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Tales of the Marvelous: Nie Yinniang

Enjoy a tale fantastical proportions by the pioneer of Chinese short fiction, Pei Xing

09-25-2013 [Pei Xing \(裴翎\)](http://www.theworldofchinese.com/author/peixing1/)



Nie Yinniang was the daughter of Nie Feng, the General of Weibo (an area in modern day Hebei Province) during the Zhenyuan Period of Emperor Dezong's reign in the Tang Dynasty. She was only 10 when a Buddhist nun came to beg for alms. Fond of Yinniang, the nun asked the general: "Will you give me your daughter and allow me to educate her?"

General Feng was angered by this, rejecting and reprimanding her.

The nun, however, remained stalwart, threatening the mighty general: "Even if you put her in an iron locker, I will still take her away." The little girl disappeared that very night.

Astounded and dismayed, the general ordered a search of the area for his missing daughter, but to no avail. Thoughts of their missing daughter haunted the general and his wife for years to come.

Five years later, the nun returned with Yinniāng. “Her training is finished, and it’s time for her to return home,” the nun explained. As the girls’ parents celebrated the return of their daughter, the nun vanished in an instant. The family wept with joy.

When asked about her years of training, Yinniāng simply replied: “It was just reciting scripture at first, nothing else.” With disbelief, her father asked again, Yinniāng replied: “I don’t know what to do. You wouldn’t believe me, even if I told you honestly.” General Feng reassured her, encouraged her to speak.

Yinniāng began her tale: “When I was first taken, in the dark, I had no idea how far I had traveled with the nun. At dawn, I found myself in a large cave. There were no people outside, only a thick forest that housed many apes and monkeys. There were already two girls in the cave, both 10 years old as well. They were beautiful and smart, but I never saw them eat. They bounced around the steep mountain cliffs like apes in the trees and never fell. The nun then made me swallow a mysterious pill and handed me a two-foot long sword. It was so sharp that you could cut a hair in half by blowing it toward the blade. I learned mountain climbing with the two girls. Gradually, my body became lighter and lighter. After a year of sword practice, I was able to hunt apes. Later, I switched my target to beasts such as tigers and leopards. Every time I tried, I cut their heads off with ease. Three years later, I could stab eagles in the sky. By this time, my blade had worn down to only six inches, but I could still attack birds easily.

“In the fourth year, the two girls stayed back to guard the cave while I was taken to the city. I had no idea where I was, but the nun pointed to a man in the crowd, explaining his sins and crimes in great detail, then she said: ‘Cut his head off for me when his guard is down. He will be as easy a target as a bird.’ She then passed me a three-inch dagger. In broad daylight, on a bustling street, I decapitated him without raising any attention. I stuck his head into a bag and brought it back to the cave. Later, the nun used potions to turn the head into water.

“In the fifth year, the nun assigned me another assassination. She said: ‘That official is sinful. Many innocent people have died at his hands. Go to his room in the night and cut his head off.’ So, I went with my dagger and snuck into the house through an unclosed door. I hid on a beam as the official played with his child, and I didn’t do the deed until daybreak, bringing his head back to the nun. The nun was in a thundering range and asked why I was so late. I told her: ‘I saw the official playing with his child. It was so lovely that I couldn’t bring myself to kill him.’ But the nun snapped at me: ‘The next time that happens, you kill the child first. Kill his loved ones before you end his life.’ At that lesson, I could only bow.

“Then, one day, the nun said, ‘You can hide a dagger in the back of your head, let me show you. It won’t hurt. And, now you can draw it out whenever you need it.’ Amazing as it seems, the nun did as she said, continuing: ‘Your training is coming to an end. You can go back home.’ When we were parting, she also told me that she would see me again in 20 years.”

Yinniāng’s strange tale struck fear deep into her father’s heart.

Later, Yinniāng was discovered to be disappearing into the night, only to reappear in the morning. General Feng was too scared to inquire as to her whereabouts. But with this fear, his love for her began to diminish.

One day, a mirror polisher was passing by Yinniāng, and she told her father: “That young man can be my husband.” Feng didn’t dare to refuse and married Yinniāng to the young man. Yinniāng’s husband had only one skill—polishing mirrors, nothing else. So General Feng provided generously for the couple but kept both of them at a distance.

Years later, Feng passed away. By then, the Commander of Wei had heard of Yinniāng’s skills, hiring her and her husband as his close officers. This went on until the Yuanhe Period (806-820) under Emperor Xianzong. One day, the commander found himself an enemy—the Governor of Chenxu, Liu Changyi.

The commander sent the couple to collect Liu's head. This time, things did not go so smoothly. As they set out, Liu foresaw their coming, and gathered his officers: "Wait at the north of the city tomorrow morning; you will see a man and a woman riding a white donkey and a black donkey respectively. The man will try to shoot a magpie with a slingshot and miss. The woman will grab the slingshot and hit the magpie with a single shot. Bow and inform them that I sent you there to greet them."

Everything went exactly as Liu said. The surprised couple said: "Governor Liu is an amazing prophet. How else would he know we were coming? We wish to meet him." When Liu arrived, the couple bowed and apologized: "We deserve the punishment of death for such malicious intent!"

Liu replied: "No, you were only carrying out orders. I wish to hire you. Please stay here and trust in me." Yinniang realized that her old master could not compare to Liu and agreed: "My governor, we are convinced by your talents and are happy to serve you." When Liu asked about compensation, the couple said, "Two hundred bronze coins per day will be more than sufficient." Their demands were met. Later on, Liu found out that the couple's donkeys were missing. He ordered a search, eventually finding a pair of paper donkeys in a bag, one white, the other black, causing the great governor to infer that—as well as having considerable martial powers—Yinniang and her husband possessed powerful magic.

A month passed and Yinniang told Liu: "Our former commander does not know we now serve you. He will send others. Cut some of your hair and wrap it in red silk. I will put it on his pillow to let him know our loyalties have changed." Liu did as she said, returning early the next morning, saying: "The message is sent. The commander will order an assassin named Jingjinger to kill me and collect your head in the early hours of the morning, but don't worry, I will find a way to defeat him." Liu was relieved and showed no signs of fear, but he did light candles during the night and remained alert. At midnight, a red flag and a white flag magically appeared, floating and seemingly fighting with each other around his

bed. Suddenly, a head and a body fell from thin air. Yinniāng appeared, triumphant: “Jingjinger is dead.” She dragged the corpse outside and turned it into water with the potion the old nun used, consuming even the corpses’ hair.

Yinning later issued Liu a warning: “There will be another assassin named Kongkonger early tomorrow morning. His skills are mysterious and magical. No human has ever lived to speak of his power, even ghosts can’t track him down. He will sneak in without so much as a shadow. I am no match for him. This time, you will have to depend on luck. Please wear Yunnan jade around your neck and cover yourself with blankets. I will turn into a small insect and hide in your intestines—the only place I won’t be discovered.” During the night, Liu did what Yinniāng suggested. With eyes closed, he lay on his bed. Suddenly, a loud noise rang from his neck. Yinniāng jumped from Liu’s mouth to congratulate him: “You are safe! Like an eagle, the assassin only strikes once and flees. He is deeply ashamed by the failure and will be hundreds of miles away in a few hours.” Later, Liu checked the jade and found a deep dagger mark. In gratitude and amazement, he awarded Yinniāng and her husband with handsome gifts.

In the eighth year of the Yuanhe Period (813), Liu was transferred from Chenxu to the capital. Yinniāng did not wish to go with him. She said: “I will travel to various mountains and lakes to visit the saints. All I ask is that you give my husband a small position.” Liu agreed and gradually lost contact with her.

When Liu passed away, Yinniāng arrived at the capital on her white donkey and grieved at her former master’s memorial.

During the Kaicheng Period (836 – 840) under Emperor Wenzong, Liu’s son, Liu Zong, was on his way to report for duty as the Governor of Lingzhou. On an old plank road in Sichuan, he ran into Yinniāng, whose appearance hadn’t changed a bit; she still rode upon a white donkey. At the reunion, Yinniāng gravely told Zong: “I see a great disaster in your future, you should not be here.” She gave him a pill and asked him to swallow it. “Quit your position next year and go back to your hometown of Luoyang. It’s the only way to avoid this disaster.

My pill will only keep you safe for one year,” she said. Though Zong had his doubts, he thanked her and offered colorful silk as a gift. Yinnieng refused and disappeared. Sadly, Liu’s son did not heed her words, and—after one year—Zong kept his position. He died mysteriously in Lingzhou. That was the last time anyone ever saw Yinnieng, the great female assassin.

– Translated by Liu Jue (刘珏) and Tyler Roney

About the Author

Pei Xing (裴铏) was known as a pioneer of short fiction in the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907), largely because of his work *Tales of the Marvelous* (《传奇》), a three-volume collection of short stories. Each tale focuses on an individual, often involving immortals, fairies, magical beasts, and dazzling heroes. Little is known of the author’s life, except that he was appointed the deputy governor of Chengdu in 878. *Chuanqi* became a literary genre unto itself, and eventually served as the inspiration for operas, folklore and later literature. Only 31 stories remain, the rest lost to history.

Want more tales of the marvelous? Check these: Wei Zidong

(<http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2013/10/tales-of-the-marvelous-part-2-wei-zidong/>),

The Kunlun Slave (<http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2013/09/tales-of-the-marvelous-part-1-the-kunlun-slave/>),

Ma Zheng (<http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2016/11/tales-of-the-marvelous%EF%BC%9Ama-zheng/>).

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