

The Difficulty of Pleasure

Stephen Owen

Notice: This work is protected by copyright law (Title 17, U.S. Code).

The rubric « entertainment » is, in English, already a category with a blurred definition, covering many rather distinct activities staged for pleasure. Their counterparts in Chinese are no less various, though the constellation of types is shaped somewhat differently. From the classical tradition in Europe the experience of a collective « audience » in watching « shows » of various types has always been a topic of serious interest. Indeed, it is a good question what the pleasure was in hearing of Pentheus torn apart by the Bacchantes. Certainly « shows » existed in China from antiquity, but drama enters the written tradition rather late (the earliest texts are perhaps thirteenth century), and serious reflection on what happens in watching theater is not found in any quality until the late seventeenth century. The ancient « Nine Songs » of the Chuci (3rd c. BC ?) are mildly « metatheatrical, » in that they describe the religious performances of which they were, perhaps, a part ; but like much else in the early tradition, interpreters recuperated these texts as circumstantial first person lyric.

One form of entertainment, however, did catch the discursive imagination : this was watching performances of song and dance, which was often a topic in the lyrics of song. Song and dance did not stand alone, but were part of a larger set of topics surrounding feasts and partying, including drinking, playing games, and, potentially at least, sexual encounters. The « artiste, » ji, of Tang times sang and danced but might also have sex with a member of her audience. By early modern times this term came to mean simply « prostitute. »

The following paper will take this topic into the Tang and focus on the Tang. It is, however, a much larger theme. These sensual entertainments continued into the Song, where they can be seen in the tradition of song lyric (ci) and in the rich anecdotal lore surrounding that aspect of life. At the same time they form the negative backdrop for literati parties without women performers, which became an important occasion for serious reflection on the nature of happiness (le).

Pleasure is, it seems, a troubled enterprise. It is hard to stage, hard to sustain, and dangerous if too perfectly attained. As in many banquet poems in the Classical and European tradition, in China the call to pleasure is often so ominous that one wonders

how the banqueter, thus summoned, can separate pleasure from desperation. The speaker in « Hawthorn on the Mountain » (*Classic of Poetry* CXV) from the seventh or eighth century BC. calls on someone to hold a feast under threat :

Hawthorn on the mountain,
elm tree in the marsh :
Gown and robe have you,
but never donned, never worn ;
cart and horses have you,
never driven, never ridden ;
when you wither up and die,
they will delight another man.

Gao tree on the mountain,
niu tree in the marsh :
court and chamber have you,
but never swept or sprinkled down ;
bell and drum have you,
never beaten, never struck ;
when you wither up and die,
another man will hold them.

Lacquer tree on mountain,
chestnut tree in marsh :
food and drink have you,
so why not have the zither played
to take your joy,
draw out your days,
for when you wither up and die,
another man will take your home.

Pleasure requires an expenditure of what has been stored up, hoarded – an expenditure of what one has precisely by virtue of withholding expenditure. The speaker threatens the person who has accumulated much : if you do not enjoy what you have, another will. To permanently possess one must, paradoxically, consume. If the person thus addressed does heed the singer's call and hold the feast, his can only be a pleasure with dark shadows and images of some other man making use of what has been his – riding his horses, using his hall and his orchestra, eating his food and drinking his ale. Is this truly pleasure or competitive consumption, a way of clinging to what is his under threat of loss ?

Let us, however, imagine that the patron of the feast, carried away by the splendor of the music and the strong ale, does indeed begin to forget himself in pleasure and to truly enjoy the entertainment. Then, we may suppose, the adjacent song in the *Classic*

of *Poetry* (« Cricket » CXIV) could be sung to him, its other stanzas all varying the message of the first :

Cricket in the hall,
the year draws to its end.
If we don't take our joy now,
the days and months will pass us by.
Yet let not pleasure go too far,
just think upon your stations ;
delight should not get out of hand,
the well-born man is circumspect.

The singing voice that urged him to desperately indulge now warns him to hold back. The reveler finds himself trapped between wasting his life in constraint and ruin that follows from excess.

Such push and check of pleasure, dramatized in these two songs from the *Classic of Poetry*, bear a close relation to the utopian theory of rites and the affections in the *Record of Music* (*Yueji*), preserved in the Han compendium *The Record of Rites* (*Liji*) :

Human beings are born at rest ; this is their inborn nature. Stirred by things, they are set in motion ; this is desire in nature. When things are encountered, knowledge knows them, and only then do likes and dislikes take on form. Likes and dislikes have no measure within, while knowing is seduced from without ; unable to reflect on oneself, normative natural process is destroyed. Things stir a person endlessly, and a person's likes and dislikes have no measure ; when this happens, the person is transformed by whatever things he encounters. When a person is transformed by things, normative natural process is destroyed, and the person's desires are taken to the extreme... For this reason the former kings prescribed music and rites as measures for people. By weeping in mourning clothes of hemp they gave proper measure to funerals. By bell and drum, shield and battle-ax [for military dances] they gave harmony to expressions of happiness. By the cap and hairpin of the marriage ceremony, they distinguished male and female. By festive games and banquets they formed the correct associations between men. Rites gave the proper measure to the people's minds ; music made harmony in human sounds ; government carried things out ; punishments prevented [transgression]. When these four were fully achieved and not refractory, the royal way was complete.

Music unifies ; rites set things apart. In unifying there is a mutual drawing close ; in setting things apart there is mutual respect. If music overwhelms, there is a dissolving ; if rites overwhelm, there is division. To bring the affections into accord and to adorn their outward appearance is the enterprise of music and rites.

This was not the only theory of the affections in ancient China, but it was, in many variations, the most widespread. The human affections (*qing*), once set into motion,

tend to an excess that is often linked to loss of self (being transformed by the push and pull of constant stimuli and unable to reflect). Thus some « measure » (*jie*) is required by which the affections can find a satisfying limit and be checked in their propensity to excess. In this version in *The Record of Music* the bound antithetical pair, « music and rites, » provides that measure. As music unifies the listeners, threatening loss of self and the dissolution of distinction, ritual prescription and role alienate, preserving distinction.

If we think of the stanzas of « Cricket » in this context, we see both the affections « set into motion » by the call to pleasure and due measure immediately given in the warning not to carry pleasure too far, to maintain the appropriate social distinctions of one's role, which is the social embodiment of rites.

The Confucian vision is one in which the proper measure of emotional engagement will satisfy everyone and society will be in harmony. It is hard, however, not to see the instability inherent in this process of excitation followed by limitation. Due measure is also the interruption of a trajectory toward excess. It recurs time and again in the poetic expositions (*fu*) of the Han in which the appetites are verbally whetted, then abruptly checked.

Consider the first century AD. « Poetic Exposition on the Dance » (*Wu fu*) by Fu Yi (d. c. 90 AD.). The poetic exposition itself is put in the mouth of the legendary ancient orator Song Yu, who, in the introductory frame narrative, persuades the circumspect king of Chu to stage a dance by his palace women.

King Xiang of Chu had visited Yunmeng Park and had made Song Yu write a poetic exposition on what happened at Gaotang. He was going to hold a drinking party and said to Song Yu, « I want to fête my courtiers – what can I do to give them pleasure ? ».

Song Yu replied, « They say that song is the way to intone words and that dance is the way to fully express what is intently on one's mind. So it is better to listen to notes than to recite a verse, and better to observe it in visual form than merely to listen to the notes. Dances such as *Jichu*, or the Whirling Gust, or Brightness are the ultimate things to observe in your palace ladies and the most perfect wonder of the world. Why don't we have these performed ? »

The King said, « What about the question of “Zheng” ? »

What troubles King Xiang here is « the music of Zheng and Wei, » the corrupting music of sensual excess against which the Confucian tradition sternly warned. Song Yu soothes the king's worries by citing examples of morally uplifting music and dance in the Confucian tradition. Then in conclusion Song Yu makes an odd turn : « The music of Zheng and Wei serves to give pleasure to those sitting close together and to join in delight. Such pleasing indulgences in surplus time is not for the purpose of influencing your people – what harm is there in it ? »

Through the mouth of Song Yu, Fu Yi has opened a dangerous space here known as « surplus time » – leisure. To Confucian moralists a king's music was of the highest

importance, a subtle influence that touched the moral disposition of all his subjects. The sensual « music of Zheng and Wei » had no place in a well-governed polity, except as a minatory example, tied to the melancholy history of the ruin of those two ancient domains and illustrating the terrible consequences of bad music. For Song Yu, however, the sensual indulgence of such music can be fully enjoyed if safely contained in a bounded interval called « surplus time ». Within that interval the music needs not leak out and corrupt the people.

The far boundary of that interval of time checks the trajectory of indulgence. In the poetic exposition proper, Song Yu describes the phases of the dance with increasing intensity, a whirl of clothes and flirtatious glances that inflame desire. Then, about three quarters of the way through, the performance is abruptly concluded and the king's guests are sent home. The guests hasten down the dark streets with an urgency that one suspects grows from unconsummated desire.

With his notion of « surplus time », this fictive Song Yu has proposed a minor heresy. A ruler was always supposed to be on duty. The Duke of Zhou, the paragon of all princes, was said to have spat out his food when eating and wrung his hair dry when washing whenever the arrival of worthy guests were announced, so anxious he was to win them over. The point of that often repeated anecdote was that there could be no interval outside the demands of state duty. Likewise the Confucian writers on cosmopolitical music never suggested that there were times when the king's music didn't matter. Only with the creation of « surplus time » could we have entertainment in the full sense, as distinct from morally uplifting ritual performances.

Such a protected space for pleasure was inherently unstable. The moralists always wanted to recapture it for royal obligation and duly submitted their protests when royal pleasure seemed too intense. Yet their unease with leaving that interval free may have been based on wise insight, for the far boundary of the interval, the boundary that checks the trajectory to pleasure, is always in danger of breaking down, with pleasure spilling out and continuing through the night and into the dawn.

We come here to a large issue, which is the impossibility of Carnival or the protected spaces of art in the Chinese elite tradition. Carnival is in time what art is in space (even temporal arts of language and music are brought to some version of the stage that divides what is acceptable in the social world from what can occur in art). It is not that transgressions of those bounded spaces do not occur – a member of the audience may conceive desire for the actress – but more often such transgressions are an unexpected whimsy (if I were to say that I wanted to reach out and caress the buttocks, thighs, or breasts of the statue of a beautiful woman in a museum). When the avant-garde actor moves across the stage into the audience or from the audience into the company, it intensifies awareness of the margin of the stage. Such margins of art have not always been in place, but over the past centuries they have thickened and hardened. As the space of art must be enclosed, Carnival and its variants must have a clear beginning and ending recognized by the community – it cannot always be *Midsummer's Night*.

Without those culturally sanctioned intervals and spaces of inversion and excess, there can be only a resolute check against the movement toward dissolution of order, or a tense stasis, or some form of displacement, such as memory or dream¹. Closure becomes an essential element of such discourse : resolutions of self-control, ending the party, or the separation of the lovers.

The last emperors of the brief late Southern Dynasties and of the no less brief Sui had profound political problems that were indifferent to whether or not those emperors spent too much time enjoying music and dance and the pleasures of their palace ladies. Indeed it is fair to say that they might as well have enjoyed themselves to the utmost, since it was political genius they needed rather than moderating restraint. Unlike the latter, the former cannot be achieved by an act of moral will. In the minds of the early Tang historians, however, the fall of the three brief dynasties that preceded them, spanning the early sixth to early seventh centuries – Liang, Chen, and Sui – was due to the dissolute pleasures of their last emperors (in two cases the second generation after the founder). It seemed that these princes had transgressed the boundary that should limit pleasure's interval : they had « gone too far ».

Li Shimin, posthumously known as Taizong (r. 627-49), was the second Tang emperor. He came to the throne by killing two of his brothers, one the Crown Prince, and by forcing his father to abdicate the throne ; he then had the accounts of the dynastic founding rewritten to magnify his own role in the Tang founding and to take the credit from his father. Yet he wanted to be an exemplary Confucian ruler, and made a great show of restraint and austerity, of not wanting to « go too far. » He had some reason to be uneasy – not because of fratricide or grossly unfilial behavior, but because two of the three dynasties immediately preceding him had all fallen in the second generation. His historian-courtiers explained that these catastrophes had come about because of the immoderate indulgences and entertainments of those second generation rulers.

Li Shimin wrote more than any other Tang emperor, often coming back to the uneasy interplay between the prideful celebration of what he has to enjoy and the discursive restriction of his pleasure, a self-humbling praise of austerity. The preface and series of poems entitled « The Imperial Capital » is particularly interesting in this regard. The series begins by marking off an interval of surplus time in which the emperor engages in a series of pleasures. Often these pleasures are declared adequate in comparison to some more extreme alternative : « who needs X ? » (when X is an example of going too far). The day's surplus time comes at last to an excursion, a feast, and, of course, a dance performance by palace ladies. The dance, described in the ninth poem of the set, is the point of danger where he could easily slip over into the indulgences that destroyed the second generation rulers who were his predecessors. Thus in the tenth and final poem of the set, Li Shimin checks his momentum toward pleasure and vows still greater austerity.

Li Shimin (Tang Taizong) *The Imperial Capital* (10 poems with preface)
Preface

In the leisure from my myriad devices [duties] I go roaming in the arts of letters. I have observed kings and emperors through the ages and have examined what they did in their times. Back in the days of the Yellow Emperor [Xuan], Fuxi [Hao], Shun, and Yu there were truly no failings whatsoever. But when it came to the Qin Emperor and King Mu of Zhou, then to Han Wudi and Wei Mingdi, their lofty domes and graven walls showed the utmost excess and decoration in the extreme. Their taxes and exactions depleted the universe ; the tracks of their carriages covered the whole world. China's nine regions had no way to meet their exactions, and all the rivers and seas could not satiate their desires. Was it not fitting that they were overthrown and collapsed in ruin ? I follow in their footsteps, most recent of a hundred princes, and I let my mind run to a thousand years in the past. Deeply stirred by my reflections on the past, I can envisage those men of wisdom [such as the Yellow Emperor, Fu Xi, Shun, and Yu]. I hope to use the manners of Yao and Shun to sweep away the failings of Qin and Han, and to use the melodies of Xian [chi] and [Wu] ying to alter decadent tones. This is not at all hard if one looks for it [the right measure] in human feelings. Thus I have observed the Cultural Discipline found in the Six Classics and have considered the merits of Military action in the light of the Seven Virtues. In my terraces and kiosks I have chosen only what lets me avoid the parching heat and damp ; in metal and stone [musical instruments] I value what brings accord between mortal men and the spirits. In all cases I give things measure through [principles of] moderation and harmony, and I do not enlist them for excesses and recklessness. Thus one may delight in channels and moats and needs not seek the shores of rivers and seas ; the Unicorn Gallery [with its paintings of worthies] may offer amusements, and one does not need to be among the mountains and hills. Good and loyal men may be associated with, and one does not need the gods and immortals from over the sea. Feng and Hao [the Zhou capitals] may be explored, and one does not need to be at Alabaster Pool [with Xiwangmu in the Kunlun Range]. To give up the fruit in search of the flower, by which men indulge their desires, throws the great Way into disarray ; and the good man would be ashamed to do so. Thus have I composed these pieces on the Imperial Capital to show my civilized aims.

I

Qin's streams lend vigor to the emperor's lodging,
Hangu Pass makes the royal dwelling robust.
Intricately decorated halls rise a thousand yards,
detached palaces of more than a hundred cubits.
Linked roof tiles touch the Milky Way remote,
soaring lodges mount far through the empty sky.
Sun and clouds shadow the tiered palace towers,
windblown mists emerge from grillwork windows.

II

In the towering corridors I am done with critical tasks
and for a while stop at Honoring Literature Lodge ².
Jade coffers reveal the Dragon Diagram ³,
from golden straps phoenix script is unrolled ⁴.
Leather bindings, where broken, are reconnected ⁵,
bluish scroll casings are unrolled and rolled up again.
Facing this I can linger here long,
on the lecterns I review the ancient canons.

III

I turn my footsteps out from the groves of letters
and stop to delight in a military feast.
The carved bow mimics the full moon,
the sturdy steeds seem like lightning bolts.
The startled goose falls to the arrowless bowstring ⁶,
the crying gibbon grieves over the swift arrow ⁷.
Many fine things indeed, viewed with appreciation –
in this place I do forget all weariness.

Li Shimin's preface breathes with royal self-consciousness, as he weighs the fates and reputations of virtuous rulers of high antiquity against those of monarchs who went too far. In his eyes excess was the cause of imperial ruin, and as « the most recent of a hundred princes » he vows imperial restraint. At the same time he inhabits perhaps the grandest capital and palace complex that China had ever, so that swelling pride contends with gestures of moderation.

Thus, as the first poem suggests the material splendor of his palaces, whose « linked roof tiles touch the Milky Way », Li Shimin is careful to circumscribe his enjoyments in the first line of the second poem : « In the towering corridors I am done with critical tasks. » That is, the activities here and in the remaining eight poems all belong to « surplus time, » when he is finished with the essential business of government. All he needs to do is to regulate that surplus.

The *Analects* (VII.6) of Confucius offered a proper model for such surplus : After « setting one's aims in the Way, holding fast to Virtue, and cleaving to Fellow-Feeling », one might « roam in the arts (*you yu yi*) ». « Roaming » (*you*) strongly suggests a relaxation of engagement that contrasts strongly with the previous moral imperatives ; and while Confucius would have understood the « arts » (*yi*) in a sense very different from Li Shimin, the Tang emperor enacts his sense of the Confucian imperative by strolling over to his literary establishment cum library to show his interests in the Confucian cultural program.

To celebrate the imperial book collection demonstrates his support of things civil/literary (*wen*). The best way to avoid excess is to maintain a balance, and for this purpose he next goes to the counterpart of *wen*, which is *wu*, the « martial virtues, » where he is thrilled by a display of the martial arts by his guards.

IV

Reed pipes play as I attend the Odeum,
Peering far, listening, I enjoy the season of flowers.
The fast pipes are in tune with the crimson string,
unaccompanied song slowly holds « White Snow ».
The brightly colored phoenix gravely arrives,
black cranes in droves form lines ⁸.
Get rid of the music of Zheng and Wei –
classical tones now may give pleasure.

Following appreciation of his cultural and military establishments, Li Shimin listens to a musical performance. Here, for the first time, we see the definition of the pleasures of the palace in negative terms, defined by what they exclude. This was the motif of the preface : a princely morality achieved by refraining from potentially beguiling indulgences. Here Taizong concludes by saying what he need not have said. It is not simply that he enjoys the music performed, but some overemphatic affirmation that this classical music « does indeed » give delight and one should banish the « music of Zheng and Wei ». Li Shimin began his career as a tough northern general ; no doubt earlier in his life he would have had ample occasion to hear the rousing popular music that contemporaries would have called « the music of Zheng and Wei ». Now, playing the role of Confucian emperor, he must learn to love a music that was probably, by comparison to popular music, immensely boring. Another, more problematic musical performance will follow later in the day.

V

On a fine day I pursue relaxed inclinations,
the palace park is truly full of marvels.
The form of the bridge leads over the Milky Way,
the thrust of a cliff touches the steeps of cloud.
Mist and colored haze shift from shadow to sunlight,
flowers and birds are scattered here and there.
How can letting one's carriage tracks go compare to this,
and enjoying Alabaster Pool ten thousand leagues away ⁹?

VI

Flying carriage awnings leave flowering gardens,
 magnolia oars roam by azure isles.
 Between the duckweed sun-sparkle is cast in confusion,
 from the lotus a scented breeze arises.
 Cassia paddles fill mid-stream,
 songs set to strings shake the long hilly isles.
 Why require songs by the River Fen ? –
 here and now is a place for a merry feast ¹⁰.

VII

With the setting sun the paired watchtowers dim,
 as my coach returns, dusk falls on the palace compound.
 Trails of mists scatter in the first sapphire night sky,
 then the glistening moon makes its light white silk clear.
 Lifting the drapes, I amuse myself with books and zither,
 the open balcony draws cloud and fog.
 The River of Stars sinking makes the tiered kiosks gleam,
 and a clear breeze shakes the jade trees.

The three poems that follow the performance of classical music describe an imperial outing in the park and the emperor's return to a quiet evening. In each case poetry serves to make small-scale world beautiful, so that Li Shimin can affirm its adequacy and that he does not need to « go too far » as did those rulers of olden times, King Mu and Emperor Wu. The « jade trees » with which the seventh poem ends, are supposedly ash trees, but their presence in his vision and in his palace must call to mind the danger that lurks for all second-generation princes of recent times.

« Jade trees » (*yushu*) must recall « On Jade Trees, Flowers in the Rear Courtyard » (*Yushu houting hua*), the song composed by Chen Shubao (r. 582-89), the doomed last emperor of the Chen Dynasty, whose fate was still recent memory. Chen Shubao certainly « went too far » not by traveling to distant places but by indulging himself in the sensual entertainments of his palace, feasting and enjoying his palace ladies – thus neglecting precisely those « critical tasks » of government to which Li Shimin has assiduously attended. It was that life of pleasure, overflowing the boundaries of « surplus time » that was supposedly embodied in this song. And the story went that when courtiers heard that song being performed, they wept, knowing that the dynasty would not last long. The appearance of « jade trees » is fitting here to lead into the next two poems, concerning feasting and the dances performed by palace ladies.

VIII

Such joy and pleasure will be hard to find again,
 good times are truly to be treasured.
 Jadelike ale brims over the cloudy beakers,
 aromatic morsels are arrayed on finely-wrought mats.
 A thousand flagons are fitting for Yao and Yu,
 all beasts move in harmony with stone and metal [chimes] ¹¹.
 Achieving my aims, I treasure time fleeting,
 forgetting cares, I think foot-wide jade disks to be of little consequence ¹².

IX

At Jianzhang Palace, an evening of revels,
 two times eight, and all beguiling ¹³.
 Figured lace in Zhaoyang Hall,
 redolent by the tortoiseshell mats.
 Pendants shift, at that moment stars stir ;
 fans hide [faces], the moon newly full.
 Do not struggle to climb Hanging Garden –
 one faces goddesses and immortals right here ¹⁴.

The eighth and ninth poems bring the stages of the day's enjoyment to a crisis. The feast poem goes as feast poems had since the songs from the *Classic of Poetry* quoted earlier : enjoy the moment for it will not come again. The feast, with its music that sets even the animals dancing, passes into the dances of the palace ladies, whose beguiling motions absorb the imperial attention. Again he rejects wonders far away for those close at hand, but in this case with a slight, but significant twist. In this case it is not the more moderate pleasures of his immediate surroundings that make ancient extravagances unnecessary ; now the goddesses and immortals of Hanging Garden are right before him. And the imperial trajectory to indulgence begs a check.

X

As I here experience the utmost roaming and observing,
 I grow abstracted in long and solitary speculation.
 Unrolling a scroll, I peruse the traces of those before me,
 reflecting on myself, I pursue what is past.
 I view the austerity of the thatched roof in antiquity,
 then observe my extensive balustrades and halls now.
 The Way of Man hates the peril of loftiness,
 the dispassionate heart abstains from fullness and excess.
 Bearing Heaven's [Charge] I will do my utmost to be sincere and respectful,

presiding over the folk, I will long for gracious nurture.
 Accepting the good, I will examine loyal criticism,
 making clear the statutes, I will show caution in punishments and rewards.
 The « six and five » are truly hard to continue ;
 the « four and three » are not easy to aspire to ¹⁵.
 I await the broad application of the Pure Civilizing Transformation,
 and then I will have successor echoes on Yunyun and Tingting Mountains ¹⁶.

Confucius suggested that after serious ethical concerns one might « roam » (*you*) in the arts ; in his interval of « surplus time », Li Shimin has roamed and observed to the « utmost », or at least to a margin that casts him back on reflection. Reflection compares his splendor to the simplicity of ancient monarchs, which in turns teaches him to draw back from the margin of excess. The set ends with a recoil from the trajectory to indulgence, offering a series of vows and hopes to be a worthy ruler.

Li Shimin's « The Imperial Capital » is hardly a highpoint of Tang poetry, but it does dramatize imperial anxiety. Through these poems and numerous public encounters, Li Shimin staged imperial self-control and his openness to good counsel. The dynasty survived its second generation. Later rulers, however, lacked Li Shimin's sharp sense to publicize their restraint. Rulers who feasted in the enclosure of their pleasure palaces easily gave rise to the public suspicion that they were « going too far ».

In December of 755, over a century after Li Shimin composed the set of poems above, Du Fu set out from the capital in the predawn darkness to visit his family in Fengxian to the north of the capital. The times seemed troubled. From various public displays and gossip in the palace, the emperor Li Longji, later called by his temple name Xuanzong, apparently doted on his consort Yang Yuhuan, whose cousin, Yang Guozhong held the post of chief minister. Other members of the Yang family, both male and female, had prominent places in the government and harem. Yang Guozhong was, moreover, engaged in a personal feud with the general in charge of the northeastern command, An Lushan. Around dawn Du Fu passed by the imperial pleasure palace on Mount Li, whose hot springs afforded a measure of comfort to the imperial party in the dead of winter.

At daybreak I passed by Mount Li,
 the royal couch lay on its towering height.
 Ill-omened auras stuffed the cold sky,
 as I tramped along slippery valley slopes.
 Vapors surged swelling from Jasper Pool,
 where the royal guardsmen rub and clack.
 There lord and courtiers linger in pleasures,
 music stirs, thundering through empty space.
 All granted baths there have long hat ribbons,
 no short tunics join in their feasts.
 Yet the silk bolts apportioned in the royal court

came first from the homes of poor women.
 Whips flogged their menfolk,
 gathering taxes to present to the palace.
 His Majesty's gracious gifts of baskets to courtiers
 are in fact to bring life to the principalities.
 If the courtiers disregard perfect government,
 it is not that our prince throws these things away.
 Many officers are now filling the court,
 it is fitting that kindly men tremble.
 What's more, I've heard golden plate of the Household
 is now all in the homes of the Marriage Kin.
 In the midst of halls goddesses dance,
 diaphanous mists strewn over marble flesh.
 Cloaks of sable warm the guests,
 moving notes of flutes follow clear zithers.
 Guests are urged to taste camel-hoof soup,
 frosty oranges weigh upon sweet tangerines.
 Crimson gates reek with meat and ale,
 while on the streets, bones of the frozen dead.
 Splendor and privation, a mere foot apart,
 so upsetting it is hard to recount further.
 From « Going From the Capital to Fengxian County, Singing My Feelings »

Surrounded by evil omens and the steady tramp of the imperial guard, the emperor, his presence metonymically indicated by the « royal couch », takes his pleasure with his courtiers. Du Fu seems to hear distant music as he passes by, music he would take to as a sign of nightlong revelry.

Imperial infatuation is favoritism (*si*), by which the emperor's wealth and power leak away into the homes of the « Marriage Kin », in this case the Yangs. They too enjoy heedless pleasures behind their crimson gates, while outside is a suffering population, bled dry to provide the luxuries consumed within, with music and dancing women in diaphanous fabric, like goddesses. We have encountered this before : it was at this point at which Song Yu had King Xiang of Chu send the revelers home and at which Li Shimin, Xuanzong's ancestor, checked himself by moral self-reflection. But Xuanzong seems to have crossed the limit of proper measure, with music that plays on into the dawn.

At this point we should check our own trajectory. How does Du Fu know this ? It is certainly because this is the gossip around Chang'an. I'm sure such parties may have been described by those who were guests. Tales of Xuanzong's fanciful extravagances became a favorite topic after An Lushan's rebellion toppled him from his throne. Here, in a poem from before the great rebellion, we have Du Fu bearing witness to Xuanzong's excess (though who can say how much of this was written in 755 and how much in the revisions of his poetry in his later years). There are, no doubt, some grains

of truth in the stories – Xuanzong made a great show of his power and prestige, in contrast to Taizong (Li Shimin) who made a show of his restraint. But these stories, like all stories of extravagance and intrigue behind the walls of palaces, had a life of their own. People love « sad stories of the deaths of kings », and imagine what glorious excesses led to their demise.

How did Xuanzong slip from being the dynasty's most successful monarch to being the instrument of its undoing ? What would the popular account have us believe ? We can anticipate the answer : a relaxation of restraint, a failure to enclose surplus time, a desire to sleep late.

During the Kaiyuan Reign the Constellation of the Stair showed a world at peace, and there were no problems in this sea-girt world. Xuanzong had been on the throne for long years, and he had grown weary of dining late and robing in the night. He deputed matters of governance both large and small to the Grand Counselor of the Left, and increasingly lived in seclusion and gave himself to excursions and feasts.

Thus begins Chen Hong's « Account for the Song of Lasting Pain » from the early ninth century, which tells of the love between Xuanzong and Yang Yuhuan, the Noble Consort (*guifei*). Some sympathy for Xuanzong is called for here. In the years just before the An Lushan Rebellion (the Tianbao Reign rather than the Kaiyuan), Xuanzong had been on the throne for over forty years. For more than forty years he had to preside over dawn court, which required that he get up at around three in the morning to be properly fitted out in his regalia. This could easily wear a man down, particular one getting on into old age. If, at the same time, he was dining late, he must have accumulated a staggering debt to sleep. Should, however, a prince fail to appear at dawn court, the popular suspicion was not that an old man might grow weary of getting up in the middle of the night, but rather that he must be worn out from a night of sexual excess, which would have been preceded by drinking, feasting, and the dance.

The prince who checks himself becomes famous and successful ; the prince who relaxes his guard and gives himself to pleasure pays the price of losing his empire. This is a homily for princes, and one might object that it was different for common folk – they could be called to pleasure easily, to immerse themselves in the feast and when darkness came, « to go roaming, candle in hand ». We do find such calls in the *yuefu* songs and « old poems » from the Eastern Han, such as the feast song « West Gate » :

Out West Gate
I walked in thought :
if we don't take pleasure today,
what day are we waiting for ? –
the taking of our pleasure
must come at its due time :

why should we stay in dark brooding
awaiting the moment to come again ?

Drink the strong wine,
broil the fat ox,
call to the one your heart loves –
and in this way be sorrow-free.
Man's life lasts not a hundred years,
he has worry enough for a thousand :
the daylight so short, the night too long –
so why not go roaming, candle in hand ?

I am not the undying Qiao the Prince
nor can I expect his count of years.
I am not the undying Qiao the Prince
nor can I expect his count of years.
A man's life is not of metal or stone
how can one expect to live a full span ?
If you're greedy for goods and grudge expense,
you'll end up a laughingstock in later days.

But those were simpler times. As we enter the ninth century the intensity of absorption in pleasure that ruined princes came to be shared by the poets as well. It was against such a threat of absorption in desire that blander Neo-Confucian joys were eventually proposed. One function of the imperial harem was to lure the emperor to spread his attentions widely and prevent passion for one woman, a « favoritism » (*si*) that either consumed imperial power or permitted it to leak out to her family. This was precisely what happened to Xuanzong, as Bai Juyi (772-846) describes in the « Song of Lasting Pain » :

In the harems there were beauties,
three thousand there were in all,
but the love that was due to three thousand
was spent on one body alone.

It is easy to see how such a desire for passionate absorption could be shared by prince and subject alike. For Li Shangyin (c. 813-c. 858) it is often a passionate absorption in the moment of performance, of song or dance. Thus he concludes « Yan Terrace : Autumn » :

Her singing lips, for a whole lifetime,
watched, holding back tears (rain) ;
too bad that the sweet fragrance
grows old within the hand.

This represents a strangely visual experience of song, as if trying to see into the singer and the heart that sings those words, a lifetime spent with tear-filled eyes focused on the singer's lips. In the first « Walls of Emerald » Li Shangyin concludes with a similar wish to watch a dancer, whose lightness of motion, like that of the famous Han consort Zhao Feiyan (Flying Swallow), is kept from blowing away by a crystal bowl held over her :

If only that pearl of morning
would stay both bright and still,
I would spend a whole lifetime facing
the bowl of crystal.

These are powerful images of desire for absorption in performance, but they are both linked to figures of impossibility. The eyes may fix on her lips for a lifetime, but the hand that reaches across that space and touches picks up a fragrance that ages in the hand. And the « pearl of morning », the sun, will not stay fixed ; time will not stop ; and the lifetime spent watching the dance, made unreachable by the crystal bowl, cannot occur.

In this context we might consider one of Li Shangyin's most famous poems, one of a type scattered through his collected works entitled *Wuti*, literally « without title », but in the context of Chinese poetics where poems must have titles, best translated as « Left Untitled, » suggesting a circumstance of composition too private or too problematic to name.

Li Shangyin, Left Untitled

Last night's stars,
last night's wind,

the western side of the painted mansion,
east of the cassia hall.

For bodies, no wings in paired flight
of particolored phoenixes ;

for hearts, one point running through
the magic rhino horn.

The hook passed across the table,
the springtime ale warm,

divided in teams, guessing what was covered,
the waxen lamp shone red.

Alas that I heed the drumbeat
and go off to my official duties,

galloping my horse to Orchid Terrace,
the like of a rolling tumbleweed.

Song Yu assured the King of Chu that in his « surplus time » he could indulge in viewing the dance. When the interval of the performance was over, the king could end the performance and send his guests home. For Li Shangyin as well there is a sudden sound that puts a term on the night's pleasures, the dawn drum that makes him go off to his official duties.

The poem is an erotic one, and just as for the audience watching the sensual dances of the king of Chu's court, it is an unconsummated eroticism. It is neither the full pleasure of the senses nor is it the peculiar distanced of engagement and disengaged appreciation of the aesthetic tradition that follows from Kant. The speaker here is « interested », but the forces that restrain him are equal to the forces that draw him on, so that he is held in a stasis of attention, like a lifetime spent watching singing lips, that needs the outside call of the drum to break him free. The balance of lure and restraint is not unlike the double action of « music and rites », but it is far from some satisfying « proper measure ». The experience of this interval of night is not truly bounded ; as it seems that the speaker's rapt attention would have continued had it not been interrupted by the drum, so he returns to the experience in memory and the poem. As the first line tells us, this is not a poem of direct experience, but of remembered experience.

The first couplet is a setting, but a setting of a peculiar sort, invoking a « last night » that locates the time of the poem on an indefinite day looking back to the night before. Chinese poems, in their titles and texts, often locate the occasion very precisely. This poem too begins by gesturing towards a particular occasion, but one that we can never know and can scarcely even guess. In formal terms it points to knowledge of a particular circumstance, but withholds that knowledge – as if the poet said to us : « I have a very important secret, but I'm not going to tell you. » Presumably there is another who alone would fully share the knowledge that the poem obliquely refers to – even if she (?) read it years later. Thus in its opening couplet the poem creates a world of privacy, while by circulating the poem among his friends and including it in his collected poems, he calls the attention of others to the existence of a privacy from which they are excluded.

In the second couplet we learn that bodies were unable to do something together, while hearts « communicated » (the *tong*, translated as « running through » in reference to the core of the rhino horn, also means « to communicate » or « to have sexual relations » and in the phrase *tongxin*, « communicate hearts » often refers to an understanding between lovers). One scarcely needs the possibility raised by commentators that rhino horn was an aphrodisiac. The soft core (a « point » in cross-section) that runs through the horn is a fine figure for a « line » of secret commu-

nication – phallic in poetic imagination, if not in realized fact. The mating flight of phoenixes is likewise called forth as a speculative possibility even in being denied.

The simultaneity of union and separation is displaced into games, whether played by women and men together or played by the women and watched by the man. « Pass-the-hook » was a drinking game, and as in most Chinese drinking games, the loser paid a forfeit by drinking a measure of ale. The game in which something is « passed across the table » (*gezuo*, « seated divided ») restaged the scene of communication and separation, while the spring ale, drunk by the looser, warms the blood and loosens restraint.

« Guess-what-is-covered » was another game whose basic elements are obvious from the title, as is the double meaning. Again the players are « divided in teams » ; not only is this a figure of separation, the meaning for our particular players was shared, while ostensibly excluding the other members of the teams.

The activities of the evening can, for the lovers, only restage again and again the mutual desire and separation : there can be neither advance nor retreat, only repetition, until the drumbeat breaks the spell. Some attention is due to the figure of the *peng*, the wind-blown plant conveniently translated as « tumbleweed » ; it is carried helplessly by the wind, broken from its roots, and it is the poet's claim that he could not help leaving. The implication is that he wanted that tense stasis of the night to continue on. And indeed, beginning the poem « Last night's stars », he tells us that after he reaches the office he goes back to repeat and continue the interval in memory.

I hope it has escaped no one's attention that the poetic mode of this piece is yet another repetition, this one directed to readers : we are at once drawn in and kept away, « guessing what is covered ».

If ordinary lovers are frustrated in their desires, what then of those princes who indulged themselves, « went too far » and paid the price of the ruin of their kingdoms. It is hardly surprising that Li Shangyin was fascinated by such rulers, returning to them again and again in his poetry. It is easy and commonplace to read such poems as Li passing negative judgment on their excesses. Yet Li outlines the lure so clearly and persuasively that we can never be sure which side he is on.

One of Li Shangyin's favorite dissolute princes was the Last Ruler of the Northern Qi, whose favorite consort was Feng Xiaolian, « Little Love. » Legend has it that when the North Zhou army invaded the Northern Qi and took the city of Pingyang, routing the Qi army, a report of the crisis was sent to the Last Ruler, who was hunting. The Last Ruler was about to return, when Little Love asked that they hunt one more round. The Last Ruler agreed. Two months later the Northern Zhou army took the Northern Qi capital Jinyang.

Several other allusions might help explain these poems. A great beauty was known as a « toppler of kingdoms » and a « toppler of cities. » When his ruler Fucha heeded slanderers, the ancient minister Wu Zixu prophesied that thorns and brambles would grow in his palaces.

Li Shangyin, The Northern Qi

I.

One smile toppled it,
the kingdom then was lost,
why bother about thorns and brambles
and only then feel pain ?
On the night that Little Love's white body
lay stretched before him,
we already had news that the Zhou army
had entered Jinyang.

II.

I know that an artful smile is the match
for myriad careful cautions,
a city-toppling beauty is best
when wearing a soldier's garb.
Jinyang has already fallen,
don't worry about what's past –
she begs her lord and ruler
to hunt another round ¹⁷.

The first poem of the pair opposes the historian's understanding of consequences with the immediacy of Little Love's smile and her bare body. The first line is ambiguous : perhaps she made the Last Ruler « fall for her » at which one knew that the kingdom would fall because of her. There is no need to wait, to let things play out ; an entire history is collapsed into that single moment when his eyes look at her body. It is from this that the poem derives its power : a large, habitual narrative of the fall of dynasties is set in the balance against the suspension of time as the ruler's eyes focus on Little Love's body, and the intensity of that gaze weighs more.

In the second we have the figure of warfare. « Match » *di*, is also « be the enemy of ». The « myriad careful cautions » constitute the political savvy of a ruler ; the artful smile of the beauty is their opponent and can best them. Thus the beauty is best in uniform, as Little Love would have been on the hunt.

Perhaps we should take the *di*, the competitive « matching » and outdoing, in some absolute sense. The vision of the body and the panache of her plea to continue the hunt are set against the fall of a kingdom and found to be stronger lures. There is something here more profound than the opposition between a foolish, besotted ruler and wise moralists, ministers and historians, who know better. The latter, along with good self-denying rulers like Li Shimin, live with « myriad careful cautions ». Every action is a chain of consequences. Of equal, and obviously greater power is the invitation to absorption in the present moment ; as Little Love says : « don't worry about what's past » – or what is to come. The lure of absorption in the pleasures of the body or thrill of the hunt is a way out of a life of « myriad careful cautions ».

When the dawn drum beat and called Li Shangyin to his office, he left. But he could also, with contempt and admiration, imagine of those princes who could forget everything for the pleasure of the moment.

NOTES

1. When we reach the drama of Tang Xianzu toward the end of the sixteenth century, dream is clearly being used as a sanctioned interval of excess. In « Peony Pavilion » in dream and as a ghost Du Liniang is permitted sexual license. Half of that long play, however, is devoted to resolving her liaison in the public world of family and society. The passions of dream do here cause problems in the social world.
2. This was an institution established by Wei Mingdi to foster the study of letters. Li Shimin is here referring to the corresponding institution in the Tang.
3. The « Dragon Diagram » is the « River Diagram » (*He tu*), an arrangement of the eight trigrams which was said to have appeared on a dragon that came out of the Yellow River during the reign of the Sage-King Fuxi. Here the « Dragon Diagram » stands for rare texts.
4. Golden straps were used to bind the jade tablets used in the Feng and Shan ceremonies. « Phoenix [seal] script » plays on the legendary etiology of writing in observation of the tracks of birds.
5. Leather was sometimes used to bind together bamboo slips used in books through the Western Han.
6. The *Soushen ji* contains a story of the famous archer Geng Lei, who boasted to the King of Wei that he could bring down a bird without using an arrow when he pulled and released his bow. He made good on his boast when a wild goose flew overhead. Apparently the wild goose expired from alarm, knowing that it would have been hit.
7. In an anecdote linked to the Geng Lei anecdote in *Soushen ji*, the King of Chu had his best archers try to shoot a white gibbon discovered in the king's park. The gibbon caught the arrows and laughed at the archers. But when the King summoned the famous archer Yang Yiji, the gibbon clasped a tree and howled as soon as Yang touched his bow.
8. The officials.
9. Alabaster Pool was where the Queen Mother of the West feasted the far-travelling King Mu of Zhou. It was a standard figure for excesses of various kinds : « going too far, » seeking immortality, sensual delight. Here Li Shimin affirms the superiority of an excursion in his own palace parks in Chang'an.
10. This refers to a famous occasion when Emperor Wu of the Han was crossing the River Fen, feasting and with music playing,
11. This refers to a story in the *Shujing* that when Kui had music played for the Sage-King Shun, each kind of animal danced.
12. This couplet rephrases an aphorism in the *Huainanzi* : « Thus the sages did not esteem a foot-wide jade disk, but valued the passing moment, for time is hard to get and easy to lose. »

13. « Two times eight » refers to the dance formations of the palace ladies.
14. Hanging Garden was a section of the legendary Kunlun Mountains far in the west, an abode of immortals.
15. The « six and four » refer to legendary musical compositions of high antiquity. The « four and three » are the four dynasties of high antiquity and the three founding kings : Yu, Tang, and Wen.
16. Yunyun and Tingting were two small peaks in the Taishan Range, where in antiquity the Feng and Shan ceremonies were held.
17. Here I concur with Zhou Zhenfu in *Li Shangyin xuanji* (Shanghai, 1986), p. 298, that Jinyang here is a mistake for Pingyang, the city that actually fell while the Last Ruler was hunting.

Glossaire

<i>Chuci</i>	楚辭
<i>ji</i>	妓
<i>ci</i>	詞
<i>le</i>	樂
<i>Yueji</i>	樂記
<i>Liji</i>	禮記
<i>qing</i>	情
<i>jie</i>	節
<i>fu</i>	賦
<i>Wu fu</i>	舞賦
Fu Yi	傅毅
Song Yu	宋玉
Li Shimin	李世民
Taizong	太宗
<i>you yu yi</i>	遊於藝
<i>yi</i> “arts”	藝
<i>wen</i>	文
<i>yushu</i>	玉樹
<i>Yushu houting hua</i>	玉樹後庭花
Chen Shubao	陳叔寶
Du Fu	杜甫
<i>si</i> “favoritism”	私
Chen Hong	陳鴻
<i>guifei</i>	貴妃
<i>yuefu</i>	樂府
Bai Juyi	白居易
Li Shangyin	李商隱
<i>Wuti</i>	無題
<i>tongxin</i>	通心
<i>tong</i>	通
<i>gezuo</i>	隔座
<i>peng</i>	蓬
<i>di</i>	敵