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The Life and Writings of Xu Hui (627–650), Worthy Consort, at the Early Tang Court

Among the women poets of the Tang dynasty (618–907) surely the best known are Xue Tao 薛濤 (770–832), the literate geisha from Shu 蜀, and the volatile, sometime Daoist priestess Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (ca. 844–870?). More interesting strictly as a poet than these two figures are Li Ye 李冶 who was active during the late-eighth century and whose eighteen remaining poems show more range and skill than either Xue Tao or Yu Xuanji, and the “Lady of the Flower Stamens” (“Huarui furen” 花蕊夫人) whose 157 heptametric quatrains in the “palace” style occupy all of *juan* 798 in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, even though she lived in the mid-tenth century and served at the court of the short-lived kingdom of Later Shu 後蜀.¹ Far more influential in her day than any of these, though barely two dozen of her poems are now preserved, was the elegant Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉兒 (ca. 664–710), granddaughter of the executed courtier and poet Shangguan Yi 上官儀 (?–665) who had paid the ultimate price for opposing empress Wu Zhao's 吳曷 (625–705) usurpation of imperial privileges.² After the execution of Shangguan Yi and other members of his family, Wan'er, then just an infant, was taken into the court as a sort of expiation by empress Wu.³ By the end

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¹ Her extant works greatly outnumber those of any woman prior to her times, doubtless owing something to the increasingly widespread development of private libraries, as well as the advent of printing, under the following Song dynasty.

² Note that the date of 664 given in all reference works as the year of Shangguan Yi's death is wrong. He was executed on the *bingxu* day of the twelfth month of the first year of the Linde 麟德 reign-period, which is equivalent to January 3, 665. Since *most* of Linde 1 overlaps with 664 AD, the earlier year has been commonly given – and perpetuated – as that of his death. It may seem a small matter, but no doubt those extra three days were important to Shangguan Yi.

³ To indicate her status as member of a disgraced family, her face was marked with the tattoo of a slave or criminal.

of the seventh century and beginning of the eighth, she had become the empress's private secretary and, after the deposition of the empress, would later become the chief arbiter of court poetry competitions during the equally distaff-dominated reign of Zhongzong 中宗 (705–710).

However, the first of all women poets of the Tang, an individual scarcely even noted in traditional literary history but no less impressive than her now better-known successors, was the young lady known as Xu Hui 徐惠.⁴ She is the only one of the thirty-plus “empresses and consorts” (*hou fei* 后妃) given biographies in the official Tang histories to have any of her own writings quoted there. Indeed, she is portrayed with the tropes normally used to describe a Tang literatus rather than a consort: instead of her appearance which is not remarked at all, it is her literary ability on which the official records focus. Daughter of a minor literatus named Xu Xiaode 徐孝德, she was born in 627 in Huzhou 湖州 (present-day Wuxing 吳興 district, just south of Lake Tai in northern Zhejiang).⁵ Li Shimin 李世民 (better known by his temple-name of Taizong 太宗) had acceded to the throne in September of the preceding year, relegating his father, the founding emperor of Tang, to emeritus status. Xu Hui's brief life was to be exactly coterminous with the Zhenguan 貞觀 reign-period (627–50) of Taizong, just as she herself was to become bound to the imperial presence. In the year she was born, other historical events of note included the departure of the young, then unknown Buddhist monk Xuanzang 玄奘 to India in search of authentic scriptures and Shangguan Yi's passing of the *jinsi* 進士 examination (though the *jinsi* was not then the prestigious and difficult test it would become later in the century).

Xu Hui was an infant prodigy, then a child sensation. We are told that she began to speak when only four months old and that by the time she was three years of age she could recite the *Analects* and the *Book of Odes*. If true, this surpasses even John Stuart Mill's remarkable precocity. At seven she began to compose her own poetry, the first example of which that remains to us is a little variation done in Chu 楚 style, devised in answer to a challenge from her father to produce

⁴ Brief official biographies in *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975; hereafter abbreviated as *JTS*) 51, pp. 2167–69, and *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975; hereafter, *XTS*) 76, pp. 3472–73. Jeanne Larsen has written an unreliable biographical note about her and translated several of the *shi*-poems in Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1999), pp. 52–54; unfortunately the translations are filled with so many errors as to be virtual fantasies.

⁵ A 10-*juan* collection of Xiaode's writings was held in the imperial library in 721 (see *JTS* 47, p. 2074) and later (*XTS* 60, p. 1599 – but the entries in the *XTS* “Yiwen zhi” 藝文志 are chronologically jumbled), but none of his works has reached the present day.

some lines on the theme “In the mountains you cannot long remain” (*shanzong bukeyi jiu liu* 山中不可以久留), from the “Zhao yinshi” 招隱士 (“Summoning the Recluse”) poem of the *Chu ci* 楚辭. Her effort, making effective use of allusion and of phrasing associated with that anthology, reads as follows:

仰幽巖而流盼 Looking up at the hidden cliff, I let my gaze
 drift;
撫桂枝以凝想 And caress a cinnamon bough, to focus my
 thoughts.
將千齡兮此遇 Taking a thousand ages, oh, to come upon one of
 this sort:
荃何爲兮獨往 Why is it that the iris, oh, is gone forever alone?⁶

The prosody of this little piece matches that of “Zhao yinshi.” The cinnamon bough which attracts the poet’s attention in line two appears twice in the earlier poem, where on both occasions the reference is to gathering or grasping cinnamon boughs and lingering long.⁷ This leads to thought of how infrequently those of pure mind meet with success – a common sentiment throughout the *Chu ci*, fortified here by use of the “iris” that is twice a particular symbol of natural and moral purity in the central poem of that anthology, “Li sao” 離騷. The worthy are unappreciated and most often make their way alone: this lament is, from the time of *Chu ci*, a commonplace among the scholars and would-be bureaucrats of medieval China. Young miss Xu is disposing her words aptly as part of the literary game. It is no wonder that her father, a hopeful but underpraised scholar himself, is said to have been quite pleased with her reply to his challenge. So much so that, we are told, “he could no longer keep her shut away” as was normal for most girls.

From here Xu Hui progressed to more serious study (not simply memorization) of the classics and histories, “a scroll always in her hands.” She soon came to the emperor’s attention, and he installed her in the palace as a “Gifted One” (*cairen* 才人) – a fifth-rank resident of the monarch’s seraglio. At this time her father was made prefect (*ci-shi* 刺史) of Guozhou 果州 (near present-day Nanchong 南充, Sichuan).

⁶ *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960; hereafter, *QTS*) 5, p. 59. Here the poem is titled “In the Manner of Xiaoshan” (“Ni Xiaoshan pian” 擬小山篇), the putative author of “Zhao yinshi” being considered at that time the shadowy Huainan Xiaoshan 淮南小山. See also the 12th-c. *Tang shi jishi* 唐詩紀事 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1972) 3, p. 25.

⁷ There is one other occurrence of the image of the “cinnamon bough(s)” in the *Chu ci*, in the “Greater Arbiter of Fate” (“Da siming” 大司命) poem from the “Nine Songs” (Jiu ge 九歌), and there the image is used in just the same way. This is the *locus classicus* of the image, which the “Zhao yinshi” is itself following. The *gui* tree, both as symbol and object, appears many times in various other poems in the *Chu ci*.

Sometime later she was promoted to the third-rank title of “Preferred Helpmate” (*jieyu* 婕妤) and then the second-rank, level-eight title of “Replete of Mien” (*chongrong* 充容). A greater promotion was still to come but, as we shall see, only after her death.

It might be helpful at this point to lay out schematically the denominations, ranks, and numbers of Tang palace ladies during the first decades of the dynasty, according to the official accounts.⁸ In descending order of rank, this was the ideal arrangement adopted at that time:

Table of Denominations and Ranks of Tang Palace Ladies

RANK	TITLE (TOTAL APPOINTED)	SEPARATE DESCRIPTIONS
正一品 First Rank	Ladies, <i>furen</i> 夫人 (5)	Resplendent Heir-giver, <i>huanghou</i> 皇后 = “Empress” Precious Consort, <i>guifei</i> 貴妃 Immaculate Consort, <i>shufei</i> 淑妃 Virtuous Consort, <i>defei</i> 德妃 Worthy Consort, <i>xianfei</i> 賢妃
正二品 Second Rank	Concubines, <i>bin</i> 嬪 (9)	Splendid Paramour, <i>zhaoyi</i> 昭儀 Splendid of Mien, <i>zhaorong</i> 昭容 Splendid of Charm, <i>zhaoyuan</i> 昭媛 Finest Paramour, <i>xiuyi</i> 修儀 Finest of Mien, <i>xiurong</i> 修容 Replete Paramour, <i>chongyi</i> 充儀 Finest of Charm, <i>xiuyuan</i> 修媛 Replete of Mien, <i>chongrong</i> 充容 Replete of Charm, <i>chongyuan</i> 充媛
正三品 Third Rank	Preferred Helpmates, <i>jieyu</i> 婕妤 (9)	
正四品 Fourth Rank	Lovely Ones, <i>meiren</i> 美人 (9)	
正五品 Fifth Rank	Gifted Ones, <i>cairen</i> 才人 (9)	
正六品 Sixth Rank	Consolers of the Throng, <i>baolin</i> 寶林 (27)	

⁸ *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (CSJC) 3, pp. 32–33; *JTS* 51, pp. 2161–62; *XTS* 76, pp. 3467–68. The early Tang rulers were following in this the model of the preceding Sui court.

RANK	TITLE (TOTAL APPOINTED)	SEPARATE DESCRIPTIONS
正七品 Seventh Rank	Aurigal Maidens, <i>yunü</i> 御女 (27)	
正八品 Eighth Rank	Selected Maidens, <i>cainü</i> 采女 (27)	

Some of these titles and ranks changed slightly in different reigns, most notably in that of Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–56), but this is the hierarchy in place at the time Xu Hui was part of the harem.⁹

Aside from her childhood verse quoted above, the remainder of her extant works were all written in the 640s, after she entered the emperor's service in her teens. We shall examine them in order. In doing so, it is good to remember that she was still a younger person (who would die at twenty-three); but also that in literate, high cultures, even of a hundred years ago in the West, it was by no means unusual – as it is today – for a teenager to have been well enough trained in the literature of his or her ancestors to produce mature writings that both assume and advance the tradition. In Xu Hui's day it was not her age that would have excited admiration but rather her gender, for it was most unusual in the mid-seventh century for a court woman to engage in activities of brush and ink.

The extemporaneous composition of verse on an assigned topic – as demanded by Xu Xiaode of his seven-year-old daughter – was a well established form of amusement and social contest in medieval China. Indeed this was the most immediate kind of literary activity engaged in by the learned elite, and was especially indulged in at court. Of the four *shi* 詩 poems of Xu Hui that have come down to us in various texts, two are poems of this sort.

The first, in eight lines, celebrates an imperial progress through the picturesque and historically important Barrier of the Enfolded Vale (Han'gu guan 函谷關, south of present-day Lingbao, He'nan, about midway between Luoyang and Chang'an), and was done in reply to an

⁹ One will note that the numbers and designations of the emperor's women had increased considerably by Tang times, when compared, for instance, with those of the Wei 魏 dynasty (220–65) four centuries earlier. For the latter, see Robert Joe Cutter and William Gordon Crowell, *Empresses and Consorts: Selections from Chen Shou's Records of the Three States with Pei Songzhi's Commentary* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1999), esp. the tables on pp. 137–38. For an attempt by Xuanzong to reduce the number of palace women early in his reign (though he later reversed the policy), see P. W. Kroll, "Four Vignettes from the Court of Tang Xuanzong," *Tang Studies* 25 (2007), pp. 1–27.

on-the-spot order from Taizong as the emperor and his entourage were returning to the western capital from a stay in the east:

“Autumn Wind at Enfolded Vale, In Response
to Fiat” 秋風函谷應詔

秋風起函谷	The autumn wind rises in the Enfolded Vale,
勁氣動河山	And a rugged air shakes river and mountain;
偃松千嶺上	Bent-over pine-trees atop a thousand ridges,
4 雜雨二陵間	And confused rain between the Two Mounds.
低雲愁廣險	Lowering clouds turn the drawn-out gorge sad,
落日慘重關	As the setting sun brings gloom to the layered barrier.
此時飄紫氣	At just this time a swirling, empurpled aura
8 應驗真人還	Sanctions and confirms the Perfected One’s re- turn. ¹⁰

The first six lines of this poem are neatly fashioned within the limits of a disciplined vocabulary, though without being stale. The opening phrase carries a hint of the famous “Song of the Great Wind” written by Liu Bang 劉邦, the founding emperor of the Han dynasty (“A great wind rises. . .”), but the scene here is one of hard going instead of regal dominance. The “Two Mounds” of line four refers to the two peaks of Mount Eryao 二嶠山, one where Gao 皐, ruler of the Xia 夏 dynasty was supposed to have been buried, the other near which King Wen of the Zhou 周文王 is said to have taken shelter from a rainstorm:¹¹ this reminds us of the longstanding imperial legacy of the area. But the gloomy sky and rough travel change in the final couplet. We encounter quite a load of extra meaning, as out of the twilight gloaming appears a purple aura. Purple is the color of celestial supremacy and was specially connected with the Daoist heavens.¹² And legend had it that a purple aura long ago heralded the advent of the Daoist sage Laozi when he passed through the Han’gu Barrier as he was departing China.¹³ A

¹⁰ *QTS* 5, p. 59; *Tang shi jishi* 3, p. 25; *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (1567 edn.; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966; hereafter, *WYTH*) 170, p. 9a. The *WYTH* version has the variant “bo-real 朔 air” in line two and “With just this poem 詩” in line seven.

¹¹ Li Jifu 李吉甫, comp., *Yuanhe junxian tuzhi* 元和郡縣圖志 (813; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983) 5, pp. 141–42.

¹² See P. W. Kroll, “Li Po’s Purple Haze,” *Taoist Resources* 7.2 (1997), pp. 21–37.

¹³ It was here that he was said to have written down the *Daode jing* 道德經 to satisfy the request of the barrier-guard Yin Xi 尹喜. See, e.g., *Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972) 63, p. 2141, especially the 5th-c. commentary of Pei Yin 裴駟 which mentions the aura and identifies Laozi as a *zhenren*. The aura’s purple color is mentioned in the mid-8th-c. commentary of Sima Zhen 司馬貞 quoting the third-century *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳. But note that the original version of this story was to a text called *Lieyi zhuan* 列異傳, not *Liexian zhuan* – an error that has entered into and been perpetuated by modern, typeset editions of *Shi ji*; see Max

“Perfected (or Realized) One” is a term for the ethereal denizens of the Daoist heaven of Highest Clairty (Shangqing 上清), all of whom are associated ultimately with the deified Laozi (“Lord Lao, Most High 太上老君”). Add to this the fact that the Tang imperial family claimed descent from Laozi, and Taizong can here be seen as a latter-day avatar of his divine ancestor, now returned again in the same aura that enveloped him long ago when he passed through this very place. Thus, the autumn wind that at first seemed so troubling has yielded a truly empyreal (as well as imperial) vision. The earthly Son of Heaven, pushing through the rain, has been revealed in his sublimer aspect.¹⁴ This is done very briskly and expertly in the young lady’s poem, though it has taken us some time to explain it.

The second poem of this kind is called “On the Assigned Topic, ‘In the Northern Quarter there is a Fair One’” 賦得北方有佳人. The topic given is the first line of a famous poem by Li Yannian 李延年 (d. 90 BC) in which he describes the loveliest woman of his time – as it turned out, his younger sister who was then taken into the palace by Han Wudi.¹⁵ One assumes that Xu Hui was accorded this topic largely because of her sex. The ten lines she writes on it go quite a ways beyond Li Yannian’s original poem in their depiction of a devastating beauty:

由來稱獨立	She has always been esteemed as one who “stands unmatched”
本自號傾城	Even taking for herself the epithet of “city-toppler.”
柳葉眉間發	Willow leaves push out between her eyebrows,
4 桃花臉上生	And peach blossoms come forth upon her cheeks.
腕搖金釧響	At a quiver of her wrist, gold bangles resound;
步轉玉環鳴	When she turns her steps, jade bracelets sing.
纖腰宜寶祿	Her slender waist is just right for a jewelled girdle,

Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan: Biographies légendaires des immortels taoïstes de l'antiquité* (1953; rpt. Paris: Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1987), p. 67, n. 4.

¹⁴ The equation of the imperial presence and also the ranks of courtiers with the hosts of the Daoist heavens, like the equation of the pleasure spots of nobility with those heavens, is common in Tang court poetry from the very beginning of the dynasty, though it has not always been recognized as such.

¹⁵ She is known to history as “Lady Li” 李夫人, and it is in her official biography that Yannian’s poem is recorded; see *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975; hereafter abbreviated *HS*) 97A, p. 3951. The poem, which lent several images to literary history that were later to become clichés, reads: “In the northern quarter there is a fair woman;/ Surpassing all others, she stands unmatched.// With one look, she topples a city of men;/ With another look, topples an entire state.// Best not to know of this city-toppler, state-toppler;/ Such a fair woman is most difficult to win.” Lu Qinli 逯欽立 collates the versions of the poem handed down in various medieval encyclopedias, in his *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 102.

- 8 紅衫艷織成 Her pink blouse a perfection of seductive weaving.
 懸知一顧重 One knows from afar the weight of a single glance
 from her,
 10 別覺舞腰輕 And can sense, besides, the lightness of her danc-
 ing waist.¹⁶

The physicality of the description is rather forthright and perhaps suggests a certain boldness on Xu Hui's part. This is a woman of greater refinement and greater eroticism than Li Yannian's prototype. The "willow leaves" of line three are a light-green cosmetic application, somewhat resembling a fleur-de-lis, painted between the eyebrows; it can be seen on Tang murals depicting aristocratic ladies. It makes a pleasing complement to the lightly rouged cheeks, here imaged as peach blossoms. Fine jewelry ornaments the enchantress's own beauty, topped with a "seductively" woven pink blouse. One does not need to get close to her, to fall under her spell. The Han "state-toppler" is here recast as an elegant Tang court lady; perhaps Xu Hui imagines herself in the role. It is worth noting that, except for a slip in line two, Xu Hui has expertly employed the binary alternation of level (*ping* 平) and deflected (*ze* 仄) tones between the important second and fourth words of each line – an extra mark of virtuosity.

We also have a poem by Xu Hui written on the oft-employed theme of the neglected lady, here specifically a "Tall Gate Plaint" (Changmen yuan 長門怨). According to the well-known story, Han Wudi's empress Chen 陳皇后 was sequestered in the Tall Gate Palace (Changmen gong) and feared she would be replaced in the sovereign's affections by a newer favorite. She is supposed to have enlisted the great poet Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BC) to compose in her behalf a *fu* that would turn the ruler's attention back to her.¹⁷ The "Tall Gate Plaint" became a stock *yuefu* motive, and there are more than two dozen examples of the theme preserved from medieval times.¹⁸ In Xu Hui's contribution to the tradition she seems largely to take the role of Ban Jieyu 班婕妤 (Preferred Helpmate Ban), another Han palace-lady (attached to

¹⁶ *QIS* 5, p. 60.

¹⁷ This *fu* has been translated and studied by David R. Knechtges, "Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's 'Tall Gate Palace Rhapsody,'" *HJAS* 41 (1981), pp. 47–64; revised translation in his *Wen xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature*, vol. 3: *Rhapsodies on Natural Phenomena, Birds and Animals, Aspirations and Feelings, Sorrowful Laments, Literature, Music, and Passions* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1996), pp. 159–67.

¹⁸ They form their own category in the twelfth-century *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1961) 42, pp. 4b–8a. For an introductory study of these poems, see Brigitta Ann Lee, "The Poems of 'Complaint in the Long Gate Palace,'" M.A. thesis (University of Colorado, 1998).

Chengdi 成帝, r. 32–6 BC) who was set aside after earlier enjoying the emperor's affections¹⁹:

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 舊愛柏梁臺 | The cherished of old – at Cypress Beams Terrace; |
| 新寵昭陽殿 | The newly preferred – in the Hall of Radiant
Yang. |
| 守分辭芳輦 | Accepting her part, she refuses the scented palan-
quin; |
| 4 含情泣圓扇 | Filled with feelings, she sobs behind a round fan. |
| 一朝歌舞榮 | A sudden morning's songs and dances now are in
full flower, |
| 夙昔詩書賤 | And the long-ago <i>Odes</i> and <i>Documents</i> are held in
disrespect. |
| 頽恩誠已矣 | Fallen from his favor – in truth, it is all over with: |
| 8 覆水難重薦 | Water once spilled cannot be presented again. ²⁰ |

The Cypress Beams Terrace (Boliang tai) was built at Han Wudi's behest in 115 BC, only to burn down eleven years later; the abandoned lady associates herself anachronistically with it. On the other hand, the Hall of Radiant Yang (Zhaoyang dian) was famed as the most lavish of the women's quarters at the court of Han Chengdi; it holds the now triumphant rival of the poetic speaker. Historically, this was Splendid Paramour Zhao (Zhao Zhaoyi 趙昭儀), younger sister of Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕, who had supplanted the latter in the monarch's gaze after Zhao Feiyan had replaced Ban Jieyu.²¹ The third and fourth lines of Xu Hui's poem allude directly to incidents or images associated with Ban Jieyu: the first is her high-principled demurral at riding in the emperor's carriage (because those rulers of former times who rode with their consorts met inglorious ends),²² and the image of the round fan recalls the famous "Poem of Complaint" ("Yuan ge shi" 怨歌詩) attributed to Ban Jieyu in which she compares herself to a fan made of white silk taffeta that had been used often by her lord but now is set aside.²³ In our poem the bereft woman has acquiesced to her demotion and finds an

¹⁹ For her biography, see *HS* 97B, pp. 3983–88; translated by Burton Watson, *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han by Pan Ku* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1974), pp. 261–65.

²⁰ *QJS* 5, p. 59.

²¹ See *HS* 97B, p. 3989. Watson has also translated the biographies of the two Zhao sisters; see *Courtier and Commoner*, pp. 265–77.

²² *HS* 97B, pp. 3983–84. She makes reference to the last rulers of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties whose infatuations with undeserving women played a role in the downfall of their kingdoms.

²³ This ten-line pentametric poem is probably apocryphal, but in medieval times (and even by some scholars today) it was unquestionably attributed to her and widely quoted in anthologies and encyclopedias. The *Wen xuan* version of it goes as follows:

analogy to herself in canonical texts regrettably contemned by a ruler whose head is turned by flighty, present-day amusements. Here again we find an allusion to Ban Jieyu, who was fond of reciting from the *Odes* and other ancient texts.²⁴ The phrasing of the penultimate line recalls the words and plight of Qu Yuan 屈原 (trad. 343–290 BC), author of the “Li sao” 離騷 and prototype of the unappreciated courtier.²⁵ The final line’s image of spilled water that cannot be reused ends the piece on a homely, hopeless note.²⁶

In addition to the compositions quoted already, there is one more *shi*-poem of Xu Hui’s. This is a quatrain said to have been composed by her as an explanation to mollify Taizong’s anger after she once arrived very tardily upon being summoned. This little piece is recorded in the early ninth-century *Da Tang chuanzai* 大唐傳載, as well as in the eleventh-century *Tang shi jishi* and the early twelfth-century *Tang yulin* 唐語林, and is therefore her best-remembered composition. It reads as follows:

朝來臨鏡臺	During the morning, she faces her mirror stand;
妝罷暫徘徊	With her makeup done, she paces to and fro a while.
千金始一笑	It would take a thousand in gold to start a smile from her,
一召詎能來	So how ever could she come at a single summons? ²⁷

新裂齊紈素	Newly cut out, unbleached taffeta of Qi,
皎潔如霜雪	Candent and untainted, just as frost or snow:
裁爲合歡扇	Now fashioned into a “joined-in-joy” fan,
團團似明月	Is perfectly round, like the luminous moon.
出入君懷袖	It goes in and out of milord’s sleeve and breastfold,
動搖微風發	To be set aflutter when a slight breeze arises.
常恐秋節至	Yet always one fears the advent of autumn’s term,
涼風奪炎熱	When cool gusts drive off the burning heat.
棄捐篋笥中	One is cast aside then, in box or in basket,
恩情中道絕	As favor and affection are broken off in mid-path.

Wen xuan 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986) 27, pp. 1280–81; cf. Lu, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, pp. 116–17, which collates various versions. Ban Jieyu is also credited with a *fu*, recorded in *HS* 97B, pp. 3985–87; translated by Watson, *Courtier and Commoner*, pp. 263–64.

²⁴ *HS* 97B, p. 3984. The works cited are ones of moral and monitory intent.

²⁵ Specifically, the first line of the “Li sao’s” envoi: “It is all over with now!”

²⁶ Cf. the somewhat different context in which the image was used by He Miao 何苗 when seeking to deter his elder brother He Jin 何進 (d. 189) from an action that ultimately cost him his life: “Water once spilled may not be gathered up”; *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 69, p. 2250.

²⁷ *QTS* 5, p. 60; *Da Tang chuanzai* (SKQS), p. 18a; *Tang yulin jiaozheng* 校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987) 4, pp. 403–4; *Tang shi jishi* 3, p. 25.

The pertness – almost brashness – of this little *jeu d'esprit* must have amused the emperor and invoked his indulgence, if the story surrounding the poem may be believed. The poet's self-awareness of and confidence in both her appearance and her literary skill come forth here, in a similar – through briefer – way than in the variation above on Li Yannian's "state-toppler."

The framing note that accompanies the poem in *Da Tang chuanzai* (and repeated in the later anecdotal collections) says that when summoned on this occasion, Xu Hui was in her private rooms at Chongsheng Monastery 崇聖寺 in the southwest corner of Chang'an's Chongde 崇德 ward. This is intriguing. What was later to become the monastery was during Taizong's reign Jidu Nunnery 濟度尼寺. It appears that some palace ladies were occasionally given leave to visit overnight at selected Buddhist establishments in the capital. The function of monasteries as guesthouses was a common fact of medieval social life. Xu Hui must have been enjoying such an outing when called back to the imperial presence, if the anecdote attached to our poem is credible. Or the story may be apocryphal, arising from the fact that she might later have taken up residence at this nunnery. For, upon Taizong's death in 649, many of his concubines were moved out of the palace compound and into Jidu Nunnery, which establishment was then transplanted to Xiushan 修善 Monastery in the capital's Anye 安業 ward.²⁸

So far we have examined Xu Hui's poems in the *shi* form. The fact that three of these five works are not quatrains already sets her apart from most women poets of the Tang who only rarely were able to compose poems longer than four lines. For instance, of Xue Tao's ninety-one extant poems, eighty-six are quatrains, one is in six lines, four are octaves. Sustained verse composition was not a common skill for women poets of the Tang, whatever the reasons for this might be. It is only fair to note that occasions for such longer versifying on the ladies' part would be rare, if they ever were more than private. Xu Hui is virtually unique among Tang women in having also authored a *fu* that has been preserved.²⁹ The exceptional range of Xu Hui's writings, including as we shall see a lengthy petition on political affairs, cannot be overestimated.

²⁸ *Chang'an zhi* 長安志 (SKQS) 9, p. 11b; *Tang liangjing chengfang kao* 唐兩京城坊考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985) 4, p. 100.

²⁹ The only other woman who can make this claim is the little-known Niu Yingzhen 牛應真, from whose brush in the ninth century there remains a rhapsody, "Wangliang wen ying fu" 魍魎問影賦, in *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (1814 edn.; rpt. Taipei: Datong shuju, 1979; hereafter, *QTW*) 945, pp. 1b-3a.

Xu Hui's *fu* was written at imperial behest "to accord" (*he* 和) with a rhapsody produced by the emperor. The topic is "The Little Hill" ("Xiao shan" 小山), referring to a pleasure garden attached to the "annex court" (*yiting* 掖庭) of the palace women, in which was contained, after the normal Chinese fashion, an artificially contrived microcosm of hills, ridges, valleys, waterways, rocks, trees, and flowers. The emperor additionally composed a quatrain on "The Little Hill," which pictures it in somewhat unassuming, unrefined guise:

近谷交縈蕊	The near valley is laced with strings of petals,
遙峰對出蓮	And a distant peak faces emerging lotuses.
徑細無全磴	The footpath is slight, and has no full stepstones;
松小未含煙	The pines are small and have collected no mist. ³⁰

As one might expect, the descriptions in the rhapsodies are considerably more generous in extent. In order best to appreciate Xu Hui's composition and place it in proper sequence, we should look first at Taizong's *fu*. In it the emperor sets a tone for admiring the less flagrant qualities of this modest garden and seeks thereby to find higher virtues in it.

"Fu on the Little Hill" 小山賦

何四序之交運	How the connected phases of the fourfold sequence
轉三陽之暮時	Round to this late hour of the third month of
	<i>yang!</i>
風辭暄而入暑	Bidding farewell to spring's mildness, breezes
	recede into heat;
4 樹替錦而成帷	Replacing flowers' figured silks, trees fill out
	into curtains.
想蓬瀛兮靡覩	I envision the isles of Peng and Ying, but can't
	lay eyes on them;
望崑閩兮難期	Look off toward Kunlun's fells, but have no
	hope of a tryst. ³¹
抗微山於綺砌	Yet an unassuming hill has been raised near the
	traceries steps,
8 橫促嶺於丹墀	A snug-formed ridge extending from the
	cinnabar-red parvis.
啓一圍而建址	Opened to a whole reach, it sets firm its base;
崇數尺以成峴	Exalted but several feet, it makes up an alp.

³⁰ "Yong xiao shan," *QTS* 1, p. 19; *Tang Taizong ji* 唐太宗集, ed. Wu Yun 吳雲 and Ji Yu 冀宇 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1986), p. 95.

³¹ Penglai 蓬萊 and Yingzhou 瀛州 are two of the paradise isles of the "immortals" in the Eastern Sea. Mount Kunlun 崑崙山, in the far west, was the home of the goddess Xiwangmu 西王母 with whom King Mu of Zhou 周穆王 was said to have once had a rendezvous.

- 既無秀峙之勢
12 本乏雲霞之資
承墮宇之殘露
挂低空之斷絲
- 爾乃
參差絕巘
16 薇紆短逕
風暫下而將飄
煙纒高而不暝
寸中孤嶂連還斷
20 尺裡重巒欹復正
岫帶柳兮合雙眉
石澄流兮分兩鏡
- 爾其
移芳植秀
24 擢幹抽莖
松新翠薄
桂小丹輕
細影雜兮俱亂
28 弱勢交兮共縈
纒有力以勝蝶
本無心以引鶯
半葉舒而巖暗
32 一花散而峰明
何纖微之同景
亦卑細以相成
- It is indeed without the contours of a salient tor,
And surely lacks resources for engendering
cloudy mists.
Accepting the leavings of dew fallen from the
eaves,
It lets hang torn threadlets lowered from the
sky.
- In this way, then,*
Unevenly arrayed – it is stacked up sheer;
Floridly twisting – its short footpath.
The breeze drops a while, before whirling up
again;
A haze just lifts high, and there is no more over-
cast.
In less than an inch a lone bluff seems joined,
yet breaks free;
Within only a foot, tiered crests incline, then
stand straight.
Its notches are girded with willows of a kind with
paired eyebrows;
Its rocks are cleansed in currents that are like
two distinct mirrors.³²
- And here*
Scents have been varied, blooms planted,
Stems shoot up, stalks push forth.
The pine seems new, its bright verdure thin;
The osmanthus is small, its reds still faint.
Fine shadows mix together, all in confusion;
Tender shapes interlace, mutually entangled.
They have just the strength now to bear a butter-
fly,
But surely have not the gist to entice an oriole.
With half a leaf unfurled, the cliff is darkened;
With a single blossom strewn, the peak is now
brightened.
The shared spectacle of such slight fragility
Is formed up from what seems the lowliest
trifles.

³² The garden's willow trees remind one of the willow-leaf-shaped application between a woman's eyebrows, noted in one of Xu Hui's poems earlier. In this part of the garden there are also two clear rivulets that reflect the scenery.

於是	<i>At this</i>
換浮歡於沈思	We trade flimsy pleasures for profound musings,
36 賞輕塵於勝地	Prizing the lightest dust in this superb spot.
俯蟻垤而有餘	Looking down at an ant-hill, one feels more than content
仰終南而多愧	But looking up to Zhongnan mountains, much abashed. ³³
非爲固於九折	Not that this is more stable than Nine Bends Peak,
40 庶無虧於一簣	But neither is it incomplete by one basketful of earth. ³⁴
聊夕玩而朝臨	If I might dally here at evening, gaze out from here in the morn,
42 足攄懷而蕩志	It were enough to unbind my thoughts and set my mind free. ³⁵

Of course the whole point of a garden such as this is to encompass in a small scope what seems to be a manifold landscape. Taizong's *fu* is an excellent example of praising the magnificence of the small. Some of the descriptions are especially nice, such as the previously bare trees of line three "fill[ing] out into curtains" as they take over the scene from the "figured silks" of the springtime flowers. The succession of delicately portrayed images in lines 23 through 32 is equally charming.³⁶ And here there may be another, subtly placed level to Taizong's *fu*. Given that "The Little Hill" is a garden attached to the court of the palace women, we might also see in the emperor's depiction of it an exploration of women's space. Though the possible analogies are neither consistent nor obvious, some of the plant imagery at least seems suggestive of the women themselves. For example, the "varied scents and planted blooms" (line 23) may remind one of the women who have been plucked from outside and placed in the harem; the freshness and slightness, the "tender shapes" of the plants may recall the youthful beauties brought here from all over the empire. In the conclusion to

³³ The soaring Zhongnan mountains, south of the capital city of Chang'an, are contrasted with their miniature counterpart, highlighting the question of perspective and relativity.

³⁴ The Nine Bends Peak in northern Sichuan was a notoriously difficult fastness (*gu* 固) to be negotiated on the way to Chengdu. In the *Book of Documents* we are told that if one is not careful about small matters, they will adversely affect one's larger plans, as when "in making a mound of nine fathoms, the deed may be incomplete for just one basketful of earth." See *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (SSZJS), "Lü ao," 13, p. 3b (p. 195). Cf. Confucius's similar comment in *Lunyu* 1x/18.

³⁵ "Xiao shan fu," *QIW* 4, p. 4a-5a; also *WYYH* 27, pp. 1a-b, the eighth-century *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Taibei: Dingwen shuju, 1976) 5, pp. 92-93, and *Tang Taizong ji*, pp. 113-15.

³⁶ In some of his *shi*-poems Taizong has a keen eye for natural phenomena. Cf., for instance, the couplet, "The shade of the pine-tree turns with the sun on its back;/ Shadows of the bamboo slue before the wind" 松陰背日轉 / 竹影避風移; from "Yiluan dian zao qiu," *QIS* 1, p. 9.

his *fu*, Taizong masters his appreciation of the sensual delights found here, trading “flimsy pleasures” for “profound musings,” and placing the garden (and the women) in perspective: he may “dally” here overnight, but it is only to “unbind his thoughts” for a brief time, before he must return to larger concerns.

Lady Xu’s poem is an answering composition, here elaborating on the emperor’s phrasing and images, there providing a counter to them. The extreme care with which she does this is quite remarkable, as comparison of related lines will show.³⁷ We also have here the added, interesting game of balancing the small scope and unpretentious nature of the garden with the need to extol everything associated, even indirectly, with the emperor. One way of doing this is to invoke Laozi’s advice that one should “do nothing” (*wuwei*) and not flaunt one’s possessions, either material or mental. We shall, nevertheless, not be surprised at the amount of meticulous flattery in the poem.

“Deferentially to Accord with the ‘Fu on the Little Hill’

Indited by His Majesty” 奉和御製小山賦

惟聖皇之御寓	Indeed, the imperial lodging of his Sagely Augustness
鑑敗德於前規	Holds a mirror against virtue’s ruin in the lessons of the past.
裁廣知以從狹	Trimming a wider knowledge to follow the more narrow,
4 抑高心而就卑	He checks his vainer thoughts, adopting the more lowly. ³⁸
懼逸情之有泰 欣靜慮於無爲	Wary of the peremptoriness of heedless feelings, He delights in quiet reflections, in “doing nothing.”
於時	<i>At this time</i>
季春移序	Spring’s ending month shifts the sequence,
8 初光入暑	As earlier sunlight moves into summer’s heat.
露溽池臺	Dew makes muggy the terrace by the pond,
煙霏林榭	And mist damps this wooded, private garth.
睿情悒以無歡	When his sagacious feelings are fretful with a lack of cheer,

³⁷ Wherever possible in the translation of Xu Hui’s *fu*, I have tried to use the same English renderings for identical wording as in the translation of Taizong’s *fu*.

³⁸ This is reminiscent of Han Wudi’s “adopting the more lowly” in his incognito excursions among the populace, as described in Zhang Heng’s 張衡 (78–139) “Xi jing fu” 西京賦, *Wen xuan* 2, p. 78. We might also translate 就卑 as “to go among the lowly,” pointing to the populace for Han Wudi and the female visitors of the little garden for Taizong.

- 12 懷仁智而延佇 Cherishing wisdom and humaneness, he lingers
a long while.
思寓賞以登臨 Thinking to appreciate the view, he ascends to
gaze out from here;
非聘麗於茅宇 No surface beauty is flaunted in these floss-grass
eaves.³⁹
殊華嶽之削成 Unlike is it from the chiselled forming of March-
mount Hua,
16 異羅浮之移所 And it differs from the transplanted site of
Mount Luofu.⁴⁰
- 爾其 *In this way*
表玩宸衷 To give dalliance to his sanctified thoughts,
故作離宮 He has made therefore a detached palace.
含仁自下 Enclosed with humaneness, it is naturally
humble;
20 帶嶮非崇 Girded into a tight area, by no means exalted.
分上林之卉木 Apportioned with plants and trees from His
Highness's Grove,
點重巒之翠紅 It is dotted with bright verdure and reds on its
tiered crests.
葉新抽而不樹 Leaves newly push forth but don't make up a
tree;
24 花散植而無叢 Flowers are planted randomly, not in any group-
ings.
雜當窗之帶柳 A belt of willows is mixed together, across from
a window;
交約砌之珪桐 Scepter-leaved paulownias intermingle by a
ledge of steps.
織塵集兮朝嶺峻 Fine dust settles here, on the ridge's pinnacle in
the morning;
28 宵露晞兮夕澗空 The night-time dew dries up, and at evening the
gill seems spent.
影促圓峰三寸日 Shadows are snug to the rounded peak, three
inches from the sun,
聲低疊嶂一尋風 And voices descend from the creased bluff, in one
stretch of wind.
- 風輕兮拂蘭蕙 The lightness of that wind – it brushes orchid
and sweet basil;

³⁹ To roof with “floss-grass eaves” is a traditional image of simplicity in building.

⁴⁰ Legend had it that Hua Shan was “formed by chiselling (or paring)” by a giant spirit, and also that Luofu Shan had floated to its present location in the south of China from its original site as an island of the immortals in the eastern sea.

- 32 日斜兮蔭階砌
蝶留粉於巖端
蜂尋香於嶺際
草臨波而側影
- 36 石瑩流而倒勢
雖蓬瀛之蘊奇
故未留於神睇
彼崑閩之稱美
- 40 詎有述於天製
豈若
數簣之形
託於掖庭
俯依綺檻
- 44 仰映朱楹
恥巖崖之鄙薄
荷眺矚之恩榮
其保終於一國
- 48 奉天睠於千齡
- The slanting of the sun—it shades the stairs and steps.
While butterflies shed powder at the edge of the cliff,
Bees seek out scents by the margin of the ridge.
Grasses stand over the wavelets, their shadows tilting,
As rocks glitter in the current, their shapes inverted.
Even the wonders gathered at the isles of Peng and Ying
Can hardly be retained in the seeing of the gods;
And those fells of Mount Kunlun, esteemed so lovely,
Can scarcely be described in their celestial formation.
- But those don't compare with*
The shapings from several basketsful of earth,
Here entrusted to this annex court.
Where looking down, one leans on tracered railings,
And looking up, is dazzled by vermilion columns.
Shamed by the sparse rudeness of these steep and cliffs,
I brave the gracious honor of thy notice and regard.
May you be protected till the end, throughout the whole kingdom,
Be favored with Heaven's watchfulness for a full thousand years!⁴¹

Xu Hui's first task in this poem was to follow the emperor's lead closely in form and content but not be abjectly imitative. In terms of form, Taizong presents four stanzas, the first two of which rhyme in the *she* 攝 categories *zhi* 止 (*tsyi*) and *geng* 梗 (*keingQ*),⁴² employing level-tone rhymes in the first stanza and deflected-tone rhymes in the second, which he then follows in stanzas three and four by continuing

⁴¹ "Fenghe yuzhi 'Xiao shan fu,'" *QJW* 95, pp. 1a-b; *WYYH* 27, pp. 1b-2a (under the title and name Chongrong Xu shi 充容徐氏).

⁴² For Middle Chinese transcriptions I use the system of David Prager Branner, as devel-

to alternate level- and deflected-tone categories but now reversing the sequence of the same rhyme-groups (梗 *keing*, then 止 *tsyiQ*). Lady Xu offers five stanzas in her poem, beginning with the same *tsyi* rhyme-category as the emperor and ending with the other category (*keing*) used by him. In between, in her second, third, and fourth stanzas, she makes use of the rhyme-groups *yu* 遇 (*nguoH*), *tong* 通 (*thung*), and *xie* 蟹 (*gheiQ*) respectively.⁴³ And as Taizong had done, from each stanza to the next she alternates level- and deflected-tone rhymes. Overall, she has both imitated and varied the form of the emperor's composition.

As to content, the chart below identifies the lines where she has taken hints from – and usually changed, in lesser or greater degree – the imagery and wording employed in Taizong's *fu*:

	XU HUI'S <i>FU</i>	TAIZONG'S <i>FU</i>
LINE NUMBERS:	7–8	2–3
	17	4 ¹
	22	25–26
	23–24	23–24, sequence reversed
	27	36
	29	8
	36	22
	37	5
	39	6
	4 ¹	4 ⁰

The deftness with which this compositional game is played is of prime importance in such exchanges. Analysis of each of these examples would be fruitful, but perhaps calling special attention to just a few will suffice for the present. Look, for instance, at how Xu Hui has taken the botanical images in the tetrameter quatrain that begins Taizong's

oped over the past decade and especially as presented in his "A Neutral Transcription System for Teaching Medieval Chinese," *Tang Studies* 17 (1999), pp. 1–169, and *Cūyùn: A Handbook of Chinese Character Readings* (North Chelmsford, Mass.: Erudition Books, 2002).

⁴³ When one looks in more detail at the rhyme-words in Xu Hui's poem, some matters of interest to historical linguistics emerge. For example, in her second stanza she blends the 夔 and 語 categories that are separated in the *Guangyun* 廣韻 and in *pingshuiyun* 平水韻 practice; and in her fifth stanza blends the 庚 and *qing* 清 categories that are differentiated in *Guangyun*.

third stanza (lines 23–26) and neatly reshuffles them in the hexameter lines 21–24 of her own third stanza. As part of this, she recalls the pine and osmanthus trees noted by the emperor but does so simply by mentioning their colors, then devotes a couplet to the flowers and leaves that Taizong had pictured (but in reverse sequence), and goes on to fill out the scene with two other species of tree, the willow and paulownia. Closer to the beginning of her poem, Xu Hui introduces for comparison with the “little hill” the famous peaks Mount Hua and Mount Luofu, citing the legends associated with them. This she does instead of merely resuming the emperor’s early references to the holy seamounts Peng and Ying and the mythical Kunlun mountain; however, at an appropriately chosen spot much later in her poem Peng, Ying, and Kunlun all appear.

In Xu Hui’s response to the emperor, she emphasizes the “smallness” of the women’s garden in an appropriately deferential manner. Note that she begins her *fu* where the emperor’s left off, praising his control of his feelings, though here his political acumen is more clearly implied. Taizong’s presence is never far from Xu Hui’s mind, in the way she develops her images from his and in her direct references to him at both the beginning and end of her poem. Perhaps we may even see him indirectly at certain points (just as some of his imagery may refer indirectly to the women), as in the “wind” and “sun” of lines 31–32 that “brush” and “shade” the garden. Certain key words used by Taizong recur in Lady Xu’s poem, but usually in different sections: thus, the monarch’s “dallying” in this garden (in the penultimate line of his poem) is brought forward sooner (line 17) by Xu Hui, while, on the other hand, the “snuggness” of the little ridge noted early (line 8) by the emperor is transferred to the shadows round its peak mentioned quite later (line 29) by his concubine. The effect is like that of a kaleidoscope, in which some of the same colored pieces are rearranged with a number of new items to form patterns similar but distinct from what has come before.⁴⁴ As an extended single exercise in poetic art, there is nothing comparable to this by any woman writer from the Tang dynasty.

We have not yet canvassed all of Xu Hui’s extant writings. Aside from her poetry, we also have a highly interesting paper that offers advice to the sovereign on foreign and domestic policy. As a distaff composition, this too is highly unusual in the Tang annals. The docu-

⁴⁴ The scholar-official Xu Jingzong 許敬宗 (592–672) seems also to have written an accompanying *fu* to that of Taizong. See Xu’s “Yiting shan fu, ying zhao,” *QJW* 151, pp. 7b–8b. At eighty-four lines this piece is much longer, and in its wording is much more fulsome (even turgid), than either the emperor’s poem or that of Xu Hui.

ment has to do with the increasing hardships suffered by the populace because of the emperor's military campaigns against foreign or "barbarian" forces, the building of extravagant new palace structures, and the dangers of conspicuous excess. It is rather lengthy and invokes various arguments in urging the monarch to be more prudent in his actions: in such wise he will be in line with the teachings of former kings and sages. This submission, dated to 648, is quoted in full in Xu Hui's *Jiu Tang shu* biography. It is reproduced with some variants in *Wenyuan yinghua* and *Quan Tang wen*.⁴⁵ Excerpts from it are also included in the ninth-century *Da Tang xinyu* 大唐新語,⁴⁶ the tenth-century *Tang huiyao* 唐會要,⁴⁷ and, most significantly, in Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019–1086) grand narrative history, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑.⁴⁸

The petition is couched largely in the elaborate style and diction of parallel prose, which was the standard form for state documents. This was no easy manner to master and, assuming that the composition at hand was not edited or ghost-written by a purposely anonymous court official (and there is no reason to be suspicious about this), it provides impressive testimony of Xu Hui's abilities and learning even beyond that of a talented poet. The careful rhetorical organization of the piece will be apparent, as is the effective way Xu Hui disposes certain repetitive phrases to punctuate her argument.

There are four major sections to the piece. The petition begins by lauding the current state of the empire and looking backward for models of rulership that the emperor might take even more to heart. He must keep vainglory in check and must apply himself to following through on well-meant intentions. The attention given in this opening section to the *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 ceremonies at Mount Tai 泰山 and one of its foothills – by which a ruler declared to Heaven and Earth, respectively, that he had successfully fulfilled his regnal charge as Son of Heaven, bringing universal benefit and tranquility to the empire – was meant to salve a particular sore. Several times during his reign, notably in 637, 641, and earlier in 648, plans had been made for Taizong to perform the rite, but each time he had been dissuaded by his advisers from

⁴⁵ *WYH* 27, pp. 2a–3a; *QW* 51, pp. 7b–8b. For a version of the text with annotations by Ma Maoyuan 馬茂元 and Liu Chutang 劉初棠, see *Tangdai wen xuan* 唐代文選, ed. Sun Wang 孫望 and Yu Xianhao 郁賢皓 (Suzhou: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1994), pp. 2226–36. Mention of the petition is made as being a product of unusual womanly ability, in the tenth-century *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Taipei: Guxin shuju, 1976) 271, p. 564B–C, where Xu Hui is misidentified as the daughter of Xu Jian, her famous nephew from the next generation (for whom, see below).

⁴⁶ *Da Tang xinyu* (SKQS) 2, pp. 5a–b.

⁴⁷ *Tang huiyao* 30, pp. 555–56.

⁴⁸ *Zizhi tongjian* (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1976) 198, p. 6254.

carrying out this most awesome of all imperial rituals (it had last been accomplished by Guangwudi 光武帝 of Han in 56 AD), and he still had regrets over it. Xu Hui suggests that the self-effacement demonstrated by him in *not* performing the rite is more to be lauded than if he had done so. This opening section is rife with allusions; here and throughout we shall note the most interesting of them:

It has been two and twenty recurrences from [the beginning of] the Zhenguan era till now.⁴⁹ The winds have been moderate and the rains accommodating, the years fruitful and the harvests imposing; the people have had no misfortune of flood or drought, the state no adversity of famine or want. Far in the past the Martial One of Han 漢武, a normal ruler who maintained traditions, yet offered tablets incised in jade;⁵⁰ and Huan of Qi 齊桓, an unpretentious sovereign of a small state, still planned enterprises dusted with gold.⁵¹ [Accordingly,] I wish Your Majesty to enlarge his exploits⁵² by curtailing himself,⁵³ to yield to the virtuous⁵⁴ and not arrogate all merit.⁵⁵ The countless millions have inclined their hearts even though you forwent the rite of announcing success;⁵⁶ at the places for the *feng* and *shan* you waited to present yourself, but the ceremony of sending up accomplishments was not to be performed.⁵⁷ Such merit and virtue as this has been sufficient for

⁴⁹ This line provides us with an unequivocal dating of the document to 648, the Zhenguan era having been inaugurated on January 23, 627 (the count of twenty-two years is inclusive, in the normal Chinese fashion). Sima Guang (*ibid.*) gives an exact date for the submission of the piece – Zhenguan 22, third month, *gengzi* day, equivalent to April 17, 648.

⁵⁰ It was part of the *feng* ritual for the ruler to leave behind a prayer to heaven, incised on jade tablets. Xu Hui emphasizes that Han Wudi, unlike Tang Taizong, was not a dynastic founder but merely a ruler in the ordinary line of established succession 守文之常君, yet is now known as the greatest of Han emperors and the first to carry out the *fengshan* rituals.

⁵¹ The prayer-tablets offered during the *feng* ceremony of a Heaven-approved monarch were sealed with gold thread; see *Hou Han shu* 7, “Jisi zhi,” p. 3164. Although Qi was an insignificant state in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC, its ruler Duke Huan, rose to become Overlord (*ba* 霸) of all the Zhou states. Again the contrast is with Taizong who is obviously the greater and more accomplished sovereign.

⁵² See *Han Feizi* 韓非子 (*Baizi quanshu*), “Renzhu” (sect. 52) 20, p. 2b: “The illuminate king, upon enlarging his exploits, bestows rank and emolument.”

⁵³ See *San guo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973) 29, “Wei shu,” p. 820: “There has never been someone who in curtailing himself does not shine more brightly [because of it].”

⁵⁴ As did the sage-king Shun 舜. See *Shang shu zhengyi*, “Shun dian,” 3, p. 2a [p. 126A].

⁵⁵ Cf. *Laozi*, chapters 2 and 77: “The exploits being accomplished, one does not arrogate all merit.”

⁵⁶ The “rite of announcing success” (*gaocheng zhi li* 告成之禮) refers to the *fengshan* ceremonies. Xu Hui avers that since the people have all given their hearts to the monarch, performance of the rite itself is not necessary.

⁵⁷ The “ceremony of sending up accomplishments” (*shengzhong zhi yi* 升中之儀) is another reference to the *feng*; see *Li ji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (SSJZS), “Li qi” 24, p. 5a (p. 1440B). The phrase “the places for *feng* and *shan*” paraphrases the original, which reads: “at Yun 云 and

hundreds of kings to savor and ponder, has caught and enveloped a thousand ages. Men of olden times said: “Though one flatters you, do not *be* flattered”⁵⁸ – indeed, there is reason for this. Take care with beginnings and attend to the ends, for the sagely and wise are too seldom found together.⁵⁹ From this one realizes that for him whose emprise is grand it is easy to be proud, so I pray Your Majesty find *that* hard; and one realizes that for him who is best at starting out it is hard to finish,⁶⁰ so I pray Your Majesty find *this* easy.

In the second section of the petition, Xu Hui addresses the dangers that result from continuous military adventures. She takes in the broad scope of Tang campaigns, from the northeast where Taizong himself had twice recently led costly but unsuccessful expeditions against the state of Koguryō and where preparations for another attack in 649 were now underway, to the far west where Chinese forces had since 638 been attempting – with gradual success – to establish suzerainty over the oasis kingdoms of the Tarim Basin that controlled trade on the Silk Roads. Although some of the wording in this section is reminiscent of certain famous texts, such as Jia Yi’s 賈誼 (200–168 BC) essay on “Finding Fault with Qin” (“Guo Qin lun” 過秦論),⁶¹ direct borrowings are rare and the points are argued straightforwardly, within the limits of parallel structure:

With all due respect, it appears that in recent years both corvée and military service have been consolidated, such that there are armies in Liaohai 遼海 to the east,⁶² conscripts by Kunqiu in the west,⁶³ troops and horses are wearied from bearing armor and headpiece,

Ting 亭.” Mount Yunyun, east of Tai Shan, is said to have been the spot where the *shan* sacrifice to Earth was performed in antiquity; the term *tingting* is used to refer to “the very summit” of Tai Shan where the *feng* was to be carried out.

⁵⁸ See *Shang shu zhengyi*, “Lü xing” 19, p. 8a (p. 249B).

⁵⁹ For the joint establishment of the sagely and wise by the kings of old, recognizing how brief was life, see *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, ed. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 548 (Wen gong 6).

⁶⁰ Cf. from *Shi jing*, Ode 255: “None there are who have not the beginning;/ Few there are able to bring it to a finish.”

⁶¹ For which, see *Shi ji* 6, pp. 276–82, and *Wen xuan* 51, pp. 2233–40.

⁶² Taizong’s expeditions against the northern state of Koguryō were centered on Liaodong 遼東 (around present-day Liaoyang, Liaoning). Lady Xu uses the alternate name Liaohai here in order to match onomastically the “sea” (*hai*) of the northeast region against the “mountains” (*qiu*; see next note) of the west.

⁶³ The name “Kun mountains” invokes the traditional myth of the cosmic mountain Kunlun (see n. 31, above) in the far west. The actual reference is to the Central Asian deserts and ranges, particularly centering on the Tarim basin.

boats and wagons worn down in transport and haulage.⁶⁴ With the calling out and levying of conscripts for the frontier garrisons, those who go and those who remain behind are heartsick with mortal fears; trusting to the winds or breasting the waves, men and rations are in danger of being whirled away or sunk. The demise of a single able-bodied tiller of fields leaves several dozen without supplies to be had; mischance befalling a single ship will capsize the provisions of several hundred – this is to convey agricultural output, which is finite, only to glut the swelling waves that have no end, and to plot against other peoples yet unconquered only to deplete our own victorious armies. Even if one eradicates the nefast and scourges the violent, holding to time-honored guidelines of state, still, to wallow in war, treating men-at-arms as playthings, is what our own savants of former times warned against.

Long ago the August One of Qin 秦皇 swallowed all of the Six States, but [in so doing] nevertheless sped the warrant for Qin's own peril and destruction;⁶⁵ the Martial One of Jin 晉武 took complete possession of the Three Regions, but nonetheless formed the legacy of Jin's own overthrow and defeat.⁶⁶ Surely this is the result of flaunting one's claims and presuming on greatness, of casting moral power aside and contemning the kingdom, of plotting for gain and ignoring the damage done, of indulging one's whims while giving free rein to passions. In consequence it happened that the far-flung, far-spread limits of empire, however extensive, could not keep from annihilation, when the black-haired plebs, in full bellowing outcry, brought on the destruction. It is from this that one realizes the extent of a domain is no insurance of long-term stability and that the troubles of the people are the source that facilitates disruption. I pray Your Majesty shed beneficence widely on those who are displaced, show compassion to the ill-treated

⁶⁴ The boats, thousands of them – mainly for supply but some also for naval attacks – were used of course only in the Korean expeditions, not in the Serindian ones.

⁶⁵ Referring to the First Emperor of Qin who, after completing the conquest of the six major states of the late Warring States period in 221 BC, unified all of China for the first time in centuries – but for barely a dozen years before Qin's ongoing oppression of its people became so intolerable that they rebelled against his successor.

⁶⁶ This is Sima Yan 司馬炎, who on February 8, 266 AD, became the founding emperor of the (Western) Jin dynasty. Xu Hui's reference here is probably to his conquering of Wu and reunifying all of China under one rule in 280. However, the internal intrigues and jealousies of the Sima clan, evident already at that time, would lead by 311 to the downfall of the dynasty and the loss of north China for more than two and a half centuries to outlanders from the north and west.

and charity to those in need, reduce the exactions of conscripted service and increase the benevolence of the soaking dew.⁶⁷

The third section of the document takes up the issue of over-indulgence in palace construction projects. The incessant building of grandiose structures is seen by Lady Xu as a burden both on the people and the land itself. She mentions particularly two recent projects that, in her view, have been excessive. The first was Taizong's renovation of the old Taihe Palace 太和宮 compound in the Zhongnan 終南 Mountains south of Chang'an. This had been built for his father, emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–26) in 625, and Taizong had had it demolished in 636; however, a decade later, in order to have a retreat from the summer heat of the capital, he had it rebuilt and expanded, and it was completed in May of 647, now renamed the Palace of Halcyon-blue Haze (Cuiwei gong 翠微宮). The second project referred to by Xu Hui was the building of an entirely new compound, located in Phoenix Valley (Fenghuang gu 鳳凰谷), Yijun 宜君 county, about eighty miles north of the capital. This was called the Jade Splendor Palace (Yuhua gong 玉華宮) and was completed only a few months after the Cuiwei gong in August of 647, outdoing in sumptuousness the latter palace (which Taizong professed to find less spacious than he had hoped).⁶⁸ In place of such wearing activity of benefit to only a few, Xu Hui reminds the emperor of Laozi's *laissez-faire* injunctions that the best ruler is one who “does nothing” (*wuwei*; and see in this regard similar sentiments voiced in her *fu*) yet under whose rule everything necessary still is accomplished.

Your handmaid has heard that the fundamental principle of engaging in government is to place the highest value on “doing nothing.” With all due respect, it appears that achievements founded in earth and wood⁶⁹ may not be deemed in compliance with this. For the northern pylons had just been set firm as Halcyon-blue Haze was built to the south, and nary a season had fled before Jade Splendor was being designed and laid out.⁷⁰ Even if one were to adopt the contours of the mountain and conform to the bends of

⁶⁷ The “soaking dew” (*zhan lu* 湛露) is a traditional image of the ruler's favor; see Ode 174 of the *Shi jing*.

⁶⁸ The Yuhua compound was converted into a Buddhist monastery by Taizong's son and successor in 651. From late 659 the famous monk Xuanzang 玄奘 was in residence there, carrying on his endless translation of Sanskrit sutras he had brought back from his pilgrimage to India.

⁶⁹ That is, the building of great halls and palaces.

⁷⁰ As noted, the Yuhua gong was opened only three months after the rebuilding of the Cuiwei gong. Interestingly, in his edict on erecting the Yuhua gong, Taizong stresses the fragility of its construction; see “Jian Yuhua gong shouzhao,” *QJW* 8, pp. 14a–15b; *Tang Taizong ji*, pp. 397–98.

the river,⁷¹ there would be no lack of toil in framing and raising; cut it back once and do so again, there would still be quite an expense of effort and labor. In the end one might roof just with thatch and floss-grass to evince restraint, but there is already the exhaustion of erecting wood and stone; one may get workers by hiring at goodly wage,⁷² but abuses from mistreatment and bullying are not absent. For this reason, the rudest of dwellings and the poorest of food are what a sagely ruler finds most satisfying,⁷³ as a prideful ruler is enraptured by chambers of gold and terraces of chalcedony.⁷⁴ Therefore, a sovereign in possession of the Way exploits his own ease to bring ease to his people, while the sovereign who is devoid of the Way takes pleasure in pleasing himself. I pray Your Majesty use all in heed of their right season,⁷⁵ that their physical strength might then be untiring, and when employing them give them proper rest, that the people in this shall take joy.

In the final section of her submission Lady Xu inveighs against the conspicuous consumption endemic at court. Some of her phrasing recalls an edict issued by the monarch Mingdi of Song 宋明帝 (r. 466–473) on December 1, 466, explaining to his court the perils of all forms of ostentation.⁷⁶ She is also aware of and alludes to a discussion Taizong had with his adviser Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596–658) in 643 regarding a similar subject, when the question of lacquer utensils was raised – which centers on the inevitability of step-by-step corruption.⁷⁷ Follow-

⁷¹ That is, even if one conserved in devising a palace's ground-plan by adapting it to the local geography.

⁷² Instead of impressing them by corvée service.

⁷³ Cf. *Lunyu* VIII/21: "As for [the sage-king] Yu 禹, indeed I can make out no flaw. Though with only the poorest of food and drink, he yet extended filial piety to the revenants and spirits. . . in but the rudest of dwellings and abodes he spent all his efforts in [cutting] water-courses and channels."

⁷⁴ Recalling Han Wudi who in his youth was so infatuated with the girl Ajiao 阿嬌 that he promised to house her in "a chamber of gold" (*Han Wu gu shi* 漢武故事 [*Gu xiaoshuo gouchen* 古小說鈎沈 (Hong Kong: Xinyi chubanshe, 1970)], p. 337), and the decadent, last kings of the Xia and Shang dynasties who built "halls of gemstones, terraces of chalcedony, porticoes of ivory, and couches of jade" (*Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989] 8, p. 256).

⁷⁵ That is, do not employ the people in palace building projects at the times when their labor is required in the fields.

⁷⁶ For this edict, see *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 8, pp. 158–59. Reference works give Mingdi's year of accession as 465, but this is another mistake owing to the same problems as noted for Shangguan Yi's death (see n. 2, above). He took the throne on the *bingshen* day of the twelfth month of the first year of Taishi 泰始, which is equivalent to January 9, 466.

⁷⁷ See *JTS* 80, p. 2730; cf. *XYS* 105, p. 4025; also Wu Jing's 吳兢 (ca. 670–749) *Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978) 2, p. 53, which may be the earliest version of the anecdote. Xu Hui's reference to the gist of the conversation predates Wu Jing's record by more than half a century.

ing this, she closes with an elaborate, hopeful peroration in which she urges the sovereign to take to heart all he can learn from the lessons of the past, so as to make his reputation endure forever.

Now, costly playthings and ingenious curios are, after all, the bills and axes that unmake a state; gems and jades, damasks and embroideries, are truly toxins and poisons that nonplus the mind. With all due respect, it appears that caprices in clothing, delicate and fine, are as transformations from what is so-of-itself;⁷⁸ textile tributes, costly and rare, are like handiwork of the divine transcendents.⁷⁹ And even so, hasting after the fanciest in the latest vogue is truly to forfeit plainsilk of the purest of styles.⁸⁰ One realizes from this that lacquering utensils is not a craft that invites rebellion, yet when Jie 桀 had these items made, his people rebelled;⁸¹ that shaping cups of jade could hardly be a skill that summons destruction, yet when Zhou 紂 put them to use, his state was destroyed.⁸² Just here we see why the font of dissipation cannot but be curbed. Setting norms for frugality is the same as being apprehensive of luxury; but how, if one [on the contrary] sets norms for luxury, may one control its after-effects?⁸³

⁷⁸ That is, devolutions of the stuff of Nature (*ziran* 自然, “what is so-of-itself”).

⁷⁹ Things not normally of this world.

⁸⁰ Cf. these words of Song Mingdi: “. . . in hope that the best instruction from the purest of styles shall neatly bring honor to [the practices of] highest antiquity, and that even the wealthiest shall uphold modesty and give less esteem to the latest vogues.” A sentence or two earlier he mentions “textile tributes.” *Song shu* 8, p. 159.

⁸¹ Jie was the last king of the supposed Xia 夏 dynasty nearly four millennia ago. According to legend, his dynasty fell because of his pernicious ways. These included personal extravagances such as using lacquered utensils. The earlier sage-king Shun is said to have rejected such items, for he knew where they would lead. In 643, five years before Xu Hui’s petition was written, Taizong asked the courtier and scholar Chu Suiliang about this. Chu replied: “[The arts of] carving and incising do harm to agricultural concerns, while extra-fine embroidery disrupts women’s work. To start off designing excess and nimity is the gradual approach to peril and destruction. When lacquer utensils will no longer do, one must make them of gold; when gold will no longer do, one must make them of jade. The reason why hortatory officials must admonish about such gradual steps is that when all has reached its fullest extent, there is nothing left to admonish.” Accepting this statement, the emperor replied, “So, if the lord of men attends to excess and nimity instead of caring for the common people, the trigger of his peril and destruction lies waiting to be turned in his palm.” See n. 77 for references.

⁸² The bad, last king of the Shang 商 (or Yin 殷) dynasty, Zhou is an archetype of cruelty and profligacy. Tradition has it that when he began to use ivory chopsticks, his upright minister Jizi 箕子 expostulated with him: “When one makes jade chopsticks, he will find it needful to make jade cups; making the cups, he will surely long for costly and unusual items from distant lands to be controlled by him. The gradual approach to fine carriages, horses, palaces, and halls begins from this.” *Shi ji* 38, p. 1609. The king did not heed Jizi’s counsel in this or other matters and his empire fell in 1045 BC.

⁸³ Cf. *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhu* (Zhao gong 4), p. 1255: “If the *junzi* 君子 sets norms for tolerance, the end will be the same as cupidity; but if he sets norms for cupidity, what end could there be?”

Humbly, I submit: let Your Majesty's light be as a mirror against what has not taken form,⁸⁴ your wisdom reach to where there are no bounds, pushing thoroughly into the arcane secrets from the Unicorn Gallery,⁸⁵ completely probing profundities in the Forest of Classicists.⁸⁶ The tracks of orderly and disorderly rule from a thousand kings, the traces of security and peril through a hundred eras, the premises dictating rise and fall, fortune and misfortune, the impulses behind gain and loss, success and failure, hence shall be embraced and contained in the store of your heart, obligingly encompassed within the scope of your vision, so that in the protracted contemplations of your sanctified thoughts you shall find every least word at call. Verily I fear lest in knowledge's not being deemed difficult and in the fact that action is not easy, one's mind may rest proud in the nobility of heritage, one's body find ease in the comforts of the times. Humbly, I pray you check your will⁸⁷ and trim your feelings, be as prudent of the finish as of the start,⁸⁸ pare away weaker flaws to enhance heavier virtues, following the truths of today to replace the wrongs of the past, that your esteemed name be interminable as are sun and moon, your fulfilled legacy forever grand as Heaven and Earth!

To receive such extended advice on public issues from one of his palace ladies must have been an unprecedented experience for Taizong.

⁸⁴ His illuminate rule will keep malefactors and misdeeds from appearing, for they will be immediately reflected. Cf. *Li ji zhengyi*, "Jing jie" 50, pp. 4b-5a (pp. 1610c-1611a): "Thus the power of the rites to transform through instruction is subtle – stalling misconduct when it has not taken form, causing people daily to move toward the good and away from wrong, though they are not conscious of it."

⁸⁵ The Unicorn Gallery (Lin ge 麟閣) was inaugurated by Han Xuandi 漢宣帝 (r. 73-48 BC) and in it were placed portraits of officials who had distinguished themselves in service to the state. The emperor should ponder their actions and examples. However, as suggested by Ma Maoyuan and Liu Chutang, here "Unicorn Gallery" might be meant as "Unicorn Hall" (Lindian 麟殿), one of the palace libraries of the Han.

⁸⁶ That is, the teaching and practice of those seeking to follow the Way of the canonical texts. In rendering *ru* 儒 as "classicist(s)," I follow Michael Nylan. In many recent publications she has forwarded a nuanced and compelling view of the whole issue of classicism and "Confucianism" in Han times and beyond; see, e.g., her "A Problematic Model: The Han 'Orthodox Synthesis,'" in *Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Kai-wing Chow et al. (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999), pp. 17-56, esp. 18-19, 25-30, 37 n. 15, and *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2001), pp. 32-33, 53-54, 364-65 et passim.

⁸⁷ The poet in Qu Yuan's "Li sao" tries to do just this near the end of the poem, when his celestial equipage is threatening to take him too high: "I checked my will and held back our pace. . ." *Chu ci buzhu* 楚辭補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963) 1, p. 46; also borrowed later but with a different result in the "Yuan you" 遠遊 poem in that anthology, 4, p. 172, on which see Kroll, "On 'Far Roaming,'" *JAOS* 116 (1996), pp. 653-69.

⁸⁸ This phrase is quoted verbatim from *Laozi*, chapter 64. Cf. the similar advice given at the end of the petition's first section, recalling Ode 255.

The contrast with his greatly loved but long departed Empress Wende 文德皇后 (592–627), younger sister of Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (d. 659), must have been especially evident: she had resolutely refused to discuss affairs of government with him, even when he pressed her to do so.⁸⁹ One might have noticed, in a few places in this document, some phrasing and ideas similar to those expressed in the lady's *fu* quoted earlier. It is at least possible that Xu Hui was inspired to write this piece not so much by earnest concerns over state policy as by a craftsmanlike desire to work out further, in a different form, the literary imperatives of the theme of imperial self-restraint. But it is also true that before and after this time arguments were being made by prominent statesmen at Taizong's court who were anxious over the emperor's excessive use of power. The historians who included the petition in Xu Hui's *Jiu Tang shu* biography must have wanted to underline this point. Whatever her motives may have been, so impressed was the emperor with this petition that he is said to have rewarded Xu Hui generously. There is, however, no indication that Taizong was convinced to reduce his luxuries or his larger ambitions. Indeed, preparations for another military campaign in Korea continued apace. But Taizong would not live to command that expedition.

For, in July of the following year, 649, he was dead in Chang'an. We are told that Xu Hui's despair over his demise was so consuming and the memories of his kindnesses to her so acute that she became quite ill. She is reported as having said to those closest to her, "The favor that I have been burdened with is truly deep; and my resolution lies in an early death. If it be that one's soul [after death] is possessed of consciousness, then my wish is to serve at the chamber of His long-bowered sleep."⁹⁰ Within a year, sometime in 650, after Taizong's son and successor Li Zhi 李治 (better known as Gaozong 高宗) had inaugurated the Yonghui 永徽 reign-period, Xu Hui departed this world. She was posthumously awarded the title of "Worthy Consort" (*xianfei* 賢妃), the lowest of the first-rank designations for the sovereign's principal wives. She was also granted the privilege of satellite burial within Taizong's mausoleum, the Zhaoling 昭陵, where, we imagine, her soul has faithfully served his in the everlasting night.

The influence enjoyed by Xu Hui as one of the emperor's women benefited other members of her immediate family. A younger sister

⁸⁹ See *JTS* 51, p. 2165; *XTS* 76, p. 3470.

⁹⁰ Her *JTS* biography says she wrote a heptametric poem and also contributed to a linked-verse composition to express her thoughts at this time; but these are not preserved.

would eventually become “Preferred Helpmate” to Gaozong (though all of that monarch’s too-appealing women would gradually be put in the shade or in the grave by the redoubtable empress Wu); she was said to have literary talent as well, but we know nothing of her works or even her name. Xu Hui’s younger brother, Xu Qidan 徐齊聃 (ca. 630–672?), received an initial appointment under Taizong, as magistrate of Taolin 桃林 (present-day Lingbao county, He’nan), owing to his older sister’s preferment. He later went on to a successful bureaucratic career in his own right under Gaozong, holding positions as a drafter in the Secretariat, an academician in the Chongwen College 崇文館, and tutor to the crown prince who would later become emperor Ruizong 睿宗.⁹¹

It was Xu Qidan’s son, Xu Jian 徐堅 (659–729), in whom the family’s official fortunes and scholarly prowess reached a new fulfillment in the first quarter of the next century.⁹² Xu Jian, posthumous nephew of the worthy consort, born nine years after her death, would gather to himself the imposing ranks and titles of grandee of bright emolument, acting as constant attendant and unassigned cavalier, literatus of the Academy of Assembled Worthies, associate master of the Academy Library, and duke opening up the principality of Donghai county 光祿大夫行右散騎常侍集賢院學士副知院事東海郡開國公. A long-serving court scholar and official, he was part of the commission responsible for the large encyclopedia *Sanjiao zhuying* 三教珠英, completed in 701, was a particular friend of the important historiographer Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) and of the influential poet and statesman Zhang Yue 張說 (667–731).⁹³ After Xu Jian’s death in 729 he was canonized by court order, a mark of his own official reputation. More importantly for posterity, he is known as the chief editor of the invaluable commonplace book called *Chuxue ji* 初學記. Presented to the throne in 726 and originally meant for the education of the young imperial princes, this

⁹¹ Biographies in *JTS* 190A, p. 4988 (in the section on literary figures), and *XTS* 199, p. 5661. Two of his court memorials are preserved in *QTW* 168, pp. 12a–13a. Ruizong remembered his tutor and honored Qidan with a posthumous elevation in rank upon becoming emperor in 684. This seems to have been one of the few imperial actions he was allowed without interference from Wu Zhao who was herself by then effectively emperor.

⁹² Biographies in *JTS* 102, pp. 3175–76, and *XTS* 199, pp. 5662–63. A number of his official documents may be found in *QTW* 272, p. 13a and nine poems in *QTS* 107, pp. 1111–13. For a sense of his role in early eighth-century court scholarship, see the many mentions of him in David McMullen, *State and Scholars in Tang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988).

⁹³ Zhang Yue is yet another example of someone whose date of death has long been given in error: he died on February 9, 731, not in 730 as usually given. Notice of this some years ago (Kroll, “On the Date of Chang Yüeh’s Death,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 2.2 [1980], pp. 264–65) has begun to have an effect on reference works from China, owing largely to its being publicized in Chen Zuyan 陳祖言, *Zhang Yue nianpu* 張說年譜 (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 1984), p. 87.

thirty-chapter collection of scholarly knowledge, famous quotations, and pithy parallel couplets of use in literary composition remains today an important reference work consulted by every serious student of Tang texts.⁹⁴

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>HS</i>	<i>Han shu</i> 漢書
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Jiu Tang shu</i> 舊唐書
<i>QTS</i>	<i>Quan Tang shi</i> 全唐詩
<i>QTW</i>	<i>Quan Tang wen</i> 全唐文
<i>WYYH</i>	<i>Wenyuan yinghua</i> 文苑英華
<i>XTS</i>	<i>Xin Tang shu</i> 新唐書

⁹⁴ On the compilation and subsequent publication history of the *Chuxue ji*, see Hu Daojing 胡道靜, *Zhongguo gudai de leishu* 中國古代的類書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), pp. 94–102; other Tang encyclopedias are discussed on pp. 77–94, 102–15. See also the remarks of McMullen, *State and Scholars*, pp. 219–20.