

*Lady Cao,  
To the Son of Heaven,  
in response to Decree 21827  
Re: the former chief of Deshima  
Titsingh, also written Ti Qing*

May Heaven bestow longevity on Your Majesty! As soon as injuries permitted—nay, sooner—I set myself to the task of obeying Your command, and if my handwriting lacks its usual elegance this is due to the corporal punishment with which my previous request was rewarded. Yet to keep Your Majesty waiting seems more unbecoming than a faltering calligraphy.

It was the chief Councillor in person who, surrounded by four of his stalwarts, graced our Pavilion with his presence, and no other than he wielded the rod—corrective action apparently being too momentous a task with which to entrust inferiors. So far, I have not mentioned his name. Nevertheless, the tone and tenor of my previous pleas must have offended Grand Councillor Heshen deeply: he seemed beside himself with rage.

‘A whore, that’s what you are, a lowly harlot! Admit it!’

The bamboo swished above my bare back. I neither squirmed nor cried. My mouth was sealed; my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth, for I am not and have never been what Your servant made me out to be! True, after Xueqin’s death, in circumstances so straitened that maintaining residency in Peking seemed ill-advised, I went to Nanking and became a courtesan—a word which, if it had lost its lustre, still meant something other than *harlot*. A courtesan used to be a lady who moved in eminent circles: scholars saluted her as a confidante, privy to tender sentiment and poetic mystery. Who would dare call the poetess Liu Rushi a whore?

Rest assured, Your Majesty: it was merely to chide bad taste that I gainsaid Heshen; never did I intend to defy *You*. I even owe Your Majesty gratitude for commanding Heshen to spare my soles; under Your glorious reign, the flogging of feet has fallen into disuse. Be that as it may, I would never call myself a harlot, and never will I stoop to mendacity, let alone betray those noble courtesans of yore! And while the stick descended on my back, blow after blow, stab after stab of pain, my loyalty to the Throne wavered not. I counted the blows; I endured the pain. At eighteen I rose from the block. My tousled hair stuck to blood on my shoulder blades while I clamped the bodice of sackcloth to my bosom.

I advanced; Heshen and his cronies recoiled...

My back was in shreds; the blood dripped on the flagstones. I ignored it, and demanded permission to speak. Heshen nodded with a chalk-white face.

In the deafening silence, I kowtowed to Your Majesty's underling. My forehead touched the floor, while pain numbed my wits. High above me I heard: 'Baoqin! If not a whore, what are you?'

As if stung I blurted out, 'The incarnation of Liu Rushi! I, Heshen, embody courtesans on a par with the poets, writing poetry them- selves!'

'Ha! What poem proves your literary merit? *Erotic* merit will do as well.' His henchmen bellowed with laughter; I ignored them. Heshen drew closer. The stench of cheap jasmine tea vexed my nostrils while he whispered, 'Tell me, woman, what's the best verse you ever wrote?'

'The best verse?' Words, images, dreams tumbled through my waking mind like an infestation of butterflies. 'I wouldn't know, good Sir. Many a poem of mine can be found in any anthology worth its salt, at least those the Censorate didn't burn. Better judge for yourself!'

Heshen stood motionless. None of the forgotten concubines has ever believed him to be a eunuch, although he had been sighted at night in the Forbidden City, a privilege never granted to a whole man. To me, though, Heshen was nothing but a eunuch: I could not envisage that man loving a woman—the thought of it! How such ideas could enter my head, I have no way of knowing, nor do I wish to know. I know only that I had to muster courage, Oh Majesty, courage that overcomes pain. 'I care not for my poems,' I continued. 'My genre is the novel. If Heaven permits, my novel will be completed ere I die. And if Heaven does not permit, I shall perish with a work-in-progress to my name, as *he* did!'

'He – who?'

I, being rather tall, rose above the chief Councillor's plump figure, at my eye level his shaved skull gleamed beneath his hat-with- peacock-feather. 'He who created *Dream of the Red Chamber!*'

'Not merely a harlot, I hear, but a harlot who thinks of herself as the paragon of sophistication!'

His words were like squeals of mice. Even Heshen must bow to the Imagination. '*Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; // Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real,*' I replied, quoting the deceased Cao Xueqin.

'So she did read the *Dream!*' he jeered to his company. 'The entire first chapter, no less!'

I hope Your Majesty finds it in Him to chide His servant for this; in the presence of a Lady of Letters, such rudeness was most unseemly!

‘Not only did I read the book from cover to cover, master Heshen, I had a part in the story myself. More adventures of mine will be found in the novel I am composing now. Who knows, I may even make *you* immortal!’

His face turned purple. ‘Hold your tongue, woman, or I’ll declare the thrashing invalid and have the procedure repeated from scratch!’

‘Heshen!’

Old Concubine Chun Xian—it was at her request that Heshen’s punitive exercise was reduced to half—had entered the hall without a stick to lean on. Startled, Heshen and his cronies stared at her. Indeed all eyes were glued to her frail yet proud stature, shuffling towards the couch we offered her. But she ignored the gesture. She pointed an arthritic finger at Heshen; the faint tinkle of her tiny bracelets accentuated the quiet.

‘Show us the Emperor’s Decree commanding what you did to Lady Cao.’

With reluctance, he produced the document, waving it disdainfully in front of her eyes. Oh Your Majesty, even in the blur of my unshed tears I noticed the Imperial Seal was lacking.

‘Has the Emperor endorsed the punishment?’ the venerable old lady inquired.

The Grand Councillor was at a loss for an answer.

‘A forgery!’ Chun Xian exclaimed with a quivering voice. ‘Out of my sight, you scum, and be damned! Yongzheng’s remembrance has been sufficiently profaned, wouldn’t you say?’

The name of Your forbidding Imperial Father, whose favourite Chun Xian once was, drove all who were present out of our wits for fear. Your confidant left the pavilion as if it had been he who had been administered a thrashing, his henchmen skulking at his tail. That’s how it was, Your Majesty: Old Concubine Chun Xian, Your youngest step-aunt, can testify.