

During the Tang Dynasty, stories called *chuanqi* (Chinese for “transmission of the strange”) were popular among the educated classes. They frequently blended stories of the supernatural and strange with Buddhist or Taoist themes. Although not considered as elevated an art form as poetry or painting, they were written in the florid literary language of the time. This story takes place in the Tang capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an) and refers to Taoist potions for immortality, a common topic in Chinese folklore. Like nearly all *chuanqi*, it was written anonymously.

Du Zijun

Anonymous, 8th Century

Du Zijun lived, apparently, around the time of the Zhou and Sui dynasties. As a young man he was extravagant and unmindful of his patrimony. Being a man of free and easy spirit, he gave himself over to drinking and dissipation until he had squandered all his wealth. When he appealed to his relatives, they disowned him, one and all, as irresponsible.

Winter was coming on, his clothing was in rags, and his belly was empty. As he walked about Chang'an, the sun set and he still had had nothing to eat. He found himself at the west gate of the East Market, uncertain where to turn. His hunger and chill were obvious, and he looked up to heaven and sighed.

An old man there leaning on a staff asked him, “What are you sighing about, sir?”

Zijun said what was on his mind. As he grew eloquent over the shabby treatment he had received from his relatives, his indignation showed on his face.

“How many strings of cash would you need to feel well off?” the old man asked.

“With thirty or fifty thousand I could get along.”

“That's not enough.”

“A hundred thousand.”

“Still not enough.”

“A million.”

“Still not enough.”

“Three million.”

“That should do,” the old man said at last, and drew from his sleeve a single string of cash, saying, “This is for tonight. Tomorrow at noon be waiting for me at the Persian Hostel in the West Market. Don't be late!”

Zijun went at the appointed time, and the old man actually delivered the three million, leaving without telling his name.

Now that he was rich, Zijun's profligate nature flared up again; he was convinced that he would never again be a pauper. He rode sleek horses and dressed in light furs; he assembled drinking companions, hired musicians, singers, and dancers in the gay quarter with never a thought for the future. Within a year or two he had gradually exhausted his resources. Fine clothes and carriage were replaced by cheap ones, he surrendered his horse for a donkey, and then gave up the donkey and walked. In no time he was as destitute as before.

At his wit's end, he stood at the gate to the market, bemoaning his lot. As if in response to his sighs, the old man appeared. Seizing Zijun's hand, he exclaimed, “Amazing, that this should happen again! I will help you again—how much do you need?”

Zijun was too embarrassed to reply and, to the old man's urgings, he could only shake his head in shame.

“Come again at noon tomorrow, the same place,” the old man said.

Swallowing his shame, Zijun went, and was given ten million strings of cash. Before receiving them, he was filled with determination to invest his money wisely in the future, putting Shi Jilun and Yi Dun quite in the shade. But once the money came into his hands, his resolve grew unstable and his irresponsible character reasserted itself. Within a couple of years he was poorer than ever.

Again he ran into the old man in the same old place. Humiliated past endurance, he covered his face and fled. The old man seized the skirt of his robe and stopped him. “Too bad!” he said. “You have had bad luck.” And he offered him thirty million, with the warning, “If this does not cure you, poverty is in your blood.”

Zijun thought, “When I lost all I had through extravagance and dissipation, my relatives and high connections spared me not a glance. Yet this old man has come to my aid three times—how can I repay him?” And to the old man he said, “With what you have given me I can put my affairs in order. It enables me to provide for widows and orphans and restore my name as a man of honor. I am deeply touched by your great generosity, and when I have accomplished this task, I will be at your disposal.”

“It is what I had hoped. When you have taken care of your affairs, meet me next year on the fifteenth of the seventh month by the twin junipers at the Temple of Laozi.”

Reckoning that most widows and orphans of his clan were to be found in the area to the south of River Huai, he transferred his capital to Yangzhou, where he bought some fifteen hundred acres of good land. Within the city he built a large house, and on the main roads he erected over a hundred hostels, in which he lodged the widows and orphans of the whole region. He married off his nieces and nephews and had the unburied remains of his relatives moved to the clan cemetery. He requited those who

had been kind to him and avenged his wrongs. When this was all done, the date was approaching, and he went to the appointed place, where he found the old man whistling in the shade of the twin junipers.

Together they climbed the Cloud Terrace Peak in the Hua Mountains. When they had gone forty tricents or so, they came upon an imposing edifice, not the dwelling of any ordinary person. High overhead were colored clouds, and wary cranes were soaring about. The main hall stood out; inside was an alchemist's furnace over nine feet high emitting purple flames that lit up the door and windows.

Nine jade damsels stood around the furnace, which rested on a green dragon in front and a white tiger behind. Just before sunset the old man appeared, no longer in ordinary dress, but now wearing the yellow cap and red robe of a Taoist priest. In his hands he held three pills of hornblende and a cup of wine, which he gave to Zijun, instructing him to swallow them. Then he spread a tiger skin against the inner wall on the west side and seated him on it, facing east.

“Be careful not to speak,” he warned. “Though you see imposing spirits or fearful demons, or yakshas, or fierce wild beasts or hell itself—even though your dearest relatives are bound and tortured, none of it will be real. Through it all you must neither move nor speak; quiet your heart and fear not, and in the end you will suffer no harm. Just put your mind on what I have said.” And he went out.

Zijun looked around in the hall. There was only a large earthen jar filled to the brim with water, and nothing else. No sooner had the Taoist departed than the slopes of the hillside were covered with armed men carrying flags and banners, a thousand chariots, and ten thousand horsemen. The roar of their shouts shook heaven and earth. One of them they addressed as “Great General”; he was over ten feet tall, clad, as was his horse all in golden armor of a dazzling radiance. His bodyguard of several hundred men, all holding

swords or drawn bows, dashed into the hall shouting, “Who are you that dare face the Great General?”

On both sides they raised their swords and advanced, demanding to know Zijun's name and what sort of person he was, to which he made no response. Enraged, they made a great uproar as if they were about to slash him and shoot arrows into him, but he paid them no attention. The general left in a fury.

All at once there were all sorts of creatures—fierce tigers and poisonous dragons, griffins and lions, cobras and scorpions—roaring and snatching as they rushed forward to seize and bite, even leaping into the air over his head. Zijun remained unperturbed, and in a little while they were all gone.

Then a great rain fell in torrents, with thunder and lightning in the murky air, and fire wheels racing by to the left and the right, the lightning striking in front and behind, until he could not open his eyes. In a moment the water in the hall was over ten feet deep, lightning came in an unbroken stream, and the thunder roared, as though the very hills and rivers were split open. In no time the waves had reached the place where Zijun sat, but he did not budge at all and paid no attention to anything around him.

Before long, the general appeared again, leading a troop of ox-headed jailers and demons of extraordinary appearance. They carried a huge caldron which they placed in front of Zijun. They surrounded him on all sides with long, forked spears. He was given an ultimatum: if willing to tell his name, he would be set free; if not, he would be impaled through the heart and thrust into the boiling caldron. He made no response.

Next they brought in his wife and dragged her to the foot of the steps. Pointing to her, the general said, “Tell your name and we will let her go.”

When he did not respond, she was whipped until the blood flowed. They shot her with arrows, cut her with knives, poured boiling water on her, and seared her flesh with irons until she could not endure it and screamed and wept, "I am of no account, a disgrace to a gentleman like you. But I have after all had the good fortune to serve you more than ten years as your wife. Now I am tormented past endurance by these demons. I would never expect you to get down on your knees and beg favors of them, but all it would take to save my life is just one single word!" Her tears rained down as she alternately prayed and cursed.

When Zijun persisted in paying no attention, the general shouted, "You think we can't hurt your wife?" And he ordered them to bring the knife and block and slice her, inch by inch, beginning with her feet. She screamed and wept even more desperately, but to the end Zijun never once paid her the slightest attention.

The general then announced, "This villain has perfected his black magic and cannot be allowed on earth any longer." He ordered the attendants to behead him, and when it was done, they led his ghost before the Yama King, who said, "Is this the sorcerer of the Cloud Terrace Peak? Deliver him to the tortures of hell."

There he experienced in complete form all the tortures—swallowing molten bronze, being beaten with an iron cudgel, pounded in a mortar, ground in a mill, buried in a fiery pit, boiled in a caldron; he climbed the mountain of knives and the tree of swords. Through it all he remembered the Taoist master's injunction and it all seemed bearable, so never a sigh escaped him. The torturers reported that he had suffered all the punishments, and the Yama King said, "This man is a secret villain. It is not fitting that he should be reborn a man; we will have him born a daughter in the family of Wang Quan, the deputy magistrate of Shanfu county in Songzhou."

From birth the little girl was sickly, and hardly a day passed without acupuncture or moxa-burning or some nasty medicine. And she was always falling out of bed or into the

fire, but whatever the pain she never made a sound. Soon she was grown into an extraordinarily beautiful girl, but because she never spoke, she was thought by her family to be dumb. Her relatives would take liberties with her and offer her all sorts of insults, but she would not respond.

In the same town was a *jins*hi named Lu Guei who, hearing of her beauty, sought her through an intermediary for his wife. The family declined on the grounds that she was dumb, but Lu said, "If my wife is worthy, what need has she for speech? She will serve as a reproach to sharp-tongued women." They agreed to the match, and Lu married her as his wife, with all the six rites.

For several years their love was very deep. She bore him a son, who at two years was unusually bright and clever. His father held the child in his arms and talked to her, but she did not respond. He tried all sorts of ways to get her to talk, but never a word would she say. In a fury he exclaimed, "Minister Jia's wife despised her husband and would never smile, until he shot a pheasant, which made her feel better about him. I cannot do as well as he did, though I should think my accomplishments as a man of education were better than any mere archery. If you are not ever going to speak, what use to a man of honor is the child of a wife who despises him?"

And he took the child by its two feet and dashed its head against a stone, spattering blood for several paces around. In Zijun's heart love welled up, and for an instant he forgot his vow, inadvertently letting slip a sound of distress: "No—"

The sound was still in the air as he found himself sitting in his old place, the Taoist standing in front of him. It was just the beginning of the fifth watch. He saw the purple flames shoot up through the roof and all at once they were surrounded by a fire. Roof and walls were all in flames.

"You have failed me!" the Taoist said with a sigh.

He seized Zijun's hair and threw him in the water jar, and the flames subsided.

“My son, your heart was purged of joy and anger, grief and fear, loathing and desire,” the Taoist said to him. “It is only love that binds you still. If you had not uttered that cry, my elixir would have been ready, and you, too, could have become an immortal with me. It is hard, alas, to find someone with the capacity for immortality. I can smelt my elixir again, but your body must remain earthbound. Take heed!”

Pointing out the distant road back, he sent Zijun on his way. Zijun climbed up on the platform to look. The furnace split apart and inside was an iron rod thick as a man's forearm and several feet long. The Taoist had put off his robe and was cutting at the rod with a knife.

When Zijun got back home, he was filled with shame that he had forgotten his vow, and resolved to go back and try to make amends. He went to the Cloud Terrace Peak, but there was no sign of anyone, and he returned home again, sighing and chagrined.

Translated by: James R. Hightower.

Source: Anonymous. “Du Zijun.” Translated by Hightower, James. *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*. Mair, Victor, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.¹

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