

TALES FROM ANCIENT CHINA'S IMPERIAL HAREM

Compiled by Yuan Yang and Xiao Yan



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INTRODUCTION

In ancient China the imperial harem, called the rear palace, was often astonishingly large. The common belief that it usually contained "three thousand beauties" or even more is borne out by historical records. In the period known as the Sixteen States (304-439), the ruler of the state of Zhao had no less than a hundred thousand lesser wives and woman attendants. Palace women in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) numbered over forty thousand. Emperor Shihuang of Qin, the first emperor in Chinese history, also had more than ten thousand women attending to his sensual desires.

The imperial harem of China underwent five phases in its development: (1) It was first set up in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties (ca 21 century-221 B.C.). (2) It took form in the Qin and Han dynasties (221 B.C.-220), when a stratified system of imperial women with different titles and privileges was established. (3) It attained maturity in the Wei, Jin, Sui and Tang dynasties (220-960), when the structure of the imperial harem became basically fixed. (4) It underwent a period of consolidation in the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (960-1911). (5) It was dissolved after the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1911.

Throughout history numerous titles were bestowed on the imperial wives. In the Tang Dynasty, for instance, at least a hundred titles were given to the emperor's lesser wives. At the emperor's demise, his empress was elevated to the status of empress dowager and his consorts became the consorts dowager.

The emperor had full control over the destiny of his wives. Upon entering the palace as one of his wives, a woman had no choice but to try every means to win the favor of her imperial master. Her sole purpose was to give the emperor pleasure and

bear him heirs. More often than not, sorrow and grief became the dominant note of her life. Sometimes she managed to win the good graces of the emperor. Sometimes she was manipulated by powerful courtiers or eunuchs. In a few cases, she assisted the emperor in governing the country or reduced him to a puppet while wielding supreme power over the nation herself.

Thus some imperial women influenced the behavior of the Son of Heaven and even the policy of the imperial government. In various ways they helped shape the destiny of the dynasty. Thanks to their moral integrity and outstanding talents, some of them contributed to the benefits of the country and the people. There were also a few who, motivated by a vicious ambition, committed horrendous atrocities.

Depending on their family background and upbringing, the imperial women differed greatly in manners. Some indulged in wanton extravagance, and others were content to lead simple and honest lives.

Joy and sorrow went hand in hand in the imperial harem. Resplendent robes, pleasure excursions and sumptuous feasts were the order of the day. At the same time, a palace lady had many sorrows unknown to the country woman. She was separated forever from her family. With little chance to meet the emperor, she had to spend her days in loneliness and seclusion. Even if she was one of the lucky few to enjoy the emperor's favor, she still could have no sense of security and had to pit her wits against her rivals.

Most palace women were resigned to their hapless fate and died unfulfilled. Only a few wielded great power or even gained supremacy over the imperial court, sometimes at the expense of the country and the people.

The stories in this book, selected for their historical value or literary merit, vividly portray the social customs and palace life in ancient China and afford the readers new insights into the role of women in Chinese history.

LEIZU TEACHES PEOPLE TO SPIN SILK

The Chinese regard themselves as descendants of Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor) and Yandi (the Red Emperor), two legendary tribal kings who lived about 4,500 years ago.

As the story goes, when Huangdi was young he devoted himself so much to public welfare that he scarcely had the time to look for a wife. This made his parents a bit anxious. Eventually some elderly people visited his family with marriage proposals. Without exception the prospective brides were very pretty, much to the satisfaction of his parents. But Huangdi turned down all offers. "You have to be satisfied with one of these lovely maidens," his parents protested. Huangdi smiled. "I want my wife to be exceptional not in looks but in ability." His parents nodded their understanding and pressed him no more.

One day Huangdi was hunting in the west hill when he caught sight of a young woman under a big mulberry tree. She was kneeling on one knee, with one hand placed on the tree trunk. A lone thread of silk was coming out of her mouth and falling on the ground in a bundle the size of a jar. The silk produced by the young woman was first a golden color and then it turned to silver. From behind a rock Huangdi watched her, transfixed.

"I never expected to meet a silk-spitting girl!" Huangdi told himself. "Youcao taught people to build wooden houses, and Shennong taught them how to grow crops. People today no longer need to worry about food or shelter, but they still wear unsightly animal skins. How nice it would be to wear clothes made of silk!" He checked his impulse to call out to the girl and decided to wait until she finished.



After spinning three large cocoons, the girl stood up to leave. Huangdi stepped forward, bowing with clasped hands. "Please wait a minute, sister!"

Glancing at him, the girl asked, "What do you want, brother?"

"I wonder if you could teach me to make silk like you did a moment ago," he replied.

"My mother will allow me to teach only one person," said the girl.

"And who is that?"

"My future husband." The girl blushed, covering her face with both hands.

Her words quickened Huangdi's pulse, but his heart sank when he took a closer look at her. She was quite unattractive: short, dark-skinned, and thick-lipped. On second thought, Huangdi decided that it would be wonderful to have a silk-spitting girl for a wife. Plucking up courage, he said, "With your consent, I am ready to take you as my wife."

The girl walked up to him, and they sat down side by side on a rock. Huangdi then asked, "Now that we are engaged, can you tell me who you are and where you live?"

"My name is Leizu. I used to be a maid servant of the Heavenly Queen, who banished me to earth because of my transgression."

"What did you do?"

"One day I went to the garden with a few companions to enjoy the flowers there. A five-color plant, heavy with fruit, caught my eye. The fruit looked and smelled so inviting that I picked some and ate them. They tasted sweet. After I swallowed them, my stomach felt funny and I wanted to throw up. I crouched on the ground and began to spit silk.

"Just then some butterflies appeared from nowhere and started to circle the fragrant plant. I wondered if I could

make them spin silk also by feeding them the seeds of the plant. Well, after eating the seeds, the butterflies laid eggs, which turned into little worms. I fed these silkworms with the seeds, and they began to spit silk. I watched in fascination.

"Unfortunately a quick-tongued maid informed the Queen of what I had done. She flew into a rage and at once drove me out of Heaven. Thrown into a valley, I nearly fell victim to a pack of wolves. But an old woman named Xiling Shi happened to be gathering firewood there. She found me and took me to her home, so I acknowledged her as my mother. The two of us have lived together ever since."

Huangdi placed his hands on Leizu's shoulders, not knowing what to say. "I keep some silkworms on the northern slope of the hill," said Leizu. "They grow well by feeding on mulberry leaves. Some are spinning silk now. Let me take you there to look!"

Huangdi went with her and was pleased to find all the cocoons were as big as jugs. "I will return and send people over to fetch these cocoons," he said. Leizu smiled and nodded.

Back home, Huangdi told his parents that he had finally found himself a wife. The news spread quickly. When Huangdi brought Leizu to his house, he was greeted by a huge crowd. At the sight of the bride, however, someone whispered, "Why should he marry such a coarse girl when he has many pretty ones to choose from?" "Don't you worry," his companion responded. "Huangdi knows what he is doing. Maybe this girl is quite extraordinary." The sight of the cocoons also aroused great wonder among the spectators.

Leizu then began to demonstrate how to reel off raw silk from the cocoons and how to coil it up. Under her instruction, several girls followed suit. The sight of the fine

silk coils brought happy smiles to the faces of everyone.

Leizu taught people to cultivate silkworms, spin silk and weave cloth. Thanks to Leizu, they began to wear clothes instead of animal skins. This gained her high esteem. The image of a god that used to be enshrined in the spinning room of every rural household was Leizu, Mother of Silk.

KING SHUN'S TWO WIVES, EHUANG AND NÜYING

In very ancient times the throne was not hereditary. A king was supposedly elected on the basis of his merits.

Like Huangdi, King Yao was also a renowned and sage ruler of ancient China. When he was old, people recommended Shun to be his successor. After testing Shun for a long time, Yao finally abdicated in his favor. He also married his two daughters to Shun.

Nüying, the younger one, was his natural daughter, but the elder one, Ehuang, was adopted. Yao doted on his daughters, who were both clever and attractive. He took them along on all his inspection tours across the country.

The two girls were only too happy to marry Shun, but Yao's wife had something else in mind. She wanted her birth daughter, Nüying, to be Shun's principal wife, with Ehuang only being his consort. Yao adamantly objected to such an arrangement. Instead, he suggested that the order of precedence be decided by the result of a three-part contest. The wife agreed reluctantly.

The first part of the contest was to cook some beans. Yao gave each daughter ten beans and five jin of firewood. Whoever cooked the beans first would be the winner.

As the elder daughter of the family, Ehuang had worked in the kitchen for many years. She poured a little water into a wok and had the beans done in a short time. Nüying, however, had no cooking experience. She filled the wok with water and used up all the firewood before the water was hot. Glumly Yao's wife had to admit that her favored daughter had lost the first round.

The second part of the contest was to stitch shoe soles.

Yao let his wife bring two strings of rope and a pair of cloth soles. Each daughter was then given a sole to stitch with the rope. Whoever finished first would be the winner.

With plenty of experience, Ehuang knew exactly what to do. She cut the rope into short pieces, using them one by one. In less than half a day, the sole in her hands was well sewn with close stitches. Not knowing how to do this, Nüying tried to sew with the long rope, which often became quite knotted as she worked. In half a day her work was not yet half done, and the stitches already sewn were quite irregular. Annoyed, Yao's wife decided to try to find a way to save the situation.

When the appointed wedding day drew near, Yao announced the third part of the contest. His two daughters would leave for Lishan, where Shun lived, at the same time, and whoever arrived first would be the winner.

At this Yao's wife remarked, "Because she is the elder sister, Ehuang should ride in a carriage, and only a three-horse carriage is fit for this great occasion. The younger sister, Nüying, can make do with a mule." Though aware of his wife's partiality, Yao did not object.

Taking a shortcut, Nüying sped along on the mule. Ehuang, on the other hand, rode in the carriage at a leisurely pace. But half way there, Nüying's mule suddenly gave birth. "What a vicious animal to spoil everything for me like this!" she cursed angrily. "From now on the mule must never give birth again!" As is widely known, her curse has been fulfilled. The place was later named Luoju (Foal Birth) Village.

Ehuang meanwhile arrived at the scene in her carriage and picked up her distressed younger sister. Together they rode to Lishan.

Shun treated Ehuang and Nüying with no partiality, and made no distinction of status between them. With their devotion and support, he ruled the country with great benevolence and fulfilled many tasks that benefitted his people. During his reign he made frequent inspection tours to make

sure that the people were living in peace and contentment.

At a hundred years of age he made one more tour to the south, although by that time he had already abdicated the throne in favor of Yu. Seized by a sudden illness, he died at Cangwu Mountain (modern Ningda County in Hunan Province). The news threw the entire nation into deep grief. Ehuang and Nüying, who had shared weal and woe with him for dozens of years, wept uncontrollably. Hastening to the south, they passed a bamboo forest where they wept so bitterly that the bamboo trunks were left with indelible tearstains. This was how the tearstain variety of bamboo came into existence in south China.

Yu was also grieved by the death of his predecessor. Accompanied by his ministers, he went to the Cangwu Mountain to hold a grand funeral for Shun. To commemorate the great ruler he had a mausoleum and a temple built there. The two constructions survive to this day.

After the funeral Yu returned north, taking Ehuang and Nüying with him. The two sisters, heartbroken over the death of their husband, drowned themselves in the Xiang River. They are said to have turned into immortals, known as the Xiang goddesses. Thus tearstain bamboo is now called Xiang Goddess bamboo.

NÜJIAO ENCOURAGES HER HUSBAND TO TAME FLOODS

In ancient times floods were a common calamity. During Shun's reign, about four thousand years ago, a flood-fighting hero called the Great Yu emerged. Yu's father, Gun, had tried for nine years to tame the floods at Shun's order, but to no avail. Because of his failure, he was executed by Shun at Yushan.

Fully occupied in his flood control mission, Yu remained single until he was more than thirty years old. At Tushan he met Tushan Shi's daughter, Nüjiao, who was a renowned beauty. They fell in love at once. When Yu was called away by his duty, Nüjiao missed him dearly and composed a song to describe the anguish of her longing. Yu was greatly moved when Nüjiao's maid told him about it. They finally got married at a place called Taisang.

Four days after the wedding Yu bade his wife good-bye and left to fight the floods away from home. During the next thirteen years he passed his house three times without entering. Then one morning, about four years after his departure, he came home for the first time. On approaching the gate, he overheard his mother grumbling, "The father tried to tame the flood and met his death at Yushan. The son also tried to tame the flood and disappeared for four years. The father was a simpleton and the son is an imbecile!"

Just then a child burst out crying and was scolded by Yu's mother. "Will you ever stop crying? If you must cry, go and cry to your father. That would save your grandmother a lot of trouble!" This was followed by Nüjiao's voice comforting the

