



The Eighteen Laments

by Tsai Wen-chi

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By Tsai Wen-chi,
Later Han Dynasty

Translated by Rewi Alley

With Illustrations in Colour

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Foreword

FEW cries so charged with human passion have rung down the corridors of history as Tsai Wen-chi's *Eighteen Laments*. As the Chinese historian Kuo Mo-jo says, in answer to critics who have doubted whether Tsai Wen-chi actually wrote this epic poem or not, only a person who had actually suffered as she did could possibly have written it so powerfully.

Tsai Wen-chi was an unusual woman with an unusual father. Her early years were those of the time when the Han Dynasty was in decline. Warlords were out for power, and the people's rebellion of the Yellow Turbans under Chang Chiao rose in struggle to try to bring peace and livelihood to the common folk with the cry of "Land to the Tillers". The court lost authority. Tsai Yung, her father, a noted intellectual, had been wrongly accused and convicted, being then exiled. If Tsai Wen-chi was then born, Kuo Mo-jo writes, she too would have had her hair cut off like that of other convicts and their families. Nine months later, the family was pardoned, but on the way back to court, they incurred the displeasure of the governor of Wuyuan, and were

forced to escape. During the following twelve years the family roamed from place to place, finally returning to Loyang, where the infamous militarist Tung Cho had seized control. The lust for power had maddened this great, corpulent Tung Cho, and death was the only answer he gave to any who incurred his slightest displeasure. He now forced Tsai Yung to become an official. That was in 190 A.D., he being sent in the train of the new young Emperor Hsien-ti, who had replaced his murdered elder brother the 14-year-old Emperor Shao-ti, on its miserable march to Changan from the Loyang the insane Tung Cho had burned. Tsai Yung was also made Marquis of Kaoyang.

In the third year of Hsien-ti, Tung Cho himself was murdered by his henchman Lu Pu. Tsai Yung was then arrested as a Tung Cho supporter and died in prison. His daughter Tsai Wen-chi had been married to a certain Wei Chun-tao in Hotung, and did not go with the father to Changan. Her husband, however, died in some way or another, so that she returned to her old home at Tung Lien. There she was captured when the Huns drove down from the northern frontier and took the place. They gave her to a tribal chief, and for twelve years she lived with him, bearing him two sons. With the coming to absolute power of Tsao Tsao, a messenger was sent to the Huns bearing presents and money, asking for her return. She was sent back but was not allowed to take her children, and then married off again to a certain Tung Szu, who was an official. Tung Szu made a mistake and was condemned to death, a fate from which Tsai Wen-chi saved him following a personal appeal to Tsao Tsao. Tsao Tsao received her kindly, and asked her about the writings of

her father who in their younger days had been his friend. He wanted to know whether any of the books he had written had been saved or not. She told him that all had been scattered but that she herself had memorized some portions. He asked her to write these down for posterity, which she did.

In this brief outline, one can see that Tsai Wen-chi was an unusual woman of an unusual family. That her poem, set of course as all poems then were to music, was not commented on for long after her death, was due to the code of the feudal commentators of the time. They of course felt that she should have killed herself rather than become the wife of an enemy chieftain. Kuo Mo-jo, who has done some research into the matter, says that there still exists a reference to the music of the poem in pre-Tang times, music that combined Han with that of the tribesmen, though the historians of that period did not mention her. In the Southern Sung period (1127-1279) the Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi, while prejudiced, yet did add the *Laments* to his collection, saying that at least Tsai Wen-chi felt the shame of all that had happened to her. The Sung poet Su Tung-po also expressed his admiration for the *Laments*. In our own time, it has been Kuo Mo-jo who has become the authority on the subject, and who has written a moving historical play about it. He says that the *Laments* was the best piece of work of its kind written after Chu Yuan's "Li Sao" of the Warring States period, better even than Tu Fu's "Seven Songs of Tungku" of the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D. — 907 A.D.). He says too that it reminds him of the rolling ocean, or the fire from a volcano. Something that rings as a desperate call from the bottom of a tortured soul.

But perhaps the chief point in Kuo Mo-jo's play is its re-appraisal of Tsao Tsao, so long despised as a traitor. Tsao Tsao is shown as a man of ability and patriotism working for the betterment of his country.

The best painting of the captivity of Tsai Wen-chi is an unsigned one — a magnificent piece of colour — kept by the Nanking Museum, parts of which have been reproduced in Shanghai and which now illustrate this translation. Experts feel that it was probably painted during the Ming Dynasty (1368 — 1644 A.D.) though in the style of Sung. The life, customs and way of life of the Huns of olden time are of course imaginary, perhaps based more on those of the Mongol tribes well known in the Ming period. Yet again, one cannot rule out the possibility that the artist may have seen earlier paintings that may have given him some guide.

One cannot hope to do real justice to a Chinese poem in translation to a foreign language to convey the music as well as the meaning of it. One feels it to have been a privilege however to try and render the *Laments* of the lovely, gallant and talented Tsai Wen-chi into an English version which, despite its shortcomings, does make her known to the West.

Rewi Alley

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I.

BORN in time of peace, growing up
with the Han Dynasty in its decline,
wondering why evil Heaven gives us
wars, refugees, confusion, disaster;
the earth too has little virtue,
just causing me to be born in
this time of trouble; each day full of
the clamour of war, danger on roads
everywhere; folk rushing here and there
without proper homes, both soldiers
and people full of misery; a whole land
in the throes of struggle, then suddenly
wild Huns driving down amongst us!
Unable to order my life
as I would, forced to
marry again and go off,
adopt the customs of another land
so hard for one of Han; now when others
oppress me, maltreat me, to whom can I go
for help? I compose my first song
and, with my lute, sing it; my heart
filled with rage and bitterness,
though none other knows of it all!



II.

THE Huns forced me to marry,
and like a prisoner put me in a cart
taking me over into the horizon, I
just watching one cloud after another
spreading across the heaven, ever seeing
new mountain ranges succeeding those crossed;
as we went I wondered how if I was
ever to return — would I find my way?
A long road that led to the grasslands
so many thousands of *li* wide, with
sands often rising, and the temper of
my captors so bad, like that of a snake,
each with his bow standing arrogantly;
now in this my second song, two strings
of my lute seem to break; hope has left me;
heartbroken, I can but sigh.



III.

TRAVELLING, ever travelling from
the land of Han to that of the Huns;
I thought of how my home was gone,
my body taken, feeling it were better
had my parents not given me birth;
woollen clothing so harsh that both
flesh and bones were sore; for food
but meat and milk; never can I hold
down the misery in my heart; all through
the night listening to the sound
of guards beating drums; desert winds
so fierce that camps outside the wall
are enshrouded in dust; for me there is
the bitterness of today, then that
of thinking over the past; as
I compose this third lament I wonder
when can I clear myself of this misery?



IV.

NEVER a single day, never a night
that I do not think of home; no one,
not a thing, that breathes is more
wretched than am I; cruel fate
came down from heavens, our people
without leadership, I just forced to be
a prisoner amongst Huns; Han
customs, Han thought so different from
all I find here, making it hard
for me to go along with them all;
Han food, Han drink, again not the same;
but to whom can I talk about this?
I ponder over all I have gone through
and write this fourth lament,
my heart still more full of misery.



V.

I SEE a lone wild goose, and would
write a letter and get the bird
to take it to Han; then when I see
one flying north I pine it might
give me news of my old home; but
wild geese fly so high, how
may I catch them? In my heart
misery remains, so my brows are
ever wrinkled in frown; this night
looking at the moon and playing my lute
this fifth lament is written, through
my ever deepening sadness.



VI.

SO much ice and frost, my body
ever half frozen; hungry and I
am given bad smelling mutton
and milk that so revolts me
I cannot eat; at night I hear
the river waters running, imagining
they too weep for me; in the morning
when I get up I see the Great Wall
and think how far I am away from
my home; longing for it, but wondering
how ever I could find a messenger to go down
that long road; so now I compose
this sixth lament, so wretched I cannot
play the lute or sing to it.