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Eighteen Songs on a Nomad's Flute: The Return of Lady Cai Wenji

Eighteen Songs on a Nomad's Flute (*Hujia shiba pai* 胡茄十八拍): Eastern Han story of Cai Wenji 蔡文姬, daughter of the statesman and literatus Cai Yong 蔡邕. Wenji was abducted by the Southern Xiongnu 匈奴 in 195 CE and later returned to China.

At least 6 major painted versions, including fragments of an original album, ink and colors on silk, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 12th century (reign of Song Gaozong 宋高宗); a set by Li Tang, Southern Song, National Palace Museum, Taiwan; and a handscroll, ink and colors on silk, Metropolitan Museum, 14th century (Ming dynasty).

Illustrations are of a poem-cycle by the Tang-dynasty poet Liu Shang 劉商, ca. 773, based on the laments traditionally attributed to Lady Wenji (Poems of Lament and Resentment, *Beifen shi* 悲憤詩, included in the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, the History of the Latter Han, compiled ca. 440).

Liao 遼 Khitans Preparing Drinks, murals from the tomb of Zhang Shiqing, Xuanhua County, Hebei (Liao Khitan dynasty, 916-1125)

Ceramics: Ding 定-ware from Dingzhou, Hebei; *sancai* 三彩-glazed wares (plate with cloisonné glazes, vessel in the shape of a fish).

Landscapes of the Four Seasons, murals arranged in the main burial chamber of Liao emperor Shengzong's 遼聖宗 (r. 983-1030) tomb, Qingling, Inner Mongolia.

Deer in an Autumn Grove and Deer Among Red Maples, pair of hanging scrolls, ink and colors on silk (Liao dynasty, 904-1125). Cf. N. Song-dynasty writer Guo Ruoxu's 郭若虛 record of the gift of 5 paintings from the Liao emperor Shengzong to the Song court.

Kulun Banner, Jilin: Khitan aristocrat's tomb with Wenji's Return, dated 1088.

Gong Suran 宮素然 (early 12th century), Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 Rides Off to the Xiongnu, handscroll, ink on paper. Osaka Municipal Museum: Wang Zhaojun was a concubine in the harem of Han Emperor Yuandi 元帝, who volunteered to marry the Xiongnu khan Huhanye 呼韓邪. The artist was a Daoist nun from the southwestern province of Guizhou. Another version by Zhang Yu 張瑀 is in the Jilin Provincial Museum, identified by the Qing Qianlong emperor as the story of Wenji painted in the Jurchen Jin dynasty (115-1234)

Su Ruolan 蘇若蘭 and the *Xuanji tu* 璇璣圖 (Big Dipper Picture). Liao Tomb #2: Baoshan, Inner Mongolia: Su Ruolan sending a silk tapestry of *huiwen* 回文 poems to her husband.

Also: Portrait of Su Ruolan and Palindromic Poems, handscroll, ink and colors on silk, probably a 17th century copy of a Song-dynasty work (Sackler Museum, Harvard).

Anonymous, Southern Song (ca. 1142), Welcoming the Imperial Carriage, handscroll, ink and colors on silk. Shanghai Museum. Depicts the return from Jin/Jurchen captivity in 1142 of Empress Wei with the remains of N. Song Emperor Huizong and two empresses, and her welcome by Emperor Gaozong. Cf. poem cycle by Cao Xun 曹勛 on the imperial family's captivity in Jin/Jurchen territory.

Liu Shang, *Eighteen Songs on a Nomad's Flute* (excerpts from Robert 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, 1974). For the full transcription and translation of the poems, go to:
<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39569?sortBy=Relevance&ft=lady+wenji&offset=0∓rpp=20&pos=1>

1. The Han house is declining, the barbarians of the four directions have become unfriendly.
They raise arms, and wars are incessant.
Pity my father and mother who bore and reared me;
For witnessing parting and turmoil—this is the moment.
At gauze windows, looking into mirrors, I had not experienced the world;
I thought that the beaded curtains could shelter me—
... Alas! A helpless woman carried away into the aliens' dust.
2. I was taken on horseback to the ends of the earth;
Tiring of life, I sought death, but death would not come.
The barbarians stink so! How can they be considered human?
Their pleasures and angers are like the jackal's and the wolf's—how unbearable...
3. I am like a prisoner in bonds,
I have ten thousand anxieties but no one to confide them to.
They can make me work, or they can cut my hair;
They can eat my flesh, and they can drink my blood.
Knowing this is death, I would suffer anything willingly,
But to make me his wife is worse than killing me.
Alas, how a pretty face has made me suffer,
How I resent it that I am weak and soft like water.
5. I sleep by water and sit on grass;
The wind that blows from China blows my clothing to pieces.
I clean my hair with mutton fat, but it is seldom combed.
The collar of my lambskin robe is buttoned on the left;
The fox lapels and badger sleeves are rank-smelling.
By day I wear these clothes, by night I sleep in them...
9. In the past, when Su Wu was questioned by the Khan,
It is said that the migrating geese knew how to carry the message.
Imitating Su Wu, I prick blood to write a letter;
In this letter I write a thousand and ten thousand grievances.
But the bearded barbarian youths are excellent horsemen;
They bend their bows and shoot flying birds, far and near,
Now the geese of the frontier are afraid of people;
How can I have my heart heard from these ends of the earth?
10. How I am grieved by the indignities I have suffered, and revolted by rank smells;
How I despise the nomad land and hate the nomad sky!
When I became pregnant with a barbarian child, I wanted to kill myself.
Yet once I bore it, I found the love of mother and child.
His looks are strange, and his speech is different, yet my hate turns to love;
Deep inside, I feel the tug of my heartstring.
Morning and evening he is with me;
How can I not pity that which my womb has borne and my hand nurtured?
18. Cool spring water cleanses a jade that had sunk in the mire.
As I hold towel and comb, I rediscover the good rituals and etiquettes;
Touching the *qin* again enables me to live or die without regret—

... Now all my sorrows are told in the Song of the Nomad Flute.

Suggested Reading: Robert Rorex, "Some Liao Tomb Murals and Images of Nomads in Chinese Paintings of the Wen-Chi Story," *Artibus Asiae* 45, no. 2/3 (1984): 174-198.
Julia K. Murray, "A Southern Sung Painting Regains Its Memory: 'Welcoming the Imperial Carriage (Ying-luan t'u)' and Its Colophon," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, no. 22 (1990-92): 109-124.