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## Mi-Lou, the Palace of Going Astray

In his later years the Emperor Yang of the Sui (569–618) went astray, losing himself in the pleasures of the flesh. One day he addressed his close attendants:

“I, lord of mankind, enjoy the wealth of all the world and now wish to taste the very limits of pleasure in the present, to find fresh satisfactions for my will. Since the world now enjoys peace and wealth, untroubled either within the empire or on the frontiers, such pleasures are mine for the pursuit. Though my palace buildings are magnificent and spacious, it disturbs me that I lack secret chambers and tiny rooms, hidden porches and small doors. If only this sort of thing were to be mine, I could look forward to growing old therein.”

Then one of the close attendants, Kao Ch'ang, informed the throne of a friend of his, a native of Che-chiang named Hsiang Sheng, who was said to be a skilled architect. Summoning Hsiang Sheng to an audience the next day, the Emperor questioned him about such an undertaking. Hsiang Sheng begged the Emperor to allow him to draw up plans. Several days later the plans were presented, and His Majesty perused them with great pleasure. On that very day commands were sent out that the appropriate officers should provide the necessary timber. Over twenty thousand laborers were conscripted for the purpose, and within a year the work was completed.

There were towers and mansions high and low, with windows and balconies in gleaming contrast; there were hidden openings, secret chambers, railings of jade and red balustrades, all connecting one with the other, ringing around in all directions. The secret chambers led one into another, with a thousand doors and ten thousand windows all green and gold above and below. Gilt dragons were coiled, lurking beneath the beams, and jade beasts crouched beside the entrances. The walls and the pavements gave off light, while sunbeams shot through the intricately carved window screens. It was the ultimate in craftsmanship, as had never been seen in earlier times. And it came at great expense of jade and gold, so that the royal treasury was

left utterly empty. If someone went into it by mistake, he would not be able to find his way out even after a whole day.

When the Emperor first went to tour it, he was greatly pleased, and said to his entourage, "Even an immortal from the other world would go astray wandering through this. In Our eyes it shall be a 'Palace of Going Astray.'" His Majesty then commanded that Hsiang Sheng be awarded an office of the fifth rank, and to show his appreciation he added to this a thousand bolts of silk from the treasury. Next he commanded that several thousand well-born women from the harem be lodged in the palace. Every time he visited the place he would remain inside for an entire month.

**Mi-Lou:**  
**Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire**

