

**KLARA BLUM**

**THE SHEPHERD AND THE WEAVER**

**Translated by Melody Winkle**

## PART ONE: THE DREAMER OF SHANGHAI

### CHAPTER 1

"Nü dshe-dso tssji Yün..."

Three girls stood on the stage. The one on the right in light blue silk was the morning star. The one on the left in deep blue silk was the evening star. And the middle one, glittering in silver, was the Milky Way. With high, expressionless voices, they sang:

*"The woman wove thin clouds ..."*

The Nan Hsing Theater performed the ancient legend, adapted for the stage according to ancient use, depicted according to the ancient traditions of the art of acting. Plot, meaning, and character formation were fragmented beyond recognition into rhythm and color, acrobatics and symbolism.

Niulang and Zhinü - the shepherd and the weaver - two constellations and a mythical pair of lovers - were played by famous stage artists. Senior officials and even a few foreigners were present in the audience. They understood nothing, but the exotically appealing abundance of images was irresistible.

A strongly stylized loom appeared against the starry background. A graceful creature moved rhythmically in front of it and began to wail artfully after making a few circular gestures.

*"We are only chess figures*

*In the old hands of the gods..."*

"Yes," said a young Chinese man sitting next to his companion in the fifth parquet row, "Chess figures - that's right! Shall we go, Kai Men? I can't take this stuff anymore."

Instead of being astonished or indignant, Fu Kai Men followed him with obvious

willingness, without even glancing at the delightful image dominating the stage: a young man dressed as a golden-feathered rooster, the guardian of the male principle Yang, dancing before a girl wearing a long-eared, silver-white fur hat on her head, representing the Moon rabbit, the guardian of the female principle Yin. He performed his acrobatic jumps with such exhilarating grace that he literally seemed to fly.

"I was really surprised," Fu Kai Men said as they stepped out onto the street, "that you suddenly wanted to see this traditional twinkling and jangling and jumping today. Why is that? Because your name is Niulang?"

"My lowly name has little to do with it," replied Tschang Niulang. "The legend of these two constellations has fascinated more important people than me. It's strange, what our farm workers fantasize in the sky and paint between the stars during their nights of sorrow. And it is despicable how our official theater distorts and flattens this simple, profound peasant tale."

They walked side by side along the wide, noisy Edward VII Road. It was a warm summer night in 1929.

Tschang Niulang wore a long, flowing Chinese outfit of inconspicuous dark blue, but of the most precious silk fabric. He was tall and slim and had a fine face with long, narrow eyes and a searching line around his mouth, a line of gentle stubbornness.

Fu Kai Men, on the other hand, looked European, although not very elegantly dressed, short and slim, his face flat-nosed with a touch of dry irony.

"Are you surprised?" he asked. "What does our official art know about the living Chinese people? It prefers not to know anything. Especially nothing of the lao baixing."

His face became serious, and a tone of political solemnity entered his voice as he uttered those three syllables. They literally meant "the old hundred names", the hundred Chinese

surnames which, spread across the huge nation, are repeated endlessly, like Müller and Schulze, Hinz and Kunz. You meet a Hsü or Fu, a Wang or Tschang, a Tschen or Li in every hut and on every street corner. But lao baixing, the Chinese Hinz and Kunz, did not convey contempt. They expressed the sense of honor and self-confidence of the little man. "We, the respected people of the masses! We, the Chinese collective! We, the old hundred names!"

"We should create a new theater," Niulang dreamed. "The theater of today's Chinese people."

"I'm afraid the people have more urgent concerns," Kai Men said dryly.

"Everything is urgent," Niulang insisted. "It's been a year since we started our night school. Aren't more people coming every day? Aren't they studying with greater diligence every day?"

They had reached the Huangpu river and were now walking along its banks. Niulang's apartment was in the opposite direction, but the later he got home, the happier he was.

"I have to admit," said Kai Men, "that I was very skeptical at first. I thought, at best people would learn to read and write so they could do inventory, and I didn't think they would have anything to spare for history and sociology, literature and foreign languages. These business managers are mostly typical Shanghainese, so greedy for money they are morally beneath the level of a worker or farmer."

"Be generous," smiled Niulang, "we two are also business employees."

"Well, you - you are above all a son of the Tschang Silk Company."

"All the worse for my morale."

"Why don't they use you in your father's business?"

"I think the exalted one doesn't want me to see how he treats his people. And he's very

happy for me to do the correspondence with Fontenay," Niulang's voice became glassy with restrained fury. "Isn't it a great honor for a Chinese man to have his son work for a foreign employer?"

"And also good protection at the customs office," added Kai Men.

"But to get back to our school, we don't just have business employees among the students. We have workers too."

"Yes, Wang Po Tscheng."

Ah! You noticed him?"

"Who can miss that enthusiastic character?"

"The way he studies!", said Niulang. "I'm not worthy of teaching him. Me, the autodidact. The most famous professor would be barely good enough for that transport worker. How he studies! I hope my son will study like that one day."

"He most certainly will. Your little Tjen To is a splendid child.

"You're exaggerating," Niulang retorted with his usual modest laugh. "After all, Mee Tssjing is an excellent mother and will certainly raise him in an exemplary manner."

"And she's a beautiful woman as well," Kai Men reminded him.

"Yes," said Niulang wearily, "she is and remains the beautiful, proud, well-bred Miss Tang - daughter of one of the first families of Peking."

"Not only was she born Miss Tang, but she is also the married Madame Tschang, and she has been for seven years."

"Yes. But do you think she called me by name even once during those seven years? For six years before the child arrived, she avoided any direct address. And now - now she just says "Father of Tjen To"! And she's not wrong. After all, she only married me on her parents' orders -

the same reason I married her."

"I think you underestimate Mee Tssjing. She didn't abandon Tsai Yun, even though the Tangs condemned the girl."

"Tsai Yun is her sister, after all."

"Only her half-sister and the daughter of a concubine."

Niulang had long suspected that his friend was secretly in love with the twenty-two-year-old women's rights activist, who was both funny and pretty. He didn't speak about it. He didn't permit himself to ask questions. But Niulang knew that it would make him feel very good to hear something about her.

"Tsai Yun's mother," he said, "was a beautiful girl from a simple background. She is said to have been the daughter of a shoeshine boy. The poor concubine soon realized that her master had tired of her. My exalted father-in-law still had eight more like her. He could afford it."

They had arrived at Broadway, which the locals metaphorically named the Way of Flowers and Willows. In non-metaphorical terms, it was called Brothel Way.

"The woman was looking forward to giving birth," said Niulang. "You know the house of the Tangs in Peking with the purple-gold dragon in front of the gate. It stretches from Tji Chua Men Street to Schao Tssjü Lane. In this magnificent building, the woman who was about to give birth was consigned to a storage room - without windows, without a bed. Lying on the floor, she did not give birth to a boy, as she had anxiously hoped, but only a girl. This meant the last prospect of improving her position in the Tang family had vanished. It was a warm summer evening. Through the open moon gate, she saw my mother-in-law passing by, holding four-year-old Mee Tssjing by the hand. She called to her and, in an exhausted voice, begged her to send one of the servant girls. But the mistress waved her off. They were expecting guests, so all the

amahs would be busy."

"And you call her a Chinese woman!" Kai Men gritted between his teeth.

"Rich people are not Chinese," claimed Niulang. "Rich people are a nation unto themselves."

"With a few exceptions," Kai Men corrected dryly.

"Fine, with a few exceptions. So the poor daughter of the shoeshine boy gave the child her breast until it fell asleep. Then she arose with the last of her strength, spread out an old silk robe that had been hanging forgotten on a nail over the scuffed table and laid the naked child on it so it slept comfortably in the soft warmth of the evening. It was dusk. The unsightly room sank into darkness before the eyes of the exhausted woman. Only the child's body, a dark gold, shimmered above her. Then she began to imagine the future self of her daughter, a creature capable of rising above all that was common and ugly, a person who would one day soar high above her mother's revilers and eclipse them all with the splendor of her worth. And so she named the child Tsai Yun, the Shining Cloud."

Fu Kai Men was silent for a long time, and Niulang honored his silence. They had now arrived in a poor part of town called Hongkew, which was home to old Fu's grocery store. Here on the corner of Kung Ping Road was also the gray two-story house of a business friend who had rented them several rooms for their night school.

I'll try putting on a theater performance in the fall, the thought went through Niulang's head. The large room held around two hundred people.

Kai Men lived a few streets away on Ward Road behind his father's store with his parents, siblings, and wife, the daughter of the neighboring ironmonger. Like Niulang, he had been married before the age of twenty and only in accordance with his family's wishes. Niulang

decided to accompany his friend on the way home. Perhaps he wanted to talk about Tsai Yun and his love after all. Of course, that wasn't very likely.

"We let our personal feelings rule us far too much these days," Kai Men suddenly burst out, not very logically, but Niulang understood the connection.

"That's a perfectly natural reaction," he said graciously. "Confucianism has gagged us for long enough. Obedience, self-control, propriety, and again propriety and again self-control. It was simply unbearable. Weren't we relieved when the translation of Goethe's *Werther* appeared, because we finally could see the example of a young man who did not allow his passions to be constrained by labels?"

"It's been two years since the trade unions had the upper hand in Shanghai," Kai Men said in a hushed voice. "From one day to the next, we thought we had freed ourselves from the foreign bloodsuckers, that the revolution had achieved its goal. And then - betrayed and bludgeoned. Is it pathetic to dwell on the pain of love?"

"Our people say, in small things, see the big picture," Niulang contradicted.

"Our young writers," said Kai Men, who had regained his dry irony, "now love to give free rein to their exuberance." And he quoted, "I do not desire knowledge, nor fame. If only I could find a woman, whether beautiful or ugly, but with a passionate and overflowing heart..."

"He's not so wrong," Niulang insisted.

"Of course," Kai Men smiled, "I also know a young gentleman from a good family who has written a poem in the classical style of Le Sse.

*My parents called me Niulang,*

*My love dream captured between the stars.*

*I seek my love's happiness among the stars*



*And find it difficult to return to earth.  
From the sky, weaver, you shine, on me  
In eternal, delicate, spun splendor.  
Then I know the awaited night is coming,  
And finally, I meet you on earth."*

"Yes, Kai Men, but I've written another Le Sse.

*My parents called me Niulang,  
And yet did not recognize the meaning of this name:  
I belong to the people who herd and weave  
And hammer iron and dig trenches.  
The sweat and blood of the shepherd and craftsman  
Nourished the silken world of my ancestors.  
Your silken world has taught me to think.  
And now I think, how do I right the wrong?"*

They had arrived at Kai Men's front door. And as if they had grown tired of talking after the overly long conversation, they parted wordlessly.

## Chapter 2

I'll try in the fall, thought Niulang. Should I start with a foreign theater piece? Chekhov? Or Gogol? I'd prefer a revolutionary Chinese play, but that would be challenging for the police even before we have prevailed. Or, maybe...?

"Where does the gentleman wish to go?"

Startled out of his thoughts, Niulang looked into the malnourished face of a rickshaw coolie, whose quizzical smile revealed a row of damaged teeth, and who yet possessed an intriguing charm. Recently in history class, Niulang had covered the Opium War, describing how Great Britain used military power to force China to buy the destructive narcotic. The same smirk of the coolie had appeared on Wang Po-Cheng's face, with the black gaps between his teeth and an expression of indestructible intelligence. "And what did the British missionaries say about the Opium War?"

"How far to Albi Lu?" asked Niulang absentmindedly, dwelling on his memories.

The coolie quoted a fairly high price. Niulang had money, enough to say yes without further ado, but he knew the poor devil would torture himself with bitter self-reproach for not having asked for more. So he bargained down a little and climbed in.

Holding the drawbars of the two-wheeled cart in his hands, the skinny figure walked ahead of him. It was a strangely lively walk, light on his feet, with his head thrown back and his hips swaying.

He's taken opium, Niulang thought. He couldn't do this anymore, he had to muster up his strength. Great-uncle Tschang Ming Tjen had died of opium poisoning. The poor smoke because they are suffocating in misery, the rich because they are suffocating in luxury. Great-uncle Ming

Tjen loved me very much. He taught me to write poems in the classical style. In his time, such poems were still a prerequisite for the state examination, but no one among Hang Chou's civil servants could write Li Sse with as much beauty and elegance as he did. When did he die? About a month before we moved to Shanghai.

The rickshaw turned into the wide, beautiful Avenue Joffre. The effect of the opium had visibly worn off, the laborer walked with limp steps and coughed miserably.

"Dao-la! Here we are!" Niulang shouted suddenly. He hastily got out, handed him the full fare and explained, "I'd prefer to walk a stretch. I'm an experienced pedestrian."

The laborer looked closely at the silken cavalier, who had just donated a quarter of the journey and had apologized on top of it. "The master is good," he remarked with authority. He said it without any humility, rather philosophically and with conscientiousness. He sat on the left drawbar as if it were a club fauteuil, pulled out a shaobing, a round unsweetened bread, from his pocket, and began to chew with relish.

Niulang was indeed a practiced pedestrian and also a skilled swimmer and gymnast. His boss, Monsieur Fontenay, who was in the habit of showing him off like wares to foreign business friends, praised his athleticism no less than his education. He called himself an artist because he had managed to pick out such an accomplished specimen from an "inferior" race. "Extreme strength, gentlemen, with extreme delicacy. I'm telling you, this young man is real Tschang silk."

Niulang entered a luxurious garden street in the French Concession, Avenue Roi Albert, called Albi Lu by the natives. It cost his father, as a Chinese man, insanelly high taxes to be allowed to live here. His house was at ground level, broadly laid out, and interspersed with graceful courtyards. A silk wall decoration with a poem from the seventh century by Wang Jihung in the reception room.

*I would love to see friends with me every day,  
We discussed philosophy.  
I would have gladly chased the tax collector away,  
So he no longer bothers me with taxes and faxes.  
I would gladly see sons and daughters married  
In families, distinguished and chosen.  
If my life offered me such joy,  
Then I have no need of paradise after death.*

Underneath stood a slender porcelain vase, painted with birds and flowers. On the right, a miniature silver pagoda, a black lacquered box with green tea, and an embroidered fan. On the left, a carved miniature ivory pagoda, a green lacquered box with black tea, and a painted fan.

Porcelain, thought Niulang, and ivory and silk and lacquer. And you hit your forehead on the ground to kowtow and you take a wife at your parents' command and you play the game of moonlit storms with her at your parents' command and more silk and more ivory and the government makes unequal contracts and the whites condescend to get rich from us while kicking us in return, physically or morally, depending on rank and status, and then more silk and more lacquer. I'm sick of it, I'm thoroughly sick of it.

He crossed a second courtyard square. The two semi-circular moongate doors of his room were open. Little Tjen To slept with a crinkled nose. Mee Tssjing stood up and greeted her husband with an old-fashioned but very graceful bow.

"The Exalted One is still awake," she reported. "He wishes to speak with you."

Niulang thanked her politely and crossed a third courtyard square. Through the moon-shaped opening, he saw his father-in-law writing hieroglyphics in perfect calligraphy in his

account books. Tschang Da-Dshin, owner of the Tschang Silk Factory and the Tschang Export-Import Company, had become a real Shanghainese, and this word was practically synonymous with the big businessmen and high earners of the upper classes. But his birthplace was Hangzhou, the city of delicate green bamboo groves and silver lakes, exquisite temples and graceful palaces. Hangzhou, the Chinese Florence, was filled with memories of famous poets and statesmen, and he himself was the scion of an old family of aesthetically-minded civil servants. He endeavored to uphold this privilege through his calligraphy, his sometimes somewhat pretentious way of speaking, his respect for spiritual values.

Niulang cleared his throat in a dignified manner and stepped in. Looking up briefly, the father ordered,

"Sit here. I need to speak to you urgently."

But then he interrupted himself with a sudden exclamation of pleasure that did not seem entirely unintentional.

"When I look at your face! Uncle Tschang Ming Tjen as he lived and breathed."

Niulang was silent.

"You're not happy about that?"

"That question, my father, requires a lengthy answer."

"Fine, we'll put it off until another time. I just want to remind you what you owe to him. He read the classics with you. Without him, you would never have learned the language of scholars. I couldn't send you to a university. I am a businessman and need a son with business experience. But when I saw how you continued to study the classics on your own in your free hours, as well as history and English and French, did I not give you ample paternal encouragement?"

"That's right, Father," confirmed Niulang.

"I even tolerated you doing things that were quite disreputable in these politically tense times - I mean your night school for business employees. I was proud and happy that my son was walking among all these Shanghainese materialists, these flat-headed dollar chasers, as a true, spiritually gifted Tshang, even if his spirit led him astray. But it cannot go on like this for much longer. You mean well. But you're doing the most serious damage."

"Damage, father?"

"We employ eighteen porters to transport the bales from the factory to the store or to Godown, the warehouse at the port. One of them was suffering from lung disease. He collapsed on the way and spit up blood. The other seventeen demanded immediate changes to the working conditions and a one-time medical benefit for the injured man. I would have liked to help the poor devil in secret. But what right did I have to set such a precedent in public? One in two coolies has lung disease. Once we start caring for all of them, business will stop."

"And the working conditions?" Niulang asked.

"Ten percent wage increase and a one-hour lunch break."

"How long was their lunch break before?"

"Funny question! As long, of course, as they needed to eat their bowl of rice. If they don't eat quickly enough, they're told to hurry ... In a word, they are now on strike. I could easily chase them away. You can get eighteen porters on every street corner in Shanghai. But here in Hangzhou, it's not customary to change your servants and maids too often. That is not a subtle message.

So today their spokesman came to me. He also seems to be their instigator, a certain Wang Po-Cheng. He was quite impudent. For example, he accused me of employing eight-year-

old girls in the factory to fish the silk cocoons out of boiling water. I'm not the only one! And anyway, how did he come up with that? I can still forgive him for representing his own interests. But is such a filthy wretch allowed to set himself up as the protector of other people? Is he Confucius? Is he a Mandarin?"

"Our people say all human worries are also my worries," quoted Niulang.

Tschang Da-Dshin tactfully ignored this derailment. A father does not argue with his son.

"I certainly won't introduce any reforms until other business people start doing the same. I'm a rich man, but after all, I'm only Chinese. Without Fontenay's protection, I would be completely powerless.

So this coolie gets cheeky and I get impatient and say, "First of all, stop being lazy. A person in your position never achieved anything with violence and defiance." "On the contrary," he grinned and he began to list when and where workers had gone on strike. Not only in China, but also abroad. This bandit knew everything. He knew of a British miners' strike and of some sort of general strike in Germany or elsewhere ... And then I got a strong suspicion..."

"Your suspicions are well-founded, Father. I'm his teacher."

"But how did this turtle egg get the idea to study history in the first place?"

"That is my fault, Father. He came to learn to read and write. But I saw his unusual intelligence and -"

"I don't blame you, my son. Knowledge is more important to you than anything else, so you want to spread it everywhere. But see for yourself. What's balm for one person is poison for another."

"An absolutely necessary antidote for such conditions."

"Your family's position is linked to these conditions. Don't forget that. You may be a

philosopher, a dreamer, maybe even a reformer - but first and foremost you are a Tschang."

"I don't care that I'm a Tschang. I am a human being. I'm Chinese. And I am me."

"You can speak like that, you who have lived with the family's honor since childhood!"

"Great-uncle Ming-Tjen? He's supposed to serve as an example for me? That decadent who died from opium!"

Even as his lips formed the three syllables, o-pen-yon, he knew he had gone too far.

The old man's hand hit his face as if he were a naughty schoolboy, he who was already the father of a young son.

He stared blindly at an open account book, in which the calligraphic hieroglyphics showed the sales of goods from the last few months.

"I suppose my esteemed father has no more commands for me?" The old-fashioned expression of reverence resounded like a counterpunch. Then he left without waiting for an answer.

It was quiet in his room. Mee Tssjing slept or pretended to sleep.

Just get away, thought Niulang, burying his head in his pillow. Just get out of this haunted country.