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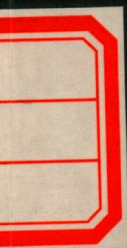
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MONK DANCE

僧舞

金仁顺 著

Patric Burton 孙 硕 译



中国出版集团
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Books in “Kaleidoscope: Ethnic Chinese Writers (I)” series

An Eternal Lamb

Monk Dance

Song Rod

Thus Speaks the Narrator

Writing Before Sleep

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A Goryeo Legend

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It is King Hyeonjong's habit to listen to gayageum and have tea in the music house in the afternoon. Queen Suk-ran had learned to play the gayageum when she was little, and she had recieved tutelage from a renowned master player living in recluse. When she was selected into the royal palace to be an imperial consort, she carried on her a grayish blue brocade bag, fastened at the opening with a lock of dark blue silk thread, which dangled and fluttered in the air and looked like a tiny blue stream. Suk-ran was not exactly beautiful, but with her gayageum about her, she had a special charm.

The king stopped in front of her, and said in a joking manner, "Does carrying a brocade bag mean you are scheming something?"

The corners of her lips tilted up a bit, and a flush climbed over her face. She hung her head, revealing her neck white and tender like a piece of fresh lotus root. The king turned and nodded at the eunuch beside him. That night, after Suk-ran was bathed in fragrance, she was

sent to the bedchamber of the king, and her gayageum was also sent in a little later. She played a tune on the stringed instrument for the king.

“What is this?” The king, acquainted with such court music as *Life Span Extended* (Shouyanchang) and *Celestial Being with Five Sheep* (Wuyangxian), was shocked by the novelty and freshness of the tune Suk-ran played. “Only the breeze in a spring morning and the moonlight in an autumn night are comparable to the tune.”

“It is *Arirang*, a folk love song,” Suk-ran replied. Then she looked up at the king, and after a very short moment of hesitation, she started to sing, slowly and softly, with her hand resting on the edge of the music platform,

“Arirang, arirang, arariyo, My love crossed over Arirang Hill. You abandoned and left me, my love, and you’ll feel a pain in your feet, before you travel away five kilometers. Arirang, with undulating hills ahead, how far away have you been? The winding road is endless, my heart is in wretchedness, and cold became my welling tears.”

The king was lost in the tune, and gazed at its performer, who was terrified by his look and whose face turned white, like a sheet. Only after a long while, did the king let out a sigh, and smiling, he said, “Such tunes should be honored with a hall.” A few months later, he had a music house erected in the inner palace.

The “Floating Sound” Music House, perched on the

bank of the lotus pond, was built just across a bamboo grove from Suk-ran's bedchamber. The structure had been designed by craftsmen and music performers together, and built with the best sandalwood; its roof, covered with green glaze tiles that had air holes, had exquisite celadon wind bells shaped like drums dangling from its hexagonal eaves. A brook traversed the inside of the structure before ending its flow in the lotus pond.

Suk-ran had placed her platform on the bank of the brook so the sound of her instrument and that of the water could add resonance to each other. Across the brook, the King settled on a mat with figured patterns, and was waited upon by two eunuchs from the teahouse, who were heating water from the brook in order to make tea for him.

"She's a woman of forty after all," reflected the king, visualizing the figure of his concubine Suk-ran in the woman in front of him. He had just turned forty back then, and Suk-ran, very young at the time, was the first person to wake him up to the reality that even he, one of the five venerated beings and charged with divine missions to rule, could hardly escape the destiny of a mortal. Every night, she would be sent into his bedchamber, all wrapped up in silk. Her body, once unveiled, with skin even more smooth than its silk wrappings, was the symbol of youth to the king. He would write poems on her back, sometimes with a brush, and more often with his finger, "Sit in silence when

the half-done tea gives out subtle fragrance,/serve it in time with pleasure amid flower blossoms by proceeding water.” He would intone his sentimental verses gently into Suk-ran’s ears with his writing, and put Suk-ran to such shyness as to bury her face in her long locks. He then would turn her around, push her down on his bed and have sex with her all night, time after time. Her long hair would spread and fly all over the bed at his forceful thrusting, no longer being able to hide her bashful blushing. Then with a wisp of hair in her mouth, she would try in vain to stop the sound that had scurried within her and scared herself.

After the passion had worn out, the king, holding Suk-ran’s beautiful hair with one hand and caressing her body gently with the other, one time had murmured, “You are my gayageum, you are my Arirang.” Suk-ran’s face was covered with tears and her body shivered slightly under such overwhelming happiness. Two years later when the bedridden Queen Yulin passed away, she was elevated from concubine to queen. And Queen Yulin’s fate, together with her title, befell on Suk-ran’s shoulders, like a piece of draping silk clothing, the clothing of wealth and power.

After the coronation ceremony, Queen Suk-ran, still in her early twenties, had about her all the grace and dignity exemplified by Queen Yulin. However, at the time when everything seemed to work out for her, the king’s passion for her body vanished from the young

world of Queen Suk-ran, leaving not a trace. He has not summoned her to his bed since. Of course, the king is never short of objects to show his sentiments when young maids with skin even more supple than coating paper are numerous in the imperial palace as flowers in a garden.

The king kept his habit of having tea and listening to Queen Suk-ran playing the gayageum in the "Floating Sound". And Suk-ran also tried hard to redeem his love by wearing such revealing clothes and voluptuous make-up as to embarrass the eunuchs in the palace. Yet whatever interest the king may have in her guts and efforts, and, at the intimate moment her position as the queen would be of no consequence and he would lose interest in her. "Something is wrong." He would say, while drawing back his hand from Suk-ran with a smile, which to her, was like a stream that set them apart.

The king, sitting across the stream, did not heed the plaintive music Queen Suk-ran is playing on her gayageum. Actually his indifference nourished her pain, giving her more appetite until her figure bloated and eyes lost pellucidity. The demureness of Queen Suk-ran became a mask that can never be detached.

Quick footsteps and the rustle of dozens of skirts made from fine summer cloth stopped at the gate of the music house, where a eunuch on his knees announced loudly: "Congratulations to the king on begetting a princess."

Hardly had Queen Suk-ran stopped playing, when

the king rose suddenly to his feet and cast a shadow in front of her, like a cloud. "A safe delivery?"

Soft voices and laughter were heard from the outside.

"The princess is born with a smile," reported the eunuch after he heard what the palace maids told him.

The King went out of the gate and his aged but straight figure basked in the sunshine. "A smiling baby girl?" he asked with a clear smile on his face.

Following on his heels and heavy under her weight, Suk-ran said apprehensively: "A new-born baby smiling instead of crying is an ill omen."

The king frowned at her remarks and retorted, "Your words have become very strange since you called in the Taoist priests to carry out the prayer rituals."

"But . . ."

"Don't forget who you are." The King waved his hand, and the blast of air sprung up from his broad sleeve was like a whip, lashing stop the words she was going to say.

"Sorry," replied Queen Suk-ran in a very low voice, her head bent and shoulders drooped.

The king resumed walking, and Queen Suk-ran did not follow him until he had taken six steps.

The maids were not lying: the baby, held in the arms of an old maid, was very lovely in her smile, with two dimples on her little face and bright dark eyes. King Hyeonjong was more delighted to beget a princess by Concubine Oriole than he was when Oriole bore him a son two years previously. He has nineteen princes, and

the only twin princesses born to him died of congenital diseases within a month of their birth.

“She loves smiling, so let her name be Princess Joy.” The king gazed at the baby for quite a while before he approached Oriole’s bed and reached out his hand toward the face that was white as a sheet. “Take a good rest.”

Oriole turned her head to the side on the pillow to avoid the King’s hand, “I am tainted with blood, and shouldn’t contaminate your sacred body.”

At this the king drew back his hand, and turned back again to look at the baby, when Queen Suk-ran’s stout figure overhung the bed.

Oriole struggled hard to sit up, “Salute the queen. ...”

While the queen only glanced at her coldly, without saying a word.

What could Oriole do but struggle even harder! Yet her constitution has always been frail, and now compounded with postnatal debility, ultimately failed in propping herself up.

“Just lie in bed.” Then the king went out with a snort at Suk-ran.

Queen Suk-ran turned white, feeling suffocated in the room, which seems to be enshrouded in the smell of blood. Then at the sight of Oriole tightly wrapped up in raw silk around her waist, she said slowly, with a seeming smile: “The daughter of a dancer never relaxes efforts to entice the king.”

"What else is a concubine good for but pleasing her king?" replied Oriole with a sweet smile.

The daughter of a dancer had been brought up in the imperial academy. One day when she was 17, she tied herself to a swing to practice dancing and was seen by King Hyeonjong who was just back from the court in his sedan. Mistaking her for an oriole flying up and down in the trees, the king asked the eunuch beside him who could see clearly, and the latter answered hesitatingly: "It seems that a woman is flying over there."

The king's curiosity was aroused and his sedan was carried to the backyard of the academy. Sadaco, the "oriole", practiced entirely out of her love of dancing rather than for the purpose of dancing for the king. When Hyeonjong came into the courtyard, she had just come down the swing and was standing on a thin rope, barefooted and with her hands high above her head making different poses. To the king, her hands were two white little birds that would fly away at anytime.

In order to make her an imperial consort, King Hyeonjong exceptionally conferred a noble title on her dancer father so that she would be qualified to be a concubine. She was the only woman that King Hyeonjong could lift and hold at the age of sixty-three. What is under her delicate skin seems not human flesh but willow catkins and kapok, and she has been the source of King Hyeonjong's confidence in his own strength. Even after she gave birth to a son, she could

still perform a whole dance on a single plate.

She was granted the title of Concubine Oriole.

Queen Suk-ran's revulsion for this frivolous title was regarded in the palace as jealousy of an old woman. And she found to her dismay that she was not able to interfere with anything since she had the useless title of the Queen.

"It's pure deception to set an example for women in the country," she once said to two other concubines close to her after getting drunk at a moon festival feast. Her complaints were somehow passed on to the king on that very night. He, however, was quite tolerant, and only said, holding Oriole's two hands in his own, "Women tend to be quibbling once they get old." Upon this, Oriole, drew out her hands from the cage of the king's fingers as if by magic and combing her dark hair with her white little fingers, she answered with a smile on her face, "The queen wants to be favored."

"She's like a wardrobe, huge enough to hold me," Hyeonjong grinned.

"Oh, is she?" Oriole grinned back.

The king stretched out his arms, pulled up his sleeves, and revealed a pair of forearms dotted with dark brown speckles shaped like hibiscus petals. "I am old," he sighed.

"Not really," Oriole protested. "You can still raise me with one arm. Let's try if it is not an offense." With this, she took off her shoes, and held one of them in each hand.

“You mean you want to listen to the sound of old bones breaking?” However, Hyeonjong did not take back his arms.

Concubine Oriole took a deep breath and held it. First she put one foot, then another, onto the king’s arm, posed several gestures, and even jumped twice before she swirled down onto the floor and let out the breath she had been holding almost invisibly.

The king laughed and said to her: “You must have been a butterfly in your previous incarnation.”

The next morning Queen Suk-ran’s maids, while waiting on her in her bath, gave her a very vivid recount of what happened in the king’s bedchamber. When they finished, Queen Suk-ran said thoughtfully: “What on earth does this low woman want to do?”

Princess Joy died a violent death when she was only five months old. The King went to the scene and saw her neck broken, head tilted to the side, but the dimples on her face still giving her a smiling countenance. The imperial doctor only looked at the body from behind the king and whispered to him: “The princess was murdered by a woman.” Without saying anything, Hyeonjong bent his head to wipe off the smile on the baby’s face. But when his finger tips touched the skin that was even softer than water, he shivered at the chill that was breeding on it.

Oriole ran in, her long hair floating behind her back, and water dripping from the end of her hair shafts in

round beads and leaving a splash mark on the floor. The contour of her body was almost visible from under the bathrobe she was in, a sight that forced the imperial doctor and eunuchs to hang down their heads.

“It will do no good looking.” Hyeonjong stops her, because despite his age and dim sight, he could see fire burning in the eyes of this soaked woman.

Oriole did not push at his hand—she saw clearly her own little Joy even across the hand that lay between her and her baby. Not a sound was heard in the vast palace except water dripping from the end of her hair onto the floor.

“How did it happen?” Oriole turned to the king, with an expression not exactly like crying nor smiling. She gripped his hand, tightly, with such strength as to frighten him. Then all of a sudden, she let go of him, her body became shorter and shorter in his eyes until eventually her whole figure knelt down at his feet. Hyeonjong’s head also bent down with Oriole’s body, and he saw among the mess of tangled wet hair two dark stars twinkling on a white face.

King Hyeonjong knew that his eyes were completely blurred.

The funeral for Joy was even more impressive than the coronation ceremony for Queen Suk-ran, especially among the imperial concubines and maids in the palace. The two women, most important to the king, maintained silence and decency amid the sad music. Concubine