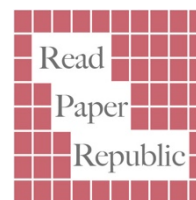


# Mahjong

《麻将》

BY FENG TANG 冯唐

Translated by Brendan O’Kane



I: 2009 AD

Shang Shu had made up her mind: she was going to get married as soon as she could, before she became a *shengnü* – a leftover woman, an old maid, married to her career.

“And I’m going to marry money,” she added, “whatever it takes.” The consulting team I headed was out eating dinner, and Shang Shu made her announcement through a mouthful of Shuntak-style *char-siu*, the roast pork a perfect balance of lean and fatty meat.

“What do you mean by ‘money?’” Bu Youde, the newest member of our team, asked earnestly. I’d recently taught Bu that in management consultancy you needed to define everything clearly before you got started, or else everything you did would be meaningless. Say you were talking about a decline in harbor throughput: was it a year-on-year decline or a quarter-on-quarter decline? Did it include cargo containers? Or say you were going to call a girl cultured – she might play the harmonica, slam down a mean game of checkers, and write brush calligraphy beautifully, but it wouldn’t mean a thing if she didn’t know her Tang poetry.

“I mean enough money that if I want an ice cream cone I can eat an ice cream cone,” Shang Shu said. “Enough money to buy three pounds of top-grade lychees if I’m in the mood for lychees. Enough so if I see a dress I like that comes in three colors, I can buy all three without feeling it in my wallet.” She chewed a spoonful of boiled peanuts determinedly. “Mmm – the flavor of the pork just soaks right into them.”

Shang Shu was hardly old – she was born in the mid-80s – and everyone told her there was no hurry. Better to play the field for a few more years, keep her indiscretions youthful while the stakes were still low, scratch her itches and get all her kinks ironed out early.

“You know, streaking, one-night stands, threesomes, your basic Kama Sutra stuff.” Our project manager Dong Wushuang drank a mouthful of his Snow beer and gazed off toward some distant, long-vanished scene that only he could see as he thought back to the Japanese porn starlets of his youth: to Kaori Kawai, Kudo Shizuka, and Sora Aoi, and Natsumi Kawahama, Sayaka Tsutsumi, Suika Satogaeri, Hitomi Nikaido, Ai Ijima, Kaho Iida, Yuko Iizuka, Hazuki Yoshimoto, Yuyu Okazaki, Rina Okada, Moemi Takagi, Reiko Takada, Rumi Takahara, Mami Miyamoto, Tsukasa Punishi, Hikaru Coto, Yaya Kouzuki, Rie Miyazawa, Akiko Kawamura, Rio Kawai, Senna Kurosaki, Runa Akatsuki, Karen Hana, Moe Yoshikawa, Nao Oikawa, Manami Yoshikawa, Sana Yoshizaki, Sally Yoshino, Asuka Imai, Shoko Imaki, Aiko Kanazawa, Reina Shindoh, Kana Inoue, Miki Kubo, Miki Sakai, Rina Usui, Reika Kikuchi, Eri Kikuchi, Tomoko Kikuchi, Mao Tachibana, Youko Gushiken, Kawai, Konatsu Aoi, Minami Aoyama, Nozomi Ran, Nanako Satomi, Yurika Satomi, Reika Tachibana, Ai Yatiki, Mai Suzushiro, Reiri Suzukawa, Mona Suzue, Manami Suzuki, Hitomi Ashiya, Mio Asakawa, Yoko Asou, Kasumi Misato, Ryoka Misaki, Saori Miyuki, Mizukiran, Asuka, Maya Kitani, Saori Nanami, Kanae Naito, Risa Uchida, Ami Ayukawa, Aki Katase, Asaka Hirayama, Yuuki Mehara, Yuko Maehara, Kaya Asami, Rie Asai, Rin Kwano, Aoki Rei, Shiori Aono, Aoba Miku, Chiasa Aonuma, Reiko Akimoto, Riko Akina, to Akimoto Yuna, Karen Kisaragi, and Jyuri Wakabayashi. He thought of all the dreams that had never come true, all the dreams it was too late for him to realize – but it might not be too late for the younger generation. Or so he told Shang Shu.

“I *am* in a hurry,” Shang Shu said. “I’m not trying to be Madonna or Hillary Clinton or Nina Wang or Lin Qiaozhi. I just want to get married and have children and raise them and get old and die happy. I want to find a man I like and be all lovey-dovey with him. I want him to play with my fingers and I’ll play with his fingers. But the way things are in China today, *A*’s marry *B*’s – I’m talking about men here – and men who are *B*’s marry girls who are *C*’s, and *C*’s marry *D*’s, and if you’re a woman who’s

an *A* and you don't keep your eyes open, you'll end up a old maid before you know it. Maybe you could be mistress to an *A*, or paramour to a *B*, or mentor to a *C*, or the object of worship for a *D*, but that's not the life I want. It's a curse, I tell you. When we help our clients draft strategies, the key is always picking the right window of opportunity – and the window is closing for me. I'll go to school in America, and my ambitions will take over and I won't be able to keep myself from going into business, and I'll dive headfirst into a few projects, and before I know it I'll be past thirty and an old maid."

We could define Shang Shu as an *A*.

She had been a small-town superstar from way off in the exotic southwest with beautifully clear Mandarin and a good head for figures, and she tested into Tsinghua University before she was eighteen. There she was the fairest flower of her department, though that particular flowerpot only had three flowers in it and the competition was not exactly fierce. She'd gone straight from college into an analyst job at a top consulting firm, where she worked on enough corporate group strategies over the following three years to give her more experience than all of the graybeards at the Tsinghua School of Economics and Management combined. No tallyman ever worked his abacus beads as nimbly as she manipulated Excel spreadsheets; no campus revolutionary ever painted big-character posters as pithy as her Powerpoints. Some of her projects had taken her to Europe, where she'd penned journal entries in Spain and picked forsythia in Greece. And now, turning her sights to the future, Shang Shu was preparing to wrap up the strategy planning project she was working on for a major northern port, go back southwest to say goodbye to her parents, and then head to Harvard Business School.

She may not have majored in the liberal arts at Tsinghua, but Shang Shu wrote heartfelt blog entries, took photographs, and knew her Tang poetry by heart. She wasn't tall, but she had a pleasant face, a nice figure, and curves in the right places. From now until the time she hit menopause, she would always be able to go out wearing a schoolgirl outfit and no makeup and pique the interest of Lolita fetishists, and she was guaranteed to get carded any time she went to a bar in the US or Europe.

Most remarkable was how *nice* she was, how positive and hard-working. At Tsinghua, she'd given every student in the boy's dormitory paired with hers an embroidered cushion. When she came to our company, she began making Thai-style rice porridge for the whole team every morning. One time we were reporting to a client on the results of the strategy we had drafted for them: our team spent the morning giving presentations, and the afternoon was given over to evaluations from a dozen or so outside experts the client had brought in. I don't know where the client found such a bunch of useless old men and women – not an ounce of common sense between them, their heads full of just about every variety of garbage you could name: everything from Matsu, the goddess of sailors, to Li Ka-shing, the king of Hong Kong real estate, to liberating Taiwan to the financial crisis to isolationist national self-interest to international mergers and acquisitions. The worst of them actually stood there and read from his graduate thesis for half an hour. Attendants kept coming by and refilling our teacups the whole time, while I sat there smiling attentively. Five hours later, the smile was frozen there – you could have lifted it straight off my face and hung it on the wall. After the experts had finished their speeches I was invited to make a response.

"Having listened to everybody's feedback, I think we've heard some very incisive, wide-ranging, and stimulating things here today, and I'm sure they'll be extremely useful to us in our future work." Silently I added something my mother used to say whenever my father drove her up the wall: "After all the time you've lived, after all you've said and done, how can you still be such a stupid *cunt*?"

Shang Shu sat there with an unforced smile all that interminable afternoon. I sent her a text message complimenting her on being so good-natured, and she replied: "Thirty years of Reform and Opening Up, with those geezers in the driver's seat the whole time, and our fair motherland still managed to develop so rapidly. Just imagine what new heights we'll be able to rise to once they've all died! *That* was why I was smiling."

There are people at Tsinghua with passions for female *ginkgo adiantoides* and computer motherboards, and so naturally romance bloomed for Shang Shu, flower of her department. Her beau was her high school sweetheart. They came to Tsinghua together – the perfect golden couple – strolled around the campus radiating perfection, and graduated together flawlessly. Then her boyfriend left for America, where he had been for the past three years.

“I broke up with him today,” Shang Shu said.

“Why?” Bu Youde asked.

“Distance relationships don’t work. Things just don’t go right when the other person isn’t there beside you. Love is about being there for each other.”

“But you’re about to go to America,” Bu Youde said. “So you’d be together then, right?”

“But I already arrived at the conclusion that it wasn’t going to work out.”

“Why? The factors that would make it not work out are about to disappear.”

“Fine,” said Shang Shu. “I’m interested in someone else, all right? I just feel like my boyfriend is too young, too immature.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Now it all makes sense.”

“Independent thinking,” Dong Wushuang said. “Bu Youde has the makings of a fine analyst.”

Feng Mudan, one of the senior analysts on the team, chimed in. “You have to use your brain when you’re on client interviews,” she said. “Ask more questions than you think you have to, and don’t worry about looking stupid. Better to look stupid than get back to your desk and not be able to write anything.”

“Do you fall for people easily?” I asked Shang Shu.

“Very.”

“So what do you do? How do you approach them?”

“I don’t,” she said. “The feelings are like wild flowers – they’re pretty, but they mostly don’t last very long.”

“And the ones that do last? You don’t tell them either?”

“I never, ever tell them,” she said. “I just wait it out. And anyway, the guy I have my eye on isn’t around either. You know how it is with management consultants like us – we never have anything around except our computers and our underpants. Anyway, after I became interested in him, I realized I couldn’t just keep going nowhere with my ex.”

Shang Shu’s ex-boyfriend began sending her flowers by international courier service after that – fresh flowers, always in different arrangements, every three days, if not more often. “It’s the same as how my parents used to buy me treats after I got sick,” Shang Shu said. Feng Mudan bought a vase, and from then on we always had fresh flowers in our conference room. Depending on how the client was treating us that day, the team would either urge her to get back together with her ex-boyfriend or to tell her new obsession how she felt – there was no rhyme or reason to our advice; we just wanted fresh gossip. After seven or eight weeks, there was a stretch of four days in a row with no new flowers. Dong Wushuang surmised that a credit crunch must be hitting America along with the second wave of the financial crisis.

“I told my crush how I felt yesterday,” Shang Shu said. “He didn’t even answer me. I’m such a loser!”

“How did you tell him?” The team asked as one voice.

“I sent him an e-mail.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I was really busy and it had been a long day, but after the PS meeting I’d thought through one of the big problems that had been bothering me, and I was in a good mood. I checked my e-mail every ten minutes for the rest of the day, but he didn’t even answer. I’m such a loser!”

The team decided unanimously that:

The object of Shang Shu’s affections might well be someone at our company. “PS” was short for “problem solving” in our firm’s secret argot.

Shang Shu had severe emotional obstacles that kept her from expressing her feelings.

Because of the severity of this disability, our team was resolved to sacrifice what little time for sleep it had in order to draft a surefire strategy for Shang Shu to break the curse and marry her A during her two years in America. Otherwise her time at Harvard would all be for nothing.

Once again displaying a talented newcomer’s enthusiasm, Bu Youde spoke:

“The goal of our strategy is clear: marry an A during the coming two years at Harvard. Step One will be to delineate our potential market – which A’s are likeliest to marry – and to segment the market into different categories of A. Step Two will be to select our target market – which A segments will be our chief objectives. We can evaluate this in two dimensions. The first of these is the relative desirability of different A segments: for this we can refer to the wisdom of the ancients. Wang Po, the renowned Ming dynasty matchmaker, said the five words to keep in mind when ranking men were: “Pan,” “Deng,” “Meek,” “Free,” and “Donkey,” i.e. that the man should have the looks of Pan An, the wealth of Deng Tong, a meek and mild personality, free time to spend with his wife, and a dick like a donkey. The other dimension is Shang Shu’s competitiveness vis-a-vis these market segments – what killer differentiating features she offers the different A’s. Step Three will be to draft a detailed strategy and implementation plan for targeting the A’s selected in step two. Step Four will be a budget projection and comparison of outlay versus return on investment, as well as chief potential risks.”

“Let’s keep our pro bono work separate from our jobs,” Dong Wushuang said. “No need to be so serious about it – let’s go straight to Step Three, a brainstorming session to come up with differentiating strategies for Shang Shu to adopt.”

Feng Mudan kicked off the brainstorming session: “Shang Shu can play cute and innocent well enough to make A’s think she’s a B. She may want to refer to what the Japanese call *kawaii* – I’m sure she’ll be able to pull it off. Just make sure you always sound surprised and terribly impressed: ‘Wow, you know how to use a *mouse*? That’s *amazing*! Wow, you’re so *smart*! I was thinking all *day* and I didn’t have a single *idea*! Wow, it’s so *big*! I bet it must make all the girls just *squeal*! And so on.”

“Let’s not get trapped in conventional thinking,” Dong Wushuang said. “We can expand our scope of A’s if we think laterally. We could include men who are married but not *happily* married – who’s happily married, am I right? – or we could get rid of age restrictions. Say our A is five years younger than Shang Shu, no problem. Ten years younger, even better. Fifteen years older, just right.”

An hour later, Shang Shu looked on unhappily as the team achieved consensus. Her killer strategy would be to rent a bigger apartment than she needed once she got to Harvard Business School, and turn it into a mahjong parlor. After all, school was boring, especially business school, and people got

lonely in America, especially in Boston. The plan was for her to keep her eyes open for the first month of classes and pick four or five men who made her heart go pitter-pat, or at least caught her eye, from among the bored and lonely. She would invite them to her apartment on the weekend to play the harmonious, patriotic mahjong that they loved so well from their dear homeland.

“But I don’t know how to play mahjong,” Shang Shu said.

“The strategy doesn’t hinge on *you* playing,” Feng Mudan said. “The key is for you to watch from the sidelines while presenting yourself in the best possible light. You can learn a lot about a man from watching him play mahjong. You’ll see how he handles winning and losing, how he deals with luck, how fast he thinks, whether he has poise and a sense of humor, and whether or not he’s physically strong enough to keep playing into the wee hours of the morning. His personal qualities and moral fiber will be laid bare. Meanwhile, your role will be to accommodate them. After three or four rounds, you’ll get up and slice a plate of fruit for them, or bring in four or five bowls of ice cream. When it’s almost suppertime, you’ll tell them to keep playing without you while you go to the kitchen to cook. Make sure they can smell the food, and whatever you do don’t make them stop playing. Let them come to you in their own time. After it gets late, make midnight snacks for them – shrimp wontons, sesame and sweet-rice dumplings, that kind of thing.”

“You’re going to have to know how to play mahjong, even if you don’t want to actually play it,” Dong Wushuang said. “That way you can give them compliments so apt they’ll be forced to acknowledge them. We’ll put a copy of Strip Mahjong on your computer. Take some time to learn the rules and get a feeling for the game. If you want to show off your feminine side to the fullest, go buy a mahjong set and practice until you can choose tiles by touch. Imagine: your Mr. A is just one tile away from winning the game. He’s on the edge of his seat. Three turns go by, but he doesn’t get the tile he needs. He says he’ll need to borrow your luck for a minute. You put out your hand and select a tile, hand it to him without even looking at it, and say: seven stripes wins the game. Do it on a pure suit hand with a double-kong payout if you really want to gild the lily, and I’ll bet your Mr. A will fall ass over teakettle in love with you on the spot.”

Bu Youde spoke up. “In conclusion: you’re going to have to make some changes to your courseload. Less finance, less accounting, less business law, and more cooking – Chinese food, ideally, but learn to make Western food too. And then maybe some electives – flower arranging, acupuncture, Chinese medicine... sick, far from home, men’ll be at their most vulnerable.”

“Give it ten weeks,” I said. “If nobody falls head over heels in love with you, I guarantee I’ll set you up with a job that’ll give you enough money to buy ice cream and three pounds of top-grade lychees any time you want.”

## **II: 2012 AD**

Shang Shu didn’t marry an *A* after graduating, and she didn’t come to me for a job. I heard that the four men who were regulars at her Gold Maid Mahjong Parlor gave themselves mahjong nicknames – Tiles, Lucre, Pairs, and Numbers.

There were all sorts of stories about Shang Shu and the four men, and all sorts of versions of the stories – straight stories, bloodcurdling stories, sexy stories. I asked Shang Shu what the real story was. She said she’d never, ever tell.

What people knew for sure was that after Shang Shu graduated she, Tiles, and Numbers opened Four Winds Amusements in Beijing and Shanghai. They formed a strategic alliance with neighborhood residential committees to build China’s largest chain of gaming parlors. Operational cash-flow was positive within half a year; earnings (before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) were positive inside a year, and a private fund called Yes Capital gave them fifty million dollars in first-round financing in exchange for a 20% share.

### III: 2030 AD

A petite young Chinese woman arrived at Harvard Yard that summer. She wasn't tall, but she had a pleasant face, a nice figure, curves in the right places, and looks that would pique the interest of Lolita fetishists. She might have been one of the Chinese high school students who came for summer camp, except that she didn't take snapshots or rub John Harvard's bronze feet for luck. Instead, she went around asking people: "Do you know which apartment the Gold Maid Mahjong Parlor was in? Do you remember what happened to the mahjong table?"

There were all sorts of stories about Shang Xiaoshuang's parentage – straight stories, bloodcurdling stories, sexy stories. She had asked Shang Shu what the real story was, but Shang Shu said she'd never, ever tell. What people knew for sure was that Shang Xiaoshuang's father, whoever he was, had won at mahjong with a royal seven-pair hand the night he fathered her – but there had been at least fifty seven-pair hands won that autumn, and ten royal seven-pairs. And Tiles, Lucre, Pairs, and Numbers had each won at least one.

Twenty years later, the old mahjong table was still sitting in the apartment building's storage room. Shang Xiaoshuang brushed the dust from it and looked at the edge of the table, where someone had scratched a shallow doodle of a chicken. What nobody knew was that Shang Xiaoshuang's biological father, after celebrating his amazing win and before fathering Shang Xiaoshuang, had used his fingernail to scratch the picture of a chicken from one of the mahjong tiles into the table.

She drew a sheet of paper out of her backpack and consulted it. There were four rough doodles of chickens on the paper, and under each of the chickens was a label: by Tiles, by Lucre, by Pairs, by Numbers.

*You can ask questions to the author and translator of this story here:*

*<https://paper-republic.org/nickyharman/that-damned-thing-she-said-four-short-stories-from-china-to-celebrate-international-womens-day/>*