

monk, as clearly as if he could point to them in the palm of his hand. There were other things that the historians had missed and not written about, and Hong spoke of all of them in detail. Then he bid farewell to the monk and departed. He was never seen again.

—S. M. Allen

Further Readings

Campany, Robert Ford. *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

“Tang Xuan” 唐暄

Records of Communications with the Underworld (Tongyou ji 通幽記), compiled by Chen Shao 陳劭 (c. 795–820)

Introduction

“Tang Xuan” is a touching tale of a grieving husband’s brief reunion with the ghost of his beloved wife. Named after the protagonist, it reveals the expectations and realities of the marital life of the elite. Marriage in medieval China was almost always negotiated by parents (or family elders) on the basis of mutual benefit to the families. The practice of endogamy among elites meant that families such as that of Tang Xuan and his wife, Ms. Zhang, reaffirmed and strengthened their alliance each generation by additional intermarriages. The personal feelings of the bride- and groom-to-be were not necessarily part of the marriage considerations. This led many men to seek romance outside of the marriage, although many married couples did eventually develop deep affection for each other.

“Tang Xuan” also discusses a wide range of topics, from spirituality to aspects of mundane life in the underworld. The story thereby comments on many popular beliefs and practices relating to death and commemoration, and expresses views that either challenge or confirm commonly held notions. The bureaucratic nature of the otherworld is a given. It refutes the practice of burying married couples together so as to reunite them in the afterlife but reaffirms the deep-rooted belief in the fixity of one’s predetermined allotments of lifespan, wealth, career, and marriage. The story goes beyond these to address the pervasive question of the validity of Buddhist and Daoist beliefs. Even questions regarding the state of the existence of the *hun* 魂 and *po* 魄 souls vis-à-vis the corpse are not left unaddressed.⁷

Ultimately, it is poetry, rather than spiritual exploration, that brings the couple together. Most elite women in the Tang were well educated; however, they were expected to conceal their accomplishments, especially poetic talents, from the public. While husband and wife did sometimes exchange poems, only a handful of these verses were preserved in literary anthologies. Social class and not ability decided whether a woman could circulate her literary works outside her immediate family. There were several female poets in the Tang dynasty, such as Li Ye 李冶 (d. 784), Xue Tao 薛濤 (768–831), and Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (c. 844–869), whose verses were greatly admired by contemporary literati. None of them had ever been a wife or a mother. Instead, they lived their lives in the public eye as courtesan, Daoist nun, or sometimes both.

Tang Xuan was a historical figure. However, other than the facts he himself relates in this story, not much is known about him. Tang Xuan’s and his wife’s clans were powerful elites that for generations controlled the western approach—the Hexi 河西 corridor—to China proper. Both produced many high court officials (including several chief ministers) during the medieval period and continued to dominate local politics and society well into the eleventh century. Whether Tang Xuan believed that he had experienced these events is beside the point. Rather, in expressing his views on love, marriage, and popular beliefs, the story provides a valuable perspective on the intellectual debates with regard to religious beliefs and practices prevalent in his days, as well as on everyday life in Tang China.

7. See the Introduction, pp. 18–28.

Translation

Tang Xuan was a native of Jinchang 晉昌 commandery. His aunt married Zhang Gong 張恭, a descendent of Zhang Gui 張軌 of Anding 安定 (255–314),⁸ who lived in seclusion in the Weinan 衛南 District of Huazhou 滑州 and was well respected by many. They had three sons who were Presented Scholars (*jinsi* 進士). Of their three daughters, the eldest married into the Xin 辛 clan and the second married into the Liang 梁 clan. The youngest daughter, adored by Xuan's aunt, studied the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Rites* and was known to have great virtue. During the Kaiyuan reign period (713–742), her father (i.e., Zhang Gong) passed away. She mourned and ravaged herself beyond what was required by the *Rites*. Xuan had always admired her. When the mourning period ended, he took her as his wife, and set her up at the estate in Weinan.

In the eighteenth year of the Kaiyuan reign period (730), Xuan had cause to go to Luoyang and was unable to return for many months. One night when he was resting at his host's, he dreamed of his wife weeping behind flowers and then laughing as she peeped into a well. When he woke up, he was horrified by what he had dreamt. The next day, he went to a diviner and inquired about it. The diviner said, "Those who cry behind flowers, their beauty fades with the blowing of the wind; those who smile while peeping into wells, they delight in taking the path to the Yellow Springs (i.e., the realm of the dead)." After several days, the notification of death did indeed arrive. Xuan was exceedingly distraught.

Several years later, Xuan finally got to return to Weinan. He searched out all remaining traces of his wife's presence and was moved to compose these poems. One poem read:

8. Nothing is known about Zhang Gong other than what is available in this story. Zhang Gui 張軌, on the other hand, left many records. He was a prominent statesman and the Regional Governor of Liangzhou 涼州 during the waning years of the Western Jin 西晉 (266–316) state. His sons later founded the state of Former Liang 前涼 (320–376) that controlled a vast territory including modern day Gansu, Ningxia, and Xinjiang Provinces.

寢室悲長簟	In the bedchamber, I grieve over the long bamboo mat,
粧樓泣鏡臺	By your makeup table, I weep before the mirror stand.
獨悲桃李節	Alone, I am melancholy in the season of peach and plum,
不共夜泉開	Because we were parted when the Long Night and Yellow Springs opened. ⁹
魂兮若有感	If your <i>hun</i> -soul has any awareness,
髣髴夢中來	Come ever so faintly into my dreams.

The other poem read:

常時華堂靜	The splendid hall we always used is quiet,
笑語度更籌	Where cheerful conversations are long gone.
恍惚人事改	While in a daze, human affairs now changed,
冥寞委荒丘	The dead one has been entrusted to the desolate hills.
陽原歌薤露	On the sunny plain I sing the dirge "Dew on the Onion Grass," ¹⁰
陰壑悼藏舟	In the shaded valley I mourn the hidden boat. ¹¹
清夜莊臺月	On this cloudless night, a makeup table lit by the moon,
空想畫眉愁	In vain I imagine your painted eyebrows and grieve.

That evening the wind and dew were fresh and clear. Xuan, troubled, could not sleep. In the small hours, he dejectedly recited the aforementioned monodies. Suddenly, he heard in the dark a sound like sobbing, at first distant, but then gradually nearer. Xuan was alarmed. Sensing something odd, he prayed to it and said, "If this is the spirit of

9. Both the Long Night and Yellow Springs refer to the underworld.

10. A funeral song from the Han dynasty. For a translation, see Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), 278.

11. A hidden boat cannot be easily found or moved. It is an allusion drawn from *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Tang Xuan, by alluding to it, mourns the fact that the impermanence of all things makes preserving a boat (i.e., his wife) by hiding it impossible.

the Tenth Daughter, why hold back from a chance to meet and converse? Don't allow other-worldliness to obstruct our past affection."¹²

A moment later, he heard these words: "I am the daughter of the Zhangs. Hearing your dejected recitation and remembrance really distresses me, even though I'm in the netherworld. I am struck by your sincere heart that does not abandon me for being a fallen *hun*-soul and thinks of me often, hence this evening we can talk to each other."

Xuan sighed in amazement. With flowing tears and swallowed sobs, he said, "I cannot thoroughly express all that is in my heart. However, if I could once more see your countenance, I would die without regret."

She replied, "The paths of the dead and living are separated; seeing each other is exceedingly difficult. I also worry that you may have doubts. It is not that I don't wish to go to such an extreme."

Xuan pleaded ever more earnestly, swearing that he was completely without misgivings. Presently, he heard someone summon [the servant] Luo Fu 羅敷 to fetch a mirror and then heard in the dark the rustling sound of someone walking. Luo Fu came before him bowing and said, "The mistress wishes to reminisce about the past and is now looking forward to meeting the Seventh Son."

Xuan asked Luo Fu, "In the eighth year of the Kaiyuan reign period (720), I sold you to the Kang 康 family in Xianzhou 仙州 and have since heard you died there. How did you come to be here?"

Luo Fu replied, "I was redeemed by the mistress and now I look after A-mei 阿美."

A-mei was Xuan's deceased daughter. Xuan was once again saddened. Shortly afterwards, his late wife called for lanterns and candles and stood to the north of the eastern stairs.¹³ Xuan went before her, weeping, and bowed. His wife returned the bow.

Xuan then held her hand and told her about his life. His wife also shed tears and said to Xuan, "The ways of the dead and living are separated, and I have been parted from you for a long time. Though I am

12. Families and close friends referred to an individual by the number of his or her birth-order within the same generation, at times counting from either a common grandfather or great-grandfather. The male (*lang* 郎) and female (*niang* 娘) children were counted separately. Hence, Tang Xuan is called the "Seventh Son of the Tang [family]" and his wife the "Tenth Daughter of the Zhang [family]."

13. The Classics state that the underworld is located in the north and that the host receives his guests on the eastern stairs. The ghost of Tang Xuan's wife stands on the north side of the eastern stairs to signal that she is a guest from the underworld.

insubstantial with no form to attach to, my yearning for you has never left my heart. On this day of six alignments,¹⁴ the underworld officials were moved by your sincerity and earnestness and thus released me temporarily to come here. It is an opportunity that comes but once in a thousand years. I am both happy and sad. Moreover, Meiniang (i.e., A-mei) is still young and I could entrust her to no one. What lucky night is tonight, that I get to express my feelings to you once more!"

Xuan thereupon ordered the household servants to line up and pay their respects to her, to move the lanterns into the room and to set up the screens. He refused to sit down first, but his wife said, "The loftiness and lowliness of the *yin* and the *yang* give precedence to the living. You must sit down first." Xuan then did what she said.

She smiled at Xuan and said, "You said your love for me was no different from when I was alive; however, I heard you have already remarried. Was there any time lapse between the new and old marriages?" Xuan felt quite ashamed. His deceased wife said, "Given your karma, you are fated to remarry. Your new wife resides in Huainan 淮南. I also know her to be very easy-going and good natured."¹⁵

Therefore Xuan asked, "The allotments in life, are they always fixed?"

She replied, "Indeed they are."

He questioned her again, "What Buddhists call karma—is it true?"

She replied, "Its principles can be easily observed. How could it be false?"

Xuan asked yet again, "Between Buddhism and Daoism, which is right?"

14. Medieval Chinese used the sexagenary cycle to record the year, month, and day. It counts by combining two sets of counters—the heavenly stems and earthly branches. The first set consists of ten graphs and the second consists of twelve. The cycle begins by pairing each successive stem with each successive branch. Once it completes six sets of ten combinations (i.e., sixty digraphs), the cycle restarts. Each graph in the cycle, moreover, is assigned one of the five elements (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth). Thus, diviners could predict the outcome of the event that is to take place on a specific day by its elemental makeup. A day of six alignments is when these six graphs that mark the date and the elements they each represent complement each other. It indicates an auspicious outcome for Tang Xuan's meeting with his wife.

15. Here, Tang Xuan's wife was apparently demonstrating her unearthly knowledge by telling him to whom he was currently married or was to be married (if the text is corrupted).

She answered, "They are different tributaries that come from the same source. There are, moreover, those who hold celestial ranks in the realm of the Great Ultimate 太極 and are in charge of all spirits. As for the transformation from something into nothing, this teaching is even more superior. The rest is the same as what has been said in the realm of men—I won't go into details today, so as not to burden you with this knowledge." Xuan was afraid and dared not ask more questions.

Thereafter he asked what she would like to eat. She responded, "The underworld has all the delicacies of the world except for rice porridge, which I can't get."

Xuan therefore ordered the servants to prepare it. When it arrived, she asked for a separate bowl and portioned some out for herself and ate. She lifted the rice porridge to her mouth as if she were emptying the bowl. But when the bowl was cleared from her table the rice porridge remained as before. Xuan provided food to her entire retinue; among them was an old woman who refused to sit with the others. The wife said, "She is a well-respected elder and not the same as those youngsters." She said to Xuan, "This is the wet nurse Purple Chrysanthemum 紫菊. Don't you recognize her?"

Xuan then remembered and had her served on a separate mat. The rest of the attendants were mostly unknown to Xuan. He heard their names being called and they were names he had written when he had returned from the capital and fashioned a great number of servants out of paper to serve his wife in the afterlife.¹⁶ He asked his wife about them, and she said, "They are the ones you gave me." He then knew that she had received all of the money and servants he sent.

His wife said, "A carved golden case I often used in the old days is now hidden on top of the beam in the northwestern corner of the main hall where no one knows." Xuan sent for it, and indeed there it was. She then said, "Don't you want to see Meiniang? She is all grown up."

Xuan asked, "Meiniang died when she was still in the crib; can one age in the underworld?"

She responded, "There is no difference."

Shortly after, Meiniang arrived. She was about four or five years old. Xuan patted her and wept. His wife said, "Don't hold her, because

16. The Chinese contribute to the comfort of their deceased loved ones in the underworld by burning money, houses, servants, etc., made from paper. It is a practice that continues to this day.

you will startle her." Luo Fu took Meiniang into her arms and they suddenly disappeared.

Xuan ordered servants to lower the curtains. They embraced as though she were still alive, except that Xuan noticed that her hands, feet, and breath were cold. He then inquired where she resided in the underworld.

She replied, "With my parents-in-law."

Xue said, "You are so numinous. Why not return to life?"

She responded, "After one dies, one's *hun* and *po* souls go to separate places and each is registered. They are distant from, and do not remain in, the corpse. Do you not experience this in your dreams? Can you remember your body? After I died, I couldn't recall at all when I died and, moreover, had no knowledge of where I was buried. Whenever you sent money and servants, I would know, but as to my body, I really do not give it much thought."

They continued to caress each other tenderly as the night wore on. Xuan said to her, "The day of us sharing the same tomb chamber is not too far into the future."

She replied, "I've heard that the rite of joint burial is in fact just a meeting of corpses. The spirits themselves don't really meet each other in the tomb. Why bother talking about such things?"

Xuan asked, "After women are buried, do they not remarry?"

She responded, "In death as in life, the chaste and the vile go their separate ways. After my death, my elders wished to rob me of my dedication to you and marry me to Mingyuan 明遠, the nephew of Zheng Qianguan 鄭乾觀, the Protector of the Northern Court. I swore that my dedication was true. The old and young in the family took pity on me and I thereby avoided it." When Xuan heard this, he was moved.

Filled with emotion, Xuan presented a poem to her:

嶧陽桐半死 A paulownia tree¹⁷ half dead on the southern
slope of Mount Yi,

延津劍一沈 a sword sunk alone at the Yanping Ford.¹⁸

17. *Firmiana simplex* is often used to make stringed instruments; a happy marriage is generally described as two stringed instruments played together in harmony. Tang Xuan here alludes to the death of his wife.

18. In ancient sword lore, the Yanping Ford 延平津 is where the two fabled swords, Longquan 龍泉 and Tai'a 太阿, were reunited and flew off together as dragons. The loss of one spouse therefore is often alluded to as the sinking of one sword.

ha! wen in death!

in mine
po: to
in death

如何宿昔內 How could it be that in so little time,
空負百年心 I came to carry in vain a wish to spend a
hundred years with you?¹⁹

The wife spoke, "Now that I have witnessed your feelings, I would like to leave a reply. Is that all right?"

Xuan said to her, "You never wrote poetry in the old days. How can you compose poetry?"

The wife told him, "I have always appreciated elegant writings. I worried that you would dislike me, therefore I never composed. But how could I miss the chance to declare my dedication tonight?" Thereafter she tore her sash and inscribed a poem on it that said:

不分殊幽顯 I never thought we'd be on different paths,
unseen and seen,
那堪異古今 How can I bear the difference between the past
and present?
陰陽途自隔 The ways of *yin* and *yang* are set apart from one
another,
聚散兩難心 Meeting and separation both torment my heart.

And:

蘭階兔月斜 The moonlight slants over the thoroughwort-
clad steps,
銀燭半含花 The silver-white candlelight half conceals the
flowers.
自憐長夜客 I pity myself for being a sojourner of the Long
Night,
泉路以為家 The path to the Yellow Springs has become my
home.

Xuan fought back tears as they spoke. Alternating between joy and sorrow, they did not realize it was dawn. A moment later, they heard the sound of someone knocking at the door and saying, "Your parents-in-law sent me, Danshen 丹參, to convey a message. They order me

19. One hundred years here is synonymous to a lifetime.

to hurry you for fear that if it gets bright, the underworld officials will discipline you."

The wife sobbed and rose in taking leave of Xuan. Xuan composed a letter and gave it to her. As she straightened her clothes, he smelled a strong fragrance unlike any in this world. He asked, "Where did you get this fragrance?"

She replied, "It was a fragrance left by Han Shou 韓壽.²⁰ Before I came here, your parents gave it to me."

Xuan held her hands and said, "When will I see you again?"

She responded, "In forty years." She gave Xuan a gauze handkerchief as a memento. Xuan, in return, gave her a gold-inlaid case. She then told him, "The day of our future meeting is set. I cannot linger any longer. Should you feel guilty during the next forty years, offering prayers and sacrifices at my grave will not bring me any benefit. But if you must give a feast in my memory, then only do it during the twilight hours on the last day of the month, in a meadow or on a riverbank, calling out my name, and I'll receive everything. I must hurry and I can't talk with you any longer. I hope you will take care of yourself." When finished she mounted the carriage and left, waving her sleeves. It was a long time before she disappeared, and the whole household saw her.

This event was reported in Tang Xuan's writing.

—J. Choo

Further Readings

Dudbridge, Glen. *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China: A Reading of Tai Fu's Kuang-i Chi*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Teiser, Stephen F. *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994.

20. Han Shou lived in the late third century. He was an influential courtier of his time. Yet it was his affair with his political patron's daughter that ensured his place in history. Allegedly, her father found out about the affair because Han Shou wore the rare fragrance she gave him.

dead in-law
call me
back