

BIRTH



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CHINA

A SON SOON

by Xu Nuo

translated by Jeremy Tsiang

Characters in order of appearance

Gan Wei, female, 40	Wife of a rich businessman. Mother of three. Very fond of gossip.
Li Xiao, female, 28	Nurse at a private hospital. Mother of a 5-year-old daughter.
Sister Liu, female, 46	Well-known within certain circles as a medium whose predictions are very accurate. Speaks with a heavy north-east accent.

A Son Soon was commissioned for the BIRTH festival and first performed in October 2016 at the Royal Exchange Theatre Manchester UK with the following cast:

Gan Wei	Shobna Gulati
Li Xiao	Elizabeth Chang
Sister Liu	Mina Anwar

Directed by Natalie Diddams

Afternoon. A courtyard off one of Beijing's old alleyways. This is Sister Liu's home; an ordinary house, similar to the ones around it. Li Xiao and Gan Wei sit on a stone bench in the courtyard, waiting for Sister Liu.

LI XIAO. Mrs Gan, I think... let's forget it.

GAN WEI. What? We might not get another chance. Don't want to miss the boat.

LI XIAO. But isn't this a little... inappropriate? I mean, it's just a simple thing, I shouldn't have bothered you ...

GAN WEI. No need to be so formal! I've been telling everyone, if not for you, I'd have died in that delivery room having my third. You saved my life. Now your problems are my problems. I know my duty!

LI XIAO. But ...

GAN WEI. No more buts. You know how famous Sister Liu is. Everyone says she's really spot on. I had to pull all kinds of strings to get this appointment, and even then it took more than a month. *(lowering her voice, into Li Xiao's ear)* I heard that Zhang Ziyi was ahead of us in the queue

...

LI XIAO. Actually, I got the results today.

Li Xiao pulls an express-delivery envelope from her bag.

GAN WEI. This is ... You sent a sample to Hong Kong to be tested? That's against the law, you know!

Li Xiao nods gingerly.

LI XIAO. Don't tell anyone! If the hospital finds out, I'd be fired for sure.

GAN WEI. I know, I know. Boy or girl? Boy or girl?

LI XIAO. I haven't opened it.

GAN WEI. Open it!

LI XIAO. ... I don't dare.

GAN WEI. Fine, come here, let me feel.

Gan Wei wraps her sleeve around her hand and places it on Li Xiao's belly, which is flat – Li Xiao is not yet showing. Gan Wei gropes around for quite a while, her eyes shut in deep thought. Suddenly, she beams.

GAN WEI. It's a boy!

LI XIAO. *(not sure whether to laugh or cry)* Mrs Gan, I've told you before, that's not accurate.

GAN WEI. Doctors are always so stubborn. If you don't believe me, fine. But when we see Sister Liu later, don't you talk like that.

LI XIAO. Is she really as good as all that?

GAN WEI. Her people are chosen as disciples by the gods, to help us mortals here on earth. She's not an ordinary person.

LI XIAO. What do you mean, "not an ordinary person"?

GAN WEI. *(mysteriously)* For instance, no descendants for her.

LI XIAO. She's not allowed to have children?

GAN WEI. Of course. Those chosen by the gods will join the pantheon – they're already half divine. So how could they have kids with a mortal?

LI XIAO. And their families agree to this?

GAN WEI. When the gods come down to earth, how could us mortals agree or disagree?

LI XIAO. *(thoughtfully)* That ... must be quite a relief.

GAN WEI. How could it be a relief? It's a sacrifice. Everyone wants lots of kids and grandkids. If you don't have children, can you still call yourself a woman? We used to have to stop at one, but now they're allowing a second – and isn't everyone rushing to pop out one more? Isn't that why I brought you here?

LI XIAO. *(smiling bitterly)* You're right, I must have a second one. I must.

Gan Wei remembers about the test, and snatches the envelope out of Li Xiao's hands.

GAN WEI. Let me have a little peep – see if it's skirt or trousers.

Li Xiao, suddenly agitated, snatches it back.

LI XIAO. Don't! don't! *(She kneels, wrapping her arms around her head.)* This is my only chance. I'm afraid the results won't be ...

Gan Wei starts to understand.

GAN WEI. You mean, you're here today ... to ask for a boy?

Li Xiao slowly nods.

GAN WEI. Huh. Damn this old-fashioned way of thinking. All right, then. When you see Sister Liu later, offer her three cigarettes first thing. It works if you're sincere.

LI XIAO. What cigarettes?

The sound of a door opening. Knowing that Sister Liu is about to appear, Gan Wei tenses up.

GAN WEI. *(quiet)* Just do what I do.

The courtyard door creaks open, and a long-haired middle-aged woman in traditional robes drifts in. She looks like she's just finished practising tai-chi. On her back are a practice sword and a black cloth bag. She appears unsurprised to see Gan Wei and Li Xiao in her courtyard. Placing her bag and sword on a stone table, she begins doing some simple tai-chi stretches.

GAN WEI. Sister Liu! You don't make it easy to pin you down.

Sister Liu nods slightly, and glances at Li Xiao.

SISTER LIU. So this is the friend you mentioned?

GAN WEI. Yes! The nurse I was talking about, the one who saved me! If you could take a look at her ...

SISTER LIU. *(raising her legs)* Mm. Got the cigarettes?

GAN WEI. Yes. Here.

She takes a pack from her tiny Dior handbag and offers it to Sister Liu with both hands, placing it on the stone table next to her.

LI XIAO. *(quiet)* Why the cigarettes?

GAN WEI. For the spirits, of course! Sister Liu's doing all that hard work summoning them to tell your fortune, the least you could do is give them something for it

LI XIAO. *(even quieter)* Isn't the money enough? Eight thousand—

SISTER LIU. *(loudly)* The fags are for the spirits, the cash is for me. I take cards too.

Sister Liu opens the pack of cigarettes, pulls three out, and arranges them on the table.

GAN WEI. *(quiet)* It's coming.

Sister Liu strikes a match and lights the cigarettes, then stands them upright. She closes her eyes again and begins to chant quietly.

SISTER LIU. King Wen's drum and serpent's cry, let your dancing fill the sky.

We all love the spirits so, but who knows whence they come and go?

Nothing happens.

SISTER LIU. King Wen's drum and serpent's cry, let your dancing fill the sky.
We all love the spirits so, but who knows whence they come and go?

One of the cigarettes goes out. Sister Liu smiles and repeats her chant. This time, all three cigarettes go out. She quickly grabs one and puffs on it until it lights again.

SISTER LIU. I've been up to the heavens and looked around, but only the fox spirit was there. The spirits wait for no one. Quickly now, I'll take the two of you together. Take turns asking questions.

LI XIAO. *(nervously)* You go first.

GAN WEI. It's your first time, you go.

LI XIAO. I— I'm still thinking—

SISTER LIU. Quickly!

GAN WEI. Me! I'll go first!

SISTER LIU. Date and time of birth.

GAN WEI. Fox spirit, ma'am, my name is Gan Wei, Gan as in sweet, Wei as in rose. I was born at three in the morning, 20th December 1976.

Sister Liu listens with one hand held palm upwards, quickly calculating by running her thumb over the other four fingers.

GAN WEI. If I may ask the mighty spirit – when should my husband and I have our next child?

Sister Liu shuts her eyes and quietly chants as she searches for an answer. Li Xiao stares at Gan Wei, startled.

LI XIAO. Mrs Gan, you want another baby?

GAN WEI. I ... yes.

LI XIAO. Didn't you say you'd rather get beaten to death than suffer like that again?

GAN WEI. That's how it is with us women, isn't it? You forget how much it hurt.

LI XIAO. But you had pregnancy-induced hypertension! You've had three C-sections! You're gambling with your life. At your age, there's a high risk of ...

GAN WEI. Two days ago, I saw on the news that someone had a baby boy on the first. She named him "Eighty Thousand". She was due on the thirty-first, but if he'd arrived then, with the one child policy still in place, she'd have been fined eighty thousand. So she held on, held on, right up till the first, when the new policy came in. Didn't have to pay a penny. Not bad, saving eighty thousand yuan just like that.

LI XIAO. But your body—

Sister Liu's eyes blink open. She sits cross-legged on the table. Gan Wei rushes over and kneels in front of her.

SISTER LIU. Ugh, you medical types. Here I am, asking the gods to help you – but no, you'd rather talk about science.

Gan Wei and Li Xiao are embarrassed. They glance at each other, silent.

SISTER LIU. Gan Wei, I've asked the fox spirit, and she says this won't be easy.

GAN WEI. Oh? Why?

SISTER LIU. Have you been lying to me?

GAN WEI. Absolutely not, Sister. Every word I've said is true.

SISTER LIU. So which year were you born?

GAN WEI. ... 1968.

SISTER LIU. I almost got your past life wrong.

GAN WEI. What was my past life?

SISTER LIU. I saw you in the moon goddess Chang'e's arms. You were her jade rabbit.

Li Xiao is unable to suppress a giggle.

LI XIAO. Sorry.

GAN WEI. No wonder I love looking at the moon.

SISTER LIU. I saw you and your husband, with a whole litter. Two tiny little white jade rabbits, and a dark one.

Gan Wei's face changes. Li Xiao bursts into laughter again, but sensing this is inappropriate, hastily stops.

LI XIAO. This is ridiculous. You're talking nonsense.

Gan Wei glares at her, then turns back to Sister Liu.

GAN WEI. Go on.

SISTER LIU. You asked when to have your next child. The way I see it, the question isn't when to have it, but when to conceive it.

GAN WEI. You mean—?

SISTER LIU. Timing. It's all in the timing. (*a sudden gesture – smack!*) The moment yin and yang come together!

GAN WEI. Oh! Then please help me calculate that. The most accurate time. I'll definitely do exactly as you say.

Li Xiao can't take any more of this. She stands to leave.

LI XIAO. I'm sorry, I can't listen to this. To be honest, this sounds like you're making it up as you go along.

Sister Liu gives her a dirty look, jumps off the table, and exits into the house.

GAN WEI. That's done it! You scared away the spirit.

LI XIAO. Mrs Gan, listen to yourself. This makes no sense. I sincerely urge you not to believe any of this. Think of your health. Don't have any more babies.

GAN WEI. Let me ask you, if you look down on my beliefs, what are you doing here?

LI XIAO. It's different for you, you have money, you have a son and two daughters. You have a son, that's the most important thing. My mother-in-law is always nagging, "A son for reputation, a daughter for good fortune." We only have my little girl at home, so that means our family has no reputation. She loses face. I have dreams where I'm walking down the street, and everyone's pointing and staring. What should I do? If I had anywhere else to turn, I wouldn't have—

GAN WEI. You want kids for your family's reputation? Cute. I'm doing it for my marriage. My husband's asked me for a divorce three times, starting fifteen years ago – once every five years. So what did I do? Gave him three children. Nothing like a baby for mending a relationship. If he tries to divorce me during the pregnancy, I'll ask him for so much money he'll back down. After nine months, I'll have worn him down. When the kid's born, with all our family and friends coming to visit, you think he'll still want a divorce? Forget it. I needed to have all those babies. I'd have been a fool not to.

Li Xiao is shocked.

LI XIAO. If things have got that bad, why not just get a divorce? You're putting your own life at risk, and the baby's too.

GAN WEI. Put it this way – I married into a rich family, so having kids is a good career move. Giving birth is the best financial product I have right now. Sure, doing business carries some risks. But it's worth it.

LI XIAO. But your husband doesn't want any more kids? He doesn't love you any more, and you want to have his babies?

GAN WEI. Funny. Let me ask you – do you love your husband?

LI XIAO. I ... sure, I ... love him. Otherwise I wouldn't put up with this.

GAN WEI. Enough. You'll understand in a few years. You just can't bear to let go of him. I've lived through that. After the age of forty-five, we might as well be married to gay men. Your husband – balding with a forty inch waist – watches the news all day, then at the weekend goes out with a bunch of lads to bet on football. If he wins, he gets drunk, and if he loses he says nothing, just crashes into bed and sleeps, snoring like thunder. He stops breathing three times during the night, and each time you think he's died. Just as you're happily climbing out of bed to put on some lipstick, he starts breathing again! My biggest question right now is whether my husband's death or menopause will come first.

Li Xiao can't find anything to say to that.

GAN WEI. You don't understand? You will, soon enough.

Gan Wei pulls out a black credit card, signals to Li Xiao to do the same, and walks towards the house.

GAN WEI. Believe in this or don't, it doesn't matter. You spend the money to buy some peace of mind, so you can go home and tell them, "At least I tried." (*knocking at the door*) Sister Liu? Sister? It was our fault, scaring away the fox spirit. We'll take it seriously this time. The incense is ready for you.

Gan Wei nudges Li Xiao.

LI XIAO. I'm very sorry, Sister Liu.

Sister Liu appears, having tied up her long hair.

SISTER LIU. This can't happen again. You almost damaged the life qi. I had to shift a lot of energy.

GAN WEI, LI XIAO. Of course, of course.

Sister Liu pulls a credit card machine from the black bag. Gan Wei and Li Xiao hand over their cards with both hands. Gan Wei swipes hers first.

GAN WEI. Sister Liu, how's the spirit? Not angry?

SISTER LIU. Angry – of course she's angry. I had to be very diplomatic. If she decided to leave, I'd be out of a job. *(taking Li Xiao's card)* You, that'll be an extra two thousand. Date of birth. *(begins counting on her fingers)*

LI XIAO. ... 26th May, 1988.

SISTER LIU. Hmm. Another dragon. What's your question?

Li Xiao is tongue-tied.

GAN WEI. She wants to know if she's going to have a son this time.

SISTER LIU. *(beating the table rhythmically)* I don't know, I don't know. How many times do I have to tell you? I only see past lives, not the future. Seeing the future would shorten my life.

LI XIAO. Then tell me, what's my past life?

SISTER LIU. You ... Ah, but you haven't come alone, have you?

LI XIAO. What are you talking about?

SISTER LIU. You haven't. There are quite a few little girls sitting alongside you.

Li Xiao is stunned. Gan Wei shrieks. Li Xiao buries her face and weeps.

LI XIAO. I'm so sorry for them ...

GAN WEI. You mean—?

LI XIAO. It was a sin, what I did.

GAN WEI. You just told me to take care of my body, yet ...

LI XIAO. I often feel that in China, a woman's womb doesn't belong to her. When I was a kid, if someone had asked me, would you rather be a boy or a girl? I'd definitely have said a boy! Why? Because only boys got to sit at the dining table at mealtimes, while the females had to squeeze into the kitchen, next to the stove. On New Year's Eve, the boys always got given much more money than us girls. My second aunt only had a little girl, and my grandma spent more than ten years scolding her for that. My parents always said that girls marry out of the family, like water splashing away from your front door, never coming back – so they saved the best of everything for my little brother. Only when I got an education did I learn that this is called “sexism”, and it's wrong. I had to get away from my hometown, that middle-

of-nowhere place, if I didn't want to be bullied just for being a girl. I studied so hard, and got a uni place in the city. Then I had my own little family, and I thought I'd become one of those "modern women" they talk about. But everything turned bad when I had my daughter. All of a sudden, I was the most useless person in our household. Everyone started urging me to have another one, to have a son. Even my mum and dad said if I didn't give my husband's family a son, I might end up as an abandoned wife. I spent so long trying to escape my hometown, to be an independent woman, but I don't have the strength to resist my entire family. If I don't want to lose everything, I'll have to have another one, another baby, a boy ... I'm ridiculous, I know. The number of times I've carried a baby out of the delivery room and told the family, "Congratulations, you have a little princess!" Over and over, my husband explains, "The Y chromosome comes from the man." But that doesn't change how it is for us. My in-laws still talk about my "useless womb". My daughter is "a losing proposition". Your family is your destiny.

Sister Liu looks pained.

SISTER LIU. Forgive me for being blunt. The troubles you two have – even the gods can't help you.

GAN WEI. Hers might be tricky, but surely mine is doable?

SISTER LIU. People always say "it works if you're sincere." That's not just empty words. What it means is you have to ask for what you truly want, in order for your wishes to come true. But you two – one says "I want to know when to have another baby", one says "I want to know whether my baby is a boy." In fact, neither of you have asked what you truly want to know. So what's the real question? Only when you know that, will my answers be any use to you.

GAN WEI. But I really do want a baby ...

SISTER LIU. No, you want to hold on to your husband. The baby is just your strategy.

Gan Wei is silent for a while.

GAN WEI. So ... will I be able to hold on to him?

Gan Wei shrugs. Li Xiao smiles.

LI XIAO. Think about your past life, jade rabbit.

GAN WEI. ... I've been tired for a long time. Of my husband, of my kids. I've had more than enough of this kind of life. I cling to it because ... I don't want anything to change. But I'm drowning. Damn it. If this investment is failing, I should get rid of my shares.

LI XIAO. As for me ...

GAN WEI. You know what you ought to do?

LI XIAO. What?

Gan Wei nods at the envelope.

GAN WEI. Read it. Even I know rubbing your stomach isn't an accurate gender test.

LI XIAO. But once I look ... there's no turning back.

GAN WEI. There's no turning back anyway. Don't you want a boy? So open the envelope. XX, you're done, don't have any more. Dead end. XY, you hit the jackpot, congratulations all round. You can calculate all you like, those are the only two outcomes.

Li Xiao is silent, then slowly shakes her head, and turns to the audience.

LI XIAO. I still remember, on my wedding day, every single guest said the most traditional thing to me, "I wish both of you happiness, and may your union soon be blessed." I thought they meant blessed with a child. I didn't know – only a son is a blessing. Girls don't count. But I accepted those wishes sincerely. I want children, I want many, many children. No test results can make me decide to have a baby or not. That's just what I want.

She flings the envelope into a rubbish bin in a corner of the courtyard.

SISTER LIU. Mm. Just a reminder, once your fortune's been told, whatever the outcome, I don't give refunds.

LI XIAO. Thank you. You were very accurate.

SISTER LIU. All right, your time's up. You can see yourselves out.

Sister Liu goes back into the house. Gan Wei and Li Xiao go through the gate, and stand outside saying goodbye.

LI XIAO. Thank you, Mrs Gan. Goodbye.

GAN WEI. Bye ... Li Xiao! May your union soon be blessed ...

Li Xiao laughs.

GAN WEI. Blessed with a child, girl or boy!

Gan Wei and Li Xiao exit. Sister Liu re-enters from the house. She has changed from the robes into a tight-fitting tracksuit.

SISTER LIU. *(shrugging)* My mentor once said to me, the spirits themselves decide whom to speak through, so I was destined to be chosen. One in a million. When my mentor discovered me, my parents cried all night, because if I became a medium, that'd mean never having kids. They had no idea – I thought that was absolutely brilliant! Just listen to all of them. Women are driving themselves crazy over having kids,

what kind of kids to have, whether to have them or not. I just hand everything over to the gods to take care of. I never wanted children, and no one could force me to have them.

Sister Liu starts jogging, her braids swinging. Then she stops and goes over to the bin, pulls out the envelope, and rips it open.

SISTER LIU. *(to the audience)* You didn't see me do this. Look, in case she changes her mind, I'd better make sure ...

Sister Liu looks at the results and sees something that startles her.

SISTER LIU. Wow!

She tosses the envelope back into the bin and jogs off stage.

END.

