

Buying Books

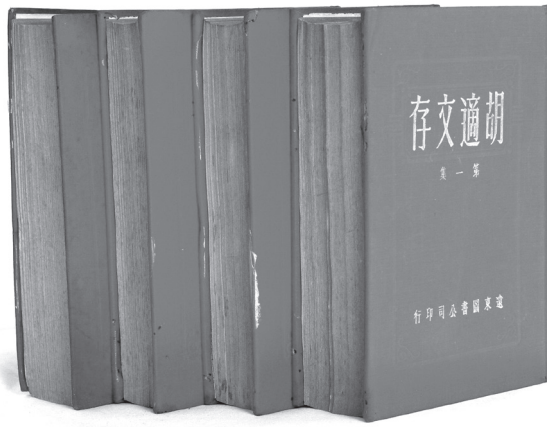
A new book is like a newlywed,
Tender caresses till night has fled.
Gazing upon her lustrous look of jade,
Oblivious that my hair has greyed.

Paraphrase

- L1: The joy of buying a new book is like the joy of a newlywed.
L2: To lovingly turn the pages is like the tender caresses throughout the night.
L3: Sitting face to face, gazing upon her lustrous look of jade,
L4: The hours and years would pass timelessly by, oblivious that the head of hair, that was once jet-black, has faded into grey.

Background

This short poem of only four lines was written in June 1959 at the same time as the poem in Chapter 15 “Buying Books to Celebrate My Birthday, Ji-Hai Year 己亥初度买书自寿”. On Father’s 65th birthday, Peter had sent him a birthday gift of five Australian pounds. Father used the gift to buy two sets of books, *Collected Works of Hu Shi* 《胡适文存》 and *Analects of Chinese Literature* 《中国文学史论集》. So delighted was he with



Collected Works of Hu Shi 《胡适文存》, first of two sets of books bought in May 1959 by Qing Shan for his birthday on 12 June in that year, with the birthday gift of money from his son Peter (敏良), studying in Australia.



Inscribed in the book is Qing Shan's delightful poem on the joy of "Buying Books", in the calligraphy of his younger brother-in-law Guang Guo (光国).

the books that he composed this short poem and asked Uncle Guang Guo (Mother's fourth younger brother) to write it in his calligraphy on the inside cover of the first volume of Hu Shi's works. The calligraphy is beautifully written. These sets of books are still in our possession. Father died a year later on 6 June 1960 at the age of 66. We are happy he derived so much joy from his books. Even a birthday gift of just a small sum of money could bring so much happiness.

Appreciation

Although consisting of only four lines, the poem is easy to read and understand. It is said that a good poem, like a good tune, will always have one or two lines that are so “catchy” that no one can miss them and which will be easy to remember. They are what we might call “quotable quotes”.

All four lines of this poem are in fact “quotable quotes”. We two brothers are extremely fond of buying books ourselves and sometimes visit bookshops together. As we rush out of the bookshop and impatiently make our way home to read them, we would find ourselves instinctively quoting to each other the first two lines, “A new book is like a newlywed, Tender caresses till night has fled”. Similarly if we see a starry-eyed couple lost in each other’s gaze, you will find us quoting the last two lines of the poem, “Gazing upon her lustrous look of jade, Oblivious that my hair has greyed”. There is fun indeed in poetry.

There is passion too in poetry. The analogy between the excitement of a new book and a newlywed may cause some eyebrows to be raised among the more prudish of readers. For the less prudish, this is a rather clever and even pleasurable analogy. Not everyone would think any less of Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (317–420) when he wrote his love poem “Ode to A Fantasy of Love 闲情赋” in which he fantasized how he longed to be close to his love. Two pairs of the more sensual lines from Tao Yuanming’s poem are quoted as an illustration:

愿在衣而为领 I’d love to be the collar of her dress,
承华首之余芳 To breathe in the lingering fragrance in her
tress...

愿在裳而为带 I’d love to be the sash encircling her gown,
束窈窕之纤身 To tightly clasp her dainty waist around...