

“ A SONG OF SEVEN SORROWS ” AND “ WITH THE ARMY V ”
By Wang Can

Introduction

The poet Wang Can (177-217) lived during the chaotic last years of the Later (Eastern) Han dynasty (25-220). He was recognized early in his life for his exceptional intelligence and for his remarkable memory — talents which brought him the respect of older, important officials and contributed to his success in life as an official, poet, and master of the game of *weiqi* (known in the west as “go”). Throughout Wang Can’s life, the Han empire was dominated by generals who were at war with one other, each attempting to control the person of the Han emperor. Early in the reign of the last Han emperor, Xiandi (r. 189-220), Wang Can fled the western capital, Chang’an (near modern Xi’an), to avoid capture by the rebel forces that had taken the city. He fled south of the Yangzi to take refuge there with Liu Biao, the strongman who controlled the south. Although he stayed with Liu Biao for fifteen years, Wang Can was dissatisfied, as Liu Biao did not appoint him to any significant positions. When he had an opportunity, Wang Can left the south to join General Cao Cao, the strongman who had taken control of the north. Cao Cao rewarded Wang with respect and high-ranking positions. Wang Can died of illness while on a military campaign in 217.

“A Song of Seven Sorrows” is a particularly famous poem. In the poem, the “Tomb of Pa,” which Wang Can climbs as he leaves the city, is the tomb of the Han Emperor Wan — an emperor during whose reign the empire flourished and was at peace. The poem “Falling Stream,” which he mentions in the poem’s closing lines, is one of the poems in the “Book of Songs” (also known as the *Classic of Odes*), a compilation of poems and songs from the Zhou dynasty. In “Falling Stream,” an anonymous Zhou poet compares his emotional reaction to the fall of the Zhou capital to the cascade of cold spring water falling down over rocks.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete documents follow this section)

“A Song of Seven Sorrows” translated by Paul Rouzer.

“With the Army V” from *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, edited and translated by Stephen Owen (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 264-65. © 1996 W. W. Norton & Co. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

“A Song of Seven Sorrows” and “With the Army V”
by Wang Can (177-217)

Excerpt from “A Song of Seven Sorrows”

The Western City thrown into lawless disorder;
jackals and tigers come to plot its ruin.
Again I abandon the capital and depart.
Consign myself to the barbarians of the South.

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

“A SONG OF SEVEN SORROWS” AND “WITH THE ARMY V,” BY WANG CAN

Questions:

1. How does Wang Can describe the place from which he comes — “the Western City,” i.e. Chang’an?
2. What does he mean by “jackals and tigers”?
3. How does he describe the South? Why?

As I leave the city gates, I see nothing before me,
save white bones covering the level fields.
On the road, a starving woman
who hugs her child, then abandons him in the weeds.
She turns to hear his screams and howls
then wipes her tears and goes on alone—
saying ‘I hardly know where I shall die!
How can I look after both of us?’
I drive on my horse, abandon her and depart,
for I cannot bear to hear her words.

[Translated by Paul Rouzer]

Questions:

1. How does Wang Can’s life compare to that of the woman whom he observes as he leaves Chang’an? Does he have anything in common with the woman? What might account for the difference between Wang Can’s ability to survive in the circumstances he describes as compared to the situation of the woman and her child?
2. What is the purpose of Wang Can’s description of the woman and the child? As a poet, why should he have included this vignette?

Excerpt from “With the Army V”

The traveler’s sorrows were many;
I could not stop my falling tears.
Then at dawn I crossed the borders to Qiao,
where cares melted, I felt easy and free.
Roosters were crowing on every side,
millet swelled the level fields.
Inns and lodgings filled the hamlets,
men and women thronged the crossroads.
Unless in domains ruled by a Sage,
who could enjoy such blessings?
The Poet once praised a “happy land” —
though a stranger here, I still wish to stay.

[Translated by Stephen Owen]

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

“A SONG OF SEVEN SORROWS” AND “WITH THE ARMY V,” BY WANG CAN

Questions:

1. After describing travel through an area of devastation, Wang Can praises the peace and prosperity of Qiao. To what does he attribute this peace and prosperity?
2. From what body of knowledge or philosophy does he draw that attribution?

Complete Documents

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“A Song of Seven Sorrows” and “With the Army V” By Wang Can

“A Song of Seven Sorrows”

The Western City thrown into lawless disorder;
jackals and tigers come to plot its ruin.
Again I abandon the capital and depart.
Consign myself to the barbarians of the South.
My close kin all face me in sorrow,
dearest friends follow and cling to my robes.
As I leave the city gates, I see nothing before me,
save white bones covering the level fields.
On the road, a starving woman
who hugs her child, then abandons him in the weeds.
She turns to hear his screams and howls
then wipes her tears and goes on alone —
saying ‘I hardly know where I shall die!
How can I look after both of us?’
I drive on my horse, abandon her and depart,
for I cannot bear to hear her words.
Southward I climb the Tomb of Pa,
turn my head, look to the city.
I know now how the poet of ‘Falling Stream’
moaned and felt his heart break within!

[Translated by Paul Rouzer]

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

“A SONG OF SEVEN SORROWS” AND “WITH THE ARMY V,” BY WANG CAN

“With the Army V”

I kept faring down roads choked with weeds,
with a trudging pace, my heart in sorrow.
When I looked around, no hearth fires seen,
all that I saw were forests and mounds.
City walls grew with brush and briars,
footpaths were lost,
no way to get through.
Canes and cattails to the broad bog’s end,
reeds and rushes lined the long stream.
A cool breeze blew up at sundown
and swept my boat gliding swiftly along,
Wintry cicadas sang out in the trees,
and the swan ranged, brushing the sky.
The traveler’s sorrows were many;
I could not stop my falling tears.
Then at dawn I crossed the borders to Qiao,
where cares melted, I felt easy and free.
Roosters were crowing on every side,
millet swelled the level fields.
Inns and lodgings filled the hamlets,
men and women thronged the crossroads.
Unless in domains ruled by a Sage,
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