

凌叔華：短篇小說

Short Stories by Ling Shu-hua

Translated by Marie Chan

Mid-Autumn Eve 中秋晚

IT WAS MID-AUTUMN Eve;¹ the graceful moon had just mounted the roof-ridges; not a thread of cloud hung in the limpid sky; the backs of the houses and the courtyards appeared to be paved with a glaze of hoarfrost and the trees all around shaded by silver thaw. Intermittantly from the drawing room wafted the swirling smoke of cigarettes and the aroma of various delicacies.

Ching-jen had just finished paying his obeisance to his ancestors. He was still wearing an outer jacket and skull cap as he paced the length of the reception room, contentedly watching his wife as she cleared away the sacrificial offerings with her own hands. She instructed the cook as she worked:

"You'll serve dinner in a while; don't cook the fish any more. The chestnut chicken should be stewed with some cooking wine. Put some more sugar in the vegetable dish before you cook it. The 'harmony duck' is not tender enough; simmer it a little longer."

"That's right. Simmer the 'harmony duck' some more and add a couple of slices of dried bamboo shoots. Isn't that right." Ching-jen walked to her side and asked her. His cheerful countenance expressed complete satisfaction with her arrangements.

"All right, add some bamboo shoots. And debone the ham. Make sure that the soup is not too oily."

The cook received his instructions and left with the bowls.

Ching-jen sat down on an easy chair and took off his cap. Leaning against one of its arms, he rested with his eyes half-closed. He noticed that she was wearing the same lake-colored² silk dress that she wore on the third day of their wedding this spring. The shoulders, sleeves and the hems of the skirt were embroidered with gold and green sprays of flowers. Because she was very active today, her face did not seem as pale as usual. A lovely peach bloom peeped out from underneath the pale rouge that she had applied to her cheeks. He thought she was very beautiful this evening. Were he a European or an American, he would hug her and kiss her passionately that very minute. But it was not

¹The fifteenth day of the Eighth Month is the mid-point of the autumn season in the traditional Chinese calendar; it is the festival of Reunion. Here the word "Eve" denotes evening of the festival day, not the evening before.

²A light bluish-green.

Decorations in this article are taken from Les Toiles Imprimées à l'indigo, Editions en Langues Etrangères, Peking, 1956, and Paper-cuts by Li Yao-pao (李堯寶刻紙集), Yi Mi Book Company, Hong Kong, 1957.

customary for Chinese to indulge in such public demonstration of marital affection.

"Do you want *hua-tiao*³ or grape wine tonight?" T'ai-t'ai⁴ asked as she walked towards him with a slight smile.

He was basking in a sweet intoxication; he did not quite hear her question and only gathered that it was something about wining and dining. He answered without giving it too much thought:

"Whatever you like."

"I know nothing about wine. Shall we invite someone to drink with you?"

"I only want to drink with you tonight. I don't want any other company." He eyed her smilingly, signaling his desire to have his wife sit beside him.

"I'll get drunk after a cup or so. You can take ten cups with no effect." Obliging she sat on the armrest of his chair. With her round chin graced by that affectionate dimple, she seemed lovelier than ever.

He could no longer control himself and seized her hand, saying with a laugh, "I want you to get drunk. This is the first Mid-Autumn Festival we have spent together. This is the festival of family reunion. It is right for us to be together in harmony. Such a pity mother is not here; she likes your cooking too."

He thought of his beloved mother alone with his younger sisters in the country on this festive occasion. For an instant his thoughts flew far away.

"My mother told me, eat a 'harmony banquet' and you'll not be separated from each other throughout the year."

"Let's go and look at the moon before dinner." Ching-jen and his wife walked out side by side.

At dinner time, as the second course was being served, Ching-jen was just about to toast his wife who had not even finished her first cup of wine, when the doorman Lao Tung rushed in—

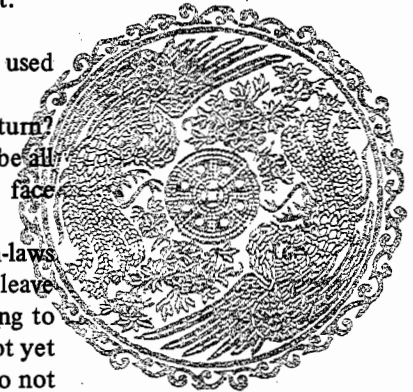
"Master, there's a phone call from Mason Lane asking you to go there immediately. The doctor said that *ku t'ai-t'ai*⁵ is sinking fast."

"What doctor said so?" Ching-jen paled and stood up to go.

"They didn't say which doctor. They've already hung up. They used someone else's phone." Lao Tung retired from the dining room.

"How can your foster sister's illness take such an abrupt turn? Didn't Doctor Wang say the day before yesterday that she would be all right? I don't imagine it is anything serious," his wife said, her face immediately frosting.

"I'll go and get her a couple of good doctors. Poor thing, her in-laws don't want to spend too much on the doctor. . . ." He started to leave the table. T'ai-t'ai shared his uneasiness but she was most unwilling to have Ching-jen leave at this moment. The "harmony duck" was not yet served. If he did not eat the "harmony duck" it was tantamount to not



³The finest kind of rice wine produced in the Shao-hsing district of Chekiang.

⁴Honorific for a married woman.

⁵Honorific for a married daughter.

celebrating the harmony feast. Afraid that it would not augur well for them in the months to come, she dragged him back to his seat.

"Have some rice before you go. You must eat the rice tonight, you know."

Ching-jen was most upset. He remembered the wilted and wan face of his foster sister the last time he saw her, the tears that flowed from those listless eyes staring at the roof of the bed curtain. He was in no mood to eat but he knew that at the Mid-Autumn dinner some rice must be eaten. He called out—

"Serve the rice and get the rickshaw ready. I'm going out right away."

When the rice was served, he gulped it down hastily and washed it down with some fish broth.

"Why is the 'harmony duck' still not served? Master is nearly finished." T'ai-t'ai was getting anxious. She was afraid that he would leave without tasting the "harmony duck." When the duck finally appeared, he was rinsing his mouth and hurriedly putting on his jacket. She was most unhappy; the peach bloom left her face as she pathetically looked at him, saying:

"Do take a piece of duck before you leave. You must eat a piece on this feast day." She chose a fleshy morsel and put it in his plate.

"I don't have time to eat. There's someone waiting for me with her dying breath. I don't have the appetite."

She felt abused but she was afraid that his failure to eat the duck would be an ill omen. She begged him in a low voice—

"It's bad luck not to eat the 'harmony duck'. Ching-jen, please take a piece."

Ching-jen felt that he could not refuse. So he sat down again and put the piece in his mouth. It was terribly greasy and he spat it out. He swallowed another mouthful of rice, rinsed his mouth again and took a sip of tea.

"Is the rickshaw ready?" He walked hurriedly to the door.

"It's been ready for some time. They phoned again and asked you to hurry. They said that ku t'ai-t'ai wants to talk to you, Master."

"Tell them I'll be there immediately." He hurried into the rickshaw, and the puller dashed away.

IT WAS ALMOST mid-night. The moon had mounted high into the sky. Its clear and pallid rays shot into the window, making it seem even more dismal. T'ai-t'ai sat by the window, thinking troubled thoughts. The recollection of this evening's dinner made her even more ruffled. It seemed to her that the god of misfortune had entwined Himself around that piece of uneaten duck and was scheming to deal with Ching-jen.

She felt she was lost in a dark forest; fear, bitter agitation and sorrow had trussed her up. She longed for someone to come and soothe her and lead her out by the hand. If only she could silently cling to the hand of a loved one—naturally Ching-jen would be her first choice—she would be rid of most of her fear and anxieties.

At last Ching-jen came back. She ran to the courtyard to greet him.

"What happened? Nothing serious, I hope?"

Ching-jen's face was deathly pale and his eyes were bloodshot. He threw himself on the couch as soon as he entered the drawing room and rasped:

"How can you ask? Had I got there five minutes earlier, I would have seen her. It is all because you insisted that I eat that bowl of rice and delayed me for ten minutes . . . poor thing, all she had was a foster brother in Peking and he could not be with her when she died . . . her death is too tragic." His throat felt scratchy. He felt as if he could still see his foster sister that very moment, see that pinched and shrivelled white face, those dim and tear-soaked eyes which were wide open and that mass of tangled hair. She was covered by a white bedsheet with yellow coins scattered over it. Before the bed a pair of ghastly white candles flickered with a stick of incense standing between them. The more he thought about it the sadder he became. Unconsciously he heaved a deep sigh:

"Oh, we've not done right by her. . . . Poor thing, she became a widow one year after her marriage. She didn't have a single child. She could not even see her foster brother before she died. . . . It's all because you made me eat that bowl of rice. Chang Ma told me that with her dying breath she called for someone to fetch me. . . . Oh, I really have not done right by her."

T'ai-t'ai had always believed that talks of the dead were taboo on feast days. Ching-jen's incessant reproaches were certainly annoying. But she did her best to control herself and answered him in a strained voice:

"Stop blaming me. It's better not to see death on a feast day."

She didn't expect the word "better" would sting Ching-jen. With an air of peeved disagreement, he said—

"I would not have expected such callousness from a young woman like you. She died all alone and you claim that it is better not to see her. What is 'better' about that?"

His sorrow had changed to anger. He spoke bitterly. This was the first time since their marriage that he felt his wife was wrong. When he finished speaking, he stretched out his foot and kicked off his shoes violently. Accidentally, one of the heavy shoes knocked a vase from a small tea table, smashing it into smithereens.

His harangue had astonished his wife. She was on the point of rebutting and giving vent to her own grievances when the breaking of the vase spelled another inauspicious act. She could no longer control her anger and sorrow.

"What's the matter with you? Why are you deliberately picking a quarrel with me tonight?" she started to sob. "You refused to eat, you smashed a vase on a feast day. How can one celebrate this auspicious day? I too. . . ." she broke down. Ching-jen did not expect such fury from his wife. Already vexed, he was becoming uncontrollably angry.

"I didn't break the vase on purpose. And you, you cursed me on a feast day. . . . What do you mean, 'you too' . . . ? Go on, say it!"

T'ai-t'ai sobbed and snivelled, soaking her white muslin handkerchief.

That did not stop her from saying, "You can say what you like . . . you're picking a quarrel with me on a feast day."

As his wife changed a handkerchief to wipe away her tears, he noticed that her red, swollen nose was grotesquely large. The two lips that he had always found so lovely were now bare of lipstick, leaving only a purplish mouth, contorted and about to cry. Her eyes were never beautiful, but because he was in love, he could find no fault with them. Now he noticed that the outer corners were slanted very high and suddenly he recalled that his mother used to say, "Slant-eyed women are the hardest to deal with." For the first time since their marriage, he found his woman ugly.

"Nobody is trying to pick on you. Oh, it's impossible to reason with you women." He stumbled out into the central courtyard. The round and dazzling moon seemed to be sneering at him; the sight of it made him groan involuntarily. He took a couple of turns round the courtyard and felt that his lined jacket was damp from the cold dew. He returned to the house.

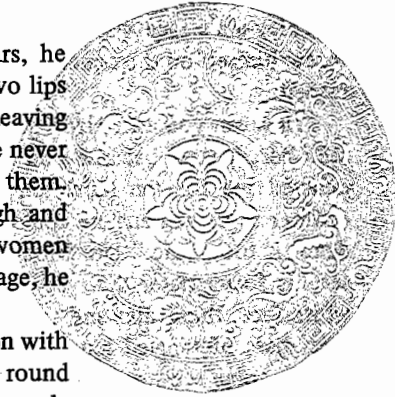
His wife was still sobbing but he was too irritated to humor her. He went to bed by himself.

He could not sleep all night long. He stole a look and saw that his wife's lips were blue and her eyes puffed from crying. He thought she was both pitiable and hateful. But he had made up his mind not to be appeased nor to speak to her. As dawn approached, he saw that she had lain down fully clothed on the couch. He too closed his eyes and fell asleep.

As soon as he closed his eyes, he dreamt of his recently deceased foster sister. She was wearing the outfit that she used to wear when they all lived together in his house some seven years ago, and she was beckoning to him with a smile. He woke up with a start. Tossing and turning, he recalled how she had sat by his bedside when he was ill with malaria seven years ago, helping his mother to administer his medicine. He did not want to take those quinine pills because they looked so foul. Tearfully she had begged him to take them. It was from her hand that he drank the sugar water which washed down the pills, mouthful by mouthful. At the last mouthful, his lips grazed her smooth and sweetly scented hand and his heart was filled with an unspeakably delicious feeling. Impulsively he gave her hand a greedy sniff. The blood rushed to her cheeks. Smiling wistfully he fell asleep. She was a little embarrassed the next time she saw him but she seemed to be even more solicitous of his welfare. She was betrothed since childhood to the Feng family. When she left to be married the following year she cried bitterly and he had suffered the pangs of parting with her. A year after her marriage, she became a widow. Exactly five years passed before they saw each other again. It was not until this spring that they met again in the capital. Remembering all this, he heaved many more sighs.

"I've done her wrong. I wasn't with her when she died. Would she hate me for this?" He crawled out of bed when he thought of this. The gauze at the window was growing light. It was already six thirty.

He was upset and felt a trifle foolish as he remembered his quarrel



with his wife last night. The sight of her sleeping with her arms thrown over her eyes filled him with compassion. But he was still unwilling to admit that he was wrong. He felt that he had not been wrong; he walked to the couch and said awkwardly:

"Better go to bed. This is no place to sleep."

His wife did not answer. He left her, hurriedly dressed and rushed out to make funeral arrangements for his foster sister.

It was not until ten o'clock that night that he settled the arrangements for clothing, coffin and such. The Feng family could not contribute very much. He felt that his foster sister was treated shabbily and so he took out the two hundred odd dollars from the profits from his shop. He advanced one hundred and sixty dollars for the coffin alone and even then the undertaker had said that the coffin was not a very good one.

"All I can say is that I did all I could," he said to himself as he walked home into the courtyard, feeling the empty wallet in his pocket.

With tangled hair and dim, bloodshot eyes, his wife was leaning against the bedpost talking to a maidservant. The two stopped when they saw him. Stiffly he picked up a chair and sat down with a sigh:

"Well, I've finally finished all the funeral arrangements."

"Have you had dinner, Master?" The maid brought him a cup of tea.

"More or less. You can't expect a person to eat properly when he's making funeral arrangements. Have you already eaten?"

"We waited until nine thirty. T'ai-t'ai only had a few mouthfuls."

After a few minutes, the maid went on, "Have you looked at the two bills on the table, Master? They said that you promised to settle them today."

"Oh, no. I forgot about that and spent all my money today. What shall I do?" Ching-chen scratched the hair on his forehead. He was a little worried and asked his wife:

"Have you spent the hundred dollars I gave you the day before yesterday? Can you pay these bills?"

"Didn't I show you the account yesterday? You wouldn't look at it yesterday and here you go asking me for the money. Well, I certainly haven't squandered any of your money . . . And I don't have a foster brother either, to give me money and look after me."

T'ai-t'ai was waiting for a pretext to let out all the chagrin in her heart, and she couldn't help adding this gratuitous remark.

"Say, you're an odd one. What has got into you that you want to pick a fight with me these two days? What kind of talk is this? What is this about foster brother giving money? She's already dead. Don't talk such nonsense. I really should steer clear of you."

"I know that you cannot stand me. I'm going to my mother's to get away from you. Why pick on me and make me look foolish on a feast day? How did I ever wrong you?" She started to cry again, at the same time calling out:

"Yang Ma, pack up. We're going home to my mother's. They won't care if they have one more mouth to feed. I'm not. . . ." Tearfully she got up to pack.

Ching-jen did not speak; he just paced back and forth. When she finished packing and left, he too went out with a sigh.

That evening she returned ruefully to her home. One day passed and then another until it was the third day. Ching-jen's friends unanimously advised him to fetch her back. But he was unhappy and did not go. Each day at sunset, he would go along with a couple of acquaintances whom he seldom associated with before and roamed the pleasure gardens, listened to the opera, trailed behind fashionable women and watched the fun. Often they would go to a small café to eat a simple meal and drink the strong *pai-kan*.⁶ When they became tipsy they would go to watch the female entertainers perform and bawl out bravos. Often he would not return home until one or two o'clock in the morning.

AFTER A MONTH, Ching-jen's mother-in-law heard about his philandering. She began to grow anxious for her daughter. On the Double Ninth festival she sent her daughter back to Ching-jen. There was no further bickering between husband and wife but a new, ice-cold stone tablet seemed to have been erected between their hearts, graven with the message that they shared each other's food and bed, but nothing more.

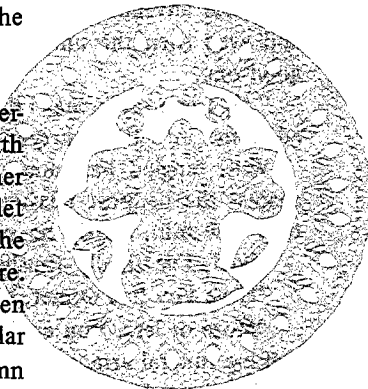
A familiar figure in the city's pleasure haunts by now, Ching-jen advanced a grade in the spring of the second year. He became a regular customer of a certain establishment in Stone Alley. By the Mid-Autumn Festival of the second year, he had mortgaged his general store. He used half the money to pay the Pao Ch'eng Jewelers and the Lao Chieh Fu Silk and Brocade Shop for the two girls at Stone Alley.

In early spring, his wife had had a miscarriage—a baby boy with fine features. The doctor said that her liver was inflamed from excessive anger and hence the embryo was injured. His wife was ill for fully three months. After that her face became sallow and haggard and she aged considerably. Ching-jen was frequently away. Little by little he found her very ugly and a bore to talk to.

Ching-jen's mother came in the third year. She learnt about his debaucheries, the mortgage of the shop left to him by his forefathers and the fact that although the remaining paper company was not mortgaged its deed was pawned. She talked to him but to no avail, and could only content herself with blaming her daughter-in-law for being too stupid to please her son so that he was forced to dissipate the family wealth outside. She turned an ill-tempered countenance towards her daughter-in-law all day long. On the third Mid-Autumn Festival, T'ai-t'ai skulked alone in the kitchen watching the fire and wiping her tears. She did not dare cry out loud.

That evening Ching-jen suddenly remembered his foster sister's expiration on Mid-Autumn Eve three years ago. He told his mother all about it and again laid the blame on his wife. The old lady had always loved and favored her foster daughter. That evening, after hearing the story, she bitterly chided her daughter-in-law.

⁶The finest form of kao-liang, a liquor made from sorghum.



At the end of the Eighth month, Ching-jen's wife miscarried another six month old baby boy. Since his nose was malformed and he had only one ear and imperfect fingers, everyone said he was deformed. The doctor simply said it was a miscarriage induced by venereal disease.

On the Mid-Autumn Festival of the fourth year, spider webs hung all over the drawing room where Ching-jen used to reside. As the moon mounted the roof-ridge, a couple of hideous black bats appeared; stretching their wings they flew to and fro, chasing their own shadows. In a small room next to the kitchen, two women talked. One of them was Ching-jen's wife, the other probably her mother:

"Do you have to move out the day after tomorrow?"

"There is no alternative. We're handing over the bill of sale tomorrow. It's a good thing I begged them to wait for another day."

"Are you sure Ching-jen will not come back for you?"

"He won't come. I heard Wang Erh-yeh say he is living off relatives in the *San-pu-kuan* area."⁷

"Oh, who would have thought that his family would have fallen to such a state!"

"Who'd have thought . . . but no, mother . . . its preordained by my destiny!" She blew her nose and said with a sob, "The first Mid-Autumn Festival after my marriage, I had a quarrel with him. He took a piece of 'harmony duck' and spat it out again. I was most upset; after that he knocked down a vase that had been used in offerings to the gods and broke it. I just knew that it would not turn out well."

"This is the will of heaven; heaven allots calamities and misfortunes. Who can evade them? Accept your lot and cultivate a good fortune in another life." The old lady finished, coughed a few times and blew her nose.

Two o'clock passed; little by little the light in the small room died down; slowly the paper on the window dimmed. A couple of moths pounded against the window as they plunged hither and thither. In a little while, the light died out. The moths fell on the icy dew and, covered with white frost, they went to meet their creator. Then the sound of heavy breathing came from the little room punctuated by an "ai . . . yo, ai . . . yo" sound which seems to continue the pounding of the moths against the window-pane.

As of old, the moon quietly paved a thin glaze of cold hoarfrost on the courtyard; as usual it shaded the tips of the trees with a canopy of silver thaw. Fatigued by flying, the bats hid themselves. Stirred by the gentle breeze, a spider web beside the great pillar emitted a faint silken ray in the moonlight.

⁷Literally, "Three Don't Tend"; a district located in the southern section of Tientsin, between the French and Japanese Concessions. In the early days of the concession the area was a "no man's land", or *San pu-kuan*, meaning that neither the local Chinese administration nor the French and Japanese authorities cared about it.

Embroidered Pillow 繡枕

WITH HER HEAD bent down, Missy¹ was embroidering a cushion. The weather was swelteringly hot. Even the little Pekingese dog could do no more than stretch under the table and pant with tongue hanging out. Flies buzzed dizzily around the window. Chang-ma stood behind the young mistress waving a fan, her face streaked with rivulets of sweat. Time and again she would wipe her face with a handkerchief but it never stayed dry; as soon as she had wiped her nose, drops would show around her mouth. She noticed that even though her young mistress was not perspiring quite as badly, her face was also flushed and scarlet. Her white shirt of fine linen was soaked through at the back. Chang-ma could not help saying:

"Missy, do take a rest and cool off. I know that Master said the cushions must be delivered tomorrow but he didn't say morning or afternoon."

"He said they must be delivered before noon tomorrow. I have to hurry. Come over here and fan me." She bent down and resumed sewing.

Chang-ma walked to the left. As she fanned, she looked at the embroidered article and uttered oohs and ahs of praise:

"I always thought those tales of young ladies who are beautiful as well as smart and clever were just made up by storytellers. I never knew there are such people. Oh, what a fine young lady we have here—fresh as the spring onion and such a hand at needlework! This bird is so neat."

For a fraction of a second a dimpled smile flickered across Missy's face. The loquacious Chang-ma spoke again:

"Well, when this pair of cushions is presented to Minister Pai and admired by everybody, I wouldn't like to say how many matchmakers will be here; they'll likely batter down our doors, trying to squeeze in. . . . I hear that Minister Pai's second son is an eligible young man of twenty or so. I can see Master's plan. Remember the fortune-teller told Madam last time that the lucky star is shining in your horoscope this year?"

"Stop this chatter, Chang-ma," Missy paused in her sewing to cut her short. Her cheeks flushed.

The room became very quiet; there was only the rustle of the needle as it threads through the satin and the faint swish of the wind. Suddenly the call of a teenage girl is heard outside the bamboo curtain:

"Ma, I'm here."

"Is that you, Syau-nyou? What are you doing here on a hot day like this?" Chang-ma asked nervously. Syau-nyou, in dark blue trousers

¹*Ta hsiao-chieh*, literally, eldest young mistress, a form of address for the eldest daughter of the house.

and blouse, her head covered with beads of sweat and her pumpkin-shaped face scarlet from the heat, had already slipped in through the curtain and now stood by the door, gawking at Missy.

"Ma, Auntie told us yesterday that Missy has spent half a year on a pair of cushions," the girl said breathlessly. "She said that there are thirty or forty different threads on the bird alone. I just can't believe there are that many colors. Auntie said, 'Hurry and see for yourself if you don't believe me. In a day or two they'll be sent away as a gift.' So as soon as I finished my meal I came to town. Ma, may I come over and take a look?"

Chang-ma chuckled apologetically when her daughter had finished.

"Missy, is it all right for Syau-nyou to take a look at your work?"

Missy lifted her head and looked at Syau-nyou. Her clothes were quite filthy; she was wiping her face with a grey handkerchief. Her gaping mouth revealed two rows of large, yellow teeth; she was staring in wide-eyed curiosity. Unconsciously Missy frowned:

"Tell her to go now; we'll see about it later."

Chang-ma sensed that Missy objected to her daughter's unkemptness and did not wish her to look. She quickly turned to Syau-nyou and said, "Just look at the sweat on your nose. Go and wipe your face. There's water in my room. Don't let your foul sweat annoy Missy on a hot day like this."

Syau-nyou's face fell in disappointment. She did not want to budge even after her mother had told her to go. Noticing her unwillingness, Chang-ma felt sorry but nevertheless gave her a stare:

"Go and wash your face in my room. I'll be with you right away."

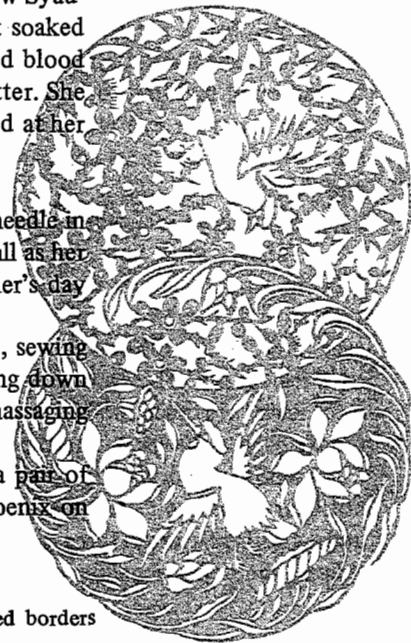
With a pout, Syau-nyou lifted the curtain and left. As she changed a thread, Missy raised her head and looked out. She saw Syau-nyou wiping her forehead with her lapel. The lapel was almost soaked through. The pots of pomegranate plants in the garden spouted blood red flowers which blazed in the sun. It made her feel even hotter. She lowered her head and noticed that two wet patches had formed at her own armpits.

IN A FLASH two years had passed. Missy was still plying her needle in her secluded boudoir. Syau-nyou had grown to be as big and tall as her mother. She had learnt to keep herself tidy, and on her mother's day off she could even fill in as a housemaid.

One summer evening, Syau-nyou was sitting by the light, sewing a pair of pillow-ends² when she heard Missy calling her. Putting down her needle and thread, she hurried to Missy's room. As she was massaging Missy's legs, she chattered away intermittently:

"Missy, the day before yesterday, Godmother gave me a pair of beautiful pillow-ends. It's a kingfisher on one side and a phoenix on the other."

²Old-fashioned Chinese pillows were decorated with two embroidered borders on each end, known as pillow-ends.



"Don't tell me the bird is half-and-half," Missy seemed to be scoffing at her.

"Well, there's a long story behind these pillow ends of mine. I got quite mad with Godsister because of them. They were originally given to Godmother by Wang Erh-sao³. She said they were cut from two soiled cushions. They were really beautiful when they were new. One was embroidered with a lotus and a kingfisher. The other was a phoenix perched on a rock. They were given to her master, as presents, and on the day they arrived they were placed on the chairs in the drawing room. But the same evening a drunken guest vomited on one cushion, leaving a dirty patch. The other one was pushed to the floor by one of the card players and was used by someone as a footstool. The fine satin was covered with muddy footprints. The young master of the house told Wang Erh-sao to take them away. So Godmother got them from her and gave them to me. The night I brought them back I admired them for ever so long; they are too lovely. The phoenix tail alone is made up of forty different kinds of thread. The kingfisher's eyes turned towards the little fishes in the pond seem to be alive. They sparkle—I don't know what kind of thread it is."

Missy's heart gave a little jump when she heard this. Syau-nyou went on:

"What a shame to spoil pretty things like these. Godmother saw me a couple of days ago and told me to cut off the dirty part and make pillow-ends with them. Would you believe Godsister could be so small? She said I always wheedle nice things out of Godmother."

Missy did not pay any attention to the story of their bickerings. She only recalled that in the intense heat of those dog days two years back, she had embroidered a pair of exquisite cushion covers—covers which also had a kingfisher and a phoenix on them. She remembered it was so hot she couldn't hold a needle in the daytime, and often she had to wait until nightfall to begin work. When she finished the covers she suffered from an eye ailment for more than ten days. She wanted to see how these cushions compared with hers and told Syau-nyou to go and fetch them.

Syau-nyou said when she returned with the two pieces:

"Missy, look how this beautiful piece of ebony satin is soiled. I heard that the birds were embossed before; they've caved in now. Just look at the bird's crest and the red beak! The colors are brilliant even now. Wang Erh-sao said that the kingfisher's eyeballs were once two real pearls. The lotus isn't any good now; it's turned grey. The lotus leaves are much too large; they're no use for pillow-ends. . . . Look, there's even a flower beside the rock. . . ."

Missy stared blankly at the two pieces of embroidery. She could not hear Syau-nyou's last words. She could only recall that she had to undo the bird's crest three times in all; once because her sweat had stained the delicate yellow and she had discovered it only after it was

³Mrs. Wang the Second.

completed; once because she had matched the wrong malachite thread under the night light; and the last time—she could not even remember why. The soft pink of the lotus she had hardly dared touch even after washing her hands; she would put talcum powder on her hands first. She had sewed and reseeded it . . . those large lotus leaves were even more difficult. They would not have been lifelike if done in one color throughout; she had matched threads of twelve different shades of green in all. And when she finished the cushions and presented them to the Pai family, friends and relatives had voiced numerous words of flattery; in her boudoir her own friends had made her the butt of their jokes. She had smiled shyly and blushing when she heard them; at night she had dreamt how she would be coy and arch, how she would be dressed in clothes that she had never worn before, how many envious maidens would follow her and the faces of her friends would reveal their jealousy. That was a dream world, she realized not long after; and so she never wanted to recall it or let it disturb her thoughts. But today she saw the embroidery again, and one by one the memories returned.

Syau-nyou noticed how quiet she had become, her eyes riveted upon the pillow-ends. She said:

“You like them too, don’t you, Missy? Such workmanship; they are so neat. Why don’t you make a pair like this sometime?”

Missy did not hear Syau-nyou’s question. She just shook her head in reply.

(For Chinese text of the two stories see page 162)

Ling Shu-hua's has been one of the outstanding names among those of women writers and practitioners of the short story form in the 1920's, when the new pai-hua literature was in its infancy. "Mid-Autumn Eve" and "Embroidered Pillow" were both collected in her first book, The Temple of Flowers (花之寺), published in 1928. Professor C. T. Hsia, in his standard work A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, has singled them out for praise as powerful pieces that probe deeply into "the anxiety and fear of slightly old-fashioned girls caught in a period of changing manners". Employing great economy of means, Miss Ling writes on matrimonial problems with the kind of psychological insight that is worthy of a Henry James.

Miss Ling, a native of Kwangtung who lived in Peking in her writing days, has taught in Canada and now makes her home in England. She is also a distinguished painter in the traditional style. Her late husband, Professor Chen Yuan (陳源), writer and educator, was author of the celebrated Causeries of Hsi-ying (西滢閒話).