

Was She Really Reconciled? — Ghost Wife Stories in Chinese, Korean, Japanese and American Literatures —

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Four years ago, at the 4th Quadrennial International Comparative Literature Conference held at Tamkang University, Professor Dominic Cheung of the University of Southern California gave a very interesting talk about the “Ghost-wife” theme in China, Japan and Korea.¹ It was a comparative study of *New Tales of the Trimmed Lamp* (剪燈新話) by the Chinese author Ch'ü Yu (瞿佑), of *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (雨月物語 *Ugetsu monogatari*) by the Japanese author Ueda Akinari (上田秋成), and of *New Tales of the Golden Carp* (金鰲新話 *Kumo Sinhwa*) by the Korean author Kim Si-sup (金時習). While chairing that session, I realized that there is an adaptation of that Oriental theme by the British-born American author Lafcadio Hearn, who died as a Japanese citizen in 1904 under the Japanese name of Koizumi Yakumo (小泉八雲). In this paper I would like to present my view by discussing:

- 1st: the treatment of Japanese womanhood as depicted by the American author Lafcadio Hearn.
- 2nd: some recent feminist interpretations of that ghost-wife story.
- 3rd: my interpretation of Hearn's ghost-wife story, which is partly based on the traditional interpretations of the three East Asian stories already discussed by Prof. Cheung.
- 4th: some additional comments.

Lafcadio Hearn was born in 1850 and spent his last fourteen years in Japan from 1890 until 1904. He wrote about thirty ghost stories during the latter part of his stay in Japan, using Japanese themes. One of them, “The Reconciliation,” which is the ghost-wife story in question, is included

in a volume entitled *Shadowings*, published in 1900.² The story is pretty well known in Japan as well as in the West for it was chosen as the first episode of the Kobayashi Masaki's 小林正樹 celebrated film *Kwaidan* 怪談 which means *Ghost Story*.

"The Reconciliation" by Hearn has a Japanese original and Hearn himself specifies it in a footnote. He says "the original story is to be found in the curious volume entitled *Konseki Monogatari*." The more commonly accepted pronunciation is *Konjaku Monogatari* (今者物語), (*Tales of Times Now Past*). The original story is the 24th tale of Chapter Twenty-Seven, one of the secular tales of Japan.³ As it is very short, less than two pages long, and since it is not translated by Marian Ury in her translation of *Tales of Times Now Past*, I'll give a rough translation of the tale, which was originally written towards the beginning of the twelfth century:

At a time now past, there lived in Kyoto a samurai who was very poor and who had no job. When a nobleman, with whom the samurai was acquainted, was appointed Governor of a distant province, the samurai asked the favor of accompanying him to the province as his retainer. The new Governor granted the request to the samurai, who, upon departure, divorced his wife — a good-natured, beautiful young woman, with whom he had endured the years of poverty. It was hard for him to separate himself from her, but in order to go to a distant land the samurai thought he had better marry another woman who was rich and resourceful. The samurai went to the province with this new wife.

However, after several years the samurai found that he still very much loved his former wife, whom he had abandoned in Kyoto. He began to wish to see her again, and this desire became so strong that he suffered from it even physically. When the term of the Governor expired, the samurai went back to the capital together with him. The samurai thought that he had divorced his former wife without any reason. He wished to go back to live with her again.

As soon as he arrived in Kyoto, the samurai sent his second wife back to her family. Not allowing himself even the time to change his travelling garb, he went to the house where his former wife used to live. As the gate was not closed, he entered. The house had a deserted look, and was seemingly unoccupied. He felt extremely sad. It was September the twentieth, the

moon shone brightly and the air was chilly, and the samurai was chilled to the heart. But on entering the house, he found his wife at her usual resting-place. No one else was there. Her eyes met his, and without any air of resentment, she greeted him with a happy smile:

"What's happened you? When did you come back?"

Then the samurai told her how he had missed her, how he had thought of her for many years, and said:

"Now let us live together. Tomorrow my goods shall be brought here, and my servants shall come to wait upon you. Tonight I have come here only to tell you this."

She seemed to be greatly pleased, hearing these words, and in her turn she told him about all that had happened during the years of his absence. As it became late in the night, they lay down in a room facing south to sleep together.

"Have you no one in the house to help you?"

"No, I could not afford a servant."

They had still much to tell each other. When the dawn was grey, they slept. The daylight came streaming brightly into the room, and the samurai awoke and was surprised, finding beside him the corpse of his wife, a corpse dried up to skins and bones.

"What is this?"

The horror was unspeakable. He ran away and jumped into the garden. "Isn't this a hallucination?" He looked back again at her, but there lay the corpse of the dead woman.

Hurriedly he put on his clothes and went into a neighboring house and asked as if he were a newcomer. "Is there no one in that house?" The neighbor answered:

"As the husband had gone away to a distant province, the wife fretted a great deal and fell sick. No one cared for her. Last summer she died. No one took care of the dead body. As her corpse remains there, no one dares approach the house. It remains deserted."

Hearing this he again was horrified; without saying any word, he went away.

What a horror! It must have been the soul of the woman that remained there. She lingered there to see him. She had longed so much to see him again that she came back to their bridal chamber. What a pity! So the tale's been told.

This tale reminds us of one of *The Tales of Moonlight and Rain* by the eighteenth century writer Ueda Akinari, for his "Asaji-ga-yado" 淺茅が宿 (The House Amid the Thickets) is mainly based on this *Konjaku* tale. Lafcadio Hearn used the same original tale, when he wrote his story "The Reconciliation." Before analyzing the modern transformation, let me tell you something about Hearn's linguistic ability in Japanese. He could not read classical Japanese, but he had a good understanding of spoken Japanese. Hearn and his Japanese wife Setsuko always communicated in Japanese, as Setsuko did not speak English at all. Hearn asked his wife to read aloud Japanese ghost stories which Hearn wrote down in English. While writing them down, the artist Hearn modified details and enlarged the contents. The English story "The Reconciliation" is almost three times longer than the Japanese original. There are two reasons for the modifications: first Hearn had his own literary taste, and second Hearn took into consideration his American and Victorian readers' sensibilities. Hearn's ghost stories in *Kwaidan*, which are today more popular in Japan than in the United States, were written for American and British readers. His best stories appeared often in the *Atlantic Monthly*, towards the turn of the century. As more than half of his American readers were educated women, Hearn was obliged to pay attention to their feminine sensitivities.

At this point we had better look at some passages of Hearn's retold story before moving on to examine the transformation. As the samurai of the original *Konjaku* tale is too egoistic in his behavior towards his first wife, Hearn writes in detail the samurai's state of repentance. This is a new element introduced by the American author. He explains:

But it was in the time of the thoughtlessness of youth, and the sharp experience of want, that the Samurai could not understand the worth of the affection so lightly cast away. His second marriage did not prove a happy one; the character of his new wife was hard and selfish; and he soon found every cause to think with regret of Kyoto days. Then he discovered that he still loved his first wife. . . .

Hearn then describes the good characteristics of the first wife. He likely had in mind the good qualities of his wife Setsuko:

her gentle speech, her smiles, her dainty, pretty ways, her

faultless patience. . . . Sometimes in dreams he saw her at her loom, weaving as when she toiled night and day to help him during the years of their distress.

As the samurai had repented and as the first wife was gentle and patient, there was, in fact, a possibility of a reconciliation. The title "The Reconciliation" is well chosen: readers have a premonition of a reconciliation, so we can say that the title plays an important part as it suggests a happy ending. I don't know if American women of today would pardon such a selfish man. I guess, however, that even in the United States towards the turn of the century there were women who would forgive their thoughtless husband if he tried to atone. There is, however, a kind of contradiction in the behavior of the samurai. Logically speaking, if he goes back to his first wife, he has to divorce his second wife. This act may constitute a new cruelty. Hearn adds extenuating circumstances in parenthesis: (she [= the second wife] had given him no children.) and he sent her to her own people.

The scene of homecoming is impressive and Hearn describes in detail the romantic air of the deserted house. Hearn elaborates on the important scene of the meeting as follows:

He pushed the screen aside, and uttered a cry of joy; for he saw her there, — sewing by the light of a paper-lamp. Her eyes at the same instant met his own; and with a happy smile she greeted him, — asking only: — "When did you come back to Kyoto?"

Then the samurai explains and apologizes to his former wife for his past rudeness. I don't know if it is really better for the story to have this rather long passage of apology. I find some of Hearn's expressions, such as "self-reproach," to be too modern for a mediaeval tale. At any rate Hearn had to conform to the ethical standards of his American readers.

After having talked far into the night, they lay down. The Japanese version which Hearn used is a Yedo version of the original *Konjaku* tale. It is not as blunt as the original text which says "futari kaki-idakite fushinu." 二人搔抱て臥しぬ. But it is still clear in both Japanese versions that the two had sexual intercourse, while Hearn, a writer of the Victorian period, was more vague and decent in his description. The husband and the wife's

lengthy talk about servants and other daily affairs at this point seems to be a bit dull. It might be interpreted, at best, as a literary trick on the part of the American author, since the conversation gives us the impression that the reconciliation was almost complete, and that they slept afterwards.

I very much admire the awakening scene in Ueda Akinari's version.⁴ The hero of *Ugetsu Monogatari* vaguely knew that he was cold, and groping with his hands, he tried to pull up the covers. But to his surprise, leaves rustled beneath his touch, and as he opened his eyes a cold drop of something fell on his face. In Ueda's tale, the pale shining moon of dawn still remains in the sky, while in Hearn's story, the awakening of the husband is not as slow. Here is Hearn's passage, which constitutes the climax:

When the awoke, the daylight was streaming through the chinks of the sliding-shutters; and he found himself, to his utter amazement, lying upon the naked boards of a mouldering floor Had he only dreamed a dream? No: she was there; — she slept. . . . He bent above her, — and looked, — and shrieked; — for the sleeper had no face! . . . Before him, wrapped in its grave-sheet only, lay the corpse of a woman, — a corpse so wasted that little remained save the bones, and the long black tangled hair.

One of the most salient characteristics of Japanese ghost stories is that they give readers a shock at the culminating point of the story. The shock is strong in the original *Konjaku* tale: "otoko uchi-odorokite mireba, kaki-idakite netaru hito wa karekareto karete hone to kawa to bakari naru shinishi hito nari keru." 男打驚て見れば、搔抱て寝たる人は、枯々と干て骨々皮と許なる死人也けり。(He awoke and was surprised, finding beside him a corpse of the woman he had embraced the night before, a corpse dired up to skins and bones.") In Lafcadio Hearn's version the shock is also visually impressive, as Hearn adds a new element, the black hair:

Before him lay the corpse of a woman, — a corpse so wasted that little remained save the bones and the long black tangled hair.

The long black hair is very symbolic. When "The Reconciliation"

was turned into a movie by the director Kobayashi Masaki, this first episode of *Kwaidan* was entitled "Kurokami" 黒髪 or "The Black Hair." In the final scene we see not only the long black hair together with white bones but also we see the long black hair pursuing the horrified husband when he tries to run away, screaming. So in the film we get the impression that the ghost of the former wife returns to this world to avenge herself on her disloyal husband. I don't think, however, that the ghost is that vindictive either in the original *Konjaku* tale or in Hearn's story. But a transformation of Japanese womanhood begins when some American feminists and Japanese returning from abroad begin to reinterpret "The Reconciliation." Since the explanation of these women seems indicative of the influence of American feminism, I would like to explain this. Their new interpretation is as follows: the samurai hero of the Hearn story is too self-centered to be really forgiven. A normal self-respecting woman cannot accept such an egoistic fellow again. The abandoned wife must have fretted and resented terribly before she died. Consequently, the ghost of the dead wife must have tried to take revenge. According to some women returning from the United States, "The Reconciliation" by Lafcadio Hearn is a story of revenge. The title "The Reconciliation" is a trick on the part of the American writer. It is true that the first wife is depicted as very gentle and sweet throughout the story. This, too, is a sort of trick. The samurai as well as the readers are tricked by her gentle appearance. The sweeter she looks, the more effective will be the final shock, and this final fatal shock is her calculated revenge. The samurai as well as naive readers have been induced to believe that the husband and the wife have been reconciled. This is not true, however. This is a reconciliation feigned by the abandoned wife who wishes that the final shock be more deceptive and atrocious for the unfaithful samurai.

I wonder if this new interpretation can really stand. To my great regret, the film-director Kobayashi Masaki himself chose this interpretation of vindication in his celebrated movie. That is the reason why in the final scene the black hair of the dead woman pursues her horrified ex-husband. If this interpretation is correct, we have to say that there is a tremendous transformation of Japanese womanhood in Hearn's story. I don't believe, however, that that was the intention either of the *Konjaku* compiler or of Lafcadio Hearn. Towards the end of the original tale, it is clearly stated that the ghost of the dead woman appeared to the samurai because of her longing of many years. The theme of the *Konjaku* tale is what the French

romantic author Théophile Gautier calls "l'Amour plus fort que la Mort." (Love stronger than death.) And this is precisely the theme Lafcadio Hearn likes most. Moreover, Hearn generally idealizes Japanese womanhood, and in this story Hearn also emphasizes the following qualities of the first wife: her gentle speech, her dainty, pretty ways, her faultless patience. All these are probably the qualities of Lafcadio's Japanese wife Setsuko. Indeed Setsuko had toiled night and day to help the impoverished Koizumi family of samurai origin. Setsuko wove night and day, and even on the eve of her marriage to Lafcadio Hearn, she was seen at her loom. Hearn knew this and often commended her for it before their children. One recent acquisition of the newly rebuilt Lafcadio Hearn museum in Matsue is samples or swatches of clothes woven by Setsuko. I cannot imagine that Hearn, who wrote the story while listening to the voice of his Japanese wife, could change the heroine into a vindictive woman. It is known that while reading old Japanese tales for her husband, Setsuko always identified herself with the heroine. Moreover, if we read the text carefully, we see the husband clutch at the vain hope that his wife might still be living. This is not the act nor the sentiment of a man avenged by his former abandoned wife.

Of the three versions, one in Japanese literature of the early twelfth century, one in a Japanese film awarded a Grand Prix at Cannes (1964), and one in American literature at the turn of the century, the original *Konjaku* tale is probably the most impressive because of its grotesqueness in a compact form. Kobayashi Masaki's film version "The Black Hair" is excellent as a visual representation, and in visual terms revenge is generally more convenient than reconciliation, as the revenge scene makes a direct appeal to our senses. Hearn's retold story contains probably too much explanation and apology to be really forceful. However, precisely because Hearn was not a feminist, his story "The Reconciliation" represents very humanely the feminine qualities of Japanese womanhood. Hearn, as you probably know, is still very popular in Japan. Not only Japanese men but also Japanese women love his retold stories, because they feel in them a genuine conjugal affection, which outlives Lafcadio and Setsuko: love is stronger than death.

By contrast, we may point out that some excessive forms of Western feminism have as an underlying unconscious belief that hate is stronger than death. This is the reason why some feminists interpret Hearn's "Reconciliation" as a story of a revenge. Their interpretations suggest that the driving force of some feminists is resentment. We know that the resentment

of abandoned women is very strong, but I personally cannot accept any liberation movement, either political, social or sexual, so long as it is based on hate rather than love. How is it possible for us to like a piece of literary work whose dominant theme stresses that hate is stronger than death?

Now in order to better understand Hearn's "Reconciliation" let us consider the three afore-mentioned ghost-wife stories by the Chinese author Ch'ü Yu (1341-1427), by the Korean author Kim Si-sup (1435-1493) and by the Japanese author Ueda Akinari (1734-1809). As these stories have nothing to do with Hearn's story in terms of direct influence, we cannot make any influence studies, but we still can make some meaningful literary comparison, as they share the same theme. The three East Asian stories are summarized by Dominic Cheung as follows.

The Chinese "Story of Ai Ch'ing" (愛卿傳) is about a charming prostitute named Lo Ai-ai (羅愛愛) who is later married to a wealthy man Chao (趙). After becoming his wife, she was well behaved as a housewife. Chao soon was summoned to serve at an office away from home, and was detained for some years before he could finally return. In the meanwhile, Ai Ch'ing (= Lo Ai-ai) was forced to marry a local millionaire during a period of civil strife, but she refused and hanged herself. After Chao returned and learned of what had happened, he exhumed her corpse, weeping tremendously, and reburied her. A month later, his ghost wife appeared and spent the night with him. The next morning, she told Chao she had to leave and be reincarnated.

The Korean tale "Yi-saeng Looked Over the Fence" (李生窺牆傳) has a "happier" ending compared to the Chinese story, although it was written under the direct influence of the Chinese original. (The Korean tale was written in classical Chinese). Ch'oe (崔) was a maiden from a rich family who fell in love with Scholar Yi. They were later married after some difficulties with their families. When the red turban bandits seized the capital, Scholar Yi fled and his wife was captured. She refused to be molested by the bandits and was killed. When peace was finally restored, Yi came back to his house. Late at night, his ghost wife appeared before him. Although the scholar knew she was a ghost, he nevertheless loved her as a living person. They lived together for three years. One night, Ch'oe told her husband that their union in this world was coming to its end, and it was time for her to return to the Great Divide. Soon afterward, Scholar Yi too passed away.

We know that Korean culture has a distinctive, strongly self-assertive

identity of its own; however, in this case, in style and form, the Chinese and Korean stories closely shared the tradition of the classical romance. On the other hand, "The House Amid the Thickets" by Ueda Akinari is a bit different, since it is based more on the *Konjaku* tale than on the Chinese "Story of Ai Ch'ing." There is no deliberate display of the author's poetical talents in a rather artificial manner, which causes an irrevocable flaw in the previous two stories. In the Japanese tale Katsushiro was a good-for-nothing scoundrel who wanted to leave for Kyoto to make some profit as a merchant. His wife Miyagi told him not to go but he refused. After he finished his business and was on his way home, he was robbed. He returned to Kyoto again but this time he was stricken with illness. Fortunately, he was saved by his friend's father-in-law and he stayed in the old man's house for seven years. Meanwhile, Katsushiro's home village was ransacked by soldiers. When he returned to his village finally, he could barely recognize his house. His wife answered the door, and they both wept. The next day, Katsushiro awoke and found himself sleeping amidst the thickets. The site was actually not far away from the grave of his wife.

The emergence of the ghost story genre in Edo Japan owes much to the influx of the *Trimmed Lamp* 剪燈 tales and *Strange Tales from the Leisure Chamber* (聊齋志異), but to put too much stress on Chinese influence is to make the comparison too mechanical to be a real comparative study of literature. As Arthur Waley remarks,⁵ to try to affiliate the whole of Japanese literature to corresponding Chinese works is "a kind of learned game," and Waley does not think that "those parallels were meant to be taken very seriously." According to this eminent British orientalist, the fault is with some Sinophile Japanese scholars who, "more as a kind of learned game than as a result of any conviction" tried to find for every Japanese work a Chinese prototype. The fault seems, then, to lie with some Japanese comparativists, who have insisted so much on the similarities of East-Asian ghost-wife stories.

I know that there are some Chinese expressions in "The House Amid the Thickets" which the Japanese author Ueda Akinari borrowed from "The Story of Ai Ch'ing," but before ending I feel obliged to point out a decisive difference between the Japanese group of tales (the *Konjaku* tale, "The House Amid the Thickets," "The Reconciliation" and the film "The Black Hair") and the Chinese group of tales ("The Story of Ai Ch'ing" and "Yi-saeng Looked over the Fence"). In the Japanese group of tales what appears most unexpected is the awakening of the husband when he

finds that the wife he slept with was a ghost, while in the Chinese group the protagonists as well as the readers know already that their wives are ghosts. In my opinion that difference is critical, since I consider the final shock a *sine qua non* of a good short story. Literary artists should build up suspense in narrative, otherwise stories tend to be somewhat pointless.

About the psychology of ghost-wife story writers, I am of the same opinion with Dominic Cheung. The ghost wife is a projection of human subconscious struggling against the finitude of human life. Writers as well as readers wish that she may continue to live even after she dies. Whether it is the Chinese Ai, the Korean Ch'oe, the Japanese wife in the *Konjaku* tale, or the woman in Hearn's story, wives appear to respond to the longing of their dear husbands. Ai Ch'ing said most appropriately in the Chinese story, "I am touched by your longing for me. Even though I was far away in Hades, I was sad and mournful. This is why I want to appear before you tonight." Though not that explicit, the wife in Hearn's story "seemed as fair and young as in *his fondest memory of her*." and "she answered him with loving gentleness, *according to his heart's desire*." All these expressions suggest that the ghost wife appears to respond to the wish of the husband. The expressions suggest also the force which makes the impossible possible, the incredible credible, the force that breaks the limits of the finite span of life.

Biographically speaking, Lafcadio Hearn was separated from his dear Greek mother at the age of four, when his British father abandoned her. Hearn's longing for the Eternal Feminine starts from that traumatic separation. In many cases, Hearn's writing is an unconscious effort to turn the eternal separation into a reunion. Although an agnostic, Hearn was a man of religious character and aspired for something beyond the finitude of life. That is the reason why he liked dreams so much and why his ghost stories have such an enduring charm.

In the case of "The Reconciliation" the ghost wife is so gentle and attractive that it is impossible for me to imagine that she is vindictive. Traditional interpretations of other East Asian ghost-wife stories reconfirm that impression. Of course we can always try an innovative interpretation of a work of art. However, because of the reasons already mentioned, I personally cannot accept any feminist interpretation of Hearn's story, as I feel that love, not hate, is stronger than death.

Notes

1. See Dominic Cheung's article "The Ghost-Wife Theme in China, Japan and Korea" in *Tamkang Review*, Vol. XV, No. 1, 2, 3, 4, pp. 151-174.
2. Lafcadio Hearn: *Shadowings* (Toyko: Tuttle), p. 3.
3. As for the Japanese text of *Konjaku Monogatari* which Koizumi Setsuko read aloud for her husband, see Hirakawa's article "Onna wa hatashite wakai-shitaka" in *Hikaku Bungaku Kenkyu*, Vol. 47, (Tokyo: Asahi shuppan, 1985), pp. 94-108. The standard texts, given for example by Iwanami Koten Bungaku Taikei differ considerably from the above text.
4. See the English translation by Leon Zolbrod: *Ugetsu Monogatari: Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, (Tokyo: Tuttle).
5. See Arthur Waley's article "The Originality of Japanese Civilization" in Ivan Morris ed.: *Madly Singing in the Mountains - An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley* -, (George Allen & unwin: 1970), p. 333.