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Answering the Emperor in Verse:
Zhang Liang and Xie Jin as Poets at Court
in the Popular Tradition of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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SUMMARY

In the popular print culture of late imperial China, we encounter two texts in which a slight narrative provides the context for a large number of poems. In the first of these, Zhang Liang (d. 185 BCE) becomes a poet when he decides to leave the court and seek the Way. When the emperor tries to change his mind, he counters his arguments with homiletic poems in praise of religious discipline in pursuit of longevity. In the second text, Xie Jin (1369–1439) passes the metropolitan examinations at a very young age and must meet the emperor's repeated challenges with his poems, to prove his talent and solidify his position.

Key words: Zhang Liang, Xie Jin, *shihua*, *dayoushi* (doggerel)

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INTRODUCTION

One volume in the *Zhongguo huaben daxi* 中國話本大系 (Complete Collection of China's Vernacular Stories) contains two independent texts that stand out by the number of poems they contain. One of these is *Zhang Zifang guishan shixuan* 張子房歸山詩選 (A selection of the poems of Zhang Zifang on leaving for the mountains), while the other is titled *Xie xueshi shi* 解學士詩 (The poems of Secretary Xie).¹ The first title is devoted to the legendary tale of Zhang Liang's 張良 (social name Zifang; d. 185 BCE) departure from the court of Liu Bang 劉邦 (d. 195 BCE), the August Ancestor (Gaozu 高祖) of the Han dynasty, after the latter by one means or another had killed three of the able generals who had helped him found his dynasty. The second tale relates the 'from rags to riches' story of Xie Jin 解縉 (1369–1415), who achieved high office in the early years of the Yongle era (1403–1424) but died in prison. The tales as told in both these texts have little to do with the lives of their main characters, as we know them from more reliable historical sources. They also show a remarkable formal similarity, as the majority of the poems that fill these texts are spoken or composed in reaction to imperial comments or orders. Interestingly, the introduction to *Zhang Zifang guishan shixuan* draws attention to the contrast between, on the one hand, the fictional wisdom of Zhang Liang in leaving the court in a timely manner and, on the other hand, the real-life short-sightedness of Xie Jin in overstaying his welcome at court, suggesting that these two texts appealed to the same audience (they were at least once published together²). Both the *Zhang Zifang guishan shixuan* and the *Xie Xueshi shi* are here presented in complete translations.

The historical Zhang Liang was born into a noble family of the state of Han. After Han had been

¹ Cheng Yizhong 1991, 1–8 and 1–21 (no continuous pagination). These editions are based on printed copies held at the National Library of China in Beijing. Another modern edition of *Xie xueshi shi* is included in *Dalian Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu zhongxin* 1995, 1: 473–500. In this edition the text is called *Xie xueshi shihua* 解學士詩話. I have not seen the edition of the *Zhang Zifang guishan shi* by Rong Zhaozu 容肇祖 in *Minsu* 民俗 110 (March 1933). Rong based his edition on a manuscript. The first scholar to discuss these two texts was Dai Bufan 1980, 179–185, who based his comments on a combined edition by the mid-Qing publisher Li Guangming Zhuang 李光明庄. This publisher apparently specialized in materials for primary education.

² Dai Bufan 1980, 179–185.

destroyed by the First Emperor, Zhang Liang tried to take revenge by having him killed by a hired strongman, but the attempt failed. Later Zhang Liang joined Liu Bang (d. 195 BCE) as an advisor. Legend has it that, in the meantime, he had acquired a divine book on military strategy from a mysterious Master Yellow Rock (Huangshi gong 黃石公), after showing sufficient humility. Zhang Liang's best known feat of arms in Liu Bang's struggle against Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE, who styled himself the Hegemon-King of Western Chu [Xi Chu bawang 西楚霸王]) was his proposal to have the Han troops before their final battle against Xiang Yu sing songs from Chu at night, making Xiang Yu's troops believe that their home region had already been conquered by Liu Bang, leading to their mass defection—a defeated Xiang Yu would eventually commit suicide. Zhang Liang was ennobled as marquis of Liu 留, and lived out his remaining years at the Han court, while a suspicious Liu Bang and his wife (Empress Lü 呂) did away with two of his ablest generals (Han Xin 韓信 [d. 196 BCE] and Peng Yue 彭越 [d. 196]) on trumped-up charges, and next killed a third (Ying Bu 英布 [d. 195 BCE]) when, fearing to be next, he rose in rebellion.³

Following the death of Liu Bang, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–ca. 86 BCE) reports in his *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the historian), Zhang Liang declared he wished to retire but abandoned that idea on the advice of Empress Lü:

Zhang Liang announced, “. . .With the wagging of my meagre tongue I have become a teacher to the emperor. . . . A common man can reach no greater heights; here I am content to rest. I wish now to lay aside the affairs of this world and join the Master of the Red Pine in immortal sport.” He set about practicing dietary restrictions and breathing and stretching exercises to achieve levitation.

At the time of Gaozu's demise, Empress Lü, who was greatly indebted to Zhang Liang, urged him to eat, saying, “Man's life in this world is as brief as the passing of a white colt glimpsed through a crack in the wall. Why should you punish yourself like

³ The primary source for the collapse of the Qin and the foundation of the Han is the *Shiji* 史記 by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–ca. 86 BCE). For a translation of his biography of Zhang Liang, see Watson 1993, 99–114. Also see Loewe 2000, 683–686.

this?" Zhang Liang had no other recourse but to listen to her advice and begin eating again. Eight years later he died.⁴

Popular tradition eventually insisted that Zhang Liang, who early in his career had already received the teachings of an immortal, would not have been able to witness the gross miscarriage of justice and stay on at court, and it came to be believed as a certainty that he left the court to practice the Way and achieve immortality.

In the anonymously composed *Qian Han shu pinghua: Xuji Lühou zhan Han Xin* 前漢書續集 旅后展韓信 (The plain tale of the History of the Former Han: The sequel: How Empress Lü beheaded Han Xin) of the thirteenth century (?), Zhang Liang's departure from court is only a very short episode:

When Zhang Liang had learned that the king of Han [Liu Bang] had murdered these three generals, he that very day handed in his boots and plaque, and his official gown, these symbols of his office, to the king of Han in person. When he had made his bows, he stated, "Your Majesty, your servant is advanced in years and cannot any longer rule the court. That is why I hand in the three symbols of office and take my leave. I will devote myself to farming and nurturing my nature at Mt. Shang." The August Ancestor replied, "Chamberlain, if you leave for those mountain wilds, how can that compare to ordering the court with Us and daily wearing brocade and eating meat? How can you subsist on salted beans?"

[Zhang Liang replied:] "I have here a poem:

I lack the energy to unroll my books on strategy again:
Your Majesty beheaded great men without any reason.
Unwilling to love the golden seal of office at my waist,
I flick my sleeves and depart to seek the white clouds.

⁴ Watson 1993.

My hands wrenched open the road to profit and fame
 And my body jumped out of the street of contention:
 If this old servant would not go and leave for the hills,
 He'll die like Han Xin and Peng Yue beneath the sword.”⁵

The legend of Zhang Liang's departure from the court of Liu Bang may already have been dramatized in the twelfth century. In the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368) it was turned into a regular four-act *zaju* 雜劇 play titled *Han Zhang Liang cichao guishan* 漢張良辭朝歸山 (Zhang Liang of the Han rejects the court and leaves for the mountains) by Wang Zhongwen 王仲文 (fl. 1250). Ming sources also mention a *Zhang Zifang qizhi guishan* 張子房棄職歸山 (Zhang Zifang abandons his office and leaves for the mountains) and a *Zifang guishan* 子房歸山 (Zifang leaves for the mountains). These titles may refer to Wang Zhongwen's plays or may refer to independent treatments of the same materials.⁶ In view of their contents it comes as no surprise that none of these plays was adopted into the Ming palace repertoire—all that remains from them is a single song from Wang's work.⁷

From the sixteenth century, however, we have a text titled *Zhang Zifang mudao ji* 張子房慕道記 (A record of Zhang Zifang seeking the Way), which is not only the precursor of *Zhang Zhifang guishan shixuan*, but also may well be derived from one of the *zaju* adaptations, as it clearly structures its tale in four major scenes: a confrontation at court between Zhang Liang and the emperor; a confrontation at his own mansion between Zhang Liang and his colleagues; and a confrontation between Zhang Liang and his wife—once all these have failed to change Zhang Liang's mind and he has left, the story concludes with yet another confrontation between Zhang Liang and the emperor, this time in the mountains, where Zhang has achieved immortality.⁸ The dialogues in this text are almost

⁵ Anonymous 1955, 36–37.

⁶ Idema 1990, 196.

⁷ *Zhang Zifang qizhi quishan* was included in *Yongle dadian*, but the section devoted to *zaju* of that work has not been preserved (Fu Xihua 1957, 15).

⁸ For a facsimile edition of this text, see Hong Bian 1955, 83–91. A critical edition was provided in Tan Zhengbi in Hong Bian 1957, 102–114; for an annotated edition see for instance Hong Bian 2010, 161–176. Hanan 1973, 234 dates this text to his “middle

completely conducted in verse. These poems, needless to say, are not the works of the historical protagonists, but derive in style and imagery from the flourishing homiletic literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when popular teachers and new religions developed a rich literature urging their adepts to renounce the world and submit themselves to a regimen of strict discipline, in order to achieve the life eternal, so avoiding the horrors of hell and the endless cycle of reincarnation. While the emperor too declaims a few poems, it is especially Zhang Liang who consistently voices his arguments for leaving the court and seeking immortality in the poems he composes.

The number of poems, as well as the fact that these poems are all spoken by the characters in the story, make *Zhang Zifang mudao ji* stand out even in the quite heterogeneous (only partially preserved) collection in which it is contained, *Qingping shantang huaben* 清平山堂話本 (Vernacular stories from the Qingping mountain hall), also known as *Liushijia xiaoshuo* 六十家小說 (Stories by sixty authors). Several Chinese scholars have classified *Zhang Zifang mudao ji* as a *shihua* 詩話 (tale with poems), but feel uneasy about this because the text is so different from the thirteenth-century *Da Tang Sanzang qujing shihua* 大唐三藏取經詩話 (The tale with poems of Sanzang of the Great Tang-fetching sutras), which is divided into short chapters, each concluded by a poem spoken by one of the characters.⁹ That unease may be unneeded as the *shihua* format would appear to have remained popular in religious storytelling of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century China.¹⁰ André Lévy, who also provided a complete translation into French,¹¹ suggested that *Zhang Zifang mudao ji* might be an early example of

period” (1400–1550). Also see Lévy 1979, 45–48. The majority of Chinese scholars treat this text as one of the “Song Yuan huaben” 宋元話本 (vernacular stories of the Song and Yuan), suggesting a date of composition in the period 960–1368 (Cheng Yizhong 1980, 68). For an attempt to date this text to the early Song, see Liu Ruiming 2012, 1024–1025.

⁹ See for instance Hu Shiyong 1980, 169–173.

¹⁰ Idema 2019. As a text on renunciation and enlightenment in which the dialogues are to a large extent in poems, *Zhang Zifang mudao ji* also shows quite some similarity to *Niaoke chanshi du Bai shilang xingjiao* 鳥窠禪師度白侍郎行腳 (The Trajectory of Chan Master Bird Nest of Vice-Minister Bai). This text is nowadays usually classified as a precious scroll (*baojuan* 寶卷). *Zhang Zifang mudao ji* shows clear Buddhist influences, for instance in comparing the human condition to a house on fire.

¹¹ Lévy 1971, 171–181. For another French translation see Dars 1987, 374–386. A Japanese translation had been provided by Iriya Yoshitaka 1958, 215–222.

daoqing 道情, a Daoist genre of prosimetric storytelling from the Ming and later,¹² but if so, it would be atypical for that genre as it is known from the few preserved works in this genre from the last decades of the Ming. As *Zhang Zifang mudao ji*, to the best of my knowledge, has not been translated into English so far, I present a translation here to facilitate comparison with *Zhang Zifang guishan shixuan*.

Zhang Zhifang guishan shixuan evidently is based on the *Zhang Zifang mudao ji*, but most likely not directly on the text of that work as we have it.¹³ More likely, it was written down on the basis of a memorized version. The main body of the text has been shortened and simplified. Some poems have disappeared, and several eight-line poems have been reduced to four lines. Peng Yue and Ying Bu have disappeared from the text, so it is now only Han Xin's fate that causes Zhang Liang's awareness of the precariousness of a position at court and stimulates him to leave it. Elements that may have been an echo of a stage performance (for instance the cranes and deer that accompany Zhang Liang on his entrance for his final confrontation with the emperor) also have been removed. *Zhang Zifang guishan shixuan* adds a short introduction in which his career is characterized as a rise from commoner status to glory and riches (following Sima Qian), and his wisdom in leaving the court is contrasted with Xie Jin's reluctance to do so. It also has developed the conclusion by adding some poems at the end that stress some elements of internal alchemy and note that Zhang Liang's religious name became Red Pine (Chisong 赤松). Interestingly, the earliest preserved printing of *Zhang Ziliang guishan shixuan*, now kept at the National Library of China at Beijing, combines it with a printing of *Xiao'er lun* 小兒論 (Treatise on the little boy), in which the precocious young boy Xiang Tuo 項橐 confronts the Great Teacher of Ten-thousand Generations, Confucius, with questions this Sage cannot answer, so combining the denial of the highest political power with the subversion of the greatest intellectual authority.¹⁴ The full title of this edition is *Qie Zhang Zifang Xiao'er lun Xueshi shi* 鑿張子房小兒論學士詩 ([Newly]

¹² Lévy 1971, 168, following the suggestion by Iriya Yoshitaka 1958, 360. In Yuan times the expression *daoqing* (sentiments of the Way) primarily refers to lyrics on the joys of the retired life.

¹³ Dai Bufan 1980, 183, states that *Zhang Zifang guishan shixuan* predates *Zhang Zifang mudao ji*, but that is very unlikely.

¹⁴ A modern edition of this text by Cheng Youqing is included in Cheng Yizhong 1991, 1–3. The story of Xiang Tuo is already encountered among the Dunhuang manuscripts. For an incomplete translation, see Waley 1960, 89–96. The Dunhuang text concludes with a long ballad in which Confucius takes revenge for the humiliation he has suffered, but this ballad is missing from the texts that circulated widely in late imperial China. For a detailed study of this theme see Soymié 1954.

Cut: Zhang Zifang, Treatise on the little boy, and Poems of the secretary), suggesting that it originally also included a version of *Xie xueshi shi*.¹⁵

Xie Jin was born in a well-established family in Jishui in Jiangxi. Two of his uncles and an elder brother served the Hongwu emperor. Xie Jin passed the metropolitan examinations in Nanjing before he turned twenty in 1388. He soon attracted the attention of the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398), but almost as quickly irritated him so much that, in 1390, he was banished from court. Upon the death of the Hongwu emperor, he returned to Nanjing and eventually obtained a post as a minor functionary at the court of the Jianwen emperor (r. 1399–1402). His fortunes changed, however, with the violent accession to the throne of the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1424). Xie Jin is believed to have composed his accession proclamation. He was ordered to revise the records of the reign of the Hongwu emperor so as to justify the rebellion of the Yongle emperor, and he also was one of the editors of the massive compilation of all existing literature that eventually would become known as *Yongle dadian* 永樂大典 (Yongle encyclopedia). As one of the grand secretaries, he was appointed to a seven-man advisory council of the emperor.

But this spectacular rise to power was soon followed by his downfall. First, he opposed the emperor's plans to conquer northern Vietnam, and later he aroused the enmity of the emperor's ambitious second son. In 1411 the emperor threw him in prison, where he died after some years in 1415 (he was first made drunk and then suffocated under a pile of snow). He was cleared of guilt upon the accession of the emperor's eldest son in 1425, and his confiscated property was returned to his family in 1436. In 1465 his official titles were restored, and in 1591 he received the posthumous title *Wenyi* 文毅 (cultured and resolute).

Throughout his career Xie Jin had been a productive writer. The first edition of his collected work was printed in 1457. This went through several revisions, and a later redaction was eventually included in the eighteenth-century *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete writings in the four categories).¹⁶ As a poet, Xie Jin followed the style of the High Tang, but his model was not so much Du

¹⁵ Cheng Hong 1980.

¹⁶ For a survey of Xie Jin's career, see Chan 1976, 555–558. For a detailed discussion of his role in the revision of the historical record of the Hongwu and Jianwen reigns, see Chan 2005. Xu Yulong discusses the many editions of Xie Jin's collected

Fu 杜甫 (712–770) as Li Bai 李白 (701–762).¹⁷ Jonathan Chaves characterized his poetry as “unexpectedly fine for such a high official.”¹⁸ Xie Jin is also remembered as a fine calligrapher.

Xie Jin’s conspicuous literary talent, spectacular rise and even more spectacular fall made him a character of legend from early on.¹⁹ Legends about his ready wit continued to proliferate well into the twentieth century and are still told today.²⁰ *Xie xueshi shi*, first printed in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, is an early testimony to that phenomenon, showing that Xie Jin in the popular imagination had shed most of his historical trappings. He is now the son of a dirt-poor bean curd seller, who impresses his rich neighbor by his intelligence and arrogance. He passes the metropolitan examination with highest honors at the age of fourteen (thirteen in the Western telling), causing the emperor to suspect corruption in the selection. He dispels that suspicion by meeting the repeated literary challenges from the emperor, who continues to test him. Some of the poems included in *Xie xueshi shi* have counterparts in his *Wenyi ji* 文毅集 as included in the *Siku quanshu*, and so may somewhat safely be assumed to have originally been authored by Xie Jin, but even these would appear to have been quoted not from an early edition of the *Wenyi ji* but rather from a faulty memory. Most of the poems in *Xie xueshi xuan* have likely been selected from a popular mass of witty, risqué, contrived or otherwise remarkable poems that circulated anonymously. For instance, four of the lines of one of the poems on two young girls on a swing are included in reverse order in a Jiajing edition of Xie Jin’s works, but these lines are also credited to another Ming poet, and occur in several other Ming works.²¹ And the two lines “A horse in golden halter whinnies on its fragrant meadow; / In a jade room a man

writings. Many poems that came to be included over the years as works of Xie Jin were at a later stage rejected.

¹⁷ Sun Wenlong 2016, 16–17.

¹⁸ Chaves 1986, 155.

¹⁹ Chen Donggen 2011, 46–51 collects the anecdotes about Xie Jin from a wide variety of Ming and Qing sources, but does not seem to be aware of the existence of *Xie xueshi xuan*.

²⁰ For a compilation of such stories, see for instance Chen Donggen 2011, 202–358.

²¹ Chen Youqing 1992; Roy 2001, 490n2.

gets drunk on a bright springtime day" claimed by Xie Jin to be by Li Bai are widely quoted in the Ming but can at best be traced back to the Song.²²

Cheng Youqing 程有慶, the editor of the *Xie xueshi xuan*, suggests that the text is made up of doggerel poems (*dayou shi* 打油詩) ascribed to Xie Jin but not necessarily by him.²³ While "doggerel" is the first translation of *dayoushi* in many dictionaries, that term is misleading in this context if it is understood in the meaning of "rough, poorly constructed verse, characterized by either extreme metrical irregularity or easy rhyme and monotonous rhythm, cheap sentiment, and triviality."²⁴ *Dayoushi* abide as a rule by all the formal rules of traditional Chinese poetry. But whereas classical poetry is expected to express the author's sincere feelings, *dayoushi* focus on the humorous treatment of its subject. As a form of playful, light poetry, *dayoushi* through the ages has enjoyed a low reputation but wide popularity.²⁵ As entertaining reading, a text like *Xie xueshi shi* way well have appealed to many readers as an introduction to versification. Nevertheless, when Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓 (1701–1754) in Ch. 11 of his famous novel *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (The scholars), wants to ridicule a bluestocking, he has her study the *Xie xueshi shi*, testifying to the low reputation of this popular text among the literary elite of his time.

²² Roy 1993, 498n24.

²³ Cheng Yizhong 1991, 1.

²⁴ Greene 2012, 373.

²⁵ Fu Xiaosong 2007, 1–14; Liu Xinjin and Liu Xiaojuan 2002, 1–9

A RECORD OF ZHANG ZIFANG SEEKING THE WAY

Introduction to the tale:

Riches and status in a dream and poverty in a dream;
 Pleasure and joy in a dream and anger all in a dream:
 This one scene of hustle and bustle is of no concern—
 Which person is not a person living inside a dream?

The story goes that in the years of the Han dynasty the August Ancestor has ascended the throne and ruled his realm from the city of Chang'an. One day he held court and gathered his civil officials and military officers, his nine chamberlains and four ministers. When each of them had reported on his tasks, one man stepped forward from the ranks. In his purple gown with its golden belt and holding his plaque before his breast, he stepped forward and said, "May Your Majesty live a myriad years! I observe that in recent years the empire enjoys great peace: the winds are mild and the rains are timely, so the common people enjoy their profession. My desire is to seek the Way and practice self-cultivation, for which I ask Your Majesty's permission."

The August Ancestor said, "Why would you want to enter the mountains and seek the Way?"

Zhang Liang replied, "I have seen that the three kings died a miserable death, unable to live their life to the end."

The August Ancestor asked, "Which three kings?"

Zhang Liang replied, "Han Xin, the king of Qi,²⁶ Peng Yue, the king of Daliang,²⁷ and Ying 年 Bu, the king of Jiujiang.²⁸ These three kings were loyal and fierce and honest servants of the throne who brought peace to the state and stability to the land. I remember how they in the days of the war with

26 Loewe 2000, 147–149; Watson 1993, 163–184.

27 Loewe 2000, 447–448; Watson 1993, 147–152.

28 Loewe 2000, 651–652; Watson 1993, 153–162.

the king of Chu²⁹ never laid down their armor and never left the saddle. With their bows on their backs and their arrows at hand, girded with their swords and armed with their whips they never slept day or night and suffered greatly by day and night. If such fierce generals even lose their lives, how much more so will I! How can I not fear death?”

The August Ancestor said, “You definitely must want to abandon Us because you think your rank is too low and your responsibilities are too small. You must have heard, ‘A steel blade may be sharp, but it will not behead an innocent person.’”

Zhang Liang replied, “How could I be without crime? But the sun and the moon, I consider, may be bright but will not shed light below an overturned pot. How could the three kings end like this?”

The August Emperor said, “The King of Qi Han Xin had committed a crime. How could he be said to have died a miserable death? You do not know the circumstances. We here have a poem as evidence:

Han Xin’s merits are the foremost of the ten dynasties:
 Beheading Shi Zu at night, he overawed Zhao and Yan.³⁰
 But always wanting to harm others and profit himself,
 He even desired to steal the realm of the house of Han!”

Zhang Liang had stated his case, so he only smiled sardonically, and then said, “Your Majesty must have heard this word of the ancients, ‘When the lord is not right, his ministers flee to foreign countries; when the father is not right, the son flees to another village.’ Your Majesty failed as a ruler and did not think back to the moment when you raised a high terrace in Baozhou to appoint him as general.³¹ I have here a poem as evidence in case you do not believe me.

²⁹ Xiang Yu. Loewe 2000, 599–602; Watson 1993, 17–50.

³⁰ The historical sources know no Shi Zu 詩祖, and it is generally assumed that this is mistake for Long Ju 龍且 (Loewe 2000, 411), one of the ablest generals of Xiang Yu. Long Ju was defeated and killed by Han Xin in 203 BCE. Zhao and Yan refer to northeastern China.

³¹ When Han Xin was appointed General-in-Chief in 206 BCE, a special ceremony was conducted to impress the troops. This was because Liu Bang had earlier dismissed Han Xin, so, to honor him and assure the military of his confidence in him, he

Han Xin ended up as the victim of Empress Lü's machinations:
Decisions were not made by the Son of Heaven but by his spouse.
Because of her trickery he died inside the Weiyang Palace, as you
Forgot the time when you in Baozhou appointed him as general!"

The August Ancestor said, "Chamberlain, Han Xin, Peng Yue and Ying Bu were filled with resentment against me!"

Zhang Liang replied, "I have a poem as evidence:

At the moment of his death, when Han Xin died beneath the sword,
He silently lowered his head, filled with resentment against you:
'Had I known from the start I would die at the hands of a woman,
I should from the very beginning have joined the Hegemon-King!"

Zhang Liang stated, "I don't see those three men anymore, so I want to seek the Way with all my heart."

The August Ancestor replied, "Chamberlain, you are the foremost of my officials and hold the highest rank at court. You wear a gown of purple gauze with a belt of white jade, and dine on rare delicacies and exquisite dishes. Why would you want to leave for the hills and seek the Way?"

Zhang Liang said, "Having witnessed the execution of these three kings, I am filled with ten fears."

The August Emperor asked, "Which ten fears?"

Zhang Liang replied, "I will only dare tell them if you forgive my crime."

His Majesty declared, "You are forgiven!"

Liang said, "Please listen to me, I have a poem as evidence.

One, I fear to be to be confined to a house of fire;

Two, I fear that my relatives will suffer vexations;

had a high terrace raised on which he conducted the appointment ceremony.

Three, I fear that diseases will wreck my health;
Four, I fear that when ill I will find no medicine.
Five, I fear that my breath will stop, my body die;
Six, I fear that in distress I will appeal to Heaven;
Seven, I fear that a tree is cut down for my coffin;
Eight, I fear that locked in jail I'll suffer greatly.
Nine, I fear that on death I'll be left in the wilds;
Ten, I fear to become a victim of Xiao He's laws!³²

Zhang Liang [further] said, "Your Majesty, where can I hide when Impermanence³³ arrives?"

The August Ancestor asked, "Chamberlain, right now you enjoy luxury and wealth, and yet you want to suffer hunger and cold!"

Zhang Liang replied, "I have a song as evidence if Your Majesty doesn't believe me.

Seeking the Way I'll be without a worry,
Practicing self-cultivation I will be happy.
Coarse clothes and bland food I will find when needed,
And straw sandals or hemp boots will not tie me down.
I do not covet riches and status, luxury and glory,
But free and at ease I will find my pleasure in idleness.
Carrying a thorn basket in my hands
I'll collect medicines in the mountains,
And discarding this jade belt and this purple gown
I will enjoy myself visiting friends with my zither."

³² Xiao He was one of Liu Bang's advisors from his earliest days. As an administrator he was responsible for the Han code of law, renowned for its strictness. Following the establishment of the dynasty, he became closely allied with Empress Lü (Loewe 2000, 603–605; Watson 1993, 91–98).

³³ Impermanence is the personification of death.

The August Ancestor asked, "Where will you practice self-cultivation, chamberlain, when you leave for the mountains?"

Zhang Liang replied, "I have a poem as evidence.

Allowed to practice self-cultivation, I'll flick my sleeves and leave:
At dawn I'll roam the mountain peaks, I'll rest in greening fields.
When thirsty I will drink the fragrant wine that's made of grapes;
When hungry eat yang-strengthening pills of pine and cypress.
When idle I will watch the hills and roam uncultivated landscapes,
And when depressed I'll play the zither, feeling unrestrained.
So if you ask your servant to which place I will repair, I'll say
My mind and body may be found on White Cloud Mountain!"

The August Ancestor said, "Chamberlain, you may want to leave and practice self-cultivation, but if later we would be in trouble, we still would need you to support the dynasty and stabilize the state!"

Zhang Liang replied, "I have a poem as evidence.

It took ten years of warfare to conclude the bloodshed:
Tigers fought and dragons battled, refusing to make peace.
Illusionary is this world, but every day and every month
We fought from north to south to found the present empire.
Great heroes and good generals grew lesser every year,
And with each year more blood colored the yellow sand.
Today I say goodbye to you, your servant takes his leave—
And if the emperor is missing me, that's not my problem."

The August Ancestor said, "At present the empire enjoys great peace, so you should stay with us to enjoy glory and riches at court. But you want to suffer hunger and cold, with yellowed greens and bland food. Practicing self-cultivation Zhang Liang seeks the Way!"

When Zhang Liang heard this, he said, "I have a poem as evidence.

Sun and moon pass back and forth as fast as a shuttle;
Light and shadow of the four seasons quickly pass by.
If you beware when young, your vexations will be few,
But the lust for luxury will cause you many conflicts.
I return this purple gown and this jade belt to my lord;
The ivory plaque and black boots—a stream's ripples.
I divest myself from all fame and profit of the court—
I don't care for that fierce fight over profit and fame!"

The August Ancestor said, "Chamberlain, you don't have to busy yourself with your office, only have to accompany Us at all times. What about that?"

Zhang Liang replied, "I have a poem as evidence:

Glory and riches, wealth and status never last long,
If you scrutinize this carefully, white hairs multiply.
As a human being one cannot escape Impermanence:
Most feared in life are the troubles of one's old age!"

The August Ancestor said, "When you grow old, We will provide you with government rice, a monthly salary in cash, and clothes for the four seasons; We will ennoble your wife and appoint your sons to office. How about it?"

Zhang Liang replied, "How can your gifts of clothes, money and rice replace the advent of old age? I have a song as evidence:

Once you are old,
A hundred diseases will torment you;
All the teeth in your mouth will hurt

And your arms will hang paralyzed.
With a stooped back you cannot stand;
Short of breath you can hardly speak.
When eating or drinking
You will cough up slime,
And when you sip tea,
Your mouth will drool.
Your hands are as cold as iron,
Your feet are as cold as bricks.
With all these many diseases
You're not even worth two worthless cents!"

The August Ancestor said, "If you insist on leaving for the hills and seeking the Way, I will provide you with food for all seasons as well as clothes and footwear."

Zhang Liang replied, "I have a poem as evidence:

Sun and moon move like a shuttle and cannot be stopped;
The seasons resemble an arrow—a blade that kills you!
The clear breeze and bright moon will always be present,
But this career in a house on fire will have no conclusion.
The splendid light of sun and moon follows the seasons,
And the true fire of the Great Yang tortures us humans.
If you, strong, and I, weak, fight over fame and profit,
I'll unavoidably have to go and pay King Yama a visit."³⁴

The August Ancestor argued most strongly, but Zhang Liang did not yield. "Return to your mansion and come back tomorrow so we can continue our discussion."

³⁴ King Yama is the ruler of the underworld and judges the souls of the deceased.

When Zhang Liang had taken his leave from the emperor and left the court, he intoned a poem:

“Roaming the rivers and lakes of the hundreds of districts
The human heart is unlike the river that flows on forever.³⁵
When receiving great favors, one should timely retreat;
When fully achieving one’s ambition, it’s time to stop.
Don’t wait for all kinds of complaints to fill your ears
When that earlier love and affection turns into a feud.
It’s not the case that your servant retires far too early—
The service to one’s lord and king always ends badly.”

Zhang Liang took his leave with a bow, left the court and went home.

The August Ancestor said, “Officials and officers, I failed to persuade Zhang Zifang.” Thereupon he ordered the officials on his behest to go to Zhang Liang’s mansion and persuade him to change his mind.

“Prime minister, our lord wants to retain you, ‘Don’t leave for the mountains and seek the Way, but leave the household while staying at home and keep Us company from early till late. Your foodstuffs, clothes and money will be provided each month.’ Wouldn’t that be great?”

Zhang Liang replied, “I remember how Han Xin, Peng Yue and Ying Bu repeatedly established great merit in fighting over the empire and grabbing the realm. But what is now left of their merits?”

Zhang Liang did not yield, so the officials spoke again, “Prime Minister, at present the empire enjoys great peace. As an official you have been appointed to the highest rank and your position is one of the Three Dukes. At court you enjoy glory, wealth and status, so why do you want to leave for the mountains and seek the Way?”

Zhang Liang laughed loudly, “I have a poem as evidence.

³⁵ The “river that flows on forever” is an image for the passing of time.

Because of Zhang Liang of Han's songs to scatter Chu
Eight thousand troops scattered and fled in all directions:
The Hegemon-King died for the sake of the empire,
Regretting he had not earlier crossed the frontier river.³⁶
A myriad of miles of hills and rivers honor the emperor;
The whole world is at peace now bloodshed has ended.
Why am I, Zifang, so eager to leave for the mountains?
Great favors engender too many issues and conflicts!"

The civil officials and military officers failed to persuade him, so they all went home.

When Zhang Liang had seen off these officials, he returned to his mansion and took his leave of his wife, "I want to leave for the mountains and seek the Way."

His wife replied, "Prime Minister, each day you enjoy the comfort of dragon rooms and phoenix pavilions. You hear the triple shouts of 'A myriad years', eat delicious foods and drink imperial wine. Truly,

In spring you sleep behind red brocade bed-curtains,
In summer you rest inside blue gauze mosquito-nets.
Two pairs of red candles precede you;
One couple of beauties support you.

So why do you want to leave for the hills and seek the Way? Who will take care of your food and clothes in winter and summer when you live all alone in the open field and the overgrown wastelands?"

Zhang Liang said, "I have a poem as evidence.

³⁶ When hard-pressed by pursuing troops of the Han, a fisherman had offered Xiang Yu to ferry him across a river, so he would be able to return to his home region and raise new troops. Xiang Yu refused because, he said, he would be unable to face the relatives of the soldiers who had died.

The hare runs and the crow flies without ever stopping;³⁷
Past and present are rise and decay for a thousand years.
One barely has seen an infant son and young daughter,
And one's head turns grey and one's temples turn white.
Seeking the Way, cultivating the truth, practicing asceticism,
I'll roam the hills, enjoy the scenery and refine the pill.³⁸
When idle I will take my zither and play some tunes,
When bored I will watch the gibbons climb the trees."

When his wife heard this, [she said,] "Prime Minister, Your office is presently of the highest rank and you enjoy riches, status and glory. You have only one man above you but stand above all others. In the morning we share joy, and in the evening we share pleasure, but you refuse to enjoy all this and want to leave for the mountains and seek the Way. Regret will come too late once you suffer a freezing cold and a gnawing hunger!"

Zhang Liang did not yield and left a poem:

The cycle of life and death revolves myriads of times
But deluded people don't understand even half a hair!
A heart of greed resembles a weed that yearly grows,
Creating sins like a mountain rising higher and higher.
If you don't repent and regret your sins to the Buddha,
You'll suffer for your delusions in this house of fire.
If as a human being one does not act in a fair manner,
One will not evade torture on the three ways, in hell!

His wife said, "Prime Minister, you go and practice self-cultivation! But the boys and girls in this

³⁷ The moon is inhabited by a hare, and the sun by a three-legged crow.

³⁸ The elixir of eternal life.

household have not yet been married—your sons are unwed and your daughters are still single. Wait until you have settled these family duties. Then it's still early enough."

Zhang Liang replied. "If the Great Limit arrives, your body returns to the Yellow Sources,³⁹ and how can you stay when your fate has been dyed by that yellow sand?" That very moment Zhang Liang wrote out the following poem:

Once Impermanence arrives, all business is finished:
 Rolled in a mat on one side of the bed you can't stay.
 Filled with sorrow, you cherish your kid, still so little;
 Love for your sons, lust for your wives abruptly end.
 With all kinds of tricks you fight over profit and fame,
 But when your soul has gone you turn into a skeleton.
 Each and every person is only a simple-minded fool
 Who will end up resting in a grave on the open field.

When he had recited it, he left.

The August Ancestor issued an edict, ordering the gate-keepers, "Don't let Prime Minister Zhang leave. How would he dare to leave without taking his leave of Us?"

While the August Ancestor said this, Zhang Liang arrived, carrying his cap and belt, his court gown, his ivory plaque, and his black boots on a red plate, which he deposited in front of the Five Phoenix Loft, after which he secretly departed.

The August Ancestor dispatched people in all four directions to pursue and arrest him, but after several days of searching, they hadn't found any trace. But on the red plate there was a poem as evidence:

I lack the energy to unroll my books on strategy again:
 Your Majesty beheaded great men without any reason.
 Unwilling to carry the golden seal of office at my waist,

³⁹ The Yellow Sources refer to the underworld, the realm of the dead.

I flick my sleeves and depart to seek the white clouds.
My hands wrenched open the lock of profit and fame
And my body jumped out of the street of contention:
It is not that your servant wants to leave for the hills,
But he is afraid to die like Han Xin beneath the sword.

Ever since Zhang Liang had departed, the August Ancestor was filled with anxious thoughts of longing and could not get him out of his mind. On the gate of the palace a large yellow poster was placed, stating, "If someone comes to know the whereabouts of Zhang Liang, he will be granted an official position."

One day a woodcutter pushed the crowd aside, stepped forward and took away the poster.⁴⁰ He entered the palace and reported, "Your Majesty, I saw Prime Minister Zhang practicing self-cultivation and seeking the Way on White Cloud Mountain."

When the August Ancestor heard this, his heart was filled with joy, and his dragon face showed his pleasure. He immediately set out in the phoenix conveyance⁴¹ and went off to the White Cloud Mountain to find Zhang Liang. When he had arrived there, one day he saw a thatched hermitage, but he did not see Zhang Liang. "He told people to come to the mountains!" There is a poem as evidence:

Two lines at the entrance of White Cloud Mountain
Had been left there by Zhang Liang as good advice:
Red cheeks that love sex die with their hearts extracted;
Purple weeds with intertwined branches pass still in leaf.⁴²
The bee visits a hundred flowers but people eat its honey;
The ox plows the barren field but rats dine on the grain.

⁴⁰ The person who takes away the poster claims to be able to meet its challenge. The woodcutter may well be a transformation of Zhang Liang.

⁴¹ The imperial carriage and the imperial escort.

⁴² "Intertwined branches" are a common image for love and affection, the attachments that tie us to a life of suffering and the cycle of rebirth.

These are the three most grievous events of this world:
The waning moon, a fading flower, people dying young.

When the August Ancestor had read this poem, tears flowed from his eyes, as he did not see Zhang Liang, and he intoned a poem:

A lord and king, I came in person to visit this mountain
But I don't find my wise minister—my visit was in vain.
Peach blossoms in the sun pierce eyes with their blaze;
Bamboo leaves in the wind chill this man to the bone.
In the oven the ashes for refining the pill are not yet cold;
On the wall the ink for writing his poem is not yet dry,
And the traces on the go board are still clearly visible—
In what place may Zifang be hiding himself from me?

When the August Emperor had intoned this poem, he did not see Zhang Liang and heaved a heavy sigh, facing heaven. When he returned and arrived halfway down the mountain, he suddenly saw Zhang Liang, who was singing Daoist songs to the accompaniment a fisherman's drum and clappers. While immortal cranes danced around him and wild deer held flowers in their mouths, he came forward to welcome the emperor.

When the August Ancestor saw Zhang Liang, his dragon face was filled with joy, and he composed a poem:

Ten times you were summoned but never responded;
The concern that the road was so far caused Us worry.
We clearly know you have the method of immortals
And change stone into gold without any refinement.
But the court now lacks a pillar that supports the sky,
So we wait for you to put on the purple gown again.

If you will change your mind and return to the court,
Our land will be blessed with an unshakeable stability.

When Zhang Liang had heard this, he said, "Your Majesty, allow me to state that I have sworn not to return. I will here in the mountains practice my behavior and cultivate the Way. If Your Majesty does not believe me, I have here a poem:

When idle, I gather medicinal herbs in the mountains,
I don't want to wear a purple gown back in the palace.
Gnashing your teeth, Your Majesty appointed Yong Chi;⁴³
Shedding tears, the king of Han had Lord Ding beheaded.⁴⁴
Xiao He is firmly settled in the position of prime minister;
Han Xin, who founded the state, was not sure of his life.
It is not that I thought that my appointment was too low—
If I transgress the king's law, there is no hope of mercy!"

Zhang Liang, "Your Majesty, be informed that Han Xin, Ying Bu and Peng Yue all three fought and grabbed from north to south, but each of them died by the sword. If Your Majesty does not believe me, I have here a poem as evidence:

I left for the mountains in order to evade disaster:
Han Xin was tricked and fell down in dirt and dust.

⁴³ Yong Chi 雍齒 (d. 192) had been an early supporter of Liu Bang, but later defected to his enemies. Following the final defeat of Xiang Yu, Liu Bang, confronted with unrest among his troops, followed Zhang Liang's advice to confer nobility on the person he was known to hate most and granted Yong Chi a title (Loewe 2000, 657).

⁴⁴ The "King of Han" refers to Liu Bang by his first title. Lord Ding refers to Ding Gu 丁固, a general of Xiang Yu who once had allowed Liu Bang to escape. When he presented himself to Liu Bang upon the death of Xiang Yu hoping for a reward, Liu Bang had him executed for his disloyalty to his master (Loewe 2000, 62–63).

Because Your Majesty fell short of the Right Way,
Empress Lü conceived a plan to kill these heroes.”

The August Ancestor said, “Don’t compare [the present] to those earlier troubled times!”

Zhang Liang replied, “Your Majesty, if you want to return to the court, allow me to invite you to my thatched hermitage, so I can offer you a cup of tea.”

Zhang Liang led the way for the emperor. While they were walking, an immortal lad ahead of them conjured up a large stream, across which a single tree log formed a high bridge. When the August Emperor was invited to cross first, he was afraid he might slip and didn’t dare cross it.

Zhang Liang flicked his sleeves, crossed the bridge, and intoned a poem:

The bridge was made by laying down a single log—
Who knows who was the man who made the bridge?
How can a dragon foal pass a single-log bridge?
Above the deep stream one can’t walk side by side!
A hundred dragon tails hang down from the void,
A thousand large thorns grow beside the ravine.
Even though it’s not the magic of divine immortals,
It scares a human heart so much it fears to cross.

On the deep-blue deep water, waves and billows rose in a thousand layers, so the dragon carriage of the August Ancestor could not go forward. When Zhang Liang saw this, he laughed loudly and intoned a poem:

Fan Li retired to the lakes to flee the purple gown;⁴⁵
I, Zifang, cultivate the Way and will not go back.

⁴⁵ Fan Li 范蠡 was an official in the ancient state of Yue. He assisted its ruler Goujian to take revenge on the neighboring state of Wu. Following Yue’s victory, he left Gou Jian and became a merchant, sailing the rivers and lakes.

The mind's monkey is firmly tied to the root-less tree,⁴⁶
Ambition's horse is firmly tied up, will not be freed.
I say goodbye to civil officials and military officers,
As I've taken my leave from merit and from fame.
It is not only so that I have left for the mountains—
I avoid dying by the sword on the execution grounds.

The August Ancestor could not convince Zhang Liang to return and as his heart was filled with sorrow, tears gushed from his eyes. On his side of the ravine Zhang Liang said goodbye to the emperor with a bow, and intoned two poems:

Zhang Liang handed in his seal to the emperor;
Fan Li left the king of Yue and fled to the lakes.
These two men did not think their office too low,
But feared that the empire would not last forever.

From now on don't listen to Empress Lü's words:
You fail as a ruler and hurt those loyal and good.
I've left behind that bottomless, deep pit of fire
And by myself jumped from the ring of quarrel.

Zhang Liang reined in his mind and left for the mountains. Admonishing the people at large, he composed a poem:

I admonish all of Jambudvipa's⁴⁷ wise and good men:
In this world never boast about your name and fame.

⁴⁶ The "root-less tree" is an image for the absolute truth, only accessible by mystical insight.

⁴⁷ In Buddhist cosmology Jambudvipa is the continent inhabited by humans.

Impermanence doesn't fear dukes, counts, or barons,
Death doesn't fear civil officials or military officers.
If men and women don't rein in their hearts early on,
They will be in a panic when the Great Term comes.
Imitate me, Zifang, and leave for the mountains, so
You won't have to defend yourself to King Yama!

The end of the story *Zhang Zifang Seeking the Way*

A SELECTION OF THE POEMS OF ZHANG ZIFANG LEAVING FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Zifang rose from a common subject to the position of imperial advisor, reaching the acme of wealth and status. But if he would not retire from court when his merit was completed, how could he know the sword of the Weiyang Palace⁴⁸ would not be tried out again? So it would be better to roam under the protection of Master Red Pine. He composed poems to express his intention, and these are well worth being transmitted for all eternity. Enjoying the favors of his lord, Xie Jin too basked in glory for a time. If he had possessed the courage to retire in midstream, he would not have had to cede much to Zifang!

The August Ancestor said, "Only because you do not see Han Xin anymore, you want to enter the mountains and seek the Way. But practicing self-cultivation is very hard work—how can it compare to the advantages of being an official?"

[Zhang] Liang replied, "By what trick can a human being escape when Impermanence arrives? I have a poem here:

Practicing self-cultivation and seeking the Way amid rocks and streams,
I will become, free from 'in favor' and free from 'against', an immortal.
For my bland food and my coarse clothes I'll depend on my own efforts;
Walking on grass-made shoes or straw sandals, I will lead a carefree life."

The August Emeror asked, "Where will you go to practice self-cultivation?"

Liang replied, "I have a poem to inform you.

Leaving to practice self-cultivation I will not be an official;
Each and every day I will each morning roam the mountains.
When thirsty I'll drink the fragrant wine that's made of grapes,
When hungry eat life-lengthening pills of the divine immortals.

⁴⁸ The imperial palace.

When idle I will read the books as well as enjoy the scenery,
And when I am unoccupied I'll sit down and strum the zither.
So if you ask your servant to which place I will repair, I'll say
My mind and body may be found on White Cloud Mountain!"

The August Emperor asked, "Who will be able to support Us, Chamberlain, when you have left to practice self-cultivation?"

When Zhang Liang heard this, he composed a poem:

Ten years the war lasted with its murder and bloodshed:
Tigers fought and dragons battled, damaging each other.
Today I say goodbye to you, your servant takes his leave—
And if the emperor is missing me, that's not my problem.

And yet another poem:

Sun and moon pass back and forth as fast as a shuttle;
Light and shadow of the four seasons move on and on.
I will not fight for any fame and profit of the court—
A fight for fame comes in the end with many pains!

The August Ancestor said, "What about it if you would have no responsibilities but to accompany Us from early till late?"

Liang said, "I have here a poem:

Glory, riches and status all end up in the grave—
What to do when one day Impermanence arrives?
I will leave for the mountains as soon as possible:
When you can ramble freely, then go and do so."

The August Ancestor said, "Chamberlain, there is no need to enter the mountains. You should practice self-cultivation while staying at home."

When Zhang Liang heard this, he again composed a poem:

Sun and moon move like a shuttle and cannot be stopped;
The seasons resemble an arrow—a blade that kills you!
The clear breeze and bright moon will always be present,
But loyal and brave heroes will come to a premature end.

The August Ancestor argued strongly, but Zhang Liang did not yield. Taking his leave from the emperor and exiting the palace, he composed a poem:

Roaming the rivers and lakes of the hundreds of districts
The human heart is unlike the river that flows on forever.
When receiving great favors, one should timely retreat;
When fully achieving one's ambition, it is time to stop.
Don't wait for all kinds of complaints to fill your ears
When the earlier love and affection turns into a feud.
It's not the case that your servant retires far too early—
I fear that in due time my lord will not offer protection.

When Zhang Liang had taken his leave from the emperor, exited the palace, and returned home, he composed a poem:

The hare runs, the crow flies, urging us on day and night;
Light and shadow resemble an arrow: the ancients are few.
I urge you, gentlemen, please do not covet profit and fame,
Leave for the mountains as fast as you can and don't tarry!

At that time his fellow officials also urged him, "Right now you should enjoy glory at court! Why should you suffer misery practicing self-cultivation?"

Zhang Liang smiled and composed a poem:

Because of Zhang Liang of Han's songs to scatter Chu
Eight thousand troops scattered and fled in all directions:
The Hegemon-King died for the sake of the empire,
Regretting that he had not earlier crossed the river.

When the officials had failed to persuade him, they all dispersed.

When Zhang Liang had seen the officials off, he returned to his house and took his leave of his wife, "I want to leave for the mountains and seek the Way." And he composed a poem:

The hare runs and the crow flies without ever stopping;
Past and present are rise and decay for a thousand years.
I've made up my mind to go and practice self-cultivation:
I'll roam the hills, enjoy the scenery and refine the pill.

When his wife heard this, tears flowed from her eyes, and she argued strongly, "Why did you make up your mind to leave for the mountain and seek the Way?"

When Zhang Liang heard this, he replied with a poem:

The cycle of life and death revolves myriads of times
But deluded people don't understand even half a hair!
If as a human being one does not act in a fair manner,
One will not evade torture on the three ways, in hell!

His wife said, "Our children have not yet been married. It won't be too late to leave when everything will have been arranged."

Zhang Liang replied, "How could I stay if the Great Term arrived?" And he composed a poem:

Once Impermanence arrives, all business is finished:
Rolled in a mat on one side of the bed you can't stay.
Glory, riches and status eventually all will vanish;
Love for your sons, lust for your wives abruptly end.
With all kinds of tricks you fight over profit and fame,
But your corpse decomposes and turns into a skeleton.
Each and every person is only a simple-minded fool
Who will end up resting in a grave on the open field.

Zhang Liang left his wife.

* * *

Now tell that the August Emperor issued an edict that it was not permitted to allow Zhang Liang to enter the mountains, but Zhang Liang still left on his distant journey. The August Emperor dispatched men in all directions to track him down but they could not find him. But on the red platter was found a poem that read:

I lack the energy to unroll my books on strategy again:
Your Majesty beheaded great men without any reason.
Unwilling to carry the golden seal of office at my waist,
I'm afraid I'll be executed like Han Xin by the sword.

Ever since Zhang Liang had left, the August Ancestor thought of him every day, now he could not meet him. On the gate of the palace a poster was placed, stating, "If someone knows the whereabouts of Zhang Liang and reports them, he will be rewarded with high office."

A woodcutter took away the poster and reported, "Myriads of years to Your Majesty! I saw Prime Minister Zhang practicing self-cultivation on White Cloud Mountain."

When the August Ancestor heard this, his heart was filled with joy and his dragon face showed

his pleasure. He immediately set out in the phoenix conveyance and went off to the White Cloud Mountain. He failed to find [Zhang Liang] there, but saw a thatched hermitage, and in the hermitage a new poem just written:

Two lines at the entrance of White Cloud Mountain
 Respectfully presented by Zhang Liang to his lord:
 Red cheeks that love sex die with their hearts extracted;
 Purple weeds with intertwined branches pass still in leaf.
 The bee visits a hundred flowers but people eat its honey;
 The ox plows the overgrown field but rats steal the grain.
 These are the three most grievous events of this world:
 The waning moon, a fading flower, people dying young.

When the August Ancestor had recited the poem, he did not see Zhang Liang, and as tears coursed down his cheeks, he composed a poem:

Setting out with Our train, we visit this wild mountain
 But don't find Our wise minister—Our visit was in vain.
 Peach blossoms in the sun startle my eyes with their red;
 Bamboo leaves in the wind chill this man to the bone.
 In the oven the ashes for refining the pill are not yet cold;
 On the table the ink for writing his poem is not yet dry,
 His books, zither and go board are all here as before—
 In what place may Zifang be hiding himself from me?

When the August Emperor had intoned this poem, he did not see Zhang Liang return to his hermitage, so he could only turn his conveyance around to return to the court. When he arrived halfway down the mountain he suddenly saw Zhang Liang with a fisherman's drum and clappers in his hands. His hair was done up in two tufts and he was dressed in a gown made up of hundred pieces; his feet were shod

in straw sandals, and around his waist he had a Master Lü belt.⁴⁹ Loudly singing Daoist lyrics he hurried forward to welcome the emperor.

When the August Ancestor saw Zhang Liang, his dragon face was filled with joy, and he composed a poem:

Ten times you were summoned but never responded;
Separated from Us by mountains, the road was so far.
We clearly know you have the method of immortals
And change stone into gold without any refinement.
But the court now lacks a pillar that supports the sky,
In the palace is no person to wear your purple gown.
If you, wise minister, are willing to return to the court,
Our land will be blessed with an unshakeable stability.

Zhang Liang replied, "Your Majesty, the ancients said, 'Practicing self-cultivation resembles climbing a mountain. How could I feel regret and retreat? I have here a poem:

At the foot of White Cloud Mountain I roam at ease:
This far surpasses high rank and salary in the palace.
When idle I repair this old cassock by the window;
When bored I gather medicinal herbs on the peaks.
The king of Qi achieved his great merits all in vain:
When he displeased the dragon face, he was killed.
It's not so that I, your servant, am bereft of feeling,
But I don't want to suffer the end of Prince Han!⁵⁰

⁴⁹ A belt like the one worn by the immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓?

⁵⁰ Prince Han here refers to Han Xin.

Zhang Liang addressed the emperor, “Your Majesty, if I would return, I fear I might suffer the same execution by the sword as the king of Qi. If Your Majesty does not believe me, I have here a poem as evidence:

When the hare has died, the hunting dog is cooked;
 In the palace great men are beheaded without cause.
 Great peace is originally established by the generals,
 But the generals are not allowed to enjoy that peace.
 Foolish people, desiring a salary, die by the sword;
 Smart people save their lives by hiding their names.
 From now on I’ve broken the vat of sour vegetables⁵¹
 And jumped from the human world’s pit of fire!”

The August Ancestor repeatedly tried to change his mind, but Zhang Liang did not yield, so he could only prepare his conveyance to return to the court.

Zhang Liang said, “Your Majesty, come and drink a cup of tea at my hermitage.” The August Ancestor turned his conveyance around and went ahead. Zhang Liang secretly dispatched the god of the mountain and the god of the soil to conjure up a big ravine across which they placed one rotten tree log as bridge. When he invited the August Ancestor to be the first to cross, the August Ancestor was scared and afraid, so he didn’t dare cross the bridge. Zhang Liang rose into the air, and said, “Your Majesty, forgive my crime!” Pointing to the one-log bridge, he composed a poem:

Across the ravine has been laid one log as bridge—
 Who knows who is the man who made the bridge?
 The jade pillars supporting heaven are fully the same;
 The golden viaduct across the ocean is not different.

⁵¹ Confucian scholars may be referred to as “sour pedants”, so perhaps “the vat of sour vegetables” refers to the narrow-minded Confucian officials at court.

To the sides no railing or balustrade offers support;
Below it the deep turning waves and white billows.
The emperor doesn't know the method of immortals
And the dragon carriage can, scared, not proceed.

The August Emperor could not cross the bridge, but emotionally he could not leave Zhang Liang, and all accompanying officials shed tears. On the other side of the ravine Zhang Liang took his leave from the emperor and all civil officials and military officers with a bow, and composed a poem:

Today I say 'Goodbye my lord', I cannot but do so.
Below White Cloud Mountain I'll spend my years.
In the green pine forest I've a house for three lives;⁵²
At the red grass rapids I'll tie up my one little boat.
I untie this jade belt and return it to His Majesty;
Straw shoes and a bamboo staff will be my mates.
Proudly I laugh at the cosmos without any shame,
Free to roam the endless expanse of misty rivers.

The August Emperor readied his conveyance and returned to the court.

Well, Zifang became a disciple of Master Yellow Stone, and his name in religion was Red Pine.⁵³ Hiding his surname and burying his name, he practiced self-cultivation seeking the Way, and wrote the following poem:

Since I rejected merit and fame and avoided the world,
I enjoy myself by the side of a pond or below the woods.

⁵² The "three lives" refer to past, present and future.

⁵³ Red Pine was mentioned as the teacher of Zhang Liang in the introductory paragraph.

When the wild flowers set seed, I know spring has left;
 By the sprouting grass I realize a new year has arrived.
 When I cross a sandy creek, the gulls are my friends,
 When I gather mushrooms, cranes welcome me back.
 A clear source stills my thirst, pine seeds my hunger,
 And when unoccupied I recite the *Yellow Courtyard*.⁵⁴

Cultivating the Way, Zhang Liang enlightened his mind and saw his nature. He wrote the following poem:

Having clearly understood pre-celestial principles,
 I refine the pure yang inside a hole in a brick gate.
 I lead the white horse to graze on the western hill
 And tie up the green dragon inside the northern sea.
 When the young girl goes roaming, be attentive;
 Not released by Lord Metal, nature runs wild.
 In the moon-sickle oven, lead and cinnabar unite;
 The pill matures of itself, the body turns fragrant.

When Zhang Liang's merits were complete and his good actions had reached the full number, he rose up in broad daylight. He composed the following poem:

When the nine-cycle pill is completed, the Way's fruit is complete;
 When the three-thousand merits are reached, one becomes immortal.
 You'll be summoned by jade tablets with their golden inscriptions
 And, stepping on auspicious clouds, you will visit the Ninth Heaven.
 Who understands the dark and mysterious truth of these matters,

⁵⁴ *Huangting jing* 黃停經 (Yellow Courtyard Scripture) of the second century is one of the earliest Daoist books to teach the method of mediation known as inner alchemy.

Will know how to successfully plant lotus flowers inside the fire.
When all yin will have been removed, the golden pill has matured
And a crane takes you to Jasper Pond's meeting of the immortals.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The meeting at Jasper Pool, held once every three thousand years when the peaches of immortality have ripened.

THE POEMS OF SECRETARY XIE

This is a story from the reign of Hongwu (1368–1398) that originated from Jishui District of Ji'an Prefecture in Jiangxi. A man named Xie Tong 解通 had married a woman surnamed Chen 陈. Husband and wife were dirt poor and made a living selling bean curd. They had one son, and as soon as he turned six they send him to school to study the books, where he was given the name Xie Jin 解缙. When he had been in school for four years, he could compose poems and produce couplets. At one moment an elder teased him by asking, "What does a little boy love?" Jin promptly replied with four poems:

What is it that a young boy loves?

He loves a room that's filled with orchids.⁵⁶

And next he wants to ride a dragon,

Rise to the sky and watch the sun!

Let people say the sun is in the sky,

But I will say the sun is in the heart.

If one is not alert when roosters crow,

A booming bell will ring to no avail.

The Sage⁵⁷ has left us the Six Classics;

Heaven and earth have sun and moon.

The sun and moon will shine forever

And the Six Classics will not vanish.

⁵⁶ Orchids signify noble sentiments.

⁵⁷ Confucius.

What is that a young boy dreams about?
At night he dreams his brush is growing flowers.⁵⁸
Where do the flowers' roots originate?
"Our home is the vermillion mansion."⁵⁹

When the teacher released his pupils, Jin went home. His father Xie Tong ordered Xie Jin, "My son, "Take a bucket and come with me to buy bean curd." Xie Jin obeyed him, and when he passed with his father in front of the district office, he saw a monk who had been put on display with a wooden collar around his neck for adultery, and he composed the following poem to ridicule him:

He knows the Law and yet transgressed the law;⁶⁰
He left the household yet still wears a collar.⁶¹
Four wooden planks, bereft of any feeling,
Now must support the biggest water melon.⁶²

Because his poetic inspiration was not yet exhausted, he composed yet another poem:

A pure-bald shining pate supports a pure-bald shining neck;
The man so full of passion suffered from a heartless beating.

58 A dream of a brush growing flowers predicts great literary talent.

59 "The vermillion mansion" here refers to the red (sincere, spontaneous) heart. This set of four quatrains is also included in Xie Jin's collected works, where it is preceded by a long later preface in which the author states that these were composed for a granduncle at an early age. See Xie Jin 1983, 662 (5.20b). For an alternative translation, including the preface, see Chaves 1986, 161–162.

60 The Chinese word *fa* 法 refers to the Law of the Buddha and to the law of the land.

61 "Household" (*jia* 家) and wooden "collar" (*jia* 枷) have the same pronunciation.

62 The monk's bald head.

The man who left the household is a man who wears a collar:
It is the little monk⁶³ who is to blame for this monk's woes!

When Xie Tong returned home after buying bean curd, he instructed Xie Jin., "From now on you cannot intone poems to hurt people. I will pardon you this time. Now release the chicken and sweep the floor." Xie Jin hurried to sweep the floor and move the chicken coop, while loudly declaiming:

I cleanly sweep the ground before the hall
And lightly move the chicken in the coop.

When Xie Tong heard him loudly declaiming, he said sternly, "I told you not to intone poems, so why are you doing it again?" Jin thereupon very softly added the following two lines,

I clearly only said some common words
But still he claims that I intoned a poem!

When Xie Jin was angrily berated by his father, he went outside to play. There he saw a woodcutter who was taking a rest after carrying his load of firewood for quite some distance. The woodcutter made a deep bow, saying, "Sir Student, my mother is seriously ill. Please tell me where I can find doctor Dong 董 so I can get some medicine." Jin thereupon intoned a poem:

Go all the way down to the south,
And take a turn and then go east.
A white plaque with a big inscription:
That is the house of doctor Dong!

Let's forget about idle talk but tell that Xie Tong on the evening of the thirtieth day [of the last month

63 "Little monk" (*xiaoheshang* 小和尚) is a common euphemism for the penis.

of the year] saw that each and every house and family was pasting on new spring couplets, so he hastily got some red paper and said to Xie Jin, "Take this and ask your teacher to write out a couplet so I can paste them on." Xie Jin replied, "Father, there is no need to bother my teacher, let me write a couplet myself." When Xie Jin walked outside and looked around, slightly to one side, the house on the opposite side of the street was the mansion of minister Cao 曹, and to the left of the gate wall was the bamboo garden of the Cao mansion. When Xie Jin saw the thousand stalks of bamboo in the bamboo garden opposite his house, he used them as his theme to compose a couplet:

The gate is facing thousand bamboo stalks;
The house preserves ten thousand scrolls of books.

When the next morning on the first day of the New Year minister Cao came back home after paying his New Year visits, he saw that a dilapidated house on the other side of the street had posted a couplet reading "The gate is facing thousand bamboo stalks; / The house preserves ten thousand scrolls of books," so he asked his major domo, Cao Bao 曹寶, "Who is living in that dilapidated house across the street?" Cao Bao replied, "That is the Xie family that sells bean curd." Minister Cao then asked, "What kind of foundation for the study of books do they have if they are selling bean curd? Who else is living there?" Cao Bao replied, "They only have one son, who is called Xie Jin." In his rage minister Cao ordered Cao Bao, "Cut down one half of the bamboos in the bamboo garden!" Cao Bao immediately cut them down. Minister Cao also ordered him to go and see whether the Xie family had taken down their couplet. When Cao Bao got there, he saw that the sheet of red paper had been extended, and read:

The gate is facing thousand bamboo stalks, so short;
The house preserves ten thousand scrolls of books for long.

When Cao Bao returned and reported this, minister Cao grew even angrier and ordered Cao Bao to cleanly dig up all those bamboo roots in the bamboo garden. When minister Cao again sent Cao Bao to have a look, he only saw that the couplet had been extended again, now reading:

The gate is facing thousand bamboo stalks, so short they're gone;
 The house preserves ten thousand scrolls of books: for long it lasts.

When Cao Bao returned, he reported these words too. Minister Cao's anger rose from his heart, his fury rose from his gall. "How does this boy defame me like this!" And he ordered Cao Bao, "Go there and ask them who wrote these couplets for them. Bring him here!" Cao Bao walked over to the gate of Xie Tong's house. When Xie Tong saw Cao Bao, he hastily invited him inside and asked him to sit down. Cao Bao said, "My master told me to ask you who wrote the couplet at the gate. He told me to bring him over." When Xie Tong heard this, he hastily replied, "Uncle Cao, that is no one else than that no-good son of mine." Xie Tong hastily went inside and told Xie Jin to go along to Master Cao, but no more about that.

Let's tell that when Xie Jin entered, he saw Cao Bao sitting in the best place. He loudly shouted, "Pfui! Who are you that you dare sit down in the best place in my house? Get me a cudgel so I can give this scoundrel a beating!" When Cao Bao heard this, he hastily rose to his feet, made a deep bow, and said, "Lord Xie, my master says that you used his bamboos in your couplet and tells you to come over so he can interrogate you." Xie Jin replied, "Your master may occupy the first rank and be one of the Three Grandees, but he cannot command me and he cannot order me about. I am his neighbor, and if he wants me to come, he will have to write a note to invite me, Lord Xie. Only then will I come." Cao Bao had heard the words Xie Jin spoke, and reported them in detail to his master. Minister Cao remarked, "He is right." He got a red note and told Cao Bao to invite Xie Jin.

When Xie Jin received the note, it said, "An invitation from your friend Cao." Xie Jin changed into a frozen-green straight gown and a goose-yellow skirt. Waving a white paper fan, he walked to the gate of the Cao mansion, and shouted, "Sir Cao Bao, how come you haven't opened the main gate to welcome me now your master has invited me? Only opening a side door is not the proper way when inviting someone. You go inside and tell your master on my behalf. Tell him that Xie Jin says that now he has been invited by my master the main gate must be opened to welcome him, to show your respect to the guest." Cao Bao went inside, to the main hall, and reported to his master, "Xie Jin wants my master to open the main gate to welcome him. Only then is he an invited guest." Minister Cao said, "This little creature has quite some gall! Bring me a white plaque and my red brush, so I can write out a line for which he has to provide a matching line. If he can come up with a matching line, I will open the main

gate and see him. But if he cannot come up with a matching line, bring him inside and he'll get twenty strokes of a cudgel." Minister Cao wrote down the line:

The small dog lacks wisdom and thinks the road too narrow.

Xie Jin replied with the following matching line:

The great roc spreads its wings and deems the sky too low.

[Minister] Cao pointed to the stone lion and wrote down the following line:

The stone lion carries a stone incense burner on its head—when will it end?

Xie Jin came up with a matching line using the clay judge:

The clay judge⁶⁴ carries the ledger of life and death in his hands—when are you fetched?

Minister Cao wrote out yet another line:

The sky is the go board, the stars are stones—who dares make a move?

Xie Jin replied with a matching line:

The earth is a *pipa*, the roads are strings—how can one strum it?

When minister Cao saw that Xie Jin was adept at coming up with matching lines, he praised him as a rare talent, "This boy will in a couple of years become the Top-of-the-List!" And he ordered Cao Bao,

⁶⁴ The clay judge refers to the statue of an associate judge of King Yama, the ruler of the underworld.

“Open the main gate and invite Lord Xie to come in.” When Xie Jin had walked up to the dripping eaves, he made a deep bow, and minister Cao came out to welcome him. When they had sat down as guest and host, he saw that he was wearing green, so he produced the following line to make fun of him:

Emerging from the water the frog wears a green jacket.

But Xie Jin pointed to the red gown of minister Cao and answered with the following matching line:

Falling into the boiler the lobster puts on a red gown.

Minister Cao said to himself, “This little beast! While I compare him to a living creature, he compares me to a dead one!” Secretly he was filled with rage, and knowing that his parents made a living by selling bean curd, he deliberately asked him the insulting question, “Lord Xie, what is the trade of your parents?” Xie Jin replied, “My father carries the sun and moon on his shoulders, selling them on the street, while my mother back at home kneads the cosmos with her hands.” When minister Cao saw that Xie Jin answered him without effort, he invited him into his study for a cup of tea. There he used the four little paintings hanging there of the green dragon, of the white tiger, of a carp, and of Liu Hai 劉海⁶⁵ to come up with the following line:

The dragon doesn’t chant, the tiger doesn’t roar, the carp doesn’t jump and the toad doesn’t hop, so Liu Hai with his disheveled hair collapses with laughter.

Xie Jin promptly replied as follows:

Carts without wheels, horses without saddle, elephants without tusks and cannon without smoke make the general inside his camp die from frustration.

⁶⁵ Liu Hai is an immortal who is often depicted with a three-legged toad on a leash.

When minister Cao repeatedly had seen Xie Jin display such rare talent, he hastily ordered Cao Bao, “Bring some snacks, and give Lord Xie some sweets.” When they had finished their tea, minister Cao happily thought to himself, “I am already advanced in years and I have no son, only one daughter. Let me discuss it with my wife to have him marry our daughter and become our heir—wouldn’t that be best? Let me raise the issue right now.” So he said, “Lord Xie, I am already advanced in years and have no son or nephew.⁶⁶ I have only one daughter, so what would you think about it if you became our son-in-law?”⁶⁷ Xie Jin hastily jumped to his feet, made a deep bow, and said, “How would I dare to refuse when you, sir, show me such love and don’t disdain my poverty! I will return this favor when I later will have achieved merit and fame.” Xie Jin bowed down to show his gratitude, took his leave and went home.

When minister Cao had seen Xie Jin off at the gate, he went inside again and thought to himself, “A word once spoken cannot be caught by a four-in-hand. I will have to live up to my promise.” Thereupon he discussed it with his wife, “Let’s select a good hour, so we can bring him to our mansion, and I can instruct him from early till late in the histories and classics.” When Xie Jin soon had finished his studies, he took part in the district examination and was selected as a student of the prefectural school. Later, at the age of fourteen, he became a first-place presented scholar⁶⁸ of the class of the year *mouchen* of the Hongwu period (1388) and was appointed as a reader-in-waiting. He was promoted to grand secretary of the Eastern Pavilion, also serving as [the head of] the right secretariat of the heir-apparent of the Hanlin Academy.

When the emperor saw that Xie Jin had passed as Top-of-the-List at the age of fourteen, he asked, “You must be related to one of the examiners?” Jin kowtowed and composed the following poem:

With none of the examiners your servant is related:

Each Son of Heaven has the servants who belong to Him.

66 In the absence of a son, a nephew of the same surname would be considered a suitable candidate for adoption as son and heir.

67 The Chinese specifies that Xie Jin will move to the mansion of minister Cao as his heir.

68 “Presented scholar” (*jinsshi* 進士) is the title of those who passed the metropolitan examinations.

Gan Luo served as prime minister when he was only twelve,⁶⁹
 And I am even two years older than Gan Luo of yore.

When Xie Jin and his fellow officials paraded the streets [of the capital],⁷⁰ he saw a camel, so he asked them, “What is this kind of creature?” The two fellow officials were northerners and replied, “You don’t have this in the south. This is a brownie donkey.”⁷¹ Xie understood that they were insulting him, so he composed the following poem:

Its head is like a Hunnish⁷² goat, its neck is like a goose;
 It is no donkey and no horse and also not a mule.
 This creature, it is true for sure, is not found in the south;
 It’s only in these northern climes one finds so many beasts.

Secretary Xie was very short, and when he paraded the streets people all called him Shorty Xie. When Jin heard this, he composed the following poem:

Contemporaries laugh at me because I am so short,
 I laugh at them because they need a lot of cloth for clothes.
 Now hang them upside down and not a drop of ink comes out,⁷³
 So what would be the use of bodies twenty meters tall?

69 Gan Luo 甘羅 served as an official in the state of Qin in the second part of the third century BCE.

70 The three top-ranked “presented scholars” paraded through the city once the final results of the last stage of the metropolitan examinations (the palace examination) had been posted. The trio is here designated as officials as they were assured of an appointment.

71 “Brownie” here translates *man* 蠻, a common term for the non-Han ethnic groups of southern China. Northerners also used it as a denigrating term for southern Chinese.

72 “Hunnish” here translates *hu* 胡, a common term for the non-Han ethnic groups to the north of the Chinese world. Here the word is used as a denigrating reference to northern Chinese.

73 People who have studied long and hard are said to have a belly filled with ink.

When Xie Jin returned home, it happened that a singsong girl presented him a cup of tea. He composed the following poem:

Ten fingers, long and tapering, present a cup of tea;
The flower of the peony is covered by white gauze.⁷⁴
While other people may consider you a priceless treasure,
In my eyes you are nothing but a rotten piece of melon.

When Xie Jin noted at the courtesan establishment a little girl named Precious Pearl, he composed the following poem to ridicule her:

You are a pearl that is as round as round can be:
You are the first of precious treasures and rare goods.
But later when you have been pierced by a steel needle,
You'll not be worth a single coin with such a hole.

When the emperor and Xie Jin were walking, they saw a chicken laying an egg, and Xie was ordered to compose a poem:

It looks like round but isn't round. And square? It isn't square.
Heaven and earth⁷⁵ are fully wrapped and hidden in its orb.
Two kinds of white, inner and outer, have to be distinguished,
These dominate one spot of yellow in the very middle.
It is an image of the universe before division,⁷⁶

74 The peony flower is here used as a euphemism for the vagina. Cf. the use of "rose" in Western literature.

75 Heaven is round, earth is square.

76 The cosmos was one undifferentiated mass until the two contradictory but complementary forces of yin and yang started to form, resulting in further differentiation until all creatures had been formed.

Yet holds the shapes of hills and streams throughout the cosmos.
 When it has fully grown its wings, it soars into the sky
 And turns into the Golden Crow that moves the sun around.⁷⁷

The emperor saw the emerging new moon, and ordered Jin to compose a poem:

Last night the emperor in heaven hosted all immortals:
 A fine chignon, a rainbow skirt, her temple locks aslant.⁷⁸
 She dropped her comb of jade—nowhere could it be found
 Because the wind had blown it off into the cloudy sky!

The emperor summoned Xie Jin and told him, “We have here eight topics you have to cover in four lines of verse.” Jin asked, “Which eight topics?” The emperor said, “Civil officials and military officers, physicians and diviners, fishermen and woodcutters, and farmers and herd boys.” [Jin composed the following poem:]

The hairy awl will certainly not cede to Dragon Spring;⁷⁹
 An illness at your midriff means your fate depends on Heaven.⁸⁰

77 The sun is inhabited by a three-legged crow. This poem has a counterpart in Xie Jine’s collection, where it is titled “Written in jest on a chicken egg” (*Xiti jiluan* 戲題雞卵) (Xie Jin 1983, 657/ 5:14a). For a translation of that poem, see Chaves 1986, 160.

78 This line describes Chang’e 嫦娥, the beautiful goddess of the moon. The chignon is fixed in shape by a comb and hairpins.

79 The “hairy awl” refers to a writing brush, so to a civil official. Dragon Source is the name of a famous sword from antiquity, so refers to military officers.

80 The first part of the line refers to an incurable disease, so to a physician, while the second part of the line refers to a diviner who tells one’s fate.

While carrying the fish you caught you meet him in the hills;⁸¹
The rain-soaked soil has all been plowed—he sleeps next to the ox.⁸²

The emperor said, "Xie Jin, there was a birth in the palace last night." Xie Jin immediately replied, "This is my poem:

My Lord, last night you witnessed the descent of a true dragon."

The emperor said, "It was a princess."

"Change, the goddess of the moon, came down from highest heaven."

The emperor said, "But she died."

"This mortal world, she reckoned, could not make her stay for long."

The emperor said, "She was not buried but thrown into the Gold Stream River."⁸³

"She turned around and jumped into the Water Crystal Palace."⁸⁴

One day the emperor was fasting for the night in the Hall of Literary Splendor. As the moon was shining into the hall, he ordered Jin to compose a poem on the moon palace that had to include a verdict. Jin's answer was:

81 The person the fisherman meets in the hills is the woodcutter.

82 The first part of this line refers to the farmer, the second part to the herd boy.

83 The Gold Stream River refers to a river running through the palace grounds in Peking.

84 The Water Crystal Palace is the underwater palace of the dragon king.

What is the reason why you left the corner of the earth,
And why do you now cross the sky without a proper permit?
And then there's yet another crime that you are guilty of:
It is prohibited to enter people's home at midnight!

One more poem:

Resting at ease, without a worry, happily awake,
And through the paper window enters slanting the full moon.
The Lord of Heaven⁸⁵ sees that you are sitting here alone
And therefore sends now Chang'e down to serve you at your side.

When the emperor was walking outside with Xie Jin, he saw a palace lady who was wearing a jacket fastened with nine knots. [Xie Jin wrote the following poem:]

One piece of shark-weave has been cut into the whitest gauze,
And the appearance of this beauty puts Chang'e to shame.
But if she happily agrees to lock her spring-heart up,⁸⁶
Why does this modest maiden need so many, many knots?

The emperor and Xie Jin were angling in the Gold Stream River, and, while Xie Jin caught many fish, the emperor did not catch any. [Xie Jin composed the following poem:]

The line of seven feet and hook are thrown into the water
But once the golden hook has sunk it never reappears.

85 The Jade Emperor.

86 Spring is associated with eros and sex.

The common fishes do not dare to meet the Son of Heaven—
An emperor blessed with long life will only catch a dragon!

While the imperial procession was on its way, a red rainbow appeared in the east, and Xie Jin was ordered to compose a poem:

Purple and green and blue and red together form a bridge,
A bridge that is on either side without a firm foundation.
The Lord of Heaven knows our master travels by this way
And therefore hands us down one band of clearest sky.

The emperor hid cock's comb flowers of different colors in his sleeve. He first pulled out the red one and next pulled out the white one, as he had Xie Jin compose a poem:

This cock's comb seems to have been dyed in bright-red paint.

Then the emperor showed the white one:

Then how can it today be suddenly so white, like powdered?
The reason is that when it wanted to announce the dawn
Its head was fully covered by the early morning frost.⁸⁷

The emperor asked Xie Jin, "Can you make a poem on a rice dumpling?"

Glutinous rice and sesame seeds, wrapped in a bamboo leaf,
And when they have been finished, they are left before your feet.

⁸⁷ This poem has a counterpart in Xie Jin's collection (Xie Jin 1983, 664/ 6.2ab), where it is called simply "A White Cock's Comb Flower" (*Bai jiguanhua* 白機冠花).

Only because the inside tastes so great,
It would not hurt my lord to bend his waist.

The emperor saw a fierce wind stirring up the snow and ordered Jin to compose a poem:

All under heaven storm and snow engage in wild confusion;
The falling snow and roaring storm, they fill my face with flakes.
The snow that's brought here by the storm resembles whitest jade;
The snow that's leaving with the storm resembles silver dust.

After heavy snowfall the soldiers outside the south gate had made a monk of snow. When the emperor saw it, he ordered Xie Jin to compose a poem:

This monk we see has never entered a maternal womb
But yesterday came down to earth at heaven's high behest.
It borrows now the South Gate as his lodging for tonight—
Tomorrow, when the sun comes out, he will return to heaven.

While the emperor was out on horseback, he encountered heavy snowfall and ordered Xie Jin to compose a poem:

One flake is coming from the east, one's coming from the west,
And lightly, lightly they fall down, not soiled by any mud.
The Lord of Heaven knows our master is on a procession
And scatters silver flowers to support the horse's hoofs.

The emperor saw that the snow on the Changyang Hall had turned into icicles two feet long, and ordered Xie Jin to compose a poem:

Still yesterday the scarlet clouds protected distant hills:
Goose feathers were cut up as snow that then came down from heaven,
And in the sky white dragon tails came all cascading down
To fall on the enormous building of the Changyang Hall.
On the glazed roof tiles of the hall they form a silver cover;
The silver heads enclosed in gold are now the hardest jade.
It seems as if Yuchi Jingde allows his horse to take some rest
And that he has hung up his whips, all made of water crystal.⁸⁸

The emperor asked Xie Jin, "Which should We follow of the three teachings—Confucianism, Daoism or Buddhism?" Xie Jin replied, "I would not dare to decide." And he composed a poem:

One has to read the sutras and one must recite the books;
One follows Buddha and immortals, and the Teacher⁸⁹ too.
When the First Emperor buried and massacred the Classics,
Who knew he would be taken in by weeping over bones?⁹⁰
Huizong revered Daoism: his devotion was one-sided;⁹¹

88 Yuchi Jingde 尉遲敬德 (585–658), a ferocious fighter of foreign extraction, was one of the ablest generals supporting Li Shimin 李世民 (599–649, r. 626–649), the second emperor of the Tang dynasty (617–906). His favorite weapon was the steel whip. In late imperial China he was universally known as one of the two door gods.

89 The "Teacher" refers to Confucius.

90 When the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (2. 221–210 BCE) had conquered the Chinese world, he took several measures to unify the empire. In order to establish ideological conformity and obedience to his will, he is said to have "burned the books and buried the scholars." The second line of this couplet may refer to the legend of Meng Jiangnü 孟姜女. When her husband had died of exhaustion while employed in the building of the Great Wall, his body was buried in the structure of the wall. When Meng Jiangnü arrived at the Wall, bringing her husband his winter clothes, and learned of his death, she wept till the Wall collapsed and revealed her husband's bones. In many versions of the legend Meng Jiangnü then tricks the First Emperor into providing her husband with a grand funeral.

91 Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125) presided over the final decades of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126). He was a great patron of Daoism. He ended his life as a prisoner of the Jurchen, who conquered northern China in several campaigns

Wudi's respect for monks was also all to no avail.⁹²

Only the sage, wise ruler of the Great Ming dynasty
Will without partiality rely on all these teachings.

The emperor was out boating and ordered Jin to come aboard. Unexpectedly the boat sprang a leak and they hastily jumped ashore.

When I stepped on the boat, the planks gave way and separated,
So now Your Majesty and I are spattered both by dust and mud.
My emperor, don't laugh at me because my clothes are wet—
It's only now that I jumped through the Dragon Gate at last!

The emperor ascended a mountain supported by Xie Jin and demanded a poem:

Upwards we climb, upwards we climb, upwards we climb again!
Upwards we climb, and so we climb the highest mountain top.
When we look up, both the red sun and the white clouds are low
While the wide world of streams and hills can all be seen at once.

On the tenth day of the Ninth Month the emperor and Xie Jin were walking outside when they saw two rams butting their heads. The emperor said, "Compose a poem on the spot without any thought!"

Without any thought! Without any thought!
These animals show no respect before Your Majesty!
We celebrated yesterday the day of Double Yang,

starting in 1125.

⁹² Emperor Wudi (r. 501–549) of the Liang dynasty (501–556) was a great patron of Buddhism. He ended his life in prison after a rebellion.

And now today we see again a pair of butting rams.⁹³

The emperor and Xie Jin saw a humming top, and Jin was ordered to compose a poem:

A red string three feet long it tightly tied around its middle,
And when its sound has been produced, it pierces through the clouds.
A high official is at risk as he is bound to fail:
His time is gone, his voice is silenced and he tumbles down.

The emperor was out riding and, on the road, ran into Xie Jin. Halting his horse, he demanded a poem:

Your Majesty, you halt your horse and want from me a poem.
From a quatrain by Li Taibai I borrow these two lines:
A horse in golden halter whinnies on its fragrant meadow;
In a jade room a man gets drunk on a bright springtime day.⁹⁴

The emperor and Xie Jin were out walking when they saw a palace lady taking a pee. When the emperor caught her in the act, he shouted, "Arrest her!" [But Xie Jin intervened by saying,] "Your Majesty, please listen to my poem:

She looked around: it seemed she was alone,
And with white hands undid her silken trousers.
Then, when the pomegranate's rind broke open,
The mussel's mouth released its precious pearls."

⁹³ The number nine stands for *yang*, and the ninth day of the Ninth Month is known Double Yang (*Chongyang* 重陽). This has the same pronunciation as "butting rams" (*chongyang* 衝羊).

⁹⁴ Li Bai (Taibai) 李白太白 (701–762) is one of China's most famous poets. He glorifies the pleasures of wine in many of his poems..

The emperor saw that it was raining in the third month. He summoned Xie Jin and asked him, “What is the value of this rain?” He replied, “I’ll determine the value.

Once the jade steps are wet in cloistered courtyards,
 The plow can enter deep into the earth.
 You want to know how much its value is?
 All fields are covered soon by yellow gold!”⁹⁵

The emperor ascended the palace hall. When the civil officials and military officers had paid him their obeisance, he told them not to disperse, “We had a dream. Please explain it.” The head of the directorate for astronomy⁹⁶ did not dare to explain it, but Xie Jin stepped forward from the ranks and said, “Allow me to explain this dream.” The emperor said, “The sun went down, mountains collapsed, the sea fell dry and flowers faded.”

The sun goes down: the Royal Star appears;
 Mountains collapse: the earth is fully flat.⁹⁷
 The sea falls dry: a dragon will appear;
 When flowers fade, the seed is bound to form.⁹⁸

Xie Jin one day accused Heaven for its lack of impartiality, composing the following poem:

I wash my hands, burn incense, and now pray to Heaven:
 O Lord of Heaven,⁹⁹ you are imperfect in these two matters.

95 “Yellow gold” here refers to ripening grain.

96 The head of the directorate for astronomy was expected to be able to read the signs of Heaven, including dreams.

97 The Chinese word *ping* (flat, equal, fair) also has the meaning of “peace.”

98 The Chinese word *zi* (seed) also has the meaning of “son.”

99 The Jade Emperor.

Those good-for-nothing cruel bullies live a life of pleasure,
But families that practice virtue are beset by trouble.
The men who beat and curse their neighbors all are strong and healthy,
While those who piously read sutras suffer from diseases.
If, Lord of Heaven, even you are not impartial,
How should we then expect officials to remove injustice?

The emperor ate cherries and ordered Jin to compose a poem:

A white-jade plate presents us with their red carnelian
Now at the golden steps you gift us with their purple coral.
While walking on the highest peak of Mt. Emei for fun,
The Old Lord overturned his cinnabar-refining furnace.¹⁰⁰

The emperor asked Xie Jin to compose a poem on the theme of a writing brush.

Purple bamboo and thinnest hairs tightly bound with some thread—
So, like a dragon or a tiger, at the student's side.
When thirsty it will drink from the jade inkstone's pond;¹⁰¹
While sated it will walk across the flowered letter-paper.
When it writes down "Your Majesty," a minister is fearful;
Inscribing poems in a temple, it scares ghosts and gods.
And even though it may not be a sword like Dragon Source,
It still assists Our Emperor in bringing us Great Peace.

¹⁰⁰ The Old Lord is one of the names for Laozi 老子 (the Old Master), the patriarch of Daoism. The later tradition often depicts him as an alchemist refining cinnabar into the red pills of immortality, to which cherries here are compared.

¹⁰¹ An inkstone has a little depression (the pond) into which water is poured and the solid ink is rubbed in order to produce writing ink.

In his youth Xie Jin wrote two poems on his ambition:

My scales are not yet fully grown,¹⁰² but my ambition soars:
 When I'm enraged, I will make sure the world is overturned.
 My eyes will never look upon the source of any stream,
 My mind is only set on jumping through the Dragon Gate!¹⁰³
 No thousand nets will have the strength to stop me in my course,
 And never will I take the bait of those ten thousand hooks.
 Just wait until the time my scales are fully formed indeed
 And I command the wind and rain to irrigate the cosmos!

From early on my one ambition is as high as heaven,
 I never used my writings to befriend the high and mighty.
 I have the courage to saw off the horns on dragon heads,
 Am brave enough to pull the whiskers from a tiger's face.
 I stretch my arm and grab the moon to bring it down to earth,
 And, diving in, I catch the turtle that supports an island.¹⁰⁴
 Just wait until next year in spring the news will be announced
 And I will change my student's gown for one of purple hue!¹⁰⁵

The emperor ordered Xie Jin to compose a poem on the sweet flag.

¹⁰² The writer here compares himself to a carp that when fully grown will jump across the Dragon Gate and turn into a dragon.

¹⁰³ Dragon Gate is the name of a famous rapids in the Yellow River. A student who passes the examinations is compared to a carp swimming upstream that manages to pass these rapids.

¹⁰⁴ The floating islands of the immortals in the eastern ocean are said to be supported by giant turtles.

¹⁰⁵ The metropolitan examinations were held in spring once every three years.

Each leaf so green is three feet long: an ancient Tai'a sword¹⁰⁶
That dancing in the wind beheads the waves of the whole river.
Dragons are filled with fear on seeing on a bridge its shadow,
As silently the flowing stream by day and night will whet it.
Both banks when filled with mist so generate a deadly air
When late at night the tapping rain joins with a fishing song.
Its only fear is that in fall the west winds will arise
And do away with its sharp blade, creating much resentment.¹⁰⁷

The emperor saw the new moon arise and ordered Jin to compose a poem to the crescent moon.

The third and fourth days of the month: the moon is still so vague,
It is not yet a beauty's eyebrow and it is not yet a bow.
It is as if a ring of jade was broken in two pieces,
One half of which sank in the sea and one floats in the sky.

The emperor was walking outside with Xie Jin. When he saw a spider's web, he demanded a poem:

Its web is hanging in the air but offers no obstruction
West of a painted wall or to the east of white-washed walls.
For its construction it will need a thousand clever schemes
But once completed it does not require the slightest effort.
It only fears a gust of wind and its attendant waves
But it allows the tiny dew to make a fine display.
And if it will invite the wanton play of little kids,
It hangs its captured flies and honey bees all upside down.

¹⁰⁶ Tai'a is the name of a famous sword from antiquity.

¹⁰⁷ This poem has a counterpart in Xie Jin's collected works. See Xie Jin 1983, 657 (5.14b).

His fellow officials congratulated minister Wang of the ministry of personnel on the occasion of his birthday, wishing him long life. Xie Jin sent him the following poem:

I wish you a long life but surely not like pine and cypress:
 When pine and cypress have grown old, they have no color left.
 I wish you a long life but surely not like crane and turtle:
 When crane and turtle have grown old, they're thrown into a ditch.
 I wish you a long life, but like the moon up in the sky
 That for ten thousand years on end will spread the purest light.
 Today at Jaspis Terrace the immortals are assembled
 And lead the stars in paying homage at the Golden Palace.

When the honored consort of the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1424) passed away, the civil officials and military officers all arrived. They hastily had written “An elegy” on the envelope of their submission, but inside there was only one sheet of white paper. When they reported their arrival, Xie Jin was summoned to read the elegies. When one blank sheet of white paper was selected, the officials all said, “Excellency Xie, please recite an elegy!” Xie Jin said:

One single cloud from Mt. Wu,
 A handful of snow from Chu's peak;¹⁰⁸
 A blossom from the imperial park,
 The full moon high up in the sky:
 The Son of Heaven is filled with sadness,
 The common people shed tears of blood.
 Like clouds dispersing, her soul has vanished—
 A fading flower, a waning moon!

¹⁰⁸When in ancient times a king of the state of Chu visited Mt. Wu (Shamanka Mountain), the goddess of the mountain appeared that night in his dream and shared his couch. On departure she told the king that during the day she manifested herself as clouds and rain. The snow refers to the white skin of the lady while alive.

Alas, o woe!

May you partake of these offerings.

Xie Jin's poem on the upper body of a beauty:

A hundredfold seductions and a thousand charms—
But her full body is not painted, just the upper body.
Despite his skill, this artist shows a lack of understanding:
He failed to paint the part that men find most attractive!

Xie Jin's poem on a visiting card:

While I consider you another me,
He will consider me another man.
Once you have left your home and master,
You'll spend your lifetime pasted on a wall.

Xie Jin's poem on a drill:

Throughout the day a hat encapsulates my head
As if a cooking pot was the commander of the world.¹⁰⁹
To make a hole I have ask you for your help—
By him you will be dragged off faster than the wind.

Xie Jin's poem on a saw:

¹⁰⁹ This translation is tentative.

One half of common people live in houses using rafters.
 You start to grind, and snowflakes fall in wild profusion.
 But this is not because your backbone has such strength—
 Your complete body is made up of iron teeth.

The emperor and Xie Jin were walking about when they saw a palace lady enjoying an erotic dream. The emperor requested a poem.

How charming are the fingers of her hands!
 Chang'e enjoys a little noontime nap.
 Where may her dreaming soul have gone?
 She shares the couch of you, Your Majesty!

The grand secretaries went to offer their congratulations to the minister of personnel on the occasion of his birthday. When all had arrived, secretary Xie came last. The other lords all said, "Because that smoked chicken came so late, he will have to drink three cups of wine as penalty." Jin wrote the following poem:

You may malign us Jiangxi people as smoked chicken,
 But Zhejiang salted beans fall into trays and baskets.
 While those from Yunnan, Guizhou, are true brownies,
 The earthen dogs¹¹⁰ from Fujian put out classic books.
 While Sichuan has a lot of rats with pointed faces,
 The Huguang¹¹¹ people are malodorous dried fish.
 The Henan people all are donkey thieves,
 Their crotch you find in Shandong and their claws in Shanxi.

¹¹⁰ A type of sandbag.

¹¹¹ Hubei and Hunan.

The Nanjing people make a living hauling manure buckets,
And Beijing people like to have their butter.

These other lords said to Xie Jin that he showed a "freezing rooster walk":

You show the freezing rooster walk,
Your legs are covered with fish scales.

Jin replied,

In the fifth watch I can announce the dawn,
And call awake all people in the court!

The emperor and Xie Jin were walking about when they saw two palace ladies playing on a swing. The emperor requested poems:

Two charming girls of sixteen years, so beautiful and young,
Are in the shade of the green willows playing on the swing.
The two of them, with both their arms, pull hard and pull again,
And their four golden lotuses¹¹² rise upwards upside down.
A face of rouge and powder meets a face of rouge and powder;
A shoulder of white cream next to a shoulder of white cream.
Young princes on a springtime outing halt their whips and pause:
Flying immortals are descending from the highest heavens!

Near music terraces and halls the scenery is gorgeous
And beauties in a happy mood are playing on the swing.

¹¹² "Golden lotuses" was a common euphemism for the small bound feet of women in late imperial China.

They pull and pull the silken ropes with their so tender hands
 While with their golden lotuses they shake the painted plank.
 Their brocade sleeves keep floating through a rain of purple petals;
 Their cloudy locks are trembling in the mist between green willows.
 The passers-by have never seen such a seductive scene:
 It seems as if immortals are descending from the sky!

The emperor asked Xie Jin, "I want a poem on seven flying creatures. They should all be listed in the first line and each one of the later seven lines should describe one kind." Jin promptly composed the following:

Bee, butterfly, moth, swallow, goose, cicada, oriole:
 Collecting honey from the flowers in the brightest colors,
 Emerging early from the woods, its voice so loud and clear,
 Around the curtains often dancing as it flies and flutters,
 Transmitting from the Hunnish land the letter from Su Wu,¹¹³
 Awakening the soundly sleeping Zhuang Zhou from his dream,¹¹⁴
 On branches of the greenest willows twittering its songs,
 And with a single sound announcing that the sun has set.

The emperor and Xie Jin were walking about and saw a crab. The emperor requested a poem:

¹¹³ Su Wu 蘇武 was dispatched on a mission to the northern Xiongnu in 100 BCE by Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty. Upon his arrival he was kept prisoner by the Xiongnu and employed as a shepherd. He informed his master of his plight by binding a letter to the leg of a migrating goose. When this goose was shot and the emperor learned of his condition, action was taken for his release, so he was able to return home after nineteen years.

¹¹⁴ The philosopher Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (third century BCE) dreamed he was butterfly, and on awakening wondered whether he was perhaps a butterfly dreaming it was Zhang Zhou.

It does not seek out rivers and it does not stay in ponds:
It dares display its powers in the waves of the wide sea.
Its pair of tongs are closely fitting like a pair of scissors,
While its eight claws are sharply pointed like an iron awl.
Inside its stomach it, in secret, hides true amber,
But from its mouth it often spits fake glassy beads.
Your Majesty, don't scoff at it because it is so small—
Who equals it in this wide world in walking on the wild side?¹¹⁵

The emperor asked Xie Jin to write poems on the fan.

It's made of paper and bamboo and it is white like snow,
Inviting a comparison with the bright silver toad.¹¹⁶
You cannot only spread it out, but also fold it up,
From dawn to dusk—when will it ever take its leave from you?

As soon as you will pick it up, it generates a cool,
It even can subdue the dog days' stifling summer heat.
The secretary in his jade hall also brings it with him
And nobles always carry it when they appear at court.

It comes down to the human realm from the first day of summer,
And in each year we find it in the Fifth Month and the Sixth.

¹¹⁵ *Hengxing*, here translated as "walking on the wild side" literally means "walking sideways" (like a crab) but is more commonly used with the meaning of "running amok, breaking the law, tyrannizing others."

¹¹⁶ The moon is inhabited by a toad. The round white paper fan is compared to the full moon.

It is in fashion when the pomegranate is in flower
 And only stops its work when *wutong* leaves¹¹⁷ are falling down.

It seems like full but isn't full, like waning but is not—
 Bamboo and paper, silver coating, and as white as snow.
 The smiling beauty uses it to hide her coral lips;
 The student waves it lightly as he reaches for the moon.¹¹⁸

A breeze so fresh and night so cool remove the burning heat
 As it accompanies the bright moon on my study desk.
 Involuntarily I take it up and wake a breeze
 That, fresh and cool, will free me from the dog days' stifling heat.

The emperor heard an autumn cicada chirping and ordered Xie Jin to write a poem.

Coming to life it sheds its husk and leaves the yellow sand,
 But roaming through the suburb's gardens, it does not seek flowers.
 Its voice is like a flute of jade and pipes of ivory;
 The sound like a Tibetan reed or like a fife from Qin.
 It hides itself in willow trees and from its branches chirps,
 When hungry, drinks from the clear breeze and early morning dew.
 So it drums up a cooling breeze that sadly stops then blows,
 And calls forth separation feelings in a million homes.

It was raining and the ground was slippery, so Xie Jin fell down. When the others laughed at him, Xie composed a poem:

¹¹⁷ The *wutong* is the Chinese parasol tree.

¹¹⁸ Passing the highest examinations is compared to plucking a branch from the cassia tree on the moon.

The springtime rain is slippery like oil,
So much came down the street is now a stream.
When Secretary Xie then tumbled down,
A herd of oxen laughed themselves to death.

A poem on a Siberian hawk:

This seaside bird came flying from the ocean's western shore
And soaring high it keeps its talons free from dust and mud.
Clenching its fists it scares the geese, so all their gall is scattered,
Pulling its arms it storms ahead, forcing the bird to cry.
Now settling on the highest peak, it finds the earth too narrow;
Its rage bursts through a hole in clouds as heaven hangs too low.
Throughout its life its daring rises to three thousand rods
And never will it roost together with the owl or eagle.¹¹⁹

A poem on a courtesan establishment:

Once on an outing in the suburbs of the Capital
Swallows and orioles were singing in a willow lane,
In rouge and powder leaning at the gate on purpose,
But this white cloud had left its peak without such an intention.
I may tell you to share a drink and sing to Golden Threads,¹²⁰
To share my couch below a blanket will not be allowed.

¹¹⁹ This poem has a counterpart in Xie Jin's collected works. See Xie Jin 1983, 657 (5.14b).

¹²⁰ "Golden Threads" is the name of a melody.

Don't blame this student for a heart like iron—
 The reputation of this Hanlin¹²¹ is worth many thousands!

In the early years of the dynasty there was a rebellious country that sent an emissary, saying, "List one hundred men in two sentences. If the Ming dynasty has an exceptional talent who understands this, we will offer tribute and sincerely submit." When the emperor ordered the all civil officials and military officer to respond, there was none who had a solution, but Xie Jin replied:

The twenty-eight generals of Cloud Terrace;¹²²
 The seventy-two disciples of Confucius.

The emperor was on an outing with Xie Jin, who composed the following poem:

The present Son of Heaven is no human being,
 He is the star Purple Tenuity up in the sky,
 How I would like to live a thousand million years
 To serve Your Majesty in ruling this Great Peace!

A poem to his wife from Jin while staying in the capital:

Since I left for the Capital, how many years have passed?
 My soul in dreams is always roaming by the Brocade River.¹²³
 Be diligent in sweeping clean the ground before the hall,

¹²¹ The Hanlin Academy was in Ming times one of the highest advisory colleges of the imperial bureaucracy. Here "Hanlin" is used for a member of the Hanlin Academy.

¹²² These are the major generals in the foundation of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), whose portraits were displayed in the Cloud Terrace Hall of the imperial palace at the time.

¹²³ The Brocade River here refers to a tributary of the Gan River in Jiangxi. It joins the Gan in Jishui, Xie Jin's hometown.

And take good care of all the classics resting on the shelves.
Now frequently inspect the fields when grain and millet ripen,
Repair and strengthen too the broken fence around the garden.
Mother-in-law you must obey, your sons you must instruct—
Your sufferings serve in the end a grand, far-reaching scheme!¹²⁴

When Xie Jin faced execution, he composed the following poem:

A brilliant star of letters, I incurred the royal wrath;
In vain I spent these thirty years of spring benevolence.
Of course I hoped like once Zeng Can to nurture my Zeng Xi,¹²⁵
But who could know that now Yan Lu would weep for his Yan Hui?¹²⁶
My mother, white-haired and advanced in years, will stroke the coffin,
My wife, a beauty in her prime, will burn the paper money.¹²⁷
Now watch next year when you will all be visiting my grave,
One voice will then remember me, another question Heaven.

¹²⁴ This poem has a counterpart in Xie Jin's collected writings, where it is simply called "To my wife" (*Jinei* 寄内). See Xie Jin 1983, 655 (5.10b).

¹²⁵ Zeng Can 曾參 was one of the disciples of Confucius. He stood out for his filial piety. His father Zeng Xi 曾皙 was also a disciple of Confucius.

¹²⁶ Yan Hui 顏回 was Confucius' favorite disciple but died at a young age. Yan Lu 顏路 was his father.

¹²⁷ The paper money here refers to sacrificial (imitation) money.

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