To tell you the truth," said Aunt Yang. "I would prefer to stay, were it not for the fact that my second nephew, Yang Tsun-gan, from outside the city gate, has sent someone to invite me to his betrothal party, which is taking place tomorrow, and I would like to attend.

Thereupon, she said her farewells and departed.

Yeh-niang kept the wives of Fu Ming and Kau Jun, along with Pan the Fourth’s wife, and Big Sister Tuan, in the master suite to keep company with Sister-in-law Wu, Old Mrs. Pan, and Li Kuei-chih, while Second Sister Shen and Big Sister Yu took turns singing songs to entertain them, the two boy musicians having been sent off to the reception hall in the front compound.

The party continued until after the lamps had been lighted, when the wives of Hsü-men Chiing’s three employees said goodbye and left. Only Big Sister Tuan remained, and she went off to spend the night in Sun Hiether’s quarters in the rear compound, while Old Mrs. Pan made her way to Pan Chin-lien’s quarters. The only people left sitting in Yeh-niang’s room were Sister-in-law Wu, Li Kuei-chih, Second Sister Shen, and the three nuns, along with Big Sister Yu, and Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yu-lou, and Pan Chia-lien.

Suddenly, they learned that Hsü-men Chiing’s drinking party had broken up, and the page boys began to bring back the utensils, at which Chin-lien hastily withdrew and set out toward the front compound. When she arrived there, she stood silently in the dark shadows beside the postern gate, where she saw Hsü-men Chiing, being supported by Lai-an, as he staggered in the direction of Li Ping-erh’s quarters. When he caught sight of Chin-lien standing by the gate, he took her by the hand and accompanied her into her quarters, while Lai-an proceeded back to the master suite to turn over the goblets and chopsticks he was carrying.

Yeh-niang, assuming that Hsü-men Chiing was on his way back, sent Second Sister Shen, Li Kuei-chih, and Big Sister Yu off to Li Chiao-erh’s quarters and asked Lai-an, "Has Father come with you? What’s he doing in the front compound?"

"Father has retired to the Fifth Lady’s quarters," replied Lai-an. "He’s had enough of it for this evening."

When Yeh-niang heard this, she became annoyed at heart and said to Meng Yu-lou, "Just look at that feckless good-for-nothing! I assumed that tonight, of all nights, when he came back inside, he would plan to go into your quarters, but instead, without anyone’s knowing it, he has groped his way into that place of hers. These last few days, he has been so driven by his lecherous desires that all he wants to do is fool around with her in the front compound!"

"Sister," said Meng Yu-lou, "let him fool around if he likes. If we object, it makes it look as though we give this one thing priority over everything else and are merely competing with each other for his favors. It reminds me of the punchline in that joke of Num Wang’s. After all, he has the run of all six chambers, does he not? What Father nuts after in his heart is not something that you or I can control."

"It must surely have been prearranged," remarked Yeh-niang. "Just now, upon hearing that the party up front had broken up, she took off for the front compound as though her life depended on it."

She then turned to Hsiao-yo and said, "If there is no longer anyone working in the kitchen, you can lock the ceremonial gate between the front and rear compounds for me, and then invite the three nuns to come back here, so we can listen to them recite a precious scroll for us."

She also invited Li Kuei-chih, Second Sister Shen, Big Sister Tuan, and Big Sister Yu to rejoin them, after which, she turned to Sister-in-law Wu and explained, "I have already asked the nuns to send one of their disciples to fetch a copy of Huang-shih mi ch’ien, or The Precious Scroll on Woman Huang, to recite for us. It’s too bad that Aunt Yang has already left today."

She then ordered Yu-hsiao to brew some good tea, but Meng Yu-lou addressed Li Chiao-erh, saying, "Let the two of us take turns providing the tea. It’s not appropriate to impose a further burden on Elder Sister’s staff."

Thereupon, they each went back to their own quarters and told their maid-servants to take care of the tea.

Before long, when the three nuns had come in, and a bed table had been placed on the Long, they seated themselves behind it, in the lotus position, while the rest of the company crowded into the room and took their seats in order to hear the recitation of the precious scroll. Yeh-niang washed her hands and lit joss incense, while Nun Hoo-erh opened The Precious Scroll on Woman Huang and proceeded to declaim it in a loud voice as follows.31

I have heard tell that, although the Dharma is not subject to annihilation, it is through extinction that we achieve nirvana; although the Way is not created, it is through creation that it is negated. The dharmakaya gave rise to the eight phases of the Buddha’s life; the eight phases were manifestations of the dharmakaya. The lamp of wisdom is burning brightly32; the better to open the doorways of this world; the mirror of the Buddha is shining clearly; in order to illuminate the path of darkness.33 The events of our hundred years of life slpape in an instant; the four elements that form our bodies are as ephemeral as bubbles or shadows. Every day we exhaust ourselves in mundane labor; all day long we are obsessed by karmic consciousness. How can we comprehend perfect enlightenment34 when our six senses are devoted to greed and lust? World-famous achievements35 are merely grandiose dreams; the most amazing wealth and distinction will not enable us to evade the word impermanence.36 When we expire like wind or fire, neither the old nor the young are spared.37 when the hills and streams are ended away, what heroes will there be? What I propose to do is broadcast a gatha to the ten directions, summoning all eight classes of supernatural beings to the altar,38 to save them from incineration in the burning house,39 and give them a key to nirvana.
Gatha:
Wealth and distinction, poverty and want, each have their causes;
Since they are predetermined, there is no reason to question them.
If you have neglected to plant your seeds during the springtime;
It is vain to expect your barren fields to produce an autumn harvest.

If you ascribed bodhisattva will listen to my exposition of the Buddhist dharma,
this gatha of four lines that I have just recited was bequeathed to us by a patriarch of old.
How should we explain the line:
Wealth and distinction, poverty and want, each have their causes?

In the case of you bodhisattva, you are married to a husband who is possessed of
high office and ample enrichment, and you reside in vast courtyards and secluded
mansions. You have slaves and maidservants at your beck and call and are studded
with gold and decked with silver. You grew up amid nests of satin and brocade and
were born amidst piles of silk and gemstone. When you desire clothing, you have a
thousand thousands of satin and brocade; when you want food, you have delicacies of
every variety. You are fated to bask in glory and luxury, and enjoy wealth and dis-
tinction. These are all the results of the karma accumulated in your prior lives,
which has bequeathed you a solid foundation, to which you are entitled without
having to ask for it. For the same reason, I am fortunate to be here pronouncing the
scriptures and reciting Buddha's name, as well as enjoying such delicious refresh-
ments, thanks to your benevolent hospitality. That I am fated to fare so well is no
inconsequential matter. We are all predestined to be present at the Dragon Flower
Assembly, thanks to the good karma that we have earned during our previous lives.
Had we failed to do so, it would be like neglecting to plant seeds in the springtime,
only to face barren fields at the time of the autumn harvest. In such a case, where
would the ripened seed-bearing fruit come from? Truly:

Sweep clear the spirit tower of your mind, the better to begin to work;
However happy and gratified you may become, do not relax your efforts.
Struggle to wash clean the five impurities along with the six senses;
Only then will you apprehend the mysterious doctrine and find the truth.
The hundred years of one's human existence vanish in the blink of an eye; this body of ours is fated to be transformed into nothing but flying ash. Who is able during this present incarnation to attain true enlightenment? To arrive at total comprehension of the need to revert to the concentrated? Human existence is absolutely impermanent; gone in the space of a breath, it resembles the sight of the red sun as it sinks behind the western hills. Just like returning empty-handed after one traverses a hill of treasures, once your human life is lost, it may be hard to recover in a myriad kalpas. When one comes to think about it, wealth and honor, glory and luxury, are like snow when sprinkled with scalding water. Upon careful consideration, not one of them amounts to anything; but will prove to be as evanescent as an interrupted dream. Though you may, at present, have achieved incamation as a human being, in your heart you are distressed and troubled lest, upon your death, the four elements of which you are constituted may be transformed to dust, and you do not even know where what is left of your soul will be sent to suffer. If you are fearful of the revolving wheel of life and death, you must resolve to take a step in order to move forward.

The preface of the precious scroll says: The Buddha who revolved himself in response to cries of distress, who neither courses nor goes, who holds the crown of Buddhahood, whose great vows are so vast and profound, has sworn his forty-eight vows to work for the salvation of all living beings, until each and every one of them is enabled to achieve the realization of his true nature. The mind of Amittabha is ever pure, enabling him to ferry all living beings across the sea of bitterness, the great waves of the sea of bitterness, so they may attain the wonderful fruits of enlightenment. The recitation of this text will serve to alleviate sins as numerous as the sands of the Ganges; the invocation of this text will serve to augment good fortune without limit. Those who copy this text or recite it will be reborn in the Heaven of the Lotus Treasury, those who either read it or hear it, upon their deaths will proceed to the Pure Land of the Western Paradise. All those who recite Buddha's name will achieve unlimited merit. Relying on his compassion, his compassion, his great compassion, commit yourselves to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha in all ten directions, sincerely paying homage to the eternal nature of the Three Jewels, for the wheel of the law turns unceasingly, to save all living beings.

Gatha:

The subtle and mysterious dharma of utmost profundity, is difficult to encounter even in myriads of kalpas. Now that we have heard it, and are able to keep it, We wish to understand the true meaning of the Teachings. The Precious Scroll on Woman Huang has just been opened; May all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas come down to hear it. The incense in the burner permeates the world of vanity; The sound of Buddha's names shakes the nine directions.

In former days, when the Han emperor governed the world, the rains were seasonable, the winds were favorable, the country prosperous, and the people were content, which elicited the birth of a good-hearted woman, the daughter of a householder named Huang, who resided in Niao-hua district of Tu-yen-chou prefecture. She possessed well-proportioned and good-looking features and was only six years old when she determined to restrict herself to vegetarian fare, and recite the Diamond Sutra, in order to repay the profound kindness of her father and mother. She did this every day without fail, which moved the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin to
manifested herself to her in midair. When her parents saw that she devoted herself all day long to the recitation of the sutra, they did their best to dissuade her, but she refused to comply. One day, they sought out a go-between, selected a propitious day and hour, and married her off to a son-in-law, whose name was Chao Ling-fang, and who was a butcher by vocation. They remained married for twelve years, during which they gave birth to one son and two daughters. One day, Woman Huang said to her husband, "You and I have been married for twelve years and have given birth to these attractive children, but to devote ourselves solely to our mutual affection is to be eternally immersed in samara. I happen to know a little hymn, which I would persuade you to listen to, my husband. It goes as follows:

Our fate determined that we should become a couple as husband and wife. Although we have a son and daughter, Will you cease to strive for death? I humbly hope that you as my husband, Will reach a determination like mine, To practice religious cultivation, For the rest of our natural lives. Our goodness for wealth and honor, Should be given a diminished role. Ceasing to long for fame and fortune, We should live out our allotted days.

When Chao Ling-fang had assimilated the content of the hymn, he did not feel that he could accept it. One day, he said farewell and set out for Shantung in order to purchase some pigs. Woman Huang, seeing that her husband was not at home, took her rest in a purified chamber every day, faithfully performed her ablutions, lit incense, and devoted herself to the reverent recitation of the Diamond Sutra.

Chao Ling-fang, at the time, had already departed for Shantung. While their three boys and girls were to be found in the park.

Gaeta in decasyllabic verse:
The Woman Huang, in her western chamber, bathed in perfumed waters; Changed her clothes, removed her earrings, and made herself up lightly. Every single day, she faced toward the west, burnt incense, and worshipped. Confronted her rosary, and precious scroll, and recited the Diamond Sutra.

while penning the text, before she had done, the incense smoke dispersed. Reciting Buddha's name, her voice resonated, pervading the empty firmament.

At the gates of Hell, and the halls of Heaven, says light became manifest. When King Yama himself, became aware of this, his face was suffused with joy. It must be that, in the realm of the living, a Buddhist patriarch has appeared.

Hastily calling his two underworld assessors, he bade them ascertain the details. The Assessor reported back, "Your Majesty, the testimony heard affirms that, in Nan-hua district, of Ti-ao-chou prefecture, there is a virtuous believes; The Woman Huang, who studies the sacred texts, and eats only vegetarian fare; Whose good deeds, and meritorious austerity, have startled the halls of Heaven."

To the tune "Sutra in Letters of Gold":

On hearing these words, King Yama's heart was moved to respond, And he hastily called before him a pair of messengers of death. The pair of messengers speedily hastened to the Chao family's home. The Woman Huang was at the time engaged in reading the sacred texts, When she suddenly observed that there were two immortal lads before her.

Reception in heptasyllabic verse:

Virtuous persons are summoned to the shades by immortal lads; Whereas evil persons must have yakshas sent to summon them. Woman Huang, while penning her sacred text, quickly enquired, "Whose young lads are you that have chosen to come visit me?"
The immortal lad responded to Woman Huang with the words, “Good-hearted woman that you are, you need not be concerned. We do not belong among the mortal denizens of the mundane world, but are, rather, immortal lads who come from the world of shades. At present, because you so assiduously study the sacred texts, King Yama himself has sent you an invitation, good-hearted lady.”

Upon hearing these words, Woman Huang became disturbed at heart, proceeding one point at a time, to plead with the immortal lad, “You must be looking for someone of the same name and surname. Why should you be so insistent on summoning me before King Yama? I am not unwilling to suffer a thousand or ten thousand deaths. How can I abandon my precious boy and my two daughters? My eldest daughter, Chiao-ku, is only eight years of age. Fan-chiao is only five. How could she manage without her mother? My precious son, Ch’ang-shou, is merely two years of age. I constantly cradle him in my arms and could never forget him. If you can, somehow, find a way to spare this soul of mine, I undertake to perform more meritorious deeds on your behalf.”

The immortal lad only replied to Woman Huang by reiterating, “Who is there as anxious as you in reciting the Diamond Sutra?”

PROLOGUE:
The two lads responsible for recording good and evil deeds were pitiously plucked with by Woman Huang, who repeatedly expressed her reluctance to proceed to the Underworld because of her love for her three children, whom she could bear neither to leave nor to abandon. The immortal lad urged her, saying, “Good-hearted woman:

If the Underworld decides to summon you during the third watch, the hour of your death cannot be delayed until the fourth watch.”

The situation is not like that in the world of the living, where deadlines can be evaded. When you are summoned by the Underworld, if the deadline is not met, we are held strictly accountable, with no room for allowances.”

RECITATION IN HEPSTILLOEBIC VERSE:

Weinan Huang, after considering the situation in her heart, proceeded to order a maidservant to heat but water for her. No sooner did she finish bathing herself in perfumed water, than she proceeded to make her way into the Buddhist chapel, where she sat down in the lotus position and remained silent, while her numerous soul’s true being appeared before King Yama.

TO THE TUNE “AUTUMN ON THE CU’I RIVER”:

During the dream of mankind’s life, one’s allotted time is not enduring. When faced with danger, each of us is but a wind-blowing lamp. In no time at all, we must return once more to face King Yama. One must hastily prepare for the journey, and gaze upon one’s home from the Terrace of Homeward Casing Spirits. As one’s sons cry and one’s daughters weep, it is a scene of desolation. To the tune of clanging cymbals and beating drums, the funeral is held; dressing hemp garments and mourning apparel, one’s family lays one to rest.
Recitation in Heptasyllabic Verse:
Rather than speaking of Chaos Ling-fang's sense of desolation,
Let us tell of the trip of Woman Huang's soul to the underworld.
As she gradually approached the bank of the River of No Recourse,
She came to a Golden Bridge that enabled her to cross unharmed.
Should you enquire what the function of this bridge might be,
It is only for those who read sutras and
recite Buddha's name.³⁹
By the banks of the River of No Recourse
flowed a wave of blood,
In which were seen the numerous drowning
souls of sinful beings.
The sorrowful sound of their weeping and
wailing is ever present,
As, on all sides, poisonous serpents bite
into their exposes sinews.
As she continued, she came to the Mountain
of Damaged Paper Money.
Woman Huang then stepped forward and asked
her to have it explained to her.
"When you inhabitsof the world of the living
burn paper money,
And negligently discard it before it has
been completely incinerated,
The remains of it are blown about, reduced
to tattered fragments,
And are collected here to burn the Mountain
of Damaged Paper Money."
Her route then took her by the base of the
City of the Unjustly Dead,³⁹
Where there were innumerable homeless souls
who had not yet been relieved.
When Woman Huang learned of this, her heart
was filled with compassion.
And, lifting up her voice, she proceeded to
recite the Diamond Sutra.
At this, the sinful beings in the River of No
Recourse opened their eyes;
Lunar woods became perceptible to the corpses
of the burned and flayed,
Lotus blossoms appeared to those in boiling
cauldrons and lakes of fire;
And auspicious clouds, forthwith, descended
to envelop the Avid Hell.
Thereupon, the immortal kids could not help
feeling the pressing need,
To hasten as quickly as possible in order to
make a report to King Yama.

To the Tune "Sheep on the Mountain Slope":
When Woman Huang found herself in the
Sen-Lo Palace of King Yama,
A lad reported that they had brought the
scripture-reading person.
King Yama decreed that she be invited
into his presence,
And Woman Huang knelt on his knees beneath
the golden steps.
Unable to do anything other than to
protest before him:
King Yama asked, "How many years ago did you
start to recite the Diamond Sutra?
And on what day, month, and year did you move
Kuan-yin to appear before you?"
Woman Huang folded her hands in front of her
and related the preceding events.
"Ever since I was six, I have eaten vegetarian
food and worshipped Her Holiness.
I hope that Your Highness will consent to
believe me when I state that,
Since becoming married, my zeal for reciting
the sutra has not diminished."

Recitation in Heptasyllabic Verse:
King Yama, upon hearing this, hastened to
transmit the injunction,
Saying, "Good-hearted woman, pay heed to
what I have to ask you.
How many characters are contained in the
text of the Diamond Sutra?"
And how many strokes are required to render
its motric profundities?
With what character does it begin, and with
what character does it end?
And what two characters are found to be
situated at the midpoint?
If you prove capable of reciting the sutra
without making any errors,
Your soul will be released in order to return
to the world of the living.”
Woman Huang, at this juncture, stood beneath
the steps and replied, saying,
“I hope that Your Majesty will listen to my
request on the Diamond Sutra.
The text consists of exactly five thousand
and forty-nine characters,
Which are written with eighty-four thousand
dots and strokes of the brush.
It commences with the character jiu, and it
ends with the character hui.
The two characters hui-jiu are found to be
situated at its midpoint.”
Before Woman Huang had even finished her
explication of the sutra,
In his palace, King Yama emitted rays of
light between his eyebrows.
Raising his hand, and evincing pleasure
on his doglike countenance,
He stated, “Your soul is hereby released
to return to the human world.”
Upon taking in these words, Woman Huang
bowed to the ground, saying,
“I hope that Your Majesty will condescend
to pay heed to my requests.
Firstly, I do not wish to be reincarnated
in the house of a butcher.
Secondly, I do not wish to be reincarnated
in the house of a dyer.
My only desire is to be reincarnated into
the house of a good family,
Where I can spend my time reading sutras
and reciting Buddha’s name.”
King Yama thereupon took up his brush and
promptly issued a decision.

“You will be reborn as a male child in the
Chang family of Ti-ao-chou.
That household has accumulated a fortune
of considerable proportions,
But lacks a filial son to offer sacrifices
at the family burial ground.
The householder and his spouse are equally
devoted to cultivating virtue,
And their reputation for so doing is widely
known within the four seas.”
No sooner did Woman Huang swallow a cup of
a soul-disorienting drug,28
Than the wife of householder Chang conceived
a male child in her belly.
Once the ten months of her pregnancy were
fulfilled, she bore a son,
On whose left rib cage were inscribed two
lines of characters in red.
Reading, “This is a reincarnation of Woman
Huang who recited the sutra,
And was formerly married to Chao Lien-fong,
who is a native of Kuan-shui.
This reincarnation is the karmic result of
her dedication to the sutras,
Which has enabled her to become a man who
is fated to live a long life.”
When householder Chang had finished reading
this text with his own eyes,
He cherished his child as a precious jewel,29
showing his joy on his face.

To the tune “Black Silk Robe”:
Woman Huang was reincarnated in the home
of householder Chang,
Her transformation into a male having
occurred without a hitch.
When householder Chang beheld his son,
his pleasure was enhanced.
After his first three years, it became
clear he would grow up.
By the time he was six years old, his
intelligence was obvious.
He studiously studied his lessons and
practiced his characters,
And took the name Chin-ja, or "Clever One."
At the age of seventeen, he earned first place in the examinations.

Prose:
To resume our story, when Chang Chin-ja was in his seventeenth year, he was suc-
cesful in passing the examinations and was appointed magistrate of Nan-hua district
in Tien-chou prefecture. Suddenly, he recollected that this had been his native place
during his former incarnation. After going to the district to take up his office, he first
saw to the payment of the taxes owed to the government and then took his place in
the courtroom in order to preside over his jurisdiction. As his first order of business,
he dispatched two runners to summon Chao Ling-fang on the grounds that he had
something to say to him. The two runners did not dare to be remiss but went im-
mediately to the home of Chao Ling-fang in order to summon him to court.

Recitation in classical verse:
Chao Ling-fang, in his home, was reading
sutrae and reciting Buddha's name.
The two runners, greeting him with a bow,
hastened to explain their mission.
In no time at all, he adjusted his attire,
and accompanied them to the yamen.
Once in the courtroom, he performed a bow,
and proceeded to identify himself.
Magistrate Chang rose and returned his bow,
directed him to take a seat.
Exchanging salutations, they sat down as guest
and host, while tea was served.
"You really are," he declared, "my husband,
whose name is Chao Ling-fang;
While I am none other than your former wife,
known by the name Woman Huang.
If you doubt me, in a quiet room, I'll Underso
you can see for yourself.
On my left rib cage, in crimson characters,
is an explanatory inscription.
Our eldest daughter, whose name is Chiao-hua,
has already found a married home.
Our second daughter, whose name is Fan-chiao,
is wed to a man called T'oe-Chen.
Our son Ch'ang-shou was so concerned for me,
that he kept vigil by my grave.
Let the two of us ride out our homes together,
to visit our ancestral tombs."

Prose:
Magistrate Chang, together with Chao Ling-fang and their children, five persons in all,
proceeded to the grave of Woman Huang, where, upon opening her coffin and
examining her corpse, they found that her countenance remained unaltered.
After going home, they conducted a religious service for seven days, and Chao Ling-fang
declined the Diamond Sutra, whereupon, in a flutter of prophetic mood, all five of
them, men and women, ascended to Heaven on an auspicious cloud. There is a
lyric to the tune "Immortals at the River" that testifies to this:
"Woman Huang read the Diamond Sutra and
reaped the true fruit.
That same day, morning to paradise,
All five of them ascended to Heaven.
Good people, pray to Kuan-yin,
"Bodhisattva come and save us."

Prose:
Note that the recitation of the precious scroll is finished, the Buddhists and body suits
are aware of it. Since the dharma realm is expansive, they may enable us all to ascend
to the celestial assembly. Homage to the infinite significance of the Mahayana
school of the One Vehicle, as embodied in the truly empty yet marvelously existing
truth of the Diamond Sutra. May the Buddhists in their vast assembly heed our in-
vocation from afar, that they may enable all of us, in our multitude as numerous as
the sands of the Ganges, to proceed to the Pure Land of the Western Paradise. It is
our humble wish that the sound of the recitation of the sutra and the names of the
Buddhas should penetrate the halls of Heaven above and the courts of the Under-
wold below, with the result that those who recite the Buddha's name may be deliv-
ered from the Sea of Suffering; those who commit evil deeds may be eternally
innocent in sevens; those who achieve enlightenment may be conducted on the
way toward salvation by the host of Buddhists, whose rays of glory illuminate the ten
directions, so that, to both east and west, the fading light may return to illuminate
their path, to both north and south, they may be able to find their way to their true
home, and attain nirvana, as their drifting boats reach the shore. Like little chil-
dren, they may be reunited with their mother. Upon reentering their mother's womb,
they will no longer have to fear the three calamities. For a myriad helps, they may
attain eternal peace. 190

Gatha:
The karmic circumstances that have been
produced by living beings,
From their very nonbeginning, down
until the present time,
Have isolated them from the Sacred Park, obscuring their true nature.
But, a single ray of luminous light can deliver all forms of life.

First, we must repay the kindness of Heaven and Earth for supporting us;
Secondly, we must repay the kindness of the sun and moon for shining on us;
Thirdly, we must repay the kindness of our ruler for governing our land;
Fourthly, we must repay the kindness of our parents for raising us;
Fifthly, we must repay the kindness of our mentors for teaching the dharma;
Sixthly, we must pray that the ten classes of homeless souls may all be reborn,
And attain the perfection of wisdom, enabling them to reach the other shore.  

By the time Nuni Ho-tieh finished reciting the precious scroll, it was already the second watch. Even before she was done, Yian-hsiao from Li Chiao-eh’s quarters had brought out some tea and served it to the company. After it was over, Lan-hsiang came from Meng Yu-lou’s quarters to offer a selection of exquisitely prepared appetizers, a jug of wine, and a large container of fine tea and served them to Sister-in-law Wu, Big Sister Tsan, Li Kuei-chieh, and the rest of the company. Yieh-chiang also directed Yu-hsiao to bring out four boxes of fine pastries and sweets to go with the tea for the three maids.

Li Kuei-chieh ventured to say, "Since our three preceptors have entertained us by reciting a precious scroll, I ought to show my gratitude by singing a song for you."

"Kuei-chieh," said Yieh-chiang, "it would be an imposition to ask you to sing once again.

Big Sister Yu said, "Let me sing something for you first."

"All right," said Yieh-chiang, "let Big Sister Yu be the first to sing."

Second Sister Shen said, "After my elder sister has sung her piece, I will also sing a song for you."

Li Kuei-chieh, however, insisted on being the first to sing and asked Yieh-chiang, "What would you like to hear?"

Yieh-chiang responded, "Sing us that set of songs that begins with the words:"

"Late at night, all is silent."

Thereupon, Li Kuei-chieh, after serving the company with wine, took up her balloon guitar:

Deftly extended her slender fingers,
Gently strummed the silken strings,

Opened her ruby lips,
Exposed her white teeth,
And proceeded to sing to the tune "Flowery in the Moonlight":

Late at night, all is silent.
I have unfurled my bed clothes,
And waited until the moon has risen above
The flowering branches.
It is as quiet as can be, and I have not heard any noise at all.
Only after the watch-drum have finished
Beating does he appear.
Upon seeing this face of mine, he pays it
No attention whatever,
But kneels down at my side to make his plea.
I deliberately pretend to be angry,
He surreptitiously gives me a look;
But before I can even clench my teeth,
I simply can't help starting to smile.

To the same tune:
That profligate is hard at work,
Like a moth darting into the flame.
He does his best to keep me in the dark
About his intentions.
But, for my part, it costs me no effort
To figure them out.
Recently, however, I've had some trouble
Holding onto the rudder.
He's gone to such pains to manipulate me
That my heart is touched,
Turning it into a honey-filled pastry.
Whomever it might be,
To say nothing of me,
Though I were made of iron,
I might find it hard to resist.

To the same tune:
He is altogether too untrustworthy,
My fickle lover leaves me helpless.
For two or three nights, he has failed
To come back to me,
Yet, when questioned, he makes excuses
And pays no attention.