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# TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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## “A TRAVEL TO THE CAVE OF IMMORTALS” — A LOST NOVEL OF THE TANG PERIOD\*

**Abstract.** The present articles deals with the Tang dynasty novel “Yu xian ku” (“遊仙窟”, “A Travel to the Cave of Immortals”) that had long been thought lost and re-introduced into science only at the beginning of the 20th century. This novel is emblematic, being the first comprehensive composition in the *chuanqi* genre (傳奇) that shaped many of its characteristics which became standard over time.

**Key words:** China, history of Chinese culture, Tang dynasty story, *chuanqi*, “Yu xian ku”, Zhang Zhuo, China and Japan

“Yu xian ku” (“遊仙窟”, “A Travel to the cave of the immortals”) is a story of a relatively difficult fate [1]. The author of “Yu xian ku”, a Tang official and man of letters Zhang Zhuo (張鷟, 658—730), is equally known by his second name of Zhang Wen-cheng (張文成) [2]. His formidable abilities manifested themselves from early age, and he soon became an important and respected figure in the literary circle of early-Tang China. However, information on his life is scattered and sometimes contradictory [3]. It is known that Zhan Zhuo passed state exams for the *jinsi* (進士) degree in 675 at the age of 18, which was a great achievement on its own [4]. Then he started his service as a county and provincial official, served in the capital cities of Luoyang and Chang'an, received an appointment to the Yushitai, or censorate, but being quicktempered, straightforward and unaccustomed to conceal his viewpoint, he was quickly out of favour with none other than Yao Chong, (姚崇, 650—721) advisor to the Emperor, and was soon taken to prison following an allegation by another censor, Li Quan-jiao (李全交, second half of the 7th — first half of the 8th centuries), and later exiled in a lessened rank to the south of the then China, where the climate was deemed destructive of health. Some time later, Zhan Zhuo was returned to the capital at a low court rank but soon died. Contemporaries considered Zhan Zhuo an outstanding master of literary style, with his works widely known; Zhan Zhuo was even referred to as *qing-tong xueshi* (“青銅學士”, “a learned man of Bronze coin”) meaning that every word he wrote was well wor-

thy of a copper. Zhan Zhuo's fame went beyond the Heavenly Empire: it is known that ambassadors arriving from Japan or Korean peninsula spared no money to get hold of Zhan Zhuo's poetry and prose. His extant work includes the “Chao ye qian zai” (“朝野僉載”, “A Complete Collection [of News] from the Court and the Outskirts”) in six *juans* and the story titled “Yu xian ku”.

This work is dated by Li Shi-ren (李世人, b. 1949) and Zhan Xu-zuo (詹緒左, b. 1958) between 681 and 684, when Zhan Zhuo was still a young man [5]. “Yu xian ku” is not included in any bibliography; for many years, this work had been considered lost. Zhang Zhuo's story only appears in the catalogue of books found in Japan and belonging to the extraordinary Qing scholar, bibliographer, collector and connoisseur of antiquity, Yang Shou-jing (楊守敬, 1839—1915), which contains a mention of a one-*juan* “Yu xian ku” text printed in Japan with a beginning phrase stating: “Written by a bailiff of the Xianglexian county of the Ningzhou region Zhang Wen-cheng” [6]. Meanwhile, Zhang Zhuo's novel was extremely popular in Japan where it appeared in the first half of the 8th century: the earliest full hand-written copy is dated 1344, and a wood-engraving dates back to 1652 [7]. He Man-zi (何滿子, 1919—2099) notes that the echoes of the “Yu xian ku” contents can be found in the creative heritage of such Japanese poets as Yamanoue-no Okura (山上憶良, 660?—733?) and Otomo-no Yakamoti (大伴家持, 718—785) [8]. Upon its return to the homeland at the end of the 19th century, “Yu xian ku” was distributed in the form of manuscripts and wood-engravings; for instance, Wang

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Bi-jiang (汪辟疆, 1887—1966), author of one of the modern critiques of the novel, was drawing upon a xylograph from the "Gu yi cong shu" series ("古逸叢書", "Lost in the Remote Ages") as well as other copies available to him [9]. However, in 2010 a critique by Li Shi-ren and Zhan Xu-zuo was published in Beijing that should be deemed an exemplary edition of "Yu xian ku" for the decades to come [10].

Oh these mountains called Jishishan, they are to the south-west of Jincheng, there where [Huang]he carries its waters, and the lines of "Shu Jing" — "[Yu], driving the bed of [Huang]he and stacking stones in piles, has reached Longmen" — are just about these mountains. Your humble narrator, having left Qianlong, went to be in service in Heyuan, — oh what a hard journey it was, and how far it took me from my home grounds, alas! In the olden times, Zhang Qian was coming here — [following] the countless *li* of stormy; here the great Yu already stepped on the mountain steeps two thousand years ago. Around, there are only desolate gorges surrounded by ranges of cliffs; the peaks obscure the skies, sharp as knife edges. Magnificent is the sunrise fog, and transparent the mountain springs, — as if a miracle descended from heavens, the beauty so rare in the human world. Never have I seen nor heard of such a beauty!

By evening shadow horses all tired out, and men, too, [we] have just reached a spot on a forbiddingly steep slope. Look up, and all you see for many *cun* is a dark wall, look down, and there is but turquoise waters thousands of *ren* deep; as ancient elders tell us, that is the place of the cave of the travelling divine immortals. Men are rare visitors here, with only birds flying by... [11].

This is the opening of the novel (though judging by its size it could be classified as a story; it contains more than ten thousand hieroglyphs). The locality where the action proceeds is quite precisely identified, the narrative is in the first person (in most cases it is introduced with the word *yu* "余", "I", — and the reader is expected to think that everything described happened with the author himself, i. e. with Zhang Zhuo. Intending to reach the legendary cave, he spends three days in meditation and fasting, clearing his thoughts, upon which he steps on a light boat, clad in simple clothes, and sails to a shore where he sees a girl (her name is Gui-xin (桂心)) washing laundry. Here what we can call the rising action is ended.

Asking the girl to accommodate him for the night, Zhang Zhuo finds himself in a reed hut at the gate of a house where, according to the girl, lives the tenth Cui lady, Cui Shi-niang (崔十娘), a seventeen-year old young woman of a noble family and amazing loveliness. What follows is a poetic correspondence between the main character and Cui; in order to explain his feelings, Zhang Zhuo writes Cui several letters and then meets the beauty. Finally, they introduce themselves to each other, and Zhang Zhuo is invited into house with all appropriate ceremonies, and the luxurious interiors of the house seem to match a tenement of the immortals.

The heart stopped beating from all the pearls and jades; eyes saw but ripples from the gold and silver. Five-colour floormats made of precious herbs; carpets adorned with silver ornament; *kangs* carved of ivory and brocaded mattresses... [12]

There enters another character: the Fifth aunt (五嫂), a damsel of nineteen; and a feast begins accompanied with music, singing, dancing, an unstoppable exchange of poetic improvisations and a walk in the garden of fairytale beauty. The Fifth aunt takes upon the role of matchmaker as Zhang Zhuo, the worse for the drink, openly confesses his desire to share the bed with charming Cui; this is what happens in the end. At sunrise the lovers, bidding their farewells, exchange gifts and poems, and Zhang Zhuo leaves in sadness and heartache. The climax of the novel is drawn long as poetic good byes take a long time.

The main time of action is just one night; in the opinion of the Taiyuan philologist Wang Zeng-bin (王增斌, b. 1953), the main character spent no more than thirty six hours in the abode of the immortals [13]. The story is quite unsophisticated, essentially presenting to us another version of a story of marriage to a magical maiden and visit to the tenement of the immortals (here, in particular, two immortal women, Cui Shi-niang and the Fifth aunt), but at a completely new artistic level: "Yu xian ku" is rich in colourful descriptions, variety of detail of dress and appearance of the characters, description of the feast with multiple and elaborate dialogues. The text of the novel is organized as rhythmic prose, with four to six hieroglyphs on each line, and it is a difficult task to make this style sound alive. Nevertheless, Zhang Zhuo successfully navigates the style and achieves a lively voice. "Yu xian ku" does not leave an impression of ornate and mannered, cold and artificial construction, which is achieved through the use of the vernacular contemporary to the author, contributing to the convincing and vivid narrative [14]. It is especially true of the dialogues, for instance, in a table game where everyone losing a turn shall drink a cup:

— ...Do not you laugh at me! Let's try some paired lines, six symbols each, I'd love to play against mister government servant for some wine! — said Shi-niang with a smile.

— I, miserable man, cannot play for wine, — replied your humble narrator. — But I would like to play for a night with the lady.

— What does it mean "to play for a night"? — asked Shi-niang.

I proceeded:

— If you lose, you will spend the night with the miserable me, but should I lose, then I will spend the night with you!

— A Han is riding on a donkey, and a nomad goes on foot — or a nomad goes on foot and a Han rides on a donkey! — laughed Shi-niang. — Whoever loses, you are winning anyway! However you alternate, it is good for you, mister government official, this way or the other!

— Why talk about losing or winning, — told her the Fifth aunt. — One thing I know that this night, my lady, this is inevitable for you! [15]

Hou Zhong-yi (侯忠義, b. 1936) thinks that this dialogue is very typical for a sing-song girl and her guest coming to use her services [16]. At any rate, it is necessary to observe that the images of the immortals in “Yu xian ku”, both of Cui Shi-niang and the Fifth aunt — are dramatically different from similar characters of the Luzhou prose, specifically, by their mundanity, commonplaceness, “folksiness”, if you will. Their words are simple and behaviour not much different from regular mortal women; such immortal maidens appear for the first time in Chinese prose in Zhang Zhou's novel [17]. It hardly can be source of doubt that the author, drawing upon the preceding tradition, created an original work, though many aspects remain quite traditional and well known in pre-Tang literature (a remote spot in the mountains, heavenly interiors of the lodgings of local inhabitants, a rendez-vous with an otherworldly beautiful girl from the heavenly world), and the text itself is evidently fruit of the author's imagination. “Yu xian ku” is the earliest Tang novel describing romantic feelings of a learned man and book lover to a beautiful girl of the heavens. “In general, in the history of our literature, this is undoubtedly the first

interesting narrative about love”, wrote Zheng Zhen-duo (鄭振鐸, 1898—1958) [18]. “We could call ‘A Travel to the Cave of the Immortals’ an important landmark in the development of romance novel in the history of Chinese literature” [19]. It is truly so.

A great role in the structure of “Yu xian ku” is given to poems; the novel comprises eighty-four poetic inserts of varying size (fifty pentasyllabic four-line poems, eleven pentasyllabic eight-line poems as well as quadrisyllabic four-line poems, heptasyllabic four-line poems, one sexisyllabic eight-liner and one heptasyllabic six-liner alongside with compositions of irregular length), which amounts to almost a half of the total text. As Chinese scholars observe, some of the poems have a distinct folk flavour or at least are substantially influenced by the street singing style [20]. Poems here are used to convey the characters' feelings, and it is the first such instance in the history of the Chinese *xiaoshuo* prose: “in ‘A Travel to the Cave of Immortals’ poems are used to demonstrate feelings, to flirt and tease as well as to develop feelings” [21]. Before he even saw Cui Shi-niang but heard her play *guzhen*, main character immediately composes a poem imbued with feeling and sends it to the girl. Zhang Zhuo basically lay down the tradition of using poems in this particular way within a story narrative, and “Yu xian ku” can be called the first comprehensive *chuanqi* novel [22].

## Notes

1. The translation of the title as suggested by A. G. Storozhuk is “Cave of Immortals” (Storozhuk, 2010: 371). The English version proposed by J. Hightower is “Dalliance in the Abode of Immortals” (Hightower, 1973: 90); W. Nienhauser suggested “Grotto of Playful Transcendents” (Mair, 2001: 583).

2. There is no consensus as to when Zhang Zhuo was born and died. He Man-zi supposed that the dates were 660?—740 (He Man-zi, 1988: 20). Based on historical sources, Ma Xue-qin (馬雪芹, b. 1950) defines his lifetime as 648—722 (Ma Xue-qin, 2001: 63—64); based on the same sources, Xiao Xiang-kai considers that Zhang Zhuo was born approximately in 656, and died in about 728 (Xiao Xiang-kai, 2002: 63—64). Wang Ke (王珂, b. 1981) thinks that Zhang Zhuo was born between 658 and 662 and died between 731 and 735 (Wang Ke, 2006: 53). I am drawing upon currently the most recent summarized study of Zhang Ke's biography undertaken by Li Shi-ren and Zhan Xu-zuo, see: Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010: 433—455.

3. Mainly, it refers to the mentions of various incidents of Zhang Zhuo's own life in his own “Chao ye qian zai” along with various later collections of *xiaoshuo* and *biji*; an official biography of Zhang Zhuo does not exist, but there are some details contained in the biography of his grandson Zhan Jian (張薦, 744—804) (“Jiu tang shu” (“舊唐書”, “An Old History of Tang”), *juan* 149, “Xin tang shu” (“新唐書”, “A New History of Tang”), *juan* 161). For more on Zhang Zhuo see in the works listed in note 2, especially articles by Li Shi-ren and Zhan Xu-zuo, as well as foreword and appendices to: Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010. Also see: Liu Zhen-lun, 1987; Cui Lan-hai, 2013.

4. According to the data available, Zhang Zhuo passed various qualifying examinations in 675, 677, 706 and 711, which gave him further promotion up the career ladder every time.

5. Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010: 5.

6. See: Xie Cheng-ren, 1988, vol. 8, 215—216. Yang Shou-jing went to Japan in 1880 and paid visits to numerous book archives, both private and public, and acquired, over the course of one year and by various means, many old, rare or lost (in China) works. He also created a fifteen-*juan* annotated descriptions of everything he managed to find, “*Ri ben fang shu zhi*” (“日本訪書志”, “Notes About the Books Found in Japan”), which remains a relevant bibliographic source. Several years later, many of the books that Yang Shou-jing brought from Japan were published with his assistance in a xylographic series of “*Gu yi cong shu*”.

Ningzhou — a Tang region transformed from a military district in 618 and existing until 742, upon which it was transformed back into a military district, but in 758 remade as Ningzhou. It was located in the present-day Gansu province.

7. For more on Japanese copies of “Yu xian ku”, see: Li Shi-ren, Zhan Xu-zuo, 2006-2. More on Japanese commentary to the text of the novel can be found in: Egan, 1976. Some Chinese scholars even voiced an opinion that Japanese ambassadors had purchased the “Yu xian ku” manuscript immediately upon its completion, which is why there was not a single copy left in China (see: Wang Zhi-zhong, 1991: 41). There are other viewpoints as well: “Perhaps because of the salacious banter bordering on the pornographic, the text was lost in China soon after its composition and was preserved only in Japan” (Mair, 2001: 583).

8. He Man-zi, 1989: 19. He Man-zi underscores the substantial influence of "Yu xian ku" on old Japanese literature, in particular, such works as "Genji monogatari" ("源氏無語", "The Tale of Genji"). More details on the spread of "Yu xian ku" in Japan and its influences on the Japanese literature can be found in: Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010: 41—59. See also: Ma Xing-guo, 1987.

9. Wang Bi-jiang's copy was published as part of his "Tangzhen xiaoshuo" ("唐人小說", "Prose of Tang Authors") in 1959; since then it has been republished a number of times, with one of the most recent editions coming out in 1973, — here "Yu xian ku" is placed on pp. 19—36 along with textological comments. This is not the first critique of "Yu xian ku": in 1929, Chuang Dao (川島, 1901—1981, real name 章廷謙, Zhang Ting-qian) published his version in Beijing (republished in 1989), and in 1955 Shanghai saw a publication of a critical analysis prepared by Fang Shi-min. All of these editions have their drawbacks. Certainly, "Yu xian ku" was published numerous times as part of anthologies and collections, for instance, in Li Jian-guo, 2007, vol. 1: 41—75, there is a very detailed text commentary; or in Yuan Lü-kun, Xue Hong-ji (eds.) (2001), vol. 1: 15—32, where the text of the story is accompanied with a translation to modern Chinese.

10. Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010. This 525-page volume came as a result of many years of research of its authors taking into consideration all of the most up-to-date findings about "Yu xian ku" and includes a critically restored text of Zhang Zhuo's novel checked against all known Japanese copies, both hand-written and xylographic. The text is supplemented with a detailed semantic and textological commentary on 395 pages. The novel is prefaced with a foreword, and an appendix includes articles on Zhang Zhuo by Li Shi-ren and Zhan Xu-zuo that had been previously published independently and delved on the author's life, circumstances around the creation of "Yu xian ku", hand-written and xylographic Japanese copies and their peculiarities, the novel's lexicon and difficult or ambiguous parts in various old copies of "Yu xian ku". This edition can be decidedly recommended as a must-read for any specialist studying Zhang Zhuo's novel.

11. Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010: 1—2. Jishishan, or Anematsen, mountains are located in today's Gansu province, on the border of Qinghai in the system of Kunlun Mountains with Huanghe wrapping around Jishishan on the south.

Jincheng is the name of a prefecture-level city of the Lanzhou region (located on the territory of the present-day Gansu as well). Longmen here stands for the today's Luoyang (Henan).

Qianlong, that is the Longzhou region, the territory of which is today occupied by the Long xian county of the Shaanxi province; Longzhou used to be named Jianianjun at some point, and the administrative centre of the region was the Jianyuanxian county. Apparently, Zhang Zhuo was passing by Longzhou on his travel from Ningzhou to his new office elsewhere. In 677 in Ningzhou Zhang Zhuo received an appointment to Heyuan, a military district where now stands the city of Xining, capital of the Qinghai province. It is known that Zhang Zhou was appointed to Heyuan in 680 or 681.

Zhang Qian (張騫, ?—114 BC), a famous Chinese traveler, was sent by Emperor Wu of Han to go to the West but was taken captive along the way by nomads and stayed with them

for ten years; when Zhan Qian was released, he reached Bactria and returned to China three years later.

*Cun* — an ancient unit of length, equivalent to about 2.5 metres at the Tang time; *ren* — an ancient unit of length, a bit over 1.8 metres.

12. Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010: 10.

13. Wang Zeng-bin, 2003: 60. In relation to this see an original research by Utiyama Tinari (内山知也, b. 1926) detailing the entire historical context of the narrative: Utiyama, 2010: 109—139.

14. Four examples of lexical peculiarity of "Yu xian ku", see: Pan Xiao-qi, 2008; see also: Zhao Jin-ming, 1995; Li Shi-ren, Zhan Xu-zuo, 2006-1.

15. Zhang Wen-cheng, 2010: 15, 246. "A Han is riding on a donkey..." — Li Shi-ren and Zhan Xu-zuo believe that this is some sort of folk expression that was in use during Tang time.

16. Hou Zhong-yi, 1990: 213. Chen Wen-xin is more straightforward: "With the arrival of the Tang era it became customary for men of literature to use the term 'immortal' ('仙') to denote sing-song girls or girls enchanting with their beauty. Therefore, the 'Cave of the Immortals' is nothing other than a brothel, Shi-niang — a prostitute, and the ever-present Fifth aunt — her 'madam'" (Chen Wen-xin, 2002: 194). In other words, some Chinese researches suggest to interpret this novel as a real event report about a visit to the gorgeous sing-song girl, albeit in a fantastic setting and in a highly poetic language. It is worth noting here that the term *ji* ("妓"), that is usually rendered as "sing-song girl" should not be understood to mean "prostitute", "fallen woman" at the Tang time.

An elegant educated girl well-versed in calligraphy, poetry, singing and dancing, who gets invited to feasts of Confucian scholars, is far from what defines a prostitute, even of a higher rank. Moreover, it is common knowledge that in Old China a court ruling was needed to turn a female criminal or a criminal's female relative into a prostitute in the common sense of the world; another source of the profession were women taken captive in military action... The social status of prostitutes from the lower social strata and sing-song-girls was radically different. The former could not marry freely; it was inconceivable to try and run a selection among them for the emperor's chambers. Whereas sing-song girls could have a master with whom they signed a contract, which allowed them to regain their freedom upon paying out the amount agreed upon.

Storozhuk, 2010: 119). More on sing-song girls at the Tang time and their relations with scholarly officials, see: Ping Yao, 2002.

17. More on the use of colloquial and folk lexicon in "Yu xian ku", see: Waley, 1966.

18. Zheng Zhen-duo, 1982, vol. 2: 381.

19. Xiang Kai, 1998: 42.

20. See: Zhang Mei, 2008. Summarizing observations of Japanese scholars, Utiyama Tinari writes that a range of poems from "Yu xian ku" represent borrowings of lines widely known at the time of the Tang dynasty (Utiyama, 2010: 109—110).

21. Bao Zheng-pei, Yu Yan-hua, 2005: 123.

22. On the role of poetry in "Yu xian ku", see: Zhang Mei, 2008. More on artistic features of this composition, see: Wang Zeng-bin, 2003; Yu Wei-na, 2006.

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