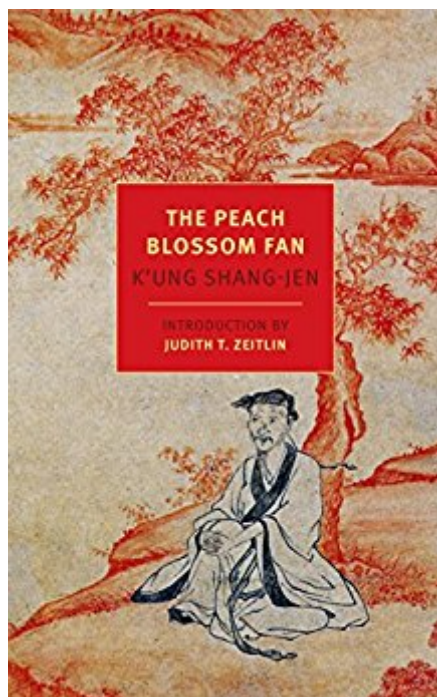


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The Peach Blossom Fan (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

A tale of battling armies, political intrigue, star-crossed romance, and historical cataclysm, *The Peach Blossom Fan* is one of the masterpieces of Chinese literature, a vast dramatic composition that combines the range and depth of a great novel with the swift intensity of film. In the mid-1640s, famine sweeps through China. The Ming dynasty, almost 300 years old, lurches to a bloody end. Peking falls to the Manchus, the emperor hangs himself, and Ming loyalists take refuge in the southern capital of Nanking. Two valiant generals seek to defend the city, but nothing can overcome the corruption, decadence, and factionalism of the court in exile. The newly installed emperor cares for nothing but theater, leaving practical matters to the insidious Ma Shih-ying. Ma's crony Juan Ta-ch'eng is as unscrupulous an operator as he is sophisticated a poet. He diverts resources from the starving troops in order to stage a spectacular production of his latest play. History, however, has little time for make-believe, though the earnest members of the Revival Club, centered on the handsome young scholar Hou Fang-y'ang and his lover Fragrant Princess, struggle to discover a happy ending.

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Customer Reviews

First of all, I should point out that I did not read this edition, but rather the original University of California Press edition. But since it is the same translation, only with a different introduction, I feel it is acceptable to review it here. Actually, I have two reviews, one for those familiar with Chinese literature and one for those who are not. For those who are familiar with Chinese literature, I don't have to say much other than that this is probably one of the best works of classic Chinese drama ever produced, (the only contender I can think of being perhaps *The Peony Pavilion*), and incredibly well translated at that. Although it is in English, it actually reads with a Chinese flavor, and you know how difficult that is to accomplish. And although ordinarily I do not favor the use of Wade-Giles in naming, in this case it actually enhances the effect of being grounded in the past. Well worth reading, because as you no doubt know, for all the pages the Chinese have put to print through the millennia, when it comes to classic Chinese literature the pickings are sadly few. For those not familiar with Chinese literature, let me point out that, yes, it is really not much of a stretch to compare this work to one of the second tier (which is still an extremely high level indeed) works of Shakespeare. Bearing in mind that Chinese drama has some pronounced differences with Western drama. The most noticeable being that Western drama is intended to be viewed all in one sitting. Not so for Chinese drama. It is generally very lengthy, and if performed in its entirety would have to extend over several days and perhaps up to a week.

This translation is obviously better than nothing if you cannot read Chinese, but it is far from perfect. There is an exchange in Scene 11, for instance, in which Tso (no relation to the chicken) tries to excuse himself of responsibility for the poor behavior of the soldiers under his command. In response, Liu throws his cup to the ground and tries to shift the blame for the action from himself to his hands in order to humorously point out that, in the same way that it is ridiculous for someone to claim they have no control over their own hands, it is ridiculous for a general to claim he has no control over his men. Here it is in Birch's translation: [Liu dashes his teacup on the floor] Tso [angrily]: Your manners are extraordinarily offensive. Why did you break that cup? Liu [laughing]: I had no intention to break it, but in the heat of the moment it fell from my hand. Tso: Do you mean that your mind cannot control your movements? Liu: If the mind were a good general, the hand could not have made a mistake. And here is the

original: (æ"èŒŒé"°ä° äœ ä,«ä»)(å ¢" æ 'ä»«)å' å' i •è¸™ŒŒ-‰œ—Œ" i ŒŒ« æ èŒŒæ•æ äœ ä (ä,Œ-ä»«)æ™ Œ" æ æœœ—Œ" i Œä, æ—Œè'Œ „é«^å...i ŒéŒœ‰œ‰œ"å »ä°†ä (å ¢")éŒœ‰œ‰œ"å »i ŒÉ é"ä Œ „åŒfå• ä,å —ä,»ä ~ä (ä,')åŒfè¥å• å —ä,»å' i Œä ä,å•« æ‰œ«ä,ä å "ä°†ä Tso's reaction to Liu breaking his cup in the original is

"è¿™ç-‰æ— ç² ï Œç« æ èŒ¶æ•æ åæ ", which (idiomatically) would be something like, "What manner of discourtesy is this, that you would go so far as to toss your cup to the ground?" This is the sort of decorous language that is very characteristic of classical Chinese. So I have absolutely no idea why Birch translates this line as, "Your manners are extraordinarily offensive. Why did you break that cup?" These are extremely plain sentences that would be at home in a children's book but which do not convey the tone of a 17th century kunqu play.

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