

The House Filler

Tong Ge

1918–1966

Spring Review

Du Fu¹

On war-torn land rivers flow, mountains stand.
In vernal town grass and weeds are overgrown.
Grieved over the years, flowers make us shed tears.
Hating to part, hearing birds s our heart.
For three months, beacon fires have burned,
Letters from home are worth their weight in gold.
I cannot bear to scratch my grizzling hair;
it's grown too thin to hold a light hairpin.

(春望

国破山河在， 城春草木深。 感时花溅泪， 恨别鸟惊心。
烽火連三月， 家书抵万金。 白头搔更短， 渾欲不胜簪。)

¹ Du Fu (712–770) was one of the most outstanding poets in the Tang dynasty. The poem is translated by Xu Yuanchong and modified by Tong Ge.

Peace Time

Kaifeng City, Henan Province

1920–1937

Chapter 1

I met the man I grew to love and the man I came to hate on the same day.

I had waited for that day for ten long years and lost hope of ever getting married. When most girls are married off at age sixteen, a twenty-six-year-old unmarried woman is considered an old maid. A fresh lad was out of my reach. The villagers believed my best chance was to marry a widower and become a *tianfang*—a house filler.

Then, out of nowhere, Father received a marriage proposal through the shop owner in Kaifeng who acted as a middleman for my opera costume-making business. However, the widower was twenty years older than me.

“Too old for you. I turned him down.” Father told me that night.

Within days, Father received a second marriage proposal. This man, also a widower, was only ten years older than me. Father met him in the middleman’s shop. When Father came home, he announced, “Jinfeng, it’s decided. At least he is mature, not bad-looking and has his own business. I can’t let this one pass.”

“Did he ask...?”

“No. He didn’t ask about your feet.” Father waved his tobacco pipe dismissively.

On the day before my wedding, Father sat in our courtyard after supper. Outside, the sun turned from bright white to golden, then to the colour of fire persimmon. The typical heat wave in summer had subsided to a comfortable warm breeze. While he was cooling off with the big plantain fan, I was in the kitchen, boiling water for a bath. Throwing dry corn stalks and twigs into the belly of the stove, I pushed and pulled the handle of the bellow by the cauldron. Sweat trickled down my forehead to my cheeks and chin, then dropped onto the ground, evaporating within seconds, leaving no trace behind.

Since I was motherless, the Hu clan had sent a woman to our house and told me what would happen on my wedding night.

“You’ve seen how animals mate. It’s just like that,” she said.

Like animals? My face burned like a hot iron. I lowered my head.

“Take a bath today, for you may not have the time tomorrow. Make sure to wash your feet well, and remember, you must always obey your husband.” With those words, the woman left.

Why especially feet? Was she implying my feet were smelly? I was a bit offended. Even though water was very scarce in our place, I would still wash my feet every two or three days, *except in the severe drought years*, unlike the rest of the villagers, who would stretch it out for ten days or even half a month. Besides, the foot bathwater was always used to water the flowers in the yard, so nothing was wasted. Women’s bound feet were private in those days. The only people who had seen and touched mine were my father and the two witches who bound them. Since I was too young, Father had taken on the routine of unwrapping, washing and rewrapping my feet. It was not a man’s job. With his big hands, he did it clumsily at first, then gradually got better. A year later, I learned to do it myself.

I closed my bedroom door, lit one single candle, and stepped into the small wooden bath basin. In the flickering shadows of the candlelight, my deformed feet looked like two

pointed horse hooves. After walking for so many years on my four-*cun*² silver waterlily feet—one *cun* too large to be a perfect bride—I no longer felt the initial sharp pain, only the ache after a long day. I scraped my skin slowly and methodically, including the deep grooves between my heels and insteps, and wondered how women's distorted feet were considered attractive. Most Chinese men had a foot fetish for the three-*cun* “golden waterlilies.” Playing with such feet gave them the utmost pleasure. All this was because of a damn emperor in the Song dynasty nine centuries ago who liked tiny-footed women.

After China became a republic in 1912, our founding father, Sun Zhongshan,³ formally abolished foot-binding. But it seemed that only some big city folks welcomed the change. I learned this from my brother Rui's letter. Being the eldest son in our family, Father sent him to Shanghai at age sixteen. He started as an accounting clerk in a shipping company, climbed all the way up to chief accountant, married and had a daughter who escaped the torture of foot-binding. But in Henan province, having three-*cun* golden waterlilies was still seen as a woman's most desirable feature. How could my husband-to-be have forgotten to ask about my feet? When he discovered my four-*cun* feet on our wedding night, what would happen? Would he be angry and regretful? Or even divorce me?

A whiff of tobacco smoke drifted from Father's pipe into the room, mixing with the smell of the mud walls, the packed earth floor, the old furniture and the new clothes. The room was hot and stuffy. Our ten chicks purchased in the spring were settling down with our three hens on the roost in the courtyard, whispering their little secrets. The moonlight grew brighter, casting swaying tree shadows onto my paper-covered latticed window. A crow's

² 1 *cun* = 1.31 inch

³ Sun Zhongshan, (1866–1925) also known as JSun Yatsen or Sun Wen, was a Chinese statesman, physician and political philosopher. He served as the first provisional president of the Republic of China and was the first leader of the Nationalist Party of China. He is widely regarded as the Father of the Nation in the Republic of China and the Forerunner of the Revolution in the People's Republic of China for his instrumental role in the overthrow of the Qing dynasty during the Xinhai Revolution of 1911–1912.

caw startled the night. *A bad omen*. Hopefully I'd see magpies the next day; they were always a good omen.

“Go to bed early. You'll have a long day tomorrow,” Father shouted from the yard. I heard him knock off the ash from his smoking pipe and saunter into his room, then shut the door.

I had a hard time falling asleep. A mosquito had got into my mosquito net, but I couldn't find it. It drove me mad. Finally, I took the net off the ceiling, balled it up, and threw it to the corner of the bed. The mice were also particularly noisy, running on the ceiling as if they were fighting or having a wedding procession.⁴ Would my husband be nice to me? What did he look like? What kind of people were my parents-in-law? All mothers-in-law were mean. As the Chinese saying goes, a daughter-in-law is made by beating just as dough is made by kneading. I only hoped I wouldn't be kneaded too hard.

When I finally drifted off, I dreamed of my wedding night. My husband, upon seeing my feet, cried out, fell off the bed and became a big scary mouse. I woke up in a fright and could not fall back to sleep.

⁴ Mice getting married is a common theme in Chinese fantasies and folktales.