The Poetry of an Imperial Concubine

The Favorite Beauty Ban

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In the history of Chinese literature, the Han dynasty is important for the development of two forms of poetry: the fu 賦 or rhapsody, and the wuyan shi 五言詩 or pentasyllabic poem. During the Former Han, the fu was the dominant literary genre, especially after the Emperor Wu period when poets such as Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 B.C.) composed their ornate epideictic rhapsodies at the imperial court. Although early reliable examples of the pentasyllabic poem are difficult to identify, there is no question that it emerged later than the fu, and for much of the Han dynasty remained in a formative stage. This state of affairs is aptly characterized by the sixth century literary critic Zhong Rong 鍾嵘 (ob. ca. 518) in his Shi pin 詩品 (Classification of Poetry): During the Former Han dynasty “writers such as Wang Bao, Yang Xiong, Mei Sheng, and Sima Xiangru vied for supremacy in the writing of rhapsodies, but there is no report that they composed shi poetry. There was nearly a century between Commandant Li and Favorite Beauty Ban, but one of them was a woman, and thus there was only one poet during this period”.

1 The woman that Zhong Rong discounts because of her gender is a famous concubine of the Former Han dynasty, Ban Jieryu 班婕妤/婕好 or Favorite Beauty Ban. Although Lady Ban's name is generally known to scholars of Chinese literature, she has received virtually no serious study in recent scholarship. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the poems attributed to her in an effort to increase our knowledge of a neglected Chinese poet.

There is a short biography of Lady Ban in the Han shu compiled by her great-nephew, the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92). The “Supplementary Biographies” appended to the Lienü zhuan 列女傳 contains a biography that is

1 Shi pin 詩品, Sibu beiyao, A.1a.
2 The most detailed study is a short chapter in Gao Guangfu 高光復, Han Wei Liuchao sishijia fu shulun 漢魏六朝四十家賦述論 (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1988), pp. 56–60.

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similar to but not identical to the Han shu account. The Song dynasty editor of the Lienü zhuan, Zeng Gong 曾鞏 (1019–1083), suggests that the supplementary biographies were written by none other than Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 49–ca. 120), Ban Gu's younger sister and Favorite Beauty Ban's great-niece. However, there really is no solid evidence to confirm that she was the author of these biographies.

Lady Ban came from a family of prominent officials and scholars. Her father was Ban Kuang 班況, who held a local agriculture post, and then was promoted to the high (2,000-bushel rank) of Colonel of Picked Cavalry. Her brothers all were accomplished scholars and officials. The elder brother Ban Bo 班伯 as a youth received instruction from Shi Dan 師丹 on the Songs, and later attended lectures on the Shangshu held in the Jinhua 金華 Hall. The middle brother Ban You 班庾 worked with Liu Xiang in editing the texts contained in the imperial collection. He also was summoned to read books before emperor, who was so impressed with You's skill, he rewarded him with duplicate copies of texts from his own archives. We do not know much about Lady Ban's education, but given the strong “fragrance of books” 書香 in the Ban family, we should not be surprised to discover that she too had acquired book learning and skill as a writer.

During the early reign of Emperor Cheng 成帝 (reg. 33–7 B.C.) Lady Ban entered the imperial harem as a junior maid (shao shi 少使), which was rank eleven in the fourteen-rank system. She rapidly rose to rank two, the position of jieyu 僕侶 or Favorite Beauty, which theoretically had a status above that of the nine ministers. She bore the emperor two sons, both of whom died within a few months of birth. She was known for her learning and strong sense of propriety. On one occasion the emperor invited her to ride with him in the imperial chaise, and she refused on the grounds that the ancient paintings always depicted the degenerate last rulers of the Three Dynasties with their female favorites at their sides, and she feared that if she shared the emperor's cart, he might be thought to resemble them.

5 See “Gu Lienü zhuan mulu xu” 古列女傳目錄序 in prefatory matter to Lienü zhuan.
6 See Han shu 100A.4198.
7 See Han shu 100A.4198.
8 See Han shu 100A.4203.
9 In a memorial written in 15 B.C., Gu Yong 谷永 (ob. 8 B.C.) claimed that the Lady Ban, along with Empress Xu, dominated the court in the Jiashan 建始 and Heping 河平 periods (32–25 B.C.). See Han shu 85.3460. Thus, she must have entered the harem at the beginning of Emperor Cheng's reign.
Lady Ban enjoyed Emperor Cheng's favor until the Hongjia 鴻嘉 period (20–17 B.C.), when he began to bestow his affection on a dancer, Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (ob. 1 B.C.), and her younger sister, later known as the Brilliant Companion Zhao (Zhao Zhaoyi 趙昭儀). In 18 B.C. Emperor Cheng's principal wife, Empress Xu 許, was accused of using black magic against pregnant palace ladies, and she was deposed. Zhao Feiyan accused Lady Ban of conspiring with Empress Xu and even trying to put a curse on the emperor himself. When interrogated by the judicial officers, Lady Ban eloquently replied with a quotation from the Lun yu (12/5): “Life and death are determined by fate, but wealth and honor reside with Heaven 死生有命，富貴在天.” She then went on to say: “If I have cultivated uprightness, but have yet to receive good fortune, what could I expect to gain by doing evil? If the spirits and gods have sentience, they will not accept the plaint of a disloyal subject. If they do not have sentience, what good would it do to complain to them. Thus, I would never do such a thing.” The emperor was so pleased with her reply that he took pity on her and rewarded her with a gift of one hundred catties of gold.

However, fearful of further accusations from the ruthless Zhao sisters, Lady Ban requested permission to leave the imperial palace, giving as an excuse her desire to care for the aged Empress Dowager Wang. The emperor granted her request, and she took up residence in the Palace of Eternal Trust (Chang xin gong 長信宮), one of the halls of the Palace of Eternal Joy (Chang le gong 長樂宮), which was the principal residence of empresses in the Han. After Emperor Cheng died in 7 B.C., she was assigned to his funerary park, where she died and was buried, ca. 6 B.C.

During the Former Han dynasty, there are several women who have reputations as poets. They include Gaozu's concubine Lady Tangshan 唐山夫人, who is credited with composing the lyrics for the set of ritual songs written in the Chu style; Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, the wife of Sima Xiangru, who is the reputed author of a famous yuefu “Baitou yin” (白頭吟 Song of White Hair);

11 For their biographies, see Han shu 97B.3988–99; Watson, Courtier and Commoner, pp. 265–77. See also Homer H. Dubs, The History of the Former Han Dynasty, II (Baltimore: Waverley Press, 1944), pp. 366–72.
12 See Han shu 97B.3984–85.
13 These are the so-called “Anshi fangzhong ge” 安世房中歌 of which seventeen are preserved in Han shu 22.1046–51. The songs recently have been included in an anthology of poetry by empresses and consorts. See Shen Lidong 沈立東, ed., Lidai houfei shici jizhu 歷代后妃詩詞集注 (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1990), pp. 58–72.
14 There are two versions of this song. The longer version is found in the Song shu 宋書 compiled by Shen Yue 沈約 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974). A shorter version is contained under the title “Ai ru shan shang xue” 爛如山上雪 (White as Mountaintop Snow) in the Yutai xinyong 玉臺新詠 compiled by Xu Ling 徐陵; see Wu Zaoyi 吳兆宜, comm., Mu Kehong 穆克宏, ed., Yutai xinyong jianzhu 玉臺新詠箋注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 1.14–15.
and Liu Xijun 劉細君 (fl. 110–105 B.C.), a daughter of a Han king who is attributed with a song expressing her sadness at being sent as a wife to the Central Asian Wusun 部孫 king. However, as poets, all of these women are elusive figures, and even the attributions of the poems are not altogether secure. Thus, the title of first female poet of the Han easily goes to Favorite Beauty Ban. Lady Ban is the only woman poet of the Former Han to whom a significant body of literary works is attributed. The monograph on bibliography of the Sui shu 隋書 lists a Han Chengdi Ban Jieyu ji 漢成帝班婕妤集 (Collected Works of Han Emperor Cheng's Beauty Favorite Ban) in one juan.

There is no information on when this collection was compiled, but it probably was put together after the Han dynasty. Lady Ban is now credited with three poetic works: two fu and one pentasyllabic poem. The pentasyllabic poem is most commonly known as “Yuan ge xing” 怨歌行 (Song of Resentment), the title given to the piece in the earliest source to preserve it, the Wen xuan 文選. The piece also is preserved in a collection nearly contemporary with the Wen xuan, the Yutai xinyong 玉臺新詠 (New Songs of the Jade Terrace), under the title “Yuan shi” 怨詩 (Poem of Resentment). The name given the piece in Yuefu shiji 楼府詩集 is “Yuan shi xing” 怨詩行. Another title that is occasionally seen is “Shan shi” 扇詩 (Poem on a Fan). For the sake of clarity, in this article I shall refer to the piece by the title “Yuan ge xing”.

Written in the persona of a palace lady, the poem is a yongwu 詠物 piece on a fan. The lady describes a fan, which when used by her lord, is round as the moon. During the hot summer it is constantly with him, but she fears that when the cooling winds of autumn arrive, it will be cast aside into a box. A translation of it reads:

15 For the text see Han shu 96B.3903.
16 Although Lady Tangshan may have written lyrics for ritual songs at the beginning of the Former Han, the texts of the received lyrics attributed to her must have been substantially altered, probably by court poets. See Huang Jihua 黃紀華, “Han ‘Fangzhong ge’ de shidai zuoze bian”, 漢《房中歌》的時代作者辨 Xiangbei shifan xueyuan xuebao (Zhe she ban) (1985: 3): 72–77. The leading authorities on Han poetry do not accept the “Paitou yin” as a work by Zhuo Wenjun. See Jean-Pierre Diény, Aux Origines de la poésie classique en Chine (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), p. 66; Yves Hervouet, Un Poète de cour sous les Han: Sseu-ma Siang-jou (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), p. 34; Chien Tsung-wu 簡宗梧, Sima Xiangru Yang Xiong ji qi fu zhi yanjiu 司馬相如揚雄及其賦之研究 (Taipei: published privately, 1975?), p. 34. Although the song attributed to Liu Xijun is preserved in a reliable source, one wonders how such a personal piece might have been transmitted to the Han capital from the remote Central Asian location where she reputedly composed it.
17 See Sui shu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 35.1057.
18 See Wen xuan (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 27.1280.
19 See Yutai xinyong jianzhu 1.26.
Newly cut white silk from Qi,
2 Glistening and pure as frost and snow:
Made into a fan of “joined for joy”,
4 Round, round as the bright moon.
It goes in and out of my lord’s breast and sleeve;
6 Waved, it stirs a breeze.
I always fear autumn’s coming,
8 When chilling winds dispel blazing heat.22
Then it will be thrown into a box,
10 And his love will be cut off midcourse.

The fan that is described here is a fan made of white silk (wan su 基素) from Qi. During the Han, the Qi kingdom had a special office that provided this type of silk to the court.23 The fan called “joined for joy” (hehuan shan 合歡扇) is a round fan (thus the comparison with the moon) with a design symbolizing connubial harmony. This lovely fan is used by the lady’s lord during the summer heat to cool himself. However, the lady fears that when autumn comes, he will have no further use for the fan, and he will discard into a box.

This poem obviously is more than a simple description of a fan. The poet uses the fan to represent a palace lady. The words that describe it—“new” (xin 新), “glistening” (jiao 絡), “pure” (jie 潔)—represent the fresh beauty of the lady when she first entered her lord’s household. Like the fan, she first enjoys the constant company of her lord, conveyed by the line “going in and out of the lord’s breast and sleeve” 出入君懷袖. Also like the fan, she enjoys his favor only when his love is hot. As soon as his devotion cools, she finds herself cast aside like a discarded fan.

A number of early sources claim that the fan stands for Lady Ban herself, who in this poem reputedly tells of how she fell out of grace with Emperor Cheng. Thus, the preface to the poem in the Yutai xinyong says the following: “In times past Emperor Cheng's Favorite Beauty Ban lost favor, and provided care [for the Empress Dowager] in the eastern palace. At that time she composed a rhapsody to lament her lot. She also wrote a poem of resentment.”25 We do not know the source of this preface. Qu Shouyuan 屈守元 suggests that it

22 The Liuchen version of the Wen xuan reads biao 飄 for feng 風 of the Li Shan version of the Wen xuan.
23 See Han shu 9.286, n. 7. The Han shu monograph on geography also mentions a fine silk from Qi called bing wan 冰纨 (literally “icy silk”), which Yan Shigu explains as glistening and pure as ice.
24 The Li Shan version of the Wen xuan reads jiao 皎. The Wuchen version of the Wen xuan, the Yutai xinyong, and Yuefu shiji all read xian 鮮. The meaning of both words is approximately the same.
might have been copied from Lady Ban's collected works, which were still extant in the time of Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583), the compiler of the *Yutai xinyong*. The *Yuefu shiji* also preserves a preface that offers the same basic interpretation of the poem as the *Yutai xinyong*: “Emperor Cheng's Favorite Beauty Ban lost favor, and she requested to provide care for the Empress Dowager in the Palace of Eternal Trust. At that time she composed a poem of resentment to lament her lot. She conveyed her plaint by means of a silk fan.”

The autobiographical interpretation of this poem has been a pervasive one in the Chinese tradition. However, the attribution of the poem to Favorite Lady Ban has been doubted as early as the sixth century. Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 520) in the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 says the following about the poem: “During the reign of Emperor Cheng when works were classified and catalogued, they obtained over three hundred poems. Court compositions and pieces collected from various states could be said to be complete, but among the poets' works that have survived, we see no pentasyllabic poems. Thus, the authenticity of the poems of Li Ling and Favorite Beauty Ban has been doubted in later times.”

Regrettably, Liu Xie does not tell us which authorities disputed the attribution of the “Yuan ge xing” to Lady Ban. It is not even clear what Liu Xie's own view on the matter is. One could read his remarks as nothing more than a report of the arguments of those who believed the poem could not have been written during the Former Han. Liu Xie in fact seems to contradict this view by citing examples of the early pedigree for the *wuyan* form.

If there were doubts about Lady Ban's authorship of the “Yuan ge xing” in the Six Dynasties period, the prevailing view was certainly quite the opposite. Favorite Beauty Ban is commonly associated with the “Yuan ge xing” throughout the Wei, Jin, and Nanbeichao period. For example, the Western Jin poet Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) clearly links her with the image of the round fan in a poem entitled “Jieyu yuan” 嫣妤 (Favorite Beauty's Resentment):

She entrusts her feelings to the jade steps,
And conveys her intention to a round fan.

By the late Six Dynasties period Lady Ban was viewed as the “fan” poet par excellence, and many poets wrote imitations of the “Yuan ge xing”. The *Yuefu shiji* in fact contains a series of songs by late Six Dynasties and Tang poets en-

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27 See *Yuefu shiji* 41.610.
28 Wenxin diaolong, Sibu beiyao, 2.1b–2a.
titled "Ban Jieyu", which are inspired by the "Yuan ge xing". Lady Ban's poem even earned high praise from Zhong Rong, who places her in the Upper Grade (shang pin 上品) of his Shi pin. He pays her the following tribute: "The short piece on the round fan is fresh and skillful in language and meaning. Her complaint is heart-felt and the style is beautiful. She successfully captures a woman's sentiments."

In spite of the prestige of the endorsement from Zhong Rong, a number of modern scholars have argued that Lady Ban could not have written "Yuan ge xing". One important argument is that "Yuan ge xing" is much too mature to be an early example of the wuyan form. Indeed, examples of indisputably authentic wuyan poems in the Former Han period are very few. Donald Holzman, who has done the most thorough critical study of Han dynasty pentasyllabic verse, does not include the "Yuan ge xing" among the reliable authentic datable poems.

It is certainly possible to raise several questions concerning the attribution to Lady Ban. First of all, it is surprising that there is no Han source for the "Yuan ge xing". If Lady Ban wrote it, why did not Ban Gu include it in her biography in the Han shu? Xiao Difei 蕭滌非 argues that Ban Gu's failure to mention the "Yuan ge xing" does not prove the piece is not authentic. He points out that still in Ban Gu's time such pieces were viewed as inferior and on the same level as the music of Zheng and Wei. Just as he does not mention other "popular" songs and ballads, he leaves out even a piece by his great-aunt Lady Ban. However, even if one grants that the "Yuan ge xing" was simply not dignified enough for early Eastern Han literary taste, the poem does not fit exactly with the events of Lady Ban's life. If Lady Ban wrote the piece after she left the court to reside in the Palace of Eternal Trust, as the two versions of the preface suggest, she should have referred to her abandonment as an event that occurred in the past instead of something she fears in the future.

Lu Qinli 遵欽立 (1910–1973), perhaps the foremost expert of this century on Han dynasty poetry, has advanced the most compelling case against Lady Ban's authorship of "Yuan ge xing". Lu examines the use of the fan image in early Chinese prose and poetry, and he shows that throughout the Han dynasty all writers use the fan as an analogy for the pattern of service and retirement of an official. A good example is the "Shan ming" 扇銘 (Fan Inscription) by Fu Yi 傅毅 (ob. ca. A.D. 90):

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30 See Yuefu shiji 43.626–32.
31 Shi pin A.3b.
33 See Han Wei Liuchao yuefu wenxue shi 漢魏六朝樂府文學史 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), pp. 103–4.

OE 36.2 (1993)
Fluttering and waving—white and round,
It stirs a cool breeze.
The precious body of the gentleman
Relies on it for comfort and ease.
In winter it hides like the dragon;
In summer it soars like the phoenix.
Knowing when to advance, when to retreat,
In accord with time he comes and goes.\(^\text{34}\)

According to Lu, what is missing from the Han dynasty use of the fan image is the association one finds in the “Yuan ge xing”: the discarded fan as a metaphor for abandonment. As in the example from Fu Yi cited above, storing the fan in winter is portrayed simply as part of a natural process, and does not involve any complaint about being cast aside or rejected. Lu Qinli finds the earliest examples of the cast off fan representing abandonment beginning in the Western Jin. The earliest piece he cites is the “Shan fu” 扇賦 of Fu Xian 傅咸 (249–294):

When the Fire Star suddenly courses westward,
Sad winds rise in accord with metallic shang;\(^\text{35}\)
The autumn sun is chilly and cold;
White dew turns to frost.
The body shudders, longing for heat;
My lord dons light furs in a warm room.
He casts me aside as if discarded;
I leave his precious hands and am stored away.
My lord turns his back on the old, faces the new;
It is not because I am without goodness.
I sorrow that I labored in vain with no reward;
All alone I harbor resentment in my solitary place.\(^\text{36}\)

Lu Qinli then examines what he considers to be evidence of borrowings from the “Yuan ge xing” by poets such as Xu Gan 徐幹 (170–217), Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), and Wang Can 王粲 (177–217). He argues that only in the Jian’an period, when poets wrote extensively on the abandoned woman theme, was the

\(^{34}\) See Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843), ed. Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen 金上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (1815; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), “Hou Han wen” 吳漢文, 43.6a.

\(^{35}\) The westward movement of the Fire Star (Huo xing 火星) or Antares signalled the onset of autumn. See Mao shi 154. The metallic shang (jin shang 金商) refers to the metal phase and note of the pentatonic scale that correspond to autumn in the ancient Chinese correlative system.

\(^{36}\) Yiwen leiju 69.1213–14.
association made between the moon as an image for fan, and the discarded fan as an analogy for the deserted woman. He suggests that the “Yuan ge xing” might have been written by a high-class musician at the Cao-Wei court.37

Lu Qinli’s dating of the piece to the Cao-Wei period of course is pure speculation. However, it is instructive to note that the Ge lu 歌錄 (Catalogue of Songs), a work of unknown authorship and date,38 refers to “Yuan ge xing” as a guci 古辭, which is the common designation for anonymous Han yuefu. The Wen xuan commentator Li Shan 李善, who cites this statement from the Ge lu,39 claims that the “Yuan ge xing” was an ancient song that Favorite Beauty Ban imitated. Jean-Pierre Diény has shown that the “Yuan shi xing”怨詩行, which traditionally has been considered a musical version of the “Qi ai shi” 七哀詩 (Poem of Seven Laments) by Cao Zhi 曹植, is likely an anonymous Han yuefu that draws upon the “Yuan ge xing” attributed to Lady Ban.40 If Diény is correct, the “Yuan ge xing” is at least as early as the end of the Later Han dynasty. Whether one can push the date back earlier than this is difficult to determine.

One other piece of evidence that has been used to dispute the attribution of “Yuan ge xing” to Lady Ban is the type of fan that serves as the dominant image of the poem. Hans Frankel has claimed that the “Yuan ge xing” is not by Lady Ban because “it speaks of a round fan, which was not used in China until many centuries later”.41 Professor Frankel does not indicate the source for his claim,42 or when he believes the round fan first appeared. However, both textual and archaeological evidence clearly shows that round fans did exist in China at least as early as the beginning of the Later Han dynasty. For example, Fu Yi’s inscription cited above describes the fan as “white and round” 素圓. Fu Yi also wrote a “Shan fu” 扇賦 (Rhapsody on a Fan), which portrays the fan as “sometimes round, sometimes square” 或規或矩43 Fu Yi was a contemporary

37 See Lu Qinli’s “Han shi bielu” 漢詩別錄, 1948; rpt. in Han Wei Liuchao wenxue lunji 漢魏六朝文學論集 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1984), pp. 22–27.
38 This work probably was compiled in the Six Dynasties period. It is listed in the Sui shu monograph on texts (35.1085) as a text in ten juan.
39 See Wen xuan 27.1280.
40 See “Les sept Tristesses (Qi Ai)”, Toung Pao 65 (1979): 51–65. The “Yuan shi xing” not only shares with “Yuan ge xing” a common tune title, but also has a line that is identical to the last line of “Yuan ge xing” (思情中道絕), and a nearly identical line (吹我入君懷). For the text of the “Yuan shi xing” see Song shu 21.623 and Yuefu shiji 41.610–11.
42 In a private communication Hans Frankel informed me that his wife’s brother-in-law, the famous writer Shen Congwen, who was an expert on ancient dress and household articles, had made a special study of ancient Chinese fans. Shen had concluded that the round fan did not exist in the time of Lady Ban, and thus her famous poem could not have been written by her.
43 See “Quan Hou Han wen”, 43.3b.
of Lady Ban's great-nephew, and thus lived not too long after the time of Lady Ban. Ban Gu himself wrote a \textit{fu} on the fan. In this piece, titled “Zhu shan fu” 竹扇賦 ("Rhapsody on a Bamboo Fan"), he also refers to the round shape of the fan.\(^{44}\)

Archaeological evidence for the existence of the round fan is not abundant. However, stone carvings found in several Eastern Han tombs portray figures holding round fans. There also is a round bronze fan that was discovered in an Eastern Han tomb located in Lingbao, Henan.\(^{45}\)

It is significant to note that all of the references to the round fan are from the Later Han period. Thus, the round fan indeed might have come into use only in this period. Based on Lu Qinli’s analysis of fan imagery, and Jean-Pierre Diény’s study of the texts of the “Yuan shi xing”, together with textual and archaeological evidence of round fans in the Eastern Han period, I believe the “Yuan ge xing” is an Eastern Han poem. The style and theme of the abandoned woman are reminiscent of the some of the anonymous songs and ballads (\textit{gu shi} 古詩 and \textit{yuefu}) which are generally regarded as Eastern Han works. There are at least two lines that it shares with songs from this tradition. For example, Line 2 of “Yuan ge xing” (栽為合歡扇) is nearly the same as a line in “Nineteen Old Poems” #18 (栽為合歡被), and Line 7 (常恐秋節至) is identical to a line in the Han ballad “Changge xing” 長歌行 (Long Song).\(^{46}\) It is quite likely that “Yuan ge xing” belongs to the same anonymous song tradition as the \textit{gushi} and \textit{yuefu}. It may have originally been a folksong about an abandoned lady. Later, probably in the Wei-Jin period, it was attached to the story of Favorite Beauty Ban, to whom the piece then was attributed.

The two \textit{fu} that are ascribed to Favorite Beauty Ban are “Dao su fu” 排素賦 (Rhapsody on Pounding Silk) and “Zi dao fu” 自悼賦 (Rhapsody of Self-commiseration). Although extracts of the “Dao su fu” are cited in a Tang commonplace book,\(^ {47}\) the earliest extant complete text is preserved in the \textit{Guwen yuan} 古文苑, which is notorious for its misattributions.\(^ {48}\) Already in the seventh century, the \textit{Wen xuan} commentator Li Shan doubted that Lady Ban was the author of this piece.\(^ {49}\)

The “Dao su fu” describes a beautiful lady, who, neglected by her lord, rises on a moonlit autumn night to pound silk on a fulling block. The \textit{fu} is a third-

\(^{44}\) For the text of the piece, see \textit{Guwen yuan} 古文苑, \textit{Dainan ge congshu}, 2.15a.


\(^{46}\) See \textit{Wen xuan} 27.1279, 29.1344.

\(^{47}\) See \textit{Yiwen leiju} 85.1456.

\(^{48}\) See \textit{Guwen yuan}, 2.1b–3a.

\(^{49}\) See \textit{Wen xuan} 13.592.
person narration, and there is nothing in the piece that reveals the voice of Lady Ban. Such puns as fu (*pju) 袜 (lapel) standing for fu (*pju) 夫 (husband) and xiú (*zjog) 袖 (sleeve) standing for jīu (*dzjog) 就 (approach) are typical of Six Dynasties folk songs and palace-style poetry. The theme of the woman pining for her lover as she fulls cloth on a cold autumn night is common in Six Dynasties verse. Thus, the “Dao su fu” very likely is a Six Dynasties work.

The “Zi dao fu” is contained in Lady Ban’s biography in the Han shu where it has no title. “Zi dao fu” is the title most commonly used. According to Ban Gu, Lady Ban wrote this rhapsody after she had left the court and taken up residence in the Palace of Eternal Trust. She uses the rhapsody to express her feelings of despair, loneliness, and abandonment. It is a piece highly charged with emotion, and represents one of the few truly personal rhapsodies of the Former Han period.

Like most fu, the “Zi dao fu” consists of two parts: the body of the piece written entirely in sao-style meter and a reprise (chóng 重) in the style of the “Nine Songs”. Lady Ban begins the fu recounting her early glorious years as one of Emperor Cheng’s favorites. The opening lines read almost like the conventional humble and apologetic phrases that begin most memorials to the throne. Her moral qualities and intelligence that she has acquired through birth earned her a lowly position in the imperial harem. The dominant images here are of bright light: she has the privilege to bask in the brilliance of imperial grace, which she compares to the light of the sun and moon. At this peak of imperial favor, she takes up residence in the Storied Lodge (Zengcheng shè 增城 舍), which was the third of eight lodges in the women’s quarters of the palace.

Heir to virtue bequeathed by my ancestors,
Endowed in life with a noble genius,
My humble person was presented to the palace towers,
To fill a low rank in the rear court.
Basking in the sage sovereign’s generous grace,
I faced the resplendent brilliance of sun and moon.
As it spread its lustrous and fiery light,
I received highest favor in the Storied Lodge.

50 For the identification of these puns, see Zhang Qiao’s note in his edition of Guwen yuan (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1973), 3.14b.
51 See Yiwen leiju 67.1188–89 for examples.
52 See Han shu 97B.3985–87.
53 This is the title given in Yan Kejun, “Quan Han wen”, 11.6a–b. The Yiwen leiju 30.542, gives the title as “Zi shang fu” 自傷賦 (Rhapsody of Sorrowing for Oneself).
54 See Ying Shao’s commentary in Han shu 97B.3984, n. 2.
55 The rear court is the harem.
At this point there is a change in rhyme that introduces a new section. In the first two lines, Lady Ban continues to express her gratitude for the favor that she had received from the emperor.

Already inordinately blessed by an undeserved position,
I thought perhaps this was a most propitious time.

She then follows with a series of lines in which she recounts her unwavering devotion to the principles of proper womanly conduct. Whenever she unties her sash, she recalls the instruction she received from her mother at the time of her sash-binding ceremony (jie li 結繫). Performed just before a young woman left for her husband's family, the binding of the sash was intended to signify the devotion of the new bride to her husband and his family.56

Whether awake or asleep, I sighed repeatedly;
I'd loosen my sash and reflect on myself.

In the following lines, Lady Ban enumerates various models of womanly behavior. First she mentions viewing portraits of famous women that serve as guides to proper behavior: “I spread out paintings of women to serve as guiding mirrors.” One can only imagine in what form Lady Ban saw such portraits. It is possible she saw them in the form of screen paintings. Liu Xiang himself claims to have painted the entire text of the Lienü zhuan on the four panels of a screen.57 Wu Hung also documents the existence of what he calls lienü screen paintings as early as the Former Han. Such paintings were didactic representations of moral conduct.58

Next, Lady Ban tells of consulting the nü shi 女史, or female scribe, for instruction on the Classic of Songs: “Consulting the lady scribe, I asked about the Songs.” According to the Zhou li 周禮 (Rites of Zhou), the nü shi was an official position charged with managing the ritual duties of the Empress.59 Although there was no such formal post in the Han bureaucracy, Lady Ban probably was using the archaic name to designate a Han equivalent of a female tutor.

56 See Mao shi 156/4.
57 A fragment of Liu Xiang's Bie lu 別錄 catalogue says that Liu Xiang and Liu Xin compiled the Lienü zhuan in seven pian, which they then painted “on the four panels of a screen”. See Chuxue ji 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 25.599. Wu Hung remarks that it is “difficult to imagine that more than one hundred stories could be illustrated and explained on the four panels of a screen”. He suggests that what Liu Xiang included on the screen was a set of annotated illustrations. See The Wu Liang Shrine, The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 175–76. I am indebted to Ellen Laing for this reference.
59 See Zhou li zhushu 周禮注疏 8.3a, in Shisan jing zhushu 三十經注疏 (Kyōto: Chūbun shuppansha, 1972).
Ban Gu informs us that Lady Ban was well-versed in the *Songs*,\(^{60}\) and apparently had committed the entire work to memory. During Emperor Cheng's reign, a palace lady named Cao Gong 曹宮 was known for her expertise in the *Songs* and actually gave instruction on the *Songs* to the Empress.\(^{61}\) The purpose of instructing court women in the *Songs* may not have been for poetic inspiration, but rather as part of training in womanly conduct. As we shall see in Lady Ban's rhapsody, she refers to the *Songs* as guides and lessons for her own behavior.

To show her mastery of the lessons on womanly conduct, Lady Ban refers first to the category of women classified in the *Lienü zhuan* as "malicious favorites" (*niebi* 賊嬖), followed by exemplars of goodness and virtue:

Saddened by the monition of the hen who crows,
I lamented the transgressions of Bao and Yan.
I praised Huang and Ying, wives of the Lord of Yu,
Extolled Ren and Si, mothers of Zhou.
Although stupid and uncouth, and unable to emulate them,
Dare I still my thoughts and forget them?

The "hen that crows" is a reference to an old saying recorded in the *Shang shu*: "The hen should not crow the dawn. When the hen crows the dawn, that is the end of the house."\(^{62}\) This expression thus designates a woman who has improper control over the court or her husband's household. As an example of such women, Lady Ban refers to the notorious Bao Si 褒姒, wife of King You 阇 of Zhou. He was so infatuated with her, he tried to satisfy her every wish. To amuse her, he ordered the beacon fires lit to summon the armies of the vassal lords. She laughed uproariously at the joke played at their expense. Later, when the Zhou capital was actually under attack, the vassal lords refused to respond to the alarm, and King You was killed.\(^{63}\)

Note: The word Yan 阇 that is paired with Bao in this line is problematic. Lady Ban is referring to a line in *Mao shi* 193, which in the Lu version of the *Songs* reads 阇妻 for 豔妻 "beautiful wife" of the Mao text. Zheng Xuan inter-

\(^{60}\) The *Han shu* (97B.3984) says that Favorite Beauty Ban "could recite the Songs along with ‘Yaotiao’, ‘De xiang’ 德象, and ‘Nü shì’ 女師". Yan Shigu claims that "Yaotiao", "De xiang" and "Nü shì" refer to ancient monitory texts. Favorite Beauty Ban's biography in the *Lienü zhuan* (8.6b) reads somewhat differently: "Every time Lady Ban recited the Songs, when she came to ‘Yaotiao’, ‘De jia’ 德家, and ‘Nü shì’ she repeated them three times." The commentator Liang Duan 梁段 argues that "Yaotiao", "De jia", and "Nü shì" refer to *Mao shi* 1, 12, and 2 respectively. All of these poems were traditionally interpreted as praising virtuous women.

\(^{61}\) See *Han shu* 97B.3990.

\(^{62}\) Shang shu zhushu 尚書注書, in Shisan jing zhushu, 11.16b.

\(^{63}\) See *Lienü zhuan* 7.2b–3a.

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interprets this poem as a criticism of the rule of King Li of Zhou. The Mao commentary interprets this poem as a satire against King You, and the "beautiful wife" as referring to Bao Si. According to Yan Shigu, Yan is the name of a favored clan in King Li's reign. However, there is no other mention of such a figure elsewhere in early texts, and thus if Yan is indeed a person's name, nothing is known about her.

In contrast to the negative examples, the reference to Ying and Huang are to noble women of the past. Ying and Huang are Nü Ying女英 and E Huang娥皇, the daughters of the sage ruler Yao, who married them to Shun, also known as the Lord of Yu. They were known for their humility, frugality, intelligence, and devotion to their husband Shun. Ren is Tairen太任, the mother of King Wen of Zhou. Si is Taisi太姒, the mother of King Wu of Zhou. They both are examples of the virtuous mother of the Confucian tradition. Tairen is hailed as one of the ancient practitioners of tai jiao胎教—instruction in the embryo. Taisi is praised for her diligent toil as a faithful wife who bore her husband King Wen ten sons. They are both celebrated in Mao shi 240 and other pieces of the Classic of Songs.

Although Lady Ban resolves never to forget their virtuous ways, the examples of their noble conduct provide her with little comfort. In the ensuing lines, Lady Ban refers to the sadness she feels now that her beauty, like wilting blossoms, has faded. She then refers to the death of her two infant children to whom she gave birth in the Yanglu and Silkworm Thorn lodges.

With the passing years I have become sad and fearful,
Sorrowing for the lush blossoms that no longer flourish.
I painfully remember Yanglu and Silkworm Thorn lodges,
Where in swaddling clothes, my infant sons met disaster.
How could this be the fault of this lowly concubine?
For one cannot seek to undo Heaven's decree.

Lady Ban then continues with a short section in which she uses another image of light to represent her fall from imperial grace. She no longer enjoys the rays of imperial sunshine, which for her have faded into darkness. Thus, after a perfunctory expression of gratitude to the emperor for overlooking her trans-

64 See Huang Zhuo黄焯, Mao shi Zheng jian pingyi毛詩鄭箋平議 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), pp. 214–18, for a thorough review of the issues. Huang concludes that Zheng's interpretation is wrong.
65 See Mao shi zhushu 12/2.6b.
66 See Han shu 85.3445, n. 16.
67 See Lienü zhuang 1.1a–2a.
68 See Lienü zhuang 1.1a–2a.
69 See Lienü zhuang 1.4a–5a.
70 See Lienü zhuang 1.4a–5a.
gressions, she declares her intention to serve the Empress Dowager in the Palace of Eternal Trust to the end of her days.

Suddenly, the bright sun shifted its light,
And as dusky evening fell, all was dim and dark.
Yet I still received generous grace of shelter and support,
And was not cast aside for my faults and transgressions.
Now to care for the Empress Dowager in the eastern chamber,
I am assigned a lowly rank in the Palace of Eternal Trust.
I dutifully sprinkle and sweep amidst the curtains;
Ever shall I do so, until my death.
I hope they return my bones to the foot of a hill,
Where they may rest in the lingering shade of pine and cypress.

The last two lines, which conclude the first section of the rhapsody, are particularly affecting. Lady Ban anticipates her eventual burial in a tumulus shaded by the proverbial graveyard trees, cypress and pine.

The reprise that ends the rhapsody is an eloquent restatement of Lady Ban's feelings of isolation and despair. The first fourteen lines emphasize the totality and finality of her abandonment:

Hidden in the dark palace, secluded and still:
The main entrance is shut, the forbidden gates barred,
Dust lies in ornate halls, moss covers jade stairs,
In its courtyards, green grass thickly grows.
Shadows in broad chambers, curtains darkly drawn,
Through empty window gratings the wind blows biting cold.
It stirs curtains and gown, blows red chiffons;
Swish, swish, the sound of rustling silks.
My soul flies away to some secret, quiet place;
My lord no longer favors me with his presence—who could feel honor in this?
I look down over the vermillion courtyard,
And recall where my lord used to tread.
I look up at his cloud-enshrouded chamber,
And twin streams of tears pour down my face.

We see in these lines an intensity of emotion that is unique in the fu of the Former Han dynasty. Although there are a number of rhapsodies expressing personal feeling by other poets in the Former Han, there is nothing that can rival the poignancy of Lady Ban's expression of abandonment. For example, the frustration "fu" attributed to Sima Qian and Dong Zhongshu, which for all their complaints about misery and misfortune, are more abstract, almost philosophi-
cal deliberations on the plight of the neglected scholar. The only piece with which Lady Ban's rhapsody might compare is the “Changmen fu” 長門賦 (Tall Gate Palace Rhapsody) attributed to Sima Xiangru. “Changmen fu” also is a rhapsody on the theme of a palace lady who waits interminably for a visit from her lover. However, even though it is an artful poem, the “Changmen fu” is not a personal expression, but rather a male poet's portrayal of the torment of a forsaken woman. Thus, it lacks the personal emotional appeal that pervades Lady Ban's poem.

The images used by Lady Ban—bolted gates, dust-covered halls, moss on the stairs, dark curtains, biting wind ruffling her clothes—all conjure up an atmosphere of loneliness and isolation. It is no wonder that many of these figures became conventions of later poetry on the theme of the abandoned woman. Lady Ban's fu in fact is the locus classicus for such phrases as yingmen bi 應門閉 (main entrance shut), yu jie 玉階 (jade stairs), dan chi 丹墀 (vermilion walkway), and lü qi 履綦 (literally “slipper ornaments”, but here probably “foot imprints”), which are commonplaces of the palace-style verse of the Six Dynasties.

Especially moving is the dramatic gesture of the last four lines of this section:

I look down over the vermilion walkway,  
And recall where my lord's sandals trod.  
I look up at his cloud-enshrouded chamber,  
And twin streams of tears pour down my face.

The abandoned lady looks down and remembers previous visits by the emperor, when he strolled to her chamber, perhaps leaving slight imprints on the vermilion-colored floor. Then, looking up, she sees his palace high and remote as the clouds, and feels even more intensely the pain of her forced withdrawal from the court. At this point, she can no longer contain her emotion, and tears literally pour in streams down her two cheeks.

Although the response of tears would have made a good ending for this poem, Lady Ban was not content to end her rhapsody on a melancholy note. In the concluding lines, she portrays herself as cheerful and relaxed. She claims to

71 See “Bei shi buyu fu” 悲士不遇賦 (Lamenting the Gentleman Who Does Meet a Favorable Time), which is attributed to Sima Qian in Yiwen leiju 30.541; and “Shi buyu fu” 士不遇賦 (The Gentleman Who Does Not Meet a Favorable Time), which is attributed to Dong Zhongshu in Yiwen leiju 30.541 and Giwen yuan 1.13a–14a. Scholars have raised questions about the authenticity of both of these pieces. Recently, David Pankenier has argued strongly that the “Shi buyu fu” is authentic. See his “The Scholar’s Frustration Reconsidered: Melancholia or Credo?”, Journal of the American Oriental Society 110.3 (1990): 434–59.

console herself with the thought that she has enjoyed more than her fair share of
honor and favor. Furthermore, the changes of fortune are impossible to reckon,
and thus she seems to accept what fate has dealt her.

With pleasant expression, I look at those around me;
Pour a winged goblet to dispel my sorrow.
I think how one is born to life,
Only suddenly to pass as if drifting in a stream.
Already I've enjoyed eminence and honor,
And lived a life of unmatchd blessings.
I shall cheer my spirit, enjoy myself to the full,
For good fortune and felicity are hard to predict.
“Green Jacket” and “White flower”—
From ancient times such has been the state of affairs.

This ending Lady Ban actually earned great praise from none other than Zhu
Xi 朱熹, who says about it: “Although her feelings arise from deep resentment,
she was able to comfort herself by accepting her lot, and was able to console
herself by referring to examples from antiquity. She was moderate and tranquil,
followed a middle course, and in the end did not display an excess of bitter sor-
row.” In spite of Zhu Xi’s endorsement, the positive, optimistic stance of the
concluding lines seems hollow in the context of the poem, and even more so in
light of Lady Ban’s personal suffering that is graphically presented in the his-
torical record. I am not sure how to construe the reference to the Shi jing in the
penultimate line. “Green Jacket” (“Lü yi” 綠衣) is the title of Mao shi 27. Ac-
cording to the Mao commentary, this song was a complaint by Lady Jiang 姜,
wife of Duke Zhuang 莊 of Wei (reg.758–735 B.C.), against a concubine who
had usurped her place. “White Flower” (“Bai hua” 白華) is Mao shi 229. Ac-
cording to the Mao Commentary, this song criticizes Bao Si, who usurped the
rightful place of King You of Zhou’s first queen. Although the surface meaning
of the allusions is clear enough—Lady Ban is simply saying that her situation is
not unique in Chinese history. However, one might be tempted to read into the
references to the two scheming concubines who are criticized in the Shi jing
songs a not too subtly disguised thrust at Lady Ban’s own rivals, the Zhao
sisters.

The directness and emotional intensity of Favorite Beauty Ban’s rhapsody
show that the fu of the Former Han was not always the impersonal, objective
descriptive poem that it often is portrayed as being. Lady Ban’s fu is personal to

73 See Chuci houyu 楚辭後語 appended to Chuci jizhu 楚辭集注 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua
shuju, 1972), 2.8b–9a.
74 See Mao shi zhushu 2.1.8a.
75 See Mao shi zhushu 15.2.12a.

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the point of being autobiographical, notably with the inclusion of such details as the names of her quarters and the death of her two infant sons. Such details are unknown in other rhapsodies of the Former Han.

I suspect that more pieces of this kind were composed in this period, but they have been lost. Lady Ban's *fu* probably survives only because her grand-nephew preserved it in the *Han shu*. Writings by women of the Former Han are not well preserved. Even though she was an imperial concubine, Lady Ban has no listing in the rhapsody section of *Seven Summaries* (*Qi lüe* 七略) catalogue. I suspect that Ban Gu obtained a copy from the Ban family collection where it was more likely to have been preserved than the imperial archives. Thus, if Lady Ban's nephew had not been the compiler of the Han history, this moving poem may never have been passed down to us.