

王安憶：名旦之口

# The Mouth of the Famous Female Impersonator

By Wang Anyi

Translated by Zhu Zhiyu with Janice Wickeri

DR CHENG spent a full year in business and managed to lose every last penny of his small savings. He'd contemplated eating rat poison or jumping into the Huangpu River, he'd fingered the noose with which he could hang himself and the scissors with which he could stab himself in the throat, but in the end, he was dissuaded by the good and virtuous Mrs Cheng. Actually he didn't want to die. He did it all so that his wife might magnanimously grant him the opportunity to back down gracefully and go on living with a clear conscience. Having got what he wanted, he pulled himself together, resumed his old profession and opened a clinic.

Dr Cheng was trained in maxillofacial surgery, a field that received scant attention. It was a highly specialized profession, so specialized that there were few patients requiring treatment, so he did orthodontics on the side. That had kept him busy for a while, but once he'd closed down his former clinic the old patients drifted away and new ones didn't know about him yet. The street where his new clinic was located was like a plot of virgin soil, with all kinds of trades and professions springing up thick and fast like mushrooms. Doctors of every ilk, quack and professional, crowded in on Dr Cheng's place, so that though it was in the busiest part of the street, his doorway was quite forlorn.

*Born in Nanjing and brought up in Shanghai, Wang Anyi was sent down to Anhui in 1970 during the Cultural Revolution. In 1978 she returned to Shanghai, where she began her career as a writer. She has since won two national literary prizes for fiction. "The Mouth of the Famous Female Impersonator" is one of five tales published in Shanghai wenxue 1986 No. 1. The intriguing plots of these tales not only set them apart from Wang's other works, but are also rarely found in the works of other contemporary mainland Chinese writers.*

Down in the street there was a constant hustle and bustle of people and traffic. The signboards were overwhelming, each seemed bigger than the last, and come nightfall, they sparkled in dazzling neon, obscuring Dr Cheng's small, dark sign until it was all but invisible.

Days passed without Dr Cheng receiving a single patient. Finally a man did come, introduced by a friend, but only to have a tooth pulled. Dr Cheng was so infuriated that he almost threw him out. But as his wrath welled up into his face, it turned into an awkward smile. Before he realized what was happening, the patient had ensconced himself in the adjustable chair and, jaws wide open, displayed a mouthful of uneven teeth as yellow as wax. All Dr Cheng's resentment seemed to have become strength massed at the decayed tooth. He pulled it out in one go and threw it into the enamel basin where it landed with a clink, humiliating him anew. As the patient walked out moaning, his hand on his cheek, Dr Cheng picked up that dirty decayed tooth and tossed it out the window. It sketched a curve and fell into the bustling crowd without the slightest sound, like a grain of sand disappearing into the sea. The loneliness of the clinic was intensified by the thriving scene outside. As he gazed sadly about the solitary room, Dr Cheng lost himself in memories of the past.

The little property left to the two brothers by their father had all been rolled away at roulette by his big brother, twenty years his senior. When Cheng reached the age of sixteen and began to understand his rights, he asked his brother for his share of the property. Of course his brother had nothing to give him. Finally the two reached an agreement that the elder brother would pay for the other's schooling in Japan. So with the first semester's tuition, room and board in hand, Cheng set out across the sea. But enquiries concerning funds for the second semester turned up no trace whatsoever. He wrote letter after letter urging his brother to send the money but to no avail, though he kept writing until he had no money left for postage. Finally, one of his teachers took pity on him and offered him a job cleaning the laundry room so he could meet his tuition. But he still had no way to buy food. Man cannot live on books alone.

What terrible days those were! He was nothing but a beggar, really, dependent on the charity of his teachers and classmates. Mealtimes were hardest to bear. Everybody else would go to the canteen, but he . . . The thought brought tears to his eyes. He had been starving. He knew what it was to be hungry. To his mind, the experience of hunger alone was hardship enough for half a lifetime.

Fortunately he met another Chinese, a Mr Shen. A faint smile crept onto his lips at the thought of Mr Shen. Mr Shen ran a noodle shop. Being Chinese, they were related by soil if not by blood, and Mr Shen was very friendly to him. Occasionally he would treat him to a free bowl of noodles. Shen had come to Japan with nothing but the clothes on his back, and from that had built up his business into his present medium-sized shop. He was extremely clever. You could tell how gifted he was from the near-native quality of his Japanese. Dr Cheng thought it a shame that Mr Shen's talents should be frittered away in the company of noodles and soup. He threw all his energies into pressuring Mr Shen to abandon business for the scholar's life, describing the splendid prospects of a PhD to him.

Thinking back on it now, Dr Cheng was rather surprised that he should have so despised business as a calling when later it had seemed quite natural to abandon his medical career to become a businessman himself. The transition from one to the other had seemed so smooth and uneventful at the time. Perhaps that could be put down to the changing times.

But to get back to our story, Mr Shen had a very quick mind, he was never satisfied with things as they were, good could always be better. So he closed down his shop and followed Dr Cheng to school. Who would have thought that Mr Shen, who spoke such beautiful Japanese and did so well in business, would be so obtuse when it came to his studies—a complete block-head? He tried everything he could think of but all he got were “O’s”. People made fun of him: “He closed up his noodle shop to open one selling O-shaped dumplings.” For Dr Cheng’s stomach, however, this was a most satisfying period, for whenever mealtime came round, Mr Shen would ask Dr Cheng to join him. He would pay for the meal but he never made Dr Cheng feel embarrassed at accepting charity; instead, he always managed to impress upon Dr Cheng that it was an honour to eat with him. At this point in their studies, however, both of them had lost confidence in Mr Shen’s prospects. It was clear that he would get nothing out of it but “O-shaped dumplings” if he continued. He had to go back, rally his forces and revive his noodle shop. After a period of struggle, the shop gradually grew prosperous again. But that’s another story.

At this point in his reminiscences, Dr Cheng’s thoughts naturally turned to his own experience in business. He’d never expected to lose everything so quickly; it was quite a surprise. It seemed that one’s fate was preordained. One should be content with one’s lot and never overreach oneself. But, but . . . Dr Cheng “buted” a few more “buts” without getting anywhere. He still believed that there was a “but” somewhere, otherwise the whole thing would be left hanging. But what? He couldn’t put his finger on it. He dropped the matter for the time being because he didn’t want to waste time, he wanted to get on with his reminiscences.

When Mr Shen left school and reopened his noodle shop, Dr Cheng was deeply remorseful. He felt that he had misled his friend, wasted his time and hurt his career. He did not know how to atone for this. Perhaps he could be reborn as a horse or an ox in his next life and toil for Mr Shen? As he did not believe in reincarnation, such talk was hypocritical. But what could he do in this lifetime while he was so utterly destitute? He had felt so miserable he’d wanted to cry. Quite to his surprise, Mr Shen, magnanimity itself, actually came to thank Dr Cheng, saying that this failure had made him realize that he was not an all-round genius and had given him a clearer understanding of his own limitations. In addition to that, the experience had been an enriching one, something extraordinary in his uneventful life, something to remember, and so on and so forth. Not only would he not allow Dr Cheng to atone for his poor advice but he wanted to pay all Dr Cheng’s tuition fees, even lunch, because having studied diligently himself, he knew how hard it was to be a scholar. He now maintained that all those gifted enough to pursue a scholarly life were geniuses, prodigies, and therefore worth investing in. The qualities people admire most in others are those they lack themselves. From now on, Dr Cheng’s

lunches were assured and it was these free lunches that enabled him to finish his courses. He also recalled, not without a pang, that every time he had lunch at the noodle shop, Mr Shen would play his favourite record for him, the hymn "Ave Maria". Its pure and holy strains resounded in his ears now, divine music from heaven against the clamour outside. His mood brightened. Memories of the hard old days had a positive effect on his spirits, after all. He sighed deeply and his mind cleared somewhat.

Slowly he turned and looked about the spotless room. The carnations on the table, the ones Mrs Cheng bought the day he opened his clinic, had withered a long time ago. She'd dissolved a vitamin C tablet in the water, but they withered all the same. The fallen petals on the table were not so sadly beautiful as the poets would have it. They were black and shrivelled at the edges as if they had been burned. Dr Cheng's heart began to ache again.

A large family, a big clinic: there were expenses to be met for both. No matter how deep his own pain, Dr Cheng still had to pull out decayed teeth as if tugging on a chest expander for exercise; he still had to fill cavities as if daubing a wall with plaster. So far not a single patient had come in for treatment requiring his special training; to have, say, a set of false teeth—or even a single false tooth—made. He faced the mouths gaping brazenly at him with an inexpressible sense of humiliation. He had never, ever, expected to end up among the quacks. He was disheartened, deeply wounded. And people were by no means clamouring to have their teeth pulled. In most cases his patients were just passers-by who stumbled in by chance because Dr Cheng still refused to change his sign to the plain and simple "DENTIST". He insisted on "MAXILLOFACIAL SURGERY" in big letters followed by "Orthodontics" in small ones. Simple folk would never understand the subtleties contained therein, but Dr Cheng would never change it either; it was his honour, his knowledge, his status, his dignity, the meaning and dream of his life, his everything, the last little thing he could lay claim to. He clung tenaciously to this final position, and even if Mrs Cheng's heart had been made of stone, she wouldn't have challenged him on this.

But pulling a few decayed teeth was hardly enough to support them. Besides, this beautiful, elegant clinic was worthy of greater things. The carnations in the vase had been thrown out long ago and replaced, for some strange reason, by a feather duster. Mrs Cheng had spoken to him about moving to a smaller, simpler place. A doctor's practice depended on his skills after all, suggested Mrs Cheng. Packaging was only secondary. Surely a fine doctor like Dr Cheng didn't have to worry about patients coming to see him. She said this very carefully for fear that she might hurt his pride which had already been hurt so badly. She declared time and again that the sign would never be changed. But when Dr Cheng spoke, after a long silence, it was only to say: "Actually, it doesn't matter much to me." And then he slowly began to take action. But it wasn't easy to find a suitable place facing the street. It had to be small but not cramped, simple yet presentable. He did not want to leave this downtown district but he needed a quiet place amidst the hubbub.

Dr Cheng failed to find such a place. But he did find a man from Pudong who was willing to share his present clinic. Dr Cheng thought it would be all right to let

this man have the reception room attached to the treatment room, and though his patients would have to pass through the reception room, the people who came to see this man wouldn't stray into his treatment room; for that convenience Dr Cheng was willing to pay a larger share of the rent. But the man from Pudong was so satisfied when he saw the place that he didn't want Dr Cheng to give him a break on the rent and they split it. As for Dr Cheng's patients having to pass through his space, the man was actually very happy about it: "In business you don't worry about having too many people around." He came the next day with two big rattan trunks and opened shop.

The man's name was Lu. Dr Cheng called him Mr Lu but the man responded, "Call me Ah Lu." Dr Cheng, however, could not bring himself to do that. It sounded overly familiar to him. He was afraid that if he let this familiarity develop, some day the man might call him Ah Cheng and that didn't bear thinking about. So he still called him Mr Lu. But the man was completely unresponsive to this form of address. After Dr Cheng had called "Mr Lu" a dozen times Lu still thought he was calling somebody else, which greatly embarrassed Dr Cheng. There was nothing for it but to call him Old Lu, although Lu was a few years younger than he was. At least this time Lu made some response; gradually he got used to it and would respond immediately.

Old Lu was a very open and straightforward person. He wasn't fussy about paying half of the fees for water and electricity. He just paid. And he had very high respect for Dr Cheng's profession; he never popped his head in to nose about Dr Cheng's room. When Dr Cheng passed through his place he offered a polite greeting. He also recommended Dr Cheng's skills to his own customers, that is, the doctor's skill in tooth extraction. Only he was a bit too noisy. He had a very loud penetrating voice and a heavy Pudong accent. He trilled at the end of every sentence and whatever followed the trill came out with particular vehemence. Perhaps because he had done business in the streets for so long and was used to hawking his wares outdoors, his voice could be heard throughout a dozen or so shops in the neighbourhood. Along with wave upon wave of noise from the market, the sound of his voice stirred up human longings. It was a voice which would not allow a person to wallow in his depression, a very disquieting voice. It left Dr Cheng feeling fatigued and annoyed. But then he thought of Old Lu's good points and further reminded himself that Lu was only shouting in his own place for which he paid rent, and not coming into the clinic to do his shouting. And when Dr Cheng's patients were few and far between, the sound of that voice assuaged his loneliness. So he left him alone.

Sometimes, much to his surprise, he found what Lu was shouting about quite interesting. Whenever a customer asked the price of something, Old Lu would set it so high it scared the hell out of people. But when his customer was about to leave he would say, "Come on, am I the emperor? This is no irrevocable imperial edict. All right, you name a price!" He looked so unassuming and gullible that his customer would turn round and make him an offer. But then he would yell again, "Hey, mister! You a tough guy?! You're taking the food right out of my mouth! Let me make a little profit, *please!*" The customer would get nervous again, ready

to leave. Then Lu would make another offer, just a little higher than the man was willing to pay and the customer would heave a sigh of relief and buy. "I knew you really meant to buy it," Lu would continue while taking the money, "In fact I'm losing money selling it at such a low price. But I don't do it for the money. Just to make friends. Good-bye! Watch your step!" Even iron and stone would yield to a little sincerity! His voice, its rise and fall, its rhythm and cadence, had a very dramatic effect. Each deal was a story brought to a close. Dr Cheng was more and more intrigued by him.

When he wasn't busy, he sometimes strolled out to pick up a few business pointers on the spot. At times Old Lu sold ties made of cloth hand-woven down in his home village in Pudong. The texture of this coarse homespun had a unique three-dimensional feel to it, almost like wool. It was so rough and unsophisticated that it seemed extremely stylish. Starched and ironed, it became quite stiff. There were many different patterns but only three ties in each pattern, just three, no more. Dr Cheng had watched Lu selling his ties. If a customer was willing to pay a little extra, he would cut the other two ties of the same pattern to pieces then and there, and the customer's tie would become the only one of its kind in the world. Who wouldn't want to possess a tie so demonstrably unique at such a low price?

Dr Cheng became aware that Old Lu's business practices were rich in artistic inspiration and psychological insight, which made them all the more entertaining. He often watched and listened and something long dormant within him began to stir. Gradually his spirits rose and he became hopeful. About what? He had no idea, except that he was not so pessimistic anymore. Perhaps it was Old Lu's warmth, his vigour, his enthusiasm for life that boosted Cheng's morale and invigorated him. His face gradually recovered its original healthy, if somewhat sallow, hue; there were a few wrinkles, but these were visible only when he smiled. By and by his stooped shoulders straightened. He was even in a mood to go to the theatre with his wife.

The day was just like a festival; looking back on it, it seemed even more festive. Mrs Cheng was wearing a melton cloth coat over a kohl-black brocade cheongsam and high-heeled leather shoes. A purse about the size of a man's wallet hung from her wrist. She had lightly pencilled her eye-brows and applied a little powder to her face. Jade-green drops sparkled at her ears in mute echo of the black of her cheongsam. As she got out of the rickshaw, she leaned lightly upon Dr Cheng's arm. At that moment Dr Cheng discovered that his wife was still young, as young and beautiful as the day they were married some fifteen years ago. It was as if those fifteen years had never been; she'd cheated the years and would continue to do so. Her unfading youth so affected him that warm feelings welled up in him and carried him back to the old days. Unconsciously straightening his shoulders, he strode into the theatre.

Inside there was the usual tumultuous scene. Although the theatre had evolved from an old-fashioned tea house into a modern opera house, discarding along the way the tea-drinking, melonseed-hawking and towel-throwing, the noisy disorder of the tea-house remained. The din seemed to arise from no identifiable source, but oozed forth from every inch of floor and ceiling, weaving itself into a solid roar.

Gentlemen smiled courteous and reserved smiles. Ladies sat staring straight ahead, nervous glances darting from the corners of their eyes, as they compared golden fringes on other mantles and silver vents on other coats. Not until the lights went up on stage, throwing the auditorium into darkness, did the ladies breathe sighs of relief and relax.

Now drums and gongs sounded. The whole scene seethed with such noise and excitement that no one with a breath left in him could have remained downhearted.

Dr Cheng did not appreciate Peking opera. Those movements representing riding a horse, fighting, opening a door, walking, etc., seemed ridiculously childish to him. He found the meticulous, highly stylized gestures and poses stilted and unappealing. The squeaking, squealing singing with its interminably twisting, writhing melodies seemed endless and he felt surrounded by the inescapable, insistent beat of the drums and gongs. His head swam wildly. He was losing control; in a word, he was desperate. This was why he seldom went to the theatre with his wife even though she was infatuated with it. Tonight was a rare exception. He felt, quite unaccountably, like a new man. An amiable smile was pasted on his lips and his gaze remained glued to the characters on stage throughout the performance.

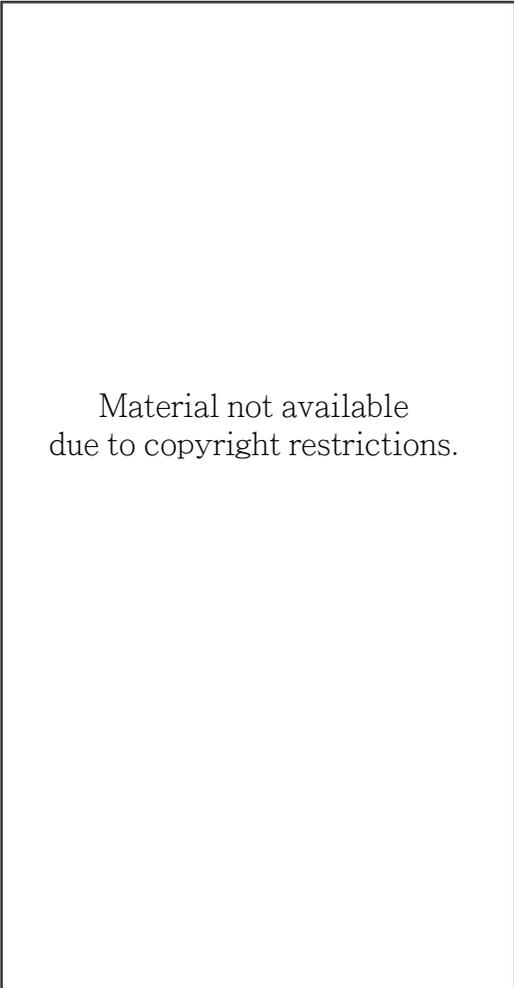
The finale was the ever-popular "Drunken Concubine", performed by one of China's ten most famous female impersonators. One sustained note rose above the accompanying music, wafted from the wings and lingered on and on. After a long pause, the gorgeous imperial concubine, dressed in phoenix coronet and brocade robe, stepped slowly, haltingly, onto the stage. Before Dr Cheng could get a clear look, the whole auditorium burst into a thundering chorus of "Bravo!" A moment's dizziness overcame him. Collecting himself and taking another look, he saw a beautiful lady standing there, slim and graceful. She glanced languidly around before moving, daintly, languorously. Another thunder-clap of "Bravo!" He guessed this must be the famous female impersonator. Although he couldn't understand what was so great about her, he found the figure on stage charming. No matter how hard he looked he couldn't tell that it was actually a man. This filled him with amazement and he kept her (his) face under close scrutiny. The imperial concubine was singing; extended sighs followed each sung phrase. Eyes fixed on the ground, she turned around slowly, her long sleeves billowing, her robe trailing over the stage. For all her glory, splendour, wealth and rank she appeared infinitely lonely. Dr Cheng took no pleasure in the actor's impeccable enunciation or the precision of his singing. He was totally taken with that phenomenally beautiful face, the eyebrows, the eyes, the nose, the lips and finally, the teeth. Here, suddenly, he frowned. Taking the opera-glass from his wife, he drew the face several times nearer for a closer look. The "Bravos!" were deafening. After each line, there followed a long interval of cheering and applause, during which the *huqin* screeched its accompaniment to the loud acclaim. But Dr Cheng heard none of this tumult. He attended to the opera-glass, adjusted it to its most powerful setting and narrowed in on the imperial concubine's mouth. She had now given full vent to her grievances. Tired, she looked ready to return to her palace. Suddenly, giant human heads rose one after another in front of Dr Cheng's glass, blocking his view. He put down the opera-glass and found, to his surprise, that many of the spectators were hurrying out. He

did not understand and Mrs Cheng patiently explained that they were heading for the stage door to wait for the famous female impersonator; they wanted to see him in person without his stage make-up and costume. Sure enough, when Dr Cheng and his wife strolled out of the theatre arm in arm, a huge crowd was already gathered at the stage door, waiting and chattering noisily. But the door, lit by a dim bulb, remained tightly shut.

Dr Cheng remained silent on their way home. And he stayed awake the whole night through. The next morning his cheeks were flushed, whether from over-exhaustion or over-excitement, it was hard to say. He seemed to be in a good mood and the fog that had hung about him had dispersed. His eyes, though bloodshot, shone brightly, but he did not go to his clinic as usual. Instead he spent most of the day at his desk writing. Mrs Cheng felt something strange was going on, but she asked no questions. Her husband seemed to have woken from a nightmare, for his energy was restored and he seemed full of determination. For this reason, there was no need for her to worry; if she did, she might make him angry. But she could not hold back her curiosity. She stole a few glances at the desk and discovered that he was writing to that "imperial concubine". This made her feel a little jealous, but on second thought she realized how absurd that was because although that famous actor played the role of an imperial concubine, he was still a man. At that, she sighed, thinking what a great artist he was, able to make people believe what was not true. That was the secret of his greatness, and her esteem for him increased. Finally Dr Cheng finished his letter and went out to post it. When he came back, he declared that the clinic would be closed temporarily as he was going to tour the country. This left Mrs Cheng suspicious and fearful, but she dared not question him. Though she suspected Dr Cheng was up to something not entirely proper, she was also keenly aware that faithful observance of all the proprieties might result in a peaceful life of plain living, but never in great honour or great wealth. Seeing her husband regain his confidence like dying embers bursting into flame again, she had greater confidence in him herself. So she did not stop him.

Dr Cheng set off on his journey. He travelled all over the country, visiting all the famous mountains and great rivers, carefree as a wandering immortal. Seeing that her husband was enjoying himself, Mrs Cheng guessed that he must have a well-thought-out plan. So she went on keeping house and raising the children without worrying about him. Occasionally she went to the theatre but unfortunately she never saw that famous female impersonator any more. She'd heard somewhere that for some unknown reason the actor had recently refused to perform. This was really a great pity. It would never have occurred to Mrs Cheng, not even in her wildest dreams, that the great actor was looking high and low for her husband. He had asked at nearly all the dental clinics and stomatological hospitals, both government and private, in town. But no one had heard of a doctor named Cheng who practised maxillofacial surgery and orthodontics.

Dr Cheng went up to "heaven on earth"—Suzhou and Hangzhou—and then turned his steps to "the finest scenery under heaven"—Guilin—where he enjoyed himself meandering among the beautiful waters and mountains. Meanwhile, the famous female impersonator was searching every corner of heaven and earth too,



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by Wang Tingzhi

looking for him. He almost believed that this Dr Cheng must be the incarnation of the God of Medicine, who had descended to earth for a short visit and then returned to heaven. He grew more and more anxious; people said that if he failed to find this Dr Cheng, he would bid farewell to the stage. Hundreds of thousands of his fans joined him in his anxiety. The whole city seethed and bubbled. By now everyone everywhere had heard of the celestial Dr Cheng. Then someone said that he had seen a sign for a dentist named Cheng somewhere. So the whole city started looking for that sign, but it was gone, nowhere to be seen, as if it had never existed in the first place, which lent the whole affair an added aura of mystery. Dr Cheng's fame grew with each passing day. Even ordinary people in the streets and alley-ways were talking about Dr Cheng, let alone his fellow professionals, who were burning with jealousy and curiosity. Meanwhile, since the famous female impersonator had stopped performing, Mrs Cheng had not felt much like going out and so she

knew nothing of the rumours until two months had passed and Dr Cheng returned as he had planned.

The reappearance of Dr Cheng's sign was a momentous event. The first person who saw it was totally dumbstruck. Then he rushed about telling everyone. The news rippled through the population, reaching tens, then hundreds, then thousands of people. It was as if the God of Medicine had returned to earth. Soon the famous actor got wind of it. He was just about to pay Dr Cheng a visit when the doctor arrived at his door. He stood calmly in the hall, dressed in a Western-style overcoat draped over a long Chinese gown, carrying local specialties from all over the country in one hand and a black wool hat in the other.

From then on Dr Cheng's clinic was as busy as a marketplace; it bloomed with prosperity. The tie-seller Ah Lu was asked to leave and two sweet young nurses were hired. The clinic was not open every day, only Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Patients had to make appointments and the fees were extraordinarily high. Still Dr Cheng had more patients than he could handle because false teeth from Dr Cheng's had a special aura about them quite unrelated to their quality.

Dr Cheng took his wife to see the famous female impersonator perform the first night he returned to the stage. There was a storm of applause even before he made his appearance. But the moment he struck his first graceful pose, a hush fell over the whole audience. They were so stunned that they even forgot to cheer; it was so still you could have heard a pin drop. Not until the imperial concubine uttered a gentle "Ah!" did the audience come to its senses and erupt with shouts of acclaim. Seen after his long absence, the imperial concubine's eyes appeared brighter and his teeth whiter; he was dazzlingly, stunningly, beautiful. Totally intoxicated with the beauty of his performance, Mrs Cheng was so thrilled she almost cried. Dr Cheng leaned toward her and whispered into her ear: "Do you notice any change in the concubine?"

"More beautiful than before," answered Mrs Cheng without thinking.

Dr Cheng smiled. He raised the opera-glass and murmured to himself, "I'll never be able to make another set of false teeth like that again, I'm afraid." Mrs Cheng looked at her husband in amazement. Then she looked at the imperial concubine on stage. She suddenly noticed that her (his) teeth had never been so bright as they were now; it was as though he had a string of pearls in her (his) mouth. She turned and looked her husband up and down and suddenly her eyes lit up. Then she returned her attention to the stage without saying anything more. Not until they got home and into bed did she start interrogating her husband about the contents of his letter to the famous female impersonator after their last trip to the theatre. Her husband said: "Nothing except that his acting was indeed superb, but unfortunately his teeth didn't look like they belonged to an imperial concubine. They were stained yellow and black, and the gums were recessed, perhaps due to opium smoking. That was all."

And nothing happened during the night.