

Song of Everlasting Regret

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During those somber years when the Roman Empire was crumbling down and Europe was stumbling towards the Dark Ages, China was ruled by the emperors of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). This was a golden era in China. The land of the Tang, rich and open-minded, attracted from all over the world merchants whose caravans carved out a “Silk Road” across the deserts and mountains. Among the numerous Tang artists and poets who produced some of China’s finest paintings and poetry, it was Bai Ju-Yi who best described the love story between Yang Yu-Huan and the Bright Emperor (Tang Ming Huang) in the famous poem “Song of Everlasting Regret”.

The Bright Emperor was the seventh Tang emperor who ruled in the capital Chang-An, the city of Long-lasting Calm and Safety, today’s Xi An. Even in his childhood, Li Long-Ji, as he was originally named, was good-looking and intelligent, and already musically talented. He became emperor when barely 28 years old, taking on the imperial name of Tang Xuan-Zong. Soon, with the help of hand-picked capable advisors, he led China into an unheard-of powerful new era of prosperity.

After twenty-four years of tireless work ruling his realm, Xuan-Zong was burning out and feeling weary. He was now turning 52, and the empire was thriving. There was not much left for him to change or improve so he started leaving more and more of the day-to-day administrative duties to his trusted ministers and officials.

All Tang emperors marry one empress and numerous more wives, to ensure the birth of many princes, out of whom only one would become the next emperor. Xuan-Zong was no exception. Apart from Empress Wang, there were eight ranks of palace ladies starting with the lowliest Selected Ladies, moving up to the Ladies of His Majesty, the Ladies of Treasure, the Ladies of Talent, the Ladies of Beauty, the Handsome Fair Ones, and the Nine Concubines all the way to the highest ranking Consorts. Wives, concubines and palace ladies, altogether there were about three thousand women he could pick from on a daily basis. Despite all his wives, he hadn’t found true love and happiness. In 737 AD, his favorite consort passed away. Xuan-Zong became lonelier than ever.

An emperor cannot stay depressed for long for he has important duties to perform. Some of the palace advisers came up with a bright idea. Bring in someone lively, pretty and charming to entertain him and smart enough to perk up his spirits. Everyone agreed that the most beautiful lady in the land was Yang Yu-Huan (Jade Bracelet), the wife of Prince Shou, one of the emperor's 23 sons.

An unparalleled beauty, Yu-Huan was then barely 18 years of age. Born in the aristocratic Yang family of Shanxi and orphaned in her childhood, she had been raised in her uncle's household where she learned singing, dancing and playing the *pipa*, the Chinese lute. By the time she had reached marriageable age, that is, around 14 or 15, she had been selected to marry Prince Shou.

Yu-Huan accepted the mission. The minute Xuan-Zong saw her, he was struck by her loveliness and enchanted by her intelligent conversation and deep empathy. When she sang and danced for him, he could not take his eyes off her.

As Yu-Huan and Xuan-Zong met more and more often, they enjoyed each other's company, playing musical instruments and composing poems and songs together. Watching him smile happily, she realized she had succeeded in helping him emerge from his melancholy. However, his behavior toward her was far from being that of a father-in-law.

The Bright Emperor had finally fallen in love. Yet what a hopeless love it turned out to be!

Following the advice of his eunuch Gao Li-Shi, Xuan-Zong tried to unravel the impossible situation. In a thinly disguised move, the emperor declared that he wished to gather blessings for his deceased mother by having a member of the royal family serve her altar and pray for her. He issued a royal edict ordering Yu-Huan to leave her husband and become a Taoist nun. In exchange, he ordered the daughter of a high official to marry Prince Shou.

What choice did she have in her own destiny? No one ever dared disobey an imperial edict for that would mean the death penalty. Leaving behind husband, palace, silks and jewels, Yu-Huan shaved her head, entered the convent, and took on the tonsured name of Tai-Zhen. For eight years, she prayed and meditated, recited mantras and fasted. Perhaps, she found peace there.

In the meantime, Xuan-Zong never forgot her. Eventually, her term of service expired. He came to the nunnery to meet her. Despite her grey linen robes and shaved head, she was just as attractive as ever. He begged her: "Yu-Huan, you must leave here and come to the palace. I will marry you!"

“Your Imperial Majesty,” replied she steadily, “I am Tai-Zhen. Yu-Huan does not exist anymore. I beg you to respect this religious place. Pray, leave, since I have no wish to return to a life of luxury and pleasure.”

But it takes more than convent rules to deter a persistent love-struck emperor. What changed Yu-Huan’s mind? Did she realize that marrying into power was the way to succeed in her world? Or was she finally touched by the emperor’s devotion? Whatever the reason, she was eventually persuaded to leave the Taoist order and move into the imperial palace as Xuan-Zong’s newest wife. He could not make her his empress since the current one was still alive, so he created a new title, the highest order of Consort: “*Gui-Fei*” or Noble Consort. From then on, she became known as Yang Gui-Fei.

At 26, Yang Gui-Fei had fully blossomed, and was at the height of her beauty. She had a gorgeous curvy figure, something rare among the Chinese. Not only so, she favored a more natural type of look, shunning the mercury- and lead-laden cosmetic products of the time. While Xuan-Zong became totally mesmerized by her charms and her candid character, women all over the empire tried to imitate Yang Gui-Fei’s style of hair and clothing. Soon, voluptuous body types replaced the previous willowy standard of beauty.

Xuan-Zong stopped visiting his other wives and only spent time with Yang Gui-Fei. Numerous legends grew around her. Once, as she was strolling through the palace gardens, she touched a mimosa. At once, the plant shut its leaves and the flower curled up. All the maids gasped: “Even flowers feel ashamed of their own beauty since they cannot compare to her!” Gossip spread the story, and since then, Yang Gui-Fei became known as “the beauty from whom flowers shy away”.

Xuan-Zong wanted to give Yang Gui-Fei all that he could in his power. He would do anything to get a smile out of her. He lavished her with jewelry and silks. Seven hundred weavers were ordered to create special fabrics for her robes. Once, she tasted some lychees and exclaimed that they were absolutely delicious. Immediately, the emperor gave orders to have fresh lychees brought daily to the palace for Yang Gui-Fei.

Now, lychees grow in southeast China, near the coast, while Chang-An is located a thousand miles away, far inland. So, a route dotted with stations was established, and riders carrying baskets of lychees would whip their horses, galloping at full speed. At each station, the baskets would be handed over to a fresh rider and horse. Thus, Yang Gui-Fei was able to enjoy her lychees fresh from the tree each day, inspiring the famous poet Tu Fu to write: “Riding in a cloud of red dust, just so the Consort might smile”.

However, unknown to her, the lychee riders, in their efforts to obey strict royal orders to gallop as fast as possible, had now and then trampled over children or elderly people who could not step out of their way quickly enough.

Since Yang Gui-Fei loved taking baths, Xuan-Zong ordered a splendid marble bath built especially for her at the Hua Qing hot springs. In the begonia shaped pool, Yang Gui-Fei soaked in warm water sprouting from the center of the bath, with tree peony bark and mulberry leaves sprinkled all around her. She would then lie face down on a long stone slab and have her attendants slap her lightly all over to improve her blood circulation.

Yang Gui-Fei was intelligent but outspoken. She had a hard time keeping to palace etiquette whenever she wanted to speak her mind. After three years of visiting only Yang Gui-Fei's inner palace, Xuan-Zong was given by devious means a sad poem written by Consort Mei, reminiscing the bygone days when both had shared poems and music. Filled with remorse, Xuan Zong visited her quarters and stayed the night. When she heard this news, Yang Gui-Fei started sobbing. Yes, she knew that he legally had many other wives, yet had he not sworn to her that he loved only her? That he would spend the rest of his life with only her? The next thing she knew, some of the other concubines and consorts also tried attracting his attention with dances and songs, sometimes lying in wait around bushes or columns to meet him "accidentally". When Xuan-Zong did respond to their flirtation, Yang Gui-Fei made a huge fuss, cried bitterly and confronted the emperor.

No one ever dared quarrel with an emperor, since even a mild disagreement might mean losing one's head. This was too much. The Bright Emperor felt ridiculous at having to justify to anyone which of his wives he chose to spend the night with. He ordered her to be expelled from the palace and sent back to her family. However, he missed her so much that he ordered her back to the palace barely a day later.

To redeem himself, Xuan-Zong then decided to reward Yang Gui-Fei's family. He brought her three sisters to the palace, and ordained their marriages to highly placed officials. He also brought her uncle's son Yang Guo-Zhong to court, and made him a minister. Unfortunately, Yang Guo-Zhong was unscrupulous and loved accepting bribes. He soon started giving away important government positions to people who gave him expensive gifts, with no attention to qualifications and ability.

Things seemed to go downhill from then on. Once more, she offended the emperor with an angry jealous outburst and was consequently kicked out of the palace and sent back to her uncle's house. This time, the days passed and Yu-Huan realized how much she had come to love him and how much she

missed him. When Xuan-Zong had exquisite dishes from the imperial kitchen sent to her, she tearfully returned them untouched with the message that she had resolved to leave the palace forever. Together with the letter was a lock of her hair, wet with her tears. This prompted the Bright Emperor to immediately order her return.

Popular opinion grew gradually more and more negative when Yang Gui-Fei “adopted” a barbarian general by the name of An Lu-Shan as her son. General An was a military governor of Turkic origin. Although 28 years older than Yu-Huan, he called her “mother” and entertained her with lively dances from the western frontiers despite his famously large potbelly “that hung down to his knees”. The emperor himself found General An highly amusing and allowed him free entry to the palace at any time.

As General An gained more power and imperial favor, a strong rivalry developed between him and Yang Guo-Zhong, the unscrupulous prime minister who was Yang Gui-Fei’s cousin. Things came to a boil and finally exploded into what came to be known as the An Lu-Shan Rebellion, a civil war that lasted eight years and killed up to 36 million people.

In the winter of 755 AD, General An launched his rebellion, claiming its goal was to march on Chang-An to remove Yang. He crossed the Yellow River and on the Lunar New Year of 756 AD, in the city of Luoyang, An Lu-Shan declared himself Emperor of the state of Yan. By June, the rebel army approached the capital. The city of Long-lasting Calm and Safety was safe no more.

Secretly, so the common people would not suspect anything, the emperor fled south west toward Chengdu under the protection of the imperial guards, with only Yang Gui-Fei, her family and his own immediate relatives. On July 15, after a month of trekking through rugged countryside, the refugees reached Ma-Wei Slope, a small town used as a courier station.

The exhausted and angry imperial guards rebelled, declaring that they would go not one step further until the root cause of the civil war was removed. The guards fell upon Yang Guo-Zhong and massacred him as well as Yang Gui-Fei’s sisters, the Ladies of Han, Guo and Qin. They then marched toward the tent where the emperor-on-the-run slept. The troops called out Xuan-Zong. They denounced the corrupt Yang Guo-Zhong as the main guilty party, and Yang Gui-Fei as the origin of the turmoil in the land.

Facing the military crowd riotously demanding Yang Gui-Fei’s death, Xuan-Zong tried to argue that she knew nothing of politics and had no part in the intrigues at court, but in vain. He finally stopped speaking. He raised his hand to quiet the mob. In tears, he ordered his beloved’s death.

It was Gao Li-Shi, the faithful eunuch, who came to Yang Gui-Fei bearing a tray with a folded white silk sash, a few yards long. To the end, she remained royal and demure. She knew what to do. She threw the glistening silk sash over a branch of the pear tree growing behind the Buddhist temple where she had taken refuge. She knotted the silk into a loop and stepped upon a stool. Without a word of complaint, she left this world. She was 38 years old.

One month later, Xuan-Zong's son Li Heng was declared emperor with the title of Su-Zong in the temporary capital Lingwu.

Six months later, An Lu-Shan was assassinated by his own eunuch. Thus ended the state of Yan.

Though Xuan-Zong returned eventually to Chang-An, he was now a broken man. He gave himself the title of Emperor Emeritus, and retired from active government, leaving Su-Zong to rule the empire. Five years after Yang Gui-Fei's death, he followed her to the grave.

Yang Gui-Fei would come to be known as the Most Beautiful Woman of the Tang Dynasty, and one of the Four Beauties of Ancient China.