

Unrecoverable Love: On the Comparison of Tragic Love Stories in *Aeneid* and *Chang Hen Ge*

In Book Four of the *Aeneid*, Vergil sighs, “a cruel master, Love knows not to what end it drives human hearts,” rendering a perpetual comment on the nature of romantic relationships.¹ Of course, Vergil’s *Aeneid* is well-known for its tragic love story between Dido and Aeneas, whose dutiful obedience to the mandates of the gods ultimately resulted in the death of his doomed lover. But the popular plot of an irrevocably lost love is not unique to the Vergilian epic. In fact, it is also found in the literary traditions of classical China. One striking example of tragic love in classical Chinese literatures is Bai Juyi’s *Chang Hen Ge* (*The Song of a Vow Unfulfilled*, hereafter referred to as *the Song*) composed during the early ninth century C.E.² A poem of considerable length, the narrative is both typical and unconventional at the same time: typical for stories of this kind often find their prototypes in the works of more ancient writers, yet unconventional in that it does not wholly give itself up to being just a “retelling.” It serves as a vehicle of the poet’s own interpretation of the event. While similar to the way in which Dido presents Aeneas as the deserter who is responsible for the death of the enthralled Queen, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang³ is pictured in Bai’s poem not only as the author of his and his

¹ Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.412: *improbe Amor, quid non mortalia pectora cogis!*

² Bai Juyi lived 772-846 C.E.

³ Li Longji, a.k.a., Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (r. 712-756 C.E.) is the ninth emperor of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.).

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beloved's separation, but also the ultimate victim, suffering from his own perfidy.

Written just a few decades after the incident took place, *the Song* tells the love story of Emperor Xuanzong and Lady Yang Yuhuan, otherwise known as Yang "Taizhen," her Daoist appellation. Having become a nun so that her previous marriage to the emperor's son is annulled, Yang was made to return to her secular way of life by remarrying her father-in-law. As Xuanzong permits his political energy to be gradually wasted away, an armed rebellion suddenly breaks out. On their hasty flight from Chang'an, the imperial guards mutinied as part of a planned coup and killed the Lady's distant cousin. A potential threat to the conspirators, the rebel generals threaten Yang into taking her life by the emperor's order. Utterly demoralized by the incident, Xuanzong soon abdicates in favor of the crown prince⁴ and spends the rest of his life in mourning. Based on this ageless story, the poem is enriched by vivid details and examinations of the main characters' behavior.

Central to the construction of both poems, *Aeneid* and *The Song*, the female protagonists and their different literary treatment serve as the most telling distinction between eastern and western expectations of women in traditionally patriarchal societies. As much as women were expected to behave in a modest way in ancient Rome, powerful matrons who exercised different degrees of control over of their domestic household are not at all unusual. Unlike Dido who makes her first appearance in Book 1 of the *Aeneid* in a grandiose fashion accompanied by

⁴ Li Heng a.k.a, Emperor Suzong of Tang (r. 756-762 C.E.).

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guards and leading men of the city, Yang was first alluded rather humbly:

A maiden of the Yangs has just reached womanhood bred in her boudoir, she remains unknown to the outside world.⁵

The use of the word “bred,” the closest possible translation of the same word in Chinese,⁶ reflects the fact that Yang was carefully raised by her family in a closely confined and monitored environment, comparable to a circus animal kept in a cage. Like Dido, whose beauty Vergil compares to the huntress goddess Diana, Yang similarly outmatches everyone else in the Harem by her gracefulness. The poets’ similar desire to portray ideal female characters as possessing unparalleled beauty is common in both eastern and western literary traditions:

As long as these miraculous things are being seen by the Trojan Aeneas, motionless, he hangs there in a single gaze while he is stupefied. Queen Dido approached toward the temple in her utmost beauty, with a large troop of young men pressing together. Just as on the banks of Eurotas or through the Cythian ridge, Diana exercises her dancers, following whom a thousand nymphs are gathered on both sides. She bears her quiver on her shoulder; striding forward, she surpasses all goddesses. Joys agitates the silent heart of her mother Latona. Such was Dido. Happy, she was carrying herself as such through the middle of the crowd, pursuing the work of a future kingdom.⁷

⁵ All translations are my own for both *Aeneid* and *Chang Hen Ge*, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ “養,” “to rear or to breed,” the usage of which is equally divided between the upbringing of children and the domestication of animals.

⁷ Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.494-504: Haec dum Dardanio Aeneae miranda uidentur,/dum stupet, obtutuque haeret defixus in uno,/regina ad templum, forma pulcherrima Dido,/incessit magna iuuenum stipante caterua./Qualis in Eurotae ripis aut per iuga Cynthi/exercet Diana choros, quam mille secutae/hinc atque hinc glomerantur oreades; illa pharetram/fert umero, gradiensque deas supereminet omnis:/Latonae

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Naturally beautiful, she could not forfeit her good look. One day she was selected at the side of the emperor. Smiling while turning her head, she gave rise to many charms, and outshone all other women in the palace complex. Bathing in the warm springs during the vernal chills, she washed her snow-white skin with smooth water. Attended by her servants, she was too faint to move, this was the first time when she was favored by the emperor.⁸

With the two passages juxtaposed, it is not difficult to notice, however, some critical differences: unlike Dido who is depicted as this entrepreneurial figure who dared to lead her people out of their native homeland of Tyre to found a new city in Carthage, Yang is rendered as a faint, almost morbid character so delicate and fragile that she constantly needs support from her attendants. Representing the stereotypical image of female vulnerability, Yang in this passage exemplifies the eastern concept of feminine beauty and parts from the western aesthetic of vital and healthy women.

"Spending the whole winter [with Aeneas] in indulgence,"⁹ Dido relegates the city's defenses to oblivion, and her infatuation with Aeneas resulted in debilitating the city's politics¹⁰ Likewise, the negative impacts of a licentious excess, as Bai depicts in *The Song*, had too resulted in upheavals in social norms in the Chinese poem:

*So much favor did her siblings receive,
That it turned the hearts of parents
Who now prefer daughters over sons.*

tacitum pertemptant gaudia pectus:/talīs erat Dido, talem se laeta
ferebat/per medios, instans operi regnisque futuris.

⁸ *Chang Hen Ge*, 3-6.

⁹ Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.193: nunc hiemem inter se luxu, quam longa, fovere.

¹⁰ Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.86-9: non coep̄tae adsurgunt turrēs, non arma
iuventus/ exercet portusve aut propugnacula bello/ tuta parant pendant
opera interrupta minaeque/ muroroum ingentes aequataque machina
caelo.

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In a society where laws forbidding parents from drowning or smothering their female babies had to be enforced, it is an extremely bold statement to make. As much as it may have been an unwarranted hyperbole on the part of the poet, it certainly underscores the destructive potential of undermining the paradigm of patriarchy by overturning the established social conventions. Just as Dido's plea, when she beseeches Aeneas to stay for the sake of protecting the city from the inroads of other African chieftains, remains an unrealized prospect,¹¹ the concern becomes very real in *the Song*. Suddenly as if from nowhere, the audience, by means of very condensed language, feels the tension of the plot-twist, hearing the clatters of the horse hoofs of the mounted nomads.

*Then An Lushan came with his battle drums, pulling
the emperor and his consort away from their newly
composed songs.*¹²

More aggressive than Iarbas, An Lushan puts his task into action. A provincial military governor of barbarian stock and the riot's initiator, An apparently has engaged in illicit relationships with Yang. According to "Zizhi TongJian" by Sima Guang written in 1086 C.E., An, after having been ceremoniously adopted by the Lady (who is nevertheless sixteen years younger than him), "is not proscribed from the comings and goings into the palaces and either ate with her at the same table or stayed overnight."¹³ However scandalous the reality may have been, it contributed less to the incident than did the practicality of eliminating his political foes and seizing real

¹¹ Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.320: te propter Libycae gentes Nomadumque tyranni odere."

¹² *Chang Hen Ge*, 16

¹³ Sima, *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*.

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power. Unlike *Aeneid* Book 4, this section of *The Story* limits its expression to a few succinct lines which convey the same heartbreaking effect, instead of expanding lengthy dialogue between the characters. Fearing his own safety more than that of his lover, Xuanzong gives in to his own mutinous guards and orders the Lady to be hanged. Yang does not resist, again lacking the same “defiance,” which Dido displays by trying to deter what the Fates dictate. In showing nothing but acceptance, Yang’s existence is ultimately secondary. Having never received the chance of developing an independent persona as Dido did, Yang is nothing more than an epitome of feminine ills that is condemned by male authority for bringing down a society’s morale.

Revealing a clearly different philosophy, *The Song* differs from its western counterpart in that its endeavor is not a political one. Although he himself admits that he was not expecting Dido to commit suicide,¹⁴ Aeneas is more responsible for the death of Dido than Xuanzong is for his beloved’s demise. If one were to look at the description of Aeneas in the face of the pleas of Anna, on her disgraceful sister’s behalf, side by side with the grief of the Tang emperor, their reaction could not have been more different with the former being nothing but indifferent and the latter, rather pathetic. Whereas Vergil praises Aeneas’ determination by comparing him to a tree unmovable by winds, Bai, on the other hand, focuses on the frailty of the emperor as an ordinary man.

With these she was begging, and with these the most pitiable sister brings and brings back her tears, but he is moved by no tears or hears no soft voices. For a

¹⁴ Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.463-4: ... nec credere quivi hunc tantum tibi me discessu ferre dolorem.

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*god blocks and the fates stand in the face of the man's gentle ears. And just as the North Winds of the Alps with blows from here and there, vie amongst themselves to uproot the strong oak, now old in its strength. There goes a hissing, and the leaves strew the ground with the trunk shaking. It sticks in the rocks and stretches to the ethereal breezes with its peak, and to the Tartarus with its root just as much from here and there, the hero is not otherwise beaten by constant prayers. Although he feels deeply the cares in his great heart, his mind remains unmoved. Useless tears are shed.*¹⁵

*Covering his face, the emperor could not save her. And turning his head, he broke into tears. With the wind blowing the dusts, he and his retinues climbed the mountain paths. From there he saw few passengers in the valleys, and the flags seemed to have faded in color during the dusk having witnessed the landscape, the emperor recollects his memory even the moon light then shed in a sorrowful hue, and the sound of raindrops beating the chimes, as if it were a weeping, breaks the emperor's heart.*¹⁶

As the above excerpts show, while Vergil visualizes the strength of the Trojan leader as an oak tree (*robore*), Xuanzong's remorsefulness here energized by an "auditory" experience. Another poem written in the Qing dynasty which derives from Bai's work, titled "Yi Zhen Fei" ("To the Commemoration of Taizhen") by Chun Shuzhai,¹⁷ gives an

¹⁵ Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.437-49: Talibus orabat, talisque miserrima fletus/
fertque refertque soror. sed nullis ille mouetur/fletibus aut uoces ullas
tractabilis audit;/fata obstant placidasque uiri deus obstruit auris./
ac uelut annoso ualidam cum robore quercum/Alpini Boreae nunc hinc
nunc flatibus illinc/eruere inter se certant; it stridor, et
altae/consternunt terram concusso stipite frondes;/ipsa haeret scopulis
et quantum uertice ad auras/aetherias, tantum radice in Tartara
tendit:/haud secus adsiduis hinc atque hinc uocibus heros/tunditur, et
magno persentit pectore curas;/mens immota manet, lacrimae
uoluuntur inanes.

¹⁶ *Chang Hen Ge*, 21-25.

¹⁷ AisinGiro Yao, alias. Shuzhai (?-1867) was a distant member of the Qing imperial household and a low-ranking civil official in the provinces, best known for his many similar narration poems.

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imaginary account of the thoughts of a deeply wounded Xuanzong in the aftermath of the event. Listening to the raindrops hitting the wind chimes intermittently, the emperor remembers the deceased lady to whom he remains sentimentally attached. Through a series of rhetorical questions asked with escalating emotion, he bemoans the fact that her ghost has never visited him even in dreams. Whereas Aeneas nauseates his audience with the same excuse of heeding the gods' commands — even in the Underworld¹⁸ — attributing the absence of company to his own faithlessness, Xuanzong regrets his hasty decision and admits that he might well have saved the Lady's life had he remained a little more adamant. Based on the commentaries of Longwen, a literary critic and an intimate friend of the author, the writer's tone is especially poignant as he ascribes the choice of Xuanzong as a result of "temerity," an attribute found not lacking in Aeneas when he fears Mercury's vacuous threats.¹⁹ Again the absence of reflection on the part of the female voice here, which is also a deliberate gesture of Bai's original, is seen by Qi Gong, the renowned calligrapher and Chinese classicist in his collection of short dissertations, as "regrettable."²⁰ As much as Aeneas may have also displayed some sort of sadness towards Dido with his effusive tears,²¹ his obedience to divine will lacks Xuanzong's self-consciousness and, therefore, proves him less emotionally devoted. In this way, rather than being depicted as truthful to his political ideals

¹⁸ Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.459-62: Per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est, invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi. Sed me iussa deum, queae nunc has ire per umbras per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam.

¹⁹ Vergil *Aeneid* 4.279-80: At vero Aeneas aspectu obmutuit amens/arrectaeque horrore comae et vox faucibus haesit.

²⁰ Qi, *Fu Guang*, 120.

²¹ "lacrimas" (*Aeneid* 6. 455); "lacrimis" (*Aeneid* 6. 476).

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as Aeneas is to his sacred mission, Xuanzong is situated on the same platform as an ordinary man hurt by Love.

If it is by the will of the gods that Aeneas should leave Dido and disembark from the shores of Carthage, it is, too, by their *numina* that Xuanzong's and Yang's story continues from there. While Roman state religion served as the backbone of the *Aeneid*, without which the epic hero could not have made it safely to Italy, Bai's poem cannot be concluded as it is without the participation of certain religious elements. Book 6 of the *Aeneid* and the concluding section of *the Song* present this common ground through the vivid depictions of a post-mortem reunion. In order that he may see his beloved one last time, Xuanzong sends a Daoist monk in search for the dead Lady's ghost. Not inappropriately labeled a psychic, the monk is the Chinese equivalent of the prophetess Sibyl, who leads Aeneas into the Underworld who, in turn, encounters the sullen Dido. After much toil, he sees an island as if from nowhere on the sea²² and suspects that the reincarnated Lady Yang may have inhabited the place. Unlike the description of the unwelcoming cave at Cumae²³ or the horrid Orcus at the entrance of the Underworld, this unnamed island — mostly likely Penglai,²⁴ although never confirmed by the poet — is described as an Elysium-like place. Here the monk has reportedly met with the deified Yang and brought her Xuanzong's message. Weeping, Yang's reaction is, too, different from that of Dido in that she feels gratitude for the emperor's remembrance in the place of

²² A mirage seems to be what the poet denotes. NEED CITATION

²³ Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.42-3: Excisum Eubociae latus ingens rupis in antrum/
quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum.

²⁴ Located in present day Shandong province, the island is known in Chinese mythology as the dwelling place of demigods.

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resentment for abandoning her. She once again assumes the weaker female image appropriate for leading literary elites in a male-dominated society:

*Her countenance was woeful with tears half-dried, as if it were a blossom dripping with dews. Staring at the recovered token, she thanked the emperor for is love. She knew nothing of him since they were separated.*²⁵

Unable to return to the emperor's side, Yang nevertheless asks the monk to bring back the token of their marriage and asks him to offer the emperor her good wishes. Using techniques similar to a modern film director, Bai puts up a montage of a reminiscence of one of the couple's many nights together:

*One the seventh day of the seventh month he whispered to her ear in midnight: "If only we could be a pair of non-separating birds in the heavens, and a cluster of intertwining branches on earth."*²⁶

Just as they come to symbolize eternal love in eastern traditions, these symbols — especially the latter — carry just as much weight in western culture. For instance, in the story of Philemon and Baucis, the last line above stands out as an astonishingly familiar scene.²⁷ Singing, the "Muse" of Bai brings *The Song* to an exclamatory end:

*Although the world may come to an end,
This sweet-bitter vow remains unfulfilled!*²⁸

To conclude, while the two poems are similar to each other in the construction of characters and certain plot designs,

²⁵ *Chang Hen Ge*, 50-1.

²⁶ *Chang Hen Ge*, 59.

²⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 8.612.

²⁸ *Chang Hen Ge*, 60.

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their differences sometimes more tellingly reveal their cultural divergence. The image of Dido does not wholly reflect that of Yang nor vice versa. Having arisen from the Confucianist literary traditions, however much Yang's relationship with the emperor may be reported a totally submissive one, she could not have shaken off the shackles of feudal values imposed upon her by a society dominated by elder males, including the author himself. Yang, therefore, could not have taken on the same degree of autonomy as Dido, as much as the latter's struggles have come to a similarly futile end. And unlike Aeneas, who moved on in the second half of the epic after his transformative experience in the Underworld in Book 6, Xuanzong clearly never completely recovered from the loss of his love and constantly dwelled on his remorse. While the former has been driven by the gods, the latter is self-conscious of his own share of responsibility. As leaders of men, both clearly had more lofty expectations to fulfill and each fails or nearly fails to realize them. Each recognized as one of the most accomplished works of literature in their respective cultural traditions, the two poems not only give a romantic impression of love stories, but also provide the moral lesson of avoiding excessive carnal indulgence and the sheer consequence of its violation. Like a prism that produces various shades of light, no poem is meant to be read uniformly. Whether one chooses to read them soberly or from a pure literary perspective, he always finds unmet splendor each time he looks at it.

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