

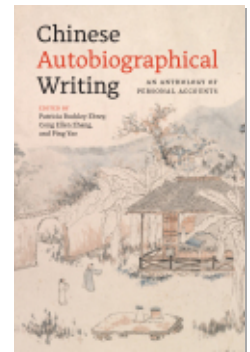


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## 7. An Abducted Woman on Returning Home: Poems by Cai Yan

□□ (ca. 177–ca. 249)



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## AN ABDUCTED WOMAN ON RETURNING HOME

Poems by Cai Yan 蔡琰 (ca. 177–ca. 249)

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*The daughter of a prominent family, forced to become the consort of a Xiongnu chief, tells of her experiences and describes her complex emotions on returning home without the sons she bore.*

Most writings by women that have been preserved from the early imperial period dwell on the hardships or frustrations they faced. Few, however, had as much to lament as Cai Yan, or Cai Wenji, as she was commonly known. The daughter of Cai Yong (132–192), one of the most distinguished Han dynasty scholars, she had a string of bad luck. Her father got caught up in factional struggles and died in prison. Her husband died early, and without children she returned to her natal home. As the Han fell into chaos, she was abducted first by followers of General Dong Zhuo (132–192) and later by armies of the Southern Xiongnu. She was forced to marry a commander of the Southern Xiongnu and gave birth to two sons during her twelve years as a captive. Cao Cao (155–220), the eventual victor of the civil wars and military dictator of northern China, was an admirer of Cai Yong. In 207, he paid a handsome ransom to the Xiongnu to redeem Cai Wenji, but she had

to leave her sons behind. Upon returning to the capital, Cao Cao arranged a marriage for her to a military official.

In the two poems below, Cai Wenji recounts in detail her experience and the emotional toll of captivity. The first poem was written in the pentasyllabic style, new during the Han dynasty, the second in the style of *The Songs of Chu* (Chu ci).

## Grief and Indignation

### POEM ONE

At the end of the Han, the court lost its power  
And Dong Zhuo upset the natural order.  
As his ambition was to kill the emperor,  
He first did away with the wise and good.  
Asserting his force, he moved the old capital  
And controlled his lord to strengthen himself.  
All through the world loyal troops arose  
And together vowed to quell this disaster.  
When Dong Zhuo's troops descended on the east,  
Their golden armor glistened in the sun.  
The people of the plain were weak and timid,  
The troops that came were ferocious barbarians!  
They plundered the fields, surrounded the cities,  
And wherever they went, conquered and destroyed.  
They killed and slaughtered, spared not a soul,  
Bodies and corpses propped up one against the other.  
From the flanks of their horses they hung men's heads,  
And behind them on their horses they sat the women.  
In this way they sped through Hangu Pass,  
On a westward journey so perilous and far!  
Looking back I only saw a distant haze,  
And my innards turned to rotten pulp.  
The people they abducted were in the thousands,  
But we were not allowed to stay together.  
At times flesh-and-blood relatives were reunited,  
Who would have liked to talk but did not dare.

If you displeased them even in the slightest way,  
They'd shout right out: "You dirty slaves.  
We really should just kill you off,  
Why should we even let you live!"  
How could I still have clung to life and fate?  
Their swearing and cursing was too much to bear.  
At other times we were whipped and beaten,  
All the bitter pains rained down on us at once.  
At dawn we set out, weeping and crying,  
At night we sat down, sadly moaning.  
One longed to die, but that was not allowed,  
One longed to live but that too could not be.  
Blue heaven up above, what was our sin  
That we should suffer this great calamity?

The border wilds are different from China,  
And their people's customs lack propriety.  
The places where they live are full of snow,  
And the Hun winds rise in summer and spring,  
Tugging at my robes in all directions,  
And filling my ears with their wailing sounds.  
Moved by the seasons, I recalled my parents,  
And my sad laments went on without end.  
Whenever guests would arrive from afar,  
That news would always give me great joy.  
But when I sought them out for tidings,  
They would never turn out to be from my home.  
Then out of the blue my constant wish was granted,  
As relatives showed up to take me home.  
So finally I was able to make my escape,  
But at the cost of abandoning my sons!

A bond of nature ties them to my heart,  
Once separated there could be no reunion.  
In life or death: forced forever apart.  
I could not bear to bid them farewell!  
My sons flung their arms around my neck,

Asking: "Mother, where are you going?  
The people are saying that our mother has to leave,  
And that you will never come back to us.  
Oh mother, you were always so kind and caring,  
How come you are now so cold and cruel?  
We still are children, not grown-up men,  
Can *it* really be you do not care?"  
When I saw this, my heart broke into pieces,  
And I felt as if I'd lost my mind, gone mad!  
I wept and cried and stroked them with my hands,  
And as I was about to depart, was filled with doubt.

The people who had been abducted with me,  
Came to see me off and say goodbye.  
Jealous that I alone could go home,  
Their sad laments tore at my heartstrings.  
Because of this the horses did not move,  
Because of this the wheels refused to turn.  
All those who watched heaved heavy sighs  
And we travelers choked back our sobs.

Going and going I deadened my feelings,  
The journey took us day by day further away.  
And so, on and on, the full three thousand miles:  
When would I ever meet with them again?  
Memories of the children born from my womb  
Completely tore me to pieces inside.  
Arriving home, I found I had no family,  
No relatives of any kind remained!  
The city had become a mountain forest,  
The courtyard was overgrown by thorns,  
And white bones, who knows of whom,  
Lay scattered around in the open field.  
Outside the gate no sound of human voices:  
Just the yelps and howls of dholes and wolves.  
Lonely I faced my solitary shadow,  
As I cried out in anguish, my heart was shattered.

I climbed to a high spot, and gazed into the distance,  
And my soul and spirit seemed to fly away.  
It was as if my life was over and done,  
And those around me had to comfort me.  
Because of them I forced myself to live,  
But even so, on whom could I rely?  
To my new husband I entrust my fate,  
I do my best to make an earnest effort.  
A victim of the wars, I lost my honor,  
And always fear that I will be discarded.  
How many years are in a human life?  
This pain will haunt me till my dying day!

#### POEM TWO

How poor my fate, alas, to meet such dismal times!  
My relatives were massacred and I alone survived.  
I was captured and abducted to beyond the western pass,  
The journey perilous and long to that barbarian land.  
Mountains and valleys stretched endlessly, the road went on and on,  
Lovingly I looked back east and heaved a heavy sigh.  
At night when I should have slept, I could not find rest,  
When hungry I should have eaten, but could not swallow a thing.  
Constantly awash in tears, my eyes were never dry.  
Weak in resolve, alas, I was afraid to die,  
And though I clung to life, I was dishonored and abased!  
Now those regions, alas, are far from the essence of yang,  
As yin's breath congeals, snow falls even in summer.  
The desert is darkened, alas, by clouds of dust,  
And its grasses and trees do not flower in spring.  
The people like beasts feed on rancid flesh,  
Their speech is gibberish, their faces unsightly.  
At the end of the year as the seasons pass by,  
The nights stretch endlessly behind the locked gates.  
Unable to sleep in my tent, I would get up,  
Ascend the barbarian hall, look out over the wide courtyard.  
Dark clouds would gather, obscuring moon and stars,

And the piercing north wind would coldly howl.  
At the sound of the barbarian reed pipe, the horses whinnied,  
And a lone goose returned, honking forlornly.  
The musicians arose and plucked their zithers,  
Their notes harmonized so sadly and clear.  
My heart spewed out its longings, my breast filled with rage  
How I longed to let it all out, but I feared to give offense,  
And as I suppressed my sad sobs, my tears soaked my collar.

As my relatives had come to fetch me, I had to go home,  
But setting out on this journey meant abandoning my children.  
My sons cried “Mother!” till their voices grew hoarse,  
I covered my ears as I could not bear to listen.  
Running they tried to cling to me, so alone and forlorn,  
They stumbled, got up again, their faces all bleeding!  
Looking back at them, I felt utterly shattered,  
My heart stunned, I fainted but did not die.

*Translated by Wilt Idema and Beata Grant*

SOURCE: Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 114–18.

### Further Reading

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