

Three Tales from the Tang Dynasty

Translated by Glen Dudbridge

Introductory Note

The translations which follow are taken from a study entitled “The Tale of Liu Yi and its Analogues”, to appear in due course as part of a volume of conference proceedings. The three tales are, in fact, the “analogues”. What that means—and how the three relate to the famous Tang prose story “Liu Yi” 柳毅 – are interesting and tricky questions which had best wait for the appearance of the full study. But the three short tales hold an interest of their own. They represent a body of legend, circulating in China before and during the eighth century, which explored the sexual and marital relations of mortal men with divine women, particularly with dragon maidens.

Two very different literary sources are involved. The *Guang yi ji* 廣異記 was the work of Dai Fu 戴孚, a man who seems to have spent much of his career during the third quarter of the eighth century as a minor official in the provincial service. From personal hearsay and from written sources he collected hundreds of anecdotes reflecting the mythology and religious preoccupations of provincial society. Two of them are represented here, both dealing with gods of China’s sacred mountains: Mount Hua 華嶽 in southern Shaanxi and Mount Song 嵩嶽 in Henan. The other tale comes from a more celebrated book – the *Account of the Western Regions* (*Xiyu ji* 西域記) by the Buddhist pilgrim and scholar Xuanzang 玄奘 (d. 664), whose historic journey through Central Asia and India in the seventh century gave him a wealth of geographical, ethnographic and Buddhological information to report to his imperial master Tai Zong 太宗. The item used here originated in what is now Swat, in northern Pakistan, where it plainly served as a dynastic myth for the local Buddhist kings. But in Xuanzang’s hands it became a Chinese cultural asset too.

The Imperial Guardsman¹

太平廣記：三衛

AT THE BEGINNING of the Kaiyuan period a certain imperial guardsman was returning from the capital to Qing Zhou. Arriving in front of the Mount Hua Temple he saw a servant-maid, clad in old and shabby clothes, who came up to speak to him.

“My mistress wishes to meet you,” she said, and led him forward to meet a woman of sixteen or seventeen years, looking woebegone and distressed.

She said: “I am no human: I’m the third bride of Mount Hua. But my husband is very cruel. My own family is in the Northern Ocean: for three years no letter has passed between us, and on this score I have suffered even worse treatment from the prince of the Mount. Now that I hear you are bound on the long journey home, sir, I should like to place a letter in your kind charge. If you can deliver it for me my father will richly reward you.”

Upon which she handed him the letter. The man was a gentleman of his word, and asked her where in the Northern Ocean it was to be taken.

The woman replied: “Simply knock at the second tree upon the coast,² and there will be someone to answer.” With these words she took her leave and departed.

When he came to the Northern Ocean he set about delivering the letter as directed. After knocking on the tree he suddenly saw a red gate beneath it, with someone coming out to attend to his business. He handed over the letter. The man withdrew for a while, then reappeared to say: “The Great King invites his guest to enter!”

He followed behind the man for a hundred paces or more. They went through another³ gate. And there was a man in crimson robes, more than ten feet tall, with many thousands of maidens in attendance. They duly took their seats.

The man then declared: “I have not had a letter from my daughter for three years!” But when he had read the letter he cried out in a fury – “How dare that slave do this!” – and gave orders to summon his palace surveillance officers of left and right.

Before long these appeared – both more than ten feet tall, most evil-looking, with huge heads and great snouts. He commanded them to mobilize 50,000 troops

¹This story survives in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (300.2383-4), whose editors took it from the now lost collection *Guang yi ji* 廣異記. Three categories of guards 三衛 – “Bodyguard” 親衛 “Distinguished” 勳衛 and “Standby” 翊衛 – all of them ranking officials, staffed various guards corps in the imperial palace. Their tours of duty were defined by the distance of their homes from the capital: eight tours of one month were required of those living between 1000 and 2000 *li* away. The hero of this story is no doubt returning from one of these short spells of duty in the capital.

²For 海 read 地, accepting the variant given by Sun Qian 孫潛 in his seventeenth-century collation of an early MS.: reported in Yan Yiping 嚴一平, *Taiping guangji jiaokan ji* 太平廣記校勘記 (Banqiao: Yiwen Yinshuguan 1970) p.112b.

³For 後 read 復, with Sun Qian.

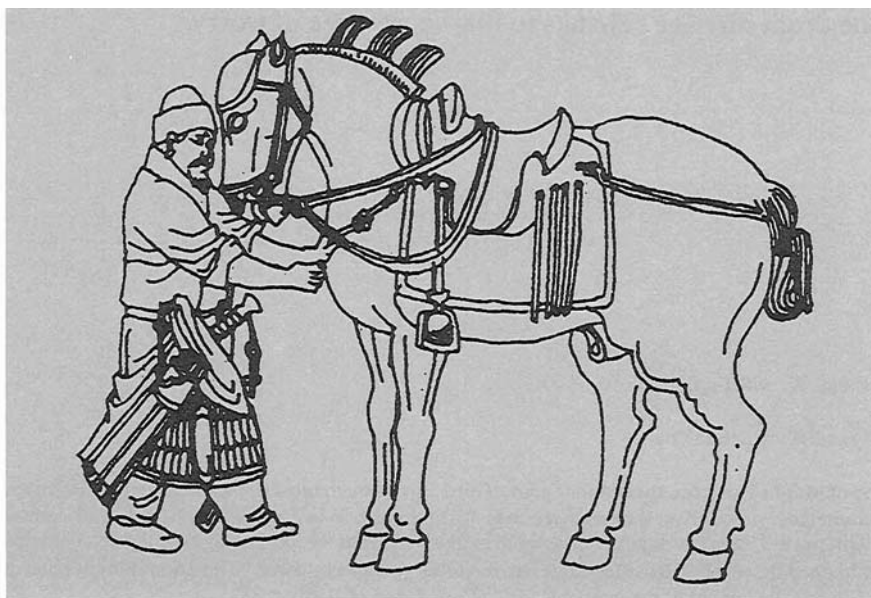
and march west on the fifteenth of the month to attack Mount Hua, making quite sure they won a victory. The two men received their orders and marched out.

Then, addressing the imperial guardsman – “I have nothing special to offer you in token of gratitude” – he ordered his attendants to pick out two rolls of silk and present them to this messenger.

The guardsman was displeased and grumbled to himself that two rolls were not enough. But as he prepared to leave⁴ the man in the crimson robes said: “Sell these two rolls of silk only when you can get 20,000 strings of cash for them! Be sure not to part with them too cheaply!”

On returning to the outside world the guardsman wanted to see for himself what would happen, so he went back to Huayin. On the fifteenth of the month, when evening fell, he saw far off in the east a cloud of black vapour like a canopy moving gradually toward the west. Thunder rolled and lightning played – the noise could be heard a hundred *li* away. And in a moment a great wind on Mount Hua, strong enough to bend trees, blew up a cloud from the westward. The cloud built up more and more powerfully and came right up to Mount Hua. Thunderbolts pressed clamorously about it, and the entire mountain looked parched and red. Not for a long time did this come to an end, and when it grew light the mountain had a black and scorched appearance.

The guardsman now went into the capital to sell his silk. When buyers heard he was asking 20,000 they all laughed in amazement and took him for a madman. Then, some days later, a man on a white horse came to buy the silk and paid the price of 20,000 without any hesitation. The cash sum was already on deposit in the West Market.



⁴For 持别 read 将别, with Sun Qian.

The guardsman now asked for what purpose he was buying the silk, and the man said: "The god of the River Wei is arranging his daughter's marriage: he will use this as a gift. No silk in the world is as fine as that from the Northern Ocean, and he was just about to send for some to be bought when he heard that you were selling Northern Ocean silk. That is why I have come."

The guardsman took possession of the cash, spent some months in trading, and then set off eastwards back to Qing Zhou. He had come as far as Huayin when he once again saw the same servant-girl as before.

She said: "My mistress has come specially to give thanks for your kindness." And he saw an ox-drawn carriage with dark blue⁵ canopy coming down the mountain, flanked by a dozen attendants. It came up to him, and there alighted the very young lady he had met before. Clothes and countenance now bright and shining, gaze alert and clear – she was almost unrecognizable.

Seeing the guardsman she bowed to him and said:

"You showed me great kindness in taking that message far away to my parents. Since the battle was fought⁶ my husband's affection has grown much warmer. The one thing that troubles me is that I have no way to repay you. But the Third Son⁷ has turned his wrath against you for delivering my letter and is now waiting for you at the Tong Guan pass with five hundred troops. You will certainly come to harm if you go there, so for now you should go back to the capital. Before long the imperial suite will make a progress to the east: spirits and demons have a terror of the drum,⁸ so if you sit in the drum carriage you will have nothing to worry about." And with these words she disappeared.

The imperial guardsman was really frightened and at once went back to the capital. A few weeks later it happened that Xuan Zong was to make a progress to Loyang. The guardsman gave the drummer some cash and came out through the pass in the drum carriage. Thanks to this he was free of worry.

⁵For 看 read 青, with Sun Qian.

⁶For 關 read 關, with Sun Qian.

⁷The god of Mount Hua bore the familiar name Third Son through most of the Tang period. Positive identification comes quite late, probably in the tenth century, at Dunhuang. Wei Zhuang's 韋莊 (836-910) famous but long lost poem "Qin fu yin" 秦婦吟, finally recovered in manuscript from the Dunhuang cave library, contains a passage on this god. In one MS. (P 2700) his title Metal Heaven God 金天神 is glossed "Third Son, Mount Hua" 華嶽三郎. See Lionel Giles, "The lament of the lady of Ch'in", *T'oung Pao* 24, 1926, p.333.

⁸Omit 車, with Sun Qian.

The Nāgas of Udyāna¹

大唐西域記：藍勃盧山龍池

Some 140 or 150 *li* north-west of the image of Bodhisattva Guanzizai we come to Mount Lanbolu. By the mountain ridge there is a Nāga Lake more than thirty *li* round, with limpid waves spreading broad and far and pure waters showing crystal clear.²

Long ago, when King Virūdhaka marched against the Śākya, four of them who resisted his armies were cast out by their kinsmen, and each took flight for himself. One of these Śākya, having escaped from his country's capital, was exhausted from hard travelling and came to a halt halfway along the road. At that point a wild goose flew down in front of him. Finding it tame and friendly he got astride, and the goose took wing and soared aloft. It landed by the side of this lake. Travelling through the air the Śākya clansman had come a great distance to a strange land: he was lost and ignorant of the way, and took a short sleep in the shade of a tree.

The young daughter of the Nāga of the lake was promenading by the water's edge when she suddenly caught sight of the Śākya. She changed into human form, for otherwise she feared it would be unsuitable, and then stroked and patted him. The Śākya awoke with a start, and made some demur: "Why do you show a worn-out traveller like me such tender care?" But then he made passionate advances to her and would have forced her to sleep with him.

She said: "I dutifully obey my parents' instructions. Even though you favour me with your kind attention, we do not have their consent yet!"

The Śākya asked: "Where among these gloomy mountains and gorges is your home?"

She replied: "I am a Nāga maiden from this lake. I learned with respect that your sacred clan are wandering abroad as refugees and by good fortune, as I took my promenade, made bold to comfort you in your weariness. You now want me to join you in the privacy of the bedroom, but we have not yet received permission. What is more, through accumulated misfortunes I have received this Nāga body. Man and beast walk different paths – it would be something unheard of!"

The Śākya said: "One word of consent from you and your long-cherished wish may be had!"³

¹This story is in the *Da Tang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記, ed. Zhang Xun 張巽 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1977) 3, pp. 63-64. For an earlier translation see Samuel Beal, *Si-yu-ki: Buddhist records of the Western World*, 2 vols., (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner 1884) with pp. 128-32 in vol. 1 on the Nāga Lake. Beal misinterpreted several key phrases in this story.

²A close examination of this topographical reference was made by a British officer, Major H.A. Deane, in "Note on Udyāna and Gandhāra", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1896, p. 661: "This measurement brings us exactly to the head of the Aushiri valley, which drains into the Panjkora near Darora. How the Pilgrim got his distance over several valleys and intervening high spurs it is difficult to conjecture. But on the hill to which it brings us there is found a large lake, more than a mile in length. It is apparently fed by snow."

³Beal's wrestling with the term *su-hsin* 宿心 (p.129, n.32) seems to miss the point. The Śākya youth is offering a bargain in which the Nāga girl's consent to marriage will earn his consent to perform the transformation of her body that she strongly desires. The bargain is then fulfilled in word and deed.

The Nāga girl said: "I will humbly obey you in whatever you require."

The Śākya now made a vow: "May all the blessed power of my good deeds cause this Nāga woman to take on a fully human form!" Upon which, in response to that blessed power, the Nāga was transformed and, finding herself now with a human body, greatly delighted.

She thanked the Śākya in these words: "I built up for myself an accursed fortune and migrated through evil forms of birth. Happily now, favoured by your kind offices and through dint of your blessed power, that vile body which I bore through long kalpas has been transformed in a moment. Even the gift of my life would not be thanks enough to repay your goodness. My heart longs to join you in your wanderings, but we are held back by what the world would say. I want to speak to my parents before we solemnize the marriage."

She returned to the lake and addressed her parents: "Today on my promenade I came upon a Śākya clansman, who by the working of his blessed power has transformed me into a human. We are in love, and I make bold to lay the truth before you."

The Nāga King was delighted with her human incarnation and impressed by such noble stock. He granted his daughter's request and came out from the lake to express his thanks to the Śākya: "You have not scorned a kind not your own, but have lowered your honoured station to join a baser one. If you would consent to visit my home, I will humbly wait on you there!"

The Śākya accepted the Nāga King's invitation and moved on at once to his dwelling. Upon which, in the Nāga palace, they performed in full the ceremony of "Meeting the bride in person"⁴ and celebrated the nuptial feast,⁵ revelling and making merry to their hearts' content.



⁴"Meeting the bride in person" 親迎 The final item in the ancient Six Rites of marriage in which the groom went to the bride's home for their joint ritual salutations. See *Yi Li* 儀禮, "Shi hunli" 士昏禮, 4.1a-5.4b.

⁵The phrase *yan'er* 燕爾 implied marriage celebrations since the line, "You feast your marriage-kin" 宴爾新婚 in *Shi jing* 35, "Gu feng" 谷風. Beal(p.131) overlooked these nuptial references and so left the story without a marriage ceremony.

The Śākya clansman felt both dread and disgust as he viewed the Nāgas' physical shape, and wanted to take his leave and go. But the Nāga King stopped him: "I hope that you will not distance yourself from us, but make your dwelling nearby. I will make you master of the land, holder of the royal title, commander of both courtiers and commoners: your blessings shall last for ages long!"

The Śākya expressed his thanks: "I never expected to hear words like these!"

The Nāga King placed a jewelled sword into a case, which he covered over with the finest white cotton cloth. He said to the Śākya: "I should like you to take this cotton as a presentation to the king of the land. When a traveller from far away brings tribute the king will certainly receive it in person, and that is the moment for you to take his life. Then you seize his kingdom! A good plan, surely?"

Accepting these instructions from the Nāga King, the Śākya went to make his presentation. As the King of Udyāna personally picked up the cotton, the Śākya gripped his sleeve and ran him through. And while the courtiers and guards broke into hubbub and disorder about the dais, the Śākya brandished his sword to announce: "This sword that I wield was conferred on me by a divine Nāga to kill recalcitrants and put rebels to death!"

All feared this divine warrior: they exalted him to the highest place. Upon which he brought good rule where before there had been corruption, he celebrated merit and pitied misfortune. Then, mustering a huge following and preparing an imperial coach, he proceeded to the Nāga palace to report on his mission. And he escorted the Nāga woman back to his royal seat.

But the Nāga woman's predestined lot was not yet discharged, and some retribution still remained to pay. Whenever she retired to the privacy of the bedroom a ninefold Nāga hood⁶ would grow out of her head. The Śākya felt fear and disgust, but could think of no better plan to deal with it than to wait for her to fall asleep and cut the hood away with a sharp blade.

The Nāga woman awoke with a start and said: "This will not be a good thing for future generations. Not only will my life receive some ill consequences, but your descendants will suffer from headaches!"

That is why the royal family of the land regularly suffer from this complaint, not continuously, but in sporadic outbreaks.

When the Śākya clansman died his heir succeeded to the throne. This was King Uttarasēna (in Chinese: "Superior army").

⁶Thus reflecting the common iconic form of Nāga images in Indian society – "the human form universally characterized by means of the polycephalous serpent-hood... In art the number of heads varies, but is always uneven; it may be three, five, or seven": J.P. Vogel, *Indian serpent-lore, or the Nāgas in Hindu legend and art* (London: Probsthain 1926) pp. 37-8.

A Man of Ruyin¹

太平廣記：汝陰人

There was a man of Ruyin called Xu, orphaned since childhood. He was fair-skinned and handsome, loved smart clothes and fine horses, and roamed wild and free. Often he would lead out yellow hunting-hounds to chase game through wilderness and mountain streams.

He [once] rested beneath a great tree more than 100 feet tall and several dozen spans in girth. High branches stretched out to either side, casting shade over several *mu*. He glanced up into the branches, and hanging there was a purse made of many-coloured silks. Thinking someone had left it by mistake he retrieved it and took it home. But the knot could not be undone. He prized the purse highly and put it in his personal case.

As evening approached it changed into a girl, who came straight up to him with a name-card in her hand and said: "The King's daughter has instructed me to pay you her respects." Thus announcing her name, she departed.

Shortly afterwards a strange fragrance filled the room and the sound of horses and carriages gradually became audible. Xu went outside and saw in the distance a line of torches. In front there was a youth on a white horse attended by a dozen riders, who came straight up to Xu and said: "My younger sister, though of mean family, humbly admires your fine character and wishes to join herself in marriage to a true gentleman. What do you think?"

Xu dared not refuse too hard, for these people were gods. So the youth commanded his attendants to sweep and clean out a separate chamber. And before long the girl's carriage arrived. The road was filled with fragrance and light. There were dozens of maidservants mounted on horseback, all of them beautiful, who held up windbreaks as they clustered around the alighting maiden and invited her into the separate chamber.

Drapery and mattresses were there in complete supply, to the amazement of the Xu family, all of whom could see it for themselves when they went to look. The youth urged Xu to bathe and presented him with new clothes. Then the maids ushered him into the girl's chamber. She was sixteen or seventeen, peerlessly lovely, dressed in a long wedding gown of dark blue, and wearing pearls and jades in profusion. Down from the dais she came to respond to his bow, and together they went up to the top of the hall. The youth now left them, while in their chamber were set up mica screens and blue-green lotus-patterned curtains, with partitions of hanging brocade to face all four walls. There was a lavish spread of fine meats and many kinds of exotic fruit, sweet and fragrant such as we never find in this world. The vessels were seven-nut goblets, nine-branched dishes, whelk-shaped cups and lotus-leaf bowls – all these patterned with faint lines of gold and studded with fine blue-green stones. There was a jade urn containing Central Asian grape wine with a really

¹The original story was collected in the *Guang yi ji* and survives in the *Taiping guangji* (301.2387-8).



strong bouquet. Over their seats were placed wax candles with a common wick² in a stand made of purple jade. The illumination was as bright as day.

Xu, always a frivolous, thoughtless type and now dazzled by all these fine wares, was highly pleased. They took their seats, and Xu asked: "A mean and humble man like me in a low and cramped hovel like this never expected to receive such generous attention. I feel joy and gladness mixed together, and really don't know what to do!"

²"common wick" symbolizes linked hearts.

She replied: "My father is General of the Southern Command at the Central Peak. If, sir, you do not [object to] my obscure and lowly origins, I want to have myself given to you in marriage and to serve you for better or for worse. Truly I am deeply happy at my good fortune in enjoying this fine occasion!"

Xu then asked: "What would the General of the Southern Command's position be in our modern establishment?"

She said: "It is a divisional appointment under the Lord of Mount Song, like the Generals of the Four Commands in times of old."

When they had drunk deep she sighed and recited the lines:

"What a night it is tonight,
That I should meet this fine man!"³

The verses were more sweet and clear than he had ever heard before. Then taking up a zither she played "The flying goose takes leave of the crane"⁴ and sang it, with head inclined, to entertain Xu as he drank. The pure notes were plangent and mournful, the singer's attitude so transported that she scarcely seemed in control of herself.

Xu could master his feelings no longer. He went up and embraced her. She smiled with a little sidelong glance at him and said: "You have done what the poet mocks – 'touched my handkerchief'; you've committed the offence in that joke about the courtier and his tassel:⁵ so now what should we do?"

She turned and ordered the feast cleared away. They removed the candles and went to bed, where they freely enjoyed the intimacy of love. She was full-fleshed and tender boned, soft and smooth as syrup.

The next day they invited in all his kin, and she carried out in full the married woman's ritual duties, bestowing generous gifts upon them. When the third day came the young man he saw before reappeared and said: "My father feels deeply in your debt and would like to meet you. He has sent me to make you welcome." So Xu went with him.

They came to the spot where he had been hunting, but the great tree was no longer there. He saw only vermilion gates and white walls, like those in a grand official residence of our own times. Formed up on either side were armed guards, all bowing in welcome. The youth led him inside to meet the Commander. He was crowned with the flat-topped turban, robed in the crimson muslin, and sat

³A line from *Shi jing* 118, "Chou mou" 綢繆. This piece was anciently interpreted as a marriage song.

⁴An echo of the Tang zither repertoire. A tune called "Parting crane" 別鶴操 appeared as one of the four main zither pieces in the *Qin pu* 琴譜 used by Guo Maoqian in his *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 (58.844-7), where its mournful theme of stern separation imposed on a devoted wedded couple resounds through poetry from the fifth to the ninth centuries.

⁵The words "touched my handkerchief" come from *Shijing* 23, "Yeyu si chun", traditionally read as a song of courtship in which the disturbed handkerchief is worn at the girl's girdle. For the "joke about the courtier and his tassel", see *Han shi weijuan jishi* 韓詩外傳集釋 ed. Xu Weiju 許維遙 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju 1980) 7.256-7: in the anecdote a consort of King Zhuang of Chu removes the tassel from the hat of a courtier who has pulled at her clothes in the dark.

enthroned in a lofty hall, with halberds and pennons arrayed in the courtyard. Xu bowed as he came before him. The Commander responded by standing up and gave him precedence as they mounted the steps. He addressed Xu with polite, concerned enquiries, and went on: “My young daughter lost her mother in childhood, but she was fortunate enough to become wife to a man as brilliant as you, which gives great cause for rejoicing. Indeed, this must have been decreed in the world of the shades. It could never have come about unless you two had been bound in a close spiritual affinity!”

Xu thanked him. And now they went together into the private suite. The gates and buildings were impressive and deeply set back, with a connecting network of winding passageways and raised walkways. In the centre of the main hall a grand reception took place, and when the feasting and revels were at their height a performance of music was commanded. Pipes and strings blended intricately together, their tunes novel and fresh, while the several dozen singing-girls were all ravishing beauties.

At the end of all this Xu was given rich gifts of gold and silk and furnished with servants and horses. In consequence his family was well provided for and he built a residence for them in their village, in all points luxurious and splendid.

The young lady was well versed in “nourishing life” by means of sexual techniques,⁶ and Xu came to enjoy an excellent physical condition – twice as fit as normal. By this he knew that she was indeed a divine being.

In due course he went back again, each time in company with the young lady. The Commander would always shower him with gifts. Over several decades she bore five sons, without suffering any loss in good looks. Later Xu died, and she departed, taking her sons with her. We know nothing of their whereabouts.

⁶Literally, “the techniques ... of Xuan and Su”, celestial women whose teachings on sexual therapeutics formed the content of two ancient manuals – *Xuannü jing* 玄女經 and *Su'nü jing* 素女經 – circulating in Tang China: see reprint of *Su'nü jing* by Ye Dehui 葉德輝 in *Shuangmei jing'an zongshu* 雙梅景閣叢書 with his editorial preface.