

張文達：我最喜歡狐狸精

## I'm All for Fox Fairies

By Zhang Wenda

Translated by D. E. Pollard

THERE ARE no men on earth, with the exception of those Stalin decried as "made of special metal", who do not like fox fairies. Hence the "I" in the title of this piece is not restricted to the sex-maniac Zhang Wenda, but includes all men.

If I were asked, would I make an exception of the hen-pecked husband and the guardian of the public's morals, I would answer, "no". And my reason would be that hen-pecked husbands are invariably obsessed with sex, only, being kept on a tight rein, they do not dare stray in word or deed. If the rein were relaxed or slipped altogether, then they would immediately break out and feed their appetites to the full. As to guardians of the public's morals, the majority of those are impostors. "I have never seen anyone love virtue as well as they love female beauty": this remark of Confucius is proof against a thousand arguments to the contrary, and is valid universally.

The biggest name in the fox fairies' hall of fame has got to be the Empress Daji. *The Investiture of the Gods* makes her out to be capable of any iniquity, a complete moral ruin, but actually this is unjust. First of all, this nine-tailed vixen had enjoyed a state of grace for a thousand years (without which she could not have changed into human form), and was perfectly properly cultivating her mind and body in her cave, as free and aloof as a floating cloud, when all of a sudden the Dark Empress of the Ninth Heaven, in order to settle a private score (King Zhou had made some saucy remarks to her statue in the temple, which might have been improper behaviour, but did not violate the Heavenly Commandments), ordered

*Zhang Wenda has been a journalist since 1954. He is a columnist who writes for a number of Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong. A volume of his zawen entitled Reflections 倒影 was published in 1986. This essay is collected in Xianggang zuojia zawen xuan.*

her to descend to the mundane world and chop off short the imperial reign of the house of Shang. Consequently, all that Daji did was at the behest of the Empress, and had her backing. Later on, when Daji's great task was accomplished, the Dark Empress of the Ninth Heaven not only did not reward her, on the contrary she turned nasty, and disclaimed responsibility, much to her discredit, I feel. The reason the Dark Empress gave for breaking faith was: "I ordered you to cut short the reign of King Zhou, I did not give you licence to be so wicked."

This statement of the Dark Empress makes no sense. It is like asking a woman to sell her favours and set up a monument to chastity at the same time. The truth is, the ability to do that kind of thing is unique to humans: in their leaps and shifts they can perform unpredictable turnabouts. A fox fairy might well have enjoyed a state of grace for a thousand years, but she would be a babe in arms in comparison.

As to Daji having got up to all kinds of wickedness, that is true, but for that King Zhou has to be held to account; and the fact that she was following the Dark Empress's orders only makes her the more blameless.

However, Daji is not included among the fox fairies I like—not because I do not go in for captivation and charm, but because I am not an emperor. An emperor has an emperor's lot, which is not available to others on demand.

The fox fairies I like are the ones familiar to all from the *Liaozhai zhiyi*\*, the grand man's precious daughters and the pretty damsels from humble homes. Yet another is the thousand year old fox in "The ancient mirror", the first story in *Romances of the Tang and Song*. When this fox was transformed into a beautiful woman, not only did she do no evil, she was sold from hand to hand by a lot of stinkers belonging to our earthly kind, until by chance her reflection was caught in the "ancient mirror", and she met her destiny. What I find most moving is the final scene. The lady asks for wine, gets drunk, starts to dance, and sings this song:

*Precious mirror, precious mirror, sad indeed has been my fate!  
Since I forsook my fox form I have been wife to a string of men.  
Though life has its pleasures, death does not dismay me.  
I have no call to love and linger, and cleave to this domain!*

When the song ended, she changed into a wizened fox, curled up on the ground, and died.

I like fox fairies the more because after they transform themselves into beautiful women, they generally keep themselves to themselves and lead a decent life; they conduct themselves like ladies, and would not dream of acting "liberated". Imagine the scene as in the light of flaming candles, the maid draws aside the curtains, and the young wife enters in all her dignity, what a sight for sore eyes! If as soon as she got into the room she stripped off to her birthday suit, and threw in the line, "I make this sacrifice for art's sake", I do not know how anyone could stomach that.

\*A famous collection of tales about ghosts, fox fairies and Taoist magic written by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 in the Qing dynasty. See *Renditions* No. 13, Spring 1980, for selected translations.

Material not available due to copyright  
restrictions.

BAY AND ISLAND OF HONG KONG  
Lithograph by Ciceri after a landscape by August Borget

Material not available due to copyright  
restrictions.

BAMBOO AQUEDUCT ON THE ISLAND OF HONG KONG  
Lithograph by Ciceri after a landscape by August Borget

Courtesy of Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Archives.