

班固：漢書外戚傳

Two Imperial Ladies of Han

By Pan Ku (A.D. 32-92)

Translated by Burton Watson

佳與寧再一絕北
人傾不笑笑世方
難國知傾傾而有
再 傾人人獨佳
得 城國城立人

I Madam Li, Concubine of Emperor Wu

MADAM LI, a concubine of Emperor Wu the Filial, originally entered service in the palace as an entertainer. Her elder brother Li Yen-nien, who had an innate understanding of music, was skilled at singing and dancing and Emperor Wu took a great liking to him. Whenever he presented some new song or musical composition, there were none among his listeners who were not moved to admiration. Once when he was attending the emperor, he rose from his place to dance and sing this song:

Beautiful lady in a northern land,
Standing alone, none in the world like her,
a single glance and she upsets a city,
a second glance, she upsets the state!
Not that I don't know she upsets states and cities,
but one so lovely you'll never find again!

The emperor sighed and said, "Splendid! — but I doubt there's anyone that beautiful in the world." The emperor's elder sister Princess P'ing-yang then informed him that Li Yen-nien had a little sister, and he forthwith had her summoned and brought before him. She was in fact strikingly beautiful and skilled at dancing as well, and because of this she won his favour.

She bore him a son, known posthumously as King Ai of Ch'ang-i, but died shortly after at a very young age. The emperor, filled with grief and longing, had a portrait of her painted at the Palace of Sweet Springs. Later, Empress Wei Ssu was removed from the position of empress, and four years later, when Emperor Wu passed away, the general in chief Ho Kuang, following what he knew to have been the emperor's wishes, had sacrifices performed to Madam Li in the emperor's mortuary temple as though she had been his official consort, posthumously honouring her with the title "Empress of Emperor Wu the Filial."

EARLIER, when Madam Li lay critically ill, the emperor came in person to inquire how she was, but she pulled the covers over her face and, apologizing, said, "I have been sick in bed for a long time and my face is thin and wasted. I cannot let Your Majesty see me, though I hope you will be good enough to look after my son the king and my brothers."

"I know you've been very sick, and the time may come when you never rise again," said the emperor. "Wouldn't you feel better if you saw me once more and asked me face to face to take care of the king and your brothers?"

"A woman should not appear before her lord or her father when her face is not properly made up," she said. "I would not dare let Your Majesty see me in this state of disarray."

"Just let me have one glimpse of you!" said the emperor. "I'll reward you with a thousand pieces of gold and assign your brothers to high office!"

But Madam Li replied, "It is up to Your Majesty to assign offices as you please — it does not depend on one glimpse of me."

When the emperor continued to insist on one last look at her, Madam Li, sobbing, turned her face toward the wall and would not speak again. The emperor rose from his seat in displeasure and left.

Madam Li's sisters berated her, saying, "Why couldn't you let him have one look at you and entreat him face to face to take care of your brothers! Why should you anger him like this!"

"The reason I didn't want the emperor to see me," she said, "was so I could make certain he would look after my brothers! It was because he liked my looks that I was able to rise from a lowly position and enjoy the love and favour of the ruler. But if one has been taken into service because of one's beauty, then when beauty fades, love will wane, and when love wanes, kindness will be forgotten. The emperor thinks fondly and tenderly of me because he remembers the way I used to look. Now if he were to see me thin and wasted, with all the old beauty gone from my face, he would be filled with loathing and disgust and would do his best to put me out of his mind. Then what hope would there be that he would ever think kindly of me again and remember to take pity on my brothers?"

WHEN Madam Li died, the emperor had her buried with the honors appropriate to an empress. After that, he enfeoffed her eldest brother Li Kuang-li, the Sutrishna general, as marquis of Hai-hsi, and appointed her brother Li Yen-nien as a chief commandant with the title "Harmonizer of the Tones."

The emperor continued to think longingly of Madam Li and could not forget her. A magician from Ch'i named Shao-weng, announcing that he had the power to summon spirits, one night lit torches, placed curtains around them, and laid out offerings of wine and meat. He then had the emperor take his place behind another curtain and observe the proceedings from a distance. The emperor could see a beautiful lady who assembled Madam Li circling within the curtains, sitting down and then rising to walk again. But he could not move closer to get a good look and, stirred more than ever to thoughts of sadness, he composed this poem:

Is it she?
is it not?
I stand gazing from afar:

The two excerpts that form this article are taken from Chapter 97 of the Han shu (History of the Former Han) by Pan Ku. This chapter, entitled "Accounts of the Families Related to the Emperors by Marriage," contains biographies of the Han imperial consorts and concubines. The selections presented here deal with Madam Li, concubine of Emperor Wu the Filial (r. 140-87 B.C.), and Lady Pan, concubine of Emperor Ch'eng the Filial (r. 32-7 B.C.). Both women are famous in the history of Chinese literature, the former for the poetry she inspired, the latter for the poetry she wrote. In his Chinese Rhyme-prose (Columbia University Press 1971), Burton Watson has presented translations of some of the more grandiose and public works in the fu (賦) or rhyme-prose form dating from the early period. Here the reader will encounter two renowned examples of the form used for a more intimate expression of bereavement and personal sorrow. These excerpts are part of a volume of translations from the lieh-chuan (列傳) or Biographies section of the Han shu, scheduled for publication sometime in 1974.

timid steps, soft and slow,
how long she is in coming!

He then ordered the experts of the Music Bureau to devise a string accompaniment and make it into a song.

He also composed a work in *fu* or rhyme-prose form to express his grief at the loss of Madam Li; it read as follows:

Beauty soft and yielding, matchless grace,
A life cut off forever, to thrive no more —
We decked the new temple, waited to greet you,¹
But firmly you declined to return to your old home.
Grieving in the thicket, rank and weed grown,
Hiding in a dark place, harbouring your pain,
You left your horse and carriage at the crest of the hill,
To tarry in that long night that knows no dawn.
Autumn's breath is sad and sharp with chill,
The limbs of the cassia fall and fade away.
Your spirit, lonely, pines for those far off,
Your soul wanders restless to the borders and beyond.
Consigned to sunken darkness for long ages to come,
I pity these lush flowers cut off half way;
Reflecting that for all time you'll return no more,
I recall how you came and went in beauty's prime,
Petals clustered about a center, unfurled to wait the wind,
Blossoms heaped and jumbled in increasing radiance,
Shining serenely, elegantly fair,
Pleasing in gentleness, yet more grave than before.
At leisure, unconstrained, you leaned against a column,
Lifted moth eyebrows, cast your glance around the room.

¹ According to commentators, the "new temple" is the curtained area rigged by the magician to summon the dead woman's spirit. As will be seen, the poem shifts restlessly back and forth between descriptions of Madam Li herself and metaphors of blooming or fallen flowers.

But when you'd roused my heart to follow after,
 You hid your rosy face and shone no more.
 Forced to part after intimate joys,
 At night I start from dreams, dazed and lost.
 So sudden that change from which you'll never return,
 Your soul set free to fly far off;
 In such perplexity your sacred spirit,
 Roaming in grief and consternation;
 But the days are many since you took to that road,
 And in the end, hesitant, you said goodbye,
 Traveling ever westward, quickly out of sight.
 I am sunk in longing, silent and dumb,
 With thoughts that surge like waves, and pain in my heart.

Reprise:

Beauty wreathed in splendor,
 A crimson flower fell.
 (Those other jealous wretches,
 How could they compare?)
 In days of greatest glory,
 Cut off before your time!
 Your son and brothers sobbing,
 Bathed in tears of woe,
 Wailing, lamenting,
 Unable to cease their cries,
 But such cries must go unanswered —
 Let there be an end!
 Thin and worn with sighing,
 You grieved for the future of your little boy,
 And though sorrow left you speechless,
 You trusted to the favour you had once known.
 No vows are needed among good men,
 Much less between those who love!
 Though you're gone and will never return,
 I repeat once more my pledge to be true!
 You left the sunny brightness,
 Went to realms of dark,
 And though you descended to our new temple,
 You come no more to the gardens of old.
 Ah, alas,
 I dream of your soul!

LATER, Li Yen-nien and his younger brother Li Chi were tried on charges of immoral behaviour with the women of the palace, and Li Kuang-li, the eldest brother, surrendered to the Hsiung-nu. As a result, all the members of the Li family were put to death.

II The Beautiful Companion Pan

THE BEAUTIFUL Companion Pan was a concubine of Emperor Ch'eng the Filial. When the emperor first came to the throne (32 B.C.), she was selected to enter the women's quarters. At first she held the rank of Young Attendant, but she very quickly won great favour with the ruler and was advanced to the rank of Beautiful Companion, taking up residence in the Tseng-ch'eng Lodge. She twice moved to other quarters because of pregnancy, but though she bore a son in each case, both died a few months after birth.

Once Emperor Ch'eng was amusing himself in the women's quarters and invited Lady Pan to ride with him in his hand-drawn cart, but she declined, saying, "In the paintings of ancient times one always sees the sage rulers with eminent ministers by their side; only the last rulers of the Three Dynasties, the men who brought destruction to their lines, have their women favourites beside them. Now if you invite me to share your cart, will you not appear to resemble the latter?"

The emperor, impressed with her words, abandoned the idea. When his mother the empress dowager heard of the incident, she was pleased and said, "In ancient times it was Lady Fan, nowadays it's the Beautiful Companion Pan!"¹

Lady Pan was thoroughly versed in the *Odes* and other works such as "The Modest Maiden," "Emblems of Virtue," and "The Instructress."² Whenever she was summoned to an interview or communicated with anyone by letter, she always followed the dictates of old-time ritual.

FROM THE *hung-chia* period on (20-17 B.C.), the emperor took an increasing interest in his ladies in waiting. Lady Pan recommended to him an attendant of hers named Li P'ing, who won favour with the emperor and was promoted to the rank of Beautiful Companion. The emperor said, "In earlier times Empress Wei also rose from humble origin to a place of honour," and he accordingly bestowed upon Li P'ing the surname Wei, so that she became known as the Beautiful Companion Wei³ Later Chao Fei-yen and her younger sister likewise rose to prominence from humble beginnings, but they overstepped all the bounds of ritual and regulation and in time came to outshine all their predecessors. Lady Pan and Empress Hsu both lost favour with the emperor and were seldom summoned into his presence.

In the third year of *hung-chia* (18 B.C.) Chao Fei-yen slanderously accused Empress Hsü and Lady Pan of resorting to sorcery to win favour, attempting to put a curse on the other women of the palace, and extending their imprecations even to the person of the ruler. As a result of the charges, Empress Hsü was removed from her position. When Lady Pan was cross-examined by the law officials, she replied, "I have heard that life and death are decreed by Fate, and wealth and eminence are decided by Heaven.⁴ Even when one follows correct behaviour he cannot be certain of good fortune, so what could he hope for by committing evil? If the gods have understanding, then they will not listen to the pleas of a disloyal subject; and if they have no understanding, what good would it do to offer pleas to them? Therefore I would never resort to such actions!"

¹ Because the king of Ch'u in ancient times was excessively fond of hunting, his concubine Lady Fan refused to eat meat as a form of protest. Lady Pan has shown herself to be a similar model of behaviour in correcting the faults of her lord.

² Commentators identify these as works on correct behaviour; the translations of the titles are tentative.

³ Empress Wei, the consort of Emperor Wu, began her career as a dancing girl.

⁴ Lady Pan is quoting from *Analects* XII, 5.

The emperor, impressed with her answer, took pity on her and awarded her a gift of a hundred catties of gold. But the Chao sisters continued in their arrogant and jealous ways and Lady Pan, fearful that before long she would meet with disaster, asked to be allowed to wait upon the empress dowager in the Palace of Lasting Trust. The emperor gave his permission and she accordingly retired from court and took up residence in the eastern palace, the Palace of Lasting Trust. There she composed a poem in *fu* or rhyme-prose form giving vent to her sadness; it read:

Virtue of ancestors handed down
 Bestowed on me precious life as a human being,
 Allowed me, humble creature, to ascend to the palace,
 To fill a lower rank in the women's quarters.
 I enjoyed the holy sovereign's most generous grace,
 Basked in the radiance of sun and moon.
 Burning rays of redness shone on me,
 I was granted highest favour in the Tseng-ch'eng Lodge.
 Already receiving blessings beyond what I deserved,
 I yet ventured to hope for more happy times,
 Sighing repeatedly, waking or asleep,
 Undoing my girdle strings with thoughts of the past.¹
 I spread out paintings of women, made them my mirror,
 Looked to my instructress, queried her on the *Odes*;
 I was moved by the warning of the woman who crows,
 Pained at the sins of the lovely Pao-ssu;
 I praised Huang and Ying, wives to the lord of Yü,
 Admired Jen and Ssu, mothers of Chou.²
 Though I'm foolish and uncouth, no match for these,
 Would I dare turn my thoughts away, let them be forgotten?
 The years pass in sorrow and apprehension;
 I grieve for lush flowers that no longer flourish,³
 Weep for the Yang-lu Hall, Hall of the Wild Mulberry,
 Babies in swaddling clothes who met with woe.⁴
 Surely it was due to no error of mine!
 Heaven's decrees — can they never be changed?
 Before I knew it, the bright sun had veiled its light,
 Leaving me in the dusk of evening,
 But still the ruler's kindness sustains and shelters me;

¹ When a girl was about to be married, her father fastened the strings of her girdle and gave her words of instruction and warning; Lady Pan is recalling that time.

² A hen that crows at dawn in place of the rooster is an ancient symbol for a domineering woman; the specific reference here is to Ta-chi, concubine of the evil last ruler of the Shang dynasty. The beautiful but treacherous Pao-ssu brought about the downfall of King Yu of the Chou. O-huang and Nü-ying were daughters of the sage ruler Yao; he gave them in marriage to his successor to the throne Shun, the lord of Yü. T'ai-jen and T'ai-ssu were the mothers of kings Wen and Wu respectively, the founders of the Chou dynasty. Most of these women are mentioned in the *Book of Odes* and were no doubt depicted in the paintings that Lady Pan was perusing for her instruction.

³ The flowers are her own fading youth and beauty.

⁴ The halls are the places where she bore her two sons.

In spite of faults, I have not been cast off.
 I serve the empress dowager in her eastern palace,
 Take my place among lesser maids in the Palace of Lasting Trust;
 I help to sprinkle and sweep among the curtains,
 And shall do so till death brings my term to a close.
 Then may my bones find rest at the foot of the hill,
 A little shade of pine and cypress left over for my grave.

Recapitulation:

Hidden in the black palace, gloomy and chill,
 Main gates bolted, gates to inner quarters barred,
 Dust in the painted hall, moss on marble stairs,
 Courtyards rank with green grass growing,
 Spacious rooms shadowy, curtains dark,
 Chamber windows gaping, wind sharp and cold,
 Blowing my skirts, stirring their crimson gauze,
 Flapping, rustling them, making the silk sound.
 My spirit roams far off to places secret and still;
 Since my lord departed, who finds joy in me?
 I look down at red flagstones, remembering how he trod them,
 Look up at cloudy rafters, two streams of tears flowing;
 Then I turn to left and right, my expression softening,
 Dip the winged wine cup to banish care.
 I reflect that man, born into this world,
 Passes as swiftly as though floating on a stream.
 Already I've known fame and eminence,
 The finest gifts the living can enjoy.
 I will strive to please my spirit, taste every delight,
 Since true happiness cannot be counted on.
 "Green Robe" – "White Flower" – in ancient times as now.¹

WHEN Emperor Ch'eng passed away (7 B.C.), Lady Pan was assigned to tend his grave and funerary park, and when she herself passed away, she was buried there in the funerary park.

(For Chinese text see page 126)

¹ The song in the *Book of Odes* entitled "Green Robe," Mao #27, is said to describe a wife whose place has been usurped by concubines; "White Flower," Mao #229, is traditionally interpreted as censuring King Yu of the Chou for putting aside his consort Queen Shen in favour of the evil Pao-szu. Lady Pan compares herself to these unfortunate women of antiquity. Though Pan Ku does not mention it here, in ch. 100, the chapter devoted to the history of his own family, he reveals that Lady Pan was his father's aunt.

Lady Pan (1st century B.C.)

A SONG OF GRIEF

I took a piece of the fine cloth of Ch'i,
White silk glowing and pure like frosted snow,
And made you a doubled fan of union and joy,
As flawlessly round as the bright moon.
It comes and goes in my Lord's sleeves.
You can wave it and start a cooling breeze.
But I am always afraid that when Autumn comes,
And the cold blasts drive away the heat,
You will store it away in a bamboo case,
And your love of it will stop midway

棄常出裁新
捐恐入成裂
篋秋懷合齊班
筍節君歡紈婕
中至裙扇素好
恩涼動團皎怨
情颯搖團潔歌
中奪微似如行
道炎風明霜
絕熱發月雪

*From THE ORCHID BOAT: Women Poets of China
by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung. English translation
Copyright © 1972 by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling
Chung. Used with permission of McGraw-Hill Book
Company.*