

THE HEAD ORNAMENTS ON THE GROUND

—A Note on “*Ch'ang Hen Ko*” and “*Jen Shih Chuan*”—

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IN his article “On the Short Story”, Hu Shih (胡適) writes that Po Ch'ü-i's (白居易) longer poems are often very good short stories, but he has a grave shortcoming in that “he is rather doltish, ever mindful to end the poem with its ‘thesis.’” Po's “*Ch'ang Hen Ko*” (長恨歌) is quoted for illustration.

Another instance is “*Ch'ang Hen Ko*.” Its subject matter is the Taoist priest's interview with Imperial Concubine Yang (楊貴妃) and his bringing back pledges from her to the abdicated Emperor Hsüan-tsung (玄宗). Po, while composing a poem on it, did not himself believe the fairy tale of this interview; hence he sings not only that the Imperial Concubine's abode, the fairy mountain, is “utterly visionary and unsubstantial” (在虛無飄渺間), but that when the Concubine died away from the world, “Her head ornaments left uncollected on the ground:/ The emerald feather, the gold bird, and the jade scratcher” (花鈿委地無人收，翠翹金雀玉搔頭). Quite expressly he intimates here that the head ornaments the priest claims to have brought back from “heaven” have actually been handily picked up at Ma Wei Slope (馬嵬坡).¹

This criticism is disputable, for the two lines in question are highly lyrical, so much so that they are not likely to have much narrative significance. Besides, Hu Shih is probably mistaken in thinking that these head ornaments are the central pledges by which the Taoist priest hopes to convince the abdicated emperor of the tale of his interview with the deceased imperial concubine. The priest relies not upon these primarily, but on the private vow between the two, uttered years ago when they were alone in the night of the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month, the night of annual reunion between the Cowherd and the Seamstress and derivatively the night of reunion between lovers in general. Consequently, if Po really was incredulous about the Taoist's tale and wanted to unmask him, he should have directed his innuendo toward the vow rather than toward the material pledges. That the head ornaments are inadequate pledges to convince people is quite obvious and can be demonstrated by a comparison with the ancient Chinese practice of *ping-fu* (兵符), the military tally. Usually the king or the commander-in-chief would hold half of the tally and give the other half to a general; when the king or commander-in-chief issued an order through a messenger, he would

let the messenger take his half of the tally along, and when the general saw that the messenger's half matches his own, he would know that the dispatch was genuine. But now the Taoist priest brings to Emperor Hsüan-tsung the halves of the head ornaments and claims that the other halves are in the Imperial Concubine's hands at her fairy abode, can he expect the emperor to believe him? Ch'en Hung (陳鴻) writes clearly in "Ch'ang Hen Ko Chuan" (長恨歌傳) that when the Taoist priest receives the halves of the head ornaments from the imperial concubine at the fairy abode he shows reluctance to depart, murmuring that people may not believe his words yet, and is content to leave only after she has disclosed to him the private vow.

Ch'en Hung, for one, never shows any suspicion for the two lines quoted above. In his "Ch'ang Hen Ko Chuan", by way of giving the origin of the poem, he tells how in the winter of the first year of Yüan-ho (元和元年, 806 A. D.) he and the poet heard a detailed and intimate story of Emperor Hsüan-tsung and Concubine Yang from their friend Wang Chih-fu (王質夫), who afterwards requested that the poet composed a poem thereupon and he recorded the whole story in a prose. He was likely to know how the poet received the story. "Ch'ang Hen Ko Chuan" has a shorter and a longer versions. The shorter one, appearing in *T'ai Ping Kuang Chi* (太平廣記, 486) and *Wen Yüan Ying Hua* (文苑英華, 794), has no parallel to the two lines in question. The longer one, collected in *Li Ch'ing Chi* (麗情集) by Chang Chün-fang (張君房) of Sung Dynasty,² has these sentences in the scene of the Imperial Concubine's death:

She kneels and pays her respects to the Emperor. Blood trickles down as she looks back, and her gold hairpin and emerald feather fall upon earth. The Emperor later collects them himself. (拜於上前，回眸血下，墜金鈿翠羽於地，上自收之。)

What is worth notice here is that the author, while admitting no possibility of the Taoist priest's later picking up the head ornaments at Ma Wei Slope, does take pain to note the ornaments. He found the picture of their being on the ground striking.

Hu Shih must have been very much preoccupied with his idea of Po's short-coming to miss the lyrical quality of these two lines. They are charged with the sentiments pertaining to the death and dissolution of rare beauties. This is seen most clearly when the lines are read in context. In the poem the four lines that form a rhyming unit and do not rhyme with the preceding and the following lines are these:

花鈿委地無人收
翠翹金雀玉搔頭
君王掩面救不得
回看血淚相和流

Preceding these are the six lines in two rhyming units, telling of the royal group's exodus from the capital at the threat of An Lu-shan (安祿山) and then the imperial guard's mutiny and the concubine's execution. Following these four lines immediately is the resumed journey to Szechwan. These four lines make a pause in the fast moving narrative of the poem, a pause for the poet to pay the homage of a sigh to the luckless lady. In the longer "Ch'ang Hen Ko Chuan", after the words quoted in the last paragraph, the writer continues to voice his regret.

Alas, that such a rare beauty, also the love of the emperor, should thus die helplessly at the end of a strip of fabric! (嗚呼! 蕙心執質, 君王之愛, 不得已而死於尺組之下!)

Actually, the image of head ornaments on the ground is earlier than the composition of Po's "Ch'ang Hen Ko." It is found in "Jen Shih Chuan" (任氏傳) by Shen Chi-chi (沈既濟). In this short story, Madame Jen is a fox that has become an elf. She is in love with a young man, Cheng Liu (鄭六), and also on very good terms with his great friend and relation Wei Yin (韋崙). Apart from being exceedingly beautiful, she is witty, understanding, and, incredible as it may sound, also extremely faithful in requiting Cheng's love—in short, an ideal mistress. In the end, Cheng receives an appointment from the government as the administrator of a county at some distance from Ch'ang-an, and wants to bring her along to his post; she at first declines on the ground that a fortune-teller has warned her against taking any trip in that direction, but as Cheng insists and Wei joins him in persuading her, she finally gives in to them. Midway on the journey, at Ma Wei Slope (that place again!), they run into a hunting band, and as the hounds approach the lady metamorphoses back into a fox and leaps from her horse to flee them. The hounds catch her up and kill her. Cheng buys her corpse back from the huntsmen and buries it. When he returns to the spot, he sees her horse chewing grass on the roadside, on whose saddle and spurs are left her clothes, like cicadae's exuviaes. Elsewhere, "nothing from her is in sight, except her head ornaments on the ground (惟首飾在地, 餘無所見)."

The likeness in the treatment of the lady's death in the two narratives is impressive. Both narratives, having come to the killing, pause a little for a lyrical description of the scene when the lady is there no more, leaving the fallen head ornaments lying desolately on the ground. And now we see that if we want to take Po to task as Hu Shih did on account of the two lines, the charge should rather be one of plagiarism. But let us examine the lyrical description a little further first.

The image of head ornaments on the ground has a remarkable metaphorical significance. The lady is a flower, and just as detached petals are left on earth when the flower has withered, head ornaments are found on the ground when the

lady has turned dust. The passing away of beautiful women, of flowers, of springtide and youth and life has a universal appeal, and calls forth some common responses. One of them is the so-called *carpe diem* attitude. It is a very common one, and Tu Ch'iu-niang's "Pick the flowers when they are there" (杜秋娘句, "有花堪折直須折"), like Herrick's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" or Ronsard's "Quand vous serez bien vieille", is but one of the more popular of the innumerable poems in various civilizations expressing this view. But when, whether you have gathered rosebuds or not, springtide has passed away, what then? One answer is a renunciative exclamation, "*Vanitas!*" The beautiful women of the past are gone, the bones of heroes and their famed horses are putrid, the meadhalls have moldered and kingdoms crumbled: *sic transit gloria mundi*, and why should we still attach our emotions to things mundane? This view is most noticeable in medieval Christian Europe, where people went so far as to develop a taste for the images of death and decay, for worms, skulls, and dance macabre. It is echoed in Chinese poetry here and there too, to be sure; but the more characteristic Chinese attitude seems to be one of missing, regret, and longing. The poets stop short of asking "*ubi sunt?*", but sigh and long to see them, to see the flowers and springtide and beautiful women again. This attitude is not so thorough-going in comparison with the medieval Christian one, not reaching the other world; it is more human, more secular, and perhaps ultimately more congenial to poetry.³ Both "Jen Shih Chuan" and "Ch'ang Hen Ko" have this sentiment of missing the lady. In the former the lady is just missed; in the latter the sentiment of longing finds further expression in the Taoist priest's trip to the fairy mountain and the promise of reunion.

In this light the coincidental use of the same image in the two works can be explained. There is probably a natural association between head ornaments and flower petals as there is a natural association between flowers and good-looking women,⁴ and since the image of fallen petals is such a familiar motif in Chinese poetry, it is not impossible that the two authors should each hit upon the image of fallen head ornaments independently. But this is a mere conjecture, and cannot rule out other possibilities. In any event, the image is a striking one, expressing the sentiment of missing effectively in a most dramatic manner. The best T'ang *chuan-ch'i* (傳奇) are capable of giving highly sensuous scenes with economy of description; e. g., the scene in "Hung Fu Chuan" (紅拂傳), where the heroine combs her long hair that reaches the ground, and the stranger with curly whiskers watches her attentively in the inn. Worthy of the tradition, the image of the head ornaments—delicate feather- and bird-shape articles made of precious metals and stones by skillful artisans—which have fallen from the lady's hair and cheeks carries all too much the senses of sound, color, touch, and smell, on an undertone of tragedy. If Po Chü-i did plagiarize here, he still should be given credit for having taste.

NOTES

1. *Hu Shih Wen Ts'un* (胡適文存), Vol. I, pp. 129-42. My translation.
2. *Li Ch'ing Chi* is not easy to come by. Its "Ch'ang Hen Ko Chuan" can be found in the *Wen Yüan Ying Hua* of Ming Lung-ch'ing years (明隆慶版文苑英華, 794), following the shorter version of the same story.
3. Cf. the Japanese scholar Ogiwara Sakutarō's (荻原朔太郎) idea that the essence of poetry is a nostalgic longing for objects unattainable.
4. Later on in the Sung Dynasty, Chou Pang-yen (周邦彥) laments his roses with the lines.

夜來風雨

葬楚宮傾國

釵鈿墮處遺香澤

.....

(Wind and rain last night,

Ended the beauties of Chu palaces.

The fragrance lingers where the head ornaments fell

.....)

The tenor of the metaphor here is reversed.

“首 飾 在 地”

孫 述 宇

長恨歌中有“花鈿委地無人收，翠翹金雀玉搔頭”兩句，胡適之曾嘲為替後來臨邛道士帶回鈿合金釵作伏線。但這兩句詩用來作伏線，有各種困難，且其抒情性顯然重於敘事性。用“首飾遺地”的形象來詠歎“美人塵土”的意思，並不始自白居易的長恨歌；沈既濟的任氏傳已經有過。

中國詩中傷悼和追懷思念之情比西洋詩中多得多，“落紅”的形象是常見的，“遺佩”的形象也是常見的。沈、白二人相合的“首飾在地”形象，是一個暗喻，以落花喻美人之死；以後宋代周邦彥詠歎薔薇謝後，有“釵鈿墮處遺香澤”句，則是反過來以美人死喻落花的。