

# The Spirit of the River

By P'ou Song-lin

In a small village along the river Tsz lived a fisherman named Siu. He started every night with his nets, and took very great care not to forget to bring with him a small jar of spirits. Before throwing his cast-net, he drank a small cup of the fragrant liquor and poured some drops into the slow current, praying aloud:

“O Spirit-of-the-river, please accept these offerings and favour your humble servant. I am poor and I must take some of the fishes that live in your cold kingdom. Don't be angry against me and don't prevent the eels and trouts coming to me!”

When every fisherman on the river brought back only one basket of fishes, he always proudly bore home a heavy charge of two or three baskets full to the brim.

Once, on a rosy dawn of early spring, when the sun, still below the horizon, began to eat with its golden teeth the vanishing darkness, he said aloud:

“O Spirit-of-the-river! For many years, every night I have drunk with you a good number of wine-cups; but I never saw your face; won't you favour me with your presence? We could sit together, and the pleasure of drinking would be much greater.”

Hardly had he finished these words when, from the middle of the stream, emerged a beautiful young man clothed in pink, who slowly walked on the smooth surface of the limpid water, and sat on the boat's end, saying:

“Here I am.”

The fisherman, being half-drunk, was not troubled in any way; he bowed to the young man, offered him, with his two hands, a cup of the strong wine, and said:

“Well! I long wished to receive your instructions, and I am very glad to see you. You must be mighty tired of living in that water; the few drops of wine I pour every night are quite lost in such a quantity of tasteless liquid. You had better come up every night; we will drink together and enjoy each other's company.”

From this day, when darkness closed in, the Spirit waited for the fisherman and partook of his provisions. As soon as the sun rose above the horizon he suddenly disappeared. The fisherman did not find that very convenient; he asked his companion if he could not arrange to stay with him sometimes in the daytime.

“Impossible; we can't do such a thing, we spirits and ghosts. We belong to the kingdom of shadows. When the shadows, fighting the daylight, bring with them the Night, we are free to go and wander about. But as soon as the herald of the morn, the cock, has proclaimed the daily victory of the sun, we are powerless and must disappear.”

On the same day the fisherman was sitting on the bank, smoking a pipe before going home with his baskets, when he saw a woman holding a child in her arms and hastening along the river towards a ford some hundred yards up stream. She was already in the water, when she missed her footing, fell into the river, and was rolled away by the stream. The child, by some happy chance, had fallen on the bank and lay there, crying.

The fisherman could easily have gone in his boat and saved the woman, who was still struggling to regain the bank, but he was a prudent man:

“This woman, whom I don't know, seems to be beautiful,” thought he. “Maybe it is my friend The-Spirit-of-the-river who has arranged all this, and chosen the girl to be his wife. If I prevent

her going down to his cold lodgings, he will be angry and ruin my fishing. All I could do is to adopt this boy until somebody comes and asks for him.”

And he did not move, until the poor woman had disappeared in the yellow stream; then he took the child. Once back in the village, he inquired about the mother; nobody could tell who she was. The days passed and nobody asked for the boy. This was strange enough, but, stranger still, from this day the fisherman never saw The-Spirit-of-the-river again. He offered him many cups of wine, and his fishing was as good as ever, but though he prayed heartily, his companion of so many nights did not appear any more.

When the boy was three years old he insisted on accompanying his adopted father in his night fishing. Summer had come; the cold was no more to be feared. The man consented to take his adopted son with him; they started together in the twilight.

As soon as the darkness closed, the boy’s voice changed; his appearance was different.

“What a silly man you are!” said he. “Don’t you know me now? For more than two years I waited for an opportunity to tell you who I was. But you always went out at night and you never came back before the sun was high in the sky. You had never failed to present your offerings; so I could not resist your prayer when you asked me to stay with you in the daytime. Now, here I am, till your death; when the sun is up I shall only be your son, but when the night closes I shall be your companion, and we will enjoy together what longevity the Fate allows you.”