhang still believed that a disaster was waiting to fall on his head.

"Sir, I heard you dug up a golden gourd. Can you let me take a look at it?"

Old Man Zhang, like a petty thief who had been arrested, obediently brought out the golden gourd with trembling hands and put it on the bedside table.

"Whoa! That's unbelievable! Truly unbelievable!"

The reporter gasped in awe and lifted his camera, snapping a series of shots from different angles. The flash was so bright that Old Man Zhang's eyes were filled with a spinning rainbow halo, and he couldn't see anything clearly.

"I heard a gold dealer offered a high price to buy this, but you refused?"

"I didn't sell it."

"May I ask, what was it that made you so indifferent when faced with such a large sum of money?"

"They... they were gonna resell it to Westerners, but I know this is a national treasure."

"You're thinking of turning this over to the state, is that true?"

"Well..."

"Why do you want to give it to the state?"

"I..."

"Because you consider yourself Chinese, right?"

"Uh..."

"Good! The modern peasant! So, when are you preparing to turn it over?"

"Well..."

"Sir, how about this – If you go today, I'll accompany you."

"It's..." Old Man Zhang really didn't want to give the golden gourd to the bank.

"Bless my ancestors! Just turn it over already! It's like keeping an altar to the gods in a donkey pen. This isn't the kind of thing you keep in the house! Sooner or later it's going to lead to trouble!"

Old Lady Zhang pulled out the theatrics to persuade Old Man Zhang. "But... the country..."

"Grandma speaks the truth. Turn it over to your country and everyone can relax. Let's go, sir!"

"OK, let's go, but the state can't cheat me one penny. This is a national treasure, I've got an idea of what it's worth." Old Man Zhang suddenly turned irascible...

Old Man Zhang, clutching the golden gourd to his chest, sat on the back of the reporter's bicycle as he peddled to the county bank. The reporter told Old Man Zhang to sit outside while he ran to the bank president's office. As soon as he had explained the situation, he requested that the bank president go down to personally receive the golden gourd.

After following the reporter's painstaking directions, the drama of 'the peasant transferring a national treasure to the state' began. The bank president received the golden gourd into his own hands and lifted it up in the air. The reporter's flashbulb threw shadows high and low.

After the transfer ceremony was done, the bank president gave the golden gourd to an employee, telling him to weigh it.

As soon as the employee weighed it, he said to the bank president that it was probably fake. The discrepancy between the gourd's volume and weight was too great.

Hearing this, Old Man Zhang anxiously said, "If you guys want it, take it. If not, give it back. How could I, Old Man Zhang, try to fool the state with counterfeit goods?"

The bank president said, "Old comrade, why don't you go home? We've accepted your golden gourd but we have yet to

appraise it. It's just the bank's procedure. After a couple of days you may come back to get your money. Here's a receipt – hold on to it."

The reporter said, "Sir, there's no need to fear. The day after tomorrow you can return and get your money. The bank will give you a fair price. Right now I have to go back to the newspaper office to write a draft. Have a safe trip home."

Old Man Zhang had a problem. If there was some matter weighing on his mind, whether large or small, he would stare off into space unable to sleep. In the more than twenty days since he had returned from the gold fields, he had lain on the *kang* wide awake every night, and every day he felt muddle-headed and dazed.

When the golden gourd was in his house, he feared it being stolen. During the day he took the gourd with him when he left the house, and at night even the footsteps of a mouse startled him. One night he had a good dream, the next a nightmare; he was covered in hot sweat one moment, then in cold; one day he didn't think of drinking tea, the next he didn't eat. Every day, Old Lady Zhang wiped tears from her face.

Village folks want to get rich, but they also want to find peace.

That day, after the county reporter took Old Man Zhang to the bank to turn over the national treasure to the bank president, the first thing he did was let out a sigh of relief. It was as if someone had dug out his heart and left an emptiness in his chest so large that a horse could race through it.

After he got home, he put his head down and slept. That night he slept like the dead, snoring thunderously, shaking the house so hard that years of accumulated dust fell from the rafters.

The villagers heard that Old Man Zhang had given the golden gourd to the bank. Each and every one of them flapped their lips and waggled their tongues, shaking their heads like they were rattle drums. How could the bank give him as much as the



gold dealers? If this old man isn't muddle-headed, then he must have lost his mind.

Old Man Zhang felt some regret on the second day after returning from the county seat. While drinking a strong cup of tea that his wife had poured for him, he persuaded himself to believe that since he had given the golden gourd to the bank, he could not express regret. Didn't that reporter say I was Chinese? Besides, how much wealth a single person might get isn't for him to decide – it's up to Heaven to determine. While it's good that the gold dealers offered a lot of money, what if some disaster comes along and costs me my life? No matter how little the bank gives, could it be less than 10,000? In my mind I have a number for how much my golden gourd is worth, so it's certain that I'm gonna be rich!

Once he told this theory to the villagers, they felt they had nothing more to say about it.

Old Man Zhang was once again mentally balanced, so he naturally slept well, and ate better, too. He hummed a tune, took a stroll to the end of the lane, and had a leisurely chat. He returned home with his hands behind his back and lay down on his bed, waiting for the day when he could go to the bank to pick up his money.

On the day the bank would let him withdraw the money, the well-rested Old Man Zhang was in high spirits. He asked Old Lady Zhang to take down the fur saddle-bags from the donkey pen wall and hang them on the garden wall. He used a willow branch to beat the surface of the bags until the whole yard filled with the smell of ash from the *kang*.

Old Lady Zhang asked, "What do you need that for?"

"I'm cleaning it out so I can pack the money."

Old Man Zhang put on his ocelot-fur hat that had lost all but a few of its hairs. "It's gonna be tens of thousands of *yuan*. If it's all in big notes it'll be fine, but if it's in singles, one bag ain't gonna be enough!"

"You gonna come home carrying it on your back?" Old Lady Zhang asked.

"If I don't bring it back, am I supposed to just give it away?"

"Oh dear lord! You deposit it in the bank! If you bring it home, a thief will rob the place."

"Oh, that's right, how could I be so foolish to forget to deposit it in the bank! I was thinking about Shanshenbao having gone to the gold fields and not come back yet. What would happen if I got robbed carrying the money on the way back! I'm getting' muddle-headed in my old age."

"It's been seven days," Old Lady Zhang said, "I said not to go, but you insisted on letting our son go. Several thousands of miles of road..." Old Lady Zhang used the palms of her hands to wipe her eyes.

"It wasn't me who wanted to let your son go. You saw how Zhao Manku looked – like we'd gone behind his back and had all the fun by ourselves. The two of them have been friends since they were kids, and even though he's a worker now, he comes by every New Year to pay his respects with boxes of cakes. He knew well and good that if he went he'd get nothing, but talking to him was like pouring wind in a donkey's ear – he'll listen but it doesn't sink in. What was I supposed to do? I was forced to let Shanshenbao go, otherwise I'd get labeled as a man with a thick wallet but a thin heart. You wait. They'll come back in the next couple of days. Zhao Manku said he'd pay a hundred *yuan* a day. This time it's a good thing that he doesn't have to go up to his neck in debt. We don't even need the wages now. We'll just count it as a chance for the kid to fulfill his dream of riding in a car. In the old days, only mayors and officials rode in Beijing Jeeps. Regular folks didn't even get to touch one."

Old Man Zhang came out of the main gate and was just about to go to the county seat when he bumped into Teacher Liu, the primary school teacher. Teacher Liu, with a newspaper in hand, said, "Old Zhang, you're in the paper."

"Huh? Teacher Liu, what did you say?"

Old Man Zhang didn't understand.

"You had a reporter in your house. He's already written an article about you and your golden gourd," Teacher Liu said using his most casual style of speech.

"What'd he write?" Old Man Zhang pressed.

"Here, listen while I read it out loud," said Teacher Liu, who then began to read.

The elder Zhang Jikui of Nalong Village in this county excavated what appears to be a bottle gourd made of gold. Gold dealers received news and rushed over, willing to pay a high price to purchase this rare treasure, but Zhang Jikui, who has received many years of education from the Party, was unmoved in the face of large sums of money. Refusing to be enticed by the gold dealers' high prices, he resolutely delivered the golden gourd completely intact to the county bank. When a reporter asked the elderly Zhang Jikui why he did this, Zhang Jikui said with much emotion, "I am Chinese."

"The bullshit's flowing now," Old Man Zhang said with a strange chuckle and shook his head.

"You don't believe it? Look here, at this picture – isn't that you putting a golden bottle gourd into the bank president's hand?"

Old Man Zhang moved his head closer to look. The image was blurry and he couldn't clearly see if it was him.

"It's this one!" Teacher Liu said as he pointed to the picture.

Old Man Zhang carefully looked at it for a while, and it did indeed seem to resemble him a bit. He smiled and said, "Teacher Liu, why don't you give me this newspaper, and I'll have Shanshenbao take a look at it."

"With this, Old Man Zhang, you have become famous! OK, I'll give you the newspaper to keep as a souvenir."

Old Man Zhang thanked Teacher Liu and carefully folded the newspaper, tucked it into his pocket, and set off down the road.

A black-billed magpie called from above his head and Old Man Zhang's spirits were high.

He thought about the parents of his son's wife. Giving them 9,990 *yuan* wasn't an issue – he would give it to them tomorrow! He would build his son a lavish home, with two supporting beams, seven cross beams, and five rooms. He'd invite Sun Shoushan to re-frame the main gate, raise the main beam, lay the roof, and tile the interior. Nobody else could do it as well. Then he would bring in a color television... but he had heard that the TV often showed men and women intertwined together and nibbling at each other's mouths. What to do? In the future, after his son was married, what kind of scene would that be if he and his daughter-in-law watched that together? The heck with it. If one of those Western shows came on, he'd just cut the power!

The more Old Man Zhang thought about it, the happier he became. He felt like he had covered the whole six-*li* road to town with a single step.

He had agreed to come today, so how come the door wasn't open? Old Man Zhang squinted to peer through the metal cracks. Inside there was another glass door with a green silk curtain hanging over it so that nothing was visible.

"Look, look, look, this old man is the guy in yesterday's newspaper who dug up a golden bottle gourd."

As soon as Old Man Zhang heard this, he quickly turned his head and saw a group of city people looking at him as if he were a monkey.

He immediately felt like there was no place to put his hands and no place to look with his eyes.

"Sir, how much did you get for that golden gourd?" one woman asked with a giggle.

"They still haven't given it to me. I'm gonna get it today, but they won't open the door."

"Look how anxious you are, no one has even gotten to work yet! How much do you reckon you're going to get?" a middle-aged office-worker type asked Old Man Zhang as he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Thirty, forty..." Old Man Zhang suddenly shut his mouth, smiled, and lowered his head and changed what he was going to say. "Who knows, maybe ten or twenty thousand!" The national price, at lowest, couldn't be lower than 10,000. The gold dealers offered 40,000, so could the government give 30,000 less than that? He said ten to twenty thousand, but as he spun this lie his heart quickened and his face flushed red. He was afraid the others wouldn't believe him.

"Whoa! That's a lot money!" Everyone's jaws dropped.

"We couldn't earn that much in our entire lives!"

"Humph! In today's world officials have gotten fat and farmers have gotten rich. It's just us office workers who are left poor."

"That's the truth! They're so rich they're leaking oil, these farmers."

As soon as Old Man Zhang heard this he got anxious. "What are you talking about? We do bitter hard work all year, and everything we get's from blood and sweat!"

"We don't lack for suffering either, but how much money have we seen for it?"

Old Man Zhang was speechless. He just felt himself heating up from head to toe, so hot that he wanted to drink water, ice-cold water.

Just then a loud noise came from behind him. He turned around and saw that the bank had already opened. He looked like he was fleeing from some sort of calamity as he bore through the doors.

He sought out the bank president who had taken his golden bottle gourd. The bank president politely invited him into his office, asked him to sit on a scarlet velvet sofa, and gave him a cup of tea.

"Bank president, I... I am..." Old Man Zhang was exceedingly ill at ease. He didn't want to cause the bank president any trouble. He just wanted to find out how much money the golden gourd was worth as soon as possible.

"Uh, that... your piece of gold... We have conducted our technical appraisal.. uh, this... and the result, um... was not ideal. Won't you first sit for a bit, and our clerk will come over at once. Of course... with this, ah..."

Just as the bank president spoke, a business clerk approached. He held a square porcelain tray in his hands. He walked up to Old Man Zhang and carefully placed the square tray on a table in front of him.

Old Man Zhang looked and saw on the plate there were two lumps of ugly black rock and some pieces of yellow metal as thin as paper.

"This ... what is this?" asked Old Man Zhang.

"Let our clerk give you an explanation, OK? Little Wang, give this gentleman the details."

The clerk, holding stainless-steel tweezers in his hand, respectfully acknowledged the bank president. Then he used the tip of the tweezers to touch the two ugly black rocks, one big, one small, while he said to Old Man Zhang, "After you dispensed the gold to us, we weighed it and discovered a discrepancy between its weight and volume. We next performed a technical process, and determined this golden bottle gourd was originally a gold-covered rock, formed by geological activity. After peeling it, these two rocks appeared. They fall under the category of common silicate materials with no value whatsoever. There is merely this one external layer of gold, of about seventy percent purity, with a total weight of thirty grams..."

Little Wang earnestly carried out his appraisal, but unfortunately he was from Zhejiang and his hometown accent was so thick that poor Old Man Zhang didn't understand a single sentence.

Nonetheless, Old Man Zhang sensed that this thing in the white porcelain tray was somehow related to his precious golden gourd. Terrified, he turned his head toward the bank president.

The bank president was a local, and although he bit words and chewed phrases that made you feel awkward when he spoke Standard Chinese, at least Old Man Zhang could understand him.

"Eh, just now, our clerk, Comrade Wang, told you a bit about the situation surrounding the appraisal of your gold. All he was saying is that it turns out that your golden bottle gourd was not originally pure gold, but gold-covered rock. There are two rocks wrapped inside, and only an outer layer, as thin as a piece of paper, that is gold."

"Huh?" Old Man Zhang's face turned as white as a piece of paper, and as if there was an iron plate attached to his neck, he turned his head back with great difficulty and threw his gaze toward the white tray.

"Rock... gold-covered rock..."

"Precisely, an embroidered pillowcase filled with grass. If it were not for our prompt appraisal, we would have been fooled by its gorgeous exterior. But with this, we've revealed its true identity." The bank president continued to speak, "Little Wang, have you considered how much money this old man can receive?"

"I just said the total weight is thirty grams, figuring sixty *yuan* per gram the total amounts to 1,800 *yuan*."

"1,800 *yuan* isn't bad," the bank president said to Old Man Zhang. "A dozen days round trip and in one swing you got this much – why, it's more than two months of our salary!"

"But, what... I... dug... was... a... golden... bottle... gourd... a... golden... bottle... gourd... it's... a... treasure... The... gold... buyers... offered... forty-seven... thousand... and... I... didn't... take... it..." Old Man Zhang said haltingly, stressing each word.

But he felt that his voice was as far away as if it came from outer space. It seemed to him that the clerk standing before him was a drunk, swaying back and forth. Then he discovered that the wall covered in embroidered banners behind the clerk was also swaying together with the clerk. It swayed more and more, like the rope swing he hung from the rafters and played with as a child. He

had just thought to use the coffee table to support himself, when suddenly, the whole room turned upside down.

9

Old Man Zhang was rescued and driven to the hospital by the bank president and the clerk. The hospital initially wanted a deposit of 1,000 *yuan*. The bank president hastily asked the clerk to take the car, return to the bank, and from the money that Old Man Zhang was to receive, take out 1,000 *yuan* cash, then bring it back to the hospital. But thanks to the bank president's guarantee, Old Man Zhang had already been admitted to the emergency room and treated.

The bank president then made a phone call to the county newspaper, found the reporter, and told him the entire story. The reporter couldn't help but sigh.

Soon after, the bank president made the reporter take his car to go to Nalong Village to pick up Old Man Zhang's family. He demanded that the reporter be careful doing this, because the president had to explain the circumstances to them, but he didn't want to frighten them.

The reporter agreed as he got into the bank president's car. The driver stepped on the gas, and the car flew in the direction of Nalong Village.

Old Man Zhang left the emergency room after three days. He opened both eyes, but those eyes had clearly sunken back into their sockets. He caught sight of Old Lady Zhang.

Old Lady Zhang was still covering up with that old light yellow headscarf.

He said, "The department store has fine threaded scarves. You should go choose a good color and buy a new one."

Old Lady Zhang said, "I'm not young, and this scarf isn't worn out, so why exchange it for a new one?"



Old Man Zhang said, "You're right, the Zhang Family ain't destined to be rich."

Old Lady Zhang said, "So long as we're all in good health, that's better than anything."

The bank president came to see Old Man Zhang the day he left the hospital.

There was only numbness in Old Man Zhang's eyes, not a bit of suffering on his face. The president thought that quite strange, but he couldn't make sense of it. He simply helped Old Man Zhang pay the bill, bought some malt milk extract, milk powder, a tin of fruit, and such things, and put them all in a bag. He tucked the bag into Old Lady Zhang's hands, saying, "That this gentleman dug up a big piece of gold and turned it over to the bank is truly highly commendable. Especially under the circumstances with these gold traffickers rushing around, it really was a touching thing to do. I know the impact of this matter is great on your husband, but the public's business is done in the open, so there's really nothing else I can do. You should receive 1,800 *yuan* for that gold. By staying in the hospital you spent 1,500 *yuan*, so I'm returning 300 *yuan* to you. It's all here, go ahead and take it."

Old Man Zhang took the money from the bank president's hand, tucked it into his chest pocket, and numbly said, "You, a bank president, have shown so much concern for me, you are truly good."

The bank president said, "This is how it should be handled. You two folks get in the car, and I'll take you home."

The bank president used his car to take Old Man Zhang home. Old Lady Zhang repeatedly expressed her gratitude, and insisted the bank president stay for a meal before letting him leave.

The bank president said, "I'm on official business, I really don't have time to eat. Wait until I have some free time and I'll definitely come and eat a meal of Granny's homemade noodles." He once again told Old Lady Zhang to let Old Man Zhang rest, and then left.

Once villagers heard that Old Man Zhang had lost a fortune and had come back from the hospital, they all came to see him. Some brought eggs, some brought rice porridge, and some brought deep-fried bread.

The neighbors came and went, one after another, and Old Lady Zhang busied herself all day crouching by the stove making tea, making the whole house smell of herbs and mint.

The villagers said everyone who had gone to Angsai Beach to mine gold had returned two days before. They hadn't seen a glimpse of gold, but Guo Galai's arm was broken. Guo Galai's father brought his broken-armed son to the hospital, and the hospital demanded a deposit of 5,000 *yuan*. Old Man Guo couldn't borrow the money, so he just cursed Old Man Zhang to the whole village for spinning tales and creating the myth of Gesar's precious treasures that deceived his son into going to Angsai Beach.

Old Man Zhang heard this and didn't argue, as if he really had deceived people.

The young men who had gone to Angsai Beach said four or five thousand men had surrounded King Gesar's hitching post. One group after another sent stones flying like rain. Finally, King Gesar's hitching post was blown open by somebody using dynamite. They dug down several meters more, but besides sand, there were only boulders as big as cows and nothing else. They didn't know how many people were actually killed in the looting of the camps. Anyway, the beach was filled with injured or disabled folks.

Old Man Zhang just listened as if he were listening to an ancient legend. This made the villagers feel very strange.

Shanshenbao still hadn't returned. Old Lady Zhang went to ask the Angsai Beach men one after the other, but they all said they hadn't seen him. In a panic, Old Lady Zhang hurried to the neighboring villages to ask around, and she cried to the point that her eyes were red as peaches.

Old Man Zhang, lying on the heated *kang*, smoking a cigarette, said to Old Lady Zhang, "Don't worry, don't fret. Our

son's got good luck, he can't die. His truck's probably broken down somewhere and he's just fixing it."

Those two gold dealers, not knowing of the golden gourd's lamentable end, once again came to Uncle Crooked Mouth's home. They desperately pleaded with Crooked Mouth to open his golden mouth and produce a jade-like oration that would persuade Old Man Zhang to sell them the golden gourd. They were willing to pay him 10,000 *yuan*, and even put the cash on the table in Crooked Mouth's home, telling him it was his for doing the legwork.

It turns out that when the two of them first saw the golden gourd and weighed it in their hands, they knew it was an extremely rare 'gold-covered rock'.

A rock, with a gold wrapping, in the shape of a bottle gourd, generated in Heaven and formed in the earth, there's probably only one on this entire planet! It must be hundreds or thousands of times more valuable than a genuine golden gourd!

That day they were afraid that Old Man Zhang knew that what he held in his hands wasn't just an ordinary golden gourd, but a one-of-a-kind 'gold-covered rock' for which he would ask a sky-high price. So only after going outside could they talk it over and keep Old Man Zhang in the dark.

Who could have imagined that Old Man Zhang would change his mind and refuse to sell it!

They were just making idle chatter, but why did they have to mention to Old Man Zhang they would sell the gourd to foreigners? Couldn't they have just said it was for them and that would be the end of it?

The two gold dealers were so angry that they used their hands to slap their own stinking mouths.

A Guangdong gold dealer arrived in the city, heard them talking about the golden gourd, and understood that this was a priceless treasure. He immediately slapped the armrest of the guesthouse sofa and said that as long as those two could get ahold of that golden gourd, he would offer to buy it for 800,000 *yuan*!

So the two of them hurried over to Crooked Mouth's house and slapped 10,000 *yuan* in his hand, wanting him to persuade Old Man Zhang to sell them the gourd. They would add 100,000 *yuan* to the original price!

Crooked Mouth sighed and pushed the money back in front of the gold dealers' eyes.

"Why? Not enough? Then tell us, how much money will it take for you to help us out? Thirty thousand? Fifty thousand?"

The two gold dealers watched as the corners of Crooked Mouth's mouth pulled back further and further until they couldn't draw back any more. He clapped his hands over his face and squatted on the ground and began crying. The gold dealers were unable to make heads or tails of this. They tried to persuade him to stop crying so they could reach an agreement.

Crooked Mouth stopped crying, stood up, sighed again, and through his tears spoke to the gold dealers, "I'm not destined to collect that legwork fee. The golden gourd has already been given to the bank."

"Given to the bank?"

"That damn fool, how much money did he get for it?"

"1,800 *yuan*."

"You're shitting me!"

"The bank split the golden gourd open, and inside were two lumps of rock."

The gold dealers bleated "Allah!" and then remained silent for a long time. Then, "We're too late! We're too late!" they both yelled as they thumped their chests and stomped their feet.

They cursed Old Man Zhang who lost the fortune that he could have reaped. They cursed the bank president who looked at but didn't recognize such a rare treasure. They cursed until they spat white foam from their mouths, until mucus clogged their eyes, and their legs trembled.

They tired themselves shouting and exhausted themselves cursing, and they really wanted to grab a knife and stab that dog-eyed bank president, but upon further consideration they feared

breaking the law, so they simply grabbed their 10,000 *yuan* and angrily went out Crooked Mouth's door.

Uncle Crooked Mouth went to see his brother-in-law and told him that the gold dealers wanted to give him 170,000 *yuan* to buy the golden gourd.

Old Man Zhang finished listening, curled his lip, and said, "Dear Uncle, drink some tea, have some bread." After he finished speaking, he continued to smoke his tobacco with no expression on his wooden face.

"Brother-in-law, are... are you sick!?" Crooked Mouth asked, his voice faltering.

"Farmers, what sickness do they have?"

"Then you..." Crooked Mouth became even more nervous.

After several days passed, Old Man Zhang left his *kang* and appeared on Nalong Bridge. People asked him what he was doing there on such a cold day. Why wasn't he sleeping on his heated *kang*?

Old Man Zhang said, "I'm waiting for my son. Shanshenbao should be back any day now."

Teacher Liu from the village school read an article in the county newspaper, titled 'A Bundle of Straw Wrapped in an Embroidered Pillow, the Golden Gourd Turns Out to be Gold-covered Rock':

Local dispatch: Zhang Jikui, a resident of Nalong Village in this county, dug up what appeared to be a golden gourd. After the bank appraised it, it turned out to be a 'gold-covered rock', two rocks covered in a skin of gold as thin as a cicada's wing. Moreover, the gold only weighed thirty grams.

When a reporter asked the bank president how he identified this as an 'embroidered pillow', and thereby prevented the economic loss that could have been incurred, the bank president happily said, "Besides the high-level of professionalism among our business clerks, even more

importantly, this cannot be separated from the high degree of responsibility they feel towards their work."

After reading the news article, Teacher Liu lifted his head and looked out his window.

Nalong's primary school was built on a hillside, on the high ground. In a glance he noticed the lone figure of Old Man Zhang squatting on the bridge.

Teacher Liu lowered his head again and crumpled the newspaper, still smelling of fresh ink, into a ball. After wiping ashes from the stovetop with it, he lifted the stove lid and stuffed the paper inside.

A cold wind blew hard through the cracks in the schoolhouse.

The cold wind poured down Old Man Zhang's collar.

A penetrating chill, like an ice-cold serpent, crawled down Old Man Zhang's spine.

Old Man Zhang, motionless, hunched over into a lump, his eyes rigidly watching the distant intersection, as if he were a half-rotten tree stump.

# THE FANTASTIC TALE OF THE GOLDEN PHOENIX EGG

## Introduction

Maying, Horse Camp, is an ancient village on the banks of the Huang River. It is near Qinghai Lake and west of the Sun Moon Mountains. According to legend, Qinghai Lake was formed from the bronze mirror of Princess Wencheng (a Tang Dynasty princess who married the king of Tibet). In the middle of the lake is Haixin Mountain, where, according to ancient tales, dragons reside. When Qinghai Lake freezes in the winter, herders drive their mares in heat across the ice to Haixin Mountain in order to get the dragon's seed. When the lake freezes again the following year, the herders drive the mares that have the dragon's seed back to the lake's shore where they give birth to dragon colts, which folks call Qinghai Piebalds. The Qinghai Piebald flourishes in the areas surrounding Qinghai Lake and is the ultimate military steed. In order to get these first-rate warhorses, kings throughout history stationed military units along the Huang River. They drove the horses they collected around Qinghai Lake across the Sun Moon Mountains and trained them on the banks of the Huang River. Horse Camp, then, is a military camp that came to Qinghai prior to the Ming Dynasty in order to secure the border and manage horses.

The upper village is referred to as Upper Corral, the lower village is referred to as Lower Corral, and the area between the two where a few thick-barked elms grow is referred to as Horse Watering Spring. Other than that, the military camp residents left behind no other mementos or traces worth talking about. After the military campers completed their imperial orders, they were unable to return home. Their descendants changed from raising military horses to farming, flourishing on this piece of land, generation after generation, turning the Horse Camp of that time into the

thousand-home village of today. They changed into true Qinghai folk.

And yet, when the old folks in a fit of pique curse someone as a 'military crook', or use such terms as 'drilling' to refer to bullying and 'standing tall' for a boy who has become an adult, one can't help but recall their ancestors' military experiences long ago.

The story of the Golden Phoenix Egg happened in Upper Corral of Horse Camp. This story, rich with the fantastic flavor of the west, has nothing to do with the ancestors of Horse Camp. The story's hero is Jing Fengshan, nicknamed Gold Bug. He has no sons or daughters, other than a born-out-of-wedlock son named Jiahu, but not surnamed Jing. Of course, this is all for later in the story.

Jing Fengshan was originally from Upper Corral. In the thirty-sixth year of the Republic of China (1948) both his parents passed away. His older brother's wife drove him out of the house and he then became a wandering beggar. He wandered down to Malian Gully, Huangzhong County and heard of a local gold-boss nicknamed Ox-head Meng who was recruiting sand coolies for the gold fields. Jing Fengshan found Ox-head Meng's home, put his name on the list, and went to the gold fields. He was seventeen years old.

Jing Fengshan returned on the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month, when his older brother was sitting cross-legged on a step weaving a straw horse and chicken to honor the Kitchen God and his sister-in-law was making miniature pancakes to honor the Kitchen Goddess.

He was riding a mule fully equipped with saddle and blanket. When he reached the gate, he slid off the mule, surprising his brother and sister-in-law so much that they completely forgot about the Kitchen God and Goddess who were waiting to return home for the New Year. They ran over laughing and smiling, welcoming him back.

Jing Fengshan took a heavy, cow-hair saddlebag off the back of the mule. Unable to resist temptation, his sister-in-law



rushed forward and opened it up. Inside was nothing but a hair-grease-covered rock in the shape of a horse saddle.

Completely bewildered, Sister-in-law was also afraid of annoying this younger brother who had such great connections, so she simply smiled. With his brother leading the mule, Jing Fengshan followed his sister-in-law, toting the saddle-bag into the house.

After the mule entered the courtyard and before his older brother figured out what was going on, it had started eating the straw-horse mount of the Kitchen God and the straw-chicken messenger for the Kitchen God that his brother had spent half the day making. His sister-in-law said it was OK that the mule ate them. "Seems to me they weren't as well woven as the ones you made last year, so you can weave new ones now," she said.

Sister-in-law ducked into the kitchen and made noodles with onion flowers for her brother-in-law. Jing Fengshan ate so much his stomach stretched as tight as a drum and he burped continuously.

Finally, Sister-in-law carefully began to ask the younger brother where he had been and how he made his fortune.

Jing Fengshan rubbed his face, full of chapped and scabbed flesh bubbling up like boiled potato skin, and mysteriously said, "I've seen a gold pit!"

### More Introduction

The gold boss, Ox-head Meng, liked Jing Fengshan.

Even though Jing Fengshan was only seventeen years old, he was tough as a tiger with a body packed full of muscles. When they were going to the gold field, Ox-head Meng gave him a specially made pick-axe that weighed more than twenty pounds. Walking to the Maduo gold field for thirty-eight days, Jing Fengshan never complained of sore feet or aching shoulders.

After they reached the gold field, the pick became his to use. He could swing the thing fifty times digging up sand and not even work up a sweat. He was stronger than a fully grown thirty-year-old man. This made Ox-head Meng so happy he said, "That Jing kid's a real tough guy. Give him a few more years of eatin' hardtack, and he just might be as promisin' as me."

Such praise from Ox-head Meng sent Jing Fengshan's heart rippling, and he started swinging the pick like a tunneling machine.

The person Fengshan most admired was Ox-head Meng. He could never forget the day they left for the gold fields when over a hundred sand coolies stood in Ox-head Meng's courtyard, and there was still room for more. He'd heard there were two more courtyards further inside the compound. Fengshan was only able to peek through the doorway, but what he saw stunned him. Both the inner and outer courtyards were the same. There were big, stylish, pitch-roofed rooms with two columns and seven rafters, carved beams, and painted ridgepoles. A huge garden was in the center of the courtyard where showy jasmine and flowering peaches were the first to bloom. One yellow and one red, they dazzled the eye.

A big pile of snowy white steamed buns was stacked on a large square table beside the gate when they set out, and as each sand coolie passed by, the gold boss's wife shoved a bun into his hands, all the while repeating, "Out you go in one piece, and in one piece you will return; carry out a big steamed bun, and carry back a big hunk of gold..." The sand coolies loved hearing that.

Now, the hundred sand coolies worked themselves to death night and day for Ox-head Meng while he stood pigeon-toed with his hands behind his back, humming, "Awaitin' my sweetheart til early morn', missin' him so my mouth has gone dry, the moonlight shines on the gate, but still I don't see you," waiting for the gold to roll in.

Jing Fengshan thought to himself, "Ox-head Meng says I have more promise than him. If I can actually get to that day, what a sight it would be. Damn. If I do nothin' else this whole life, I'd want to see that scene of me bein' a gold boss. I'd spend my days

the way Ox-head does, and I won't have spent my time on earth in vain."

But now, this future gold boss didn't have so much as a complete pair of pants. Like a kid's, the crotch was torn out. At night, he crawled into a pile of grass to sleep like a dog. And he had a melon-sized, saddle-shaped rock that he dug out of the ground that he used for a pillow.

The sand coolies were eating barley 'chicken-head pimples' full of oat husks and such under the moonlight one evening. Jing Fengshan endured the swelling in his throat caused by being poked by the oat husks, and reluctantly swallowed three bowls full of matchbox-sized 'chicken-head pimples'. Lying beside the river he was gulping cold water like a cow when he noticed Ox-head Meng returning from cleaning the gold panning boxes.

Fengshan ran up to him and said, "Boss Meng, I've risked life and limb workin' myself to the bone for you. Tell me the secret, how'd you got rich and became a gold boss?"

Ox-head Meng laughed so hard at this that three Buddhas attained nirvana and nine Buddhas came into the world. "This silly fool," he thought. "I gave him a club and he thought it was a real needle." But Ox-head spoke in all seriousness, "You've got the makings of a good kid, so I'll tell you a trick. When you leave the gold fields this year, take somethin' with you. It doesn't matter if it's a handful of sand or a rock. After a couple of years you'll strike it rich, and once you've done that, aren't you a gold boss? But there's one condition. At that time, don't go bullyin' people with your wealth and come trying to fight me over my gold claim! OK? Ha ha ha..."

The kid was really simple-minded. Fengshan didn't know that Ox-head Meng was having a good laugh at his expense, so he really believed the God of Wealth had turned his moneyed eyes on him. He thought hard about what he should take back from the gold fields. When he climbed into his pile of grass and laid his head on the saddle-shaped pillow rock that night, an idea flashed

across his mind. Yes, I'll take back this damn rock. It sleeps with me every night – the two of us must be destined to be together!

When they were leaving the gold field that year, Fengshan found half a length of woolen rope, tied it around the pillow rock, and carried it on his back. The other sand coolies said that on a trek of this distance you might not make it back even when travelin' light. Why the hell was he carryin' that damn rock?

Jing Fengshan said, "I don't have a pillow at home. If I take this back, I'll have a pillow for my next three lifetimes."

The other sand coolies exploded with laughter. One said, "This Jing kid's pretty young, but he's already arranged his grandson's inheritance!" The sand coolies broke out in new a round of laughter.

Unfortunately for the sand coolies, having gone a mere three post-stations out of the gold fields, a group of bandits with rifles on their shoulders came charging out of the gully and surrounded them as they were passing through Long Grass Gully. Ox-head Meng and his guards pulled out their guns and began shooting back, but that only resulted in them getting killed. The bandits then took their gold and horses, tied up the sand coolies who hadn't fled, turned the horses around, and headed back into the gully.

Jing Fengshan had also been tied up. One of the bandit leaders saw the rock he was carrying on his back and asked him what it was for. With a shaking jaw, Fengshan stutteringly said, "It's... a... pillow."

The bandit said, "Fuck your goddamned pillow!" And with one swing of his knife, he cut the rope holding the rock. It fell to the ground, right on the bandit's foot. This made the bandit so angry he pushed Fengshan over, picked up the rock, and smashed it against a large boulder. Sparks flew from the rock.

Fengshan was so scared he peed his pants. Addled, he was pushed along by the bandit, not knowing where they were taking him or whether he'd be able to stay alive. He was so scared he went mute, his eyes dried up, and his lips split.

On the sixth night, the bandit gang reached a sandy ridge and took a rest. One of Fengshan's arms had been tied to the end of the rope binding all the sand coolies. He had just sat down when a bandit about his size stuffed a hunk of beef jerky into his hand.

He got up his courage and asked the bandit where they were going. The young bandit said, "We're going to Xinjiang. The Communists have already taken Lanzhou and they'll take Xining any day now. Sooner or later this'll all be Communist territory."

Fengshan asked why they'd bound up all the sand coolies. The bandit said, "After we get to Xinjiang, you're gonna join us."

Fengshan then asked, "And if we don't want to?" The young bandit put his gun to the back of Fengshan's head and said, "Pow!" scaring Fengshan so bad a cold shiver shook his whole body.

Fengshan felt utterly hopeless. He unconsciously grabbed a handful of sand from below where he sat and ran it through his hands while pondering the fact that henceforth he would wander destitute in some faraway place. Not knowing whether he would live or die, he couldn't help but begin to cry.

Then, he felt something strange in his hand, so he unfurled his fingers to take a look. There in his hand was a piece of gold the size of a melon seed! He quickly dug around in the sand in the same spot and found another piece. Just like that, in a couple of minutes he dug out seven pieces of melon-seed-sized gold nuggets!

The sun had set behind the western hills at this point and the young bandit came over to get them up to go. He said the gang planned to cross Saicuo Lake during the night and that they'd cross Stone Goat Mountain before daybreak.

Fengshan looked at the seven pieces of gold in his hand and got an idea. He softly pleaded with the young bandit, "Sir, I've got an eighty-year-old mother at home with no one to look after her, and she's waitin' for me to get back. If I can't go back, and she dies, nobody'll bury her. I've got seven pieces of gold in my hand. I'll give 'em all to you. Just cut me this one break. If I come back as a

horse or a cow or a woman in the next life, you can treat me however you like."

As Fengshan spoke he pulled over the young bandit's hand and dropped the seven nuggets of gold into it.

The bandit squeezed the gold in his hand. Then he put one piece in his mouth, bit it, and spat it back out. He looked all around, gave Fengshan a wink, and told him to kneel down. Then the bandit loosened the rope.

If you looked at Fengshan from the right, he was like a rolling donkey, if you looked at him from the left he was like a rabbit scurrying from an eagle. With a turn and two rolls he crawled into a pit in the sand. Not daring to take a deep breath or let out a long sigh, his whole body trembled like a flag in the wind.

The bandits lit torches and set out in the dark leading the way. The sand coolies were driven onward behind them.

"Hurry up! Sons of bitches, whoever won't follow us to live a happy life, but would rather run for their fuckin' lives, I'll shoot 'em right between their goddamn eyes!"

That young bandit who had taken the bribe opened up his throat and let out this stream of curses, while crisply pulling back the bolt on his rifle.

After the bandits had walked a long way off, the sound of a rifle echoed through the night air, and a bullet ripped through the firmament, like a meteor flying by.

Fengshan violently spit out a long breath of air bottled up in his guts. He rolled out of the sand pit and stood up. Just as he was preparing to run for his life he remembered the sand beneath his feet.

Heaven! Three worlds of gold are all in this one damn place, and you let me, Jing Fengshan, find it!

He wanted to dig up eight or ten pounds – no, he wanted to take all the gold and carry it back home. Wouldn't that make me, Jing Fengshan, the richest man in the world?

But he immediately rid himself of this idea. Where there's life, there's hope. The most important thing at this point was gettin'

out of this damn, seductive place. Run! If those bandits find out that someone's missin' and come back and catch me, the only thing that'll be waitin' for me will be one crisp 'iron peanut'.

He really couldn't stand the idea of leaving the gold pit. The inky black night left him unable to see anything. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. He took off his ratty shirt, ripped off one sleeve and tied a knot at one end. He filled half the sleeve with sand. Carrying that on his back he stood up and ran in the other direction.

He ran a couple of strides and then stopped. He looked at the mountains all around. The silhouettes of the mountains under the canopy of Heaven were like vague paper cutouts, only dimly discernible. The mountain peak just north of the sandy ridge was like a seated camel with its head raised, but the mountains to the south were like a dozen huge swords pointing at the sky. Having fully taken in the topography, he resumed his frantic escape.

One day I'll be back. The money and body of that damn Ox-head Meng will all be gone. Just wait to see me then!

Fengshan dreamt his gold dreams while he ran for his life, and by the time the sun had risen, he had reached the bank of a river.

He put down the sleeve full of sand and drank a couple of wonderful gulps of water from the river. Sitting up again, he gasped for breath.

The sun rose higher and a beam of sunlight pierced the middle of the river like an arrow. The river water immediately turned red as blood.

He picked up the sleeve-full of sand, found a clean place, and carefully began to feel around in it.

It didn't disappoint him. A piece of gold the size of a fingernail emerged. And then another. And another! Half a sleeve of sand had three nuggets of gold! Fengshan was so happy he did two somersaults. He carefully put the three pieces of gold in a shirt pocket close to his body.

Only then did he begin to feel hungry. He had nothing to eat. He scanned his surroundings with rapacious eyes then finally set his woeful gaze on the river.

A black shadow passed along the riverbed. Fish! Fengshan was joyous beyond measure. He leapt into the river and began feeling around. In no time, he grabbed hold of a five-inch fish. Its tail slapped forcefully at his wrist.

Fengshan jumped back onto the riverbank. He ripped open the fish's stomach and cleaned out its innards with his hands. As fast as five minus three is two, he swallowed the struggling raw fish whole.

Then, like a burly grizzly bear, he jumped back into the river again.

As the sun reached a pole's height above the horizon, Fengshan let out a burp ripe with the smell of fish. Carrying ten more fish on his back, he set out again.

Several days later he walked through Long Grass Gully. He reached the place where Boss Meng had run into trouble.

It had turned into a heaven for vultures. Boss Meng had been turned into a mere skeleton. The bare white bones made every hair along Fengshan's spine stand up straight. He turned to flee as fast as he could.

His foot came down on a rock that rolled out from under him and he wound up hitting the ground hard, flat on his back. His head rested on a rock, his eyes were full of stars, and he was unable to move for a long time.

Fengshan wanted to curse a blue streak, but he pulled himself together and swallowed that string of foul language.

He crawled to his feet. His eyes bugged out of his head when he realized that the rock he had fallen over was none other than the pillow-rock he had carried out of the gold fields.

"Hee hee hee, ha ha ha..."

Fengshan picked up the rock and laughed heartily.

"Pillow-rock, you poor thing! You waited for me, my pillow-rock. I know it was you that let me find the gold pieces.



You treat me better than my own mother. Pillow-rock, you're my fate, you're my very own God of Wealth!"

He rubbed out the white marks left by the bandit. Mumbling to himself, he found the pieces of rope the bandits had cut in the grass. Linking them together, he again tied up the rock, and like he was carrying a child, he put it on his back and set out on the road.

Boundless desert. West wind like a knife. A herd of antelope raced by him like a bolt of lightning, leaving a cloud of yellow dust behind.

One day, two days, three days. Tortured by hunger and exhaustion, Fengshan could barely move.

On the fifth day, without having even caught a mouse to eat, his eyes grew blurry and he finally collapsed on the desert floor. Just when he felt had had no more hope to survive, a herd of livestock approached.

He sat up. The livestock drew nearer. There were five or six of them, all mules. On the backs of two of the mules were people. From their clothing and equipment, Fengshan immediately recognized them as merchants in the Tibet trade.

As the mules came closer, Fengshan immediately knelt, took out the three pieces of gold from his pocket, and begged them to save his life.

Like a fox seeing a rooster, there's no reason to think a merchant won't get greedy when he sees gold. The two of them accepted the gold and gave Fengshan food and water. Then they gave him a mule.

Heaven helps those with no way forward. Jing Fengshan made it back from the gold fields.

The third day after he returned home, the traders sent somebody to find him and took back the mule.

"So, what you're sayin' is, other than this old rock, you didn't bring back shit from the gold fields?" His brother finally asked in despair.

"I saw a gold pit – there was nothin' but gold the size of melon seeds."

"Why didn't you grab a handful?"

"The bandits were gonna kill me!"

"That pit's like precious gems in the emperor's gold cabinets – and his guards will kill anyone who gets near. You're so full of shit! There's no way you could've made it back alive if you saw a pit like that!"

"If we had some money and supplies, we could hire some men and horses..."

"We'd spend it and eat it. Who's so stupid that they'd go into that damned place!"

Sister-in-law glared at Fengshan and then ignored him.

Fengshan spent a year with his brother and sister-in-law. On the seventh day of the first lunar month, Sister-in-law found some pretext to get into a big argument with her brother-in-law, and made him leave.

Fengshan said, "If I'm outta here it'll have to be tomorrow." When Sister-in-law asked why, Fengshan said, "An ancient saying handed down from our ancestors says, 'Don't go out on the seventh, and don't go in on the eighth.' Today's not a day for goin' out."

Sister-in-law, hearing this, grinned oddly and said in a malicious tone, "Today's the day to drive out ghosts!"

### 'Gold Bug' Becomes a Taken-in Groom

On the eighth day of the fourth lunar month in the year of Land Reform (1950), the folks in Temple Gully were like black ants in an ant colony moving their nest – jostling one another, lively beyond measure.

The folks in Lower Corral also went to enjoy themselves at the Temple Festival. Several young men noticed the disheveled hair and dirty face of Jing Fengshan carrying around that pillow-rock like a Daoist toting a gourd. They watched him squeeze in

among a crowd of women kowtowing inside the Niangniang Temple. The scene made these guys laugh so hard they nearly rolled over like donkeys. Pulling Fengshan out from the crowd of women, one of the youths asked him in the pinched voice of a New Year singer:

*"In the fourth month on the eighth day,  
Place incense at Niangniang's Temple.  
Women burn incense hoping for a child,  
What the hell is Fengshan burning incense for?"*

"Are you hopin' for a wife? Huh?"

"You kids would be hopin' for a wife!"

"Then what the hell are you kowtowin' for?"

"I'm prayin' that Niangniang blesses me with riches. I'll be a boss, go to the gold fields, and dig gold!"

"Well, you were in the gold fields last time, how come you didn't grab some then?"

"Bandits..."

"Ha ha ha..." Everybody laughed so much that Fengshan's eyes flushed red and his ears burned. "Boss Jing, you'd best just go back to the village! You don't even have a place to sleep, carryin' around that icy rock which can't even be used to make a woman hot!"

Fengshan lowered his head and didn't say anything.

"Gold Bug! All you do is dream."

After that, 'Gold Bug' became famous throughout Horse Camp.

The commoners led pleasant lives full of stability and good fortune after Land Reform. The village mayor, Old Man Shanhu, looked at Jing Fengshan, who was full of crazy talk and barely clothed, and thought it just wasn't right. Even though his brother had been granted four and a half *mu* of land, he couldn't be bothered to look after Fengshan. Fengshan was just dithering about here and there, carrying on about his melon-seed-sized gold

nuggets, which made the mayor worry the kid would be destroyed by all this. He asked his brother-in-law in Upper Corral, Chuang Xingbao, for a favor – to find Fengshan a marriage partner.

Liu Shanren of Upper Corral was an upstanding man who had done good deeds from the day he was born. But, his wife gave birth to five girls. Not one came out with a teapot spout, but each and every one with a plate for dipping – all daughters. His wife, back in 1937, went to Xining to visit her uncle. While riding a donkey through Wayao Gully, she saw a large pit freshly covered with dirt, with a crack in it as big as a bowl. Two human hands were sticking up through the crack. Scared out of her wits, she got sick and after she got home she never left her bed again. She died a half a year later. After asking around, they learned that several hundred Red Army troops had been buried alive at that site the night before.

Liu Shanren, now single, through a dozen or so years of hard work, had raised all his daughters. Four of them were now married off, leaving only one at home. She was a full eighteen years old, but only a little more than three feet tall, with a face full of pock marks. Around the village she was known as 'Little Pocky'.

Liu Shanren was worrying about Little Pocky's lack of marriage prospects when Chuang Xingbao, Old Man Shanhu's brother-in-law, came by carrying tea to negotiate a union. It turns out he had come to propose the second oldest son in the Jing Family of Upper Corral, Jing Fengshan.

"I heard that kid's got problems in the head," Liu Shanren said.

"Folks are just spreading schoolyard stories. His nickname is Gold Bug. He made a trip to the gold fields when he was a kid. Seeing how rich the boss was made him a little envious, so he talks all the time about digging gold and getting rich. There's nothing wrong with him," Chuang Xingbao said. "He'll be a first-rate farmhand once he starts a family and gets a bit of guidance."

Liu Shanren was pleased to hear this and accepted Chuang Xingbao's proposal gifts. They then arranged for Fengshan and

Little Pocky to have a 'free will' meeting. Just before he was about to leave, Liu Shanren told Little Pocky to go into the kitchen to make a bowl of pulled noodles for Fengshan, who ate them and left.

"They didn't say for sure if it was a go or not," Fengshan said.

"You idiot. What did you eat before you left?" Chuang Xingbao asked.

"Pulled noodles."

"That's your confirmation. The folk saying is, 'pulled noodles it's a go, ripped noodles it's off.' Whether it's a go or not depends on that last meal."

It was the time of a New Society for a New Nation. Propaganda advocating new fashions was everywhere. Old Man Shanhu, the mayor, was aware of the new way of doing things, but he also felt that this was a great event in the lives of these kids, so you couldn't be too careful. He secretly asked a blind person to pick a date for the marriage, and then brought the singing troupe from Lower Corral on that day and had them sing a Sprout Song, with striking gongs and banging drums. And with that, they sent Jing Fengshan, wearing a bright red sash, to Upper Corral and made him Liu Shanren's son-in-law.

The only 'dowry' that Fengshan brought with him to his new house was that pillow-rock.

The two young folks were naturally in complete conjugal bliss during their honeymoon period. Fengshan also set his mind on settling down. He never put on a superficial display when he went to work. When he came back to the house, he either carried a basket of dung or several stalks of fresh willow branches. He never returned empty-handed.

Once when they were eating, Fengshan suddenly recalled his gold pit. He looked around at the three rooms Liu Shanren had maintained his whole life, and said that one day he'd build a four-sided mansion.

"What are you gonna build it out of? You don't have a spare *yuan* to your name," Liu Shanren responded while slurping barley dumpling soup.

"Sooner or later I'm gonna go to the gold fields," said Fengshan.

"Did you really find gold?" asked Little Pocky.

"Really. I just don't have the travel money. If I did, I'd hire a couple of donkeys and be there and back in three months with a big pile of gold," Fengshan said, his eyebrows dancing with pleasure.

"We Liu people have made our livin' off the land for generation after generation. Whether there's a lot of food or a little, it's up to the Old Man in Heaven to decide. We've never had the intention to strike it rich. You've come into the Liu Family, so now you're one of us. Don't think about that business of sufferin' for a day to spend a life of ease. Keep your feet on the ground and bear it. If you can make it through your days, then that's good enough," Liu Shanren said, sticking out his tongue, struggling to lick the last drop of soup from the bottom of his bowl. This speech left Fengshan as stunned as a dumbstruck chicken – he couldn't move his eyes for half a day.

From Land Reform, to mutual assistance, to cooperatives, to people's communes, things changed three times a day. The farmers stuck with the Communist Party in the rush toward communism, so nobody paid any mind to the idea of getting rich. It was like that wasn't the kind of thing farmers were supposed to think about. Even Fengshan, with the nickname Gold Bug, banished beyond the Highest Heavens the plan to go to the gold fields and get rich. It even got to the point that when people begged him to tell them about the melon-seed-sized gold nuggets, he wasn't really eager to talk about it.

Liu Shanren finally entered the earth to his eternal peace. Left behind in those three rooms were only Little Pocky and Jing Fengshan. Fengshan didn't think of three rooms as small. On the contrary, he considered it a lot of space. That's because Little

Pocky never got pregnant. The two of them went to Niangniang Temple on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month every year to light incense, pray, kowtow, and show their submission. But it had no effect. This made Fengshan burn with impatience. He started picking fights with Little Pocky more and more frequently. Little Pocky was not the kind of person to be pushed around either, so the two of them passed their days in rage, such that even the chickens and dogs got no peace.

### Jing Fengshan Dreams of a Golden Phoenix Egg

On a night filled with propitious stars and an auspicious moon, Jing Fengshan dreamt that a rainbow-colored Golden Phoenix flapped its brilliant golden wings, raised its anus towards him, and laid a resplendent golden egg. The Golden Phoenix flew away leaving that golden egg teetering in front of his face like a roly-poly doll. With each wobble an eye-piercing bolt of golden light shone from the egg, making Fengshan cry out in joy. He stretched out his hands and grasped the egg firmly in his hands.

"*Pow!*" rang out crisply, and Fengshan's face burned with pain. When he opened his eyes and looked, he saw that he had grasped Little Pocky's pock-marked face. Fengshan quickly pulled back his hands, but not before Little Pocky ferociously slapped his wrist.

"Don't you dare touch me with those disgustin' paws that you use to rub all over that slut's randy flesh, you shameless military crook!"

Little Pocky cursed him lewdly and maliciously. Sticking out that short, thick leg she kicked him right in the soft bag between the legs. Like a colt that a gelder castrated with a swift stroke, Fengshan cried pathetically and his face turned as yellow as wax tailings.

In a flash that golden egg shattered into dancing golden stars before his eyes.

"Ooouuch! Fuck your damned dwarfed, pock-marked, tiny-balled ancestors! Since my ancestors came here from Pearl Alley in Nanjing hundreds of years ago, there's never been a woman as venomous as you!"

When Fengshan regained his breath a few seconds later, he jumped out of the ratty fur-lined coat holding his privates in his hands and loudly cursed Little Pocky.

"I'll make you experience somethin' your hundred years of ancestors never experienced, you shameless old donkey! Didn't you get enough mashin' with Liu Guangcai's slutty woman the other day in broad daylight in the wheat fields?"

Fengshan deflated like a punctured pig's bladder and slunk back into his ratty fur-lined coat, sealing his mouth and not saying a word.

Liu Guangcai's 'slutty woman' was known as Zaobaojie. She had a melon-seed face, with skin the color of wheat, and a slim, willowy body. Her translucent eyes were wet and soft. If you looked at her, your heart ached for her, and if you were away from her, your heart pined for her. But Liu Guangcai was a meat-headed laggard who couldn't even tell when he'd eaten or slept enough; a person whose farts couldn't have been restrained by three large millstones.

The production team had a small pasture on Nao Mountain, where they pastured all the sheep from each household in the village after collectivization. The grassland was several dozen *li* from the village. By rights, the village men should have taken turns tending the sheep there, but most men refused whenever their turn came around. Liu Guangcai liked to talk, so this responsibility was dumped on him. Thus, he was out of his home most of the year.

Zaobaojie was raising several kids all by herself. If she was able to attend to their top, than she couldn't keep track of their bottoms, so the kids went around all year bare-assed and bare-footed. She wore a shirt that had several layers of patches. Her days were so tough there was barely any water in the cistern or salt in the food.



Fengshan didn't meet Zaobaojie until after he married and came to Upper Corral. Working together, he noticed that she was so poor her clothes barely covered her body. Behind Little Pocky's back, he gave the two *yuan* he had in his pocket to Zaobaojie. Back then, a foot of machine-made cloth cost a tenth of that, so two *yuan* was enough to pull ten feet worth of cloth. Not like now, when a *yuan* won't even buy a popsicle. Zaobaojie took the money and was so happy that tears began to roll out of her eyes.

When weeding the fields that summer, Zaobaojie wore a kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate, machine-cloth shirt. She went to stand next to Fengshan who was irrigating fields, scaring him so much he thought he was looking at an immortal descended from Heaven. Exchanging a couple of words, they both had the feeling that it was too bad they hadn't met sooner. After several sets of bantering, a few rounds of flirting, and a couple cycles of coquettish glances, the two of them got a bit itchy in the heart and wanted nothing more than to throw in with each other.

Farmers always work near mountains and wild country. If two people have that idea in their minds for a long time, there is always a Heaven-sent opportunity. There's no way they won't wind up together.

Fengshan had gone to collect dung the previous day and Zaobaojie had gone to cut grass for pig feed. They ran into each other again, and without saying more than a couple of words, they snuck into the wheat field as easily as a light carriage on a familiar road. They succumbed to the wilds of passion like mythical phoenixes in union.

"You... you... damned... King of Hell..." Zaobaojie cursed without conviction, gasping for breath under Fengshan's weight.

"You... seductive... Cat God!" Fengshan yelled angrily yet brokenly as he pressed down on Zaobaojie.

The business finished, Fengshan rolled over to one side on his back and gazed at the sun.

"Gold Bug! You're the bully! A monk who hasn't had fish or fowl for thirty years ain't as rushed as you!" Zaobaojie put on her pants and pinched Fengshan on the thigh. "Hurry, pull up your pants. That's not a dried fish to be lyin' out in the sun."

Fengshan looked over at holes in Zaobaojie's shoes. He searched his whole body for some money but found none. He sighed and once again recalled that place with the seed-sized gold nuggets.

"If I'd had a bit more guts back then and stuck around for another day, I wouldn't be in this penniless situation right now."

"Did you really see a whole area filled with seed-sized nuggets?"

"I'm your slave if I'm lyin'."

"Gold Bug!" scolded Zaobaojie as she glared at him. "Then go get some. We're so poor we can't even grow hair."

"Heavens! Just sayin' it sounds better than a songbird, but that beach is a couple thousand *li* beyond the pass. You think I can get there just by shakin' my ass?"

"If you really had gold, what would you do first?"

"Build a house. Build a house with dozens of rooms."

Zaobaojie snorted and turned her head away.

"Oh, right! First I'd buy you a pair of foreign leather shoes. Then I'd give you five *yuan* and let you buy all the candy you want."

"Gold Bug! Five *yuan* of candy, wouldn't that just make me sick?"

When talking on the road, there are always people listening in the grass. A herder boy on the mountain above saw everything that transpired between Fengshan and Zaobaojie as clearly as looking at fish in a clean river. He didn't miss a single detail.

On a small, nearby pasture, this shepherd tended the production team's old and infirm sheep that couldn't walk far. Alone all day, he'd developed a habit of teasing the ewes in heat and toying with the randy goats. While driving the sheep back to the corral that day, he ran into Little Pocky who was returning

from her aunt's house, where she'd borrowed a foot of black cotton cloth she was planning to take home and make into a pair of shoe-uppers for her husband. Intending to make Fengshan play the fool, he related the whole tray-full of the business between Fengshan and Zaobaojie in the wheat field 'rolling the thresher rock'. But that alone wasn't enough for him, so he also added a few details to stir it up even more.

This was in the early fall of 1957. Everyone had heard the village cadres shouting, "If you want to get into Heaven, eat at the communal canteen," telling everyone that communism was just about to arrive. When the farmers asked what communism would be like, the cadres used simple, common language that they'd rehearsed and refined – upstairs and downstairs, electric lights, and telephones. Moreover, they punished several bad elements who said eating at the canteen was like, "When there're too many pigs, there ain't enough good food." So, everyone was looking forward to getting into the canteens after the fall to live days based on 'the basic principle of eating one's fill'.

In order to facilitate the entrance into communism, the cadres had set up a culture class for 'illiteracy eradication'. They mobilized the old, young, men, and women into groups and taught them to read under kerosene lamps every night.

On that very night that the herder boy had exposed Fengshan and Zaobaojie to Little Pocky, the illiteracy eradication teacher was right in the middle of reciting, "Liberate women, develop production." Teacher Wang, a woman only twenty-nine years of age, had just been sent to this village primary school from the county town. Just then, Zaobaojie used the excuse that her lantern was out of kerosene and went to stand next to Fengshan.

The telling of it is slow, but the action was quick. Like a tiger coming out of the mountains, Little Pocky pounced sideways and knocked the completely unprepared Zaobaojie to the ground with her head. Spreading her legs, she rode atop Zaobaojie's body and grabbed her face. With her long, hard fingernails filled with

black gunk, she scratched Zaobaojie's face until drops of blood rolled out.

Teacher Wang was from an intellectual family and had never seen women fight like this. She had no idea why they were fighting. She came forward, pulled Little Pocky off Zaobaojie, and asked her why she had attacked her.

"Oh, Teacher Wang..." Like a grieved child who sees his mother, she plopped on the ground and tearfully complained with great force. "Oh, my dear Teacher Wang! This slutty donkey in heat seduced my husband! How'd I become a hen that can't lay eggs? I can't get pregnant, I can't have kids, and it's because this slut has squeezed dry my husband's gooey thickness so he only squeezes out clear water for me at night. Oh, Teacher Wang, tell me the truth, has there ever been a greater injustice than this!?"

"Gooey what? Clear water? What are you talking about?"

"Wah ha ha ha..."

"Teeheehee..."

Of course, the whole village exploded in unbridled, crazy laughter. Teacher Wang, stunned at first, seemed to suddenly understand. The two expressions appeared on her face as fleeting as evening clouds. She simply said, "Bah!" and stormed out the door.

For a moment it seemed as if a bomb had exploded in the classroom. Waves of conversation washed over them, directly attacking Zaobaojie, who raced out of the room like a scared rabbit amid peals of laughter.

Little Pocky wasn't quite done when she got home. If Fengshan wanted to get a whiff of that fox, she'd toss out his quilt, pillow, and even that last piece of ratty felt on his *kang*.

Fengshan knew he was in the wrong, so all he could do was pretend to be a deaf-mute with closed eyes. Not saying a word and not looking up, he bore Little Pocky's curses ripping him a new hole, and then, like a man free of care, he once again dragged out his pillow-rock from under the flour cabinet, wiped the dust from it

with his sleeve, placed it on the *kang*, slipped on his ratty fur-lined coat, and went to sleep.

He dreamed of the Golden Phoenix Egg. As a result, he suffered two more slaps and a kick in the balls, banishing that pleasant dream beyond the Highest Heaven.

"If you're ever gonna get randy like a donkey in heat again, I'll take out my scissors and cut off that shit-stirrin' stick of yours!"

Little Pocky jumped off the *kang* and loudly urinated in the ceramic chamber pot while cursing Fengshan in a noxious tone.

Fengshan pitifully rubbed the sore area between his legs. Not looking directly at Little Pocky, he waited until she got on the *kang* again and tunneled under the covers. Only then did Fengshan slide off the *kang* and walk awkwardly over to the chamber pot. But, even though he exerted over it for a long time, he couldn't piss a drop.

### The Pillow-rock Ends Up in the Latrine Pit

Time is a shadow puppet played by a puppeteer. With a couple of sways and a few shakes, twenty years passed.

The farmers got progressively poorer, and the poorer they got, the more confused they became. During the Great Leap Forward of 1958, one day equaled twenty years, and they rushed wide-eyed into communism. Who could have thought that in 1960 there would be a famine, turning people into goats, eating grass and the bark off trees? Shortly after that was the 'four purifications' socialist education campaign. And then there was the Cultural Revolution. The more clearly they shouted slogans, the more distraught their lives became. Work teams even came by that were so strident the chickens went flying and the dogs jumped over walls, saying they wanted to 'cut off the tails of capitalism'. The farmers, who consider food as important as Heaven, were told to 'prefer to eat socialist grass over capitalist sprouts', putting the right to eat food on the side of capitalism.

The tougher the days got, the more Fengshan couldn't forget the gold pit he had seen. Even more, he couldn't forget the dream about the Golden Phoenix laying an egg.

For many years after Little Pocky discovered his unorthodox behavior with Zaobaojie, she doled out punishment like she had before. Once he was punished, Fengshan would sleep with the pillow-rock under his head. And once he slept on that pillow-rock, he'd dream of the Golden Phoenix laying an egg. Again and again, he had the same dream for more than twenty years!

His fellow villagers were dumbfounded when he told them about this weird business. Some didn't believe him. One borrowed the pillow-rock and slept on it for seven or eight days. Other than getting a headache, he didn't have a fart of a dream, let alone dream of a Golden Phoenix laying an egg.

The person who did the experiment figured Fengshan was fooling him. He took the pillow-rock and threw it at Fengshan's feet, cursing, "Gold Bug!"

Fengshan hurriedly picked up the rock, hugged it close to his chest, argued with him a few moments, turned into the gateway, and paid him no more mind.

Once, when Little Pocky was in a better mood, he told her about this dream. She said, "Hold it tight, that golden egg is me – your old lady!"

Once, when he told Zaobaojie about this dream, her face turned red as a cock's comb. She put her mouth close to Fengshan's ear and whispered, "Your golden egg's in my belly! Feel it if you don't believe me, a little Fengshan."

One time, he told his dream to Teacher Wang who said, "What we think of during the day, we dream of at night. As soon as you put your head down on that pillow-rock, you recall your time at the gold fields, and as soon as you think of the gold fields, you'll surely think that it would be great if you could get a big piece of gold. So, once you start dreaming, you naturally dream of a golden egg."

The production team had dispatched Fengshan to collect fertilizer in the county town where he ran into a blind fortune-teller. Fengshan told the blind man about the strange business of dreaming for twenty years about a Golden Phoenix laying an egg. The blind man listened and said, "The phoenix is a nobleman. The phoenix laying a golden egg is a nobleman giving you wealth. Once you get home there will be a happy event." Finally, he stuck out his hand. Fengshan asked, "Why?"

The blind man said, "Fee for the fortune."

In a panic, Fengshan said, "Other than this fertilizer bucket on my back, I don't have a penny. Wait til I get rich and I'll pay you back."

The blind man said, "Dig through your pockets. I'll take whatever you've got."

All Fengshan could do was take out the half of a steamed bun that he'd begged from a restaurant and stuff it into the blind man's hand. He turned to leave, and having taken a few steps, he heard the blind man curse, "Gold Bug!"

He was really unhappy that day. As the sky grew dark he carried a ratty plastic bag on his back and walked home. The plastic bag was half filled with dried buns he had begged from restaurants that day. Worried they'd grow moldy, he laid them out on the fertilizer drying field to dry in the sun. He didn't want to eat them himself – he planned to give them to Zaobaojie.

Zaobaojie's husband died in 1960 from eating some kind of poisonous grass, leaving behind Zaobaojie with four kids – two girls and two boys. The youngest boy was named Liu Jiahu, Fengshan's 'golden egg'.

It turned out Little Pocky's inability to reproduce wasn't because of the 'clear water' her husband squeezed out. She went to the hospital for an examination and the doctor said, "This lady comrade doesn't have reproductive capabilities."

One night when this 'lady comrade' expressed feelings of shame and regret to her husband because she couldn't produce a single boy or a even half a girl, Fengshan, with the magnanimity of

a sage, expressed his understanding to Little Pocky who had at that moment become so meek and lovable. Assuming a serious attitude, Fengshan pointed out that there are three unfilial acts, and lackin' descendants was the worst. "How can we not have a single person to take care of us when we're old and bury us when we're dead?" When Little Pocky awkwardly asked what to do about it, Fengshan opportunistically said, "Borrow a chicken to lay the egg, and it's already been borrowed and already been laid."

Little Pocky's countenance changed immediately. She said, "I've seen that slut's son, Jiahu, grow more and more like you every day. Hmph! If you don't plant the seed in your own field, no matter how well the sprouts grow, they're still someone else's! In my lifetime, even if I die in a field and get eaten by dogs, I'll never recognize that bastard!"

"It's not that I didn't plant a seed, but with your alkaline fields, what am I to do?"

"That's the Old Man in Heaven's retribution for you goin' against Heaven's grace!"

Fengshan had nothing to say.

Fengshan took the plastic bag of dried buns to Zaobaojie's house. Her kids repeatedly called him 'Uncle'. They grabbed the buns that were so dry and hard that your hand hurt when you poked them. They crunched into them like they were the fried beans customarily eaten on the second day of the second lunar month.

His son, Jiahu, asked, "Uncle, where'd you get so many white buns?"

'Uncle' said, "On the street."

Jiahu said, "Do white buns grow on the street? Take me with you to the street. I'll collect more to give Mum to eat, OK?"

'Uncle' said, "OK, OK. We'll wait until you're older and you can go to the street with me."

Seeing the children's greedy appetite and their scraggly faces, Fengshan almost burst into tears.



"Oh, and yet I still pine for a child. Once I got it, I got nothin' for it to eat, nothin' for it to drink, wouldn't it just be sinful? Gold Bug! You really are a damn Gold Bug! You've been dreamin' of gold your whole life, but you're still nothin' more than a beggar on the street!" He cursed himself viciously.

Zaobaojie, who had been out digging wild grass, came running madly back home with her vegetable basket and rushed into the house. Seeing Fengshan, she shouted in a panic, "Hurry, go home! Your house collapsed and the kid's aunt is trapped inside!"

Fengshan ran home like he was being chased by a hungry wolf. When he arrived, folks had already dug Little Pocky out of the rubble.

Little Pocky was like an archeological relic. With the support of several women she sat under the main gate, her disheveled hair full of mud and grass, while fresh, indescribably red blood trickled from her temple.

The way the house collapsed was rather odd. The beam that broke was none other than the central beam in the middle of the house. It broke clean in the middle and the earthen walls on either side fell over, piling up in the middle room. The three-room house had become an entirely open hall.

Right away Fengshan recalled that old blind man who first told him he was fated for wealth and then cursed him as Gold Bug.

"This must be because of a curse he made on account of me not giving him a thing for the fortune-telling fee. Nothin'! I didn't even have a *yuan*! Fucking fortune!"

Squatting by the broken beam, he wept as pitifully as an orphaned child.

The villagers all said the beam broke because it was old and had been eaten through by termites, but he shook his head vigorously.

He suddenly remembered that pillow-rock. He jumped up, grabbed a shovel, went to where he had put the rock, and with a few shovelfuls, dug out that bizarre object that had made him

dream sweet dreams for twenty years. He picked it up with one hand, walked out of the yard, and threw it in the latrine.

"Gold Bug's gone crazy!" a neighbor whispered.

The wood hollowed out by the bugs wasn't just the main beam. If he wanted to rebuild a three-room house, he'd have to gather much more timber. But Fengshan didn't have so much as a straight stick to beat a donkey.

Neighbors helped Fengshan rebuild, but they could only manage a two-room house.

It seemed as if he had become an old man overnight. For a long time, nobody saw Fengshan raise his head as he walked.

"I'm not destined to be rich," he said slowly as he watched Zaobaojie wash wild herbs in the river.

"Ay – listen to you. At this age, if you get another mouthful to eat then that's treasure enough. Gold's good, but it's not somethin' commoners should long for. We gotta try for three meals a day and enough gruel in our bowls, and that's good enough."

"I promised you a pair of foreign leather shoes, and five *yuan* to buy candy."

"Oh lord! That was just silly talk when you were outta your mind with joy. Who'd really want that?"

"If a man makes a promise but can't see it through, he's like a stinkin' radish pickled for several years that can't be brought to the dinner table. What else does he have?"

"That mouth of yours! You think that bag of dried buns can't make up for a pair of shoes and five *yuan* worth of candy? You think you owe somebody somethin'? It's us that owe you, my dear little Gold Bug. One day you're talkin' sweet, pullin' on my heartstrings. Let me tell you, that sack of bread was more valuable than a whole bag of seed-sized gold nuggets! If you talk like this again, I... I'll..." At this point Zaobaojie stopped to wipe the tears flowing from her eyes.

Fengshan got anxious, "Tell me, what'll you do?"

"I'll send your son to your home!"

"Ah! My dear wife! Ain't that just outflankin' me!"

Zaobaojie sniggered. She picked up the wild herbs she had washed, dumped out the water from the basin, and said, "C'mon, I'll make you a nice cup of tea." She left first.

Fengshan squatted for a while. Then he walked behind Zaobaojie toward her home.

### How Horrible the Word Money

The spring wind rushes in one night and, among all the trees, the pear blooms first.

In the early 1980s, each and every person of Horse Camp dreamt of the Golden Phoenix laying eggs just like Jing Fengshan, and happily began smiling. It turns out that was the day the production team was reapportioning the land, which would be contracted to individual households.

The eyes of Heaven open wide when people are happy. The whole village had a bumper harvest the first year the land was contracted to individuals. The farmers would have never thought it true, but they didn't have enough storage space in their own homes for all the grain they harvested. The flour cabinet was full, the storage room was full, even the steps were stacked full. And the threshing stone hadn't even finished rolling!

Isn't this what the farmers had hoped for all those years? Life! Complicated and simple. Complicated in that they suffered through all those years of hunger struggling to find a way to eat a meal. Simple in that once they got the land in their own hands, presto, they ate so much their bellies were round each night.

The human heart is no bigger than a chicken egg. Riding on a mule, one hopes for a horse. Having just eaten their fill for several days, and having not even finished shitting out all the elm bark they had eaten before, they discovered that their houses were small and dark and the clothes they were wearing weren't fit to be seen by others. Then they found out city folks were listening to tape recorders and watching television!

When the broadcast box announced that some people had to get rich first, a disturbing undercurrent quickly became a massive tide and began to weigh heavily on the minds of the fundamentally good-natured farmers. When the farmers turned around again, their countenances had all changed. Each and every one of them wanted to become one of the 'some' to get rich first. The desire for money, like an inflated pig bladder, instantly filled the previously empty chests of every man, making them uneasy all over. As if lice the size of barley grains had bored into their bedding, they couldn't sleep comfortably, and they couldn't discriminate tasty food from bad.

Where's the money, money, money?

Everybody in Horse Camp poured out of the village to make money. When they came back, some had made a little, but most were empty-handed.

They didn't know how to earn money. They couldn't even find a place to sell their strength.

No one knows which ancestor's clever descendant first realized that in the west there was gold! But, when the winds of gold fever swept through Horse Camp, the one who first decided to go to the gold fields wasn't Jing Fengshan. Instead, it was Zaobaojie's two sons, Jialong and Jiahu.

Jialong and Jiahu had both become adults, one of them twenty-eight years old, and one twenty-five. Jialong was honest and capable of doing hard work, like his father, Liu Guangcai. But Jiahu was impish, with a lively mind and a lot of crooked ideas. The two of them together, one churning out plans and the other providing manpower, partnered extremely well.

When they were younger, the person they respected the most, besides their mother, was their uncle, who everyone called Gold Bug. If they went several days without seeing him, they'd cry and carry on until their mother went and brought him over.

And yet, as they aged they slowly discovered the relationship between uncle and mother was not all that clear. There was one time when a kid the same age as Jiahu was fighting with

him but couldn't beat him. Unexpectedly, the kid began cursing him as Gold Bug's bastard son, which angered Jiahu so much he beat the kid half to death.

After that, every time Jialong and Jiahu saw Fengshan at their home, they were itching to grab the cleaver and chop him up, but they didn't dare act in front of their mother. They made a promise to each other. Once they'd grown up, they'd figure out a way to kill Fengshan and avenge their father's honor.

Old Fengshan and Old Zaobaojie realized that the kids had taken notice of their behavior. Old Zaobaojie said, "What's there to fear? If it hadn't been for you stealin' potatoes in the dark of night to feed 'em, how would those two kids have ever grown up?"

"Forget it. Your two girls are married off and the two boys are standing tall, so they've gotta get along on their own. Would they spread bedroom business out into the open and bathe it under the sun? That's shameless."

Fengshan stole a glance at Zaobaojie and made a funny face.

"Gold Bug! Who's shameless? That dirty mouth of yours never has anythin' good to say." Zaobaojie poked Fengshan a couple of times with her finger. "You were shameless first."

"If the bitch doesn't wag her tail, the dog won't mount," Fengshan said, and stole another glance at Zaobaojie.

"Enough, enough, my dear Gold Bug. I raised a son for you, you conscienceless scoundrel." Zaobaojie turned around, grabbed the *kang* sweeping broom and poked him gently on the thigh.

Jialong and Jiahu both left the house to work one day in the early part of that year. Spying an opportunity, Fengshan snuck into Zaobaojie's house.

With the two of them together again there was certainly a lot of old ground to go over. Talking back and forth, before they knew it, it was already past noon and Jialong and Jiahu had come back.

Zaobaojie, hearing her sons' footsteps, sprang to action, concentrated on the situation, and said loudly toward the window, "Uncle, if I had money wouldn't I lend it to you? I ran out of salt the other day and have no money to buy anything anymore. I even borrowed a cupful from a neighbor." She then winked at Fengshan.

"Forget it. I'll think of somethin' else. If I don't get a piglet, it won't do, but I'll need the cash to do it. Ay!" Fengshan walked out the door as he spoke.

"Uncle, you're already raisin' three pigs at your house, and auntie keeps promising to sell one sayin' she doesn't have enough to feed 'em. How come you're gonna buy another one?"

Fengshan's face flushed. That Jiahu, it's like he's laughing but he's not laughing. Irritating as hell. Fengshan, embarrassed and sad, stood there like a thief who had stuck his hand in someone's pocket and then was glared at by a pair of sharp eyes.

"Ma, we're so hungry our stomachs are cryin' in pain. I don't know what you've been doin', but you haven't made lunch yet!"

Jiahu shoved Fengshan aside and went into the house complaining loudly. He took off his shirt and tossed in onto the *kang* from which a cloud of dust rose.

"This kid, as big as he is, still doesn't understand manners. Uncle, go on, I won't see you off." Carrying the yeast, she went into the kitchen.

"I don't understand manners? What is this thing, manners? If I understood manners, I wouldn't do things that make people scold you behind your back. Hmph!"

"Forget it, Jiahu. Take it easy. A friend of mine gave me a big dog, I'll bring it over tomorrow. We'll tie it to the front gate, and nothin' will ever happen again." Jialong patted Jiahu on the shoulder, picked up a shovel, and threw some dirt in the pig sty.

Fengshan rarely went to Zaobaojie's house after that. As long as Jialong and Jiahu were standing tall, then there was no need for him to worry himself about that house anymore.

On the other hand, Zaobaojie came up with many opportunities to seek out Little Pocky, such as cutting shoe soles or borrowing needle and thread. Little Pocky wouldn't fight with a guest at her gate on principle. Even though her heart was filled with hatred, she wore a smiling face.

"Ay – I don't know what sins I committed in my previous life, but in this one that slut's gonna drive me to my death!" Little Pocky said to Fengshan as he lay on the *kang* smoking that night.

"You! I just wronged you once when I was younger and didn't make it up to you. So how come you still talk so mean at this age?"

"OK, I won't talk. Day and night these last decades you've snuck over to that shameless slut's house to do who knows what. But now the sons are grown and don't need you anymore. You haven't looked after this house. All these years you haven't even bought me a new shirt, and this three-room house became two rooms! The holes in the walls are big enough to see through to the stars and sparrows' nests are in every crack. Why don't you make that bastard you raised come over and fix it up!"

"Your bullshit would fill a bucket!"

"You've been full of bullshit your whole life! Aren't you the one who saw seed-sized gold nuggets? Huh? You shameless old coot! Everybody in Upper Corral and Lower Corral is runnin' off to the gold fields, but you, on the other hand, can't even sneak out a quiet little fart!" Fengshan opened his mouth for a long time, and then closed it.

### Finally, A Gold Boss

Little Pocky picked two red-topped radishes from the vegetable garden and was preparing to go home to make dinner. Fengshan was fixing the rock wall around the vegetable garden. Some rascal had gotten into the garden to steal radishes, knocking over a few of the rocks making up the wall. A hole had appeared, and if the wall

wasn't patched, it wouldn't keep pigs and sheep from coming in and trampling everything.

"Uncle, what're you doin'?"

Without raising his head while lifting rocks, Fengshan said, "Stackin' rocks." After he said it, he felt something wasn't right, so he looked up quickly and was surprised to see standing in front of him, laughing and asking him questions, were Jialong and Jiahu who used to be furious whenever they saw him.

"Oh, Jiahu..." Fengshan put the rock on top of the wall, rubbed his dirt-covered hands together a few times, and stared in surprise at his enemies, who were being unusually nice. He looked at the sun and felt that the weather was normal. Fengshan didn't know what to say.

"Uncle, just call us if you need work done in the future. Which of us wouldn't come over to help if you asked?" Jiahu pulled out a cigarette and handed it to Fengshan.

Jing Fengshan got excited and kept saying, "Sure, sure, sure." He reached out with both hands to take the cigarette Jiahu handed him. A look of not knowing what to do appeared on his face, like a long-suffering slave who had suddenly received his master's pardon.

He invited those two young relatives into the house, led them to sit on the *kang*, and even asked his wife to pour tea and serve bread. He didn't know if it was better to stand or sit. It was like he was one of the 'four bad elements' who had been under surveillance these last few years and the Party secretary and security chief were sitting on his *kang*.

Jialong finally got up and pulled Fengshan onto the head of the *kang*.

"Uncle, when we were just kids I remember you talkin' 'bout how, before 1949, you were a sand coolie and you saw a whole pit full of melon-seed-sized nuggets..."

"Yup. It was full of seed-sized nuggets. I even picked some up, but no one believes me," Fengshan said.

"We believe you!" Jiahu said.



"Really?" Fengshan's eyes lit up.

"Of course! If Uncle says it then it must be true. But Uncle, you've wanted to be a gold boss your whole life, and now that you can be one, how come you haven't made a move? All the other villages have gone to the gold fields, only our village hasn't done a thing. Everyone's lookin' to you," Jiahu said.

"Lookin' to me? What're they doin' that for?" Fengshan asked.

"Think about it! You're an old hand, and you're also the person who's seen that pit full of gold. If you don't make a move, then all the others who don't know the way and don't have experience... they'll be too afraid to do anything!"

Fengshan happily said, "That's true. Diggin' for gold ain't like plantin' crops. There's a sea of particulars and if you get 'em wrong then even if there's gold, it won't come out."

"You won't become a gold boss and get rich even once?"

"I'm already gettin' on in years. That Ox-head Meng was only forty when he was a gold boss. And besides, you've gotta be rich to be a gold boss..."

"Aw, Uncle, you're wrong! Your bones are so sturdy, you're actually younger than a forty-year-old man. And bein' a gold boss don't take a lot of strength. And, why worry 'bout not havin' money? Nowadays the government supports some people gettin' rich first, so credit agencies are encouragin' people to take out loans! Take out some loans first, then dig up some gold to repay it. Where else are you gonna find somethin' as simple as that?" Jiahu said.

"Oh?" Fengshan stretched out his neck.

"After you take out a loan, hire twenty or thirty people, rent a truck, and you sit in the front and point the way. My brother and I'll be your foremen. We'll dig for one or two months, you get the gold, and we'll take wages. Then won't we all get rich? After we get rich and come back, we'll first help Uncle tear down these two rickety rooms that are eventually gonna collapse anyway and build him a lavish house with seven rooms. What do you say?"

"There's nothin' to it. Uncle's home is our home, and his business is our business. We've got that kind of loyalty to you. After all, we ate the dried buns you brought over when we were kids," Jiahu said.

The conversation with Jialong and Jiahu brought tears to Fengshan's eyes. He slapped his thigh and said, "Let's go! I've been Gold Bug my whole life, thinkin' 'bout strikin' it rich every day. Now that the chance is here, how come I'm not as clear about it as you? Jialong and Jiahu, you two get busy makin' preparations and I'll go to the credit agency for a loan. I think I'm gonna be a gold boss!"

In unison, Jialong and Jiahu said, "Great! Uncle's Golden Egg is about to be laid!"

Fengshan's thoughts immediately turned to the pillow-rock that had given him countless dreams of the Golden Phoenix laying an egg, and which was now sitting at the bottom of the latrine. Once Jialong and Jiahu left, he grabbed a shovel, got down into the latrine, and dug out the pillow-rock. Carrying it out the gate, he washed it in the irrigation ditch, and then brought it back home.

"You're really goin' to the gold fields?" Little Pocky asked as she brought soup to the table.

"I've been dreamin' 'bout this day since I was seventeen years old."

"At your age, what are you gettin' all wild about? You don't have any kids and besides, these two rooms will serve us well until the day we die."

"That tongue of yours has no backbone, it just rolls around in your mouth! A couple of days ago you yelled at me for not lookin' after this house. You said, 'Everyone's goin' to the gold fields, how come you haven't even let out a fart?' Now you say I'm gettin' wild. All the silliness in the world is spit outta your mouth!"

"I was just sayin' that out of anger, but you took a club for a needle and thought it was real. The way I see it, you're just troubled about that bastard son of yours!"

"You damn old hag! I *do* have a bastard son! 'Cause of you, I'm gonna be the last in my line!"

"You are the last of your line! And it's because of the wickedness of your Jing Family! You really think that bastard son of yours is bein' loyal to you? Don't get too happy! He's a Liu, so on the day your eyes go blank and your legs stiffen, he won't burn even one piece of paper for you!"

"Oh, my god! You haven't had a beatin' in a while and still your face is swollen! You're proud that I'm the last in my line? It was 'cause your old man's line was dyin' out that I got taken into this house, you barren old hen! You're nothin' but a sterile jenny!"

Little Pocky pounced and knocked over Fengshan's soup bowl. And, once again, the two warriors went at each other like a couple of roosters.

Fengshan laid his head on the pillow-rock when he went to sleep that night. In a haze, that Golden Phoenix flew over, flapped its wings in a dance above him, then raised its anus and with a '*plop!*' produced a golden egg. The egg hit the ground with a crisp, sweet-sounding golden ring.

Little Pocky was still angry at Fengshan the next morning, so she went straight out to slop the pigs, let out the chickens, and sweep the yard. She didn't bother to make breakfast, or even brew the cup of tea she usually made for Fengshan every morning.

Fengshan didn't utter a word. He took the pillow-rock out to the yard and placed it on the garden wall. He first smoked it with mulberry leaves, then brought it back into the house, and put it on the family altar. He lit incense, lit a lamp, and finally kowtowed to it three times with much formality.

When Little Pocky saw Fengshan again, he was heading out the main gate. Little Pocky slammed the gate behind him, then, after some thought, she opened the gate again. She felt grieved and began sobbing.

With vigorous strides Fengshan walked to Zaobaojie's house. On this particular visit, he received Jialong and Jiahu's

warm welcome. They gave him a cigarette and lit it for him. Fengshan took it with the air of a father.

Zaobaojie, seeing that her sons were happy, also grew bolder. Given an inch, she took a mile and flew into the kitchen, fried four eggs for Fengshan, sprinkled them with garlic and coriander, and carried them out piping hot. Making himself right at home, Fengshan accepted the eggs and like an autumn wind blowing through fallen leaves, gulped down two or three of them. Zaobaojie then brewed a nice, thick pot of tea and poured out a full bowl for Fengshan. Fengshan noticed two puffy jujubes floating in the bowl, full of the scent of herbs and mint.

"I haven't figured out how much it's gonna cost to rent a truck, hire sand coolies, and buy provisions. You two help me calculate it," Fengshan said as he sipped the piping hot tea.

Jiahu said, "My brother and I were thinkin' 'bout that last night. If you count the sand coolies' wages and provisions, it'll be no more than 12,000."

"That much?" Fengshan blurted out.

"Twelve thousand ain't much. If we dig out seed-sized gold nuggets, we'll make as much as 80,000," Jialong said.

"Yeah, that's right, I was just worried..." Fengshan's neck retreated into his shoulders.

"Uncle, did you, in fact, see a pit full of gold?" Jiahu asked.

"Listen to you. At my age, how could I lie to you?" Fengshan said angrily.

"Then that's that. If we really get there and bring it back, there's nothin' to worry about!"

"OK, 12,000 it is then. I'll take out that loan," Fengshan said and slapped the table.

"Fengshan, this ain't like kids playin' house. You need to think it over carefully. Playin' with monkeys is theater, but here you need to have a clear idea in your head. What if..." Zaobaojie spoke anxiously as she picked up the teapot and poured tea in Fengshan's bowl.

"Ma! Uncle's no three-year-old kid!" Jiahu said, cutting his mother short.

Zaobaojie said, "This is a big deal. It's not like goin' to your in-laws house for a visit. If there's trouble..."

Jiahu briskly said, "Say somethin' nice!"

After several days of preparation, Fengshan finally fulfilled his life-long dream of being a gold boss. The truck and sand coolies were all hired, and Jialong and Jiahu were his foremen. Fengshan turned over all authority to the two of them while he simply concentrated on scratching the itch of being the boss.

The day they picked to set out was the third day after the Buddha's birthday, the tenth day of the fourth month. They originally wanted to go on the eighth, but some sand coolies wanted to go to Kumbum to see the lamas display the Buddha on the hill and watch the *benben* tantric performance. Some wanted to go to Temple Gully to watch the horse races. The ninth was a taboo day. "Don't go out on the seventh, or return on the eighth, and setting off on the ninth violates a taboo." So, they had to go on the tenth.

Little Pocky steamed buns all day long on the ninth, according to Fengshan's instructions. The buns had to be big. Little ones were unacceptable.

"You can't deal with it all on your own," said Fengshan, and called Zaobaojie to come over.

Little Pocky didn't want any part of that, so Fengshan said, "Then steam 'em by yourself, and if you ruin them I'll come lookin' for you."

Little Pocky said, "I'll ask somebody to help me."

Fengshan said, "It'd be bad luck if somebody else got involved."

Little Pocky asked, "Isn't Zaobaojie somebody else?"

Fengshan said, "Zaobaojie's sons are my foremen, how could she be considered somebody else?"

Little Pocky slapped the dough and said, "Then go ahead and call the slut over! You won't be satisfied til you rub sand in my eyes."

Fengshan said, "Well, if that's the way you want it."

Little Pocky and Zaobaojie were busy the whole day. One kneaded the dough and one tended the fire. The buns they made that day were big and white. Zaobaojie made a red vinegar mixture with some wild poppy blossoms picked from the garden and used it to put a red dot atop each bun. Little Pocky couldn't help but remark, "How come I didn't think of that?" Zaobaojie smiled amicably at her and said, "Auntie, I'm goin' back home. I washed those two boys' quilts, but I haven't packed 'em yet."

Little Pocky picked up two buns and put them in a small basket, gave it to Zaobaojie and said, "Take 'em. Give those kids a taste."

Zaobaojie said, "There's no need for that."

Little Pocky said, "It's nothin' special."

Zaobaojie said, "Are the buns ugly?"

Little Pocky said, "There's nothin' ugly about 'em."

Little Pocky said, "You should come over tomorrow."

Zaobaojie grunted in assent, picked up the basket, and went out the gate.

Little Pocky saw her off to the gate, waited until she had walked out of the alley, and then cursed, "Slut!"

Fengshan didn't come home the whole day.

The truck was packed the night before. On the morning of the tenth, Jialong and Jiahu came over with twenty sand coolies. Just as they were about to get on the truck, Fengshan said, "Go into the courtyard first." So they all went into the courtyard.

Fengshan had Jialong and Jiahu borrow two big square tables from the neighbors and placed them beside the gate. Then he had Little Pocky and Zaobaojie bring out the steamed buns, piled as high as a small mountain.

"Get on the truck!"

Fengshan's excited voice trembled as he spoke. Jialong and Jiahu then signaled everyone to get on the truck.

The sand coolies, one after another, came out of the gate. As each of them came out, Fengshan made Little Pocky and Zaobaojie push a steamed bun into their hands. Imitating Ox-head Meng, Fengshan said, "Out you go in one piece, and in one piece you'll return; carry out a big steamed bun, and carry back a big chunk of gold..."

As Fengshan was about to climb into the back of the truck, Jiahu said, "Boss, why don't you ride up front?"

Fengshan smiled brightly and got into the driver's compartment.

Before closing the door he looked back at Little Pocky and Zaobaojie.

"Ya'll wait for us. At most we'll be out two months. We'll be back to celebrate the folk song festival on the sixth day of the sixth month!"

The truck roared to life.

"Ay – I'm so busy I just forgot. That old coot's jacket dropped a button and I forgot to sew it back on," Little Pocky said, stamping her foot.

"I sewed it on," said Zaobaojie.

As if she'd been hit by a club, Little Pocky didn't regain her senses until Zaobaojie had collected her things, smiled at her amicably, walked into the alley, and disappeared around the corner.

"Damn slut!"

Little Pocky stamped her foot again.

### The Gold Boss Cries Prone on the Ground

Zhao Zhankui, the driver hired by Jing Fengshan's private enterprise, let off the gas and stepped on the brakes, bringing his Liberation brand truck to a stop at the mouth of Long Grass Gully.

The day was the fifteenth of the fourth month, their sixth day on the road. They'd been on good road up to this point, but there weren't even cart trails beyond Long Grass Gully.

Fengshan jumped down from the truck. He looked around for a long time and then said to Jialong and Jiahu who had gotten out of the truck after him, "This is the place. To the left is Long Grass Gully, and the Maduo gold field is straight ahead. We ran into bandits in this spot that year."

The driver had taken a piss and, as he hitched up his pants, pointed at Long Grass Gully with his mouth and said, "There ain't no road. We can't drive it."

"It ain't much farther. A person can walk it in six days, so what's the truck afraid of?" Fengshan said.

"There's nothin' to meet us up ahead, and nothin' to pull us out from behind. If we sink in, there's no way out," Zhankui said.

"Master Zhao, we've come this far. Even if there's no road, the truck's still faster than walkin', right? And if it's only just as fast as walkin', it's six more days and nights, OK? If the truck won't go, we'll carry it in!" said Jiahu.

"It's strange, there ain't even a goat trail through here," Jialong said as he walked around in a few circles.

"It's even better that there's no footprints! That means that gold pit hasn't been discovered by any miners!" said Jiahu.

Fengshan grew ten times more confident after he heard that and said, "Let's go! That fuckin' gold's gonna be all mine!"

The truck turned off the road and trundled into Long Grass Gully.

The truck wheels, bouncing off rocks on the left and clumps of grass on the right, twisted around like the butts on the kids who dance disco these days. Zhankui's hands danced around the steering wheel like a roe deer captured by a hunter, punishing him so bad his mouth was twisted around to the base of his ear.

The truck was going slower than walking. The sand coolies, complaining that the truck was tipsy, jumped out of the truck and walked a stretch, then lay down to wait for the truck to



catch up. That first day they only went about fifteen *li*. Then the sky grew dark, so they stopped for the night.

Fengshan woke up in the middle of the night to urinate. As he started climbing out of the cab, he grabbed the top of the cabin and stuck his leg out, expecting to step onto the tire. But as soon as he stuck his leg out, his foot hit something hard. Startled, Fengshan pulled his leg back in and stuck his hand out to feel it. It was the ground!

Fengshan, in a stupor, struggled to gather his thoughts, then began shouting as if he'd been attacked by a swarm of bees, "Get up, get up! The truck's sinkin'!"

Fengshan's shouting startled a bird, which squawked, flapped its wings noisily, and flew off.

His shout also woke up the driver and the others. Only after Jialong turned on a flashlight could they see what had happened. The truck had been parked on a flat piece of land and had sunk halfway into the mud.

Everybody jumped off the truck except the driver, whose door wouldn't open because of the mud.

"Hurry up and start diggin' at the front of the truck! Dig out a road! Push the truck out!" Fengshan screamed.

The sand coolies all grabbed their iron pick-axes and began digging madly.

They dug out a sloped track in front of the truck. Jialong and Jiahu tied two hemp ropes to the sheep horn on the front bumper of the truck and more than twenty people, pushing, shoving, and pulling worked on it all night before finally dragging it out.

Zhao Zhankui, who had been stuck in the cabin, opened the door and jumped out like a marmot. First, he opened his mouth wide, planning what he would say for a long time. Then he let out a big sneeze. Only then did he rub his nose and circle around his mud covered truck.

"Fuck, fuck..." he grumbled, "Boss, I ain't gonna drive no farther."

"So, you mean we should just head back home?" Jiahu asked.

"Master Zhao, play your part, we're all grasshoppers tied together on this one string. What'll we do if you won't dare go? You can't just leave us here and return on your own."

"Master Zhao, don't you want to get seed-sized gold nuggets? Stick it out a couple more days and you can pick 'em up yourself. If you really don't want to go, sorry, but you're not gettin' anything for this trip!" Jiahu said, scraping the mud off his shovel with a sharp rock.

"Even if I don't get anything, I'm not goin' any farther. Count it as my bad luck. Everybody, unload the stuff from the truck, I'll go back empty. No one knows what kind of shit lies ahead, and there's no back-up truck. I borrowed 40,000 for this truck, and I've still got 30,000 to pay off. If I lose the truck here, too, you'll find me hanging from a tree by my neck."

"You want to run?" Jialong asked sternly, jumping forward.

"Forget it, forget it. Let's set up a stove and eat first, then we'll talk about it on a full stomach," Jiahu said as he poked Jialong and gave him a wink.

A pot was set atop three stones.

Jialong and Jiahu told the others to take the meat, vegetables, and flour from the truck. They set up a cutting board on the grass and began preparing.

"I'm not gonna skimp on the flour and meat for my sand coolies," Fengshan said. "I ain't Ox-head Meng. He didn't treat his workers like people, and he came to a bad end after he struck it rich."

"Uncle's speakin' the truth. The folk sayin' goes, 'As long as the harvest is fine, who cares how much the sparrows eat?' Once we get to the gold fields, as long as the sand coolies are willin' to work hard, we can put on a feast everyday and won't lose money!" Jiahu said with a laugh.

As they ate, Jialong and Jiahu asked Fengshan, "Will the sand coolies wages be ten *yuan* a day? "

"If the gold comes in good, we'll add to that," said Fengshan.

"Many thanks, Boss Jing," the sand coolies said with smiles in their eyes.

"And the two of us?" Jiahu asked.

"You two? What wages do you want? I'll take one half of the gold that we get, and you two take one half," Fengshan said.

"You took out the loan and put up the capital, so we can't in good conscience split it down the middle. If you were to share a bit of it with us it'd only be because of your generous heart, but it's best to be clear about settlin' our accounts," Jiahu said, lighting a cigarette for Fengshan.

"Well then, each of your days counts as three days labor, so thirty *yuan* a day. Is that too little?"

"That's great," Jialong and Jiahu both smiled. Fengshan smiled too.

Master Zhao sat silently to the side with his head down.

"Master Zhao, are you really gonna turn that truck around and go back?" Jiahu asked.

"Yup," Master Zhao said, putting down his bowl.

"There's nothin' more to discuss?"

"Nope."

Fengshan angrily scolded, "Fuck your ancestors, Zhao Zhankui! You're leavin' live fish out to die in the sun!"

"Uncle, settle down, Master Zhao ain't goin' nowhere," Jiahu said.

"Unload the truck, and I'll leave," said Zhao Zhankui.

"Master Zhao, ask the sand coolies if they'll do that," Jiahu said.

"No way!" the sand coolies said.

"Well then, I'm sorry, but ask a few people to help Master Zhao get back in the truck."

Several sand coolies came over and, shoving and pulling, managed to push Zhao Zhankui into the driver's seat.

"Uncle, why don't you go sleep in the back? Let my brother and I keep an eye on Master Zhao," Jiahu said. With their faces turning dark, he continued, "Master Zhao, drive on. If you don't drive, then don't blame us for being un-neighborly out here in the wilderness."

Zhankui took stock off the situation and said no more. He started the truck, and with a couple of dozen people pulling on the hemp rope from the front, the truck proceeded.

The truck crept along like a huge tortoise.

The going was even slower going than before.

One large marsh after another, and the sand coolies carried the truck across like they were carrying a sedan chair.

The third day was even more difficult. Stumbling and fumbling for a full day and they only managed to go half a kilometer!

The truck just wasn't going to move.

Jiahu, Jialong, and Fengshan talked it over that night. "Leave the truck with a sand coolie to keep the driver company. The others can carry their gear on their backs and go on ahead. That'll be faster than taking the truck."

Zhao Zhankui wouldn't do it. He said, "What do we do if the truck sinks into the ground again?"

Fengshan angrily said, "If the truck sinks in and we can't dig it out, I'll buy you a new one!"

Zhao Zhankui said, "Fuck!"

Fengshan told Laiwazi, an eighteen-year-old sand coolie, to keep Zhao Zhankui company. The others put their tools and food on their backs and marched forward.

With Fengshan leading the sand coolie troop, they marched on for four days and nights.

One day one of the sand coolies said, "It's really strange, but walkin's much easier than ridin' in that truck. A person only lives one life, but this sure counts as gettin' a glimpse of the world."

Fengshan figured they would arrive soon. He looked at the mountain formations as he walked. He was the only one traveling light. The sand coolies carried his gear.

The mountain peak facing due north of the sandy ridge was like a camel lying down with its head raised. The peak to the south was like a dozen giant swords stabbing the sky.

That was how the seventeen-year-old Fengshan saw it.

He'd told Jialong, Jiahu, and the sand coolies about this road many times.

"Look! A sword pointin' toward the sky!" a sharp-eyed sand coolie shouted out just after walking through a mountain pass.

Fengshan's heartstrings tightened as if somebody had yanked them. His heart began racing like a scared rabbit.

Uncontrollably, Fengshan's pace picked up, and the sand coolies hurried behind.

The mountain to the north came into full view, and it indeed resembled a reclining camel staring right at them. The mountains to the south, those dozen immortals' swords poking the sky, also appeared in the best perspective. But there was no sandy ridge.

The ground under their feet was wide open space, without a grass or shrub growing on it.

And the sandy ridge?

Where'd that fuckin' sandy ridge go?

"Let's keep goin' forward," Fengshan said, breathing deeply.

The sand coolies again began walking forward.

Someone complained about being tired.

The mountains on the two sides, north and south, receded until there was no trace of a camel or swords.

Fengshan's brow began to sweat. He wiped it and looked up again. Before him, a vast lake clear as a mirror came into view.

"Damn! Saicuo Lake!" he blurted out. He remembered that night when he was seventeen and running for his life, the bandit told him they would walk through the night to get around Saicuo

Lake, and cross Stone Goat Mountain before dawn. That meant the crooked line barely visible to the west of Saicuo Lake was Stone Goat Mountain.

The sand coolies noticed him losing his presence of mind and stopped.

"This ain't right? Have we walked past it?" Jiahu came over and asked.

Fengshan nodded his head, "We walked past it."

"We didn't see any trace of a sandy ridge," Jialong said.

"Set up a pot and make some food. We'll go back after we've eaten," Jiahu said decisively.

The meal they ate was tasteless.

They walked back for half the night.

The camel and swords appeared again.

Still no sign of the sandy ridge.

"Let's sleep now. First thing in the mornin' we'll portion out the land and start diggin'. After more than thirty years, the sandy ridge's probably buried," Jiahu said, issuing the orders.

The sand coolies took out Fengshan's bedding from their packs, in which it had been divided, and brought it to Fengshan. This was the daily routine. They divided it up in the morning and carried it on their backs.

"It'd be unseemly for a gold boss to carry his pack," said Jiahu.

Fengshan found a place protected from the wind and had Jialong and Jiahu pitch the tent. They went to sleep in the dark of night.

Perhaps it was the water, but the two cups of tea he had drunk before going to sleep rumbled around in his stomach, torturing him.

The wind picked up in the middle of the night, one moment inflating the tent like a balloon, and twisting it like an intestine the next.

Fengshan couldn't sleep. He couldn't make sense of it. How could such a big sandy ridge vanish without a trace? He crawled out of the tent.

It was pitch black outside. Where the wind had blown the stars, he had no idea.

Only the camel and swords of the mountains to the north and south were faintly visible.

It must've been buried by debris.

It didn't grow legs, and there was no way it flew away!

We'll dig in the mornin'. I don't believe that the gold I, Jing Fengshan, have been pinin' for my whole life is not destined to be with me. If it weren't, would I have dreamt about a Golden Phoenix layin' an egg for more than twenty years?

Under Fengshan's direction the next morning, Jiahu and Jialong divided the sand coolies into four groups and pointed each in the four directions to begin digging.

One pit after another was dug that day, but there was no sign of sand. The deeper they dug, the more muddy layers of soil they found, but not even a single rock.

After digging for ten days, several dozen large pits lay scattered like stars in an area several hundred meters across. And still not a trace of sand.

That huge sandy ridge had really sprouted wings and flown away.

Fengshan, who had wanted to be a gold boss his whole life, and who had finally become a gold boss leading a couple of dozen sand coolies to dig seed-sized gold nuggets, squatted beside a huge pit nearly ten meters deep facing the setting sun hanging just above the horizon. He began howling like a wounded brown bear.

"This trip counts as comin' away empty-handed," said one of the sand coolies.

"The gold boss is comin' away empty-handed," another one corrected.

"We didn't come up empty?" another asked.

"We're earnin' a salary from the boss. We work for a day, and we get paid for a day. What's it matter to us if gold comes out?" explained the one who had done the correcting.

"If the boss don't get no gold, what's he gonna pay us with?"

"So, what you're sayin' is, we left behind our wives and kids to travel thousands of *li* into the wilderness just for a peep show?"

"Right. If there's no gold, it's because the gold boss didn't pick the right gold field. It's got nothin' to do with us. But if he's short in payin' one day's wage, I don't care if he's my own uncle, I'll still have it out with him!"

The sand coolies surrounded Fengshan.

Fengshan put his head down between his legs.

"Boss, we gonna dig or we gonna leave? We gonna stay or we gonna go? You gotta say!"

Fengshan lifted his head and looked at the sand coolies surrounding him. Some stood with arms crossed, some leaned on shovels. Their eyes had lost the respect they once had.

Fengshan fell to his knees in front of them.

"My dear ancestors! Thirty years ago I clearly saw a sandy ridge at this spot with seed-sized gold nuggets in it. For this I dreamt of a Golden Phoenix layin' an egg for my whole life. For this, everyone called me Gold Bug, but I didn't give in. I came here for vindication. But I don't know where the Old Man in Heaven moved the sandy ridge and so I, Fengshan, have been sacrificed. Ya'll know that I borrowed 12,000 *yuan* from the township credit agency to set up this business. Now, the Old Man in Heaven's forced me to the gates of the King of Hell! Oh, waaaaah! Dear ancestors! Please take notice and spare my sorry old bag of bones!"

"Boss, workers are paid wages – this is an old custom. We're also so poor we had no other choice but to come here with you. We don't complain about the work nor demand a share of the gold. We just want to earn a little money. If we can't get paid, there



ain't no way we can go home to face our wives and kids. And you, Boss, better not plan on goin' home to your wife neither!"

As one sand coolie spoke, he drew close to Fengshan and seized his shoulder with a thick powerful hand.

"Boss, tell us. What's it gonna be?"

The sand coolies drew tighter around Fengshan.

Fengshan melted into the ground like a puddle of mud.

"What are you doin'!?"

The sand coolies looked around to see Jialong and Jiahu running out of the tent.

"Do you think the boss would cheat you out of your wages?" Jiahu walked into the crowd and pulled the crying Fengshan up from the ground. "I'm tellin' you, us bosses ain't that sort of cheapskates! We won't cheat you out of wages, but if any of you put a finger on him, well, our fists aren't vegetarians."

"We want our wages now!" the sand coolies yelled.

"Then we'll give 'em to you now!" Jiahu yelled even louder.

"Jiahu!" Fengshan shouted, "That's borrowed money!"

"Uncle, this is our ancestor's head. We've gotta break it open and distribute it, or we might not be able to keep our lives!" Jialong said.

"From when we left until today is twenty-three days. We leave startin' tomorrow, and we'll count the trip back as seven days, no matter how long it takes. So, that makes a nice round thirty days, or one full month. At ten *yuan* a day, that's 300 *yuan* per person. What do you say, OK?" asked Jiahu.

"OK! Three hundred it is. Count it out tonight. If we can't count it all tonight, we'll take your boss's life!"

Jiahu turned to Fengshan and said, "Hear that Uncle? Your life!"

Fengshan was a beaten-silly monkey. His face was completely without expression.

Jiahu told Jialong to pour Uncle a cup of tea while he went into the tent. He pulled a pillow from inside his quilt, ripped open

the pillow, took out a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief, and opened it up. There was a stack of one hundred *yuan* notes inside.

They began distributing the money, three notes per person. With the money in their hands, the sand coolies abandoned Fengshan and left happily.

Jiahu said to Fengshan, "Thirty *yuan* a day for me and my brother, so that's 900 *yuan* each, or 1,800 for the two of us. Leavin' out Laiwazi who's waitin' with the truck driver, the nineteen sand coolies is 5,700 *yuan*. So that comes to 7,500 *yuan*. Settin' up the business, buyin' the gold minin' permit, food, and provisions cost 2,500 *yuan*. That makes 10,000 *yuan*. That leaves 2,000. Uncle, count this, it's twenty bills. Then there's the 1,500 *yuan* for hirin' the truck and Laiwazi's 300 *yuan* which we'll pay when we see him. You can still keep 200 *yuan* for yourself!"

Jiahu totaled up the account, wrapped up the twenty 100 *yuan* notes in the handkerchief, and stuffed it into Fengshan's hand.

"What'd you say the two of you took?" Fengshan asked.

"Nine hundred *yuan* per person, 1,800 *yuan* for the both of us," Jiahu answered.

"You two are animals, makin' money right off of your old man's head, huh?" Fengshan maliciously cursed.

"Hey, Uncle, you said yourself the two of us count three days wages for one day of work. We didn't take any more than that." Jiahu kept to the topic.

"OK, you two wolves, now I see what you're really all about!"

"Now you see what we're all about?" Jiahu said. "Let me tell you, Jing Fengshan, we've known what you're all about for a long time! When we were little and you brought food for us, we thought you were really a good man. We never imagined you were a yellow weasel payin' respects to a hen, just schemin' and up to no good! You randy old coot, if it hadn't been for our respect for our mother, we'd have cut you into pieces a long time ago and offered you up on our father's grave! That you didn't find any gold means shit to us! We'll swear right now to Heaven and earth that we're

only takin' what you agreed to give us and not a penny more. If we hear any more of your shit, just wait and see if we don't leave your old bag of bones right here!" Jiahu said.

"Fuck off!" Fengshan roared.

"Where to? It's dark already, just go to sleep! We're leavin' first thing in the mornin'!"

The two brothers then each got into their own beds.

In the darkness they heard Fengshan slap himself crisply on the face twice.

After the sand coolies had their tea and breakfast the next morning, they took down their tents, packed their bags, and set out.

Nobody carried Fengshan's stuff.

Jialong and Jiahu walked in front.

Fengshan, carrying his own pack, followed at the end. Wobbling with each step, he looked like a duck.

This Gold Bug who finally got to scratch the itch to be a gold boss felt that his body was extremely heavy. But it wasn't the pack that was heavy. Rather, it was that damn 12,000 *yuan* debt.

Only then did he realize Jialong and Jiahu had set a trap full of fresh flowers for him. If they had dug up gold, they would have made a profit. If they hadn't dug up gold, they wouldn't have lost anything. The only one to take a beating was Fengshan.

Before having walked far, smoke began to pour out of Fengshan's mouth.

## Epilogue

After Fengshan got home he slept.

Anyone who looked at Fengshan's bone-thin face would have been scared by the two eyes that had sunk as deep as rat-holes.

Little Pocky cried herself silly.

Fengshan said, "What're you cryin' about? This is my fate. With all that's happened, I now know what kind of fate I've got."

Zaobaojie, carrying a basket of eggs and pot of soup, came to see Fengshan. When she drew near the *kang* she wiped away tears.

Little Pocky said, "Your two sons earned money, why are you cryin' and not smilin'?"

Zaobaojie sobbed, "Auntie, curse me, spit in my face or scratch it out! I can take it. Who would've thought, with one hand full of shit and one hand full of piss I raised those two self-centered wolf cubs!? They're two animals without a human heart! Had I known the day I gave birth to 'em, I'd have dropped 'em on the *kang* and crushed 'em to death with my ass! If I had, today would be much better... But they're both grown up now, and I can't manage 'em. Instead, they make faces at me every day. I really can't bear it any longer..."

Little Pocky said, "I thought that those who really suffered in this world are the ones who are the last of their line."

Fengshan's long sleep lasted right up to the eighth day of the fourth lunar month of the following year.

The one-year limit on the debt was up. The credit agency sent several messages to Fengshan, but he never showed, so they sent two clerks to his house to collect the debt.

Twelve thousand *yuan*!

Fengshan couldn't even lay his hands on twelve *yuan*. The two clerks wanted Fengshan to come up with a plan immediately.

Fengshan angrily jumped off the *kang* yelling, "You want money? I don't have a thing! Damn, all I've got is this old bag of bones. Take it!"

"Really, Fengshan, you borrow money and you return it, that's the way it is. It's the government's money. If you can't return it, you've got to come up with a plan, and yet you talk like this. What do you think I am, some old money-grubbing landlord from feudal times like Huang Shiren?" the debt collector said sternly as he stood and crushed out his half-smoked cigarette on the *kang*.

Little Pocky was so upset she nearly lost her mind. She circled the room a couple of times on tiptoes, and then suddenly

remembered that pillow-rock that gave Fengshan countless dreams of the Golden Phoenix laying an egg.

"You damned King of Hell! You're a Cat Devil out to torture people! You're a military crook that should suffer a thousand wounds!"

As Little Pocky cursed, she picked up the pillow-rock from the cabinet and ran out the door.

The two debt collectors thought the old woman was going to kill herself so they raced after her.

In the yard the noonday sun shone hot and bright. Little Pocky lifted the pillow-rock high above her head and ferociously smashed it on the stone steps.

The rock immediately split in two.

A flash of gold light struck Little Pocky's eye, scaring her so much she screeched as if she had been bitten by a dog. When she looked again she saw a golden ball the size of a pigeon's egg roll over twice, and then she lay quietly on the ground not moving a muscle.

"My god! The Golden Phoenix Egg!" Little Pocky yelled truthfully. She then rolled through the mud and sat against the pillar.

Fengshan leapt out of his bedding, threw open the window to look, and indeed saw that golden egg shining in the sun. Barefoot, he jumped right out the window and in two steps, was next to the egg, scooping it up in his palm. He moved his mouth for a long time but not a word emerged. Tears streamed from his eyes like a mountain spring and pit-a-pat-pit-a-pat fell to the ground.

In no time, the courtyard filled with people eager to see this rarity.

"It's really a Golden Phoenix Egg?"

"Could it not be?"

"Woow! Heavens! The 'gold wrapped in rock' the old folks talked about, well, we've seen the real thing today!"

"Smash it again, maybe there's more!"

Once someone shouted that, others fought over the two remaining pieces of the pillow-rock. They put them on the stone step and began smashing them with a hammer.

In no time the rock was smashed to pieces, but there wasn't anything there.

"I never expected you were going begging with a golden bowl!" The two debt collectors smiled so broadly it seemed a spring breeze had blown across their faces. They completely forgot about the recent unpleasantness. "OK! The Old Man in Heaven has given you a golden egg. Turn it over to the bank, settle the debt, and anything left over is all yours! If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it. There really are strange things in this world. Gold wrapped in rock!"

"Nobody can ever understand all the affairs of this world."

"Otherwise, the old man would have taken out this golden egg thirty years ago."

• • •

Fengshan went to the county bank the next morning. The clerk at the bank had already heard about it from a phone call he got from the credit agency.

They accepted the golden egg, praising it to the sky. They weighed it, calculated, and came up with exactly 13,200 *yuan*. On behalf of the credit agency, the bank deducted the 12,000 loan and 1,100 in interest, and paid Fengshan the remaining one hundred *yuan*.

Fengshan sighed and took his one hundred *yuan* out the bank door. He went to the market and bought a shirt, a jacket, a pair of pants, and a black handkerchief for Little Pocky. He then bought a pair of leather shoes for Zaobaojie. When he looked again, in his hands was ten *yuan* in change.

He gritted his teeth and walked into a restaurant. He ordered three shots of booze, half a pound of fatty pork, and then put the remaining five *yuan* in his pocket. He ate and drank well, then headed home feeling pretty pleased with himself.

The entire walk back, he occasionally thought about the Golden Phoenix who laid the egg that he had met in his dreams all these years. He shook his head each time, trying to get it out of his mind.

When he got to the village, he went to Zaobaojie's house.

She met him outside the gate saying, "Those two bastards are away trying to earn money."

Fengshan took out the shoes and gave them to Zaobaojie.

"You... what are you doin'?"

"I promised these to you long ago."

"I'm an old woman, how can I wear these?"

"That's not my business."

"My dear Gold..." Zaobaojie held her tongue and then said, "You're like a silly three-year-old boy!"

"And, take this five *yuan* and buy yourself some candy."

"My lord! You little devil! You're a heart-breakin' little Gold Bug!"

Zaobaojie took the money and wept.

Fengshan burped as he came out of Zaobaojie's house that afternoon and walked home with a flushed red face.

He was especially happy. He felt light enough to float into the air. He discovered that he had never spent a day and been as pleased as he was right then.

He began to sing:

A living person shouldn't cling to the idea of getting rich,  
Gold, silver, gems, and jewels harm a person's soul.  
Get through life on plain tea and simple food,  
With no illness or disaster one's life is easy....

He was already at his front gate when he sang the last line.

Just as he pushed open the front gate, '*Whoosh*', right before his eyes a cloud of yellow dust rose, and within the dust was the sound of a breaking roof beam. He heard Little Pocky yelling with a pinched voice, "Save me! Save me!" Like an arrow shot from a

bow, Fengshan threw down the packages and scurried into the cloud of dust...



INTERVIEW WITH JING SHI ON 13 JUNE 2011

Revised and edited by Keith Dede and Susan Su

SUSAN SU: When was 'Old Man Zhang' published, and what were the circumstances of its composition?

JING SHI: It was written in 1991. My writing evolved over time. In later stories, I put more emphasis on language; in 'Old Man Zhang' there was more emphasis on language, structure, and describing the environment.

SU: There are major differences in 'Old Man Zhang Pans for Gold' between when it was first published in *Qinghai Lake* in 1991 and its final version in the *Lords of Old Town* collection in 2006. What kinds of changes were made and why?

JING: I made all the changes between the journal and book editions of the story. There were some things added later, such as the crude speech. There's more crude speech in the book version. The journal version was cleaner. Actually, in terms of content, 'Old Man Zhang' was already complete when it was published in the journal, but my thinking hadn't gotten around to certain things. When publishing *Lords of Old Town* many years later, I realized I hadn't included some things I should have.

For one, I strengthened the description of environmental destruction, which I hadn't thought about much before. For example, when they ripped up that huge grassland until it was finally just filled with piles of stones. I'd been thinking about that from an environmental perspective – humans destroying the environment for their own benefit. The destruction is vast and permanent. I thought about this more later on, and the idea wasn't easy to add to other stories. It just so happens that in digging up gold, you turn over the earth, so I put these ideas in the book. In

the face of gold and money, human relationships are no longer important and people turn on one another. So, later I added the part about him going to find that kid, to ask if they could dig gold there. That kid put on an act with his boss and ran him off.

When our society was developing, in the '80s and '90s, we destroyed many things in the name of becoming wealthy. We wanted wealth and nothing else. That was the attitude. I'm trying to respond to that attitude, and so it's reflected in the environmental destruction in 'Old Man Zhang'.

SU: When you turn in a draft of your story to a journal to be published, how much do the journal editors change?

JING: It depends. For those of us who've written before, they'll either use it or not, but they won't change it. If it's a mature writer, they'd look at it, and maybe say this story isn't appropriate for their journal, and return it. Or, if they felt it was good they'd publish it without changing a word, except for wrong characters and things like that.

When a Chinese journal editor reads the immature drafts of amateur writers, if he thinks it's interesting, then he'll revise it. When I was a journal editor, some writer would write a draft and the content would be good, but often the language wasn't up to grade or the structure was messy or obtuse. I'd make a lot of deletions and changes until it was ready, then I'd publish it. This is what editors should do. Many amateur writers don't know how to organize language, or some of the language is inappropriate. If at first we don't accept their drafts, they likely won't write anymore, thinking they lack the ability. But if they're really passionate about writing and have many ideas to express, then I'll revise it. Later after it's published, we won't indicate that the editor changed anything. This is a great deal of encouragement to an amateur writer. He'll write if his attitude is positive, and the more he writes, the better he gets. If after he's written ten drafts and we don't need to change anything, well, then he's become a professional writer.

SU: When you write, do you typically write everything out at once and then edit? Or, do you write a section, revise it, write another section, revise again? What's the process?

JING: I usually produce a full draft from beginning to end when I write. Next, I look to see which parts need additions and which parts need to be deleted. After deleting, I add more. Back when we wrote with pens, I'd put the whole draft aside and then I'd read it later. In the process of transcribing it again and again, I'd make more changes.

The outline of the story already exists in my head when I write fiction. I've prepared a draft in my mind and made mental notes that are mostly all worked out. Then, I begin writing, and while writing I make it more detailed. What originally was muddled becomes clearer when you see it on paper. Sometimes I've thought out how the ending goes, but then when I begin writing, the personality of the characters makes that ending impossible. So, all I can do is work according to the character's image, according to his personality. In the end, it's even to the point that the characters are manipulating me, not me manipulating the characters.

SU: Did you already know that Shanshenbao wouldn't return from his second trip to the gold fields when you started writing 'Old Man Zhang'?

JING: No. Old Man Zhang originally thought that Shanshenbao wanted to go. Actually, that group of young folks forced him to go to the gold fields. Old Man Zhang knew they'd come up with nothing and they'd turn around and drive back. But if he didn't let him go, then they'd think he was deliberately hiding something. He couldn't stand that in terms of his sense of respect, so he let him go. Besides, people driving in those cars to the gold fields were crazy, so he'd let his son go out and play for a bit. That's what he

was thinking. Then I didn't write the last part. Actually after he got there, they were fighting, they all died... they were sacrificed.

SU: So, you're saying Shanshenbao is never coming back?

JING: Never. Or maybe he didn't die, maybe he was just injured there, crippled. But this is left for the reader to consider. I didn't write the ending. His father waits for him to come back every day at the end.

SU: When you began writing 'Old Man Zhang' did you imagine it would have this ending?

JING: No, this scenario evolved afterward. At first I just wanted to write a story about a golden gourd because elders had told us a story about that. When they went gold digging, they dug up a golden gourd that was really beautiful. Later they broke it open and they saw the inside was just rock with a thin layer of gold wrapped around the surface. That is, a volcano fused the gold around a rock, the product of geologic activity. Overall, it's a really simple story. They dug up a golden gourd, smashed it, and saw the inside was rock. Later I romanticized the 'Old Man Zhang' story based on that. 'The Fantastic Tale of the Golden Phoenix Egg' is a story about the exact opposite, a piece of gold wrapped up in a hunk of rock. Elders told me both of these gold-digging stories.

SU: Where do you get the ideas for your characters?

JING: Usually it's like this – your situation, somebody's image, and somebody else's name. The experience of writing is like that. Or, when I'm writing a character's image, I often think of people in my village, like my grandpa, uncle, the old lady next door. The images of those people are in my head. For example, the image of Old Lady Zhang wearing that old yellow headscarf, was from an old woman who lived next door to us when I was young. She often

came out of the house looking just like that. When I think about Old Lady Zhang, it's that old lady. When I was writing 'Old Man Zhang' I immediately thought of her.

SU: How about Old Man Zhang?

JING: Old Man Zhang is my father. My dad was Sun Baye because he was the eighth child in his family. They called him Old Man Sun in the village. I knew that when I was young. So, here I described my father, who was just like that. He'd curse folks when he was angry or upset. He passed away a long time ago, but when I think of him that's the image I have, and that made me think of Old Man Zhang.

SU: Old Man Zhang is walking back from the county town one time and, as he walks, he looks like a woodpecker. Is that also something your father did?

JING: Yeah, he wore a leather hat with ear flaps pulled down on the sides and a string to tie them down under his chin. When it was hot, he'd tie the ear flaps together at the top. When he went out to buy a roll of paper and didn't want to carry it in his hands, he'd stuff it into the hat, so when he walked he looked like a woodpecker. When I was young I often saw my dad looking like that. That image is deep in my mind.

SU: An important part of this story is the relationship between Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao, and it ends tragically, yet you've written it in a comedic way. Why?

JING: Yeah, everything Old Man Zhang did was for the sake of getting a wife for his son, but in the end he lost his son. It's funny, but it's also cruel. I like to use comedic methods to write tragedies.

SU: The name of the gold boss in 'Old Man Zhang', Hanyibula, is not a Han name. Is it typical of another ethnic group?

JING: Hanyibula is a Salar name, but I didn't write it out as such. At that time, all the gold bosses were Hui, Salar, or other Muslim ethnicities. There weren't any Han gold bosses before 1949 because all the gold bosses had ties to the government. Because Ma Bufang was Hui, his government elevated his relatives and descendants so that they became gold bosses.

SU: In 'Old Man Zhang', before Old Man Zhang and Shanshenbao could go to the gold fields to dig, they first had to get a gold-digging permit. Was that common at the time?

JING: Yeah, back in the time of Ma Bufang, people had to get gold-digging permits from the government. But the gold bosses were often in cahoots with the government. The gold bosses were middlemen. They had money and power and could get one or two hundred permits at once for a thousand each, then they'd sell them for two thousand each. Regular folks couldn't get permits for themselves. After you got the permit, even if you had enough money, you'd have to use the permit to take out a loan. After they forced you to take out the loan, they didn't give you money, they made you pay it back in gold. They'd sell you shoes that were falling apart, ripped-up shirts, and rotten flour, and all at high prices.

SU: How did you learn about all of this? Was this how it was before 1949?

JING: No, this isn't pre-1949, it's post-1949. I had been living in Delingha in Haixi Prefecture. All the gold fields were in Haixi, and every year when it came time to dig gold, tens of thousands of peasants would pour in on trucks. There was a tent outside Delingha filled with people waiting to get their gold-digging

permits. They received their permit from someone working for Haixi Prefecture. Sometimes when I didn't have any work to do, I'd slip into the tent and chat with them. I learned everything that way.

SU: One of the themes of 'Old Man Zhang' seems to be fate. For example, when they first dug up that golden gourd, they said they weren't fated to be rich, and in the end, they're still poor. Does this reflect your own views, or are you expressing the viewpoint of villagers?

JING: I wrote a lot of things in 'Old Man Zhang' that were foreordained. Chinese say that this person should have such-and-such a fate, and they have such-and-such a fate. Even if you get a big piece of gold, you won't get rich. Maybe you don't get a big piece of gold in the end, but you still live just fine. But if you do get a big piece of gold, your life will be miserable. Chinese people originally thought along such lines. If your fate is to have only three pecks of grain, you can't eat eight bushels. This has already been arranged by God. I've always felt this way. This is my own idea probably. There's also a contradiction within the story because the older generation believes in fate, but the younger generation less so.

I think in the course of one's life, one's fate – you talk of God, we refer to the Buddha – is fixed, it's preordained. In this life, whatever your fate, that's your fate. All your struggling and striving is meaningless. I think that's the way it is. At the time I was writing 'Old Man Zhang', I was thinking about those folks in the generation older than me. They'd worked hard their whole lives, and in the end, their lives came out the same. At most (last?), they didn't have anything. Even if you make a mountain of gold and silver, you can't take it with you after you're dead. For example, in 'The Fantastic Tale of the Golden Phoenix Egg', I wrote that Jing Fengshan was fated to be rich, but he didn't know he was already rich. I think in the process of reading fiction, you

feel something grabbing at you, holding you back. Life is not under one's own control. All one's struggles are fruitless labor.

SU: How do you think this applies to your own life? You used to live in a small village, then you went to school and got a good job, and finally you worked hard reading a lot of stories and started writing. Now, your life is very different from what it used to be. Do you believe that's due to your own striving?

JING: I think this new life I've pursued is really comfortable, much more comfortable than my earlier life in the village. I've escaped from doing much physical labor, so now I'm really comfortable. But I always want to go back there in my thoughts. I'm always thinking that I've got a house in the countryside and nobody comes by to bother me there.

In people's hearts, they always want to return to their childhood environment. For example, my younger brother had to tear down our old house and build a new one last year. When he was tearing down the house I was really pained, but he had to tear it down because it was so old. When he was building the gate, I told him I would do it myself. So, I spent my own money and had a traditional door made exactly like they had in the villages back in the old days. Every time I see that door, it makes me think of what it was like back then, and I'm comforted. People have to make real the things that are in their thoughts, and then when you look at it, you are comforted.

Whenever I have some free time, I always go there. The human relationships and natural environment are all familiar to me. The sound of sparrows is comforting, and magpies come by chirping, bringing happy news.

Now, we've come out of the countryside and entered the city. We've worked as if our lives depended on it, running around the city, and then we finally realize the city is really no good. It has no interest in caring for our souls. It isn't a place where our souls are cared for.



SU: Teacher Liu, a minor character in 'Old Man Zhang', is part of the village but also an outsider at the same time. What is his character like?

JING: Teacher Liu can only observe things as they occur. He's an intellectual and thus can only reflect on what's happening, and he can only sigh about it. In the end he burned that newspaper with the article about Old Man Zhang selling his gourd to the State. Teacher Liu doesn't have the right to speak; he has too little means and power. Those teachers are like me. I see these things happen, but I only watch, I'm powerless. I can bring it up in my short stories, but in the end I have no control.

SU: The structure of 'Ballad of the Huang River' is unique and different from your other short stories. How did you come up with it?

JING: Authors of short stories are like tailors, sometimes we want to make one style of clothing, sometimes we want to make another style. So, the setting and language aren't the same for all the stories. For example, when I was writing 'Ballad of the Huang River', I was reading Mario Vargas Llosa's story *La casa verde*.<sup>8</sup> I enjoyed the story's structure, so I used it when writing 'Ballad'. There isn't any overlap between the two time periods. One sentence is talking about the present and the very next sentence immediately jumps to the past; the difference is huge. The idea for that leap between different times was from *La casa verde*. When I was reading *La casa verde*, I was so confused. I thought, "What's going on?" Slowly, I figured it out. He was actually not differentiating between the past and the present. He didn't explain it at all, just let the reader figure it out for themselves. But after you read it a few times, you realize that structure is really

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<sup>8</sup> 1966. Barcelona: Seix Barral.

interesting, so I used it. But at that time, I didn't think too much about including regional dialect. There is some Qinghai dialect and culture in there, but I didn't purposefully try to include regional culture. I did include how to make the coffin, how to bury the dead, how to pacify the spirits, village customs, things like that.

SU: Why do you like to include regional customs?

JING: Including regional customs portrays a character. I normally write my characters living inside a cultural environment, and in order to conform to this culture, they must make mental changes, or conflicts will arise between individuals, or maybe even a story will arise.

SU: Do you write stories because you want them to entertain people or do you think your stories should serve another purpose?

JING: There are basically three purposes. One purpose is that the reader should enjoy reading it, like watching a television series. People should want to pick it up, read it, and not put it back down. In order to do this, I pay attention to plot and language. Secondly, I don't simply write to entertain and make people happy. I also include my own thoughts; my opinions are all in there. It's just like if you buy a pack of cigarettes and I give you a lighter with it for free. Third, the stories should also serve to let the readers form their own opinions regarding the things I talk about. A good writer should be a good thinker. He has to have his own ideas, not just repeat what everyone else says. Whenever you get the ability to have your own independent ideas, then your work as a writer will have matured. Otherwise, the writer will just follow whatever somebody is saying today, and tomorrow will follow what somebody else is saying, and his fiction will never be successful.

SU: Do you think your short stories serve the purpose of maintaining Qinghai culture and bringing an understanding of it to a wider audience?

JING: People say that the world has turned into a global village these days. Information and news are spread very quickly, and in this way culture becomes more homogenized. Western and Eastern cultures interact more, and slowly, there won't be any more differences. What I'm thinking about now is that I can use my stories to preserve a picture of how life was for Qinghai people in the past – their daily lives, their culture, their traditions. A book is a durable, physical object that can be kept. Many years from now, people unfamiliar with the culture can see what it was like. Even now, some academics engaged in cultural studies, sociology, and other such fields can find interesting points for their research. Many cultural studies people have looked in my stories to find information on Qinghai people. I guess this is another purpose of my short stories, like 'Old Man Zhang' and others.

SU: What have you been reading and working on recently?

JING: I've been reading less literature. I'm working on writing two books. One is *The History of Hua'er*, which is a history of *hua'er* folk songs in Qinghai. The other book is *The Hua'er Dictionary*, which includes the vocabulary used in *hua'er* folk songs, mostly phrases from the Qinghai regional dialect. The dictionary gives the phrase and its meaning, how it's used in Qinghai *hua'er*, then gives an example of a *hua'er* that uses that phrase. This second book is already half done.

Originally, I wanted to write a short story about the relationship between multiple generations of Qinghai people and *hua'er*, but once I began researching *hua'er*, I couldn't write the story anymore. The story got overshadowed. After I finish researching, it'll probably be easier to write the story because I want to have a thorough understanding of these things. It's like if

you want to give someone a cup of water, you first have to have a bucket of water. Otherwise if they're still thirsty after you give them the cup, then you won't have any more to offer.

I'm also editing two journals. The first is *Qinghai Lake: Literary Perspectives*, which focuses on theory. The second is *Qinghai Hua'er*. I've also established a Qinghai *hua'er* researchers' conference. I'm the vice-chair, so I basically do all the work. We've organized a few events, and this way we've been able to dig up some things from remote villages. Now, we're thinking of classifying *hua'er* as a part of traditional Qinghai culture and disseminating it. I have too many of these research projects, so I don't have time to write stories anymore. It's good for me right now.

After I finish this research, it'll also help me write that short story because I'll have a thorough understanding of *hua'er* – its implications and origins, why there are Qinghai *hua'er*, how they relate to religion, their relationship with people, what they cannot be separated from, how they relate to marriage. I'll have a clearer understanding of these things. Originally, Qinghai *hua'er* weren't allowed to be sung in villages or homes because they express sexual desire. And the types of love and lust expressed aren't accepted. Historically, this happened because marriages in Qinghai were traditionally arranged by the parents. My daughter, your son. It wasn't the children dating and falling in love, it's the two of us deciding whether it's OK or not. The two might have never even met until the wedding day, even until they consummate the marriage.

Think about it, in that type of relationship, the wife immediately begins doing work in the house after she has a child. The husband and wife work entirely for their children and for their family. There isn't any love between them. At most, there's a type of familial relationship. We often say it's like 'the left hand holding the right hand,' meaning holding your wife's hand is like your left hand holding your right hand, there isn't any feeling. That's because they've already melded together. But they still need to

have a spiritual life, they need to have an extra-marital love life, and how do they do that? They go out. They both go out. They hide it from each other, but the husband, for example, knows that his wife definitely has a lover, while he also has a lover. This creates a kind of longing, the longing that occurs from not seeing one's lover often. Or perhaps when her husband is out on business, the wife is daydreaming at home, not thinking of her husband, but thinking of when her lover will come see her. Then she feels fulfilled. That way, she can continue to live and work in a difficult household. If she isn't spiritually fulfilled, then she feels like there's no point in living. This is what *hua'er* is about. It's about something that supplements marriage. That's my analysis of it anyway.

SU: Do you feel younger readers in China find these stories to be strange and unfamiliar?

JING: The younger generation can still understand 'Old Man Zhang'. There are still people like Old Man Zhang around, or there should be. In the countryside, traditional attitudes and ideas haven't changed much. On the outside, there have been many changes, but not in terms of ideas. Ideas aren't something you can suddenly wash your mind clean of and stuff something else in. Ideas are things that have been around for generations.

SU: Many Western readers do not understand the cultural background to these stories, such as the *hua'er* folk songs. How do you think a Western audience might respond to your short stories?

JING: I'd like to open a window in the West for them to understand some of the regional culture of Qinghai. I want them to feel like it's strange and unfamiliar so it will pique their curiosity.



## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Non-English terms that are used in the text are given in alphabetical order. Chinese terms are followed by Hanyu pinyin with tone marks and Chinese characters, and Tibetan terms are followed by Wylie transliteration and Tibetan script.

- Angsai Beach, Ángsàitān 昂赛滩  
Bao Nian, Bǎo Nián 宝年  
Beijing, Běijīng 北京  
Benben, bāngbāng \*\*  
Brother Tian *see Tian Laowu*  
Chahan Ridge, Cháhàn dàbǎn 察汉大坂  
Chuang Xingbao, Chuǎng Xìngbǎo 闯姓保  
Delingha, Délíng hā 德令哈  
Dongguan, Dōngguān 东关  
E'Bao Ridge, É'bǎoliáng 俄包梁  
Fenlan Fēnlán 芬兰  
Ga Jiu Er, Gǎ Jiǔ'ér 尕九儿  
Gan'gou, Gān'gōu 甘沟  
Gangu, Gāngǔ 甘谷  
Gelugpa, dge lugs pa དགེ་ལུགས་པ་  
Gesar, ge sar གེ་སར་  
Great Yu, Dà Yǔ 大禹  
Guangdong, Guǎngdōng 广东  
Guanyin Buddha, Guānyīn púsà 观音菩萨  
*Gubao de zhurenmen, Gǔbǎo de zhǔrénmén* 古堡的主人们  
Guo Galai, Guō Gǎlái 郭尕来  
Haixi Prefecture, Hǎixī zhōu 海西州  
Haixin Mountain, Hǎixīn shān 海心山  
Han Dynasty, Hàn cháo 汉朝  
*Han Hai Chao, Hàn Hǎi Cháo* 瀚海潮  
Han, Hàn 汉  
Hanyibula, Hányībùlā 韩乙不拉  
He Zhenlian, Hé Zhēnlián 何贞莲

Hejiatai, Hèjiātái 贺家台  
Henan *bangzi*, Hénán *bāngzi* 河南梆子  
Hongjin Rock, Hóngjīn tái 红金台  
Hougou, Hòu gōu 后沟  
*hua'er*, *huā'ér* 花儿  
Huang River, Huángshuǐ 湟水  
Huangshui yao, Huángshuǐ yáo 湟水谣  
Huangyuan, Huángyuán 湟源  
Huangzhong, Huángzhōng 湟中  
Jiahu, Jiāhǔ 家虎  
Jialong, Jiālóng 家龙  
Jihuanbao, Jīhuànbǎo 鸡换保  
Jin meng jie, Jīn mèng jié 金梦劫  
Jinfengdan chuanqi, Jīnfèngdàn chuánqí 金凤蛋传奇  
Jing Fengshan, Jǐng Fēngshān 景丰山  
Jing Shi, Jǐng Shí 井石  
*kang*, *kàng* 炕  
Kumbum, sku 'bum ལྷ་འབྲས  
*labazhou*, *làbāzhōu* 腊八粥  
Laiwazi Lái Wāzi 来娃子  
Lanzhou City, Lánzhōu shì 兰州市  
Li Family, Lǐ jiā 李家  
Li Shouye, Lǐ Shǒuyè 李守业  
*li*, *lǐ* 里  
Little Wang, Xiǎo Wáng 小王  
Liu Ersheng, Liú Ērshēng 刘尔生  
Liu Family, Liú jiā 刘家  
Liu Guangcai, Liú Guǎngcái 刘广才  
Liu Quanxi, Liú Quánxǐ 刘全喜  
Liu Shanren, Liú Shàn rén 刘善人  
Liuwan Village, Liǔwān dàzhuāng 柳湾大庄  
Ma Bufang, Mǎ Bùfāng 马步芳  
Ma Cunfu, Mǎ Cúnfú 马存福  
Maduo, Mǎduō 玛多  
Malian Gully, Mǎlián gōu 马莲沟



Mancang, Mǎncāng 满仓  
Maying, Mǎyíng 马营  
Mayor Zhang, Zhāng xiāngzhǎng 张乡长  
Meiyou xiewan de shiyanjilu, Méiyǒu xiěwán de shíyànjìlù 没有  
写完的实验记录  
Ming Dynasty, Míng cháo 明朝  
*mu, mǔ*, 亩  
Nalong, Nàlóng 纳隆  
Nanjing, Nánjīng 南京  
Nao Mountain, Nǎo shān 恼山  
Niangniang, Niángniáng 娘娘  
Old Man Lushan, Lùshān lǎohàn 禄山老汉  
Old Man Ma, Má Èryè 麻二爷  
Old Man Shanhu, Shānhǔ dà yè 山虎大爷  
Old Pi, Lǎo Pí 老皮  
Ox-head Meng, Mèng Niútóu 孟牛头  
Premier Zhou, Zhōu [Ēnlái] zǒnglǐ 周[恩来]总理  
Princess Wencheng, Wénchéng gōngzhǔ 文成公主  
Qing Dynasty, Qīng cháo 清朝  
*Qinghai hu, Qīnghǎi hú* 青海湖  
Qinghai, Qīnghǎi 青海  
Qinghai renmin chubanshe, Qīnghǎi rénmin chūbǎnshè 青海人民  
出版社  
Qu Yuan, Qū Yuán 屈原  
Saicuo Lake, Sàicuò hú 赛措湖  
Shanshenbao, Shānshénbǎo 山神保  
She Taijun, Shé Tàijūn 佘太君  
*shehuo, shèhuǒ* 社火  
Shouye see *Li Shouye*  
Sichuan, Sīchuān 四川  
*sileifenzi, silèifēnzi* 四类分子  
Sun Baye, Sūn Bāyè 孙八爷  
Sun Moon Mountains, Rìyuè shān 日月山  
Sun Shengnian, Sūn Shèngnián 孙胜年  
Sun Wukong, Sūn Wùkōng 孙悟空  
Tang Dynasty, Táng cháo 唐朝

Teacher Liu, Liú Lǎoshī 刘老师  
Teacher Wang, Wáng Lǎoshī 王老师  
Tian Laowu, Tián Lǎowǔ 田老五  
Tsongkhapa, tsong kha pa ཙམ་ཁ་པ་  
Wayao Gully, Wǎyáo gōu 瓦窑沟  
*Xi you ji, Xī yóu jì*, 西游记  
*Xiandai ren, Xiàndài rén* 现代人  
*xiangtu, xiāngtǔ* 乡土  
Xining, Xī níng 西宁  
Xinjiang, Xīnjiàng 新疆  
Yang Canglin Yáng Cānglín 杨苍林  
Ye Niu Valley, Yěniú gōu 野牛沟  
*yuan, yuán* 元  
Yufen, Yùfēn 玉芬  
Yushu, Yùshù 玉树  
Zaobaojie, Zàobǎojiě 灶保姐  
Zaojie Zàojiě 灶姐  
Zhang Baye Taojinji, Zhāng Bāyè Táojīnjì 张八爷淘金记  
Zhang Jikui, Zhāng Jíkúí 张吉奎  
Zhao Manku, Zhào Mǎnkù 赵满库  
Zhao Zhankui, Zhào Zhànkúí 赵占奎  
Zhaqu River, Zhāqū hé 扎曲河  
Zhejiang, Zhèjiāng 浙江  
Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, Zhōngguó wénlián chūbǎnshè 中国  
文联出版社  
*zhongpian xiaoshuo, zhōngpiān xiǎoshuō* 中篇小说  
*zongzi, zòngzi* 粽子