A ROYAL CONSORT’S SONG
Music for the zither by Madame Zhong 鍾氏 (fl. 1570–1620)

The lyrics and music of this song were written and published by the consort of a Ming prince. Addressing the boy she raised as his heir, she narrates her life experiences over a span of thirty years, presenting herself as a chaste widow, committed daughter-in-law, loving mother, and competent regent for the child.

The sons of Ming emperors were made kings and sent out of the capital to palace establishments in major provincial cities, their titles and palaces to be passed down to their eldest sons. Over time the number of kings steadily grew, and together they constituted a hereditary aristocracy supported in considerable style. Their younger sons and later descendants received lesser titles and smaller incomes, but all members of the imperial clan were given state stipends. The women who married kings and princes received corresponding titles as queens or princesses.

One woman who married the eldest son of a king is known to history because she wrote both the music and lyrics for a long poem that narrates the story of her life. Although the late Ming saw a significant increase in
publication of women's writings, there are few surviving poetic works as long or detailed as this. The author, Madame Zhong, had not been married long when her husband predeceased his father, the king, but fortunately there were posthumous sons, so her position in the family was secure, and she would eventually serve as regent for the child heir after his grandfather died. The song was published sometime after 1620 in a collection of musical scores that she compiled, a woodblock printed copy of which has survived.

The music, notated in a special kind of tablature, is written to be played on the qin, a seven-stringed zither. Among the over three hundred premodern qin songs that are extant, this song is the only one known to have been written and published by a woman. Like many other qin songs of this period, this song is divided into multiple stanzas, each with a number and title that was not supposed to be sung. Her choice to write her story in the form of a qin song adds to the author’s moral image. Not only were music and morality closely linked in Confucian theory, but also the qin in particular was valued for its connection to the ancient sage-kings. Both men and women in literati society enjoyed performing and listening to qin music.

In Madame Zhong’s own preface, she explains that she hopes later generations will learn of her hardships and virtues through the song. The content of the lyrics is centered on her contribution to the kingdom and the family, presenting her as an exemplary woman who fulfilled her social roles despite adversity of many kinds. In fact, Madame Zhong was already known as a moral exemplar before the publication of the song. As she recounts, a memorial arch commemorating her as a chaste woman was constructed by imperial decree.

Sincere Words on Enduring Hardship

1. I TELL MY STORY TO PASS IT ON

I was born in Dong Village and selected to enter the king’s household. Then with the gracious approval of the emperor, My title was changed to make me an official consort— The one and only in the inner palace. Colorful banners shine on the phoenix carriage, The golden edict glows with its dragon patterns. I was overwhelmed by all the blessings from Heaven.
The wealth and noble rank, the splendor and esteem. 
Yet who would have foreseen 
The thousands and thousands of hardships to come? 
Fatherless children, let me tell you the story.

2. SERVING MY FAMILY

I remember at that time, the mother queen Cheng was elderly 
And the father king had long been ill. 
My restless mother-in-law, Her Majesty, 
Worried that the king would not recover. 
I served them day and night, dashing about to help. 
All the state affairs fell upon the crown prince. 
I feared his health wouldn’t bear the toil— 
Were that to happen, whom could I depend on? 
When once in a while he suffered a minor ailment, my heart would 
tremble with terror. 
I had to taste all his medicine 
And see that he improved, 
Only then did I feel relieved. 
With concerns and sorrows, one after another, 
It was hard to express my fear, 
Hard to express my pain.

3. ASSISTING THE PRINCE IN CULTIVATING EXCELLENT VIRTUE

Everyone praised the prince for his benevolence and wisdom, 
Like the renowned kings in history. 
Still, he exhausted himself to assist in governance 
And stayed close to the worthy and talented. 
He took pleasure in kindness 
And his effective governance extended far.
4. ATTEMPTS TO PRAY FOR AN HEIR

Sadly, I once gave birth to a baby who failed to grow up. Thinking there were not enough proper palace ladies, I requested that a concubine be taken in to assist, Hoping she might produce heirs for the kingdom. But I noticed the prince was restrained around the concubine, His chamber tightly closed to her. So to my lord I said, “Please be lenient if she has displeased you,” And to the concubine, “Be more attentive, and serve him well.” Incense burning, I fasted and bathed to pray, And personally recited Buddhist and Daoist scriptures often. All I wished was for the prince to be blessed with a boy, It did not matter who would bear him. I tried my utmost in those days to make sure the family line would continue.

5. DOUBLED DISASTERS OF THE STATE

Yet Heaven showed no mercy— Misfortunes fell upon us one after another. We lost Queen Cheng, and then Lady Xu. The eulogy was sent, the funeral granted. I followed every ritual and observed the mourning protocols. My filial affection for them was of a high order, So was my effort and hardship. Who would have known that in only three years, all my effort would prove in vain. When my husband became bedridden, The best doctors were gathered, but none could cure him. Anxiously we waited for the stars to send a sign, As I prayed to Heaven in tears. How I wished My life could be shortened in exchange for extending his. Despite my utmost sincerity, the deities did not respond. The heavens fell, the sun no longer shone. In a court with no master, panic spread all over. Outsiders constantly took advantage of us.
Who could be trusted with the kingdom’s affairs?
My dress was soaked by streams of bloody tears.

6. PRESERVING CHASTITY AND FULFILLING FILIAL DUTIES

In ancient times there were many virtuous women,
Their names and stories recorded in the histories.
If I were to follow my husband to the netherworld,
It’d be as easy as tossing a weightless Mount Tai.
I am always surrounded by numerous palace maids,
For they fear that I might follow him at any time.
I have contemplated this over and over again,
Taking all into consideration, from the beginning to the end.
In ancient times there were both heroic deaths
And survivors with the purest virtues.
Plus the father king is old; who else would look after him?
If death is not feared, why should life be held dear?
Still I must live to care for the old and worship the spirits.

7. MY HEARTFELT STATEMENT TO OFFICIALS

With matters of significance piling up,
I stood alone, frail and helpless,
Fearing that state affairs might go wrong.
Watching officials all come to send condolences,
I carried out the rituals one after another.
I had no choice but to speak to them
From behind a screen, weeping and wailing.
Alas, the father king was old and sick,
The miserable widow all on her own.
To rely on the powerful was the only way
For a vulnerable kingdom to survive.
Despite all my efforts, I had no options.
I was just managing to sustain myself, balancing on the edge.
Heaven gave me life,
Why must it then drive me to extremes!
8. REPORTING THE HAPPY NEWS OF PREGNANCY

With the funeral completed, the bequests had to be distributed fairly
To all the beauties of the inner palace.
I asked some close servants to unlock the delicate cabinets.
Then I noticed five ladies, pale as if sick.
Doctors were summoned to check: it was true that all were pregnant!
I decorated them with red fabric and flowers.
With joyous drum and flute music leading their way,
I reported the great news to the father king.
Congratulatory memorials were presented to our majestic emperor
From government departments, counties, and prefectures.
I prayed to Heaven and the gods for the birth of the royal offspring.

9. BIRTH OF THE POSTHUMOUS CHILDREN

Auspicious vapors and colorful clouds cluster,
Casting lights on the ornate palace rooftop.
The first one, a baby girl, left me heavy-hearted.
But thanks to the ancestors’ blessing,
A few boys were born in the same year.
Since you were your mothers’ firstborns
Your births were difficult and dangerous.
Luckily all turned out well—we’re grateful for the mercy of Heaven.
Requesting titles for you
I exhausted my energy in writing up petitions.

10. NURTURE THE FATHERLESS NEWBORNS

All were born in the leap month of the year of the Tiger.
Your fast-growing teeth and glib tongues are signs of extraordinariness.
All the time I held you in my arms, caressing your skin.
Watching you play, I shared in the happiness.
I carried you on my back, I held you with my hands,
I’d hold you in my mouth if I could.
I constantly asked the nannies to be careful.
Inside and outside the palace, young and old,
I treated everyone with kindness and leniency
In exchange for their care and compassion.
I was concerned whenever one baby got indigestion, or another had a cold—
Which made me feel as if I were submersed in cold water.
I exhausted myself to care for you,
Not to mention supplying rich cradles and pearl-encrusted nappies, and a nursery supplied with silver fixtures and golden fittings.

11. REQUESTING NAMES FOR THE CHILDREN ACCORDING TO REGULATIONS

Following the regulations of our great dynasty—
The brilliance of which is on a par with the stars and the sun—
The three orphaned boys’ names were registered at the age of five.
We were so fortunate to receive the imperial grace,
Thanks to the support of the Ministry of Rites.
The widowed consorts had endured hardships
But finally got to celebrate the growth of the king’s family tree.
With a radiant glow arising from the jade certificate,
The palace and the court are joyful,
And the whole kingdom bursts into cheers.
These were not simply requests for names:
They were in fact crucial to the titles conferred later.
When I think back to the beginning,
I see everything was due to the successful title request.

12. COMMANDED BY IMPERIAL DECREE TO MANAGE THE STATE

The father king was worried about his age,
And the children were too young to understand the gravity of state affairs.
Following the precedent of the Tang dynasty,
Imperial permission was granted—
The king placed all of the state affairs under my command.
“The tax and revenue shall not be appropriated.
The ritual ceremonies shall not be interfered with by the powerful.”
He urged me to raise the sons for the throne.  
The earnest words of His Majesty laid stress on you boys.  
I, a helpless widow, could hardly carry out the heavy tasks,  
But how could I fail to accept them respectfully?  
Adhering to morality and keeping calm,  
I took on the hard work under Father’s order.

13. EDUCATING THE CHILDREN

You were born of noble rank and raised in wealth,  
But should never develop haughty or prodigal habits.  
Watch your behavior, and make no error.  
Be serious about the canons, and take pleasure in the rites.  
Draw near to the righteous, and expel the wicked.  
Compete to listen to and take good advice.  
Observe the familial rules: be filial, loving, and reverent.  
Carry on the heritage of your predecessors,  
So that my sufferings and endless longing will not have been in vain.

14. MY JOYS AND WORRIES REGARDING MY FATHER-IN-LAW’S OLD AGE

The father king had reached his seventies and was planning his retirement.  
Moved by Heaven’s generosity,  
I raised my glass with the boys to toast his longevity,  
Colorful decorations filling the eyes.  
Happy for his long life,  
Yet fearful too.  
For the radiance of a setting sun doesn’t last long.  
Afraid that the maids might be neglectful and indolent,  
I asked after him three times a day  
And checked on him at night in the others’ stead.  
The water-clock and bells resonated with my worries.  
How I wished you could instantly grow up and mature  
To serve your grandfather and manage the kingdom—  
Other than that, I had nothing more to ask for.
15. HUMBLY GRANTED A MONUMENT BY IMPERIAL DECREE

It was my duty to serve my father-in-law;
It was my responsibility to raise the children.
I willingly took on the hard work,
With no intention of making my name known.
To my surprise, following the imperial decree
To encourage and exalt virtues, the local commentators,
Officials of the ministries, and scholars of national academies
Reported on my loyal, filial, and motherly deeds.
Recommendations were sent from local governors and inspectors
To the emperor, who ordered a memorial arch to be built for me.
“Gentle and vigilant, moderate and chaste,”
The language is exalted yet sincere.
The imperial announcement shines with magnificence,
And was quoted in the local gazetteer.
I am abashed by the honor.
Deeply I am abashed by the honor.

16. SERVING MY FATHER-IN-LAW IN MY HUSBAND’S STEAD

How sad, the husband prince passed away early,
Leaving the father king behind, old and sick.
I looked after him in my husband’s place,
Day and night, attentive to his care.
I tasted his medicine and personally served him fine meals—
If only I had elixirs to extend his life!
How sad, father-in-law, that I will never see you at the dining table again.
Then making the offerings properly, I was all alone;
Managing the burial properly, I was all alone.
Rituals and ceremonies were arranged in a hurry.
Upset that I was unable to hold his coffin-ropes, my tears fell in vain.
As I sent the children off with the procession, my heart could not rest.
My body stayed in the palace, but my spirit followed the funeral procession.
Husband, if you meet your father there, you will know
The countless hardships I have endured.
17. ACCUMULATING VIRTUE AND DOING GOOD

Everyone shares feelings of compassion.
I find the custom of cremating the palace maids inhumane.
It is said that kindness should reach even the dried bones,
So I ordered graves built for them on grounds selected by divination.
More unfortunate are the old and poor with no family;
I provided them all with shelter and food.
I ordered the whole kingdom to worship Bodhisattva Guanyin.
On vermilion cliffs, amid purple bamboos,
Her manifestations were seen and heard.
I had many temples built, prayers made often,
Incense was burned on Mount Wudang,
Incense was burned on Mount Tai.
All of these were my sincere wish for the sons and the kingdom.
I performed many acts to gain spiritual merit
And worshipped the deities with the highest reverence.

18. EXALTING THE UPRIGHT AND EXPELLING THE EVIL

“Throughout hundreds of generations,
The one teacher of all monarchs is none other than Confucius.”
These were the earnest words from the king
When he entrusted me with the boys.
How could I endure the sight of Confucius’s shrine in disrepair?
I urged immediate repair.
Sir Liu repaid the state with his devotion to three reigns.
His loyalty as a servitor was impeccable.
So I saw that his temples and sacrificial rituals were properly maintained.
Who would have expected that there would be such malicious people
Who bully a widow and orphans. A crisis arose
With false charges from the outside and disorders inside the household.
Empowered by Heaven and blessed by the gods,
I put the defiant in prison and the wicked to death.
Since I purged evil and upheld justice,
The kingdom was at peace.
19. INHERITING THE TITLE OF KING

We celebrated the great turnaround in the fortune of the kingdom. We were grateful for the unexpected imperial favor written on a silken edict. The palace residents leaped with joy. Springtime returned to the halls and gardens. Inheriting the kingdom at a young age, Bestowed with a golden signet and red ribbons, The heir looked solemn and majestic in the king’s regalia. Benevolent and talented, studious and filial, He was exceptionally intelligent since childhood. His manifold beauty comparable to the sages, He seemed an offspring of the phoenix and the unicorn. In the past we received the emperor’s instructions, But it was not until this moment that my heart was finally comforted.

20. GRANTED HIGHER TITLES BY SPECIAL DECREE

Posthumous titles were conferred according to the norms. Procedures had to be followed in the various departments, The same for every kingdom, as in the past. The emperor was moved by the sincerity of the king, Who had begged many times for the emperor’s favor, Thus I was honored to receive the queen’s crown. This will not be a precedent for the future—the edict said it clearly, Nor had this ever happened to other kingdoms in the past. Miraculously, we were granted this exceptional grace. How did I deserve the honor and glory? The emperor’s decree brought glory to the family, Granting the deceased prince the title of King Zhao. My filial son showed deep reverence for his parents. Since he developed such a kingly heart, all my effort paid off.
21. SELECTING A GOOD MATE

His sagacious virtues were evident from a young age.
So a gentle lady would make him a good match.
I asked for permission to select one from among ten thousand.
She was as decent and beautiful as a precious jade.
The golden screens glowed along with the fair lady.
She looked reserved and retiring, steadfast and serene,
A befitting person to entrust with a household.
With the wedding carriages lined up, bystanders vied for a look.
The incense was burned, ceremonial prayers recited.
Their shadows overlapped on the palace stairs,
Like two birds singing with each other in harmony.
Good for your household, good for your descendants.
Generation after generation, on and on.

22. TRACING BACK TO THE ORIGIN AND
PASSING DOWN THE LESSONS

I remember when I received my lord’s favor,
We were a good match like a pair of harmonious zithers,
A happy couple that treated each other with respect.
He taught me to read and write,
To know about the past and the present.
Yet against all expectations, misfortunes fell upon the kingdom.
I kept quiet on all the sufferings—
To whom could I pour them out?
Through the music of the qin zither I express my heart,
My voice shaking, tears streaming down.
The bitterness is stronger than the bile of a bear.
May Your Majesty always keep this in mind with compassion,
And exert yourself to practice benevolence.
May your children and grandchildren
Thousands and thousands of years later
Know there was once a widow who endured hardships.

Translated by Zeyuan Wu
Further Reading

Fong, Grace S. *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008.

