

A Song of Unending Sorrow

In ancient and medieval China, the composition of poetry was expected of all educated persons. It was in fact the universal language. Poetry could take on many themes from nature to personal relationships even to political commentary on historical events. The Song of Unending Sorrow a poem by PoZhu-i a poem concerning the events of the An Lu-Shan rebellion is an example of a poem which makes comment on a historical event. The poem itself is filled with poetic language which reflects the poet's opinion about the events in this time. In this lesson the students will be taught about the history surrounding this event (using Chinese paintings to illustrate the story, a primary source) read the poem (another primary source) in cooperative groups and then write found poems in their cooperative groups to be shared with the class. For closure, the students will be assigned a choice of a Bio poem, a Wanted poster, or a Memorial plaque to demonstrate their understanding of the lesson.

Historical Background:

Determined, shrewd, and dynamic, Xuan Zong, who ruled from 713-756, put the T'ang empire at the height of its territorial expansion and cultural brilliance. Unfortunately his infatuation for Yang Gui-fei (Precious Consort) and the malignant influence of the Yang family caused him to neglect the rule of the empire and ended in the An Lu -shan rebellion. Another poet, Du Fu, describes this malignant influence and the extravagance of the Yang family in the "Ballad of Beautiful Ladies," which describes a palace picnic in April 753:

...by the winding stream at Ch'ang-an
Lovely ladies walk, looking
Proudly ahead, then exchanging
Sweet and charming smiles with
Each other; faces so beautiful,
Perfect figures showing through silk
Draperies embroidered with
Golden peacocks or silver unicorns;
Their heads dressed in kingfisher
Colours, with hanging pendants of
Cut jade; on their backs little
Over-garments studded with pearls;
Amongst this galaxy the sisters
Of Yang Gui-fei, bearing great titles'
Dishes served include the purple meat
Of camel's hump, white slices of raw
Fish on crystal plate; yet these
Hardly satisfied jaded taste; all that

Has taken so much thought and work
To prepare, left hardly touched...
Important guests and their retinues
Crowd in; at last comes the greatest,
Nonchalantly, on his horse...

Prime Minister Yang is all powerful,
His slightest touch will burn;
Best to keep clear of him and his
Evil temper.

Yang Gui-fei (her name at that time was Yang Yu huan, meaning jade bracelet) was first married to one of Xuan Zong's sons in 736, at eighteen. As the legal wife of a prince, she was presented to the emperor the day after her wedding. Possibly the emperor, 51 years old, became infatuated with her then, but he didn't face the scandal of stealing his own son's wife until 741. At that time Yang Gui-fei repudiated her marriage vows and entered a Taoist nunnery, it is probable that she and the emperor became secret lovers during this time.

In 745, Xuan Zong formally gave the title Yang Gui-fei (meaning "Precious Consort") to Yang Gui-fei, and had his son marry another woman. At this time Xuan Zong, who had been a most conscientious ruler, began to neglect his duties. Fortified by the use of aphrodisiacs, he abandoned early audiences and dallied in bed with Yang Gui-fei, who is described by a biographer as a full-bosomed voluptuary. Music, dancing and feasting became the major preoccupations of the court and its ruler.

An Lu-shan, a general, had a special place in the court, personifying the cosmopolitan nature of the T'ang court. His father was a Sogdian from Bukhara, and his mother was Turkish. In spite of his non-Chinese background, An Lu-shan became one of the main commanders in the defending of T'ang borders against foreign "Barbarians."

From his headquarters in Yuchow (modern Peking) An Lu-shan made trips to the capital where he, as a man of great corpulence, assumed the role of buffoon. Per his request, he was adopted as the son of Yang Gui-fei on his 48th birthday. It has been said the emperor was amused by this, ignoring the rumors that Yang Gui-fei had become the general's mistress besides his mother.

While all of this excess and self-indulgence was taking place, the country side had a series of disasters. In the spring of 750, there was a severe drought. In the spring of 751, the grain fleet went up in flames going to Ch'ang-an and 200 ships were lost. In the same month, another fire destroyed 500,000 weapons in the capitol's main arsenal. In the summer, the empire suffered two great military defeats one in the northwest, and one in the south. In the autumn, the floods due to endless rains, caused great damage to Ch'ang-an. In Loyang there was a hurricane. In 753, more floods, and grain became very expensive, so the government had to release it's

reserves at reduced prices. In the autumn of 754 it was the same story, floods, rising grain prices and the government attempts to control this by selling its own store at artificially low prices. Du Fu, whose own son died of hunger a few weeks before the rebellion, expressed the anger of the people at the self-indulgent emperor and his court in this poem expressing his personal grief:

. . . but while
There comes the reek of wines
And meats, that rot inside the gates
Of these rich, the bones of the
Starving and cold are strewn along
The roadsides . . .

In December of 755, An Lu-shan led a rebellion and marched on the imperial forces. In early 756, he founded a new dynasty, the great Yan, from the ancient name for the Peking region. Meeting only weak resistance, in July 756 he seized the pass leading from the North China plain to Ch'ang-an, and Xuan Zong and his court including Yang Gui-fei fled the capital at night heading to Szechwan.

On the way to Szechwan, the troops mutinied, killed Yang Guo-Zhong (Yang Gui-fei's brother and the prime minister) and forced the emperor to have Yang Gui-fei strangled. Soon after, Xuan Zong abdicated and the crown prince took over. In the meantime, An Lu-shan captured Ch'ang-an, and executed any members of the royal family lingering in Ch'ang-an. He then looted the capital and sent the his ill gotten gains to his headquarters at Yuchow.

The great Yan dynasty did not last long, however, An Lu-shan was assassinated by his son. This son was in turn was killed by another rebel leader, and that rebel leader was then killed by his son. In time control of Ch'ang-an returned to the T'ang dynasty.

When, at last, Xuan Zong returned to the capital, he was seized by remorse and tried using a spiritualist to contact Yang Gui-fei. According to some sources he did contact her in the farthest end of the universe. According to the end of the poem,.Yang Gui-fei gave the spiritualist a half of a shell box and half of a gold hair ornament which the emperor knew had belonged to her as a token of her unending love.

"Our souls belong together," she said,
like this gold and this shell--
Somewhere sometime on earth or
in heaven, we shall surely meet."
And she sent him, by his messenger, a

sentence reminding him
Of vows which had been known only to
their two hearts:
"On the seventh day of the Seventh-
month, in the Palace of Long
life,
We told each other secretly in the quiet
midnight world
That we wished to fly in heaven, two
birds with the wings of one
And to grow together on the earth, two
branches of one tree."

Lesson Plans

First using overheads of the Chinese paintings which are included, tell the story of Xuan Zong and Yang Gui-fei.

In cooperative groups, have the students, read sections of the poem and create found poems from it, sharing them with the class after they have finished. For those students who are visual and kinesthetic learners, have the students use Chinese brushes and create an illustration of their part of the poem or put Chinese characters that they feel represent their portion of the poem on the large chart paper they use for their found poems.

As a follow up have the students choose one of the following activities as a homework assignment.

1. A bio-poem
2. A wanted poster
3. A memorial plaque

Script For Re-telling the Song Of Unending Sorrow

1. A painting of Xuan Zong who ruled China from 713-756 as a shrewd, determined, and dynamic souvenir. Sadly he lost his empire for love of a beautiful consort, who was originally his son's wife. (P. 17, The Forbidden City, Newsweek, New York, 1972)
2. A painting by Ch'ien Hsuan (1235-1301) copied after a Han Kan painting (8th century) of "Yang Gui-fei mounting a horse." She was originally a slim and delicate dancing girl, but at the time of her fame she was a "full bossomed voluptuary." Notice she needs help to get onto the horse. This caused the ideal of beauty to change and full figured women were then the ultimate in perfection. She so captivated the emperor that he gave up his governmental duties, and spent all his time dallying with her. A famous T'ang poet, Po Zhu-i, said, " If she but turned her head and smiled, then were

cast a hundred spells, and the powder and paint of the Six Palaces faded into nothing." Her hold over the emperor caused him to give increasing power to her family, and to become increasingly involved in the decadence of the court.(p. 16, The Forbidden City, Newsweek, New York, 1972)

3. A painting by Chan Hsuan (8th century) of "Lady Guo-Guo and her Sisters Setting Forth on an Outing." This is a picture of Yang Gui-fei's sisters and court ladies setting out on an outing. Read the first poem in the Historical Background, to illustrate the decadence of the court. During this time, the people in the empire experienced a growing number of disasters and were starving. Use the second poem in Historical Background to illustrate this point.(P. 101, Chinese Painting, James Cahill, World Publishing Co., Ohio, 1960)

3b.A hair ornament worn by T'ang women. The blue color is made of kingfisher feathers (note the allusion to this in the poem "Their heads dressed in kingfisher" line 9 in the first poem by DuFu) and pearls and semi-precious stones. (p. 188 Chinese Art)

4. A painting of "Huang's Journey to Shu;" because of the suffering of the populace and the growing influence of the Yang clan, a famous general, An Lu-shan, led a revolt declaring the founding of a new dynasty, the great Yan Dynasty after the ancient name for his headquarters, Peking. An Lu-shan met only weak resistance and when in July 756 his army seized the strategic pass leading from the North China plain to Cha'ang-an and forced Xuan Zong to flee the capital by night for Szechwan. On the flight, the emperor's troops revolted and murdered Yang Guo-chung, Yang Gui-fei's brother and the prime minister, and forced the emperor to have Yang Gui-fei strangled. Shortly afterwards, the heartbroken Xuan Zong abdicated in favor of the crown prince. (P. 28, 57, Chinese Painting, James Cahill, World Publishing Co., Ohio, 1960; p. 84, 85 Chinese Art, Mary Tregear, Thames & Hudson Ltd. London, 1985)

5. "The Tribute Horse" The riderless white horse in this painting is representative of Yang Gui-fei's execution and subsequent absence. At this tragic end of the romance, An Lu-shan's army captured Chang-an. The members of the royal family who had remained in the capital, were executed in horrible ways, and the capital's treasures seized and sent to An Lu-shan's headquarters in Yuchow. The Great Yan dynasty did not last long, An Lu-shan's son assassinated him, he was then killed by another rebel leader, who was then killed by his son. The revolution continued for the next ten years, and finally the T'ang returned to power.(p. 61, Chinese Painting, James Cahill, World Publishing Co., 1960)

6. Shen Chou " The Tomb of Yang Gui-fei" done in 1482 shows that centuries later this "great romance" was still a subject for inspiration. Xuan Zong tried a Taoist priest to contact Yang Kuei Gui's spirit, and finally the priest claimed to have contacted her in the farest reaches of the universe. He showed Xuan Zong a jade box and a gold hair ornament that had belonged to Yang Gui-fei to prove the contact had been made, saying that they had been sent to Xuan Zong by Yang Gui-fei.(p. Great Painters of China, Max Loehr, Harper & Row, New York, 1980

TWO POEMS BY TU FU

. . . by winding stream at Ch'ang-an
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Proudly ahead, then exchanging
Sweet and charming smiles with
Each other, faces so beautiful,
Perfect figures showing through silk
Draperies embroidered with
Golden peacocks or silver unicorns;
Their heads dressed in kingfisher
Colours, with hanging pendants of
Cut jade; on their blacks little
Over-garments studded with pearls;
Amongst this galaxy the sisters
Of Yang Gui-fei, bearing great titles'
Dishes served include the purple meat
Of camel's hump, white slices of raw
Fish on crystal plate; yet these
Hardly satisfied jaded taste; all that
Has taken so much thought and work
To prepare, left hardly touched . . .
Important guests and their retinues
Crowd in; at last comes the greatest,
Nonchalantly , on his horse . . .
Prime Minister Yang is all powerful,
His slightest touch will burn:
Best to keep clear of him and his
Evil temper.

. . . but while
There comes the reek of wines
and meats, that rot inside the gates
Of these rich, bones of the
Starving and cold are strewn along
The roadsides . . .