

# ***Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: Possible Religious Symbolism within the Late-Song Paintings***

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Beginning in the Tang dynasty, the remarkable saga of Lady Wenji became the source of a famous series of poems and paintings collectively known as the *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*. Historically, Lady Wenji was a Han noblewoman abducted from her city home by nomadic marauders (ca. 195 CE) and held captive for many years on the borders of China. Her story, as written by the Tang-dynasty poet Liu Shang, traced this forced, unhappy encounter between barbaric nomads and urban Han Chinese.<sup>1</sup> As such, Lady Wenji's story became associated with cherished Han notions of the superiority of Chinese culture over other civilizations and the Confucian concept of loyalty to one's ancestral family and country. Wenji's saga thus had great cultural resonance in China and has been told and re-told in successive eras. The Tang-era cycle of poems by Liu Shang became the basis for *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*, illustrated versions of which were produced in the Song and Yuan eras, accompanied by remarkable images of camp life among the barbarians (Rorex and Fong 1974, Introduction, p. [1]). It is these scenes of camp life which will be the basis for this article [Fig. 1].<sup>2</sup>

Lady Wenji's life on the borders of China would be fascinating even without illustrations. The legend tells us that as a young widow, she was forcibly removed from her family home in

present-day Honan and taken into Inner Mongolia to live as a hostage, albeit a privileged one, among the nomadic Southern Xiongnu. While in captivity she was married against her will to Liu Bao, the *zuoxian wang*, or commander-in-chief of the tribe's left wing (Rorex and Fong 1974, Introduction, p. [1]). According to the legend, Lady Wenji assuaged her longing for home by writing poetry that became *The Laments*. Some of the early illustrations of the poems show her with her *qin*, the *literati* musical instrument of choice, to emphasize Wenji's refined upbringing and her loneliness among those so totally devoid of Han culture. The third poem of Liu Shang's cycle alludes to the vast cultural differences the lady experienced as an outsider in the nomad's camp:

*I am like a prisoner in bonds,  
I have 10,000 anxieties but no one to con-  
fide them to.  
...They can eat my flesh and drink my  
blood...  
but to make me his wife is worse than kill-  
ing me.  
Alas, how a pretty face has made me suf-  
fer,  
How I resent that I am weak and soft like  
water.*



*Fig. 1. The unhappy hostage Wenji sits with her barbarian husband on a pile carpet in the nomad's yurt. Detail from song 5, "The Encampment by the Stream." Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art.*



Fig. 2. Wenji's elder son is excited by the unexpected arrival of his kinsmen from China. Detail from song 11, "Watching the Geese Fly South." Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Nevertheless, while in captivity she grew to love her captor and she bore his children, two sons, while living among the nomads for twelve years. Then, during the infancy of her youngest son, emissaries from her family suddenly arrived to negotiate her ransom [Fig. 2]. To her joy, Lady Wenji learned that she was to be ransomed by her family and returned home. But to her mounting dismay, the realization came that she must return alone [Fig. 3].

The joy of Lady Wenji's homecoming — back to everything that had made her the woman she was — is painfully offset by the painted scene in the nomad camp after the decision has been announced. Everyone in this scene is bereft, from Wenji on down through the ranks of maids and barbarian guards. Quite simply, the painting reveals, the whole camp family has grown to love each other in their mutual captivity. The real-life implications of the decision to return Lady Wenji to her homeland in China are heartbreaking.

Nevertheless, her nomad husband and her young sons stoically accompanied Wenji to the border before turning back, never to see their wife and mother again. In the last scene, Wenji is depicted re-entering her old family compound

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the tale of Wenji's captivity had particular resonance among the Chinese elite, when members of the Southern Song royal family, including the emperor Song Gaozong, were taken into Chin Tatar custody as hostages. Although he survived, his wives, father and brothers all died in captivity while waiting to be repatriated. According to Rorex and Fong (1974, Introduction, p. [7]), "an anonymous narrative handscroll of the period has recently been identified as illustrating the return from the Chin territory in 1142 of Kao-tsung's [Gaozong's] mother, the empress dowager Wei. This event occurred only after years of negotiations between the Southern Song emissaries and the Chin, and the thousand-year-old story of lady Wen-chi must have seemed a prefiguration of the contemporary home-coming." Thus one can understand why copies of Liu Shang's poems were being made at the court

of Song Gaozong, one of them even in the emperor's own hand, and why some scholars date the extant illustrations to them around 1150, soon after the traumatic return of the empress dowager.

Others speculate, however, that the paintings date to the mid- to late 13<sup>th</sup> century, and for equally compelling historical reasons. Be-

Fig. 3. The negotiations for Wenji's return to China. Detail from the album of eighteen paintings entitled *Wen-chi kuei Han t'u*, National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.



ginning in the early 1200s, the Song dynasty was being drawn into the vortex of the coming cataclysm that would see the end of its rule, as northern warriors began massing on the borders of western China. These nomadic tribes — many of them the traditional enemies of the Han, including the Keraites, the Uighurs, the Naimans — were already making military inroads into weakened Chinese territory before aligning themselves as powerful allies of Chinggis Khan and his Mongolian horsemen. By mid-century vast reaches of the known world would know the scourge of this alliance of skilled and brutal riders.

I find that the dating of the paintings to this transitional period of cataclysmic foreign incursion in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century has considerable cultural merit; as an art historian interested in east-west exchange, I perceive some intriguing western religious symbols being incorporated into the paintings that point to this later date (Gantzhorn 1998, pp. 142-55). To demonstrate this, let us examine some of the details in the paintings that might have iconographical meaning.

If the literary poignancy of Lady Wenji's decision did not move the viewer, then certainly the details of the paintings, especially the minute depictions of camp life, could not help but charm. The unknown Song artists who painted the Boston and Metropolitan scrolls did not depict the nomads of a thousand years before them: their contemporary observations are apt, humorous and telling. In the words of one scholar, "when [the Boston scroll painter, a possible member of the Emperor's painting academy], some three and a half centuries after Liu Shang, undertook to illustrate the Tang retelling of the Han story, he employed the imagery of his own time.... He was a sensitive reporter of the details of nomad life" (Rorex and Fong 1974, Introduction, p. [7]). The artist's observations — of the

camp cooks tending their pots over fires, or of the Central Asian landscape and surroundings with their camels and yurts — all are wonderfully acute and speak of an intriguing familiarity with "barbarian" life [Fig. 4]. It is tempting to think that the painter had genuine peaceful contact with his nomadic subjects.

Certainly the artist must have observed Central Asian objects of material culture very close at hand, if not *in situ*. All of the elements of cultural exchange are interesting, among them Central Asian ewers patterned after Persian examples (similar real examples made their way into the famous collection of the Shoso-in at Nara in Japan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century; Hayashi 1975, pp. 90-95). The inclusion of woven carpets is particularly noticeable: all of the surviving versions of the story of Lady Wenji contain Central Asian pile carpets. Central Asian pile carpets have a long history that substantially pre-dates both Christianity and Islam, as the famous Pazyryk carpet from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE attests (Opie 1992, pp. 29-33).

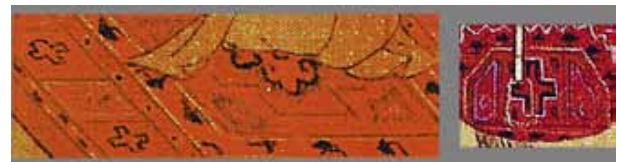
In the domestic scenes from the barbarian camp in the New York and Taiwan versions, the artist has clearly chosen to depict a significant number of woven pile carpets, and has taken great care to provide each carpet with an intricate, carefully drawn motif [Fig.5]. If we accept the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century dating of the last two paintings, these carpets hold considerable iconographic interest, as the motifs are almost uniformly crosses. In the words of one scholar these are "imposing Greek crosses, leaf-form crosses, or a combina-

Fig. 4. Horseman with carpet saddle-bag. Detail from song 13, "The Farewell." Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art.



cate, carefully drawn motif [Fig.5]. If we accept the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century dating of the last two paintings, these carpets hold considerable iconographic interest, as the motifs are almost uniformly crosses. In the words of one scholar these are "imposing Greek crosses, leaf-form crosses, or a combina-

Fig. 5. Details of carpet in Fig. 2 and saddle-bag in Fig. 4 with cross motif.





tion of the two" (Gantzhorn 1998, p. 143). This motif is significant, since it is a fact that, by the time Song China was overrun, many of these nomadic tribes allied to the Mongols — particularly the Keraites, the Uighurs, and the Naimans — had sizable segments who were converts to Eastern Christianity. The cross motif in these paintings could indicate intimate contact with these Christian tribes.

Unfortunately, the cross motif is an art-historical battleground; so a little art-historical context is helpful at this juncture. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an influential group of art historians, led by the Persian art specialist Arthur Upham Pope, vehemently dismissed the idea that the cross motif might ever suggest a Christian context when included as a design element within Middle Eastern or Central Asian carpets.

Pope and his colleagues argued that the cross was a pre-Christian symbol and therefore it was pre-Islamic as well, a geometric motif found in most folk cultures world-wide. As such, they categorically stated, in art created in the non-European world, the cross was therefore devoid of specific Christian religious meaning. Pope was equally vehement about rejecting any Christian participation (i.e. by Armenian or Greek weavers) in the craft of carpet making. He and his colleagues concluded that, since all oriental carpets were exclusively made by nomadic Muslims in the Middle East and Central Asia, the cross motif frequently found repetitively interwoven into their patterns was nothing more than a decorative device of no symbolic or religious value whatsoever — it was simply a geometric form easy to weave and its inclusion held no iconographic weight (Pope 1925, quoted in Der Manuelian and Eiland 1984, p. 13). Pope's assertion caused tremendous wrangling among carpet aficionados and pitted Armenian and Greek carpet weavers (who are traditionally Christian) against many Islamic scholars, who insisted that the craft was exclusively Muslim.

Recent research, based on materials from Central Asia and China not available to Pope and his 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors who wrote on the early origins of oriental carpets, has shown conclusively that Pope was wrong (although his authority still carries weight among some Persian art specialists). We now know that carpet-making was far from being an exclusive Muslim art form in Central Asia or the Middle East: Christians in the area wove carpets too (Der Manuelian and Eiland 1984; Eiland et al. 2002). In addition to the recent scholarship balancing the carpet debate, new archaeological evidence has seriously eroded 19<sup>th</sup>-century notions of the monolithic Muslim nature of Central Asia. During the past twenty-five years, excavations of cemeteries and monasteries along the old Soviet portions of the Silk Road, have exposed the vibrant presence of the Church of the East at sites all across Central Asia right to the borders of China, and even within the urban centers in China itself [Fig. 6] (see, e.g.: Savchenko ca. 2007; Nestorian n.d.). The renewed archaeological evidence of religious diversity in Central Asia between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries is incontrovertible proof that, even though largely forgotten by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christians in fact lived alongside Muslims, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, and Jews in those areas long before the arrival in Asia of the sea-faring European explorers and Jesuit missionaries of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Lieu and Parry 2003; Lotus 2007).



*Fig. 6. Christian grave marker from area of Lake Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan. Source: <<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/67/NestorianTombstoneIssykKul1312.jpg>>*

In light of these recent archaeological discoveries, it becomes clear that the inclusion of the cross motif in the Late-Song depictions of carpets and saddle bags in Lady Wenji's story should be re-examined and now can be reasonably interpreted as specific references to the military incursion of Christianized nomads from the boundaries of China during the era of Chingis Khan (d. 1227).

Although Moule, Pelliot and others made note of it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many western historians today are still surprised to find that a

number of the tribes that comprised the backbone of the Mongol invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century — particularly the Ongut, Kerait, and Uighur — had Christian converts. This Christian identity was mostly due to the missionary activity of the Church of the East on the borders of China beginning in the Tang era (Pelliot 1959-1963; Moule 1930; Arnold 1999).

For some reason, the fact of an Eastern Christian presence in Inner Asia during this era has always been a source of annoyance to the Latin West. In the late 1250s, for instance, the Franciscan William of Rubruck reported with great chagrin that he was not the first Christian to enter the Mongols' camps at Karakorum — far from it. He described in some detail the strong presence of the Church of the East among the Mongol elite there, his Euro-centric and Latin-Christian bias designating those Christians by the pejorative (and inaccurate) term "Nestorian." The biases of the Latin West notwithstanding, the Church of the East had strong ties in Central Asia and on the borders of China until the brutal repressions of Tamerlane doomed the church in those areas after 1400 (for its history down to the present, see Baumer 2006).

Certainly, during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the descendants of Chingis Khan relied upon these largely Christianized tribes for military support as they established their hegemony across the Middle East and into China itself. The Ongut, Kerait, and Uighur all had high-ranking Christian members, especially among their women, many of whom then married into the highest levels of Mongol nobility [Fig. 7]. There they became not only influential consorts but mothers to an impressive number of Mongol rulers. To name just a few prominent examples: Chingis Khan himself took as his chief wife a Kerait princess who was a Christian: the Uighur mother of Qubilai and Möngke Khan was the famous Church of the East devotee, Sorqaqtani Beki; and Doqуз Khatun, the wife of the Il-Khan Hül-egü, convinced her husband to spare her fellow Christians during the sack of Baghdad in 1258 (Rossabi 1979; Blair 2002).

### **Conclusion: Yuan-era reality mirrored in a noble woman's lament**

The story of Lady Wenji is a particularly "women's" story of divided loyalties and affections at the highest levels during a turbulent time



Fig. 7. Detail from grave marker of high-ranking Christian woman, Elisabeth, wife of a government official in southern China named Xindu, who died in 1317. The inscription (not shown here) is in Chinese, Uighur and Syriac. After: Baumer 2006, p. 167.

of cultural exchange. Both the painter and the poet have captured the conflicted feelings of the lady, as she explains in the 15<sup>th</sup> poem:

*I was grieved... by coming away, and now  
I hate returning.*

*I no longer understand such emotions...  
... I only feel a sharp knife stabbing at my  
heart...*

*My thoughts are at cross-purposes. I keep  
asking myself this:*

*Unless it was fate that pre-ordained such  
a marriage,*

*How could I have become bound to my en-  
emy in love and trust?*

We do not know for whom the scrolls and albums of *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* were painted, but they clearly reflect an awareness of the impact of cross-cultural contact on the most intimate aspects of domestic life, contact that was at once painful, complex, yet compelling. I emphasize that Wenji's story is not that of a rape; it is rather of two cultures colliding, learning to accommodate and trust each other, and producing offspring that combined the best features of both [Fig. 8, next page].

When we add the possibility that the motif of the cross, so prominently featured on the nomad carpets, indicates a religious incursion as well, another level of cultural nuance enters the mix. To my mind, these paintings with their crosses vividly depict the reality of the situation in China around 1250: that these border cultures and their foreign religions had once again forcefully entered China and therefore into the consciousness of the upper echelons of Han culture as well, mirroring the personal conflict and accommodation that had to occur during the end of the Song and the beginning of the Mongol Yuan dynasty.



Fig. 8. Lady Wenji nursing her first-born son. Detail from song 10, "A Child is Born." Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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## Notes

1. Liu Shang (ca. 773) based his cycle of poems on two poetic *Laments* purportedly written by Lady Wenji herself, which formed part of her biography in the History of the Latter Han Dynasty, assembled around 440. Another version based on Liu Shang was written by the Northern Song statesman Wang Anshi (1021- 1086). Lady Wenji (Wen-chi, born 177, death date unknown), also known as Cai Wenji, was the daughter of Cai Yong (132-192), a scholar of the Eastern Han dynasty. Much of Cai Yong’s work has been lost. Both father and daughter have interesting biographies as members of the talented Cai family (Cai Yong, n.d.).

2. Six important paintings of the subject are known. Boston holds the badly damaged original that the others follow. Rorex and Fong (1974, notes to the Introduction, p. [9]) list them as follows: “1. The album leaves in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (the original). 2. The handscroll in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 1973.120.3. 3. Eighteen paintings reproduced in the periodical *I-lin yueh-k’an* (Peking, 1930-34). 4. An album of eighteen paintings entitled *Wen-chi kuei Han t’u*, National Palace Museum, Taiwan, described in *Ku-kung shu-hualu* (Taipei, 1956), vol. VI, pages 4–9. 5. A handscroll with eighteen illustrations, Yamato Bunkakan, Nara, Japan; see Shujiro Shimada, “Concerning the Handscroll Painting of Wen-chi’s Return to China” (in Japanese), *Yamato bunka* (Nara, 1962), No. 37, pages 18–30. 6. A handscroll with eighteen illustrations, Nanking Museum; see *Hu-chia shih-pa-p’ai* (Shanghai, 1961).” According to the notes, dating the original and the copies is problematic: number 2 has seals from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and a “questionable” seal of the Song chancellor Jia Sidao, who died 1275; number 5 is believed to be a late-Ming copy. Three late-Song paintings, those held in Taiwan, Boston, and New York, are the basis for this paper. Note that Figs. 1–2, 4–5 and 8 are details from the handscroll in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession no. 1973.120.3, Gift of the Dillon Fund, reproduced with permission in process and pending.