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SCENE



## Prologue

CHORUS



Enter Chorus

CHORUS

Dancing girls learn their measures in the halls,  
And at the windows, they paint their eyebrows.  
Soft music attends to fair songs and dances,  
And here, we help to stage a rare romance.  
I revised my old work in th' Red Spring Hall,  
Now a new play I'll present to you all,  
Its new name being assigned to my Tea Hall.  
In this spacious world full of busy fools,  
To whom shall we impart these words of love?  
Luckily we, having the self-same taste,  
Shall in this loving play our time not waste.

10

So here we have Li Yi, a young scholar,  
Who has the courtesy name of Junyu,  
And here is the famed songstress Huo Xiaoyu,  
Who is the late Prince Huo's youngest daughter.  
O, they are a pair of star-crossed lovers,  
Both with talent and th' gift of nature.  
Their romance starts in Chang'an, the capital  
Where, on the Eve of the Lantern Festival  
They chance to meet, with an air most affable.  
Then Xiaoyu, in her maiden bashfulness,  
Hurries away, not knowing in her clumsiness  
That her fair jade purple hairpins got caught  
In the jealous twigs of an apricot.  
Thus this pair of jade hairpins, lost and found,  
Become the token of their love so crowned.

20

With the help of Lady Bao, th' matchmaker,  
The lovers exchange vows at th' nuptial altar.  
And right after th' happy consummation,  
Li Yi excels in the Imperial Examinations,  
And is duly honoured as Prime Laureate

30

Who deserves to wear the imperial coronet.  
But, being a man of integrity,  
He stoops to no corrupted authority,  
And is thus sent far away thereafter  
To the frontier, as an army adviser.

O, woeful bride! Xiaoyu has to live alone  
In her bower, and for the next three years,  
Stays longing for her lord, often in tears.  
Then Lord Lu, the powerful Field Marshal,  
Envious of Li Yi's success and much more,  
Contrives to make him his true son-in-law.  
So to the Mengmen Fort Li Yi is deployed,  
His loyalty to th' Field Marshal to prove.  
But when he return to the Imperial Court,  
He is entrapped by Lu, the devious lord,  
Virtually detained in his lavish house,  
Debarred from any letters from his spouse.  
Xiaoyu, much distressed at hearing no news  
Of her beloved husband so long out 'f view,  
Decides to sell everything she possesses  
To inquire about her man's whereabouts.  
She sells her hairpins, the token of her love,  
Which chance to fall into the hands of Lord Lu  
Who spreads th' fake news that Li Yi, the scholar,  
Has happily married his own fair daughter.  
Lord Lu gives Li Yi the hairpins as proof  
Of his wife's disavowal of their love.  
Seeing the hairpins, Li Yi curses in grief  
The frailty of women, but still in disbelief.  
Meanwhile, two friends surnamed Cui and Wei,  
Hearing that Li Yi is about a new bride to wed,  
Meet him in a garden where peonies are displayed  
And, with modesty, charge he has his wife betrayed.  
Li Yi is thus informed of Xiaoyu's lonely plight,

So the rumour melts, and th' truth comes to light.  
Our play ends when appears a knight-errant  
Who is always clad in yellow raiment.  
Our protagonist's sickly love he revives  
And so the purple hairpin again thrives.

70

Gentles all, here is a little poem I compose  
For our well-intended prologue so to close,

*A gallant descends a broken dream to mend;  
Xiaoyu sells her hairpins to seek her husband;  
In vain Lord Lu plots to hook a son-in-law;  
Li Yi finds his wife whose love is truly sworn.*



A Scholar's Longing  
for Love



SCENE



A Scholar's Longing  
for Love

LI YI

QIUHONG

WEI XIAQING

CUI YUNMING



Enter Li Yi

Li Yi

Hard have I studied for these ten long years,  
For my scholarly success and courtly life!  
Now the grand spectacle of fame is in view,  
But woeful it is that I have to stay still,  
A poor scholar among rustic fellows.  
I'm good at writing poetic dedications,  
And at ease, I can write essays on poetics.  
Each time I casually utter a few words,  
Much notice is taken by worthies of letters.  
Now away from home, a traveller I am,  
Sick at heart, alone in the winter cold.  
Yet through the dead silence of the doorway,  
Will soon be heard the first footstep of spring,  
Which, like a herald, comes to me to ask:  
For this year's Exams are you well prepared?  
This will make me well weigh and consider:  
Very likely, there is a good chance of success  
In the upcoming Spring Examinations<sup>1</sup>

10

*composing a poem*

*This great age makes me a great scholar,  
So the spring breeze I enjoy at my leisure.  
My brush produces fair flowers in dreams,  
While the springtime stays with me longer.  
To His Majesty, I did once submit a plea,  
Desiring to lead a decent life as a courtier;  
But who cares for the wishes of a poor scholar?  
So patiently, I still have to wash my old robe,  
And see off many youthful years in hope.*

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1 The Imperial Examinations in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) was scheduled at a date between spring and summer.

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Here I am, a scholar named Li Yi. My courtesy name is Junyu, and I am from Longxi Prefecture, far away in the west of Chang'an, the capital of our great empire. I take pride in saying that my father was the former prime minister, and my mother was time and again ennobled by His Majesty as the Lady of the Province. Great honours and wealth may come and go, but talent and taste, like roots, are always there to grow. So my family has long been famous for its art and letters. It has been admired as the fashion of courtly manners. Like Wang Zijing, the renowned calligrapher of the Jin Dynasty, we enshrine in our family library the books bestowed by the Emperor, many of which are treasures of rarity. Our noble house, comparable to the palace of the First Emperor of the Liang Dynasty, is furnished with famous paintings, all of which are of exquisite taste. Good paintings and calligraphy we appreciate, caring neither for the summer's heat nor the winter's snow; fair music and dance we enjoy, knowing no seasonable change. My youthful talent is praised as the rising morning sun, burning with the most vital energy and the splendour of the universe. My learnings and skills are compared to a newly unearthed magic sword that may stir up a sparkling thunderstorm. All goes well with me except for one thing. I am more than twenty years old but still remain single. It is universally acknowledged that a scholar is not yet perfect unless he is matched with a fair wife. Recently I have been travelling around and eventually arrived at Chang'an, where I am staying at a guesthouse as my home in Xinchang Street. Today is the Spring Day of the Fourteenth Year of Yuanhe of the Tang Dynasty. To mark this festive day, I have paid a courtesy visit to Lord Liu, an old acquaintance of mine, who is the Governor and Commander-in-chief of Guanxi Garrison. Now I am back home, just in time

to keep an appointment with my cousin Cui Yunming  
and my bosom friend Wei Xiaqing. We shall meet at  
my place to celebrate this happy day with good wine.  
Qihong, where? Ho! Get the wine ready.

*Enter Qihong*

QIHONG

*January days offer the time for drinking good wine;  
Spring dances in the breeze with the buds fair and fine.*

The wine is ready at your pleasure, Your Honour.

*Enter Wei Xiaqing and Cui Yunming*

WEI XIAQING AND

CUI YUNMING

The universe turns to show its heavenly plan,  
Leaving a traveller lamenting in cold and pain.  
Ladies wear flowers to contend the springtime,  
Caring not for the despair of a homesick mind.

70

*they greet Li Yi*

WEI XIAQING

*starts the first line of a poem*

*From afar, happy souls travel a thousand li<sup>1</sup>;*

CUI YUNMING

*Spring wind brings us back to our family;*

LI YI

*Good wine alone can be the friend of spring,  
And may our young age to us all ever cling.*

Pepper wine adds charm to the early spring  
And Cypress ale fills the flowery air;  
We pray to the goddess of all flowers  
To fill the tender buds with sweet nectar.

80

1 Chinese measurement of length in history, now still used in some rural areas. One *li* is about one third of a mile.

Then with her warmth, she melts the icy ponds  
So that big schools of fish are seen shoaling;  
And under the warm sun, crowds of courtiers  
Like returning files of geese from the south,  
Are streaming into the Imperial Palace.

LI YI,  
WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

90

The breath of the spring is everywhere —  
The breeze meandering over the water,  
And the painted swallows over the doorways  
That seems alive, twittering to the guests.  
O, every year, the beauty of the spring  
Returns to please us with redoubled vigour.

WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

100

Brand new are the clouds on this New Year's Day,  
And brave is the sun shining over us so near.  
To the Chaoyuan Temple<sup>1</sup> our tributes we pay,  
And we welcome the coming of the New Year.  
In these spacious courts revived by the springtime,  
Still lingers the winter's breath here and there,  
But the seasonable change is thus announced,  
Heralded by the gradual warmth of the daytime.

LI YI,  
WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

The spring breeze, with his green brush invisible,  
Strokes the wavering willow twigs and branches,  
And then, he will paint the woods verdant.  
Tusu wine, the best herbal wine for the New Year,  
We agree, is to be enjoyed first by the young.

LI YI

Well said, brothers. You mean I am still young. Yet old  
age will not spare this prime time.

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1 Renamed in the Tang Dynasty as “Saintly Descending Temple” where the imperial officials and courtiers paid tribute to the Emperor every New Year. It is located now in the Lintong District, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.

Since the coming of the last winter cold,  
You are the only two bosom friends I hold.  
Now the springtime comes in with joyfulness,  
But I am overwhelmed by returning sadness.  
Lo! Grass and trees are turning green and tender  
And the spring breeze tears apart my old robe.

110

LI YI,  
WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

O! Pray you, the saintly god of the spring!  
When the ancient imperial woods there  
Are basking in the sunshine of the spring,  
Shall we humbly beg for a tender spring?

WEI XIAQING

When Junyu says that the seams of his stylish robe are  
torn apart by the east wind, he means he has not yet  
attained success in his pursuit of office and fame. He  
simply wants to change his old robe for a purple coat  
with golden fish on it and a dark green gown of high  
rank. Well, it is but an easy matter. Remember your old  
friend Lord Liu Ji, the governor of Guanxi? And have  
you heard that the exact dates for this year's Imperial  
Examinations are still in question, because His Majesty  
is planning a grand tour in the east? That's the first  
thing first. May I suggest, therefore, that you follow  
Governor Liu to the west and see what opportunities  
are available to help you achieve your goal?

120

130

LI YI

A great man should soar high on his own and not stoop  
down for sponsorship.

CUI YUNMING

*laughs*

You are quite mistaken, Brother Xia. By saying, "the  
spring wind tears apart my old robe", Brother Junyu  
means he needs someone to thread a needle and sew up  
his torn robe. I guess that he needs to seek help from a  
particular lady.



LI YI

Who?

CUI YUNMING

140

Among the known procuresses in this city, there is one Madame Bao. Believe me. She is the best skilled in threading a needle. I mean matchmaking. Why not entreat her to run a thread through your needle?

LI YI

To tell you the truth, brothers, I have been keeping in touch with Madame Bao for some time. Yet I have not told her much of my mind about this.

WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

Surely we understand. A true scholar must be matched to a fair lady. That is a matter of course.

WEI XIAQING

150

Clad in a scholar's stylish gown,  
You've travelled to the Capital hard,  
Longing for a scholarly crown.  
Now you look for the peach blossom  
Dancing over the spring waters,  
And find it yet a harder thing.

LI YI

By heaven, it is a truly hard matter!

CUI YUNMING

You possess an amorous favour,  
A fair look made by the god of love  
Who grants you the love of a flower.  
So are you ready for your dove?

LI YI

O, woe! It is so expensive deal!

160 CUI YUNMING

It is no matter, for the knowledge  
Stored inside a true scholar's bosom,  
Can indeed pay a better homage  
To the lady who craves money.

LI YI,  
WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

O! Pray you, the saintly god of the spring!  
When the ancient imperial woods there  
Are basking in the sunshine of the spring,  
Shall we humbly beg for a tender sprig?

WEI XIAQING AND  
CUI YUNMING

Fair love sits in the middle of your brow,  
Foretelling happiness in the fair springtime;  
To enjoy the peach blossoms on the bough,  
It is better to find their sunny clime.

170

O, friend dear, we feel our hearts are tense  
Seeing you so lonely, accompanied only  
By the cold wine and the dying incense.

LI YI

Before we depart, friends, let me summarise this scene  
with a few lines, thus:

*The spring hue dyes the capital evergreen;  
People are born noble, wealthy and romantic;  
Lovers' hair turns frosty if they've no go-between,  
But once they have one, all is less frantic.*

180