

Transforming Archetypes in Chinese Poetry and Painting: The Case of Ts'ai Yen

A twelfth-century painting depicts Ts'ai Yen's 蔡琰 (Lady Wen-chi 文姬; 176? – early 200s) return from twelve years of captivity and hardship among the nomads of northwest China. (fig. 1)¹ The lady walks, wearily but with dignity, up the steps from the outer gate of her family compound to be received by her kin. She appears composed; her relatives are so overcome with emotion that they cover their mouths or their entire faces with their sleeves. The house is clearly a wealthy one in the capital: the entrance leads to at least one other courtyard and many buildings beyond; the house throngs with attendants, and male servants scuttle to bring in her luggage. Outside the gate, the streets bustle with carts, horses, and pedestrians. In composition, the scene is identical to paintings of the first scene of her abduction, but in those the teahouse opposite her compound was tightly shuttered, and the streets swarmed with dark-clad nomad horsemen.² All is now returned to peace and prosperity. When

This paper was originally part of a panel, "Transforming Archetypes in Chinese Poetry and Painting," organized for the Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in 1992. In addition to my own paper, those by Maggie Bickford and Charles Lachman appear in this issue of *Asia Major*. The fourth, by Charles Hartman, appears in a recent issue of the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* (see n. 12, below). I would like to express my appreciation for their criticism and insight, which have been crucial to the cohesion of all the papers. I also wish to thank James Trilling for his rigorous instruction in the methods of art criticism.

¹ The larger narrative handscroll would have included the poetic texts along with their corresponding visual renderings. It is reproduced in Kojiro Tomita, *Portfolio of Chinese Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Han to Sung Periods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1938), plates 61–64. For a chronology of the handscroll paintings on the theme of Ts'ai Yen's captivity, see Robert A. Rorex, "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Ts'ai Wen-chi" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University 1974); and Robert A. Rorex and Wen Fong, *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Lady Wen-chi. A Fourteenth Century Handscroll in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974).

² See, e.g., the first scene in the suite, dated to the 14th c., in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in Rorex and Fong, *Eighteen Songs*.

Ts'ai Yen is restored to her family, the city and house are essentially unchanged.

But — who says she lived happily ever after? There is no such evidence from the historical accounts of Ts'ai Yen's life, nor from the poems traditionally ascribed to her. The unhappy facts are well known and very different from the uplifting image of the painting. The transformation from a tragic to a happy ending was sudden and decisive. The two Ts'ai Yens thus created parted company forever, the happy one living on in poetry and painting, the tragic one a distant memory.

This phenomenon is what I call a transforming archetype. Although not necessarily acknowledged, it is common in many aspects of Chinese literature and art, particularly where different art forms influence or draw on one another. The relation of painting and poetry is paradigmatic, and the Ts'ai Yen story serves as a paradigm for that paradigm. I shall examine the original poetic archetype of Ts'ai Yen, its moment of transformation, and the process by which the new version became canonical. The narrative handscrolls of the story of Lady Wen-chi depend not on the original poems attributed to the historical Ts'ai Yen, but on a revisionist sequence composed in the eighth century.

As described in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, the historical Ts'ai Yen was widowed young, and without children, and so returned to her father's house.³ There she was captured in 192 by a raiding party of non-Chinese mercenaries, troops in the pay of the rebel Tung Cho 董卓 (d. 192). Carried to the lands of the Southern Hsiung-nu 匈奴 in present-day Inner Mongolia, she was forced to become the wife of a chieftain. Ts'ai Yen bore two sons to her husband in exile, then was obliged to leave them behind when, in 206, she was ransomed by Ts'ao Ts'ao 曹操 (155–220). Ts'ai Yen was actually the last surviving member of her eminent clan, and as such she was important in Ts'ao Ts'ao's efforts to consolidate power: he needed her to placate the ancestor spirits of an influential family that had been destroyed in the recent struggles.

³ Fan Yeh 范曄 (398–445), *Hou Han shu* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-ch'ü, 1965) 84, "Tung Ssu ch'i chuan" 董祀妻傳, pp. 2800–6.

Upon her return, so that she might appear at court, Ts'ai Yen was given a new Chinese husband, Tung Ssu 董祀. Although her family had been restored to its former status by Ts'ao Ts'ao, the lady found herself ostracized at court, in part because of her degrading, multiple marriages. Any joy of returning from exile was undercut by the fact that her children were left in the steppe, and her home, upon her return, was no more. In the *Hou Han Shu* biography, a poem ascribed to her attests this:

When I arrived, my family was all gone,
Again I was without even a distant relative.
The city wall had become a mountain forest,
The courtyards and pavilions sprouted brambles.
White bones of who knows whom
Strewn in all directions with no one to cover them up.
I went outside the gates, but not a human sound —
Just the wolves howling and yelping;
Desolate, I faced my orphan shadow,
Grief and anger swelled in my entrails.⁴

This was by no means the end of her troubles. Her biography gives further details of her life at court after her return, and leaves the description of her life among the nomads to the "Poem of Affliction." Not long after Ts'ai Yen's return and reinstatement, the

⁴ "Poem of Affliction," ll. 87–96, trans. Dore J. Levy, in *Chinese Narrative Poetry* (Durham: Duke U.P., 1988) pp. 125–28. Three poetic compositions are attributed to the Eastern Han poet Ts'ai Yen: "Poem of Affliction" ("Pei-fen shih" 悲憤詩 the narrative poem in *wu-yen* 五言 meter cited here; a second lament, also titled "Poem of Affliction" ("Pei-fen shih") but written in a meter known as *chiu ko* 九歌 ("Nine Songs"), emulating a form used in the ancient *Ch'u Tz'u* 楚辭; and a poem sequence, "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute," a suite of eighteen poems or stanzas varying in length from six to eleven lines, also in *chiu ko* meter. All three purport to be autobiographical laments depicting the ordeals of capture and exile of a noble Chinese lady during the fall of the Han dynasty. While there is debate whether Ts'ai Yen herself actually wrote the poems, their biographical accuracy is not in question, and on the basis of that assumption the poems have had significant influence on the tradition of narrative poetry. A summary of the debate on authorship and complete translations are in Hans H. Frankel, "Cai Yan and the Poems Attributed to Her," *CLEAR* 5 (1983), pp. 133–56.

unfortunate Tung Ssu offended Ts'ao Ts'ao and was condemned to death. His wife, fully aware of her notoriety, challenged Ts'ao Ts'ao's sentence *before* the court and asked him if he would provide her with yet another husband. Tung Ssu was spared.⁵ While the lady must have presented a formidable personality, the power of her plea for her husband's life rested on the known facts of her long exile and political victimization.

Ts'ai Yen's life is full of crises whose outcome is always determined by forces beyond her control. In history and in the poems ascribed to her, Ts'ai Yen personifies gritty survival, without hope or free choice. Her final return to China is especially pathetic because the desolation of her home mocks the hope that made possible her endurance of exile. The fact that her individuality seems to have survived her suffering reveals a dignity and even defiance, making her bold face-off with Ts'ao Ts'ao seem "in character." In her own right, yet in very different guise, she became one of the most striking female archetypes in Chinese culture, particularly in narrative painting.

It is important at this point to distinguish between the character role assigned to Ts'ai Yen in the poems and paintings about her life, and her original identity. These two aspects of Ts'ai Yen's representation evolved along quite different paths. By character role I mean the emblematic traits that come to be associated with a historical or literary figure, but may be transferred to other such figures. In the most schematic sense, the character role of Ts'ai Yen is the noble lady preserving her integrity in strange and hostile surroundings. This character role is conflated with other ladies in similar distress, such as the Han imperial concubine Wang Chao-chün 王昭君 and the unnamed lady of Ch'ang-an, the exile-cum-survivor eyewitness in "The Song of the Lady of Ch'in" ("Ch'in-fu yin" 秦婦吟) by the late-T'ang poet Wei Chuang 魏莊 (c. 834-910). The original identity of Ts'ai Yen is the person herself, and the inalienable facts of her experience. These are known through at least the two laments in her *Hou Han shu* biography, the biography itself, and possibly through the "Eighteen Songs," circulated in an anthology or text of a dramatic

performance now lost.⁶

Ts'ai Yen's identity was fundamentally changed by the mid-T'ang poet Liu Shang 劉商 (fl. 773). Liu Shang wrote a new sequence modeled on Ts'ai Yen's, likewise entitled "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute."⁷ But Liu Shang's version had a *happy* ending. Where the original Ts'ai Yen returns to find her home transformed literally into a howling desert, Liu Shang's version brings her back, weary but with her dignity intact, to a real home, with family surviving. Such treatment of the story indicates a willingness not only to avoid painful subject matter, but even to subvert events and personalities to "inspirational" ends. Yet it was the revised, or, rather, revisionist version, and not the original, which became the inspiration for later poets, and for most of the "Lady Wen-chi" handscroll paintings. In other words, Ts'ai Yen did not assume her most influential position as a cultural archetype until she had undergone a palliating process which stripped her image of a great part of its vividness and gave it a moral impact quite different from that of the historical figure.

As stated above, the transforming archetype is a phenomenon by no means confined to the story of Ts'ai Yen. It is pervasive throughout Chinese culture. Strictly speaking, whether the archetypal figure is historical or fictional is immaterial. The permutations of Wang Chao-chün range through lyric poetry, popular theater, and

⁶ For a discussion of character roles and identity, see Levy, *Narrative Poetry*, chap. 3. The analysis focuses on the "Poem of Affliction" and the evolution of the character of Ts'ai Yen as an archetype in later narrative poetry. In this chapter, I refer to "character identity" as "character type," a more general term meant to allow for recognizable archetypes not particularly identified with historical persons. In the case of Ts'ai Yen, however, the archetype and the historical figure are so completely bound up as to constitute a unique "identity."

⁷ The circulation of the sequence attributed to Ts'ai Yen is obscure until it was anthologized in the late-11th c. by Kuo Mao-ch'ien 郭茂倩 in *Yüeh-fu shih chi* 樂府詩集 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1979) 59, pp. 860-65. Subsequently, no less a critic than Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130-1200) included the sequence in his *Ch'u Tz'u Hou-yü* 楚辭後語 (in *Ch'u-tz'u chi-chu* 集注 [Shanghai: Ku-chi, 1979]), 3, pp. 12b-19b, and his assertion of its authenticity was taken on faith by the vast majority of critics until quite recently. In this century, the historical and artistic context of Ts'ai's poems has been the subject of much scholarly debate; Kuo Mo-jo 郭沫若 et al., *Hu-chia shih-pa p'ai t'ao-lun chi* 胡笳十八拍討論集 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1959); and Frankel, "Cai Yan."

⁵ *Hou Han shu* 84, p. 2803.

even a novel.⁸ Another notorious shift transmogrifies the tragic heroine Ts'ui Ying-ying 崔鶯鶯. Her first incarnation was as the disaffected heroine of the terse short story by Yüan Chen 元稹 (779-831) titled "The Story of Ying-ying" ("Ying-ying chuan" 鶯鶯傳). In later dramas Ying-ying's caddish lover is a reformed character, returning to his beleaguered bride after taking high honors in the national examinations.⁹ The irony of this particular transformation, at least, was noted by the author of *The Story of the Stone* (*Shih-t'ou chi* 石頭記). There, the touchy and passionate Lin Tai-yü 林黛玉 harks back to Yüan Chen's Ying-ying; however, Tai-yü deludes herself by identifying with the later, happily-ever-after archetype, compounding the tragedy of her doomed love for her cousin Chia Pao-yü 賈寶玉.¹⁰

These are just a few literary examples. Archetypes may be individuals, stories, or visual images that because of the continuity and conservatism of Chinese culture have gained meaning over centuries of social and artistic evolution. As they became ever more firmly established as points of artistic or literary reference, their meanings, especially in the political and ethical spheres, became codified. The life-cycle of an archetype does not always run from grim beginnings to rose-tinted maturity, but even subtle variations may, depending on context, produce a figure which would be unrecognizable to its originator.

This process offers a double challenge. On the one hand, it is a process of accretion. We cannot appreciate the emotional power of archetypes in isolation from their history, and this means tracing each one to its source. On the other hand, it is a process of revision.

⁸ See Kwong Hing Foon, "L'évolution du théâtre populaire depuis les Ming jusqu'à nos jours: Le cas de Wang Zhaojun," *TP* 72.4-5 (1991), pp. 179-225; and idem, *Wang Zhaojun: Une héroïne chinoise de l'histoire à la légende* (Paris: Collège de France, 1986).

⁹ James R. Hightower, "Yüan Chen and 'The Story of Ying-ying,'" *HJAS* 33 (1973), pp. 90-123; Li-li Ch'en, *Master Tung's Western Chamber Romance* (*Tung Hsi-hsiang chu-kung-tiao*): *A Chinese Chantefable* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976); Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema, eds. and trans., *Wang Shifu: The Moon and the Zither: The Story of the Western Wing, With a Study of its Woodblock Illustrations by Yao Daijun* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1991).

¹⁰ Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in 曹雪芹 (1715-1763), *Shih-t'ou chi* 石頭記, first published 1792.

At crucial points in their history, we find supposedly unshakeable archetypes, verbal or visual, diverging significantly from their sources. In many cases, the divergence effectively severs the archetype from its original context, and its emotional, political, and moral values are transformed to suit a new context.

But beyond Ts'ai Yen's particular case, such studies implicitly question the dynamics of text and image. The Chinese tradition has two ways of treating this relation. The first depends upon *explicit* texts; in other words, paintings faithfully illustrate specific poems or other literary works. The Wen-chi handscrolls all depend on explicit texts, which usually accompany the paintings.¹¹ The second type depends upon *implicit* texts: a given painting is not a direct illustration of a particular poem or other text, but alludes to a far-flung body of textual materials which the viewer would be expected to recognize.¹²

The mid-T'ang shift from the historical Ts'ai Yen to the revisionist figure can only be understood by reference to the cultural setting of the period. After the devastating rebellion of An Lu-shan from 755-763, China witnessed important changes in art and literature, brought on in part by the shock of the rebellion, and to a lesser degree by the brilliance of the aesthetic culture of the high-T'ang court under the emperor Hsüan-tsung 玄宗 (r. 715-755).¹³ The rebellion's blow to

¹¹ For another example of the specific dependence of a visual archetype on its accompanying verbal source, see Maggie Bickford, "Stirring the Pot of State," also in this issue of *Asia Major*. *Mei-hua hsi-shen p'u* marks the evolution of plum blossoms from an image of sensual beauty to one of enduring friendship and political loyalty.

¹² See Charles Lachman, "Why Did the Patriarch Cross the River? The Rushleaf Bodhidharma Reconsidered," also in this issue; and Charles Hartman, "Literary and Visual Interactions in Lo Chih-ch'uan's *Crows in Old Trees*," *Metropolitan Museum of Art: Metropolitan Museum Journal* 28 (1993), pp. 129-67. Lachman's article demonstrates how a visual archetype can be dependent on an implicit text from an entirely different part of the cultural tradition: the origin of the breezy image of the "Rushleaf Bodhidharma" is in strictly non-Buddhist sources, particularly the *Shih ching*. In "Crows in Old Trees," Hartman describes the complex literary background of a single image, and suggests how a cultural crisis could invest familiar imagery with new meanings. The crows, the old trees, and the pheasants converge in light of the painter's own experience to reveal an allegory of hopeless loyalism under a foreign oppressor.

¹³ Yen Yü 嚴羽, Kuo Shao-yü 郭紹虞, ed., *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua chiao-shih* 滄浪詩話校釋 (Peking: Jen-min, 1962), part 2 ("Shih-t'i" 詩體). For a literary-historical

the morale of the Chinese aristocracy and to literary culture produced radical changes in the attitudes of intellectuals toward the proper subject matter of art, and the function of art in society. While Confucian ethics had always elevated didactic purpose in literature, the trends of the mid-T'ang emphasized didactic purpose specifically in poetry and poetic criticism.¹⁴

The didacticism of the mid-T'ang included a tendency to revise history in a distinctly sentimental light. The most familiar example of this is the "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" ("Ch'ang-hen ko" 長恨歌) by Po Chū-i 白居易 (772-846). Written in 808, a mere fifty years after the T'ang's near-debacle, the poem takes the events that brought the dynasty to its knees and transforms them into a romance.¹⁵ While a lesson may be drawn from the story of the emperor who nearly sacrificed all for the sake of a woman, the consequences of this folly for the empire at large are definitely subordinate to the theme of passionate and eternal love.

There was also a flurry of "new" versions of old poems, now reworked to soften the impact of their grim subject matter.¹⁶ An aesthetic of nostalgia was adapted to the themes of important traditional poems, erasing to a great extent the moral and historical issues of the original models. Liu Shang consistently imposed this aesthetic throughout his version of Ts'ai Yen's poem sequence.¹⁷ His

discussion of the mid-T'ang, see Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1981), p. 320. For the social and political aftermath of the An Lu-shan rebellion, see C. A. Peterson, "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, *Sui and T'ang China, 589-906, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1979), pp. 464-560; and Michael Dalby, "Court Politics in Late T'ang Times," *ibid.*, pp. 561-680, esp. 561-85.

¹⁴ Charles Hartman, *Han Yü and the T'ang Search for Unity* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1987); Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yü* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1975).

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Levy, *Narrative Poetry*, pp. 70-76.

¹⁶ For the impact of the fall of Hsüan-tsung's court on the thematic and formal development of poetry, see Kang-i Sun Chang, *The Evolution of Chinese Tz'u Poetry: From Late T'ang to Northern Sung* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1980), pp. 5-15; for the revisionist impulse as it relates to narrative poems, see Levy, *Narrative Poetry*, pp. 90ff.

¹⁷ Many of the differences are subtle, and may have an equal basis in clichés of T'ang *yüeh-fu* poetry. On the development of *yüeh-fu* and its characteristics during

"Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute" is one of the most influential of the mid-T'ang's "new" versions of old topics, his influence extending far beyond his own historical context to speak to a period of similar crisis at the beginning of the Southern Sung dynasty.¹⁸

Ts'ai Yen's own poem sequence is dominated, indeed almost overwhelmed, by a voice of resentment, crying against the injustice of the universe as it devolves upon her. The first person pronoun, *wo* 我 is repeated again and again — *my* life, *my* times, *my* integrity, *my* widow's chastity, which greatly strengthens the sense of the sequence as an autobiographical work.¹⁹ This strong "I" describes herself as being in the center of the cataclysms sweeping the country, with an agony ranging from the personal to the universal levels of experience. Although she attempts to give vent to her feelings in a song sequence composed for the *ch'in* (琴, the Chinese zither) and the *hu-chia* (胡笳, nomad-style flute), she doubts that even expressing her grief will help assuage it, because no one could comprehend it: "Whom can I possibly tell of my calamity, shame and grief?/ One measure for the nomad flute, one stanza for the *ch'in*, / No one can know my heart's agony and anger!"²⁰

Liu Shang's sequence is much softened from the beginning, with a much more passive, "feminine" subject distanced from the drastic causes of her affliction. The poet's detached voice is revealed

the T'ang, see Hans H. Frankel, "The Development of Han and Wei *Yüeh-fu* as a High Literary Genre," and Zhou Zhenfu, "The Legacy of the Han, Wei and Six Dynasties *Yüeh-fu* Tradition and Its Further Development in T'ang Poetry," both in Lin Shuen-fu and Stephen Owen, eds., *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T'ang* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1986), pp. 255-86, 287-95.

¹⁸ For a study of the imperially sanctioned policies of encouraging art to reflect dynastic revival, see Julia K. Murray, "The Role of Art in the Southern Sung Dynastic Revival," *Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies* 19 (1987), pp. 41-59.

¹⁹ For the importance of pronouns in establishing narrative voice in Chinese poetry, and their relation to autobiographical expression, see Levy, *Narrative Poetry*, pp. 59-61, 82-84, 118-20. For the contemplative side of autobiographical poetry, see Stephen Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography," in Lin and Owen, eds., *Vitality of the Lyric Voice*, pp. 71-102.

²⁰ Ts'ai Yen, "Eighteen Songs," song 1, ll. 10-12. All translations are mine. For Ts'ai Yen's "Eighteen Songs," I have used Kuo, *Yüeh-fu shih chi* 59, pp. 860-65; and also the edition, with notes, by Su Che-ts'ung 蘇者聰, comp., *Chung-kuo li-tai ti nü tso-p'in hsüan* 中國歷代的女作品選 (Shanghai: Ku-chi, 1987), pp. 34-39.

in the first song: "How pitiful — a lovely woman swept off to barbarian lands!"²¹ Liu Shang's victim is pliant, grieved but accepting her fate, emphasizing the helpless passivity of women: "Early in life I met disaster because of my lovely face, / In vain I grieve that I am weak and yielding as water."²² The speaker in Ts'ai Yen's sequence laments the loss of her integrity, her autonomy; the speaker in Liu Shang's mourns that the harsh conditions among the nomads rob her of her looks.²³ Ts'ai Yen's "Eighteen Songs" never relieve her resentment. From start to finish, hers is a protest against the injustice of heaven and history for her suffering. Liu Shang softens her voice to a complaint, in the midst of a rich imagery of exotic landscape and strenuous travel.²⁴

In terms of sense of place, Ts'ai Yen gives rather little detail of life on the steppe, and even her account of the birth of her children is cast in terms of the distraction from her single-minded longing for home:

My nomad husband was fond of me, and we had two sons.

²¹ Liu Shang, "Eighteen Songs," song 1, l. 10. For Chinese text, see P'eng Ting-ch'iu 彭定求 et al., *Ch'üan T'ang shih* 全唐詩 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1960), sect. 303, vol. 10, pp. 3450-53.

²² *Ibid.*, song 3, ll. 7-8, p. 3451.

²³ For the topos of "the beauty despoiled," see Eugene Eoyang, "The Wang Chao-chün Legend: Configurations of the Classic," *CLEAR* 4.1 (1983), p. 5.

²⁴ This contrast of the voices may offer insight into the question of Ts'ai Yen's authorship. While I doubt the argument that "only a person who had actually suffered as she did could possibly have written it so powerfully" (Rexi Alley, *The Eighteen Laments by Ts'ai Wen-chi, Later Han Dynasty* [Peking: New World Press, 1963], foreword), there is nevertheless a startling contrast between the ways in which the two poets treat their female speaker's voice. The Ts'ai Yen sequence is direct, passionate, and full of fury, adhering to none of the "feminine" stereotypes of poetry written in the woman's voice that had crystalized long before Liu Shang's time. I would go so far as to say it would be impossible for any poet, male or female, to write the Han-era sequence as if in a woman's voice after the fifth century, because the "gendering" of women's voices in poetry then became too firmly fixed. While the scholars represented in Kuo, *Hu-chia shih-pa p'ai*, range broadly on the matter of authenticity, there are several affirming an early date, including Kuo Mo-juo. Other proponents of an early date are Lin Chün-jung 林俊榮, *Wei Chin Nan-pei ch'ao wen-hsüeh tso-p'in hsüan* 魏晉南北朝文學作品選 (Ch'ang-ch'un: Chi-lin, 1980), pp. 38-40; and Okamura Sadao 岡村貞雄, "Sai En no sakuhi no shingi" 蔡琰の作品の真偽 *Nihon Chügoku gakkai hō* 日本中國學會報 23 (1971), pp. 20-35.

I nurtured them, I brought them up, I can feel no shame for this,
I felt for them, pitied them, born in the far frontier.²⁵

By contrast, Liu Shang gives detailed vignettes of life on the steppe, and strikes a rapturous note when Ts'ai Yen's first child is born:

When I found I would bear a barbarian child, I wanted to kill myself;
After he was born, the feelings a mother has for her child arose as a matter of course.
His face unlike mine, his language strange, but revulsion turns to love,
Spontaneously in my heart I feel our mutual attachment.
Day by day, night after night, he is before my eyes,
How could I not love the child of my womb, reared by my hand?²⁶

In Ts'ai Yen's own poems, once her children are born, her love for them tempers all of her later experience on the steppe, but even this cannot be a source of lasting happiness, since it crushes the joy of her return to China. The famous parting scene is harrowing, both in the narrative poems and in the sequence. The "Poem of Affliction" emphasizes the dramatic aspect of the scene, while the sequence's thirteenth song stresses the emotional:

My children came forward, hung around my neck,
Crying, "Mother, where are you going?
They say you must go away,
But how will we ever be reunited?
Mother, you have always been so loving, so indulgent,
How can you now be so unkind to us?
We have not yet grown to manhood,

²⁵ Ts'ai Yen, song 11, ll. 6-8; Kuo, *Yüeh-fu* 59, p. 861.

²⁶ Liu Shang, song 10, ll. 3-8; *CTS*, p. 3452.

How could you not look back and long for us?"
 To see them this way crushed my very vitals,
 Distressed as I was, I became as one demented.
 Wailing and crying, hands clutching, caressing,
 As I was about to go, I turned back yet again.²⁷

I had never dreamed I would ever go home again;
 I caress, I embrace my nomad sons, my flowing tears soak our
 clothes.

To escort me the envoy from China has a team of horses,
 My nomad children wail 'til they lose their voices — alas! who
 could have known

That while we still lived there would come a time for a separation
 like death?

My longing for my children makes the sun lose its light,

Where can I find wings to carry me back to you?

Step by step I am farther away, though my feet can hardly go on,

Our souls devastated, our shadows cut apart, just our love is
 left to us.²⁸

Contrast these with Liu Shang's version:

Do not suppose that my nomad children cause me to feel
 shame,

Everyone speaks of their children with love.

Our hands have ten fingers: some are long, some are short,

But sever one, and the pain is the same whichever one it is.

When I go home, how could I not be reunited with my [own]
 family?

My thoughts of my ruined family will then be as cut off as the
 living are from the dead.²⁹

Here, Liu Shang suggests that distance will erase the emotion

of the lady's ties to life on the steppe, and indeed, in his sequence after the nomads turn back she never refers to them again. In Ts'ai Yen's sequence, each stanza increases her misery: she dreams of being reunited with her children, waking to renewed sense of loss; she tracks the movement of the stars as they reflect her impossible distance from them; the first glimpse of a Chinese city arouses resentment over her unique suffering. Liu Shang's transformation of the archetype, however, culminates with the decisive change in the last song of the sequence:

When I returned to my old home, I met with my kinfolk;
 The fields and garden were half gone wild, but the spring
 grass was bright green.

Bright candles again were burning from among the rubble
 and ashes,

In the cold spring I washed again, a jade piece sunk in mud;

As I put on my headcloth and comb, I felt how good our
 rituals are —

Once I plucked my silk-stringed, t'ung wood lute, I could
 have died content.

Since I went out through the passes, it has been twelve years:
 My sorrows are all set down in these "Songs of a Nomad Flute."³⁰

This inspirational finale restores Ts'ai Yen to her pre-abduction existence in almost every detail. The only trace of her experience is the poem sequence, recalling in a series of lyric vignettes an adventure, which now fades and disappears in the bosom of Chinese solidarity. Compare this last song with Ts'ai Yen's "own" description of the return to her home village, in the "Poem of Affliction," and in the two final songs:

In my seventeenth song, my heart and nose are sore as if they
 inhaled vinegar,

Passes and mountains, dangerous and long — the road brutal
 to travel.

²⁷ Ts'ai Yen, "Poem of Affliction," ll. 61-72; Levy, *Chinese Narrative Poetry*, p. 127.

²⁸ Ts'ai Yen, song 13, ll. 1-9, Kuo, *Yüeh-fu* 59, p. 861.

²⁹ Liu Shang, song 14; *CTS* p. 3453.

³⁰ Liu Shang, song 18; *CTS* p. 3453.

When I left, I longed for my home soil, I had no idea what
 would happen;
 When I came back, separated from my sons, my thoughts of
 them flow on and on.
 Wormwood on the frontier lands — brittle twigs, dry leaves,
 White bones on the desert battlefields — blade wounds, arrow
 scars.
 Wind-borne frost chills, chills; spring and summer are cold,
 Men and horses hungry, weary; bones and flesh too meagre.
 How could I know I would come again to Ch'ang-an —
 I give a great sigh, as if to break; tears fill my eyes.

The nomad flute originally came from the nomads themselves,
 Matched with the *ch'in*, their music follows the same patterns.
 With these eighteen stanzas, my song is finished,
 But the tones continue, and my longing is without end.
 From this we know how subtle strings and pipes may be; they
 reflect the work of creation,
 In sorrow and joy they follow men's hearts, and transform to
 match them,
 The nomads and the Chinese — different lands, different
 customs,
 Heaven and earth separate us, alas! — children west, mother
 east.
 Bitter am I, angry my spirit, flooding to the great void,
 The length and breadth of the universe cannot contain this
 feeling!⁵¹

Here, any joy of returning to China from exile is undercut by the fact that Ts'ai Yen's children stayed behind with the nomads, and her home, upon her return, she finds to be no more. In Liu Shang's treatment of the story the emotional endurance and essential identity of the original Lady Wen-chi have been sacrificed. In the poems attributed to Ts'ai Yen she was the outraged individual denied control of her own fate through violence, and a voice of protest

⁵¹ Ts'ai Yen, songs 17 and 18; Kuo, *Yüeh-fu* 59, p. 862.

against a political struggle. Liu Shang's Lady Wen-chi, however, has been reduced to a helpless female whose terror and hardship — even the loss of her children — are soothed by an apparently full restoration of everything she went without in exile. Liu Shang's hint of a theme of loyalty and smug affirmation of the power of Chinese culture transformed the pre-T'ang archetype of Ts'ai Yen, and at this point in its literary evolution the figure of Ts'ai Yen as an individual was decisively separated from a good part of the original issues and events.

The influence of the poems attributed to Ts'ai Yen herself diverged according to the functions of character role and original identity. The "Poem of Affliction" lent the role of the Chinese noblewoman in forced exile, as well as the voice of alienation, to later, long narrative poems. The "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute" transmitted the character identity to the mid-T'ang, where it was transformed. It was Liu Shang's version, with its happy ending, that became the inspiration for later poets, and it is this version that became the subject and often the text for a number of paintings, particularly narrative handscrolls.

The appeal of Liu Shang's version for painters was twofold. The revision had far greater scope for anecdotal variation, and its many lyric vignettes of life among the nomads on the steppe lent themselves to the romanticizing genre of nomad painting. The original made any kind of "exotic travelog" interpretation unthinkable. It provided psychological insight, but of a kind that left no room for variation.⁵² The strength of that personal voice, the account of events, the sense of extended moral dilemma all serve to define the historical Ts'ai Yen. As her options are stripped away, as her voice protests and laments the injustice of heaven, she is finally all that is left. This aspect of utter desolation and powerful voice was evoked by the poet Tu Fu 杜甫 (712-770) in his progress through the shattered landscape of the empire during the An Lu-shan rebellion. His poem sequence

⁵² In his chapter on the illustrations of the poems attributed to Ts'ai Yen, Rorex comments, "These poems are narrative, but they do not always lend themselves to the creation of narrative pictures illustrating them. The artist has to go beyond the meager resources so far as visual images are concerned of some of the poems" (*Eighteen Songs*, pp. 182-3).

"In the Ch'ien-yüan Period I Lodge in T'ung-ku Subprefecture and Write Seven Songs" (*Ch'ien-yüan chung yü chu T'ung-ku hsien tso ko ch'i shou* 乾元中寓居同谷縣作歌七首; 759), draws on the alienation and despair of the earlier suite, but Tu Fu's landscape is that of his homeland. While Tu Fu does not mention Ts'ai Yen by name, the final couplets of the individual poems have distinct affinities of language and meter with the first seven poems of Ts'ai Yen's "Eighteen Songs." Tu Fu must not only have been familiar with her poems and her story; he must also have felt that invoking her experience was a powerful way of characterizing his own apocalyptic age.³³

Later poets, such as the Northern Sung statesman Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021-1086), wrote sequences entitled "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute." Wang followed the mid-T'ang version more than the tough-minded original, although his composition clearly owes a debt to both.³⁴ The happy ending and the refurbished archetype gained even greater cultural significance under the first emperor of the Southern Sung, Kao-tsung 高宗 (r. 1127-1161). Prior to consolidation in the south, Kao-tsung's entire family — his wives, his father the emperor Hui-tsung 徽宗 (r. 1101-1126), and his brother Ch'in-tsung 欽宗 (r. 1127) — were held hostage by the Chin Tatars, who had conquered the northern plains. Kao-tsung was the only one to escape to China, and the only one to return at all, with one important exception. After many years, and after the conclusion of a humiliating peace treaty with the Chin, Kao-tsung's mother was finally returned to China in 1142.³⁵ From that moment, the absolute primacy of the happy ending was fixed forever in poetry and painting.³⁶ Even in

³³ See *Tu Shao-ling chi hsiang chu* 杜少陵集詳註, pp. 86-91. I am grateful to David Lattimore for providing me with his translation of this sequence, and for charting the correspondences between the two. For a discussion of the political and moral content of these poems, see Chou Shan, "Tu Fu's Social Conscience: Compassion and Topicality in His Poetry," *HJAS* 51.1 (1991), pp. 47-50.

³⁴ Wang An-shih, *Wang An-shih shih-chi* 王安石詩集 (rpt. Taipei: Kuang-wen, 1974), pp. 243-46.

³⁵ Murray, "Role of Art," pp. 42-44.

³⁶ Indeed, handscrolls depicting the Ts'ai Yen story were often identified as "Auspicious Omens of Kao-tsung's Return to the Throne," referring to the hoopla attending the dowager's return from exile. The album leaves now in the collection

this century, one of the critics most involved in the debate on Ts'ai Yen's poems, and one of the most vociferous defenders of her authorship, Kuo Mo-jo 郭沫若, could write an opera libretto based on her story which not only follows the revisionist version, but adds a special fillip at the end — Ts'ai Yen's children rush to her arms under the beaming countenance of a benevolent Ts'ao Ts'ao.³⁷

While it is clear that the most significant revision of the archetype of Ts'ai Yen took place at the hand of the otherwise obscure Liu Shang, treatments of her story continued to adjust to changing historical circumstances, especially in painting. We should note that all but one of the extant handscrolls with attached poems illustrate Liu Shang's rather than Ts'ai Yen's version of the "Eighteen Songs."³⁸ Individual scenes in all of them reveal developing knowledge of and interest in the life and culture of the northwestern nomads,³⁹ and individually nuanced interpretations of the story of the lady herself.

of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston were so titled: see Tomita, *Portfolio of Chinese Paintings*, p. 10. Other studies which explore the special applications of the Ts'ai Yen archetype to the "restoration" of the Sung in the South are Rorex, *Eighteen Songs*; Kojiro Tomita, "Wen-chi's Captivity in Mongolia and her Return to China," *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 26 (1928), pp. 40-45; John F. Haskins, "The Pazyryk Felt Screen and the Barbarian Captivity of Ts'ai Wen-chi," *BMFEA* 35 (1963), pp. 141-61; Wang Chu-fei, "Kuan-yü Ming mu Hu-chia shih-pa p'ai t'u ü i-hsieh wen-t'i" 關於明華胡笳十八拍圖的一些問題 (abstract titled "The Frontier as Seen in a Ming Copy of the 'Eighteen Songs' and Some Comparisons"), *WW* 6 (1959), pp. 36-37. Most recent, and with particular emphasis on the political rhetorical aspect of court-sponsored painting in the Southern Sung, are studies by Julia K. Murray: "A Southern Sung Painting Regains its Memory: *Welcoming the Imperial Carriages* (*Ying-luan t'u*) and Its Colophon," *Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies* 22 (1990-92), pp. 109-24; and "The Role of Art."

³⁷ Kuo Mo-jo, *Ts'ai Wen-chi* 蔡文姬 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1959).

³⁸ The exception is a handscroll with eighteen illustrations in the Nanking Museum. This handscroll is a late-Ming copy of an original in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (reg. nos. 28.62-28.65, Ross Collection), but is varied by a rather clumsy attempt to fit the painting sequence to the poems attributed to Ts'ai Yen. See Rorex, *Eighteen Songs*, and Shimada Shujiro, "Concerning the Handscroll Painting of Wen-chi's Return to China," *Yamato Bunka* やまと文化 37 (1962), pp. 18-30. There are several fragmentary representations of the Wen-chi story that seem to be based on her sequence, but unfortunately in each case the crucial climactic scene is lost: see Rorex, *Eighteen Songs*, chap. 2.

³⁹ See for example Rorex, "Some Liao Tomb Murals and Images of Nomads in Chinese Paintings of the Wen-chi Story," *Artibus Asiae* 45.2-3 (1984) pp. 174-97.

The complete handscroll in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fourteenth century) depicts the Lady Wen-chi in a variety of scenes of "everyday life" with the nomads, always in an attitude of dejection. Her nomad husband, who frequently accompanies her, shows remarkable solicitude: encouraging her to eat in the fifth scene ("Encampment by a Stream"), pointing out the constellations in the sixth scene ("The Constellation of the Dipper"), attending her on the birth of their son in the tenth scene ("A Child Is Born"), and escorting her on the first leg of her journey back to China (scenes 14 and 15).⁴⁰ In short, these narrative handscrolls illustrate their text precisely, relying on Liu Shang's personification of the noble Chinese lady in exile to guide their depiction of their subject, but adding their own level of interpretation by their depiction of the main characters, especially the nomad husband, barely mentioned in Liu Shang's poems.

A remarkable variation occurs in a single square album-leaf painting of the Southern Sung (late-twelfth or thirteenth century?), also in the Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 2).⁴¹ It is titled "Lady Wen-chi Returns to China," although this seems to refer to the suite from which it may have come rather than to the particular scene. The lady depicted must be Ts'ai Yen: she is riding on horseback, accompanied by her two sons, and attended by a nomad who can only be her husband, as no other male member of the household could be shown in such close proximity to her. The scene is peaceful — even happy: the children smile and look lovingly up into the faces of their parents, while the parents gaze serenely, if not downright affectionately, into each other's eyes.⁴² This is not a version of Ts'ai Yen's traumatic

farewell to her children, but an intimate vignette of her life among the nomads. The scene does not correspond to any moment from all known versions of the "Eighteen Songs," nor to any of the extant handscroll paintings. It is an excellent illustration of artistic innovation within a strong conventional system, and demonstrates that characterization and narrative elaboration do not flow exclusively from the literary tradition. Perhaps this image was meant to agree with T'ang and post-T'ang Confucian notions of the ideal woman, who is always a compliant wife no matter what the circumstances.⁴³ Or perhaps the artist wished to give some emotional background to Ts'ai Yen's wrenching separation from her nomad family. If the artist had been familiar with Ts'ai Yen's own poems, and there is no reason why not, the image may well reflect some sympathy with her later predicament, after her return to China. The carefree moment looks forward in bleak contrast to the lady's return to a home destroyed, a family eradicated, and a life at court as a despised political and social outcast.

Art forms such as poetry and painting are not just different in kind. They presuppose different heritages of images and ideas, and different conventions of interpretation. Except perhaps in illustration, they do not combine easily or mechanically, but demand a finely tuned awareness of both traditions from the artist and the reader/viewer. To combine image and text in a single work is an act

nomad chief and his son are eager and pleased, even if later restorers exaggerated Ts'ai Yen's compliance. See Rorex, *Eighteen Songs*, p. 205.

⁴³ An article by Yamazaki Jun'ichi 山崎純一, "Tōdai jokunsho niten *Joronga, Jokokyo kō*," 唐代女訓書二點女論語女孝經考 (in Ishikawa Tadahisa 石川忠久, ed., *Hoshikawa Hakushi taitai kinen Chūgoku bungaku ronsō* 星川博士退體紀念中國文學論叢 [Tokyo: Heifu, 1990]), examines the codifying texts for the proper deportment of ladies in the T'ang dynasty (*The Analects for Women and The Classic of Filial Piety for Women*), emphasizing the importance of modesty and patience in ladies of good family. This is a type evoked in the language of Liu Shang's sequence, and the passivity of the figure in the narrative paintings. I am grateful to Susan Cherniack for this reference. Julia K. Murray has examined the relationship of the *Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety* to painting; see "The *Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety* and Sung Textual Illustration: Problems of Reconstruction and Artistic Context," *Ars Orientalis* 18 (1988), pp. 95-124; and "Didactic Art for Women: *The Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety*," in Marsha Weidner, ed., *Flowering in the Shadows: Women in the History of Chinese and Japanese Painting* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1990), pp. 27-53.

⁴⁰ Rorex and Fong, *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*, provides a complete reproduction of the entire handscroll, with translations of the attached poems by Liu Shang, introduction, and commentary.

⁴¹ See Tomita, *Portfolio of Chinese Paintings*, pl. 102. Another fragment in the Museum of Fine Arts collection, perhaps early-12th c., depicts a nomad horseman about to mount (reg. no. 12.895, Chinese and Japanese Special Fund). What scene it is from, unfortunately, cannot be determined, but it may well have come from yet another "Eighteen Songs" suite.

⁴² Rorex notes that the painting shows signs of considerable retouching, especially the faces of the lady and the child she holds; however, the expressions of the

of interpretation. Both visual and verbal art have the power not only to create archetypes but to transform them in accordance with the needs of their time. A careful analysis of the traditions of text and image may reveal significant gaps between their accepted significance and their first origins.

A further question arises. The "right" interpretation of a painting is often fixed by a textual reference. Do paintings such as the suites called "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute" have the power to challenge, even transcend, their textual sources? When a painter, or a poet for that matter, takes a textual source and runs with it, who has the iconographical upper hand?

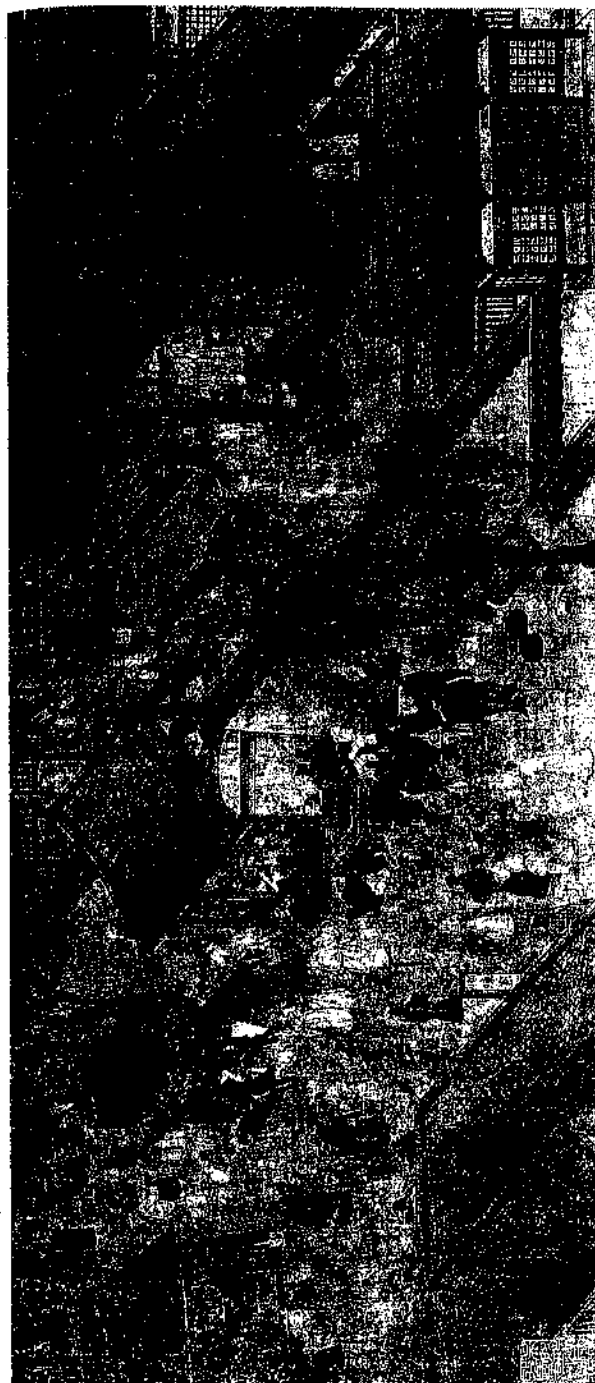


Figure 1. *Lady Wen-chi's Return to China*

Anonymous; early-12th c.

Possibly from handscroll; ink, colors, and gold on silk; 25 x 55.8 cm.

Denman Waldo Ross Collection (28.63); courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2. Lady Wen-chi's Return to China

Anonymous (once attrib. to Ku Te-chien); late-14th c.

Album leaf; ink and color on silk; 24 x 22.2 cm.

Chinese and Japanese Special Fund (12.898); courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston