

《黄庭坚：因风飞过蔷薇》

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Huang Tingjian: With the Wind It Glides Through the Roses

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Translated by Chu Qian (with permission from the Publisher)

Chapter 1

A Shepherd Boy

A man in his twenties, dressed in blue, lifted the curtain and exited the sedan. He bowed to the porters in thanks and began walking towards the riverbank.

It was springtime. Canola flowers dotted the banks with gold, and the blue tea tree glistened. A group of girls harvesting tea sang joyfully, their fingers dancing on the leaves in an effort to collect the best sprouts before Qingming to make tea. In this broad section of the river, the waters ran slowly. The man paused and took a deep breath of the refreshing spring air, saying, “Here I am in Shuangjing.” Not a tall man, he was dressed in clean cotton. There was a steadiness in his eyes. His face emitted a scholarly feel that made a few farmers in the nearby fields stop plowing. They looked in his way and thought, “He must be a literatus.”

On the dirt road, a chubby, six- or seven-year-old shepherd boy with a square face and big mouth approached the man, riding a giant ox. Holding a bamboo flute, he sang:

You ride your ox through the village and play your short flute heard over the hills.

How many of those chasing fame and fortune in Chang'an, exhaust all wits but lead a life lesser than yours?

The man stopped, giving the boy a curious look. “Kid, where are you from? What’s your name? Who taught you the song?”

The boy replied, “Nobody. I taught myself the song and the flute. If I may ask, mister, you doesn’t look like from here. Where do you come from and where do you go?”

Suddenly, the man was overwhelmed with joy. “Luzhi¹? Are you Luzhi? Haha, it seems I gave you the courtesy name Luzhi for a good reason. You are both simple (‘lu’) and upright (‘zhi’), soon to grow into a tall tree that will become the pillar of Huang family: straight against the wind in such a spring day.”

¹ Luzhi is Huang Tingjian’s courtesy name (zi), a respectful way to be addressed by fellow literati. He also had many art names (hao), including Shan’gu Ju-shi (Residents of the Valley) and Fuweng (Old River Man), as self-address or as pen names.

The boy jumped off the ox and made an obeisance with his hands cupped. “Pardon my rudeness, uncle. Mother had been restless since morning. She is anxiously waiting for you at home.”

It was the third year of Emperor Renzong of Song (1051) in Shuangjing Village, Fenning, Hongzhou (Xiushui County, Jiangxi Province)

Xiu River originates from Yellow Dragon Mountain, within Fenning’s jurisdiction. The current runs fast and zigzags, but upon passing Shuangjing, it opens up like the flat surface of a crescent-shaped mirror, glistening as it flows afar.

The boy lived in Shuangjing Village. The land on which his house sat was akin to a giant lounge chair: Hangshan Mountain to the north was like the backrest of the house; the east and west mounds were like its armrests. In front of the house, the pristine Xiu River ran deep. Because the water-facing residence was backed by a mountain, *fengshui* tellers regarded this property as a rare find.

The boy, now seven, was born in the fifth year of Emperor Renzong (1045). The man talking to him was Li Chang, his maternal uncle and the prefecture director of Jiangzhou (Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province). He was from Fenning Jianchang (Jianchang, Jiangxi Province), and his courtesy name was Gongze. Two years ago, Chang scored imperial scholarship and since then had been working in a locality not far from home.

The boy was called Huang Tingjian, or Shuye, a given name in his family pedigree. Luzhi was his courtesy name. The Huangs were a prominent scholar family. Tingjian’s father Huang Shu, courtesy name Yafu, became an imperial scholar in 1042. For years Shu had been an itinerant advisor to jurisdictions like Chang’an, Fengxiang and Yingchang (Xuchang). Last year he resigned and returned to his birthplace. Now a letter had arrived from Yingchang Wen Yanbo, offering him an advisory position. Shu was going to leave in a few days. Because Tingjian had left home with his father at the age of two or three, he didn’t recognize his uncle.

Handing the ox to a servant, Tingjian took Chang inside. As he bounded into the living room, he said to his mother Mrs. Li, “Look who’s here?”

The sight of her brother sent Mrs. Li speechless. She wiped off her tears with a handkerchief, her voice cracking as she said, “My younger brother, it has been five years since we parted.”

Chang smiled and replied, “Sister, don’t be sad. Look at how tall my nephew is. You should rejoice instead.”

The Huang family lived in a modest, clean house that suggested that the master of the household was no distinguished politician. As a matter of fact, the family hadn’t grown richer since Shu passed the imperial exam. They lived on a baseline income and couldn’t even be considered middle-class.

As the adult siblings sat down to chat, Tingjian stood next to them with a smile.

Chang said to his older sister, “Sister, you just passed 30. Why the white hair?”

Mrs. Li sighed, “Two years ago, I gave birth to Shuxian. Last month, Shuda was born. Over 20 people in the entire family count on me to make it run. My hair turned white, but I am more pensive inside.”

Chang said, “You are a lucky woman. Don’t worry. Today I had a taste of Tingjian’s scholarship. You should be glad.”

He turned to Tingjian and said, “What you just sang isn’t the work of a child.”

Mrs. Li replied, “Tingjian has always been hardworking. In fact, Shu just praised him a few days ago. But when it comes to scholarship, I don’t think anybody is on par with you, my younger brother. I would be satisfied if Tingjian learned a bit from you.”

Respectfully, Tingjian bowed and inquired, “Uncle, I want your advice on something I read last night.”

He then spoke in high volume, “It’s about a story in *A New Account of Tales of the World*. ‘In the beginning, Xie An’s ambition was to be an hermit in the mountain, but after the court’s order came several times, he could no longer stay free, so he became General Huan Wen’s military advisor. At the time Huan received a ration of medicinal herbs; among them was one called Ambition. Huan took it and asked Xie An, ‘This herb is also regarded as “tiny grass”. Why are there two names for one herb?’ Xie An didn’t answer immediately. While military advisor Hao Long was present, he replied instead, ‘That’s easy. Staying in the mountain is Ambition; coming out of it is tiny grass.’ Xie An appeared embarrassed. Glancing at Xie An, Huan laughed, ‘Advisor Hao didn’t mean badly. It made sense.’ Uncle, what does it mean? I can’t figure it out; I haven’t asked Father.’”

Chang replied, “Xie An lived thirty years in recluse on the mountains. Finally as he returned to politics by becoming Huan’s advisor, people derided him by alluding to the medicinal herb ‘Ambition’, also known as ‘tiny grass.’ Unable to stick to his ambition of a frugal and eccentric life, he reverted back to chasing worldly affairs, thus, becoming the deplorable grass. As Du Fu wrote in *The Beauty*, ‘inside the mountains the spring water is pristine; out of the mountains it is defiled,’ which also refers to this story. Du Fu never made up phrases. As your father is mindful of this, so should you.”

Tingjian nodded with respect.

At this moment, the maid rushed out, crying, “Madam, baby Shuda has soiled his pants!”

² The book contains over 1,000 historical anecdotes about Chinese scholars and artists in the Han and Wei-Jin periods.