

Preface

This creative project is a fictional retelling of the pivotal stanza in the *Song of Lasting Sorrow* revolving around Yang Gui-fei's death, which happens in a span of three couplets: "The six-fold army would not set forth, / nothing could be done, / and the fragile arch of her lovely brows / there perished before the horses. / Her flowered hairpins fell to earth, / and no one picked them up, / the kingfisher wing, the sparrow of gold, / the jade pick for the hairs. / Our lord and ruler covered his face, / unable to the protect her; / he looked around, and blood and tears / were flowing there together." The sixty couplets of the poem embrace a programmatic agenda of glorifying the Tang dynasty, embodied by the physical beauty of Yang Gui-fei and opulent love showered upon her—both in life and in afterlife. Bai Ju-yi's portrayal of the tragic romance decidedly shies away from a more morally ambivalent and complexly flawed interpretation of Yang Gui-fei's death and the decisions leading up to it. Such a rhetorical choice preserves the luster of Xuan-zong and Yang Gui-fei's romance, even against the backdrop of political disorder and murder (however euphemistically the poem tries to frame it).

Compared against the poem, Chen Hong's prose account renders a much more detailed interpretation of how the Emperor was moved to sentence his beloved consort to death. While the poem privileges description of action and environment, the prose account expands on the Emperor's thought process and emotions. However, due to their narrative scope, both accounts inevitably marginalized the interiority of the key characters that pushed the plot forward in the scene of Yang Gui-fei's death. More importantly, both accounts privilege Yang Gui-fei's character, without highlighting to most readers how much her interior thoughts are absent from the story.

As such, in this story, I sought to subvert both accounts in two main ways: firstly, by exposing the extent to which it reduces Yang Gui-fei's personhood in its glorification of the Tang dynasty and extolling of her romance with Xuan-zong; secondly, by giving a more realistic account of history as the product of multiple subjective consciousnesses rather than universal truth. These two narrative intentions manifested through a number of techniques.

While fiction offered psychological interiority, a significant narrative choice was to intentionally omit Yang Gui-fei's perspective from the story. I intensified the absence of her voice by augmenting the interior thoughts of other characters marginalized in the poem—General Chen Xuan-li, Head Eunuch Gao Li-shi, maidservant Yue-er, and the young guardsman. The piece further reduces and flattens Yang Gui-fei character through a heightened objectification and abstraction, building on what the original poem offers us. I chose to persistently describe Yang Gui-fei by the context around her, robbed of an interior self. In particular, the young guardsman and Yue-er's observations of her are focused on her features and immediate surroundings—"snowy flesh and flowerlike face" and "cushions" (9)—instead of her as a person. Yang Gui-fei's lack of self-representation in her own impending death reaches a pinnacle in the scene of her strangulation. Following historical accounts (see endnotes), I chose to set it offstage, cementing how removed she is from the action of the story surrounding her death.

Through formal techniques such as story-digressions, the focus on Yang Gui-fei is further diluted. Through multiple perspectives, notably General Chen's recollection of Chao Cuo's death and Yue-er's recollection of a being rewarded with lychee, the piece establishes narrative digressions of previous events that complicate, disrupt and defocus the primary event of Yang Gui-fei's death. One implication is that all normal order has been suspended in a liminal time of

political disorder. More crucially, I sought to unearth the plurality of the reality of the historical context. Disparity between external behavior and internal thought is exposed in the story in a way it could not be in the original prose and poem accounts—Xuan-zong faced a dilemma between personal desire and personal duty while General Chen had to pursue his own agenda under the cloak of obeisance. This heterogeneity allows for a representation of realism that the poem and prose accounts completely flatten.

The incorporation of multiple interiorities in a free indirect style, multi-voiced narrative openly admits the subjectivity of this particular account of history, with its biases, selections, omissions and distortions. The story, in its unabashed embracing of subjectivities, seeks to call into question the purported objectivity of dominant historiographies by displacing ‘history’ as a concept—its fixity and certainty—which opens up the past to imaginative revision. This taps on the possibilities offered by historical fiction as a genre: it engages directly with the past, yet is unbound by the conventions of historiography. While the original prose and poem accounts, in their sparse, univocal telling of Yang Gui-fei's death, promote a well-known, purportedly objective, hegemonic history of the Tang dynasty, this fictional retelling deliberately embraces a plurality of voices in order to better reflect the heterogeneity of history itself. This directly challenges the monological idea of a unified authorial voice providing an ideally exhaustive and definitive account of a fully mastered object of knowledge.

Ultimately, this creative project hopes to not only rework the description of Yang Gui-fei's death in *Song of Lasting Sorrow*, but to consider the epistemic implications of experimental historical fiction in challenging canonical, hegemonic accounts of events and characters as well-known as Yang Gui-fei and her tragic demise.

The Silent Song

It really ought not to be that still inside the parlor, but the wind had quieted and nobody spoke a word. Her face, tilted deferentially, was silhouetted against the sooty clouds and glassy sky. The molten yolk of the midday sun seeped over the south balustrade, across the wooden floor and onto her silk robes. Through the lattices on the north doors, riotous sounds wafted into the parlor, sifting through the minds of those indoors like powder from a clenched fist. Since she did not speak, no one asked for what she was thinking about. Their minds converged on the armored man wanting her dead. With his lips pressed tightly into a thin brushstroke, the man looked as though he was having a hard time keeping his thoughts to himself.

That man was General Chen Xuan-li, kneeling on one knee before the Emperor in his full combat regalia, the mail and mountain pattern armor dusty from the four days of being on the road. His helmet, the feathered crest atop it bristling, was carried in the crook of his right arm. Although he appeared to be the very picture of obeisance before imperial authority with his bowed head, Chen's thoughts were elsewhere. Not only did he understand that the Prized Consort's death was an inevitability at this point, but he also knew in his heart that His Majesty would eventually acquiesce. After all, Chao Cuo was dead! He had wanted to get rid of this woman's father for a long time. His men had travelled eighty-five miles in less than a day by the time the royal entourage reached Ma-Wei Pavilion, but there was no food awaiting them in the late afternoon. Hunger was always a grinding test of loyalty, especially when most of the men were fighting for an image of a woman who they didn't know themselves. He had half-expected them to refuse to proceed further and it was no surprise when they held their pikes in battle position and surrounded the Pavilion. What a stroke of luck that the soldiers took the matter into

their own hands, he thought. The groundswell of discontent had erupted in a blink: his famished men brandishing the accusation that Chao Cuo was plotting mutiny with the Hun envoys, arrows cutting through the air before the wimp even had time to respond, Chao Cuo captured before his horse could tear out of the west gates of the pavilion, his body dismembered and his head skewered on a spear for display by the edge of the roads, outside those very gates. The troops were still surrounding the pavilion presently, and Chen knew what would appease them. Time was tight, though. He or someone else would have to force His Majesty's hand. As his vision fell on the plain black boots beside him, he thought, Maybe Gao Li-shi would help?

Head eunuch Gao Li-shi, who had brought General Chen into the parlor on His Majesty's orders, couldn't help but wonder if the dark red patch on Chen Xuan-li's armor was Chao Cuo's blood. He dug his nails into soft moistness of his palms. He was the only one from His Majesty's personal entourage who had ventured out of the parlor in the past hour. It was a changed world outside the parlor's doors. For the first time in decades, he felt the need to prepare a casket for himself. He had seen the thing that was Chao Cuo's head, impaled like a chicken roasting on a branch. He felt scalded by the wild, inflamed gazes of the soldiers. He saw their exhausted faces invaded by such blank and mindless rage at bloodshed that his own anger at the incursion against His Majesty's authority vanished in fear, fear at something beyond his reason, beyond His Majesty's control. He wondered how their glorious, brilliant Emperor ended up in this quagmire—on the run, a hundred miles away from Chang'an and cornered by his own imperial army. Yang Guo-zhong certainly had a big part to play. Good riddance, the man deserved the violent death. As for himself, after close to fifty years precariously serving at court, it would be ridiculous if his career were to end in the mud and mire of an insurrecting army for the sake of a thirty-eight-year-old woman. The Prized Consort had to be sacrificed. When was Chen Xuan-li

going to speak his mind? He better do it soon. If the General couldn't do it, he himself would find a way to broach the matter with His Majesty, as delicately as possible.

Gao flicked his eyes to scan the faces of those present in the parlor. On the periphery of the room stood the servants. Like tealeaves in swirling eddies, he thought, always left at the bottom of the cup when the tea is downed. He felt what could almost be pity for those few pretty ladies hovering behind the Prized Consort. He didn't want to call it guilt, but maybe that was what it was—he didn't want to dwell on it too much—when he averted his eyes before they could land on the Prized Consort herself. There was also another suspicion at the back of his mind, but it was not to his favor for him to bring it up. Perhaps, it was for the best if no one who walked out of here alive today would know. Yes, it would definitely be for the best.

At that moment, the General finally opened his mouth. It was only a brief sentence, uttered without embellishments, but a murmur arose like a squall on the surface of a lake, heads swerving to look at the Prized Consort reclining in the southern end of the room.

How dare you, said Xuan-zong quietly. The General's head went lower, an inch or two above the gleaming wooden floor. In an emphatic enunciation, General Chen made an offering, The Imperial Army begs Your Majesty to sentence the Prized Consort to death; the soldiers will not rest assured that Your Majesty will be safe if the daughter of a traitor remains by your side.

The words resounded in the room, chasing into every corner.

How absurd, thought Yue-er, standing behind the Prized Consort. How could this burly general ever think that His Majesty would kill the Prized Consort? His Majesty even personally fed her mistress from his own dishes just now. Her mistress barely ate though. In fact, was her mistress coming down with something? She had been vomiting over the last few days on the road. Maybe the roads were too bumpy? Her mind wandered. The girl found herself thinking

about the lychees she got to taste last summer. The Prized Consort was a most kind and generous mistress—truly beautiful inside-out. His Majesty had sent hundreds of messengers on packs of steeds to bring back fresh lychees from the south of Nanling Mountains because it would bring the most childlike smile to the Prized Consort's face. A few times, after massaging her mistress's calves, she would be awarded a few lychees for her loyal service. The translucent, delicate skin of the fruit would burst as her teeth bit down, an excruciatingly sweet juice splaying against the roof of her mouth. When would she next taste a lychee? The Prized Consort had said she would give her a tiny box of lychees to bring back to her parents when she reached the age of marriage. Just a year more to go. She hoped they would return to Chang'an soon. There was no way His Majesty was going to let agree to the hulky general's senseless demand, she reassured herself again. Inner Court maidservants like her witnessed the depth of devotion between the two, a karmic bond that defied all court logic. The great honor of it all! The Prized Consort would ride in the same palanquin as His Majesty and both would spend the night in the same apartments. Of the three thousand beauties in the Six Palaces—there were the three Great Ladies, nine Royal Spouses, twenty-seven Brides of the Age, eighty-one Imperial Wives, numerous Handmaidens of the Rear Palace and Women Performers of the Music Bureau—none could compare to her mistress. His Majesty even avoided daybreak court to spend more time with the Prized Consort. She would have to remember to console the Prized Consort later on Chao Cuo's death. It certainly wasn't His Majesty's fault, Yue-er thought, so she must take great care to guide her mistress away from any resentful or bitter thoughts. The episode here at Ma-Wei Pavilion should not drive a wedge between her mistress and His Majesty. Ah, she still had to retrieve her mistress's attire for tomorrow from the trunk. Not the dark pink one because her mistress

complained that it was too tight. Perhaps, the light pink robe with the saddle-shaped collar? It might make her smile. The Prized Consort had not smiled in a while.

The young guardsman at the north doors had been looking at her for a while. Yue-er daintily looked away. She wasn't looking her best these few days since they left Chang'an. Maybe, he had seen her before from a distance? She felt a spurt of glee that a man would actually spare her attention when her mistress was also present. She sneaked a peek at him after a prolonged beat. He was now staring at the Prized Consort with a pensive look on his face.

By now, the young guardsman watching over the north doors of the parlor, with a metal ball on his helmet, had confirmed his suspicions. The faraway hollers outside had gradually faded into a staccato hum. Muffled condemnations of Chao Cuo's rebellion were now sharp cries demanding for the Prized Consort's death. He had been concentrating on this stream of sound for the past hour. His General had swept in, a hard set to his heavy-lidded eyes, twice since the din started. He knew that the Prized Consort did not have long to live if Chao Cuo was to be found dead for mutiny. Now, Chao Cuo, or rather Yang Guo-zhong the traitor, was dead. He wondered if His Majesty would promote the soldiers who quelled Yang Guo-zhong's mutiny just now. How unlucky that he missed out on all the action. He had been secretly elated when he was assigned to stand guard inside the parlor because that gave him the chance to finally gaze at the Prized Consort. He supposed now that she was to die soon—his General and the simmering troops outside would not relent, he thought—he wouldn't have the chance to do so again in the future. He was at least lucky in that one regard. Otherwise, since the Tong Pass was lost to the rebels, these few days have been sheer torture. It was a frantic scramble from Chang'an with all the royal paraphernalia down winding mountain paths, hardest for them foot soldiers. The Prized Consort and the weasel Yang Guo-zhong, meanwhile, rode comfortably in carriages and snacked

on delicacies. To think about it, was any woman worth losing a country for? Even one as beautiful as the Prized Consort was. For she was, despite her age, indeed breathtakingly beautiful with her snowy flesh and flowerlike face. It must be difficult for His Majesty. The whole nation knew how much His Majesty treasured the Prized Consort. Oh, His Majesty was speaking!

I will take care of this, the Emperor said, waving his hand to dismiss General Chen.

Yue-er let out a soft sigh of relief, as she rearranged the cushions that the Prized Consort was leaning against. Yue-er could not tell if her mistress was listening. Her marble features seemed set in placidity. The Prized Consort still had on her short blue traveling cape embroidered with different shades of plum blossoms, draped over a loose white robe that gleamed in the light—on closer look, Yue-er could see golden threads running through all the visible expanse of silk in a crane-like pattern. What poise and grace under pressure, Yue-er thought. The cushion was slightly wet to the touch.

The Prized Consort's unwavering silence was merciful, for Xuan-zong at least. He did not want to look at her gentle, peach blossom-like eyes at this moment. Throughout his exchange with Chen Xuan-li, Yu-huan had sat immobile. He had glanced briefly at her docile and open face, turned slightly to one side and her gaze averted, and felt years of love rise up like a gorge in his throat. Watching Chen Xuan-li retreat from the parlor, Xuan-zong grasped the smooth curve of the chair and heavily sat. The death of Yang Guo-zhong was unexpected, as was the loss of the Tong Pass. But, he had been Emperor for forty-four years and in times of crisis, he knew what could be sacrificed and what could not. The crucial thing for him was that the Tang Dynasty could not and must not end in his hands. He needed to unite the hearts of his Imperial Army, but he was most unwilling to do it at the cost of breaking the heart of the woman he loved. She was guilty by association with Yang Guo-zhong, but could he appease his army with the

reasoning that Yu-huan, who lived deep within the palace walls without contact with the outside world, could not have known about Yang Guo-zhong's mutiny? While he was thinking this, Gao Li-shi—a most faithful servant, Xuan-zong thought—got down on his knees, eyes watery and red lips quivering.

Your Majesty, the eunuch implored, the anger of the troops might spill over any moment to target more persons. Your humble servant begs you to make a swift decision. If Your Majesty's army wants the Prized Consort dead to cement their loyalty, they will do it by Your Majesty's mandate or by force. An orderly army is the only thing that can ensure your safety.

How long will this go on for, thought the young guardsman by the door, as the Emperor uneasily fingered his temple in visible consternation. One two three four five, six seven eight nine ten. Would there be any lunch for them at all?

Gao Li-shi, still in his full kneeling position, took a deep breath. Your Majesty, he cried out, dragging out each syllable, as he forcefully knocked the wooden floor with his forehead.¹ Thump. Thump. Thump. The Emperor sharply inhaled. The wooden floor, while smooth to the eye, had tiny splinters that gashed Gao's forehead with every contact it made. Gao saw the reddish tinge on the patch of floor before him and held back a smile.

Yue-er got an itch on her thigh but dared not move without drawing attention to herself. The thumping of Head Eunuch Gao's head against the floor felt like battle drums. Head Eunuch Gao, who used to adorn the Prized Consort with endless praises and unparalleled favors, was now resolutely turning his back on her. With each slam of his head, she could see the line gradually being cloven between them and the rest of the room. An expectant hush set over the parlor. She felt as though the Prized Consort was balancing on a precipice, crossing the abyss of something unknown. Of course, the person up there in danger might have been her. She had

gotten so used to her mistress basking in royal favor, she didn't want her to fall from it now. The sunlight seemed harsher. She could feel it boring into the back of her head, a dull heat that made every face in the parlor look shapeless and steamy, with only her mistress in clear focus. Their thoughts seemed to condense above them like flickering wisps. The Emperor was unreadable.

There was no clue when the Emperor made up his mind. One second he seemed satisfied to let Gao Li-shi go on for eternity till his forehead was stripped of skin. The next second, he stood up. Xuan-zong swooped toward the Prized Consort and clasped her pale creamy hand, still gleaming with gold rings and jade bangles—the hand that only the most powerful man in the Tang Dynasty could hold. Yu-huan, he said. Yu-huan. Yu-huan.

At the sound of the Emperor's voice, Gao Li-shi finally stopped his banging. He had pushed His Majesty to come to a decision. Did it work? He slowly rested his bloodied forehead on the back of his hands and waited.

Yue-er did not expect the Emperor to suddenly cross the room to where the Prized Consort was seated. She remembered the moments over the years when His Majesty would utter the Prized Consort's maiden name—so gently, so dotingly, she thought—when her mistress would rise from the glistening waters of the Hua-qing Palace's pools, offer wine to His Majesty in Mount Li's palace banquets during snowy nights, perform to the melody of "Coats of Feathers, Rainbow Skirts", and take her leave briefly for His Majesty to attend to state affairs.

The young guardsman wondered if anyone was going to eat the osmanthus jelly and petal-shaped almond cake on the table to the left of the Prized Consort. Perhaps he would ask the pretty maidservant standing behind the Prized Consort if she could sneak him one when the entourage departed from Ma-Wei Pavilion. She looked familiar.

Xuan-zong felt like he had aged five years in the past hour. He should turn away now, Xuan-Zong thought, he had made up his mind. But it would be cowardly to not face her and own up to his failure in their love. She stared into his eyes and his watered.

My heart is as firm as the inlay or the gold, Xuan-zong said, and I swear, I swear to you, in our next life or in Heaven we will meet again.

The Prized Consort shook as if a gust of wind had blown from the south windows.

Yue-er wondered why these same words uttered by His Majesty for countless times in the past now sounded so foreign to her ear.

Gao Li-shi let out a barely audible sigh of relief.

The young guardsman stood up straighter.

The Emperor gestured. Gao Li-shi got up to his feet and came before them both. The attention of the room fell on the Prized Consort as she opened her mouth. What came out was a sob. Xuan-zong's face began to crumble, from the top down, like a pile of sand. He turned his sleeve to cover his face as Gao Li-shi and another eunuch half-escorted and half-dragged the Prized Consort off to the annex.² He heard her struggle, the violent rustling of cloth, her percussive sobs, a yelp, Gao Li-shi's forceful grunt, and her voice cry out "Xuan-zong!" Then, the room drifted for a moment on the receding tide of sound, and in the instant Xuan-zong turned and looked up from his raised sleeves, he knew his beloved consort had stopped breathing.

Yue-er, who was now kneeling down on the ground, did not know when she started crying too but she tasted the salt on her lips and watched as the body of her mistress was carried out from the nearby annex. The plane of the world seemed tilted. Head Eunuch Gao and Xiao Li-zi looked like they were wading through water, as they solemnly placed her mistress' corpse on the floor.

In her final moments of struggle, the despair and confusion on the Prized Consort's face had drained away, settling into a final residue of indifferent blankness.

Why did His Majesty not cry? As the thought crossed Yue-er's mind, the rest of the attendants in the room broke from their stillness, as though awaking from a long slumber, straightening their skirts, wiping their brows, arching their backs, clearing their throats, smoothening their capes, gathering the loose items, covering their yawning mouths.

Summoned back, General Chen strode into the parlor and halted before the Prized Consort's corpse. She looked as though she was asleep, were it not for the garish ring of bruises around her pale neck. He paid his respects to the Emperor who was staring out of the south windows, and tested for pulse in her jugular vein and for breath with two fingers above her lips. He took off his breastplate and his helmet, and fell prostrate at the Emperor's feet. Your Majesty, please forgive us for our trespasses, said the General.

Xuan-zong brought Chen Xuan-li to his feet. You have exerted yourself greatly in the service of the nation, said the Emperor gravely, I thank you. Let us march forward South to Chengdu.

General Chen hailed the Emperor and headed out.

Unable to watch any longer, Yue-er crawled towards the corpse of her mistress.

Gao Li-shi offered a cup of steaming hot tea to the Emperor.

Xuan-zong leaned over to Gao Li-shi and asked him whether he had brought along Yuhuan's favorite jade flageolet, and the eunuch said no, he'd said that was a pity. And then Xuan-zong stood up and said to Gao Li-shi, this time without looking at him, that her attendants should be left behind. His throat was tight even after sipping the fragrant tea. As they walked out of the

parlor, he rested against Gao Li-shi, Each step felt like a thousand. He refused to look behind him.

Behind them, Yue-er sat quietly beside her mistress' dead body. As the royal entourage emptied out from the parlor, she thought about how she will bury her—the Prized Consort of the Emperor of the great Tang Empire.

“Wú huáng wànsuì, wànsuì, wànwànsuì!”³

The Imperial Army roared in a raucous demonstration of their fealty to their divine lord.

Of the ten thousand troops who were waiting then, with a hundred and thirty-five close enough to see the Emperor's face, twelve noticed the momentary sagging of his golden-robed shoulders and the brief droop of his head, as the Emperor glanced at his awaiting army, tucking in his chin as if he did not know who they were hailing, and they put it down to his sorrow at his consort's death.

¹ Kowtow, known in Chinese as 叩头, is an act of supplication that involves not only touching one's head upon the ground but also knocking it against the ground. In this story, Eunuch Gao is executing an extreme form of the custom, using self-harm to demonstrate the depth of his reverence and the urgency of his plea to the Emperor. While there is no historical record of whether Gao Li-shi really did so, this act of kowtowing till blood is shed has many historical precedents in the Chinese imperial context.

² According to historian Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* (a chronological account of all Chinese history prior to the Song dynasty), Emperor Xuan-zong ordered Gao Li-shi to bring Yang Gui-fei into the temple hall to be strangled. Notably, Bai Ju-yi's poem deviates from this historical account in a more romanticized portrayal of Yang Gui-fei perishing before the horses.

³ Wú huáng wànsuì, wànsuì, wànwànsuì (吾皇万岁万岁万万岁) is an expression used to wish long life to the Emperor. A literal translation is: “May my Emperor live and reign for ten thousand years, ten thousand years, ten thousand of ten thousand years.”