

*The Empire*

*Chǔ (0209-0206), 43*

*Hàn (0206-220), 50*

*Beginning about 0316, Chín, in the far northwest, ceased to disturb the northern states. Instead, over a period of ten years it quietly conquered and absorbed the large and fertile territory of non-Sinitic Shú to the west. This doubled its area, and thus also its war potential. As was expected, this drew no response from the other northern states – it's just barbarian territory; who cares?*

*Then, in 0278, Chín again turned eastward and pushed Chǔ out of its capital, driving it far down the Yàngdǔ River and making it from then on an eastern state. In two campaigns, it wiped out the feeble Jōu remnant, thus ending any possibility of restoring Jōu. Pursuing a policy of slaughter toward any resisting army or populace (Jàu lost more than 100,000 surrendered troops in defending its capital), Chín expanded into the north. The Sinitic states were unable to form an alliance against Chín, and fell one after another: Hàn (0230), Ngwèi (0223), Chǔ (0223), Jàu and Yēn (0222), and finally Chí (0221). The classical period was at an end.*

*What followed was the Empire. It was unstable. The First Emperor sought immortality, entertaining magicians at court and sending expeditions to the magic isles of the east (such as Píng-lái, recalled by Lǐ Shāng-yǐn on p247). When the First Emperor died on one of his symbolic mountain tours, the throne went to a younger son and not the rightful heir. The loyal generals were killed, and the tribes of the steppe promptly reoccupied the strategic Ordos area. A ruinously elaborate mausoleum was constructed for the First Emperor. It has been recently excavated, revealing a "Terracotta Army," replicas rather than living men (as on p25), buried to accompany the Emperor in death. Rebels appeared, and at their head was resurgent and vindictive Chǔ. There was a rhyme among the Chǔ people:*

*Be homes of Chǔ however few,  
The one to destroy the Chín is Chǔ*

*and under the aegis of the Chǔ King, many contended now for conquest and glory. This was the epic Chǔ/Hàn struggle. The final victor was not, as at first it seemed, the leading Chǔ general, but canny Lyōu Báng, the founder of the Hàn Dynasty. Hàn lasted for four centuries. It had the advantage of Chín's new state system, without the onus of having destroyed the old feudal system to create it.*

*Chǔ did survive culturally: the Chǔ-style fù or rhapsody had a lasting effect on Hàn and later Chinese literature. Confucianism became the state ideology, establishing the examination system which lasted until the end of traditional China.*

*A popular literature also appeared, in both prose and verse form, providing (as we shall see in due course) a new beginning for the poetry of later centuries.*

## Nine Songs

## 8. The Lord of the River

c235

*Half of Lǔ was conquered and incorporated into Chǔ in 0249. Chǔ then began to dream of a realm which would embrace all the states, divided into nine regions, each with its own customs, together making a unity. As propaganda for that unified state, and a guarantee that local religions would still be respected, a Chǔ poet wrote a masque in which shamans invoked each regional god in turn.*

*Human sacrifice, deplored in Shīr 131 (p27), might be thought to belong only to non-Sinitic, or barely Sinitic, peoples. This turns out not to be the case. Here is the god of the Yellow River, the defining river of the north, to whom maidens were regularly sacrificed. Nor is the god's domain solely watery; it is also mountainous. Symbolically, it stands for the entire North.*

*This terrifying piece portrays the god riding his chariot in his watery domain. He waits in his underwater palace; he rides forth on a turtle to survey his realm. The bride is then set adrift on a raft, to meet the husband to whom she is promised. The raft overturns, and fishes in shoals do indeed accompany her thither. And we, the hearers of this performance, identify with her – we are her – as she drowns.*

With you I wander, ah, the Nine Rivers.  
 A wind rises, ah, and whips up waves.  
 I ride a water chariot, ah, with lotus canopy;  
 I drive a pair of dragons, ah, with water-serpents.  
 I ascend Kūnlún, ah, and look in all directions;  
 My heart takes wing, ah, in anticipation.  
 The sun is soon to set, ah; I am sad, with no thought of return,  
 Only for that far shore, ah, do I sleeplessly long.  
 Fish-scale chamber, ah, and dragon hall;  
 Purple shell gates, ah; a palace of pearl.  
 What is the Sprit doing, ah, amid the waters?  
 Astride a white turtle, ah, he pursues spotted fishes.  
*“With you shall I wander, ah, the river isles,  
 The current swells, ah; I now come below.”*  
 She folds her lovely hands, ah, as she journeys east,  
 We send off the lovely one, ah, to the southern cove –  
*“The waves come surging up, ah, to be my welcome;  
 Fishes in shoals, ah, accompany me.”*

*Nine Songs*

## 1. The Great Unity

(c235)

*Pride of place belongs not to these local spirits, but to the Chǔ god Tà-yī, the “Great Unity;” the principal god of Chǔ. The players assemble, and the shaman personates the god, girt with sword and sash pendants. At the end, Tà-yī himself becomes manifest, blessing the beholders – the sun in all his splendor.*

A lucky day, ah, the stars are auspicious;  
 Solemn we come to please, ah, the August on High.  
 I grasp the long sword, ah, by its hilt of jade;  
 My sash pendants sound, ah, they clink and chime.  
 The jeweled mat, ah, is weighted with jade;  
 Why not now take up, ah, the rare incense?  
 Meats cooked in lotus, ah, on a bed of orchid,  
 I lay out cassia wine, ah, and pepper sauce.  
 Raise the drumsticks, ah, and strike the drums;  
 To a stately measure, ah, the song is quiet;  
 Add the pipes and string, ah; the melody rises –  
*The Spirit moves, ah, in rich apparel,  
 A pungent fragrance, ah, fills the hall.  
 The Five Notes mingle, ah, in rich concord;  
 The Lord is happy, and shows his pleasure.*

*Chǔ/Hàn Chūn/Chyōu*

### The Epic of Chǔ and Hàn (Shǐ Jì 7, 8)

*Yes, China has its epic. Not one in hexameter, but one which agrees with the others in being a foundational tale of war. Why war?? Because war is what unifies. Courage against adversity commands universal respect, and it is in war that adversity reaches its extreme. The epic is called the Chǔ/Hàn Chūn/Chyōu, or “Chronicle of Chǔ and Hàn.” Its hero was Lyóu Bāng, the canny commoner with scant military skills, but who, in the end, was the winner, honored after his death with the posthumous epithet Gāu-dzǔ, the High Ancestor.*

*Dramatically, the epic begins, not with Lyóu Bāng, but with the lesser figure Chǐn Shǐ. He is a commoner; he functions as a false anticipation of Lyóu Bāng. It was he (so the tale tells) who first came out against the Chǐn. His aspiration evokes the Great Bird of Jwāngdzǔ (p36):*

Chǐn Shǐng was a man of Yáng-chǐng; his personal name was Shǐ. Wú Gwǎng was a man of Yáng-jyǎ; his personal name was Shú. Once, when Chǐn Shǐ was young, he was working as a hired farmhand with some other men. Leaving his plowing, he went to the top of a little rise, and was lost for a long time in deep emotion. He said “If one day I become rich and famous, I will not forget you.” The men laughed and answered “You are a hired plowhand, what’s all this about rich and famous?”

Chǐn Shǐ sighed and said “Alas! How could the little sparrows understand the ambition of a great swan?”

In the first year of the Second Chǐn Emperor, in the seventh month, they sent out nine hundred men from the left side of town to garrison Yǐ-yáng; they camped on the way at Dà-dzǐ Syāng. Chǐn Shǐng and Wú Gwǎng were among those forced to go; they were made camp chiefs. It happened that there was a great downpour; the road became impassible. They realized that they had already lost all hope of arriving by the assigned time; for missing the assigned time, the law prescribed that they should all be beheaded. Chǐn Shǐng and Wú Gwǎng then took counsel together, saying “If we go on, we will die; and if we undertake some great plan, we will die. As long as we are going to die anyway, may we not as well die in the hope of establishing a state?”

*Chǐn Shǐ did establish a state in Chǐn, with himself as King. Many joined him, including several Confucians led by Kǔng Fú, the son of the last head of the Analects school. Why Confucians?? Because even a ruffian, once he is King, wants a little ceremony, a little respect for his new dignity. So Chǐn Shǐ received them; and made Fú his ritual master.*

*Thus did the Confucian tradition, largely repressed under the Chǐn Dynasty, find its first welcome among the successors of Chǐn.*

*We now take up the tale of Lyóu Bāng.*

Lyóu Bāng, as station chief, was escorting a group of forced laborers to Lí-shān. Many of the laborers escaped on the way; he figured that by the time he got there, he would have lost them all. When they reached the meadows to the west of Fvng, he stopped for a drink. Then, in the night, he released those in his care, saying “You guys beat it; I’m getting out of here too.” Among them were ten or so brave fellows who wanted to follow him.

Lyóu Bāng, feeling his wine, set out by night across the meadow, sending a man ahead, who returned and reported “There’s a big snake blocking the path; let’s go back.” Lyóu Bāng, now drunk, said “When a brave man marches, what does he know of fear?” He went forward, drew his sword, and struck the snake, cutting it in two, so the path lay open. He went on several leagues; then, overcome by intoxication, lay down to sleep. When those following behind came to where the snake had been, they found an old crone weeping in the night. They asked why she was weeping. She said “someone killed my son, so I am weeping for him.” The men asked how her son had come to be killed. She said “My son was the son of the God of White. He had taken the form of a snake and was lying across the path, and now the son of the God of Red has beheaded him; therefore, I weep.” They thought she was lying, and made to take her in for questioning, but suddenly she was not to be seen. When the men came up to Lyóu Bāng, he had wakened, and they told him the story. Lyóu Bāng was secretly pleased. His confidence increased, and his followers became day by day more in awe of him.

*Over the next few years, Lyóu Bāng coaxed away Syàng Yǔ’s best generals, and so gradually gained the military upper hand. We rejoin the story a few years later, at a point when Syàng Yǔ has been outmaneuvered, and is surrounded by Lyóu Bāng’s forces. He tries at least to escape with what is left of his army.*

King Syàng made a fortified camp at Gāi-syà. His troops were few, his food gone, and the Hân armies and the soldiers of the several Lords had surrounded him several lines deep. In the night, from the Hân camps on all four sides, he heard songs of Chǔ. King Syàng was greatly startled, and said “Has Hân already gained all of Chǔ? How many Chǔ men they have!” King Syàng then got up in the night, and drank within his tent. He had a beautiful woman named Yw whom he always favored and took along with him, and a fine horse named Dapple which he always rode. King Syàng now sang a sad air of heroic melancholy, and himself made a poem for it:

*My strength tore up the mountains, ah; the age I overtopped,  
The times give no advantage, ah; Dapple’s hoofs are stopped;  
Dapple’s hoofs are stopped, ah; what still can I do?  
Yw, ah; Yw, ah; how can I lose you too?*

He sang it several times, and the beautiful woman echoed it. King Syàng's tears ran down in several streams. His attendants to left and right wept too; not one of them could bear to raise his head to watch. King Syàng then mounted his horse and rode forth. The stout officers and their riders under his banner were eight hundred some. While it was still night, they broke through the encirclement and galloped south. At dawn, the Hàn armies saw what had happened, and ordered cavalry commander Gwàn Yīng to pursue them with five thousand riders. King Syàng crossed the Hwái; those who could keep up with him were only a hundred some. When King Syàng reached Yīn-líng he became confused and lost his way. He asked a farmer, but the farmer deceived him, saying "Go left." He went left, and stumbled into a marsh. For this reason, the Hàn pursuing force caught up with him. King Syàng again led his troops to the east. When he reached Dūng-ch'ung, he had only twenty-eight riders left; the Hàn pursuing cavalry numbered several thousand.

King Syàng realized that he could not get away. He said to his riders "It is eight years from the time when I first raised troops until today. I have in person fought more than seventy battles. All who stood against me I destroyed; all I attacked submitted. I was never defeated, and in the end, as Hegemon, I possessed the world. But now at last I find myself hemmed in here. This is Heaven destroying me; it is no fault of mine in battle. Today I am resolved to die, but I should like to make a sally for you gentlemen and win three victories. For you gentlemen, I shall break through the encirclement, behead a commander, and cut down a flag, so that you gentlemen will know that it is Heaven destroying me, and not any fault of mine in battle." He then divided his riders into four companies, facing four ways, and the Hàn army surrounded them several layers deep. King Syàng said to his riders "I will now get one of their commanders for you." He ordered the riders facing in four directions to ride down, planning to form again in three companies east of the mountain. Then King Syàng gave a great shout and rode down, and the Hàn troops broke in confusion; he did in the end behead one Hàn commander.

The Lord of Chì-chywán led the cavalry in pursuit of King Syàng. King Syàng glared and shouted at him. The Lord's men and horses were startled, and gave way for several leagues. His riders reformed in three groups. The Hàn army did not know which group King Syàng was in. The Hàn army divided its troops into three, and again surrounded their opponents. King Syàng rode forth, beheaded an Inspector-General, killed several tens or a hundred men, and again assembled his riders: he had lost only two men. He then said to his riders "How was that?" His riders did homage, saying, "It is as the Great King had said."

King Syàng now thought to cross the Wū River on the east. The Wū River station chief was waiting with a ferry boat. He said to King Syàng “Though the land east of the river is small, its area is still a thousand leagues, with several tens of myriads of people; it too is worth ruling. I beg the Great King to quickly cross. Only your subject has a boat; when the Hàn army arrives, it will have no way to cross.”

King Syàng laughed and said “Heaven is destroying me; what use is there in crossing over? Moreover, years ago, with eight thousand youths from east of the river, Ji crossed over and headed west; now I return without one man. Even if the fathers and brothers east of the river pitied me and made me king, how could I face them? Even if they did not speak of it, would not Ji be ashamed in his heart?” He then said to the station chief, “I see Your Excellency is a worthy man. I have ridden this horse five years; in all who faced him there was not his equal; he once went a thousand leagues in one day. I cannot bear to kill him; I make Your Excellency a present of him.”<sup>1</sup>

He then had his riders dismount and go on foot, carrying short swords. When they joined battle, he alone killed several hundred of the Hàn army. King Syàng bore on his body more than ten wounds; he turned and saw the Hàn cavalry marshal Lǚ Mǎ-túng, and said “Are you not my old friend?” Mǎ-túng turned toward him, and gestured to Wáng Yì, saying “This is King Syàng”. King Syàng then said “I hear that Hàn has put a price on my head: a thousand gold and a city of a myriad households. I will do you the favor.” He then cut his own throat and died. Wáng Yì took his head, and other riders trampled on each other contending for King Syàng; several tens were killed in the ensuing scuffle. When it was over, Rider of the Guard Yáng Syǐ, Cavalry Marshal Lǚ Mǎ-túng, and Guardsmen Lǚ Shǔng and Yáng Wǔ, had each gotten one limb. When they put the body together, the parts fitted. And so they divided the prize territory into five fiefs.

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*So much for the wars; the Chǔ opposition is now eliminated. Before looking in on the triumphant Hàn end of the epic, we may pause a moment out of respect to those who had fallen in the service of Chǔ.*

<sup>1</sup>Say what one will of winners; Syàng Yǔ is the hero of this piece; see p329.



*Nine Songs*

*The fallen soldiers of Chǔ were honored in this memorial hymn, sung at a service held for the departed, complete with a closing benediction. They now make up the 10th and 11th of the “Nine Songs of Chǔ.”*

*First is the memorial hymn proper in separately-rhyming couplets, ending with a separately-rhyming quatrain. This is followed by the benediction which concludes the service, in six lines. The broadening of the form, from units of two lines, to four lines, ending in six lines, is part of the solemnity of the occasion.*

*Metrically, we have heptameter lines in the 10th Song (4+3 syllables, the 4th being “ah;” the same meter as Syāng Yǔ’s Gāi-syā song, p46), plus a sort of pentameter (3+2 syllables, the 3rd being “ah”) in the 11th Song.*

*The metrical inventory of the post-classical period is slowly taking shape.*

Spears of Wú we grasp, ah; armor of hide we wear,  
 Wheel-hubs clash below, ah; sword thrusts fill the air;  
 Pennons hide the sun, ah; like clouds the foemen swarm,  
 Crisscross fall the arrows, ah; ahead our captains storm.  
 Our lines are overwhelmed, ah; our ranks are put to flight,  
 A dead horse falls on the left, ah; and a wounded one on the right;  
 Axles twain are tangled, ah; turn the team around,  
 Seize the jaden drumsticks, ah; let the signal sound!  
 Heaven’s times smile not, ah; the gods are of angry mind,  
 The fearful slaughter done, ah; we leave the field behind;  
 They never shall return, ah; forever they are gone,  
 The level plain is distant, ah; the road runs on and on;  
 Swords yet girt about them, ah; their longbows firm they hold  
 Head and body severed, ah; but still their hearts are bold.  
*Brave you were indeed, ah; and in battle skilled,  
 Valiant to the end, ah; your fearless blood you shed;  
 Though perished be your bodies, ah; your spirits still strike dread –  
 Your immortal souls, ah; are heroes among the dead.*

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The service ends, ah; in a flourish of drum  
 The dancers’ fronds, ah; are held at plumb  
 The maidens’ voices, ah; now softly hum  
 The fragrant orchid, ah; the chrysanthemum,  
 Through endless ages, ah; of time to come

*Meanwhile, Lyóu Bāng, now Hàn Gāu-dzǔ, "The High Ancestor of Hàn," the founder of a dynasty, returns in triumph to his old home, Pèi. The vanquished Syàng Yǔ had sung a sad song at Gāi-syà (p46), and this song of Gāu-dzǔ, in the same meter, also produces tears. Both are in the heroic mode.*

Gāu-dzǔ, on his way back, passed by Pèi, and paused there. He set out wine in the Palace of Pèi, and himself made this song:

*The Great Wind has arisen, ah,  
the clouds before it flee;  
As I return, I've mastered, ah  
All Within the Sea.  
But where can I find bold officers, ah  
to give it security?*

He had some children practice until they could sing it. Gāu-dzǔ himself arose and danced it; he was greatly moved, and his tears flowed down in streams. He said to the elders of Pèi, "The wanderer longs for his old home. Though I now dwell within the Passes, and though it be a myriad years, my soul will always think with pleasure of Pèi. As Prince of Pèi, I went forth to bring to justice the cruel and perverse; in the end, I came to possess the world. I would make Pèi my bath-town: in gratitude to its people: from generation to generation, no taxes shall be required of them." The elders of Pèi, the women, and his friends, celebrated all that day, with great rejoicing . . .

After more than ten days, Gāu-dzǔ made to depart. The elders of Pèi tried to detain Gāu-dzǔ, but he said, "My people are many, and the elders cannot provide for them." He thereupon departed. Pèi and all the district all went to the western edge of town; Gāu-dzǔ stayed to drink for another three days. The elders of Pèi all bowed their heads and said, "Pèi has been fortunate in this return, but to Fǔng you have not returned. Let Your Highness take pity on it." Gāu-dzǔ said, "Fǔng is where I was born and grew up; it least of all could I forget. It is only that I recall how under Yǔng Chǐ it rebelled against me, and went over to Ngwèi." The Elders of Pèi urgently besought him, and he made the same arrangement for it as for Pèi, and he made Lyóu Pì, the Lord of Pèi, the King of Wú.

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*And so Chǔ was defeated, and the contest to replace Chín was won by Hàn.*

Sùng Yw

## Nine Changes

*But in the literary realm, Chǔ conquered. Its literature was vastly influential in the new dynasty, giving rise to the elaborate court fù (“rhapsody”), and also to laments of the minister who is out of favor. Poems in the Chǔ style were written, and collected, together with work of the real Chǔ poets, under the title Chǔ Tsž. The series “Nine Changes” was ascribed to the Chǔ poet Sùng Yw. The orchid is the wise courtier, a flower subtly fragrant, but not prized (plucked and worn) by the ruler; the poet has been banished. There are three sections (failure to be heard, desire to return, lament for the state, both the last two quatrains, and all three marked by a rhyme change. The autumn floods at the end suggest the end of the season, and the end of the ruler’s favor. The poet laments the fate of the dynasty, deprived as it is of his wise advice.*

*“Sùng Yw” figures in an off-color burlesque in the Six Dynasties, in which the accused courtier successfully defends himself against being dismissed (p102).*

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Alas that once the orchid flower did open out, ah,  
 graceful, by the Palace on display.  
 Why never did the flower come to fruit, ah,  
 but with the wind and rain was whirled away.  
 I would have thought the Lord would wear that special flower, ah  
 – he could not tell it from the everyday.  
 Mournful it is, that those wise counsels were not heard, ah,  
 and from His Presence now I take my way.  
 My heart with mournful thoughts is all beset, ah;  
 if only I might see Him once, and have my say.  
 No regrets; yet parted for this lifetime, ah:  
 inwardly, I feel the more dismay.  
 How can I but think with anguish of my Lord, ah  
 but nine are the gates that meet the traveler’s view;  
 Where fierce dogs bark and snarl at the intruder, ah;  
 barred is the door, and lets nobody through.  
 August Heaven pours down its rains; the autumn floods, ah  
 Lordly Earth: when will it once more be dry?  
 Alone I dwell, apart from that sustaining, ah  
 I gaze at the clouds, and endlessly I sigh.

Szǎmǎ Syàng-rú (0179-0117)

### Rhapsody on the Shàng-lín Park

*The fû or “rhapsody” is an extended description or praise poem. It began in the southern state of Chǔ, but came into its own in the unified Empire, when centralized rule tended to draw all splendors unto itself. At the regional court of the King of Lyáng (fl 0178-0144), Syàng-rú wrote a fû in which representatives of northern Chí and southern Chǔ describe the hunting parks of their two kingdoms. This was too good to leave alone. Emperor Wǔ (r 0140-087) summoned Syàng-rú to court, ordering him to compose a fû on the Shàng-lín, the imperial hunting park. Forced to outdo himself, Syàng-rú outdoes himself. He begins with descriptions of Chí and Chǔ hunting parks, and then comes a third person, who rebukes them:*

When the Emperor demands that the feudal lords bear their tribute to his court, it is not that he desires the goods and articles they bring, but that his vassals may thereby report on the administration of their offices; and when he causes mounds to be raised on the borders of states and their boundaries to be marked off, these are not for the purpose of defense, but so that the feudal lords may not trespass upon each other’s lands. Now, although the King of Chí has been enfeigned in the east to serve as a bastion to the Imperial House, he is carrying on secret contacts with the Su-shvn and jeopardizing his own state by crossing his borders and sailing over the sea to hunt in the Green Hills, actions which are a violation of his duties. Both of you gentlemen, instead of attempting in your discussions to make clear the duties of lord and subject, and striving to rectify the behavior of the feudal lords, vainly dispute with each other over the joys of hunting and the size of parks, each attempting to outdo the other in descriptions of lavish expenditures, each striving for supremacy in wanton delights. This is no way to win fame and gain praise, but will only blacken the names of your rulers and bring ruin to yourselves.

Besides, what do the states of Chí and Chǔ possess, that is worth speaking about? You gentleman have never laid eyes on true splendor. Have you not heard of the Shàng-lín Park of the Son of Heaven?

*. . . and he is off in a coruscation of grand description, totally outshining all previous efforts, in a piece which has been the despair of translators, including the present one.*

*The rhapsody had a distinguished history in later literature, where, like some great cataract, it comes to flow more calmly, and to lend itself to shorter and less mighty descriptions. We will meet some of these in due course.*

Hàn Wǔ-dì (r 0140-087)

The Song for Lady Lǐ (Hàn Shū 97a)

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*Wǔ-dì was the great personality of Hàn. His armies extended the Empire beyond the Chín limits; he put Sǐmǎ Syàng-rú in charge of finding a safer route to India, but the old mule track could not be modernized. He ruled with Legalist severity, but created an efficient civil service by patronizing Confucianism, making its texts official classics for Hàn. His court was the literary headquarters of the world. Around him gathered many myths, such as this one, from a later century.*

*Love is vulnerable to all the uncertainties of life and death. Sometimes magic is called in when all else has failed. The Emperor, whose adored Lady Lǐ has died, calls on supernatural assistance for just a little more. Wine and meat are a sacrificial meal offered to the dead, who then, it is supposed, come to take part. The lack of rhyme in his song echoes a lack in the oldest Shī sacrificial poems, whereas the polymeter of this song suggests popular, not elite, tradition.*

His Highness thought unceasingly of Lady Lǐ. A magician of Chí, Shàu-wǎng, said he could summon her spirit. One night, he set out a lamp and stretched a curtain. He laid out wine and meat, and had His Highness sit behind another curtain. Looking from a distance, he saw a lovely girl, in form like Lady Lǐ, come to the curtain, sit, and walk. But he could not go closer to look. His Highness was yet more moved to sad thoughts, and made this poem:

*Is it her? Or is it not?*

*I stand and look from far away:*

*How graceful she appears;*

*how slow her coming!*

“Bān Jye-yw” (c046)

### On a Fan

*This piece was in all probability not written by “Lady Bān” (her court rank). Somebody borrowed her name for a poem on the theme of the neglected worthy.*

*The real Lady Bān was replaced in the Emperor’s favor by another, a fact which every reader of this poem will have known. The poem is thus not an insight into the feelings of its author; it is the aspirants to high office talking to themselves, in metaphoric language, about the uncertainty of their lives and hopes.*

*The use of the pentameter line, in 2 + 3 syllable form, is new and noteworthy.*

I take a piece of fragrant silk from Chí,  
 Purer than the frostfall, snowy white,  
 And make of it Fan for Pleasures Shared,  
 Round as the moon that glistens in the night:  
 Companion to Milord, in gown or sleeve,  
 Stirring gentle breezes into flight.  
 And yet I fear that when the autumn comes,  
 With fiery heat replaced by cool and light,  
 It will be put aside in box or chest –  
 Banished from the favor of his sight.



## Old Lyric

## “At Fifteen Years, I Left With the Campaign”

*The wars of Hàn were constant. Some were clashes between rebellious regions and the central government, others pushed into the northern steppe, in part to establish and maintain commercial contact with the West. Campaigns could go on for years, and in this piece the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought them – even when they survived to return home – is dramatically emphasized. Our soldier returns, like a living version of the wandering ghosts at left, encountering on the way a fellow who, with awkward sympathy, evades his question about the folks he had left behind. On arrival, he finds that his own family are now ghosts: everything is either dead, or abandoned, or reverted to wilderness.*

*He makes food from the weeds, and finds that he has no one to whom he could offer it; his duty to his parents can no longer be fulfilled. Everything that might make the homecoming meaningful is gone.*

*From the polymeter of the first of our Hàn poems, we have slipped into straight pentameter; which at this point begins to replace the tetrameter which had been standard since the time of the Shī. This piece is also organized in quatrains. Thus do later Chinese prosodic preferences crystallize out of earlier practice.*

At fifteen years, I left with the campaign,  
 At eighty years, my leave at last is due:  
 Going home, I meet a villager:  
 “Who’s still living, of the ones I knew?”  
 “Way off yonder is milord’s abode”–  
 The gravemound pines reach high into the blue.  
 In the dog-hole runs a startled hare,  
 On the rafter nests a grouse or two.  
 Creeping tares have covered all the yard,  
 Creeping mallow hides the well from view;  
 A meal of tare I set about to make,  
 A broth of mallow I begin to brew.  
 Meal and broth are finished soon enough,  
 But there’s no one that I could give them to –  
 I go outside, and gaze into the east:  
 With falling tears, my clothes are moistened through



*Nineteen Old Poems*

## 14

*This is one of a number of Hàn poems that were made collectively famous by being gathered together as a set in the sixth-century anthology Wǎn Sywǎn.*

*This poem does not sorrow for the bereaved individual, nor does it lament our common human mortality. Its point is that even death passes out of memory: the very tombs die, and are plowed under and forgotten. Loss of life is not so serious – we all know, at some level, that loss of life is the price of life. But loss of memory, loss of a past that can be revisited, is something worse.*

Those that are gone, each day more distant seem,  
 Those that are left, each day more precious grow.  
 I stare ahead, beyond the city wall,  
 Seeing only hillocks, high and low.  
 The ancient tombs for farmers' fields are leveled,  
 Cypress and pine were kindling long ago;  
 Many the sorrowing winds among the poplars,  
 So lonely as to kill a man with woe.  
 Ah, to return to the gates of my native town –  
 Back again; but there's no way to go.



*Nineteen Old Poems*

## 4

*Here is one of the more assertive of the "Nineteen." The banquet entertainers at left, one performing a sword dance, are from a Hàn tomb engraving. There is vigor in this poem too, and it ends with a moral: one should enjoy one's pleasures, but, like Ch'yn Shv' (p45), also try to accomplish something while there is still time.*

*The poem is in seven couplets; other "old" poems have five or eight couplets. There is no principle of form here, other than organization in couplets. The poem simply goes on, thought by thought, until it has reached its end, and then it stops. This is more or less what is meant by "old style."*

Today a splendid banquet there is held,  
 Its pleasures far too many to portray:  
 The fingered cithern stirs a resonance,  
 Its fresh new sounds divinely interplay.  
 The artists sing of aspiration high,  
 The hearers grasp the point of what they say:  
 Alike their hearts, that hold a single wish,  
 But what it is, they none of them betray.  
 Human life is set within its term,  
 Like dust upon the wind, it blows away.  
 How can one but whip his horses up,  
 And strive to lead, upon life's onward way?  
 Not stay behind, in poverty and gloom,  
 Bewailing one's misfortunes day by day!

Anonymous

## Long-Song Ballad

*The Chín suppression of Confucian texts was repealed in early Hàn, and experts in the various Confucian texts were sought out and installed at court, beginning in the reign of Emperor W'yn (0179-0155). Confucianism was officially recognized as the qualification for state office in the early years of that Emperor. The state structure, the career structure, was in place. The career opportunities thus created led to an age of optimism and energy, which this poem expresses. There is a push to make something of oneself, whether militarily or otherwise.*

*What is "long" about this ballad is that, like the poems on p56 and 57, it has one rhyme-sound throughout (for change of rhyme within a poem, see p51 and 55). In just a moment, we will meet a "Short Song Ballad" by Tsáu Tsāu (p63). A later poet might have omitted the final moral; its presence adds a certain antique quality. "Blazing yellow" is the sun of autumn, starting with warm weather, six weeks after the summer solstice. The eastward flow of Chinese rivers is proverbial. And no less than the river, time never returns, and life is only now.*

Garden sunflowers all in green arrayed,  
 Morning dewdrops in the dwindling shade;  
 The warmth of springtime spreads its virtue forth:  
 On every hand its luster is displayed.  
 But always one must fear the autumn time:  
 In blazing yellow, flower and leaf will fade.  
 The hundred streams run eastward to the sea:  
 When will they flow back in retrograde?  
 If Youth does not exert its energy,  
 In vain will Age be bitterly dismayed.