

Traces of Wenzhou: A Translation of Zhu Ziqing's “Wenzhou de zongji”温州的踪影 (1924)

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I. Hazy Moon, Drowsy Birds, The Lifted Curtain Reveals Red Crabapple Blossoms

This is a small painting about a foot wide, by Ma Mengrong. On the top left corner, there is a slanted green curtain, thin and long; it is about a third of the painting's height, and two thirds its length. At the center of the curtain, there is a yellow, teapot-shaped hook—is this what they call a ‘golden hook’? From the curve of the hook hangs a pair of tassels, azure in color; their silk threads are in slight disarray, as if moving left and right in the gentle breeze. On the right there is a full moon, its pale blue light suffusing the entire painting; the purity of the moon, soft and gentle, is that of the face of a sleeping beauty. On the top of the curtain slanted towards the right is a branch of intertwining crabapple blossoms. The flowers are at varying heights, clustered in five clumps of differing sizes; whether sparse or lush, the flowers are all exquisite. From the green of the tender leaves it seems as if one might draw moisture with a single pinch; under the moonlight's embellishment, the overlapping leaves faintly reveal a patchwork of light and shade. The flowers in full bloom are a vibrant red on the cusp of flowing; the yellow stamens are distinct, glistening—highlighted against the green foliage, they have a special delicate beauty. The angled branch is alive with movement, resembling the arm of a young girl. On the branch there rests a pair of black mynah birds, their backs to the moonlight, facing the curtain. One is perched a little higher, its tiny eyes half-opened and half-closed, as if just before falling into a dream, he still wishes to linger in longing. The lower one faces the higher one and has already drawn in his neck, fast asleep. Below the curtain is emptiness—not a single mark or trace.

One might think, that on such a hazy full moon night, with the crabapple blossoms so beautiful and mesmerizing; why do the lovely birds on the branch perch in a pair but dream independently? In the stillness of the late night, why

does that higher mynah still endeavor to prop up his eyelids, refusing to fall asleep? Just what is he waiting for? Is he reluctant to leave the pale moon? Reluctant to leave the distant curtain? No, no, no, you have to look below the curtain, you have to look to the middle of the curtain—have you found the person who rolls the curtain? He is charming and refined; so this is why! It is not only the half-hidden moon; not only the bird? But this person, so close yet seeming so far away, how can I endure it? I use all my might to call out repeatedly: can you come out?

This painting is so elegant, with such gentle and lively coloring, its significance exceptionally moving; though the painting seems a trifle, it has a charm so profound, so deep it moves one to the bone and more. I looked at this painting in surprised awe; I kept looking at it, reluctant to leave, unable to control myself. So I wrote all the details of my feelings and impressions, to record this predestined encounter. But I am an amateur with both western and eastern paintings, so whatever I say would naturally be a joke to the experts—I can only let it be.

II. Green

The second time I visited Xianyan, I was amazed by Meiyu Pool's Green.

Meiyu Pool lies beneath a waterfall. Xianyan has three waterfalls, Meiyu Waterfall being the lowest. Walking to the edge of the mountain, one can hear a “hua hua hua hua!” sound; bordered by two damp strips of black, a white stream of shining water appears before one's raised eyes. We first went to the Meiyu Pavilion. Meiyu Pavilion is opposite that very waterfall; sitting by the pavilion, without looking up, one can see the entirety of it. Deep below the pavilion is Meiyu Pool. A side of the pavilion sticks out from atop the rock, with nothing above or beneath it; it resembles a goshawk that has spread its wings, floating in the sky. Surrounded by mountains, the pavilion, as far as we can see, seems to be embraced by a semicircle; it is as if one is at the bottom of a well. The autumn weather is slightly overcast. Faint clouds flow above us; the wet rocky surface and moist grass patches reveal a trace of lush green. Even the waterfall seems to be especially loud. The waterfall rushes down from above, like silk threads of varying thicknesses being pulled; it is no longer a neat and smooth cloth². On top of the rock there are many jutting

¹ “Hua^叫” is an onomatopoeia indicating rushing/gushing water. However, Zhu Ziqing uses the character “花 [flower]” that has the same pronunciation as emphasis to his comparison between the waterfall and various blossoms.

² The second character of “瀑布 [waterfall]” is “cloth” and Zhu Ziqing juxtaposes both seamlessly.

angles; when the waterfall passes over them it crashes down furiously; flowers in the wind scattering like jade pieces shattering, splashing chaotically. The splattering drops sparkle in abundance; from afar, they look like many small white plum blossoms, falling down plentifully like light rain. It is said that Meiyu Pool gets its name from this “plum rain.” But I think poplar blossoms create a more precise image. When the breeze blows, the light rain dances in the wind—like the poplar blossoms. —At this point, this scene came to us as an inadvertent gift, and as we embraced it, it pierced our breasts instantly and disappeared, untraceable.

Meiyu Pool’s bright Green attracts us; we start attempting to chase after her to catch her admirable light, now dispersing, now condensing. We tug on grass, climb jagged rocks, and carefully lean forward to bow under a stone arch, arriving at Green’s³ vast poolside. The waterfall, like cloth, lies between the sleeve and lapel⁴; but my heart no longer contains the waterfall. My heart is swayed by the Green of the pool water. That intoxicating Green, as if covered by an enormous lotus leaf, that full, mystic Green. I want to spread both arms and embrace her; but that is such a vain hope.

—Standing by the water, I look at the other side—it is actually quite far away! This thick, spreading Green is especially lovely. Her loose creased pattern is like a young married maiden’s skirt; her surface gently throbs with the beating heart of a virgin’s first love; she is smooth and shining, as if she had applied “illuminating oil,” displaying the suppleness and delicateness of an egg white—it reminds one of the tenderest skin one has ever touched; she embodies no dirt or dust, like a smooth piece of jade, there is only the presence of a clear color—but you cannot see through her! I have seen in Beijing, Shi Sha Hai Temple’s willow trees brushing the ground; their leaves cannot rid their tips of a faint yellow that renders the scene lackluster. I have also seen in Hangzhou, Hu Pao Temple’s nearby steep and deep “green wall”; it has an infinite overlapping of green grass and leaves that seems too thick and dense. As for the rest of those scenic areas, West Lake is too bright and Qinhuai river is too dark. Dearest, what should I compare to you? How can I compare anything to you? The pool is presumably deep so as to conceal such an amazing Green; it is as if a slice of the bright blue sky has melted into the

³ The character here, “碧,” when used as a noun indicates jade. However, as Zhu Ziqing refers to Meiyu pool as Green, “绿,” throughout the rest of the text, I have decided to retain its consistency here.

⁴ Here, Zhu Ziqing alludes to two previous images: the waterfall resting between the two black strips, which are now replaced by the sleeve and lapel; and the notion that the waterfall is no longer a smooth piece of cloth lying between the sleeve and lapel as the falling water resembles silk threads of varying thicknesses being pulled.

pool⁵—so fresh and rich it is. —That intoxicating Green! If I could cut you into a ribbon, I would bestow it upon the lithe dancing girl; she will then be able to move with the wind. If I could scoop you up as eyes, I would bestow them upon the delightful singing blind girl; she will then have a beautiful, shining gaze. I cannot bear to leave you; how could I bear to leave you? I use my hand to lightly pat you, stroke you, as if you're a twenty-two, twenty-three-year-old lass. By cupping you into my mouth, I have kissed her. I will give you a name; from now on I will call you “Beauty Green,” all right?

The second time I visited Xianyan, I could not help but be amazed by Meiyu Pool's Green.

III. Bai Shui Ji

A few friends and I visited Bai Shui Ji.

This is also a waterfall, but it is too thin and narrow. Occasionally, it shines momentarily with white light; but when you try to look at it closely, it is not there—what remains is a strip of evaporating mist. In the past, they had mentioned a “mist-like veil,” presumably referring to something of this kind. So, the waterfall looks like this because there is a section missing in the middle of the rock; when the water passes across this area, there is no support and it falls freely downwards, pulled into a thin and narrow form. At the gap in the rock, the waterfall is truly miraculous. White light turns into an evaporating mist, resembling an indistinct shadow; sometimes even this shadow cannot be seen. Sometimes a breeze comes by, using her hands to pull on that shadow, and the mist curls upwards into a soft arc; but once her hands let go, it becomes like a rubber band, immediately drawing back obediently. I suspect, that there may be another pair of deft unknown hands that want to weave this shadow into an illusory web. —The breeze wants to take the water from her hands, but how could she be willing?

Perhaps seduction is woven into this illusory web; my reluctance to leave is compelling evidence.

IV. The Price of Life—Seventy Cents

Life should not have a price; but yet it has one! Traffickers, pimps and, more recently, kidnapping bandits put varying prices on all their goods to sell to others; I think that in the future, there will be public human markets.

⁵ There are two possible explanations for the odd description of blue in a green pool. One is due to the pool's being deep, enabling its surface to display a reflection of the sky, making it seem blue in particular areas. The second concerns the ancient word “青” [qing] that can mean blue, green or black depending on context; there is a saying “青出于蓝” that literally means that blue has its roots in green and the green here contains a hint of blue. The words “绿” (title) and “蓝,” [green] and [blue], are modern words.

Among the various “human goods,” the ones that have always fetched the highest price naturally belong to the bandits, ranging from a few thousand to the tens of thousands yuan; since the beginning of history, these kidnapped victims probably fetched the highest quotations for “human goods.” As for the prostitutes owned by the pimps, they are often heard to range from the hundreds to the thousands of yuan. The cheapest ones are the goods of the human traffickers. All they have are small children—”premature goods” that cannot afford to be sold at a higher price.

The human traffickers are just the middle men; they still have to collect their “merchandise” from the “factory” and then sell it off. The “factory’s” pricing is the genuine one! *Qing Guang*⁶ previously published a record of a girl that was bought for three dollars; it was a transfer of possession, but the low price is enough to surprise anyone. A “factory’s” price can still be lower. In any case, three hundred, five hundred yuan to buy a child—during a famine that is not a hard thing to do. But I have never seen it. The cheapest life that I ever personally saw sold was one for seventy cents! It was a five-year-old girl. A five-year-old *girl* sold for seventy cents; perhaps that cannot be counted as the cheapest. But please look carefully; to place the freedom of a life and seven small pieces of silver on the opposite plates of a scale, you will realize that it is exactly the same as comparing nine cows to a single strand of cow’s hair—the difference in the weight of both plates is too vast!

I saw this girl at my landlord’s house. At that time, I happened to be eating dinner with my children; my wife came and called me to look at a surprising matter: a child that was bought for seventy cents! The child was sitting upright on a bench; her face yellowish black, but plump and smooth skinned; her clothes were also neat and tidy. I took a few glances and felt that there were no significant differences between my children and her; I could not see any symbol that represented the low price of her life—for when we look at a cheaply priced item such a symbol is easy to find. I returned to my dining table, looked at Ah Jiu and Ah Cai, all along thinking that between them and the girl, there was no difference at all. But, I finally realized the truth. Our children are precious precisely because we have never sold them; meanwhile, that girl is cheap precisely because she is being sold; this is why she was only seventy cents! Ah, what a clever truth!

My wife told me that this child does not have parents; her older brother’s wife sold her to the assistant of the silversmith shop, which belongs to the patriarch of the landlord’s household, and this assistant is the one who

⁶ 《青光》[Qing Guang] is a supplementary journal published by the then newspaper of Shanghai, 《时事新报》[Shishi Xinbao], that ran from 1911-1949 under various starting names.

eats with her⁷. He seems to have no wife, appears to be in a poor financial situation, and likes to drink wine—what a muddle-headed man! I think, if this child’s parents were still alive, they would perhaps be unwilling to sell her—at the very least they would wait a few years; after all, she is but a pitiful little lamb. In her sister-in-law’s hands, the circumstances are different. The house is never well off; with another mouth to feed, additional spending on cloth for clothes—these extra costs are obvious. When the girl becomes an adult, it will naturally be difficult for her sister-in-law to sell her; she may even need to compensate the recipient in order to send her away⁸. What injustice! Why not take advantage of her youth when no one is paying attention and do oneself a favor by completely giving her away! Think about it: Wenzhou is not an impoverished place and has not encountered any years of famine for a long time; why, for only seventy cents, would someone willingly give their husband’s young sister to someone else? Say you need money? No one believes it! Seventy cents cannot be an emergency! It is not as if Wenzhou has a lack of buyers. Both parties probably already knew: that side wants a child to play with, this side is also happy to sell her off, so they, in half-giving and half-selling, vaguely decide on a trade. I guess that at this point, the shop assistant dug into his pocket and quickly pulled out what he had—only seventy cents. The older brother was initially not expecting this amount of money, so he generously accepted it to complete the trade. As a result, the goods and money were exchanged, and the girl is now under the shop assistant’s management.

The future of this trade lies in the hands of fate; the girl’s original surname is “Peng⁹,” so the rest of her life depends on trying her luck! But we know fate will not be kind to her. The first act of her play has already been shown to us. As my wife said, that shop assistant cannot be so patient as to raise her into an adult. He will feed her like a little pig and wait till she is strong and fat, then sell her to the butcher for him to slaughter as he wishes; during this time, for him to gain a dislike for the girl is to be expected. But who will be the butcher? When she is sold as a maidservant, the master will be the butcher! Like a shearer clipping wool off a sheep, a “benevolent” master will only exploit her by having her perform appropriate labor. When she reaches a suitable age, the master will betroth her to someone else. If this happens, even though she is trapped in the role of a maidservant, it will still be considered

⁷ The phrase “带着她吃饭的人,” literally “the person who brings her to eat”, is an odd phrase indicating that the shop assistant is now raising and feeding her.

⁸ To “送出去” [send (the girl) away] could imply two possibilities: one is for someone else to take care of her when she’s older, hence the need to compensate their expenses; the other is to marry her off to another family, which also involves dowry.

⁹ The character here is “碰”, which often alludes to the phrase “碰运气 [to try one’s luck].”

a fortunate event within the tragedy. But at present, in this money-driven world, such generous people are few; what we see is: for every ten people, six or seven are despicable! If she is sold into the hands of such people, they will exploit her, expecting labor that is beyond her capacity. When their demands are not met, they will scold and beat her. When she becomes mature, it will be unfortunate for her to be sold as a concubine; the usual exploitations are not enough, they still have to add on more. Unluckily, this child's looks are not too good, so after entering her married family, she will not gain her husband's grace and will easily incur the abuse of her husband's first wife—all of this is apparent. Her entire life will be wasted in tears. There are also some masters who keep maidservants as their own concubines; but when a young girl is with an old man, her future is forsaken in vain. A comparison between the two—life under one master and life under the other—would only be the difference between fifty and a hundred steps! —A more dangerous circumstance is being sold into a brothel by the shop assistant; the pimp will strike fear and terror in our hearts! We can imagine: how she will be forced to learn to sing and play an instrument, how she will be dispatched to suffer heavy manual labor¹⁰; how she will be hit by canes and pricked by needles¹¹; how she will be supervised to gain the favor of customers with her forced smiles; how she will eat cold leftovers; how she will endure not sleeping; how she will eventually end up with a body covered in poisonous sores¹². Her looks will only allow her to be a lesser prostitute; her fall into prostitution will be permanent! Her tragedy is also permanent! —Ah! Seventy-cents has bought your entire life—your flesh and blood is not even worth a trifling seven pieces of silver? Life is too cheap! Life is too cheap!

Thinking about the lives of my own children, I actually feel a little afraid. Every day that the “life market” in this money-driven world continues to exist, it is a danger to our children. A humiliation to our children. Those of you with children, consider this: whose fault is this? Whose responsibility is this?

¹⁰ Because she is still a young girl, she cannot be a prostitute yet and is thus reduced to heavy manual labor.

¹¹ It was a common tactic in the 1920s-30s to use needles to inflict pain on prostitutes as they do not leave scars or marks.

¹² These sores could be referring to a mixture of diseases and illnesses that come with the job as they are not particular to any sicknesses.