
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

K. B. Kepping

“THE AUTUMN WIND” BY HAN WU-DI IN THE MI-NIA (TANGUT)* TRANSLATION

In memory of my colleague and close friend Professor Marianna I. Nikitina

The love this woman had inspired in the sixth emperor of the Han dynasty, Wu-di (r. 140—87 B.C.), made her immortal as a symbol of passion that does not cease with death. According to Chinese sources [1], Li *furen* was a beauty and a perfect dancer. Her elder brother [2] Li Yuan-nian, a skilful singer and dancer, was Wu-di's favourite whose song about his sister's beauty, containing the lines —

“One glance would overthrow a city (Chin. *qing cheng*),
Two glances would overthrow a state (Chin. *qing guo*)”

— had the result that Wu-di took Li *furen* to his palace. She bore Wu-di a son, but passed away very young. Wu-di's grief over Li *furen*'s death was so great that he had her portrait be hung in the palace and even asked magicians to raise her spirit which appeared before him on a curtain as some vague shape of a beautiful woman resembling Li *furen*. Alas, this brought him no relief, and the tradition ascribes to him the following lines:

“Is it or isn't it?
I stand and look.
The swish, swish of a silk skirt.
How slow she comes!” [3]

After Li *furen*'s death Wu-di compiled a song (Chin. *qu*) “The Fallen Leaves and the Wailing Cicada”. In terms of poetical images “the fallen leaves” stand for Li *furen*, while “the wailing cicada” — for Wu-di (see n. 50):

“The sound of her silk skirt has stopped.
On the marble pavement dust grows.
Her empty room is cold and still.

Fallen leaves are piled against the doors.
Longing for that lovely lady
How can I bring my aching heart to rest?” [4]

The whole story drew my attention when I worked on the Mi-nia translation of the Chinese *leishu* “The Forest of Classes” [5]. I then came across a poem which was indicated in an introductory note as a *mourning song* compiled by Wu-di for Li *furen*. The content of this poem in the Mi-nia translation in general coincided with the well-known poem “The Autumn Wind” ascribed to Wu-di. But this Wu-di's poem, a famous Chinese verse well known to western readers [6], in its present (traditional) version, actually has nothing to do with Li *furen*: as Chinese commentators state, Wu-di compiled “The Autumn Wind” being inspired by his journey to the east of the Huanghe, where he had made offerings to the earth goddess (see the text of “The Autumn Wind” in the Appendix).

The Mi-nia text of Wu-di's mourning song for Li *furen* deeply impressed me: even a cursory acquaintance with it revealed its being a real masterpiece, and it seemed to me that the traditional Chinese text of the verse evidently yielded to the Mi-nia translation both in its perfection and overall completeness [7]. But what puzzled me was why the interpretation of the poem in the Mi-nia translation differed from that of the Chinese original. It seemed interesting to solve this problem. The aim of this essay is, therefore, to put into scholarly circulation the Mi-nia translation of Wu-di's mourning song for Li *furen* and to try to find out what stands behind the change of the interpretation of the poem, and which of the two interpretations (traditional Chinese or the one in the Mi-nia translation) is the original one.

* I have proposed elsewhere (see K. B. Kepping, “Mi-nia (Tangut) self-appellation and self-portraiture in Khara Khoto materials”, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, VII / 4 (2001), pp. 37—47) to use for the people who founded “The Great State of the White and Lofty” (982—1227) their self-designation, namely, Mi-nia, instead of foreign ethnonyms, Tangut and Xi Xia.