

The Seeing Stick

A Note about Hwei Ming's Name

To the Chinese there are two approaches to names. First there is a familiar name, like a nickname, which is blunt, even cruel to the ears of an outsider: Fat Chang. Blind Lee.

A poetic name, however, is also given at birth by scholars or wise relatives.

The poetic name always has an optimistic note to it, for the Chinese believe that, no matter how bad a person's condition, there is hope for the future.

Hwei, the lightless moon on the last day of the month

Ming, becoming luminous

So Hwei Ming was the poetic name chosen by her parents for the blind princess, a darkened moon, with the hope of becoming bright and full in the future.



Once in the ancient walled citadel of Peking there lived an emperor who had only one daughter, and her name was Hwei Ming.

Now this daughter had carved ivory combs to smooth back her long black hair. Her tiny feet were encased in embroidered slippers, and her robes were woven of the finest silks. But

rather than making her happy, such possessions made her sad. For Hwei Ming was blind, and all the beautiful handcrafts in the kingdom brought her no pleasure at all.

Her father was also sad that his only daughter was blind, but he could not cry for her. He was the emperor after all, and had given up weeping over such things when he ascended the throne. Yet still he had hope that one day Hwei Ming might be able to see. So he resolved that if someone could help her, such a person would be rewarded with a fortune in jewels.

He sent word of his offer to the inner and outer cities of Peking and to all the towns and villages for hundreds of miles around.



Monks came, of course, with their prayers and prayer wheels, for they thought in this way to help Hwei Ming see. Magician-priests came, of course, with their incantations and spells, for they thought in this way to help Hwei Ming see. Physicians came, of course, with their potions and pins, for they thought in this way to help Hwei Ming see. But nothing could help.

Hwei Ming had been blind from the day of her birth, and no one could effect a cure.

Now one day an old man, who lived far away in the south country, heard tales of the blind princess. He heard of the emperor's offer. And so he took his few possessions—a long

walking stick, made from a single piece of golden wood, and his whittling knife—and started up the road.

The sun rose hot on his right side and the sun set cool on his left as he made his way north to Peking to help the princess see.



At last the old man, his clothes tattered by his travels, stopped by the gate of the Outer City.

The guards at the gate did not want to let such a ragged old man in.

“Grandfather, go home. There is nothing here for such as you,” they said.

The old man touched their faces in turn with his rough fingers.

“So young,” he said, “and already so old.”

He turned as if to go. Then he propped his walking stick against his side and reached into his shirt for his whittling knife.

“What are you doing, grandfather?” called out one of the guards when he saw the old man bring out the knife.

“I am going to show you my stick,” said the old man. “For it is a stick that sees.”

“Grandfather, that is nonsense,” said the second guard. “That stick can see no farther than can the emperor’s daughter.”

“Just so, just so,” said the old man. “But stranger things have happened.”

And so saying, he picked up the stick and stropped the knife blade back and forth three times to sharpen its edge.

As the guards watched from the gate in the wall, the old man told them how he had walked the many miles through villages and towns till he came with his seeing stick to the walls of Peking.

And as he told them his tale, he pointed to the pictures in the stick: an old man, his home, the long walk, the walls of Peking. And as they watched further, he began to cut their portraits into the wood. The two guards looked at each other in amazement and delight. They were flattered at their likenesses on the old man’s stick. Indeed, they had never witnessed such carving skill.



“Surely this is something the guards at the wall of the Inner City should see,” they said.

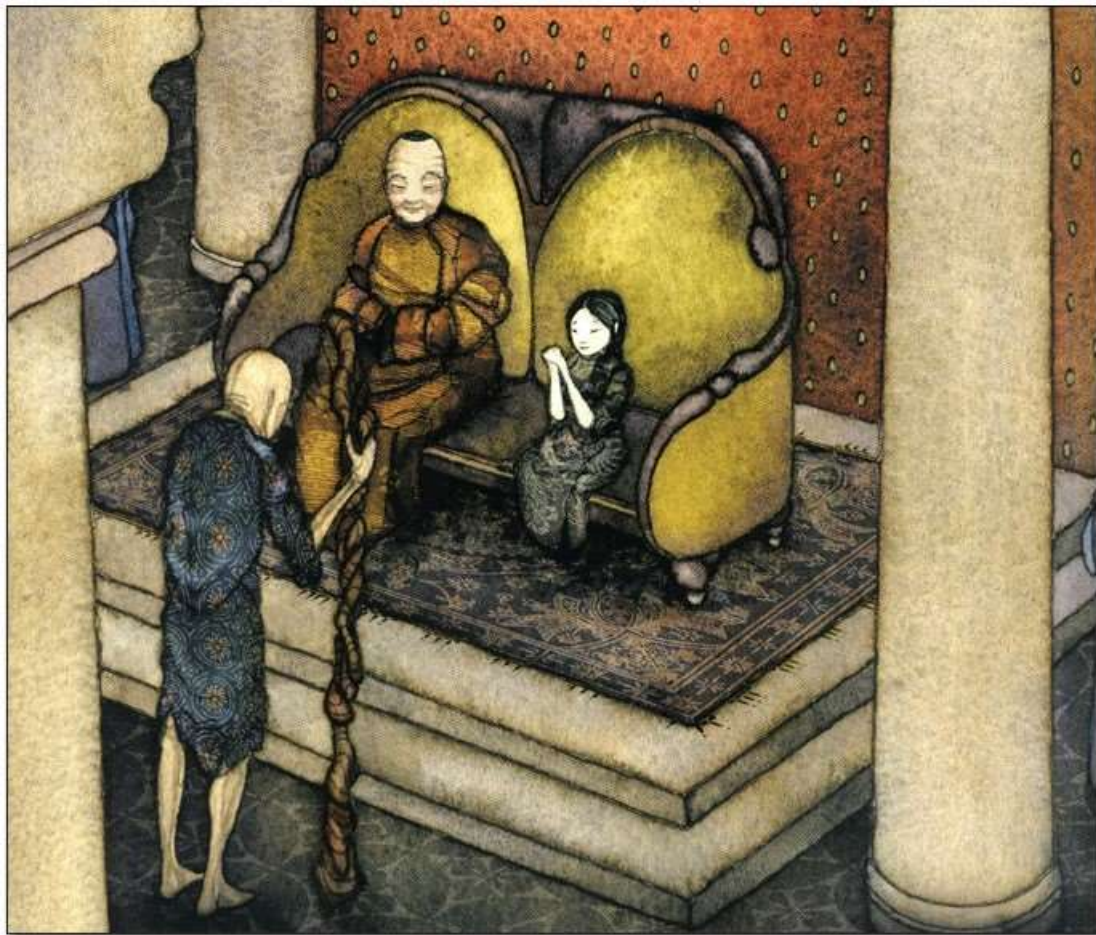
So, taking the old man by the arm, they guided him through the streets of the Outer

City, past flower peddlers and rice sellers, past silk weavers and jewel merchants, up to the great stone walls.

When the guards of the Inner City saw the seeing stick, they were very surprised and delighted.

“Carve our faces, too,” they begged like children. And laughing, and touching their faces as any fond grandfather would, the old man did as they bid.

In no time at all, the guards of the Inner City took the old man by his arm and led him to the wall of the Innermost City and in through the gate to the great wooden doors of the Imperial Palace.



Now when the guards arrived in the throne room of the Imperial Palace leading the old man by the arm, it happened that the emperor’s blind daughter, Hwei Ming, was sitting by his side, her hands clasped before her, silent, sightless, and still.

As the guards finished telling of the wonderful pictures carved on the golden stick, the princess clapped her hands. “Oh, I wish I could see that wondrous stick,” she said.



“Just so, just so,” said the old man. “And I will show it to you. For it is no ordinary piece of wood, but a stick that sees.”

“What nonsense,” said her father in a voice so low it was almost a growl.

But the princess did not hear him. She had already bent toward the sound of the old man’s voice.

“A seeing stick?”

The old man did not say anything for a moment. Then he leaned forward and petted Hwei Ming’s head and caressed her cheek. For though she was a princess, she was still a child.

Then the old man began to tell again the story of his long journey to Peking. He introduced each character and object—the old man, the guards, the great walls, the Innermost City. And then he carved the wooden doors, the Imperial Palace, the princess, into the golden wood.

When he finished, the old man reached out for the princess’ small hands. He took her tiny fingers in his and placed them on the stick. Finger on finger, he helped her trace the likenesses.

“Feel the long flowing hair of the princess,” the old man said. “Grown as she herself has grown, straight and true.”

And Hwei Ming touched the carved stick.

“Now feel your own long hair,” he said.

And she did.

“Feel the lines in the old man’s face,” he said. “From years of worry and years of joy.”



He thrust the stick into her hands again. And the princess' slim fingers felt the carved stick.

Then he put her fingers onto his face and traced the same lines there.

It was the first time the princess had touched another person's face since she was a very small girl. The princess jumped up from her throne and thrust her hands before her.



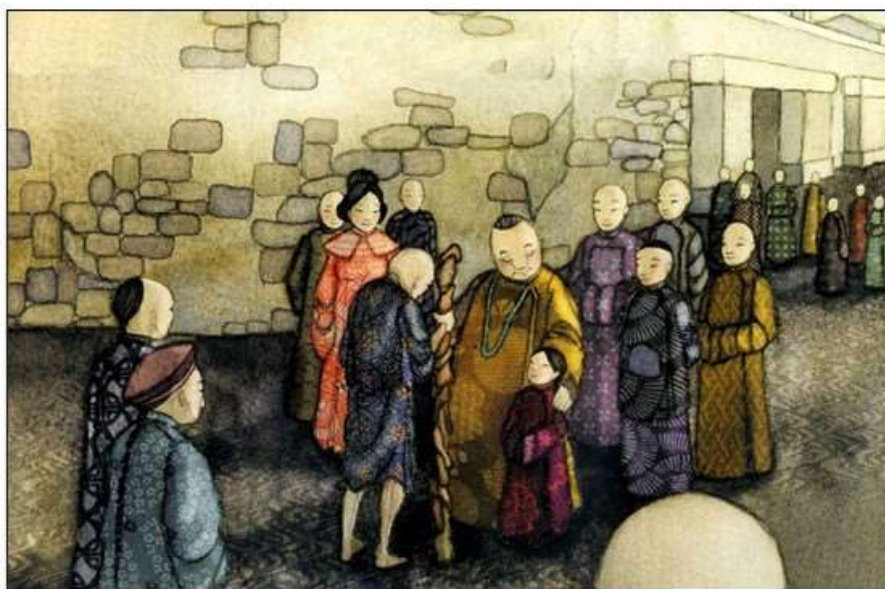
“Guards, O guards,” she cried out. “Come here to me.”

And the guards lifted up their faces to the Princess Hwei Ming's hands. Her fingers, like little breezes, brushed their eyes and noses and mouths, and then found each one on the carved stick.

Hwei Ming turned to her father, the emperor, who sat straight and tall and unmoving on his great throne. She reached out and her fingers ran eagerly through his hair and down his nose and cheek and rested curiously on a tear they found there. And that was strange, indeed, for had not the emperor given up crying over such things when he ascended the throne?



They brought her through the streets of the city, then, the emperor in the lead. And Princess Hwei Ming touched men and women and children as they passed. Till at last she stood before the great walls of Peking and felt the stones themselves.



Then she turned to the old man. Her voice was bright and full of laughter. “Tell me another tale,” she said.

“Tomorrow, if you wish,” he replied.



For each tomorrow as long as he lived, the old man dwelt in the Innermost City, where only the royal family stays. The emperor rewarded him with a fortune in jewels, but the old man gave them all away.

Every day he told the princess a story. Some were tales as ancient as the city itself. Some were as new as the events of the day. And each time he carved wonderful images in the stick of golden wood.

As the princess listened, she grew eyes on the tips of her fingers. At least that is what she told the other blind children whom she taught to see as she saw.

Certainly it was as true as saying she had a seeing stick.

But the blind Princess Hwei Ming believed that both things were true.

And so did all the blind children in her city of Peking.

And so did the blind old man.