The Lake That Fell From Heaven

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A wide quiet landscape of southern Chinese water country seen from a low hill at dawn: flooded rice fields, a canal with one black-awninged boat, a stone arch bridge, mulberry trees, and layered misty hills receding into pale distance. No figures close to the viewer

THE LAKE THAT FELL FROM HEAVEN

FIFTEEN FOLK TALES FROM ZHEJIANG

Retold, with notes on the places they belong to

MALINA REED

The Lake That Fell From Heaven: Fifteen Folk Tales from Zhejiang

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A Note Before the Stories

Zhejiang is a small province on China's eastern coast, roughly the size of Ireland, folded between the East China Sea and a wall of green mountains. Water is the whole argument of the place. Rivers come down off the hills in a hurry, slow into canals, and end in a coastline so ragged it carries more than three thousand islands. Rice grows on the flat land. Tea grows on the slopes. Silk came from the mulberry country in the north, celadon from the kiln towns in the south, and salt and fish from everywhere the sea could reach.

People have been telling stories here for a very long time.

The fifteen tales in this book were collected, told, retold, argued over, and quietly improved by farmers, boatmen, tea pickers, silk women, monks, and grandmothers, over something like two thousand years. Most of them are attached to a specific rock, well, hill, or bend in a river that you can still walk to. That is the particular pleasure of Zhejiang folklore: it is not set in a vague once-upon-a-time kingdom. It is set *there*, at that pagoda, by that bridge, and the local people will point.

I have retold these stories rather than translated them. Folk tales do not have an authoritative version; they have a hundred cousins. A story told in a Shaoxing wine shop and the same story told to children in a Hangzhou courtyard will disagree about names, motives, and endings, and both tellers will be certain. Where versions differ, I have chosen the one that seemed to me the most alive, and I have said so in the notes.

At the end of each tale there is a short section called **Where this story lives**. It tells you the real place the story is pinned to, and what is there now. Some of these places are famous enough to have ticket booths. Some are a stone in a field. All of them are real.

A few small things that will help.

Names. Chinese names put the family name first. Liang Shanbo's family name is Liang. Where a name has a meaning that matters to the story, I have given it in the text.

Pronunciation. *Q* is roughly *ch* (Qiantang is *chyen-tahng*). *X* is roughly *sh* (Xi Shi is *shee shr*). *Zh* is roughly *j* (Zhejiang is *juh-jyang*). Nobody will mind if you get it wrong.

Money, distance, and rank have been converted to things a modern reader can feel. A *li* is about half a kilometer. An official's title has usually become "the magistrate" or "the governor," because the exact rung of the imperial ladder is rarely the point.

Dragons in these stories are not the dragons of European folklore. They do not hoard gold and they are not, as a rule, evil. They are weather. They live in rivers, wells, and the sea, they are responsible for rain, and they can be reasoned with, tricked, or offended, sometimes all three.

That is everything. The stories can take it from here.

The Province, Briefly

If you want to hold the map in your head while you read, this is the shape of it.

Hangzhou, in the north, sits at the head of a bay where the tide comes in as a wall of water. West Lake is here, and so are five of these stories. It was the capital of China for a century and a half, and it has never entirely stopped behaving like one.

Shaoxing, an hour east, is canal country: black-awninged boats, stone bridges, and the best rice wine in China. It is old even by Chinese standards. Yu the Great is buried here, or so the town insists.

Ningbo faces the sea and has been a port for a thousand years. Beyond it, out in the water, are the Zhoushan islands, and among them the pilgrimage island of Putuo.

Jiaxing and Huzhou, in the flat north, are the silk country — mulberry trees, canals, and the goddess of silkworms.

Jinhua and Quzhou, inland to the west, are hill towns, ham, and a mountain where the immortals play chess.

Lishui and Longquan, in the far southwest, are the deepest mountains in the province. Swords were forged here and celadon was fired here, and both of those crafts have a story in this book.

Wenzhou and Taizhou, down the coast, are rock and sea and the strange volcanic spires of the Yandang range.

Fifteen stories, eight of those regions. It is not a complete map. It is a good walk.

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1. The Lake That Fell From Heaven

The making of West Lake — Hangzhou

A single luminous white pearl resting in one curved dragon claw

Long before there were cities, there was a river in the sky. People on earth called it the Silver River, and on clear autumn nights you can still see it, spilling from one horizon to the other.

On the near bank of that river, in a cave of black stone, lived a jade dragon. On the far bank, in a tree that flowered without ever fruiting, lived a golden phoenix. They had been neighbors for so long that neither could remember arriving.

One morning the dragon was turning over stones in the shallows, the way dragons do when they are bored, and he found a rough white pebble the size of a fist. It was not much to look at. But when he tilted it, something inside it caught the light and held it a moment too long.

He called the phoenix over. She looked at it for a while with one eye and then the other, which is how phoenixes think.

“There is something in there,” she said.

So they began to work.

The dragon had claws that could split rock, and he used them the way a mason uses a chisel, taking the stone down a hair at a time. The phoenix had a beak fine enough to pick a single seed out of gravel, and she polished where he had cut. They fetched dew from the Jade Fountain to keep the stone cool. They worked through the long dry seasons and through the floods. They did not hurry, because they had nothing to hurry toward.

It took them, by the reckoning of the stories, three hundred and sixty years.

What they made at the end of it was a pearl the size of a goose egg, so bright that when the dragon held it up, the far bank of the Silver River lit as though the sun had come out at midnight. And the light was not ordinary light. Wherever it fell, things grew. Dead grass came back green. Bare branches put out leaves. A stretch of the riverbank that had been nothing but gravel for a thousand years came up in wildflowers, all at once, in the middle of the night.

The dragon and the phoenix were pleased with themselves in the quiet way of people who have finished a long job. They took turns holding the pearl. They did not think to hide it.

Light travels, though. And heaven is full of eyes.

The Queen Mother of the West kept a palace on the highest terrace of the sky, and she kept in it every beautiful thing she had ever heard of. Her collection was famous. It was, in fact, the only thing about her that was famous. One of her attendants, sweeping a balcony at the wrong hour, saw a glow coming off the Silver River where no glow should be, and reported it.

The Queen Mother went and looked. Then she sent guards.

They came down while the dragon slept in his cave and the phoenix slept in her tree, and they were careful, and they were quick, and when the two of them woke the pearl was gone and the riverbank was dark.

They searched. They searched the water and the reeds and the sky above the reeds. They asked every star they passed. For a long time nobody would tell them anything, because everyone in heaven knew where it had gone and nobody wanted to be the one who said so.

At last an old crane, who was too near the end of her life to be frightened of much, told them.

The Queen Mother's birthday came around. She had planned a banquet, and at the banquet she planned to display the pearl, because a treasure nobody has seen is only an expense. The immortals arrived in their hundreds. The pearl was set on a stand of white jade in the middle of the terrace, and the guests made the sounds guests make, and the Queen Mother sat back and enjoyed the noise.

Then the doors came off their hinges.

The dragon came through first, and the phoenix came in over the roof, and there was a silence on that terrace of a kind the Queen Mother had never heard in her own house.

"That is ours," the dragon said. "We made it. Give it back."

The pearl going over the edge of a cloud terrace and falling through the sky, the jade dragon and the golden phoenix diving headlong after it, immortals crowding a railing above to watch

The Queen Mother had been a very long time at the top of the sky, and she had never once had to answer a question like that. She said what people in her position always say. She said that everything in heaven was hers by right, that the pearl had been found by her servants, and that they should be grateful she had given it a proper setting.

The dragon reached for it. The guards took hold of him. The phoenix came down among the guards. The Queen Mother, seeing the thing slipping, put her own hands on the pearl and pulled it toward her.

And the pearl, which had been passed between four hands and held by none of them, went over the edge of the terrace.

It fell a long way.

The dragon dived after it and the phoenix dived after the dragon, and the three of them came down through the cloud

floor together, and everyone at the banquet ran to the railing to watch, including the Queen Mother, whose hands were empty.

The pearl struck the earth in the low green country south of the great river. Where it landed it did not shatter and it did not bury itself. It spread. It became water — clear, still, and shaped like nothing in particular, holding the sky on its surface the way the pearl had held the light.

That is West Lake.

The dragon and the phoenix came down on either side of it and could not bring themselves to leave. They lay down. They have not got up since. The hill on the south shore, long-backed and green, is the jade dragon; people call it Jade Emperor Hill now, but that is a later name and the dragon does not answer to it. The hill beside it, with the two spurs that lift like folded wings, is the phoenix.

They are still there. They still watch the water.

And the old people of Hangzhou will tell you that this is why the land around the lake is the way it is — why the tea grows fat on those slopes, why the mulberries come in heavy, why a stick pushed into that soil has a nuisance-making habit of putting out leaves. The light is still in the water. It has simply gone into everything.

Where this story lives

West Lake sits on the western edge of Hangzhou, about an hour from Shanghai by fast train. It is a genuine lake, about six kilometers around, ringed by causeways, and it has been landscaped, drained, dredged, and argued over for more than a thousand years — which is its own kind of proof that people have always thought it was worth the trouble.

Jade Emperor Hill (Yuhuang Shan) and **Phoenix Hill** (Fenghuang Shan) both stand on the south side of the lake, between the water and the Qiantang River. You can walk up either of them in under an hour. From

the top of Yuhuang Shan on a clear day you get the lake on one side and the river on the other, and the shape the story is describing becomes fairly hard to argue with.

A note on the telling. This is the oldest and most widely told of the West Lake origin stories, and it exists in dozens of versions. In some, the pearl is stolen by the Jade Emperor rather than the Queen Mother. In others the two lovers are punished and turned into the hills deliberately, rather than choosing to stay. I have kept the version where they choose, because every teller I have read who was actually from Hangzhou seems to prefer it.

A single ring of ripple spreading on still water

2. The White Snake

Broken Bridge and Leifeng Pagoda — Hangzhou

A half-open oiled-paper umbrella, seen from the side, with rain streaks

A white snake lived on a mountain in the west and spent eighteen hundred years learning to be good.

This is harder than it sounds. The rule, as the old books have it, is that any creature may work its way up toward becoming an immortal, but it must do so honestly — by discipline, by patience, and by not eating anything with a family. The white snake kept the rule. She swallowed mist instead of mice. She sat still through winters. And after eighteen centuries she had earned the right to take a woman's shape, which she did, and she called herself Bai Suzhen.

She had a companion, a green snake, younger and quicker and considerably less patient, who took the name Xiaoqing. Xiaoqing had not put in eighteen hundred years of anything. She had simply attached herself to Bai Suzhen and refused to be shaken off, which is a discipline of its own.

They came down to Hangzhou in the third month, because Bai Suzhen wanted to see what the world had been doing while she sat on a mountain.

It was raining.

On the causeway that crosses the north end of West Lake there is a bridge called the Broken Bridge, which is not broken. It got the name because in winter the snow melts off its southern face first, so that from a distance the white arch seems to stop halfway. On that bridge, in the rain, a young man was standing with an umbrella and no particular plan.

His name was Xu Xian. He worked in a medicine shop. He was not clever, he was not rich, and he was not going to be either of those things, but he had the specific decency of a man who notices that two women are getting wet and does something about it.

He gave them the umbrella. He walked home in the rain himself.

Bai Suzhen returned it the next day, and then there was a reason to return something else, and inside a season they were married. They moved south to Zhenjiang and opened an apothecary, and here the story does something that folk tales rarely bother with: it shows them being happy for a while, and being good at their work.

Bai Suzhen knew medicine. She knew it the way something that has lived eighteen hundred years in a forest knows it — which roots to dig in which month, what to do for a fever that will not break, which of the things a frightened patient tells you are true. When plague came through the town she treated the people who could not pay, and she treated them first. The shop grew. Xu Xian counted the money and was quietly amazed by his life.

It might have gone on like that. It nearly did.

The trouble came from a monk.

Fahai was the abbot of the Golden Mountain Temple, and he was not a fool and not a hypocrite, which is what makes him difficult. He was a man who believed one thing completely: that the order of the world had categories in it, and that a snake belonged in the snake category no matter how many centuries it had spent being kind. He looked at the apothecary in Zhenjiang and he did not see a good marriage. He saw a boundary being crossed, and he set himself to close it.

He went to Xu Xian first.

“Your wife,” he said, “is not a woman.”

Xu Xian, who was not clever, laughed at him.

So Fahai told him what to do at the Dragon Boat Festival, when the fifth month comes in and every household drinks realgar wine to drive off snakes and insects and bad air. He told him to make sure his wife drank a cup.

And Xu Xian — and this is the part of the story that gets argued about in Hangzhou tea houses to this day — went home and poured the wine.

Not because he believed the monk. He would say afterward, and probably honestly, that he poured it to prove the monk wrong. But he poured it.

Bai Suzhen knew what it would do. She could have refused. Refusing would have been an answer too, and she did not want to give that answer. So she drank it, and asked to lie down, and told him not to come in.

He came in.

What he saw in that room stopped his heart, straightforwardly and medically. He was dead on the floor when she came back to herself.

What follows is the part that convinced generations of people that this was not a story about a monster.

A woman in white fighting a white crane and a spotted deer in a walled garden of immortals at night, reaching for a single glowing herb; she is wounded and does not stop

Bai Suzhen got up, and went to Mount Emei, and stole the herb of immortality out of the garden of the gods. She fought the crane and the deer that guard it. She was not a fighter and they very nearly killed her, and she took the herb anyway, and brought it back, and put it in his mouth.

He woke up.

And he stayed. That is the other thing people forget. He knew, and he stayed.

Fahai did not accept this. He took Xu Xian and shut him in the Golden Mountain Temple and would not let him out. Bai Suzhen came to the gates and asked for her husband and was refused, and so she did the one thing she should not have done: she called up the river.

The water came over the fields. It came into the villages below the temple. Fahai raised the mountain to meet it, and the mountain rose, and the flood went where floods go — sideways, into the houses of people who had nothing to do with any of it.

She stopped. But she had done it.

That was the crime. Not being a snake. The flood.

Fahai took her at last, and he put her under the pagoda that stands on Thunder Peak at the south end of West Lake, and he sealed it, and he said the thing that people repeat: *when the lake runs dry and the pagoda falls, she may come out.*

Xiaoqing, the green snake, went back to the mountain and spent the next twenty years learning to fight properly.

She came back. She burned Fahai out of his temple and broke the pagoda open and got her sister out. In some versions Bai Suzhen's son, grown now and first in the imperial examinations, comes to the pagoda in his scholar's robes and it opens for him. In some versions Fahai, hunted, hides in the belly of a crab, and that is why there is a small monk-shaped shape inside a crab if you open one at West Lake, and you should look.

Choose whichever you like. Hangzhou has never settled it either.

What everyone agrees on is the end of Fahai. He was not wrong about what she was. He was wrong about what that meant, and he could not tell the difference, and it cost him everything he had.

Where this story lives

The **Broken Bridge** (Duan Qiao) is at the eastern end of the Bai Causeway on West Lake, five minutes' walk from the north shore. It is small and unremarkable and there is almost always somebody standing on it having a photograph taken. In snow it does the thing the name describes.

Leifeng Pagoda stands on the south shore, opposite. The original was built in 975. It really did collapse — in 1924, from a mix of age and villagers quietly removing bricks for luck. Its fall was national news, and more than one writer noted that the story had come true. The pagoda you see now was rebuilt in 2002, in steel and copper, over the excavated brick foundations of the old one. You take an escalator up. Beneath the modern floor, behind glass, the ruin is still there.

Jinshan Temple, where Xu Xian was held, is in Zhenjiang, across the provincial border in Jiangsu. The flood scene is the most performed

sequence in Chinese opera.

A note on the telling. The earliest versions of this story, from the Song and Ming, are straightforward horror: the snake is a demon, the monk is the hero, and the lesson is aimed squarely at young men who are too easily charmed. It took several hundred years of retelling for the sympathy to migrate — and it migrated because ordinary audiences kept refusing to hate her. By the eighteenth century Bai Suzhen was the protagonist. The version above is the one that won.

One small river crab, seen from above

3. The Peak That Flew

Feilai Feng and the mad monk — Lingyin, Hangzhou

A monk's broken straw hat lying beside a small gourd wine flask

There was a monk at Lingyin Temple who was a disgrace.

His name in religion was Daoji. Nobody used it. Everybody called him Ji Gong, which is roughly "Uncle Ji," and they called him that with affection, which annoyed the temple administration more than an insult would have.

He came from Tiantai, in the hills to the south, from a good family, and he had taken vows properly. Then he had begun to drink. He ate dog meat. He slept in the sun with his robe open and his fan over his face. His hat had a hole in it, his shoes had no backs, and he smelled, on a warm day, like a man who had been sleeping in wine shops, which he had.

The other monks petitioned to have him thrown out. The abbot — a shrewd old man — refused, and said the sentence that has followed Ji Gong ever since: *the Buddha's gate is wide enough for everyone.*

So he stayed, and went on being a disgrace, and went on doing the other thing he did, which was that when somebody in the villages below was in real trouble, Ji Gong turned up.

Not with money. He had none. He turned up with a solution that was usually improper, occasionally illegal, and correct.

He got a widow's land back from a magistrate by getting the magistrate's clerk so drunk that the deed was signed in the wrong ink and the whole seizure had to be thrown out. He cured a child of a fever nobody could name by feeding her something he had scraped off his own filthy neck, which the medical profession of Hangzhou has never forgiven. He was, in the exact words of an old chronicler who did not like him, *a scandal that kept turning out to be useful.*

Now. One morning in the third month, Ji Gong came out of a wine shop in a village west of the temple, and stopped, and stood very still in the middle of the street.

He looked at the sky for a while. Then he ran.

He ran into the village square shouting that a mountain was coming. He said it was flying, that it would be over them before noon, and that everybody had to get out — now, this minute, up the road, leave everything.

Nobody moved.

They knew him. He was, after all, a drunk in a broken hat shouting about a flying mountain. Several people told him to go and sleep it off. A man selling fish suggested he take the mountain with him.

Ji Gong tried arguing. He tried begging. He got down in the road, which was mud, and begged, and they stepped around him.

So he stopped, and he thought, and he did the only thing he could think of that would move an entire village at once.

There was a wedding that morning. The bride was in the sedan chair, the chair was in the street, the procession was forming up, and half the village was standing about in their good clothes waiting to walk her to her husband's house.

Ji Gong came through the crowd at a run, threw open the curtain of the sedan chair, hauled the bride out over his shoulder, and ran.

What happened next was the largest and fastest movement of people that village had ever managed. The groom went first. Then the groom's brothers. Then the bride's father, then everybody who had ever met the bride's father, then everybody else, because a filthy monk stealing a bride in daylight is the single most interesting thing that can occur in a small place. They went up the road after him, all of them, shouting, still in their wedding clothes.

They were half a li up the slope, strung out and out of breath, when the noise started.

It came from above and behind them. It was not thunder. Thunder stops. This did not stop, and it got louder, and the light went strange, and the people at the back of the crowd turned around.

Villagers on bamboo scaffolding carving rows of seated Buddha figures into the caves and overhangs of a strange grey-green crag, a temple gate across a stream below

A mountain was coming down out of the sky.

It came in low over the trees, dragging air, and it struck the valley floor where the village had been standing four minutes earlier, and it settled, and the ground rang like a struck bell for a long time afterward.

When the dust cleared there was no village. There was a peak — a hunched, strange, grey-green crag full of caves and gullies, sitting in a valley it did not fit, made of a stone that matched nothing else for a hundred li in any direction.

Ji Gong put the bride down. He was, by all accounts, extremely apologetic.

They asked him where it had come from. He said it was from the west, that it belonged to a place across the mountains, and that it had a habit of moving when it felt like it. Then he said the practical thing, which was that it might do it again, and that the next place it landed might not have a drunk to shout at them.

So the people of the valley carved it.

They carved Buddhas into the rock — hundreds of them, into every face and overhang and cave mouth, over the next several centuries — on the reasoning that a mountain full of Buddhas is a mountain that has been given a job, and a thing with a job stays where it is.

It has not moved since.

They called it Feilai Feng: *the peak that flew here.* It stands directly across the stream from the gate of Lingyin Temple, and the carvings are all over it, from the enormous laughing Maitreya with his belly and his sack down to figures the size of your hand, tucked up in cracks where nobody would find them unless they were looking.

As for Ji Gong, he stayed a disgrace to the end. He died in 1209, in the temple, and the story is that the monks who had spent thirty years trying to have him expelled took the body down the hill themselves and would not let anyone else carry it.

Where this story lives

Lingyin Temple is in the wooded hills about three kilometers west of West Lake, and it is one of the largest and oldest Buddhist temples in China — founded in 326, burned and rebuilt something like sixteen times.

Feilai Feng is the limestone crag immediately opposite the temple entrance, and you walk past it to get in. It carries roughly **345 surviving stone carvings** dating from the tenth to the fourteenth century, which makes it the most important group of ancient rock sculpture in southern China. The big-bellied Maitreya on the lower face, carved around 1000, is the one everybody photographs. The caves behind it go back into the rock far enough to need a torch.

The geology, for what it is worth, is genuinely odd: Feilai Feng is limestone in a district that is otherwise sandstone and shale. It does not match its surroundings. This is why the story exists.

Ji Gong was a real monk — Li Xiuyuan, 1130 to 1209, born in Tiantai County, ordained at Lingyin. Almost everything else about him is folklore, accumulated over eight hundred years. He is now, comfortably, the most popular figure in Chinese Buddhist folk tradition, which would have irritated his colleagues enormously.

A small weathered stone Buddha head

4. The Dragon of the Well

Longjing, and how the tea got its name — Hangzhou

A single tea bud with two young leaves

Behind the tea village in the hills west of West Lake there is a round stone well that never goes dry.

It is not much to look at. The water in it is dark and unmoving, and if you drop a stone in, the sound comes back later than you expect. But there is one thing about it that people have been coming to see for eight hundred years, and it is this: if you stir the surface with a stick, a thin seam appears in the water and travels across it, dividing and rejoining, like a crack in glass that closes itself.

The village will tell you that is the dragon turning over.

The story goes back to a drought. Not an ordinary dry summer — the kind of drought that goes into the second year, where the streams stop, the terraces crack open, and the old people begin dying quietly and being buried without much said about it. The hill villages had nothing. The wells had gone down to mud and then to dust.

All except one.

There was a well up behind the temple that still had water in it, cold and sweet and about a bucket a day, which was not enough for anyone but was more than nothing. And an old woman lived beside it.

Her name is not recorded, which is common in these stories and always a small loss. She was very poor. She had one thing of value, which was a stone mortar in her yard — an old one, ugly, thick with green moss that no amount of scrubbing had ever shifted. She used it to pound grain, when there was grain.

Every morning she drew the bucket from the well and gave it away. Not sold. Gave. She would keep a cup for herself and the rest went to whoever came up the path — the ones with children, mostly, and the ones too old to walk down to the river, which was itself now a road of white stones.

One evening a traveler came up the path.

He was old, and he was filthy, and he was not from there. He asked for water. She gave him the last of the day's bucket, which was her own cup. He drank it and sat down on her step and looked around her yard.

"That mortar," he said.

She said it was an old mortar and not worth anything.

He said he would like to buy it. He named a price that was ridiculous — more money than the village saw in a year. She said he was joking, or mad, and he said neither, and that he would come back in three days with the money and a cart, because he could not carry it.

When he had gone the old woman looked at the mortar and was ashamed of it.

She thought: he is paying a fortune for this thing and it is disgusting. Moss an inch thick. Filth in the grooves. Nobody should hand over a treasure to a buyer in that condition. So she got water — she used the whole day's bucket, and her own cup as well — and she scrubbed that mortar until the moss came away in green ropes and the stone underneath came up grey and clean. Then she carried the dirty water out and poured it, as she poured everything, into the well.

The traveler came back on the third day with the money and the cart.

He looked at the mortar for a long time. Then he sat down on her step again, and laughed, in the way of a man who has been beaten fairly.

"Where," he said, "did you put the moss?"

She told him.

He told her what he was. He was not going to say it, but she had earned it. He was the dragon of that well, and he had been living in it, asleep, for a very long time, and the moss on that mortar was a thousand years of the well's own breath and the reason the water had never failed. He had come up in human shape to buy it back and take it with him to a wetter province, because he had been sleeping through a drought and had woken up embarrassed.

> A filthy old traveller sitting on the step of a poor hillside cottage at evening, an empty water cup in his hand, a mossy stone mortar in the yard between him and the old woman

And she had washed it into the well.

“So it is in the water now,” he said. “All of it. And it will not come out again.”

Then the dragon went home, which is to say he stood up, walked to the well, and was not there.

That night it rained.

It rained for three days, off the sea and up the valleys, and the terraces filled, and the stream behind the temple came back so hard it took out a footbridge. The drought broke over the whole west of Hangzhou, and it broke there first, at that well, at the top of that hill.

And in the spring, on the slopes around the well, the tea came up wrong.

Not badly wrong. The leaves came flat instead of curled, and a green so pale it was nearly yellow, and when the village women picked them and pressed them dry in a hot pan with their bare palms — as they still do, and their hands are extraordinary things to look at, hard as boot leather across the base of the thumb — the tea they made from it tasted of chestnut and cut grass and something else nobody has ever settled on a word for.

They called the well Longjing. Dragon Well. Then they called the village that, and then they called the tea that, and now it is one of the most famous teas in the world and grows on about fifty square kilometers of hillside, all of it downhill from an old woman who used her last water to clean something before selling it.

Five hundred years later the Qianlong Emperor came up that hill on one of his tours of the south, drank the tea, and made eighteen bushes in front of Hugong Temple into imperial property on the spot. Those eighteen bushes are still fenced. Their leaves used to go to Beijing and now go nowhere at all, being far too valuable to drink.

The village considers this a nice story about an emperor. They are clear that it is not the real one.

Where this story lives

Longjing Village is about twenty minutes by taxi from West Lake, up into the hills past Lingyin. It is a working tea village — the terraces come right down to the road, and in late March and early April the whole place is picking.

The Dragon Well itself (Longjing Spring) is at the top of the village, in a small walled garden behind a teahouse. It is a round stone pool a couple of meters across. The dividing line in the water when you disturb it is real, and it is a density effect — spring water and surface water of different temperature meeting — which is a fine explanation that has convinced nobody locally.

The eighteen imperial bushes are in front of **Hugong Temple**, a few minutes' walk downhill, behind a low fence with a plaque.

On the tea. Longjing is a pan-fired green tea, picked in ten distinct hand movements against the hot wok, and the *shifu* who do it have permanently altered palms. The pre-Qingming picking — before roughly April 5 — is the expensive one. If you buy it in the village, watch out: far more Longjing is sold each year than the hills could conceivably grow.

A single curled dried tea leaf

5. The King Who Shot the Tide

Qian Liu and the Qiantang bore — Hangzhou

One crossbow bolt crossing a small curl of breaking wave

Twice a day the sea comes up the Qiantang River the wrong way.

The bay outside Hangzhou narrows like the inside of a trumpet — a hundred kilometers across at the mouth, three at the top — and when the tide pushes into it, all that water has nowhere to spread. So it stacks. It comes up the river as a single wall, sometimes as high as a house, moving faster than a man can run, with a sound that arrives before it does and that people describe, without exaggerating, as an approaching army.

In the eighth month, at the autumn tide, it is at its worst and its most magnificent, and it has been drowning people and destroying seawalls for as long as anyone has lived there.

Around the year 900 the man in charge of that stretch of coast was Qian Liu.

He had started as a salt smuggler. This is not a slander; it is on the record, and he was not embarrassed by it. He had been a violent young man in a violent generation, and when the Tang dynasty came apart he had fought his way up through the wreckage until he controlled the whole of what is now Zhejiang and a good deal besides, and had himself

made King of Wuyue. He ruled for forty years and, unusually for a warlord, spent most of them on public works.

The great work of his life was the seawall at Hangzhou.

He needed one. The city sat on the river, the tide came up it, and every few years the wall of packed earth they kept building was taken out in a night and the salt water went into the rice fields, and the fields were finished for years afterward. Salt does not wash out.

So Qian Liu ordered a proper wall — timber cribs, stone fill, driven piles — and set thousands of men to build it.

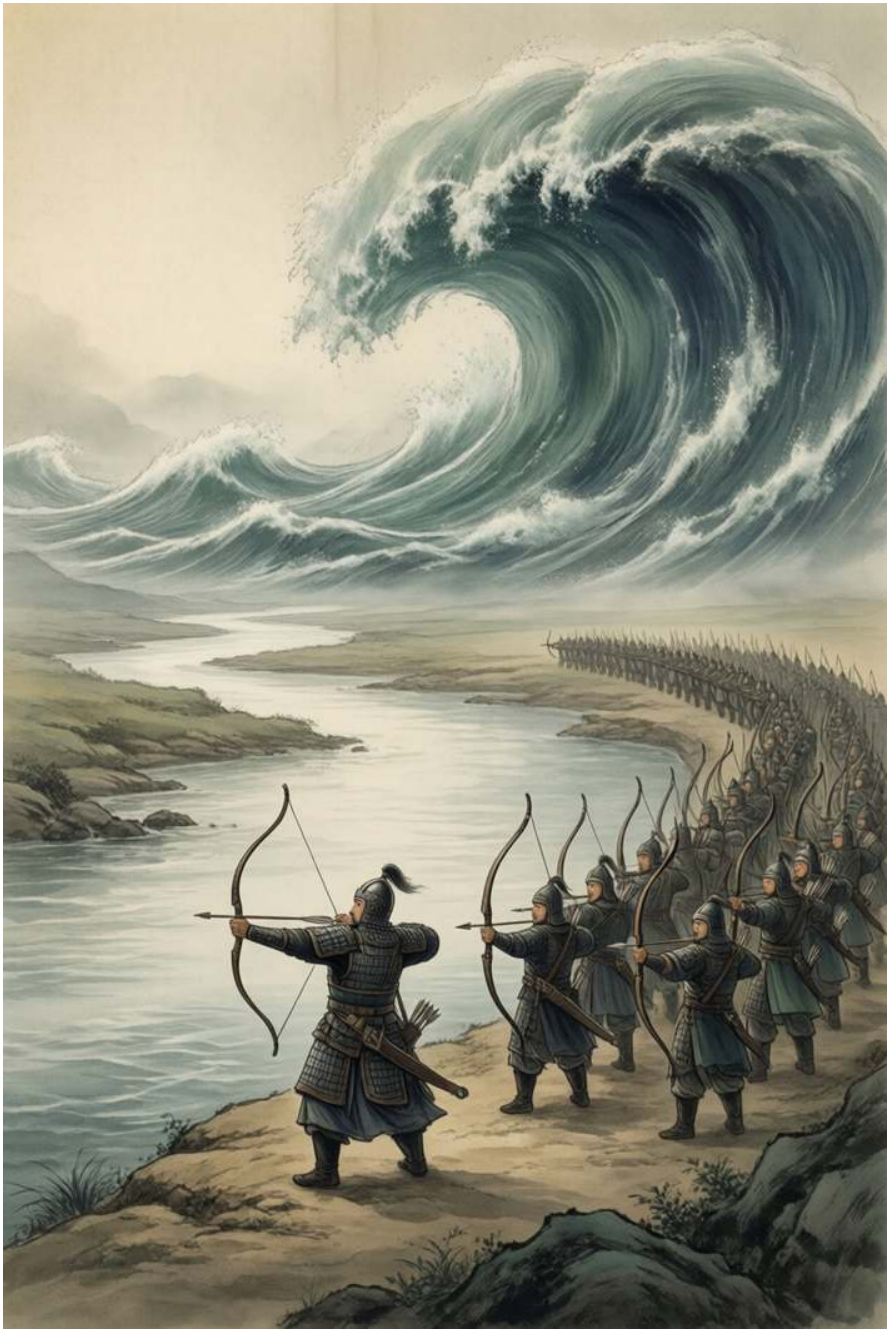
The tide would not let them.

They drove the piles at low water and the bore came up and took them out. They built the crib work and it came up and took that out. They tried again, and again, and the story says they lost the works nine times, and men with them, and the eighth month was coming.

This is where the tale leaves the record and starts doing what tales do.

Qian Liu, they say, wrote a letter to the god of the tide.

It was a formal letter, correctly addressed, in the language an official uses to a superior, and in it he explained the situation: that he was building a wall for the protection of farmers, that he had no quarrel with the sea, and that he asked the tide to hold back three days. He had the letter thrown into the river with the proper offerings.



Then the tide came in on schedule and took the works out again.

So on the eighteenth day of the eighth month, at the greatest tide of the year, Qian Liu came down to the riverbank with five hundred crossbowmen.

He put them in a line along the shore, and he gave each man three bolts, and he told them what they were shooting at.

They will have looked at each other. It is one thing to follow a king who is difficult; it is another to be told to shoot the ocean.

Qian Liu stood at the front of the line, and when the noise started far down the river — that sound like an army — he did not move. The story is careful about this. It says he stood on the bank with his own bow while the wall of water came up out of the bay at the height of a house, and he waited until it was close enough that the men behind him were praying, and then he shot the first bolt himself.

A finished timber-and-stone seawall running along a river, flooded rice terraces green behind it, and the tidal wave curving away down the far channel of the river

Five hundred crossbows went off after it.

They reloaded and shot again. And again. Three volleys, fifteen hundred bolts, into the face of the incoming tide.

And the tide turned aside.

It swung away from the Hangzhou bank — this is what the story says, and it is also, as it happens, what the river actually did over the following decades — and went up the far channel toward Xiaoshan, and the works on the near shore stood.

They finished the wall. It held. And in the fields behind it, that year and every year after, they got a crop.

The people of Hangzhou called the seawall the Qian Family Wall, and they called him the Tide King, and they built him a temple, and for a thousand years the men who watched the bore in the eighth month said that the reason it curved away from the city was that it had been shot at once and remembered.

There is a coda, and it is the part I like.

Before Qian Liu, the god of the Qiantang tide was Wu Zixu — a minister of Wu who had been forced to kill himself by a king who did not want to hear him, and whose body had been sewn into a leather sack and thrown into the river, and who had come back as the bore, furious, twice a day, forever.

That is the older story, and it is a story about a grievance that cannot be put down.

Qian Liu's story is the answer to it. It is about a man who wrote to the grievance politely first, and then, when politeness failed, shot at it and built the wall anyway.

Hangzhou has kept both. The tide is still Wu Zixu's anger. The wall is still Qian Liu's. They are still, twice a day, arguing.

Where this story lives

The **Qiantang bore** is the largest tidal bore in the world, and it happens every day. The best of it is around the **eighteenth day of the eighth lunar month** (usually mid-to-late September), when the wave can reach nine meters and travel at forty kilometers an hour. Tide-watching here

is documented from the Han dynasty onward — it is very likely the oldest continuously observed natural spectacle on earth.

The classic viewing point is **Yanguan**, in Haining, about an hour east of Hangzhou, where the river runs straight and the wave arrives square on. There are also good points at **Xiasha** and along the Hangzhou embankment. Take the warnings seriously: the bore kills people most years, almost always onlookers who stood below the wall for a better photograph.

Qian Liu (852–932) was entirely real, and so was the seawall. The Wuyue kingdom he founded ran the region for seventy-two years and did so well that when the Song came, Qian Liu's grandson handed the whole kingdom over without a battle to spare the population a war — an act that made the Qian family famous in China for a thousand years afterward.

Qian Wang Temple stands on the southeast shore of West Lake, near Liulang Wenying park. There is a statue of him with the bow.

A coiled bowstring

6. The Butterfly Lovers

Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai — Shangyu and Ningbo

Two butterflies flying together

Zhu Yingtai wanted to go to school.

Her family were gentry in Shangyu, comfortable, with land, and she was the ninth child and the only daughter, and she had been taught to read at home by a tutor who told her father, more than once, that it was a pity about the rest of it.

There was no school she could go to. That was simply the shape of the world in the fourth century, and everyone in the house understood it, including her.

So she went about it sideways. She dressed as a young man, walked into the front hall where her father was sitting, and asked him for directions — playing the part well enough that he did not know her for the length of a whole conversation. When she took the cap off, she had won the argument without making it.

He let her go. Her mother wept. She went to Hangzhou, to a private academy in the hills, as a young gentleman named Zhu.

On the road she met Liang Shanbo.

He was from Kuaiji, near modern Shaoxing, a year or two older, going to the same school, poorer, and immediately and permanently delighted with her. They talked the entire way. Somewhere on that road they

stopped at a wayside pavilion, cut their palms, and swore brotherhood, which is a serious thing and which he meant absolutely.

They studied together for three years.

They shared a room. She kept a bowl of water on the table between the beds and told him it was bad luck to knock it over, which he never did, because he was that kind of person. She wore her outer robe to sleep and said she felt the cold. When the other students went to swim she said she had a horror of water. He believed all of it. He believed all of it for three years.

This is the part that gets played for comedy on the opera stage, and it is funny, and it is also the reason the ending works. Liang Shanbo was not stupid. He was a first-rate student. He simply had no category in his head for what was in front of him, so he did not see it, and meanwhile he was becoming attached to this friend in a way he did not examine, because he had no reason to.

In the third year a letter came from Shangyu. Her father was ill; she was needed at home.

Liang Shanbo walked her the first eighteen li of the road.

That walk is the most famous scene in the story, and it is eighteen li of Zhu Yingtai trying to tell him.

She points at a pair of geese on the water and asks why they go in twos. He says geese do. She points at a mandarin duck and its mate. He says something about the season. She says, look at that shrine, let us bow to it together as a couple would, and he laughs and says two men bowing at a shrine would look ridiculous. She says: you know, I have a sister at home. Nine of us and she is the ninth, and she looks exactly like me, and she is not spoken for, and if you came to the house in the seventh month I think my father would receive you.

That one he understands. That one he can hold. He says he will come.

He comes too late.

He did come — that is not in doubt, in any version. He came to Shangyu in the seventh month and asked for the ninth daughter, and Zhu Yingtai came out to meet him in her own clothes, in a woman's sleeves, with her hair up.

And he understood everything at once: the bowl of water, the geese, the robe she slept in, the eighteen li. All of it arriving in one piece, in a courtyard, in front of her family.

But she had been promised in the spring, to a man named Ma from a wealthy house in Ningbo, and the contract was signed, and her father would not break it. There was nothing in the law or the custom of that century that gave any of the three of them a way out.

> Two young students in scholars' gowns walking a long country road together, pausing at a pond where a pair of geese swim side by side; one gestures at the birds, the other does not understand

Liang Shanbo went home and did not recover.

He was an official by then, appointed magistrate at Yin County near Ningbo, and by every account a good one — the local histories record him fixing the river dikes and dying young, and they record it flatly, with no romance about it. He was dead within the year. He asked to be buried beside the road that ran from Shangyu to Ningbo, on the hillside, and they did it.

The wedding went ahead in the autumn.

The bridal procession went out from Shangyu toward the Ma house — the red chair, the musicians, the whole long noisy line of it — and the road it took ran past that hillside.

At the grave the wind came up.

It came up hard enough to stop the procession in the road. The bearers set the chair down. The banners went flat. And Zhu Yingtai got out of the sedan chair in her red wedding clothes, and walked off the road to the grave, and knelt, and asked it to open.

The ground split.

The accounts do not agree on how — thunder in some, silence in others, the earth simply parting like a seam in others — but it split, and she went into it, and it closed.

Her maid caught the trailing edge of the red robe and it tore away in her hands, and what she was holding, when the wind dropped, was not cloth.

Two butterflies came up out of the grass where the grave had closed. They went up together, turning around each other, and away over the fields, and did not come back.

They are the same two butterflies in every telling. Sometimes they are yellow, sometimes one dark and one pale. In the villages between Shangyu and Ningbo, a pair of butterflies flying together in spring is still

called *Liang Zhu*, after them, and children are told not to catch them, though not always told why.

Where this story lives

The story is set in the fourth century and was already old when the first written version appeared in the Tang. It is one of the “Four Great Folktales” of China, and in 2006 the Chinese government put it on the first national list of intangible cultural heritage — after a long, funny, entirely genuine dispute between several cities about whose story it was. Zhejiang shares the credit with three other provinces. Nobody is happy.

Liang Shanbo’s tomb and temple are at Gaoqiao, in Yinzhou District, Ningbo, about half an hour west of the city center. There is a Liang Zhu Cultural Park there now, built around the site. Liang Shanbo is in the local records as a real magistrate of Yin County who died in office in 373.

Zhu Yingtai’s home is placed at Zhufu, in Shangyu, which is now part of Shaoxing. The **Wansong Academy** in Hangzhou is where they are said to have studied.

On the music. If you take one thing away from this chapter, listen to the *Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto*, written in 1959 by He Zhanhao and Chen Gang, both students at the Shanghai Conservatory at the time. It is the most performed piece of Chinese orchestral music in the world, and the last five minutes are the butterflies.

One mandarin duck resting

7. The Guanyin Who Would Not Leave

Mount Putuo — the Zhoushan islands

One iron lotus flower floating on still water

In the year 916 a Japanese monk named Egaku was trying to get home from China, and could not.

He had made the crossing before — twice, possibly three times, which in the tenth century made him a considerable traveler and a fairly lucky one. Ships went down on that route routinely. He had come to study, he had studied, and he was going back to Japan with what he had come for.

Part of what he was taking back was a statue.

It was a Guanyin, in wood, about the height of a child, and he had got it at Mount Wutai in the north. Guanyin is the bodhisattva of compassion — the one who hears the cries of the world, who was Avalokiteshvara in India and male, and who over several centuries in China quietly became female, because that is who people found they were praying to. Sailors in particular. A coast full of drowning men will produce a goddess sooner or later.

Egaku's ship came down the coast and out among the Zhoushan islands, which lie off the mouth of Hangzhou Bay in a scatter of more than a thousand, most of them rock, some of them big enough for a village.

Off one of them the ship stopped.

There was wind and there was tide and the sail was full and the ship did not move. When the crew looked over the side they saw why, and what they saw is the part of the story that everybody remembers.

The sea around the hull was full of iron lotuses.

They had come up from underneath — flat iron flowers, hundreds of them, packed rim to rim across the water in every direction, holding the ship the way ice holds a ship. The crew put oars down among them and could not push through. They tried to back out and the flowers were behind them too.

Egaku was a sensible man and he did not need this explained twice.

He went below, and came up with the statue, and stood at the rail with it, and said — the words are recorded in the temple's own account, and I have shortened them — that if the bodhisattva did not wish to go to Japan, he would not take her; that he would build her a place here, on whatever land was nearest, and stay to serve her there.

Then he put the statue down on the deck.

The iron lotuses went under. All of them at once, the whole field of them, and the water closed and was ordinary water, and the ship moved.

It moved toward the island.

The island was Putuo — a small one, five kilometers long, steep, wooded, with a beach on the eastern side and almost nobody on it. There was a fisherman's family living near the shore, surname Zhang. Egaku came in with the statue and told them what had happened and asked for a corner of ground.

They gave him their house.

They moved out of it, the whole family, and gave the monk the building, and it became the first shrine, and the local people called it exactly what it was: **Bukenqu Guanyin Yuan** — the Temple of the Guanyin Who Would Not Leave.

That is the founding. Everything else on that island came afterward, and there is now a great deal of it.

Because Guanyin, having declined to be exported, stayed and became enormous.

Putuo is now one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains of China, and the one dedicated to compassion. Three main monasteries, dozens of smaller temples and hermitages, and in the seasons around Guanyin's three feast days the ferries from Ningbo run all day and the island takes more pilgrims than it has residents. The path up to the summit is worn into hollows. There is a bronze Guanyin thirty-three meters high standing on the southern headland facing out to sea, and she faces that way for a reason: she is looking at the water, where the drownings happen.

A small plain shrine at the top of a sandy beach on a wooded island, a fisherman's family standing

aside as a monk carries a wooden statue in through the low door

The temple built on the spot where Egaku landed is still called the Temple of the Guanyin Who Would Not Leave. It is small. It is at the top of the beach, right where the sand ends, and it is the least impressive building on the island and by a distance the most visited, because everyone who comes wants to stand at the place where the ship stopped.

There is a detail in the older tellings that most modern versions leave out, and I want to keep it.

When the lotuses went down, Egaku did not immediately feel that he had been blessed. He had been to Wutai, he had carried that statue several hundred kilometers, he had put it on a ship at real expense and real risk, and he had done all of it in order to bring it home to a country that did not yet have one. And he was being told, in the middle of the sea, that the whole errand was refused.

The old account says he wept, and then built the shrine, and then went home the following year — without the statue, and, the account is careful to say, without complaint.

The Chinese phrase for what he did is *bu ken qu*: she would not go. But it works both ways, and the temple's name has always been understood to be about him as much as about her. He was the one who did not, in the end, insist.

Where this story lives

Mount Putuo (Putuoshan) is an island in the Zhoushan archipelago, off Ningbo. You reach it by ferry from Zhujiajian or Shenjiamen, about half an hour on the water; from Shanghai it is a long day or an easy overnight. Cars are essentially absent. It is 12.5 square kilometers and you can walk the whole of it.

Bukenqu Guanyin Temple sits at the head of Chaoyin Cave beach on the southeast shore. It is tiny and it is always busy.

The three big monasteries are **Puji** (the oldest and the administrative center), **Fayu** (up the hill, with a hall roofed in tiles taken from a

demolished Nanjing palace by imperial permission), and **Huiji** (at the summit). The **Nanhai Guanyin** bronze on the south point was completed in 1997 and is 33 meters tall, for the thirty-three forms in which Guanyin is said to appear.

Egaku (慧锷, Huie in Chinese) was a real Japanese monk of the late Tang and early Five Dynasties period, and he made at least two documented voyages to China. The founding date of 916 is the temple's; other sources put the episode in 858 or 863. The Zhoushan waters are genuinely treacherous, full of reefs and running a four-meter tidal range, and ships were lost there constantly, which is the sober version of the iron lotuses.

A small bronze temple bell

8. The Girl Who Washed Silk

Xi Shi — Zhuji, and the fall of Wu

A loose skein of pale raw silk lying on a flat river stone

There is a stream at the foot of Ningluo Mountain, in Zhuji, and on the bank of it a flat stone where the village women used to rinse raw silk.

The girl who worked at that stone was called Shi Yiguang, and because her family lived on the west side of the village everyone called her Xi Shi — Shi of the West. Her father cut firewood. Her mother did what her daughter did, which was stand in cold water up to the knee, working the gum out of silk thread, from first light.

She was, by every account anyone ever wrote, the most beautiful woman in China.

The stories about it are extravagant and worth repeating because they tell you what kind of legend she became. When she washed silk, the fish in the stream forgot to swim and sank. She had a pain in her chest and pressed her hand to it and frowned, and every girl in the district began walking about pressing her chest and frowning, and one of them — this is from Zhuangzi, writing about a century later, and he is being cruel about it — was so ugly that people locked their doors when they saw her coming.

None of that would matter except for what the beauty was used for.

South of the Yangtze in the fifth century BC there were two states, Wu and Yue, and they hated each other with the specific hatred of neighbors. Yue was roughly modern Zhejiang; Wu was roughly modern Jiangsu. In 494 BC the King of Wu, Fuchai, beat the King of Yue, Goujian, in the field, took him prisoner, and kept him.

Goujian was held for three years. He was made to work in the stables. He is said to have tasted his captor's stool to diagnose an illness, which is the kind of humiliation that gets recorded because nobody could believe a king had done it. Fuchai eventually decided he was broken, and let him go home.

He was not broken.

Goujian went back to Yue and began, very quietly, to build the machinery of revenge. He hung a gall bladder over his seat and licked it before meals so that the taste of bitterness would be the first thing every day. He slept on firewood. This is where the Chinese phrase comes from — *woxin changdan*, to sleep on brushwood and taste gall — and it is still what you say about somebody who is enduring something on purpose, for later.

He had a minister called Fan Li, who was the cleverest man of that century, and Fan Li told him that armies were not enough.

The plan was this. Wu was strong, but Fuchai was a man of appetite and his chief minister Wu Zixu — the same Wu Zixu who would end up in the Qiantang River — was the only thing keeping him disciplined. If you could get between Fuchai and his own judgment, the state would come apart on its own. So: find the most beautiful women in Yue, train them, and send them to Wu as tribute.

Fan Li went looking, and he found Xi Shi at the stream.

She was trained for three years. Not in beauty — she had that — but in everything else: how to walk, how to sit, music, dance, how to speak to a king, and how to listen to what men say in a room when they have stopped noticing you are there. She went to Wu with a companion called Zheng Dan, and Fuchai took one look at her and was finished.

He built her a palace. He built her a terrace to dance on with a hollow floor and jars set underneath so her steps would ring. He stopped attending to the state. When Wu Zixu told him — over and over, in increasingly blunt language — that Yue was arming and that the woman was a weapon, Fuchai had him sent a sword and told to use it on himself. Wu Zixu did, and on his way out said that his eyes should be hung on the east gate so he could watch the Yue army come through it.

A small boat with two figures aboard drifting out into mist on a wide lake, reeds in the foreground, no shore visible ahead

They came through it in 473 BC. Yue destroyed Wu completely. Fuchai killed himself. Goujian became the last of the great hegemons of the Spring and Autumn period, and Zhejiang has never entirely stopped being pleased about it.

What happened to Xi Shi is where the story stops agreeing with itself, and I think the disagreement is the most interesting thing in it.

The first ending is short. The Yue army takes the capital and Xi Shi is drowned — put in a leather sack and thrown in the river, on the order of the queen of Yue or of Goujian himself, because a woman who has brought down one king is not a safe thing to have in a palace. This is the oldest version. It is in the *Mozi*, more or less, and it is the one that reads like something that actually happened.

The second ending is the one people prefer. Fan Li — who found her, who trained her, who sent her — resigns on the day of the victory. He writes a note to a colleague saying that Goujian is a man you can share hardship with but not peace, and that he is leaving before he is thanked. Then he takes Xi Shi and goes.

They get a boat. They go out onto Lake Tai, north of the border, in the mist, with no title and no name, and Fan Li becomes a merchant under an assumed name and makes a second fortune three times over and gives it away twice, and the two of them are not heard from again.

It is almost certainly not true. Fan Li was real and did retire and did become a legendary merchant, and there is no good evidence Xi Shi went with him.

But it has been the popular ending for two thousand years, and I understand why. A country used her, spent her, and won. The only thing left to give her was an exit — and if history would not provide one, then folklore would, and it would put her on a boat, in the mist, going north, with the one man in the whole affair who had ever apologized.

Where this story lives

Zhuji is a city of about a million people between Hangzhou and Shaoxing, forty minutes from either by train. It is now the largest pearl-producing center in the world, which is a strange but not inappropriate second career.

The Xi Shi Temple (Xishi Dian) is in the center of Zhuji on the bank of the Huansha River — the "silk-rinsing river" — and the **Huansha Stone**, the flat rock where she is said to have worked, is at the water's edge below it, with two characters carved on it attributed, generously, to Wang Xizhi.

Ningluo Mountain and the villages of Zhuluo and Xiluo (East Shi and West Shi) are about twenty kilometers southwest, and both villages still claim her.

A note on the phrase. Xi Shi is the first of the Four Beauties of ancient China, and the idiom for her is *chen yu* — "sinking fish." The full set, one per beauty, is sinking fish, falling geese, hidden moon, shamed flowers. It is worth knowing that all four idioms describe something being defeated by the sight of a woman, and that all four women were, in their own stories, instruments of somebody else's politics.

A smooth pale river pebble

9. Yu, Who Did Not Go In

Kuaiji Mountain — Shaoxing

A woven bamboo rain hat beside a wooden digging spade

Before the dynasties there was a flood, and it did not go down for a generation.

This is the oldest story China tells about itself. The rivers came out of their beds and stayed out. The plains went under. People moved onto the high ground and lived there, and their children were born there, and the water was still there when those children were grown.

The emperor of the time gave the job to a man named Gun, and Gun did what anybody would do. He built walls.

He built them for nine years. He is said to have stolen a magical self-expanding soil from heaven to build them with, which tells you the scale of the effort and also how it was regarded afterward. Every wall he built, the water eventually came over or around or through, and the failure of a dike is worse than no dike at all, because the water arrives all at once and at night. After nine years he was executed for it.

The job went to his son.

Yu was a young man when he took it and an old one when he finished. He worked at it for thirteen years, and the thing he understood — which is the whole point of the story, and the reason it is still told in a country

that has spent four thousand years managing rivers — is that his father had been fighting the water and that this could not be won.

So Yu did not build walls. He dug.

He surveyed the whole drainage, which took years by itself, and then he opened channels: cut through ridges where a river wanted to go, deepened the beds, split the flow into nine courses so no single channel had to carry everything, dredged the mouths so the sea could take it. He moved earth on a scale that is hard to imagine and impossible to verify. He is credited with cutting the Longmen gorge on the Yellow River, which is not a thing a man does, but the principle it stands for is exactly right: *do not stop the water; give it somewhere to go.*

The detail everyone in China knows is about his house.

In thirteen years he passed his own front door three times.

The first time, his wife was in labor and he heard her from the road. He did not go in. There was a crew waiting for him at a cut upstream and he had told them what hour he would come.

The second time, some years later, his son was in the doorway, old enough to stand, and the boy waved at him. He waved back. He did not go in.

The third time the son was ten and came out into the road and asked him to come home. Yu said he could not yet, and told the boy why, and went on up the road.

Chinese has a phrase for this: *san guo jia men er bu ru* — three times he passed his gate and did not enter. It is the standard idiom for putting the public work above the private life, and it is said with admiration, and it has also been said, by more than one Chinese writer over the centuries, with a certain amount of doubt. It is not obvious that the man had to be quite so good at this.

The water went down.

And then Yu came south.

This part is Zhejiang's, and Shaoxing has held onto it for four thousand years with both hands.

The story is that Yu came to a mountain in the southeast called Maoshan and called an assembly there — every chief and lord of every region, to come and account for what they had done in the years of the flood and to be assigned their duties in the years after. It was the first time the tribes of the whole country had been called to one place by one authority. It is, in the traditional telling, the moment the thing that would become China stopped being a collection of peoples and started being a state.

A great assembly of regional chiefs standing in ranks on a broad mountain terrace before one

> weathered man in coarse robes; banners, bronze vessels, low cloud below the summit

They came. Most of them. One lord, Fangfeng, arrived late, and Yu had him executed in front of the assembly, which was a message and was received as one.

Afterward the mountain was renamed. *Kuaiji* — the assembly and the reckoning. It is still called that.

And when Yu died he was buried there, on the southeast slope, and not sent back north, because he had said that was where he wanted to be.

There has been a temple on that spot for a very long time. The First Emperor of Qin came to it in 210 BC to make offerings, which is the earliest confirmed visit; he had unified the country nineteen years before and he came a long way south to stand at the tomb of the man who did it first. Emperors kept coming for the next two thousand years. Sacrifices at Yu's tomb were made an official state rite of the Ming and the Qing, and after a gap of some decades the ceremony was restored in 1995 and is now held every April.

There is a coda that is pure Shaoxing.

The people of that region will tell you, without much prompting, that the reason the canals of Shaoxing run where they run — the flat black-water grid you can still take a boat through, with its stone bridges and its awnings — is that they are Yu's. Not built by him, they will concede, if you push. But laid out on his principle, by people who had been taught it directly: do not wall the water. Give it somewhere to go, and then go and live beside it.

It is a fair description of the town. Shaoxing has about four thousand ancient bridges. The water goes under all of them.

Where this story lives

The Tomb of Yu the Great (Da Yu Ling) is about four kilometers southeast of central Shaoxing, at the foot of Kuaiji Mountain. The site has three parts: the tomb itself, the **Yu Temple** with a nine-meter statue of him in the main hall, and the **Yu Ancestral Hall**. Stone tablets from a

dozen dynasties are set along the approach. It is a quiet place and, for a site of this importance, very lightly visited.

Kuaiji Mountain rises directly behind it and can be walked.

The annual sacrifice takes place on 20 April, around the Guyu solar term, and is a full state ceremony with music, dancers, and offerings.

On the history. Yu is traditionally the founder of the Xia dynasty and is dated, by the traditional chronology, to around 2100 BC. Whether he existed as one person is unresolved. What is not in doubt is that a catastrophic and prolonged flood episode occurred in the North China Plain in roughly that period — there is sediment evidence for it — and that the story of managing it by dredging rather than damming has functioned for four thousand years as the founding argument of Chinese hydraulic engineering. The Dujiangyan irrigation system, built in 256 BC and still operating today, works on exactly Yu's principle.

A woven carrying basket half full of earth

10. Daughter’s Red

The wine buried under the tree — Shaoxing

A sealed clay wine jar with a lotus-leaf lid tied at the neck

In Shaoxing, when a daughter was born, her father went out and buried wine.

He would brew it in the winter — glutinous rice, wheat starter, and the water of Jian Lake, which is the whole reason Shaoxing wine is Shaoxing wine and cannot be made anywhere else. He would seal the jars with clay and lotus leaf. And then he would take them out into the yard and put them in the ground under an osmanthus tree, or a plum, and cover them over, and the tree would go on growing on top of them.

Eighteen years later, on the morning of her wedding, the jars came up.

The clay came off and the wine that had gone into the ground the color of straw came out the color of amber, and it was poured for the guests at the wedding feast, and it was called *nü’er hong* — daughter’s red.

That is the custom. This is the story of where it came from, and it is one of the few folk tales I know that begins with a man behaving badly.

There was a tailor in Shaoxing who wanted a son.

He wanted one the way people wanted them in that century: not sentimentally but structurally, because a son stayed and worked and

kept the family name and buried you, and a daughter was raised and fed for eighteen years and then went to somebody else's house. When his wife became pregnant he was so certain it would be a boy that he brewed several jars of wine in advance for the celebration, and sealed them, and set them aside.

The child was a girl.

He did not celebrate. He did not open the wine. He carried the jars out into the yard, dug a hole under the osmanthus tree, put them in it, and covered them up, and he did this in a temper and with the intention of never seeing them again.

Then he got on with the business of resenting his daughter, and she got on with the business of growing up in the house of a man who did that.

She was, of course, remarkable. Folk tales are not subtle. She was quick, and she was good-natured about a situation that did not deserve good nature, and by the time she was twelve or thirteen she had learned her father's trade by watching him do it, which he had certainly not taught her.

When his eyes began to go, she started finishing his work at night.

He noticed — a man notices when the seams in his own shop improve — and he said nothing for a long time, because saying something would have required saying several other things. The shop's reputation grew. Customers came from other districts. He took the credit, and she let him, and this went on for years.

She was eighteen when she was married.

The wedding was a large one, because by then the family was doing well, and on the morning of it the tailor found that he had underestimated the guests and was going to run out of wine. There was no time to buy more. He stood in his yard in a panic, and looked at the osmanthus tree, and remembered.

He dug.

The jars came up filthy and cold. He broke the seal on the first one expecting spoilage — eighteen years, in the ground, in wet Shaoxing soil, sealed by a man who was not paying attention.

What came out was a smell that stopped the yard.

The wine had gone dark and thick and sweet and enormous. It had done in eighteen years what the good stuff does in five and does not usually survive doing. The guests at that wedding drank it and made a great deal of noise about it, and somebody asked the tailor how long he had been keeping it, and the tailor — standing in front of his daughter, in front of everybody — had to answer.

He said: since the day she was born.

It came out as a boast. That is how it was heard. Everyone in the yard thought they had just been told about a father who had brewed wine on the day of his daughter's birth and buried it for eighteen years for exactly this morning, and they were extremely moved, and they said so, loudly, and they said it to her.

A man burying sealed clay wine jars in a hole beneath a flowering osmanthus tree in a small courtyard, a newborn's swaddling visible in a doorway behind him

And the tailor did not correct them.

Whether that was cowardice or the beginning of something better is a matter of which teller you get. The versions I like best say he tried to correct it, twice, and could not get the words out, and then went and sat down, and did not drink anything for the rest of the day.

What is certain is what the guests did with the story. They went home and dug holes in their own yards.

Within a generation it was custom across the whole of Shaoxing: a daughter is born, you bury wine. And the custom had a second effect that the tailor never intended and that anyone who has lived in a village will recognize immediately. A family with jars in the ground has an eighteen-year public reason to be glad about a daughter, and eighteen years of neighbors asking how the wine is coming along, which is really a way of asking how the girl is coming along. In a century that drowned unwanted infant girls, that was not a small thing.

There is a bitter half to the custom and Shaoxing does not hide it.

If the daughter died before she married, the jars stayed in the ground. Nobody dug them up. And if a man had brewed for a son instead — which people also did, buried on the day of a boy's birth against the day he passed the imperial examinations — and the son never passed, that wine stayed down too, sometimes for the rest of the father's life, and it had its own name. They called it *huadiao*, the carved jar, because the jars for a wedding were painted and carved and the ones that never came up were not.

Both names are still on the bottles. Walk into any shop in Shaoxing and you will find *huadiao* on the shelf, and if you find a jar marked *nü'er hong*, it means the same thing now — aged, dark, sweet — and it means it because of a bad-tempered tailor who buried some wine in a temper and had the good luck to be misunderstood in public.

Where this story lives

Shaoxing is forty minutes east of Hangzhou by train, and it has been making rice wine for at least two thousand five hundred years — there is a reference to Goujian handing wine to his troops before the campaign against Wu.

Shaoxing huangjiu ("yellow wine") is not a spirit and not what most people mean by rice wine. It is brewed and unfiltered, around 14 to 18 percent, served warm in winter, and it is the standard cooking wine of Chinese cuisine. The old houses — **Guyue Longshan**, **Nuerhong**, **Kuaijishan** — will let you into the storerooms, and the sight of a warehouse floor covered in tens of thousands of clay jars under lotus-leaf lids is worth the trip on its own.

Jian Lake (Jianhu) water is protected by regulation, and the brewing season is legally restricted to the winter months, when it is cold enough for a slow fermentation.

Try it with: stinky tofu, drunken chicken, and the small river shrimp that Shaoxing does better than anywhere. Lu Xun, who was born here, put the wine shops of this town into Chinese literature permanently; the **Xianheng Tavern** on Luxun Middle Road is named after the one in his story and will sell you warm wine and a dish of aniseed beans standing up at the counter, which is exactly what the character in the story orders.

An empty shallow wine cup, tipped on its side

11. The Swordsmith and the Seven Stars

Ou Yezi at Longquan — Lishui

A straight sword blade showing the wavy pattern of folded steel

In the far southwest of the province, where the mountains stop pretending to be hills, there is a town called Longquan. Dragon Spring. It has been making swords for two and a half thousand years.

The reason is geological and unromantic. There is iron sand in those streams, there is charcoal wood on those slopes, and there is a particular water — cold, mineral, coming off the mountain — that does something to a quenching blade that water elsewhere does not do. Metallurgists will explain this in terms of cooling rate. The smiths of Longquan have a different explanation and they have had it for a long time.

The first of them was Ou Yezi.

He worked in the fifth century BC, in the reign of Goujian of Yue, and he is the earliest named swordsmith in Chinese history. Everything after him in the Chinese sword tradition descends from him or claims to. He made, by the traditional count, eight great swords, and each of them has a name, and several of the names are still in the language.

The story of the greatest of them starts with him failing.

He had been commissioned by the King of Chu — not his own king; Chu was the giant to the west, and its king had heard what came out of Yue and wanted some. Ou Yezi took the commission and went looking for a place to work, because he would not make a sword of that grade in his own forge. He said, and smiths still say, that the metal takes the character of the water.

He went up into the mountains and found the town that is now Longquan.

Under a peak called Qinxi there was a pool, and beside the pool the ground was full of iron sand, and above the pool were seven springs.

The seven springs were the thing.

They came out of the hillside in an arrangement that anybody in the fifth century BC would have recognized immediately: a bent line, four and then three, exactly the shape of the Northern Dipper. The Seven Stars. The constellation that does not set, that the whole sky turns around, and that every ship and every army in China navigated by.

Ou Yezi built his forge there and worked for three years.

What he was making was not a sword in the sense of a shaped bar of metal. He was making something that in that period was at the frontier of what human beings could do with materials — a folded, differentially worked blade, layered so the edge was hard and the spine was not, which is the entire problem of swordmaking and which nobody had comfortably solved.

He drew the iron sand out of the stream. He built the charcoal. He folded and refolded, and the story says he did it until the layers were beyond counting, and each time he quenched it he quenched it in the seven-star pool.

At the end of three years he had three swords.

The first he called **Longyuan** — Dragon Abyss — because when he ground the last bevel and held it up and looked down the blade from the hilt, the pattern in the steel ran away from him into the distance and the impression was of standing at the top of a mountain and looking down into a gorge with a dragon lying in it. That is the description that comes down to us and I have not shortened it, because it is a real description of a real thing. Folded steel does that. The layers make a topography. A good blade has weather in it.

A sword raised on a city wall at dawn, light running off the blade across a plain, the ranks of a besieging army breaking apart and horses shying below

The second he called **Tai'e**, and the third **Gongbu**.

The King of Chu got all three. And here the legend does the thing that Chinese sword legends always do, which is to raise the stakes past the point of belief and then say something true.

The story is that when the sword Tai'e was later carried into a siege — Chu besieged in its own capital, the walls about to go — the king drew it on the wall in full view of the attacking army, and the army broke. Not

from fear. The account says the blade came out and the light off it went across the field, and the besiegers' formations came apart, and their horses would not stand, and the siege collapsed that day. Afterward the king asked his sword-master what had happened, and the sword-master gave the answer that everyone who tells this story is waiting for:

The sword did nothing. It is a sword. But it was made by a man who spent three years on it in a place he chose for its water, and when a thing has that much intention in it, the people who look at it can tell.

Ou Yezi did not go back to Yue. He stayed in the mountains and made swords until he died, and the town grew up around the forge.

It is still there. Longquan today has something like three hundred registered sword workshops, and the good ones are still doing it by hand — folding, differential clay-tempering, and finishing on natural stone in a process that takes weeks per blade. Chinese sword forging was inscribed as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, and Longquan is where the inscription points.

And the pool is still there too, behind a wall, in the middle of the modern town: seven springs in the shape of the Dipper, feeding one dark pool, with the iron sand still in the streams above it.

Where this story lives

Longquan is a small city in Lishui prefecture, in the mountains of southwest Zhejiang, four to five hours from Hangzhou. It is remote, green, and cold in winter, and it is one of the two great craft towns of the province — swords here, and celadon in the same hills (see the next story).

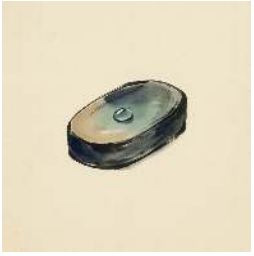
The Seven Star Well (Qixing Jing) and the associated **Jian Chi** — the sword-forging pool — are in the town, at the traditional site of Ou Yezi's forge. There is a shrine to him beside it.

The Longquan Sword Museum and the workshop district are the reason to come. Several of the older workshops will let you watch the folding and the quench, and the sound of a shop full of hammers going at different rhythms is the thing you will remember.

Buying one. Longquan blades are sold at every price from tourist stamped-steel up to work by named masters costing as much as a car. If

you want a real one, look for the folding pattern in the steel under a light (it should be irregular and organic, not a repeating printed grain) and expect to be told exactly how many folds and who did the quench. **Check the customs and import rules of your own country before you buy anything with an edge on it.**

On the names. *Longyuan* was later renamed *Longquan* — Dragon Spring — in the Tang, because the Tang emperors' personal name used the character *yuan* and it had to be avoided. The town then took its name from the sword. It is one of the few places in the world named after an object.



A flat whetstone with a single water drop

12. The Two Brothers and the Cracked Glaze

Ge kiln and Di kiln — Longquan, Lishui

A shallow celadon bowl covered in a fine crackle glaze

The same mountains that gave Longquan its swords gave it clay, and by the Song dynasty the hills around the town had five hundred kilns in them, going day and night, making the green-glazed ware that the world calls celadon.

Chinese calls it *qingci*, and the color it is chasing is not really green. It is the color of jade — and beyond that, of a particular kind of sky. There is a famous imperial instruction from the period, describing what was wanted: *the blue of the sky after rain, where the clouds break.* Potters spent centuries on that sentence.

The two most famous kilns in Longquan belonged, the story says, to brothers.

The elder was Zhang Shengyi. The younger was Zhang Sheng'er. Their father had been a potter and had trained them both, and when he died he divided the workshop, and each of them built his own kiln on his own slope, and the town called them what everyone in China calls two workshops run by two brothers: the **Ge kiln** — elder brother's — and the **Di kiln** — younger brother's.

They were not equally good.

The younger brother was the better potter. This was understood in the town, and it was understood by both of them, and it sat between them for years the way that kind of thing does. His glaze came out thick and even and deep — a plum-green, a "kingfisher green," and on his best days that impossible sky-after-rain — and his pieces went north to the capital and to the households of people who could pay anything. The elder brother's work was good. It was simply not that.

The way the story is usually told, the elder brother could not bear it, and did something about it at night.

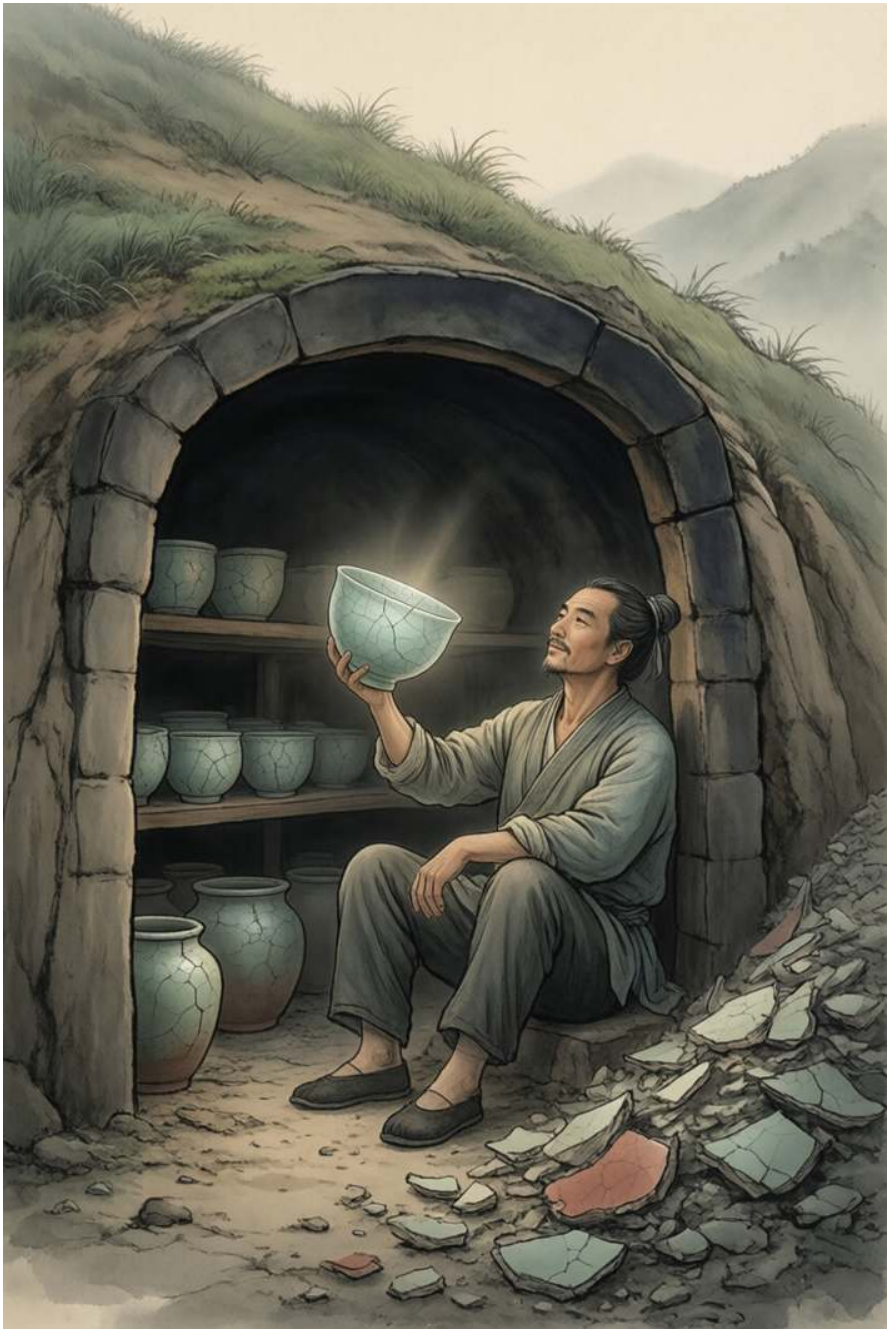
There was a firing coming — an important one, a commission, the younger brother's whole season in one kiln. The elder brother came down the slope in the dark and got into his brother's workshop and found the glaze slip already mixed and waiting in the tubs.

And he put clay in it. Plain clay, a great deal of it, worked in until the slip was wrong all the way through.

You have to know a little about glaze to see how vicious this is. A glaze and the body underneath it shrink at different rates when they cool. The potter's job is to get those rates close enough that the glaze comes off the kiln whole. Load a glaze with the wrong clay and you change its shrinkage, and the two materials come out of the fire pulling against each other, and the glaze fails.

The younger brother glazed his whole commission with it and packed the kiln and fired it for three days.

When it had cooled enough to open, he went in — and the story says he heard it before he saw it.



The kiln was ticking.

All across the packed shelves the glaze was crazing as it cooled: a fine, continuous, spreading crackle, running across every surface of every piece, and each individual crack making a small sound as it went, so that a dark kiln full of two hundred ruined pots was singing quietly at him in the dark.

He sat down in the doorway and stayed there for some time.

Then he took a piece out into the light, and looked at it properly, and did not throw it away.

Because what was on it was beautiful.

Not a fault you could see past. A pattern — a whole net of fine lines running under the glaze across the entire body of the pot, irregular, branching, going right around the curve and over the foot, catching the light differently as you turned it. It looked like ice on a pond. It looked like the crackle in old lacquer, or the veining in a stone that had been in a river for a long time. It looked, more than anything, deliberate.

He worked out how to do it on purpose.

That took him years, and it is the part of the story the potters of Longquan care about, because it is the actual craft. He learned that you could tune the crackle: adjust the clay in the glaze, adjust the cooling, and get a coarse net or a fine one. He learned to rub the fired piece with ink or with tea so the pigment settled in the lines and drew them out. He found that a piece pulled from the kiln at the right moment would develop the coarse cracks first and then, over the following weeks — sitting on a shelf in a quiet room — a second, finer set inside them, at a different angle.

Two hillside kilns on facing slopes of the same valley at night, both firing, sparks and smoke rising from each, a dark ravine between them

That double crackle is the great prize of the Ge tradition, and it has a name. The big dark lines are the *iron wire*, and the small golden ones inside them are the *golden thread*. **Jinsi tiexian.** Gold thread and iron wire. It is in every book on Chinese ceramics.

The Ge kiln became one of the Five Great Kilns of the Song dynasty — the top rank, with Ru, Guan, Ding, and Jun — and its crackled ware has been copied continuously for eight hundred years and never quite equalled.

Which brings us to the question of the brothers, and the reason I have told this one at all.

You will notice that in the version above, the *elder* brother is the saboteur, and the accident happens in the *younger* brother's kiln — and yet the crackled ware is called Ge, elder brother's ware. The story does not fit its own name.

That is because it is not one story. It is at least three, and they contradict each other, and Longquan has never resolved it.

In some versions it is the younger brother who sabotages the elder, out of jealousy of *his* skill, and the crackle appears in Ge's kiln, which at least makes the names work. In some, nobody sabotages anybody: the glaze goes wrong because the elder brother is poor and short of good materials and stretches his slip with clay to make it last, and the crackle is the accident of a man trying to get through a bad winter. In one that I am fond of, the elder brother does it on purpose, is caught, confesses, and the two of them spend the rest of their lives on opposite slopes making two different kinds of pot — crackled and plain — and are buried next to each other.

The ceramics historians, meanwhile, will tell you something more deflating and more interesting: that Ge ware and Di ware are two real and distinguishable Song product lines from the Longquan district, that the crackle is a straightforward and well-understood glaze-fit phenomenon, and that the brothers are almost certainly a story invented later to account for two kinds of pot coming out of the same hills.

I think that is probably true. I also think it does not matter very much.

Somebody, at some point, in one of those five hundred kilns, opened a door on a firing that had failed, and heard it ticking, and picked up a ruined pot, and decided it was not ruined.

Everything after that is bookkeeping.

Where this story lives

Longquan celadon has been made in these hills since the Northern Song and is still made here. In 2009 it became the only ceramic tradition on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage — the entry is *Longquan celadon traditional firing technique*.

The Longquan Celadon Museum in town is excellent and free, and it is the right place to learn to see the difference between the two wares before you go anywhere near a shop.

Dayao Village (Dayao Longquan Kiln Site), about fifteen kilometers from town, is the archaeological heart of it: a protected valley with the excavated remains of dragon kilns — long tube kilns built straight up a hillside so the slope itself provides the draft — running up the slope under shelters. It is part of the UNESCO listing and it is a genuinely

strange and moving place, mostly empty, with shard middens on the hillsides deep enough to walk on.

Telling the two apart, roughly. *Di ware* (younger brother's): thick, even, uncrackled glaze, plum-green or kingfisher-green, glassy and deep. *Ge ware* (elder brother's): grey-blue or greyish-yellow glaze with the deliberate crackle net, and often a dark rim where the glaze runs thin over the lip, and a dark unglazed foot ring. The traditional phrase for those last two features is *zi kou tie zu* — purple mouth, iron foot.

One broken shard of crackled celadon

13. The Rotted Axe Handle

Lanke Mountain — Quzhou

A rusted axe head lying alone in a ring of red rust

Wang Zhi went up the mountain for firewood, the way he did most days, and he took the path he always took, and at some point that morning he stopped taking it.

He would say afterward that he could not explain this. There was a gully he had never gone up, and he went up it, and it went further than a gully has any business going, and at the top of it there was a flat place among the rocks with a stone slab in the middle, and two old men sitting at the slab playing weiqi.

Weiqi is the game the West calls go. It is played with black and white stones on a grid, it is about four thousand years old, and a serious game between good players is long, silent, and largely incomprehensible from outside.

The two old men did not look up.

Wang Zhi should have gone. A woodcutter who blunders into two immortals on a mountain and stays to watch is asking for exactly what he gets, and every listener to this story has always known that. But he was young, and he liked the game, and he was not good at it, and what was in front of him on that slab was plainly a game of a quality he had never seen and would never see again.

So he set his axe down on the rock and stood at the edge of the slab and watched.

He watched a long time. He knew that. He would say that he understood the opening, more or less, and that somewhere past the opening the two of them went into a sequence he could not follow at all, and that he kept standing there because he expected any moment to see the point of it.

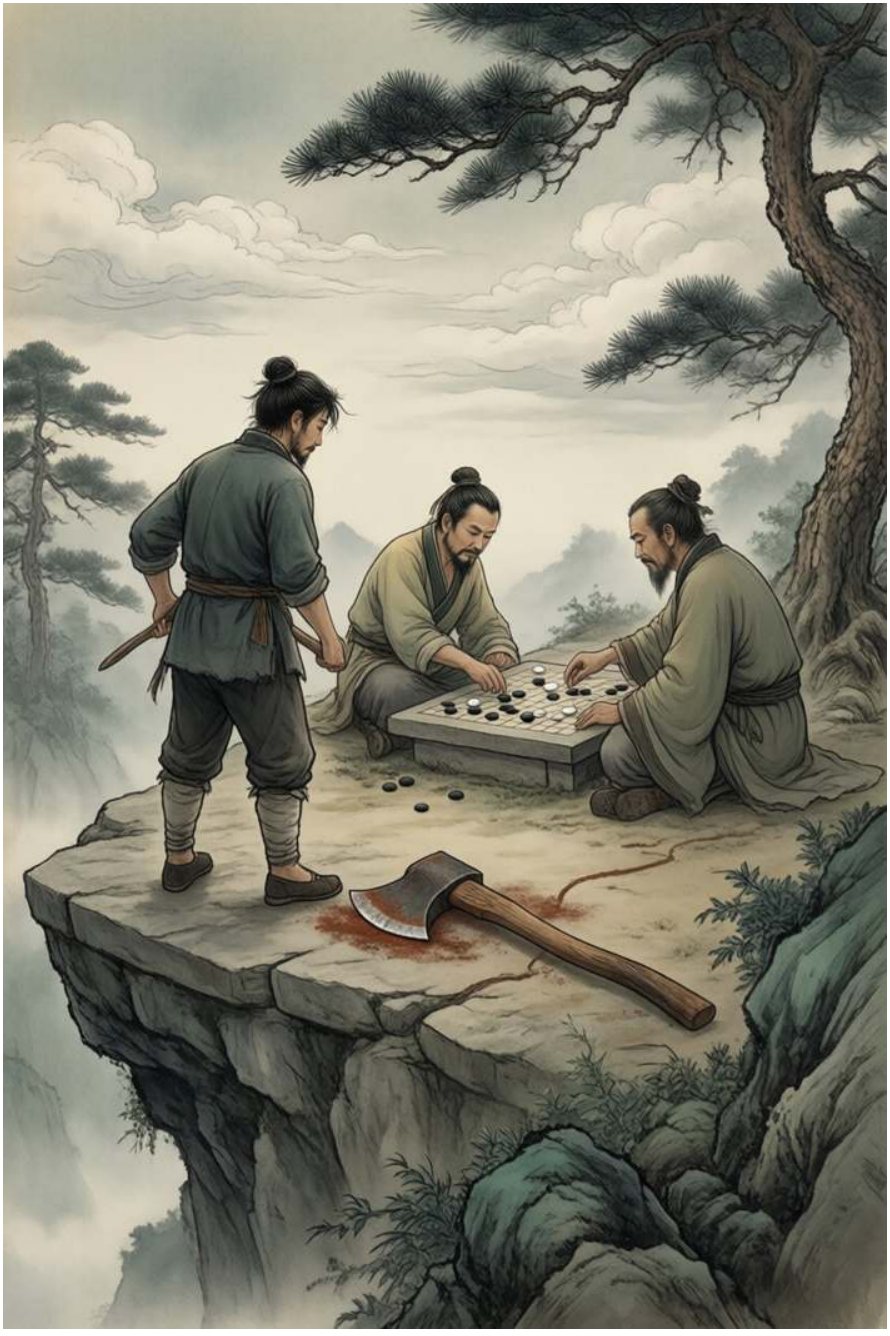
One of the old men, without looking up, reached over and handed him something the size of a date stone.

He ate it. It tasted of nothing much. He was not hungry afterward, and that was the last time he thought about being hungry.

The game went on.

The sun did not appear to move, or he did not look. Nothing happened except stones going down on wood, one at a time, in a silence so complete that he could hear the click of each one and the small sounds the mountain made underneath.

At last the old man playing white put a stone down in the lower left, and the old man playing black looked at it for a while, and then put his hand flat on the board, which is how you resign.



They both looked up at Wang Zhi.

One of them said, in a perfectly friendly way: *Are you not going home?*

And Wang Zhi said yes, of course, and turned around to pick up his axe.

The head of it was lying on the rock in a ring of red scale. The handle was gone. Not broken — gone, rotted through and fallen away to a brown line in the dirt in the shape of where it had been, the way wood goes when it has been lying outdoors for many years.

He looked at it. Then he looked back at the slab.

There was nobody there.

He went down the mountain carrying the axe head, and the gully came out somewhere he did not recognize, and the path at the bottom was in the wrong place, and when he got to his village the village was the wrong shape.

The houses were not the houses. The big tree at the head of the lane was gone and there was a bigger one somewhere else. He went to his own door and a woman he had never seen opened it and asked him what he wanted.

He gave his name and asked for his family.

She thought about it, and went and asked somebody older, and that person went and asked somebody older still, and eventually a very old man came out into the lane and looked at Wang Zhi for a long moment and said that there had been a Wang Zhi, and that he had been the old man's own great-grandfather's uncle, and that he had gone up the mountain for wood one morning and had not come back, and that they had looked for a week.

A young woodcutter standing at the door of a house in a village that has changed, holding a rusted axe head, while a very old man in the lane counts on his fingers and strangers gather

Wang Zhi asked how long ago.

The old man had to count it on his fingers, and got to something over a hundred years, and said so.

That is the end of the story in most tellings, and it stops there deliberately.

The mountain has been called Lanke ever since. *Lan* is rotted, *ke* is an axe handle: **Rotted Handle Mountain**. And the phrase *lanke* went into the Chinese language and is still in it, meaning the sensation of time having gone somewhere while you were not attending to it. There is a poem by Meng Jiao and another by Bai Juyi that use it and expect you to know it. Chinese chess and go players call the game itself *lanke* as a nickname, which is the darkest possible joke about the sport and is meant affectionately.

I want to say one thing about what the story is doing, because it is easy to read it as a warning and I do not think it is one.

The obvious reading is: do not idle, or your life will pass. That reading has been available for fifteen hundred years and plenty of tellers have used it, usually while addressing the young.

But look at what Wang Zhi actually watched. He watched two masters play one complete game of weiqi, from the first stone to the resignation, at a level no human being would ever reach. He stood there for the whole of it, and he was not bored, and when it was over he was ready to go home.

He lost a century for it.

The story does not tell you that he was wrong. It has never told you that. It tells you the price, exactly, in the one image of the ring of rust and the brown line in the dirt, and then it puts him at his own door talking to a stranger, and then it stops and lets you sit with the arithmetic yourself.

Everybody who hears it does the same sum, and everybody comes out somewhere slightly different, and that is why it has lasted.

Where this story lives

Lanke Mountain (Lanke Shan) is about ten kilometers from the center of **Quzhou**, in western Zhejiang — a couple of hours from Hangzhou by train. It is not a big mountain and it is a pleasant half-day.

The site includes the **stone bridge** — a large natural rock arch, the thing the mountain is actually famous for geologically — and a flat area presented as the **chess-playing rock**, with a stone go board on it and, inevitably, two stone old men. There is a Taoist temple, Chongzhen Guan, and a small museum on the history of weiqi, because Lanke has been designated the symbolic origin site of go culture in China and Quzhou leans into this heavily. There is an international go tournament held here.

The source. The earliest surviving version is in the *Shuyi Ji*, a collection of strange stories compiled by Ren Fang around the year 500, and it is only a few lines long — everything above is fifteen centuries of accretion. Ren Fang's version has the woodcutter given a date stone to suck, has the handle rot, and ends with the villagers not knowing him. It does not say how long. The hundred years came later, and other tellers have made it three hundred, or seven generations.

The pattern. Stories of a mortal spending an afternoon among immortals and losing a lifetime turn up independently all over the world — Rip Van Winkle, Oisín in Tír na nÓg, the Seven Sleepers, Urashima Tarō. Zhejiang has two of its own: this one, and the tale of Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao, who went up Mount Tiantai to gather herbs and came home to their seventh-generation descendants.

A single black game stone

14. The Silkworm Mother

The horse-headed goddess — Huzhou and Jiaxing

A single silkworm resting on one mulberry leaf

This is the strangest story in the book and it is also the one that was believed the hardest, by the most people, for the longest time, and it is worth knowing why.

The flat country in the north of Zhejiang, between Lake Tai and the sea, is silk country. Mulberry trees, canals, and small towns, and for something like four thousand years the economy of every household in it ran on an insect.

Silk is a difficult crop and an unforgiving one. The worms hatch in spring and eat mulberry leaf continuously for about a month, and during that month the household does nothing else. They are fed through the night. They are kept at a temperature you must hold by hand, with braziers and doors. They are silent, and then — as they grow — they are loud, a sound like heavy rain that comes up through the floor of the house. They are vulnerable to cold, to damp, to smell, to loud noise, to a stranger walking into the room. A bad year is not a poor harvest. A bad year is the entire crop dead in a day, and the family with nothing.

So the silk districts prayed. Constantly, systematically, and to a goddess of their own.

Her name is Can Hua Niangniang — the Silkworm Flower Lady — or in the older books Ma Tou Niang, the Horse-Headed Girl. And in every image of her she is a young woman wrapped in a horse's hide.

Here is why.

There was a man in the old times who went away — to war, in most versions, or on a long journey he could not get out of — and left his daughter alone on the farm with the animals. She was young. She had nobody. The nearest neighbors were far, and the months went by, and she got frightened in the way you get frightened when there is no news at all.

The only thing on the farm with any spirit in it was her father's stallion.

She looked after him, and talked to him, because there was nobody else, and one evening she said the thing that starts the story. She said it into his neck, half joking, the way you say things to an animal:

If you could bring my father home, I would marry you.

The horse broke the stall that night.

He was gone for days. And then he came up the road with her father on his back — found him, somehow, at whatever distance, and brought him — and the father came into the yard astonished and gave the horse the best of everything, and the horse would not eat it.

He would not eat at all. He stood in the stall. And whenever the girl crossed the yard he screamed and threw himself at the boards, over and over, until the timber cracked.

Her father asked her what was going on, and eventually she told him.

What he did next is the thing the story turns on, and no version softens it. He took a bow and killed the horse in the stall. Then he skinned it, and pegged the hide out in the yard to dry, and told his daughter it was finished and she was not to think about it again.

Some days later she was out in the yard with a friend, and she walked past the hide, and she was still young enough to be angry rather than frightened. She kicked it. She said something like: *You were an animal. What did you think would happen?*

The hide came up off the ground.

It came up and went around her — the whole skin, closing — and it lifted her over the wall and out of the yard, and her friend stood screaming in the dust, and by the time anybody got to the road they were gone.

They found her three days later, in a mulberry tree.

She was not a girl any more and she was not gone either. Wrapped around a branch, in a case of pale thread, working — head moving in the figure-eight that every silk farmer in that province could recognize at fifty paces — was a large white worm with a blunt head. And on the head, unmistakably, in the shape of the mouth and the two dark marks above it, was the face of a horse.

> A village procession beside a canal at spring festival, women with paper flowers pinned in their hair carrying trays toward a small temple, boats crowded along the bank

That is the story. And the reason it was believed is that it is describing something you can go and look at.

A silkworm's head does look like a horse's. It is a genuinely striking resemblance and it is the first thing anybody notices the first time they look at one closely. The Chinese name for the silkworm's head shape refers to it directly. The worm spins by moving its head in a figure eight, thousands of times, for three days, until it has wound itself into a single continuous thread up to nine hundred meters long — and then it stops, and it is sealed in, and if you want the silk you must kill it in the cocoon before it hatches and cuts the thread on its way out.

That is the other half of it, and it is why the goddess is shaped like a debt.

Every reeling season the women of those villages dropped live cocoons into hot water by the thousand. They knew exactly what they were doing. And the story they told about the origin of the whole business was a story about a girl who was owed something, who did not pay, and who was taken and turned into the thing that pays forever.

They built her temples. They held a festival for her at the start of every season — the Silkworm Flower Festival, in the second and third lunar months, with paper flowers pinned in the women's hair and a procession down the canal to the temple, and the flowers taken home afterward and put above the trays where the worms would hatch. During the feeding month the houses were closed to visitors and a mark was put on the door, and you did not knock. You did not shout in the lane. Weddings and funerals were postponed. Cooking smells were controlled. For four weeks the human beings in those towns arranged their entire lives around the comfort of a caterpillar, and they did it under the eye of a woman in a horse's skin.

The Silkworm Flower Festival is still held, at Hanshan in Tongxiang and in a dozen other towns, and it is now a heritage event with tourists. The women still pin the paper flowers in their hair.

Where this story lives

The silk country is the Hangjiahu plain — Hangzhou, Jiaxing, Huzhou — in the flat north of the province. This is one of the oldest continuously producing silk regions on earth: the earliest silk fabric ever found, dated to around 2700 BC, was excavated at **Qianshanyang** in Huzhou.

Hanshan (Han Mountain) in Tongxiang, near Wuzhen, holds the biggest surviving **Silkworm Flower Festival** (Wangcan Hui), around the Qingming period in early April. It was inscribed on the national intangible heritage list in 2008. Expect boats, opera, and a great many paper flowers.

The China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, on the south side of West Lake, is the largest silk museum in the world and is free. It has live silkworms in season.

Wuzhen and **Nanxun**, both canal towns in this district, are where the silk money went; Nanxun in particular is full of enormous nineteenth-century merchant houses built by families who made fortunes in raw silk.

The source. The horse-hide story is written down in the *Soushen Ji*, Gan Bao's collection of strange tales from about the year 350, which makes it at least seventeen hundred years old. It is a foundation myth of Chinese sericulture, and it sits alongside the more official myth of **Leizu**, the Yellow Emperor's consort, who is credited with discovering silk when a cocoon fell into her tea. Leizu is the version the court honored. The horse-headed girl is the version the villages actually prayed to.

One closed silk cocoon

15. The Lake at the Top of the Mountains

Yandang — Wenzhou

One wild goose in flight, wings extended

Down the coast in the south of the province the land does something it does nowhere else in China.

The Yandang range is the wreck of a volcano — a caldera about a hundred million years old, weathered since into a district of vertical rock: spires, blades, freestanding columns, cliffs with waterfalls coming off them in a single drop, and gorges so narrow that the sky is a strip. It rains constantly. The cloud comes up the valleys in the afternoon and the peaks go in and out of it, and the whole range spends most of the year looking like a painting somebody has not finished.

The story of the name is short, and I have put it last because it is the smallest story in the book and because I think it is the best one.

There is a lake at the top.

Not a large one. A shallow reed lake in a saddle near the highest peak, above the cliffs, sitting in the rock where no lake ought to be, filling with rain and never quite emptying. Getting up to it is a serious walk even now.

And every autumn, when the geese come down the coast — the wild geese, in the long lines they fly in, going south ahead of the cold — some of them break off from the flock and come down onto that lake, and stay the winter, and go north again in spring.

The people below could see them. That is the whole thing. From the villages in the valleys you could look up on an October evening and watch a line of geese leave the flock and go up over the cliffs and down out of sight into the rock, and know that there was water up there, and that the geese knew about it.

So they called the mountains **Yandang**: *yan*, the wild goose, and *dang*, a lake of reeds. The Goose Reed-Lake Mountains.

That is it. There is no king in it, no monk, no immortal, and nobody is punished.

It is worth pausing on what that name is, because it is not really a story about geese. It is a piece of information, compressed and made memorable, and passed down.

The people who named that range had never been to the top of it. It is likely that for centuries almost nobody had. But somebody stood in a field at the bottom in autumn and watched where the birds went, and worked out from that what must be up there, and named the entire mountain range after a lake they had never seen — on the evidence of birds.

That is a piece of reasoning. It is the same move as the woodcutter's rotted axe handle and the same move as Yu the Great's dredged channels: look carefully at the thing in front of you, and take seriously what it implies.

A shallow reed lake in a rocky saddle high above the cliffs, wild geese settling onto the water among the reeds, cloud pouring over the rim

The mountains kept the name and eventually the reputation caught up with them. In the Tang and the Song, monks came in and built temples in the gorges — a hundred and eight of them at the peak, though most are gone. Poets came, and the Yandang range became one of the standard subjects. Xu Xiake, the great travel writer of the Ming, climbed here twice and wrote it up, and his account is the reason a lot of people still come.

And the geese still come. There are fewer than there were. The lake at the top is still there, still shallow, still full of reeds, and if you make the walk in October you may see them, and if you do, you will be looking at the fact that a name was built out of.

Where this story lives

Yandang Mountain (Yandangshan) is in Yueqing, in the north of Wenzhou prefecture, on the southern Zhejiang coast. It is a UNESCO Global Geopark and one of the classic scenic mountains of China, and it is far less crowded than the northern equivalents.

The range is usually divided into three main areas. **Lingfeng** — the spires — is best at dusk, when the guides walk you through in near-darkness and the rock formations resolve into shapes: a pair of lovers, a hawk, an old man. **Lingyan** has the deepest gorge and the rope-walking performances between the cliff faces, which have been done here for generations and are not for people with a fear of heights. **Dalongqiu** is the great waterfall — a single drop of about 190 meters, which in the wet season is one of the most impressive sights in eastern China and in a dry autumn is a damp streak on a rock.

The lake itself — **Yanhu**, the goose lake — is up near Baigang Peak, the high point of the range at 1,057 meters. It is a hike, not a cable car.

Getting there: Yueqing or Yandangshan station on the coastal high-speed line, about four hours from Hangzhou or two from Wenzhou.

Best season: October and November for the geese and the clear air; spring for the waterfall. The cloud is a permanent feature and should be treated as part of the attraction rather than a problem.

A single reed stem with seed head

Afterword: On Retelling

Every story in this book has been told better by somebody else, in Chinese, out loud, to people who already knew it.

That is the condition of folklore and there is no way around it. A written version is a photograph of a living animal. What you lose is the thing the teller was doing with their face, and the pause before the part everybody is waiting for, and the fact that the audience knows the ending and is not there for the ending.

What a written version can do is carry the story somewhere it would not otherwise go, and be checkable, and say where it got things.

So, briefly, on method.

I have worked from the standard written sources where they exist — Gan Bao's *Soushen Ji* for the silkworm, Ren Fang's *Shuyi Ji* for the axe handle, the Ming vernacular collections for the White Snake, the local gazetteers of Shaoxing, Ningbo, Quzhou, and Longquan for the rest — and from the twentieth-century folklore collections that recorded oral versions from actual tellers, which are in many cases the only reason we have anything but the literary skeleton.

Where versions conflict, I have said so in the notes rather than quietly picking one and presenting it as the story. Where a story has been substantially reshaped over time — and the White Snake and Xi Shi both have been, dramatically, and in ways that tell you a great deal about the centuries doing the reshaping — I have tried to say what changed and roughly when.

I have not invented incidents. I have invented sentences. Every one of these tales in its source form is shorter than what you have just read, sometimes by a great deal; Ren Fang's original of the axe handle is under a hundred characters. Expanding that into fifteen hundred words means supplying weather, rooms, gestures, and interior states that no source provides. That is what retelling is. I have tried to keep the invention in the texture and out of the plot.

Two of the tales here are historically anchored to real, documented people — Qian Liu and his seawall, Liang Shanbo and his magistracy at Yin County — and in those I have tried to keep the line visible between what is in the record and what the storytellers added. The record is usually duller and occasionally better.

One last thing.

I have called these Zhejiang stories, and they are, in the sense that Zhejiang is where they are pinned and where they are told. But almost none of them are exclusively Zhejiang's. The Butterfly Lovers are claimed by four provinces. The White Snake spends half her story in Jiangsu. Yu the Great belongs to the whole country and is merely buried here. Folklore does not respect provincial boundaries and was in circulation long before most of these boundaries existed.

What Zhejiang has, more than a monopoly, is a habit: the habit of attaching a story to a specific rock and then keeping the rock. It is why you can still go to the bridge, and the well, and the pool with seven springs in it, and the flat stone in the stream where a girl washed silk. The stories are not preserved here. They are *situated* here, which is a stronger thing, and it is why they have lasted.

Go and stand at some of them.

The Fifteen Tales, by Region

Hangzhou *1. The Lake That Fell From Heaven — West Lake 2. The White Snake — Broken Bridge, Leifeng Pagoda 3. The Peak That Flew — Lingyin, Feilai Feng 4. The Dragon of the Well — Longjing 5. The King Who Shot the Tide — the Qiantang bore*

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A Short Glossary

bodhisattva *— in Mahayana Buddhism, one who has attained enlightenment but remains in the world to help others. Guanyin is the most widely venerated in China.*

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celadon (*qingci*) — high-fired stoneware with a green-to-blue iron glaze. The Longquan kilns are its most important center.

Guanyin — the bodhisattva of compassion; originally the male Avalokiteshvara, depicted as female in China from roughly the Tang onward.

huangjiu — "yellow wine." Brewed grain wine, typically 14–18%, of which Shaoxing is the definitive style.

li — a traditional unit of distance, standardized in the modern era at 500 meters.

qi — breath, vital energy; the animating principle in Chinese medicine, martial arts, and geomancy.

Qingming — the tomb-sweeping festival, around 4–6 April, and the solar term of the same name. The tea picked before it is the year's most valuable.

sericulture — the raising of silkworms and production of raw silk.

weiqi — the board game known in the West by its Japanese name, go.

Wuyue — the kingdom centered on Hangzhou, 907–978, founded by Qian Liu. One of the Ten Kingdoms.

Yue — the ancient state occupying roughly modern Zhejiang, destroyed by Chu in 306 BC. The character is still the one-syllable abbreviation for the province of Guangdong's neighbor and appears throughout Zhejiang place names.

About This Book

The Lake That Fell From Heaven is a collection of fifteen retold folk tales from Zhejiang Province, China, with notes on the real places each one belongs to.

The illustrations were produced with AI image generation tools. The text was written with AI assistance and edited by the author.

If you found an error — and in a book that touches this many places, dates, and disputed versions there will be some — the author would genuinely like to know.

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