

Constructing Women in Han Ballads, Southern Dynasty Folk Songs and Palace-style Poetry

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SUMMARY

This paper is a feminist study of Chinese poetic aesthetics. It traces the evolution of the image and "voice" of woman from Han Ballads (where women are more outspoken in refusing unwanted seduction and the "male gaze") to Southern Dynasty Folk Songs (where women are portrayed as more passive), to palace-style poetry (where women are depicted as refined objects subjugated to male aesthetic desires). The image of women in love, as well as women loved, is also described. For example, in palace-style poetry woman's love is described as relatively suggestive and demure. The author also notes a change in diction and style from the colloquial folk songs to the polished elaborate palace style.

KEY WORDS

male perspective	"Mulberry Tree on the Field Path"
patriarchal society	"The Palace Guard Officer"
Confucian ideology	"The One I Love"
voyeurism	Luo-fu
Emperor Liang Jian-wen	Hu-ji



Women's voices in the Chinese poetic world are generally colored by the male perspective in this patriarchal society. Views of women within the context of poetry, nevertheless, may be perceived in a comparative manner in the poetry of different periods or even different social classes. I will thus discuss the poetic presentation of women in Han ballads, Southern Dynasty folk songs as well as palace-style poetry. Discussion will explore such topics as the representation of women, the social significance in the changes of women's voices through these different eras, as well as the poetic devices and conventions related to poetic expression. In addition, the affinities and changes of these three poetic forms in relation to views and images of women will also be covered.

Han ballads (first to third century AD) are believed by some scholars to be directly collected from common people and thus to truly reflect social reality.¹ Whether this is so or not, women's images were presented in a more vivid, powerful way than in the later periods. Thus, despite the possible exaggeration in diction as part of folk song quality, we may expect to see relatively authentic pictures of women. Characterized by lively, plain language, Han ballads are predominantly narrative, with the primary focus on telling a story and communicating information. The representation and view of women will be discussed mainly through "The Mulberry Tree on the Field Path" (陌上桑),² with association to its counterpart "The Palace Guard Officer" (羽林郎), as well as "The One I Love", (有所思)³ one of the few love poems in Han ballads.

"The Mulberry Tree on the Field Path," author unknown, is a narrative poem in five-word lines, a form which denotes a later development of the Han ballads. As a very popular ballad, it is considered to have circulated among the common people for a long time before being written down, and this accounts for its inconsistency in content. It has strong ballad style features such as shifting viewpoint and repetition. In this ballad, we see a strong female character, who is outspoken, assertive, and who above all, is a woman who has her own dignity and standing. Her "virtue" is associated with her diligence, her ornaments, her beauty, and her response to the attempted seducer.

Luo-fu is greatly adored by almost all those who see her, and this is shown in how they refer to her, and how they react to her peerless beauty. The first two lines of the ballad bring out the positive character of this woman: "The sun rises at the southeast corner/And shines on our Ch'in family's house" (日出東南隅，照我秦氏樓). Not only does bright sunshine appear to be the symbol of Luo-fu, but also the use of the first person possessive in the second line "our" has set up a we-group that includes the narrator (singer), the heroine Luo-fu, and the audience.⁴ Our Luo-fu is diligent and is among us, as seen in the lines that she "likes to work with silk worms and mulberry leaves;/ She picks mulberry leaves at the wall's south corner" (羅敷喜蠶桑，採桑城南隅). And it is when she is out working that her beauty is seen and the incident that further accentuates her virtue takes place.

The lofty imagery of Luo-fu is partly outlined in her fancy ornaments and dress, which are shown in lines like: "On her pierced ears the 'bright moon' pearls;/ Of yellow silk her skirt below,/ Of purple silk her jacket above" (耳中明月珠，湘爲下裙，紫爲上襦). This colorful outfit might seem overly flowery for a woman who according to her activities appears not to belong to the upper class. This may be explained by Frankel as he points out: "The humble folk like to dress up their heroes and

heroines, with the same disregard for verisimilitude that is often found in theatrical costuming."⁵ Nevertheless, since "feminine appearance" (婦容) was one of the four feminine virtues of ancient China, Luo-fu's attentiveness to her appearance is more in line with her virtue. Her outfit simply reflects the aesthetic taste of common people. The lofty imagery of Luo-fu lies mainly in her startling beauty, which is not described directly but is more powerfully expressed in recurring lines through the reaction of the onlookers, who would simply forget their ongoing affairs and act comically when they see Luo-fu.

Luo-fu's integrity and strong personality are highlighted in her confrontation with the Prefect, who came by with five horses and upon seeing her beauty asked Luo-fu to ride with him. The third person narration changes here into a direct dialogue between Luo-fu and the Prefect that provides this ballad a dynamic dimension and a certain dramatic quality. Luo-fu sternly replied, "How stupid is the Prefect! The Prefect has his own wife, Luo-fu has her own husband" (使君一何愚! 使君自有婦, 羅敷自有夫). She quickly and firmly responds with a dignity that shows her tough and unyielding character. Without even waiting for a response, she begins to praise her husband by enumerating his great holdings, status and career accomplishments. Her husband appears to be a middle-aged high official in both the military and the civil service. This reveals the inconsistency that if Luo-fu belongs to such a high class, she could not go out and pick mulberry leaves in the countryside. We do not know if she has a husband or not, but her exaggeration and elaboration of such a husband can be viewed as her weapon to defend herself and that fully illustrates her wit, composure and courage to confront a man of power.

Another ballad in the same form written later by the poet Xin Yannian "The Palace Guard Officer" shares the same theme with "The Mulberry Tree." It is also about a beautiful,

resourceful young woman who refuses a seducer. The beauty of this woman, Hu-ji, a bartender, is mainly characterized by her fancy, expensive ornaments and dress, which is more elaborate than Luo-fu's. Also, besides the attention to her virtue and noble personality, it may be seen as the folk tendency to dress up their heroine with the luxuries to which they have no access in real life. The climax arrives when the guard officer sends her a green bronze mirror and intends to tie it on to her silk skirt as a gesture of flirtation or proposal. She replies with dignity: "I don't care if the red silk gets torn,/ Not to mention my worthless body./ A man always desires a second wife,/ A woman esteems her first husband./ In human life there is new and old;/ noble and base can't trespass on each other" (不惜紅羅裂，何論輕賤軀。男兒愛後婦，女子重前夫，貴賤不相逾). She not only satirizes men and speaks for women in general, but she also asserts her untainted integrity despite her low status. Unlike Luo-fu who exaggerates, or creates, a powerful husband to drive off the intended offender, Hu-ji deliberately denigrates herself and stresses their class difference with the similar purpose of setting up a barrier between herself and the seducer.

We see that Luo-fu and Hu-ji are both determined and ready to guard their chastity. Such an emphasis on virtue may be regarded as the influence of dominant Confucian ideology in Han society. Nevertheless, they are independent women with self-esteem who reject being adored by men who view them as sexual objects; moreover, they are able to handle the situation efficiently with strategies to defeat the male seducers. We may also perceive that at that time, men with economic and political power liked to impose their will upon young women to fulfill their desire. Presenting female images with rebellious spirit and of low class to defy and ridicule those men certainly has its social significance. Such female images of strong character can be seen in another example, "The One I Love," formed in uneven lines, an indication that

it is an earlier ballad. In this poem a woman reacts to her lover's fickleness with fury and even destroys the precious gift she prepares for him to show her determination, as such lines show: "I hear that you have another love--/ I will break it, smash and burn it,/ Smash and burn it,/ Face into the wind, scatter its ashes./ From this day on/ Nevermore will I love you . . ." (聞君有他心，拉雜摧燒之。摧燒之，當風揚其灰。從今以往，勿復相思)。When she finds out that the man she loves has affairs with another woman, she does not want to accept it, and she does not even fear that others know it, since she is a woman who would not want to be treated unfairly. Like the other two women, she knows what she wants and dares to stand up for it.

When it came to the period of the Six Dynasties, with its literary trend toward self expression rather than moral instruction--a result of constant political strife and the diminished prestige of Confucian ideology--views of women underwent changes. The anonymous folk songs of the Southern dynasties (420-589), while keeping the earlier ballad conventions of dynamic progression and naturalness and simplicity of diction, differ from Han ballads mainly in two aspects, which are the use of standardized form--the five-word quatrain, and the predominant lyrical mode rather than the narrative.⁶ Traditionally classified as *Wu songs* 吳歌 and *Xi-qu* 西曲 according to geographical localities, these songs share much in common, such as form, love theme, feminine perspective, and a propensity for punning. On the whole, they seem to display a greater grace and elegance in tone compared to the anonymous popular ballads of the earlier period.⁷ A number of *Wu* songs will be explored to see how women perceive themselves and what became the center of their lives.

As songs to the *Ziyie* 子夜 tune and its modifications make up the majority of *Wu* songs, an introductory song may manifest its quality: "Of several hundred kinds of songs,/ The *Ziyie* [is] the loveliest./ Clear and true, the sounds come forth,/

Pure and rich, as from nature itself”⁸ (歌謠數百種，子夜最可憐。慷慨吐清音，明轉出天然)。Ziyie has been referred to as the name of a singsong girl. These “sounds” then can be reminiscent of woman’s voices, and the “lovely” (可憐) characterizes the images or women in *Wu* songs. The following *Ziyie* song further denotes such quality: “Overnight I have not combed my hair,/ Let loose my hair over my shoulders./ Twisting myself on my love’s lap,/ Which part of me is not lovely?”⁹ (宿昔不梳頭，絲髮披兩肩。婉伸郎膝上，何處不可憐)?¹⁰ In the rather seductive tone, we perceive a sense of freshness and spontaneity in its simple diction. The woman’s voice here is markedly feminine, soft and sensuous. She attracts men not through fancy ornament or dress but through what is “natural” (天然). This woman views herself through men’s eyes, but rather than appealing to male society’s emphasis on female virtues as women in the Han ballads do, she is eager to be loved and she enjoys being viewed as lovely. Unlike the women in the Han ballads, she seems to consider herself no more than a sexual object, the product of male society. Nevertheless, she has her voice, her action, and self-recognition, no matter how much they are colored by male ideology, to seek what she wants.

Another feature of *Wu* songs as distinct from Han ballads is that women appear to be fully occupied with the thought of love, which intimately associates with spring scenes, as seen in the following spring song of “*Ziyie* Four Seasons”:

Bewitching the blossoms of spring trees,	春林花多媚
Poignant the message of spring birds:	春鳥意多哀
Spring breezes send love thoughts--	春風復多情
Gently parting my skirt of gauze. ¹¹	吹我羅裳開

Spring is the season for love, and a woman in love not only projects a rosy view on spring scenes, but embraces them freely. The rhythmic sequence of the first three lines formed by

parallelism and repetition unfold this woman's hyper-joyful mood in which her charm, evocative emotions and feelings of love are likened to spring blossoms, spring bird's intent and spring breezes. In the fourth line, the neat pattern is broken when the spring wind suddenly blows open this woman's skirt; this immediately forces a sensory contact with the spring scenes, that brings her feelings of love to the surface.¹² Such imagery suggests a sense of interpenetration between the subjective feelings and the external scenes. In this song, the erotic tone is set by the expression of "spring breezes," which may indicate a lover or sexual contact.¹³ The love thought of this woman then can also be directed to sexual longing. However, if a young woman is not in love, the external bright spring scene becomes a pathetic contrast to the lonely woman inside the house who wishes to identify with the sensual spring season. This can be seen in another spring song, where, after the first couplet about the splendor of a spring scene comes the closeted young woman's exclamation, "Who would not think of love? I alone have to weave with the loom" (誰能不相思? 獨在機中織).¹⁴ The subjective loneliness and the gaiety of spring paradoxically convey the woman's concern for her transitory youth, like the beauty of spring, which would fly away quickly.

The sense of longing for a man, moreover, can become emotional dependence on man especially when the man, her lover, is away. In one of the "Ziyie Songs", the first couplet reveals a woman, perhaps Ziyie herself, recalling her departure from her lover that night, and wondering when they will be together again; the second couplet catches the emotive mood in the lines: "The bright lamp shines on the empty chessboard--/ For a long time there won't be any game" (明燈照空局, 悠然未有棋).¹⁵ She must have played chess with her lover frequently; the suddenly empty chessboard under the bright lamp indicates the sudden emptiness of her heart and it sharpens her dark, sorrowful mood. In this couplet, *youran* 悠

然, for a long time, puns with *youran* 油然, the oil burning, and *qi* 棋, chess game, puns with *qi* 期, a date. The punning brings a deeper dimension, allowing us to see the burning passion of this woman who perceived no date for her reunion with her lover.

Woman's anxiety in man's absence is further intensified in this *Ziyie* song:

The night is long, she cannot sleep,	夜長不得眠
A bright moon glitters, glitters;	明月何灼灼
She imagines hearing a vague voice--	想聞歡喚聲
"Yes," distractedly, she answers the air. ¹⁶	虛應空中諾

This woman longs for her lover to the extent that it affects her mental state and creates a hallucination as if hearing the man calling her. The glittering moon-light indicates her anxiousness and desire. The lonely echo of a vain answer in the emptiness of night suggests complex feelings of aloneness and disappointment.

Furthermore, women would even suffer physically in some cases, as this *Plain* song 讀曲歌 shows:

Since I parted from my love,	自從別郎後
I've been bedridden, unable to lift my head.	臥宿頭不舉
A flying dragon alights on the medicine shop--	飛龍落藥店
Bones sticking out: all because of you. ¹⁷	骨出只爲汝

Without man's love and presence, the woman languishes. The flying dragon is a fantastic image, but together with the medicine shop can be linked to her illness in bed. As dragon bone is used for Chinese medicine, the word *gu* 骨, bones, can be a pun for dragon's bones and this woman's cheekbones.¹⁸ Here we see a woman who is emaciated by love-sickness to the degree that she needs to take medicine.

We note that women with a strong, positive personality

such as is marked in the Han ballads disappear in the Southern Dynasty songs. Women become passive toys for men's affection, and are more ready to accept or take whatever fate is bestowed on them when men depart or change in love, even though that may mean any form of suffering. This perhaps has to do with the settings changing from predominantly countryside areas of Han ballads to the settings of mostly urban milieu, where men mainly work as traveling traders and have a great deal of mobility.¹⁹ The reactions of women to the infidelity of men in this period of folk songs were feeble and passive, in contrast to the vigorous outcry seen in the Han ballads. Such passivity is seen in these lines from "Plain Songs": "My love has been taken away by someone . . . Leaving his door open without a latch,/ He has no intention of ever closing it" (郎爲旁人取 . . . 離門不安橫, 無復相關意).²⁰ As the pun on the word *guan* 關 means both "to shut the door" and "to be concerned about," this woman passively accepts her bitter fate as her lover no more concerns himself with her and even leaves the door open, perhaps waiting to capture the love of other women.

Images of women are further institutionalized and defined by men's aesthetic pleasure in palace-style poetry, produced by literati in the first half of the sixth century. It is markedly influenced by the Southern Dynasties folk songs in terms of sensuous subject matter, especially the theme of love, and the short-lines form. However, this style is marked by courtly sophistication, a change from the pastoral simplicity of the folk songs. The evolution can be noted in two ways: one is the shifting setting from the urban, ordinary world to that of aristocracy and palace, particularly centering on an upper class lady's boudoir and her garden; another is the substitution of a polished, elaborated diction for the more colloquial one of the folk song.²¹ As this style was perfected by Emperor Liang Jian-wen and the literati he associated with, I will take a few of Liang's poems for discussion.

We may first notice that Liang's poems are rarely written in the first person, as is frequently the case in *Wu* songs, nor are they presented in the form of dialogues which allow women's direct speech, as in the Han ballads. Rather, they are descriptive poems that make women only to be seen and not to be heard. We find the physical description of an upper class lady is detailed not merely by dress and decoration but also by her gesture, attitude and expression that convey a certain poetic tenor and mood, as shown in the poem "A Lovely Woman's Morning Make-up" (美人晨妝):²²

At the north window she faces her dawn mirror.

北窗向朝鏡

Brocade curtains she drapes in a slanting twist.

錦帳復斜縈

Sweet, shy, unwilling to come out

嬌羞不肯出

She still claims her make-up isn't done.

猶言妝未成

She spreads kohl wide along her eyebrows,

散黛隨眉廣

Yen rough appears across her cheeks.

胭脂逐臉生

No doubt with all this she's sensational,

試將持出眾

She deserves to be called 'Adorable'!

定得可憐名

The description of this lovely lady on her gazing at herself in the mirror and applying make-up inside her private boudoir with brocade curtains in a slanting twist inevitably possesses a decorative, sensuous quality. The emphasis on color, lines, textures from the boudoir's furnishings to the lady's eyebrows are present. She would not present herself (to whom? her lover perhaps,) before her make-up is perfectly done. Here the voyeur's roving eyes penetrate through the curtain into the woman's bedroom viewing her every gesture; this evokes imagination. It is her coyness and the make-up that make her so "adorable" or "lovely" (可憐). Compared with the "lovely" woman in the *Ziyie* song who simply presents her natural self without combing her hair, without even make-up, we perceive

different ideas of aesthetics on woman's loveliness underlined in the different flavor of folk songs and palace-style poems--one is more natural, plain and personal, the other more artificial, ornate and impersonal.

Instead of the direct addressing and passionate embrace with love thoughts or spring as shown in *Wu* songs, women's love is rather suggestive and demure in palace-style poetry. This can be seen in the "Spring Bedroom Passion" (春閨情):²³

Willow leaves slim, slim.

楊柳葉纖纖

A lovely girl lazily weaves fine silk.

佳人懶織緜

She straightens her dress, turns to her mirror,

正衣還向鏡

To greet spring cautiously lifts the blinds.

迎春試舉簾

She picks plum round and round the trees,

摘梅多繞樹

Seeks swallows, peeks up in the eaves.

覓燕好窺檐

She simply says [that she is] in the pursuit of flowers

只言逐花草

[And should be] quite above suspicion!

計較應非嫌

The willow, plum tree, and flowers of the garden, in contrast to the mulberry trees of the countryside, suggest an affluent surrounding. The spring, indicating thoughts of love, distracts her from work. She is actually awaiting and looking for spring, but she has to make sure she looks fine before her contact with her amorous feelings. She tries to move with caution as seen in the way she lifts the blind to take a look at spring, to explore a little of her own thoughts of love. She cannot help stepping out to her garden to be bathed by the spring scenes, to somehow let out her emerging amorous feelings. Her acts of picking plums and seeking swallows are symbolic of her thinking of a matchmaker and longing for the company of a lover, as plum, *mei* 梅, puns on *mei* 媒, matchmaker, and swallows often fly in pairs. Wandering around trees shows her restless emotional state; yet she excuses herself as pursuing flowers only. The aesthetics for

the voyeur here is a woman's coy love--a woman in love both shows her sensations and attempts to hide them, even though her every move is suggestive.

We find in palace-style poetry, not only women's glamour and wealth, a feature of the Han ballad, has taken a distinctly different and new emphasis on sensuality, but the feminine loveliness in *Wu* songs is also given a dimension of coyness. Through the use of erotic emblems in a detached description, women's emotions are distilled; moreover, they are fixed into a framework as an artifact to be viewed and that involves voyeurism.

It appears that in the Six Dynasties, though the strong Confucian emphasis on feminine virtue has collapsed, the deep-rooted male-dominated society goes further to make women subjugated to men, and even to objectify women for man's aesthetic appreciation. Women's lives became centered on love, and their voices softened and even diminished to nothing in palace-style poetry. One may also note that in terms of class and gender women of the middle class, as *Wu* songs' predominant urban settings suggest, have lost the unyielding character and personal strength that appeared in the Han ballads, and women of much higher class, such as of the palace, lost even the freedom of emotional expression seen in *Wu* songs. In general, women of the lower class, as presented by ballads or folk songs, are more free in expressing their volition, wish, and desire, and their activity ranges are much wider. Upper class women as presented in palace-style poetry are almost voiceless, with only some sensuous gestures that somehow reveal their intention, and they are physically confined to their stylish boudoir and cultivated garden, passing their idle time without any contact with others, not even with their lovers.

Overall, in the three poetic forms discussed we find that women constructed in Han ballads possess relatively strong and independent personalities. They attend to their work and

they can be assertive, resisting unwanted and illicit love or attention from males, and can vigorously refuse to accept a male double-standard stance on love. Women presented in the Southern Dynasties folk songs appear much weaker, softer, and are emotionally dependent on men, even passively accepting infidelity. Also, the women's obsessive love can even affect their mental and physically well-being. They certainly are considerably more free and open in emotional expression, but they seem to identify with male aesthetic values in that they wish to be lovely and to be loved, and this is the center of their existence. Women in palace-style poetry, however, have become types rather than individuals. They are reduced in space and in depth, or we may say they are even devoid of the latter and are presented only on a sensual or erotic surface that invites a male gaze. Thus, women's voices and personalities are progressively weakened as they are increasingly infused with the patriarchal ideology imposed by male-dominated society.

Notes

¹ Wang Yunxi 王運熙, "Handai de yue ho ming 漢代的俗樂和民歌," *Yuehf u shi yianjiu lunwen ji 樂府詩研究論文集* (Beijing: Zuoja, 1957) 38.

² This poem and the following are translated by Hans Frankel. See "Yueh-fu Poetry," in *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres*, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) 79-81.

³ This poem is translated by Anne Birrell. See *Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988) 147.

⁴ Hans H. Frankel, 82.

⁵ Frankel, 85.

⁶ See Shuen-fu Lin, and Stephen Owen, ed. *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986) 310, and Frankel, 94.

⁷ Marilyn Jane Coutant Evans, "Popular Songs of the Southern

Dynasties: A Study in Chinese Poetic Style," diss., Yale University, 1966. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 17.

⁸ Evans' translation. See Evans, 19.

⁹ My own translation.

¹⁰ This poem is from Liu Dajie 劉大杰, *Zhongguo wenxue fazhanshi* 中國文學發展史 (Taipei: Hua Zheng, 1988), 334.

¹¹ Ronald C. Miao's translation. See "Palace-style Poetry: the Courtly Treatment of Glamour and Love," in *Study in Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Ronald Miao (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1978) 15.

¹² Evans, 109.

¹³ Miao, 15.

¹⁴ My own translation. This poem is from Liu, 335.

¹⁵ Lin's translation. See Lin, 306.

¹⁶ Miao's translation. See Miao, 15.

¹⁷ Lin's translation. See Lin, 306.

¹⁸ Ibid., 309.

¹⁹ Frankel, 95.

²⁰ Lin's translation. See Lin, 306.

²¹ Miao, 18.

²² This poem is translated by Anne Birrel. See *New Songs from the Jade Terrace* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986) 199.

²³ Ibid., 198.

