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Iranian Whirling Girls

Po Chü-yi

I

Presented by the kingdom of Sogdiana at the end of the Heavenly Jewel reign period.[1]

The poets Po Chü-yi (see selection 180) and Yüan Chen (see selection 252) did not simply fabricate these happenings. Records exist in the official *T'ang History* (*T'ang shu*) of the presentation of whirling dancers at court as tribute in 718, 719, 727, and 729. They came from Keš (near Tashkent), Samarkand, Maimargh, and Khumdeh, all of which lay within Sogdiana, hence we are justified in referring to them as Sogdian or northeast Iranian whirlers. Such vigorous, rapidly twirling dances were common among the Iranian peoples. Compare, for example, the sacred whirling dance of the Sufi dervishes, most of whom were Iranians or who modeled themselves after Iranian styles. As for the pseudo-Iranian whirlers at the T'ang court, the history of the intrigues surrounding them is described in the introductory note to selection 180.

1. 742–755.

An admonition against contemporary morals.

Iranian whirling girl, Iranian whirling girl—
Her heart answers to the strings,
Her hands answer to the drums.
At the sound of the strings and drums, she raises her arms,
Like swirling snowflakes tossed about, she turns in her twirling dance.
Whirling to the left, turning to the right, she never feels exhausted,
A thousand rounds, ten thousand circuits—it never seems to end.
Among men and living creatures, she is peerless;
Compared to her, the wheels of a racing chariot revolve slowly and a whirlwind is sluggish.
When the tune is over she bows twice in gratitude to the Son of Heaven,
And the Son of Heaven smiles a bit of a toothsome smile for her.

Iranian whirling girl,
You came from Sogdiana.
In vain did you labor to come east more than ten thousand tricents.
For in the central plains there were already some who could do the Iranian whirl,
And in a contest of wonderful abilities, you would not be their equal.

In the closing years of the Heavenly Jewel reign period, the times were about to change,
Officials and concubines all learned how to circle and turn:
Within the palace was the favorite Precious Consort Yang, without was Roxshan,
The two were most highly acclaimed for being able to do the Iranian Whirl.
She was registered as a consort in the Pear Garden for entertainment,
He was treated as a son in the intimacy of the Golden Pheasant Screen.
Roxshan entranced the ruler with his Iranian Whirl,
His soldiers had crossed the Yellow River before the emperor suspected him of rebellion.
The Precious Consort stole the ruler's heart with her Iranian Whirl,
And when she was murdered by mutinous troops at Ma-wei, he thought of her all the more.
From then on, heaven and earth have been out of kilter,
And for fifty years it has been impossible to suppress the dissolution.

Iranian Whirling girl,
Don't dance to no purpose;
Sing this song several times to enlighten our illustrious sovereign.

Translated by Victor H. Mair