

Chapter 9: In the Forest¹

Zhao Jing of Taihu, also called the Swordsman of Qiushan, was a famous hero back in his day.

Before Zhou Zishu arrived in Taihu, he was rather looking forward to seeing this illustrious personage and taking a look at one of the great manors of martial society². His interest only increased when he heard that the Huashan³ sect leader's only son, the young chevalier Yu Tianjie, would be there as well—along with the Duanjian⁴ Manor sect leader Mu Yunge, the One-Eyed Warrior Jiang Che, and sundry others.

Zhou Zishu could recite the identities and backgrounds of these people as accurately as an inventory of his family treasures. To prevent its agents from giving accidental offense, the Window of Heaven maintained a dedicated storeroom to record the lives and deeds of any notable jianghu figure within the past fifty years.

For instance, Zhou Zishu knew that the righteous Swordsman of Qiushan, Zhao Jing, had been driven out of his home at a young age to live in poverty and indignity. To make a living, he resorted to many of the same tricks as Qin Song of the Fiendish Melody. At age twenty-seven he returned to using his original name, Zhao Jing. He married the Taihu Feng family's only daughter, and thus used her skirts to climb up the social ladder. He assassinated those who knew his former condition. Only after all this did the Zhao family acknowledge him once more.

As another example, consider the celebrated young hero Yu Tianjie, who was reputed to have sullied a maiden of the E'mei⁵ Sect and abandoned her afterwards. She killed herself in her room, along with her unborn child of three months. Of course, she loved him deeply, and so she never revealed her debaucher's name.

¹ Acknowledgements: thank you to yuer for reading with me! e, julia, bichen, mt, and moose, thanks as usual for your encouragement and help with picking the right words, especially re: translating sect names. Also thank you to rie for pointing to references on the meaning of wulin.

² 武林 (wu3lin2): the society of martial arts sects. This term is somewhat more restrictive than jianghu, which includes anyone living on the outskirts of the law. That includes beggars and common brigands. Wulin is limited to established sects, like Shaolin Temple, E'mei Sect, or—in this specific setting—sects belonging to the Five Lakes Alliance, and their associates. ([Source](#))

It is interesting that Zhou Zishu evidently doesn't consider Siji Manor, his own sect, a great house of the wulin. This might be because his shifu established the sect fairly recently, and so it was not sufficiently established by the time Qin Huaizhang died. Or perhaps because Siji Manor dealt in disguises and secrecy, the other sects didn't recognize it as a proper martial arts sect.

³ 华山 (hua4shan1) Mount Hua, located in Shaanxi. One of the Five Sacred Mountains that Zhou Zishu had intended to visit.

⁴ 断剑 (duan4jian4): broken sword

⁵ 峨眉 (e2mei2): a famous and powerful all-woman sect that features in many wuxia stories. Located on Mount E'mei in Sichuan.

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

Zhou Zishu knew these people's features all too well. His interest was stoked. Moreover, he could not resist Zhang Chengling's entreaties, and so indulged him by staying the night at the Zhao manor.

Zhao Jing had a gentleman's manners in every respect, and never looked down upon Zhou Zishu for his staggering drunkenness or his ragged finery. He wasn't born yesterday, after all, and a few moments of Zhang Chengling's tearful lamentations sufficed to convey how combative their journey had been. Naturally, he became suspicious about Zhou Zishu's origins.

After the two of them had settled in, had a bath, changed into fresh clothes, and supped to their heart's content, Zhao Jing called Zhang Chengling to his study and listened to him recount everything in detail.

Zhang Chengling was a child who had gone a long time without seeing family. Of course he left nothing out. He spoke of many things that he only half-understood, yet Zhao Jing trembled to hear them. After pondering for a while, Zhao Jing couldn't resist asking: "This... This Master Zhou, what kind of man is he? Do you know the details?"

Zhang Chengling dutifully described everything that happened that day at the abandoned temple. Zhao Jing narrowed his eyes and stroked his beard. After a few comforting words, he finally told Zhang Chengling to go rest.

After only about ten days together, Zhou Zishu had a better understanding of this child Zhang Chengling. Though he grew up pampered and was a bit useless, he was a good kid who meant well and could withstand pain. He was only a little naïve. Summoned by that old fox Zhao Jing, surely he would sell out Zhou Zishu within his first few words—and he likely wouldn't even realize.

He chuckled inwardly. Zhou Xu, Zhou Zishu—no matter the name, he had passed these years as an invisible man. Someone very knowledgeable, with an extensive information network, might vaguely know that there was a group called "Window of Heaven". But certainly nobody could know the name of its leader. Even "Commander Zhou" was believed to be an insignificant military official whose only responsibility was managing imperial guards. In the eyes of consequential people, he was important enough to flatter but not important enough to do anything else with.

As he predicted, when the sun rose Zhou Zishu had become the talk of Zhao Manor. He couldn't step into his little courtyard without meeting a ceaseless stream of visitors.

Trapped, he could only play the welcoming host.

Oh, Master Zhao, what an honor to meet you, truly the honor of three lifetimes to see your face, a hundred stories couldn't do you justice... you ask who taught this lowly one? Ah, only a nobody, not even worth mentioning... Master Qian, what an honor to meet you, truly the honor of three lifetimes to see your face, a hundred stories couldn't do you justice... where this one was born? I'm only a beggar, what does it matter where I was

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

born, no no no, I don't belong to the beggars' gang⁶, how could I have such pretensions? I'm just a nobody... Master Sun, what an honor to meet you, truly the honor of three lifetimes to see your face, a hundred stories couldn't do you justice... it's no surprise that you've never heard of me, I'm only a nobody, not worth mentioning. Master Li, what an honor to meet you, truly the honor of three lifetimes to see your face, a hundred stories couldn't do you justice... no, no, I wasn't particularly close to that other Master Li, I only happened to meet him when he needed help. My sect? I haven't got one; I'm only a commoner, not worth mentioning, really.

By dusk, Zhou Zishu's face had gone stiff from smiling. He had to rub it for a while to restore sensation. He sincerely thought that he might suffer a stroke if he went on this, and so decided to leave.

When it came to asking around about someone's private business, these jianghu heroes were as dedicated as housewives gossiping at the market. They would like nothing better than to shrink their heads until they were small enough to poke through the cracks of someone's house, casting their piercing eyes over everything to see what kind of mischief lay hidden under your skin.

If someone said that they hailed from one of the eight great sects and that so-and-so was his shifu, someone else might say *Oh, what an honor to meet you, my shishu and your honored master have been friendly for years*, and thus a relationship formed.

Without such a connection, one would be judged as an outsider, and their character would require extended scrutiny.

The moon was waning. Around midnight, Zhou Zishu's eyes flew open. He had been sleeping since before dark. Now the Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns began to trouble him. It wasn't too bad; he had rested for long enough that he didn't mind this amount of pain.

He rose, but hesitated, feeling that it would be impolite to leave without saying goodbye. So he left two notes. One for Zhang Chengling, reading: *The emerald mountains remain ever constant, and the verdant stream flows ever on*⁷. He felt quite pleased with himself after writing this note, discovering that he was becoming more and more like a jianghu man. He then spread out another sheet and wrote one line for Zhao Jing: *Many thanks for your hospitality*.

After placing the notes under a teapot, he alighted onto the roof.

⁶ The beggars' gang is a classic wuxia fixture: omnipresent beggars who also know how to fight! They are considered a well-established group, though not necessarily part of the "righteous" sects (depending on the story).

⁷ 青山不改, 绿水长流 (qing1shan1bu4gai3, lv4shui3chang2liu2) is a common parting saying among jianghu folk in wuxia stories, often with the addendum 后会有期 (hou4hui4you3qi1: someday we will meet again). The meaning is complicated and often depends on the speaker's intent. The saying refers to how the world always changes, yet some things remain the same. Jing has written a thorough exploration about the saying's multiple meanings [here](#). Unfortunately, it's unknown where this saying originated, though it resembles lines from several old poems.

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

A racoon dog⁸ quietly padded along the roof tiles. It thought it saw a shadow flash before its eyes and froze, widening its eyes to look in all directions. But it saw nothing. It shook its head in confusion and ran towards the kitchen.

Zhou Zishu left Zhao Manor without a sound, believing that he slipped away undetected. Who could have known that, in a grove not far from Zhao Manor, someone awaited him who—it seemed—had long anticipated his arrival.

Zhou Zishu's head began to hurt as soon as he saw Wen Kexing's beaming face. Wen Kexing clasped his fist in a salute, saying, "Well, Zhou-xiong, what a coincidence! It seems our fates are intertwined. To meet three times under the moon, surely it means that our hearts beat as one."

Zhou Zishu matched his smile. "Yes, Wen-xiong, what a coincidence." While he thought *coincidence my ass, you pest*.

He craned his neck but didn't see Gu Xiang. Smiling, he asked, "Why isn't young miss Gu here?"

Wen Kexing answered him bluntly. "That girl always gets in the way, and she's too slow. With her holding me back I might not have chanced to see such an unpredictable person as your...eminence."

Zhou Zishu's smile froze on his face. He stared at Wen Kexing for a long while before replying. "If an unskilled commoner like myself counts as eminent, then what would you call Gu Seng⁹ of Mount Changming? The Poison King of Guanyin Hall on the South Sea? Or the Ghost Master of the Qingzhu Mountains?"

Wen Kexing gave him a profound look. "Gu Seng doesn't concern himself with worldly matters and only pursues his cultivation. I hear the Poison King has already hidden himself in jianghu and obscured his features. I know even less about the Ghost Master, only that he's an elusive creature... who can say whether he's even human."

They both flashed sinister smiles at one another.

It was Zhou Zishu who finally broke eye contact. "This humble Zhou is nothing but a passerby; why is everyone so interested in staring at me?"

Wen Kexing acted as though he was out on a sunny day's walk and only happened to run into an old friend. When his answer came, it was maddeningly slow: "If that's the case, why won't Zhou-xiong stay for a few more days at the magnificent and renowned Zhao Manor? Why such haste to be on your way?"

"This one has already tasted the magnificence of Zhao Manor and does not wish to make a further nuisance of himself," Zhou Zishu said. "Master Zhao undoubtedly has his

⁸ [This animal](#).

⁹ 古僧 (gu3seng1): a title that literally translates to "elder monk".

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

hands full. I'm only a lowly commoner without much ability, and I've no relationship with Master Zhao except a favor worth two silvers. It doesn't justify putting my life on the line for them."

He paused, before adding: "I only escorted young master Zhang to accumulate merits. When I see Yan Wang after a hundred years, I'll be happy as long as I can reduce my penance of skin-flaying and tendon-pulling."

"Accumulating merits," Wen Kexing repeated, nodding his head with approval. "Yes, Zhou-xiong is a man after my own heart. And those after my own heart have always been beautiful, which means..."

As soon as Zhou Zishu heard him say "which means", his temples started throbbing. He was just about to interrupt when, suddenly, a blood-curdling scream rang from afar through the forest behind Wen Kexing.

The two of them froze.

Then, Wen Kexing pointed in that direction. "Ah, my kindred spirit—here's another chance to accumulate merits."

Zhou Zishu hesitated for a moment, but still hastened toward where the sound came from. Helplessly, he said, "Wen-xiong, eye defects are a serious matter; you'd better see a doctor soon."

Wen Kexing followed close behind him. Zhou Zishu's qinggong¹⁰ had almost attained the level of walking on snow without leaving a trace, yet this person managed to remain a few feet behind him seemingly without effort. Most people would remain silent so as to conserve their qi, but Wen Kexing gave a nonchalant reply: "Yes, Zhou-xiong is right. I must visit several reputable doctors when I have the chance and receive thorough treatment. For my eyesight to degrade at such a young age that I still can't see through your disguise, what a shame."

Zhou Zishu wanted very much to prevent him from ever again using his "degraded eyesight". But he gave it some thought and concluded that, though he knew himself, he did not know his opponent. A man with the intellect and self-restraint of the former Window of Heaven commander would not do something so rash.

They kept a fast pace. In the blink of an eye they had dashed into the deep forest. Before them lay a corpse.

The person was dressed to go out at night. The mask covering his face had fallen to the side. With his eyes blown open, his dying expression looked extraordinarily sinister. Even from afar, Zhou Zishu thought that this man seemed quite familiar. He stooped

¹⁰ 轻功 (qing1gong1): a cousin of gongfu, qinggong refers to the art of running and leaping with great agility. Real life qinggong is the art that inspired parkour!

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 7/2022

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

down to examine the corpse more closely. Frowning, he said, "Isn't this... the master of Duanjin Manor, Sir Mu?"

That very day they had stood in his residence and spoken nearly an hour's worth of cloying nonsense. How unexpected that Zhou Zishu became a night prowler with him, and that he had the bad luck to become a dead prowler to boot.

Wen Kexing huddled closer, stroking his chin with great interest. "Dressed in walking clothes on a moonlight night, surely he wasn't..."

Zhou Zishu turned his head, prepared to hear Wen Kexing's brilliant insights.

They were as follows: "This Lord Mu came out to pick flowers¹¹?"

Mu Yunge's corpse had no bloodstains on or around it, though his lips looked bruised. Zhou Zishu thought for a moment. When he lightly peeled back the corpse's lapels, he saw that there was an astonishing pitch-black handprint on its chest.

¹¹ Recall that this is a slang term for going out to rape people at night.