I. Text

“Lisao” or “On Encountering Trouble” 

Scion of the high lord Gao Yang,
Bo Yong was my honored father’s name.
When the constellation She Ti pointed to the first month,
On the day geng-yin I passed from the womb.
My father, seeing the aspect of my nativity,
Took omens to give me an auspicious name.
The name he gave me was True Exemplar 
The title he gave me was Divine Balance.
Having from birth this inward beauty,
I added to it fair outward adornment:
I dressed in selinea and shady angelica,
And twined autumn orchids to make a garland.
Swiftly I sped as in fearful pursuit,
Afraid that time would race on and leave me behind.
In the morning I gathered the angelica on the mountains,
In the evening I plucked the sedges of the islets.
The days and months hurried on, never delaying,
Springs and autumns sped by in endless alternation.
I thought how the trees and flowers were fading and falling,
And feared that my Fairest’s beauty would fade too.
Gather the flower of youth and cast out the impure!
Why will you not change the error of your ways?
I have harnessed brave coursers for you to gallop forth with,
Come, let me go before and show you the way!
...
I had tended many an acre of orchids,
And planted a hundred rods of melilotus.
I had raised sweet lichens and the cart-halting flower,
And asarums mingled with fragrant angelica.
And hoped that when leaf and stem were in their full prime,
When the time had come, I would reap a fine harvest.
Though they wither and die, how would that hurt me?
But I grieve to see these blossoms waste in rank weeds.
All others press forward in greed and gluttony,
No surfeit satiating their demands:
Forgiving themselves, but harshly judging others,
Each fretting his heart away in envy and malice.
Madly they rush in the covetous chase,
But not after that which my heart sets store by.
For old age comes creeping and soon will be upon me,
And I fear I shall not leave behind an enduring name.
In the morning I drank the dew that fell from the magnolia,
At evening ate the petals that dropped from chrysanthemums,
If only my mind can be truly pure and beautiful,
It matters nothing that I often faint for famine.
I pulled up roots to bind the valerian,
And thread the castor plant’s fallen clusters with.
I trimmed sprays of cassia for plaiting melilotus,
And knotted the lithe, light trails of ivy.
I take my fashion from the good men of old:
A garb unlike that which the rude world cares for.
Though it may not accord with present-day manners,
I will follow the model that Peng Xian has left.

[Translated by David Hawkes]
The poem read in Mandarin by Fusheng Wu
II. Episode Notes

- *Lisao* 離騷 (“On Encountering Trouble”)
- *Shiji* 史記 (Record of the Grand Historian)
- Sima Qian 司馬遷 (146-86? BCE)
- King Huai of Chu 楚懷王
- First-person pronoun (written as *zhen* 朕, *wu* 吾, *yu* 余)
- *xiangcao meiren* 香草美人 (“fragrant-grasses and fair-one trope or convention”)
- *xiushen* 修身 (self-cultivation)

III. Textual Source