

How do crises that provoke displacements shape literary, cultural, and artistic expressions:  
**How the Han Chinese and Ancient Indians Remembered their Talented Greek and Roman Slaves**

Roundtable #3 - Dr. Kathryn A. Hain

Ancient crises from famine to war turned freeborn people into slaves. Slave traders dispersed their stock across the Mediterranean like leaves before a storm. Some, especially nubile women, were sucked into the wide funnel leading to Red Sea and Silk Road trade. Sanskrit, Tamil, and Chinese sources recognize Greek and Roman slaves in their midst, mentioning their long-distance origins, telling their tales, but never giving their names. My contribution to this round table conversation will snapshot how this distant Mediterranean diaspora impacted literature and performances in the cultural capitals of South and East Asia.

Greek women identified as *Yavani* (Ionic) show up in India as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in a Jain harem list of multi-cultural, multilingual slave girls caring for a newborn prince. Classical Era Indian poets described Greek prostitutes valued for their whiteness and sexual appeal in courtesan houses and wine drinking venues. In the Roman era, Greek and Hebrew flute girls show up in bills of lading headed to India, in trading guides for Gujarati ports, and in St. Thomas's hagiography. Greek women skilled in archery became a brand name for bodyguards in Gupta era-Late Antiquity dramas describing the inner workings of royal harems. These careers for Greek slave women and their Indian sources are explored in depth in "Prestige Makers: Mediterranean Slave Women in Ancient India," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 31 (2020): 265-294, also available on my academia.edu site.

A different chapter focusing on Greek and Roman slaves in Han China is part of my work in progress, *Concubines as Commodity; Sex trafficking in Antiquity*. Below are excerpts ready for your critique.

What gift do you send the greatest ruler on the globe who has everything? Today, modern YouTube videos and Beijing audiences demonstrate the enduring Chinese love of acrobatic circus performers. These performances reach back over 3,000 years when a general's sword juggling prowess could win a war. The Western Han emperors (Early or Western Han 206 BCE–24 CE) used entertainers on a grand scale to project their political agenda and hegemony. After Emperor Wudi's (r. 140–87 BCE)<sup>1</sup> conquests which doubled the size of China to nearly its modern borders, he used the arts, especially circus style entertainments, as tools of diplomacy to maintain his empire and display its glory. The chronicles and ancient artistic renditions of performers portray programs featuring huge numbers of entertainers with their individual acts: singing, dancing, playing instruments, and performing amazing acrobatic tricks, all performed simultaneously. This was not a three-ring circus, but a hundred

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known as Emperor Wu, Wu Di, Wuti or Liu Che.

performances fit for an emperor.<sup>2</sup> Vassals and neighboring allies outdid themselves to send novel trickster acts to catch his attention.

Ambassadors arrived to Wudi's court from all directions. The emperor made stupendous arrangements to host, entertain, and impress these diplomats, who, if suitably impressed, would carry a description of his wealth and grandeur back to their countries. In 108 BCE, Emperor Wudi invited the ambassadors to his capital, Chang'an, to attend a great feast in their honor, with "pools of wine and forests of meats" to show off his empire's prosperity and power. A viewing stand allowed the distinguished guests to feast while viewing the performances: wrestling, weightlifting, spinning plates, swords, juggling balls, fighting animals, dramas accompanied by song and dance of ancient myths, complete with special effects of clouds, mists, and snow. A display of rare birds and animals from the royal menagerie followed the human acts. This feast with the splendid after dinner performances for the ambassadors birthed the "Hundred Entertainments" that set the bar for ostentatious displays of spectacle for every emperor, rival, ally, and even minor officials who attempted to imitate the Han court for centuries. Entertainers were the key element in this use of pageantry to project power, prestige, and good will. Modern Chinese scholars consider Wudi's diplomacy as the first Chinese promotion of economic and cultural exchange between East and West.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural exchange between East and West had already entered the Chinese circus world, thanks to some Hellenized Greeks a long way from home. The Persian shah, Mithridates II (121-91 BCE), sent two Seleucid entertainers to Emperor Wudi as part of the first Parthian peace envoy to China to celebrate the opening of the Silk Roads around 120 BCE. The Chinese chronicles describe the first western performers as Parthian tribute (along with an ostrich egg). The Parthians, more likely, sent the talented slaves as gifts given between equals. In Chinese eyes, these foreigners from the West had "deformed eyebrows,<sup>4</sup> steep noses, ruffled hair and strong side-curls, and [were] four feet and five inches in length [height]."<sup>5</sup> His majesty was highly pleased with his gift. They most likely joined the royal academy that Wudi sponsored to produce new acts.

Two and a half centuries later in 121 CE, a second group of entertainers in China identified themselves as Romans. They also arrived at the Han court as tribute, this time sent by the ruler of Shan, from what is now Myanmar, on the southern border of Han China. The Chronicles focus on the tricks that they could do.

The king of the Shan state...offered musicians and conjurors who could make transformations, spit fire, release their limbs without assistance, interchange the heads of oxen and horses, and who were also skilled at juggling even up to a thousand balls at once. They said of themselves: "We are men from Hai-hsi (west of the sea)". The west of the sea is in fact Ta-Ch'in (Rome). *Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Qifeng Fu *Chinese Acrobatics Through the Ages*, (Beijing, China: Foreign Language Presses, 1985) 14-32.

<sup>3</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> Chinese women shaved their eyebrows and redrew them to popular shapes, which changed over the centuries.

<sup>5</sup> Ma Tuanlin, *Wen-hsien-T'ung-Kao*, chapter 330, Translation Q in Friedrich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (1885, repr. New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966), 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76 in Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 42, 150-51.

Later Chinese histories and encyclopedias embellished the description of these Roman performers. The skills of the performers, now numbered at fifteen, increased with each telling. These later sources describe their ability to pour water out of their hands and drop pearls from their feet.<sup>7</sup> Informants perhaps gained their knowledge from other sources now lost or from knowledge of the current exploits of the western entertainers in their era.

A third text mentioning Roman jugglers is contained in a description of the Roman Empire, its government, cities, palaces, chariots, animals, and products. The jugglers in this admittedly distant view of the empire have a prominent place in the description. They “are jugglers who can let fires burn on their foreheads; make rivers and lakes in their hands; raise their feet and let pearls and precious stones drop from them; and, in opening their mouths, produce banners and tufts of feathers in abundance.”<sup>8</sup>

These texts provide a colorful description of the talents that these Mediterranean possessed. They provide no indication if their training came from the Mediterranean or if they gained it in the passage through Parthia or Southeast Asia. The Mediterranean culture did have a heritage of acrobatic entertainments that could have provided trained slaves for export. TBC

Indian literature describes the skills of their Greek harem guards and the delights of their Greek courtesans, flutegirls, and wine servers. Chinese chronicles describe the marvelous circus acts of Seleucids and later Romans who were sent to the Han emperor as tribute. The crisis of famine, war, or kidnapping enslaved and moved Mediterranean people to the far reaches of Asia, talented people who are still remembered two thousand years later in the literature of the richest cultural centers in Asia.

---

<sup>7</sup> John Ferguson, “China and Rome” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2 (1978): 598.

<sup>8</sup> Ma Tuanlin, *Wen-hsien-T'ung-Kao*, ch. 330, Translation Q in Hirth, *China*, 80.