

The Portrayal of Female Images in the Huajian Ji and the Transmutation of Scholar-Official Value Orientations in the Late Tang and Five Dynasties

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Abstract

As the first comprehensive collection of literati ci poetry in Chinese literary history, the *Huajian Ji* (Collection of Songs from among the Flowers) features feminine themes. This focus is not merely a product of “erotic” entertainment, but rather a literary reflection of the transmutation of scholar-official value orientations during the late Tang and Five Dynasties. Against a backdrop of political disorder and social turmoil, the scholar-official class retreated from the traditional Confucian ideal of “ordering the state and pacifying the world” to the realms of private emotion and aesthetic pleasure. Drawing on the relevant research findings of Yeh Chia-ying (on “androgynous personality” and “the beauty of weak virtue”), Luo Zongqiang (on the mentality of scholar-officials in the late Tang and Five Dynasties and the history of literary thought), Zhan Antai (on the theory of entrustment, i.e., “imbuing boudoir and travel wanderings with feelings for one’s family, state, and the times”), and Anna Shields (on the elite identity construction of the *Huajian Ji* from the perspective of cultural capital), this paper further focuses on the intrinsic relationship between the portrayal of female images and the transmutation of scholar-official value orientations. This paper reveals that the exquisite and delicate female images in the *Huajian Ji* are in fact a spiritual projection of the scholars’ withdrawal from public politics and their turn toward emotional catharsis and aesthetic self-amusement. Wen Tingyun’s objective depiction and Wei Zhuang’s subjective persona-speech represent two different value choices within the scholar-official group: “escaping reality” versus “embodying personal vicissitudes.” This study demonstrates that the ‘*Huajian Ji*’ is not merely a collection of amorous song lyrics, but also a literary text documenting the psychological changes and spiritual struggles of Five Dynasties scholars, offering a unique lens for understanding the survival wisdom of literati in times of chaos.

Keywords

Huajian Ji; female images; scholar-official group; value orientation; Late Tang and Five Dynasties.

1. Introduction

In the late Tang and Five Dynasties, with separatist warlords and the collapse of the imperial order, the traditional Confucian value system of “cultivating oneself, regulating the family, ordering the state, and pacifying the world” disintegrated. Scholars found it difficult to realize their ambitions in the public political sphere and were forced to retreat into the realm of private emotions and aesthetic appreciation, shifting their pursuits from state and family achievements to secular pleasures. [1] The *Huajian Ji*, as China’s first literati ci collection, emerged precisely under this historical background. Its lyrics take women as the core subject, seemingly depicting

boudoir love and feasting pleasures, yet they implicitly carry profound information about the mentality and value reconstruction of literati in chaotic times. [2]

Current scholarship on the Huajian Ji has either focused on its “erotic” aesthetic style, or categorized female images typologically (e.g., Zhan Antai [3]), or introduced feminist theories to examine its “male gaze” nature (e.g., Yeh Chia-ying’s “androgynous personality” theory), while scholars such as Anna Shields have interpreted its socio-historical significance from a cultural metaphorical perspective [4]. However, few studies have systematically linked the portrayal of female images to the transmutation of scholar-official value orientations. This paper attempts to bridge the gap between text and spirit, arguing that behind the soft, sorrowful female images in the Huajian Ji lie the scholars’ spiritual predicaments and value choices – from “saving the world” to “self-amusement,” and from “governing the public domain” to “retreating into private affections.” Using close reading, historical contextualization, and a gender perspective, this study reveals how the writing of female images became a literary representation of the psychological transformation of scholar-officials.

2. The Cultural Ecology and Historical Motivations for the Formation of Female Images in the Huajian Ji

Most of the lyrics in Huajian Collection focus on women's life and emotions, marking a breakthrough in the pursuit of national righteousness and achievements in traditional poetry, and opening up a new field for the expression of women's emotions in Chinese literature. [5] Compiled in the third year of the Guangzheng era of the Later Shu (940 CE), the collection comprises 500 lyrics by eighteen writers, spanning from the first year of the Kaicheng era of the Tang (836 CE) to the fifth year of the Tianfu era of the Later Jin (940 CE). This period was one of intense turmoil, and the compilation of the Huajian Ji bears unique historical characteristics and multiple contributing factors.

A. Geographical Space and Institutional Support: The Partial Peace and Prosperity of Shu

The Shu region, with its geographical advantage of partial peace, became an ideal refuge for northern scholars fleeing chaos. The Former and Later Shu regimes maintained relative stability for over sixty years, and their rulers, in order to consolidate power, actively gathered literati, forming an intellectual circle centered on the court. Moreover, the prosperous urban economy of Shu, particularly the hedonistic atmosphere of Chengdu which was known as “extremely luxurious,” shaped the scholars’ aesthetic psychology of “staying away from war and concentrating on love,” providing institutional and material guarantees for the creation of ci poetry.

B. Political Turmoil and Psychological Imbalance: From “Expressing Aspirations” to “Entertaining Sentiments”

The political collapse of the late Tang and Five Dynasties was the fundamental cause of the scholars’ spiritual turn. The disruption of the imperial examination system blocked official careers, depriving the ideal of governing the state of its social conditions. Luo Zongqiang has pointed out that changes in the political landscape and scholar-official mentality directly influenced the direction of literary thought [6]. Forced to withdraw from the public political arena, scholars found in ci poetry, a new literary form born at feasts and not burdened with the didactic functions of shi poetry, a safe outlet for their emotions. Female images served a dual function here: they were both a substitute carrier for real emotions (transforming frustrated ambitions into boudoir laments) and an aesthetic activity in themselves, satisfying the scholars’ need to escape from heavy realities.

C. Literary Traditions: The Paradigm Foundations from Palace Style Poetry to Dunhuang Songs

The female images in the Huajian Ji also have deep literary roots. First, the Southern Dynasties palace style poetry (gongti shi) provided thematic resources and creative models for treating women as aesthetic objects. Ouyang Jiong's preface to the Huajian Ji explicitly states that it "takes after the palace style of the Southern Dynasties and reflects the fashion of the Northern Quarters" [7]. Second, the Dunhuang songs (Dunhuang quzi ci) laid a folk foundation and stylistic groundwork, but the Huajian Ji poets transformed the folk lyrics' directness into the refined elegance of literati verse. The Huajian school initiated the tradition that "ci is the vehicle for romantic charm" and erected the boundary that "shi is solemn and ci is alluring." In sum, the combination of Shu's environment, political crisis, and literary traditions jointly shaped the simultaneously magnificent and sorrowful female images in the Huajian Ji .

3. Multi-Strata Female Images and Their Emotional Characteristics in the Huajian Ji

Although most female figures in the Huajian Ji are not explicitly identified, readers can discern them through their living environments, attire, and emotional states. Women of different social strata in the late Tang and Five Dynasties exhibited distinct lifestyles, behavioral norms, and emotional expressions. Three identifiable types of female images can be broadly distinguished, each carrying different emotional patterns and collectively forming a literary panorama of women in this period.

A. Aristocratic and Court Women: "Golden Caged Birds" in Deep Chambers

These women occupy the upper social stratum, enjoying luxurious material lives while suffering spiritual emptiness and melancholy. Wen Tingyun's "Buddhist Dancers" (" Pusa Man — Little Hills Overlapping") is a representative example: "Too lazy to paint her moth eyebrows / She dawdles over her toilette." The meticulous depiction shows her languor, and the concluding image of "a pair of golden partridges" contrasts her solitude. [8] Xue Zhaoyun's "Ladies' Song" (" Xiao Chongshan — Autumn Comes to Changmen Palace") uses the story of Empress Chen's loss of favor to reveal the tragic fate of court women subject to the whims of imperial grace. The aristocratic women in these poems are voiceless prisoners in exquisite cages.

B. Singing Girls and Dancing Girls: "Empathetic Flowers" at Feasts and Banquets

Singing girls were the most direct subjects and performers of Huajian lyrics. They are portrayed as charming and graceful, as in Yin E's "Apricot Garden Spring" (" Xingyuan Fang "): "Shyly she lifts her step, her Yue silk robe light / 'Comely,' they say." As aesthetic objects to be viewed at banquets, their lack of agency occasionally elicits sympathetic portrayal from the poets. The depiction of these women reflects the scholars' own contradictions and their search for solace in sensual entertainment amid career frustrations.

C. Wives and Consorts Awaiting Faraway Men: "Yearning Ones" Gazing at the Horizon

This is the largest and most psychologically profound category. Their characterization focuses on the delicate externalization of inner worlds. Wei Zhuang's "Longing for the Emperor" (" Si Di Xiang — Spring Outing") employs first-person persona to create a young woman who dares to pursue love: "I'll give myself to him in marriage / And be done with it for life. / Even if heartlessly cast away, / I will not feel shame." [9] Yeh Chia-ying comments that this poem's emotional intensity contrasts sharply with the melancholy of aristocratic women [10]. The hopeless waiting and intense longing in the figure of the longing wife become the ideal vehicle for scholars to project their own feelings of frustrated ambition. The common trait shared by all three types – being "written about" and "viewed" – lays the groundwork for the following discussion of how they bear the scholars' value pursuits.

4. Interpretive Pathways: How Female Images Bear the Value Pursuits of Scholar-Officials

Having discussed the historical and cultural conditions for the formation of female images and their typological characteristics, a more fundamental question remains: Why are these lyrics, ostensibly about women, essentially expressions of male value pursuits? How can boudoir laments and sorrows of separation carry the scholars' own frustrations, political anxieties, and spiritual predicaments? Two explanatory pathways – literary tradition and psychological mechanism – are needed.

A. The Literary Tradition of “Men Voicing Women’s Words” (Nanzi zuo guiyin)

“Men voicing women’s words” has a long history, traceable to the “fragrant grass and beautiful woman” (xiangcao meiren) allegorical system initiated by Qu Yuan’s *Li sao*, where the poet uses a female persona to express political loyalty and resentment. Late Tang and Five Dynasties poets continued this tradition, but because of *ci*’s function as “romantic entertainment,” their expression became more subtle and indirect. Yeh Chia-ying calls this the “beauty of weak virtue” (ruode zhi mei) [11]: under political pressure, scholars were compelled to transform their “unspeakable feelings” into a feminized form. Wen Tingyun’s elaborate, objective description hides the author’s emotion behind sumptuous images, while Wei Zhuang’s plain, direct first-person persona actually conceals his own life experiences. [12] These two approaches represent the two fundamental ways in which Huajian poets developed the tradition of men voicing women’s words.

B. The Psychological Mechanism of Projection

If the literary tradition provides the “how,” psychological projection explains the “why.” Alfred Adler’s individual psychology argues that under real-life pressures, creative subjects transform inner repressed desires into aesthetic images through literary creation [13]. The Huajian poets precisely projected their anxiety over unappreciated talent and helplessness over political failure onto the female figures. Wen Tingyun’s portrayal of a woman “too lazy to paint her moth eyebrows” is interpreted by Yeh Chia-ying as “metaphorically indicating the mood of talented and ambitious men whose abilities are unrecognized”; similarly, the forlorn consort who has lost favor in Xue Zhaoyun’s poem mirrors the poet’s own career frustrations. Through this projection, political feelings and life lamentations that could not be directly expressed found indirect articulation through the persona and situation of women. The literary tradition and the psychological mechanism of projection reinforce each other, jointly making the female images a mirror of the scholar-official’s spiritual condition.

C. The Self-Characteristics of Scholar-Officials Refracted through Female Images and Their Later Influence

Through the female images of the Huajian *Ji*, we can observe four spiritual traits of the late Tang and Five Dynasties scholar-official group. [14] First, the escapist frustrated by political failure. Wen Tingyun’s checkered career and the languorous posture of the women in his lyrics embody his projection of political frustration. Second, the weak and depressed type. The “soft, gorgeous, and sensuous” aesthetic of Huajian *ci* is not an active choice but the result of “compulsory softness” under political pressure, exemplifying the “beauty of weak virtue” as a survival philosophy. Third, the pleasure-seeker of soft aestheticism. Scholars invested their remaining energy into the meticulous carving of female beauty, maintaining their elite identity through refined hedonism. [15] Fourth, the dependent and precarious survivor. The Western Shu *ci* poets, as guests and retainers of powerful lords, depicted women being enjoyed and abandoned – a mirror of their own dependent existence.

The Huajian *Ji* had a paradigmatic influence on later dynasties, especially the Song literati. It was revered as the “ancestor of *ci* composed to musical tunes” and established the notion that

“ci is the domain of romantic charm.” Song literati inherited its tradition of lyricism but carried out an “elegantization” (yahua), as seen in Yan Shu and Ouyang Xiu, who transformed external opulence into internal refined leisure. Feng Yansi of the Southern Tang initiated a new tradition in which scholar-officials used ci for lyrical self-expression. The Huajian poets’ strategy of seeking spiritual release through female personae was eventually internalized by Song literati as a refined lyrical paradigm, completing the transformation of ci from a tool of “entertaining guests” to a form of “expressing aspirations and feelings.”

5. Conclusion

With over four hundred lyrics on feminine themes, the Huajian Ji constructs a magnificent yet sorrowful artistic world. This study has shown that these exquisite female images are not merely products of erotic sentiment, but a spiritual reflection of the late Tang and Five Dynasties scholar-officials’ turn from saving the world to self-amusement, and from the public domain to the private sphere. Through the literary tradition of “men voicing women’s words” and the psychological mechanism of projection, the female images become a “self-portrait” of the scholars’ political frustration, spiritual weakness, and value reconstruction. The Huajian Ji is not only a collection of amorous lyrics, but also a literary text documenting the changes in the spirit of the age. Through its soft female images, we catch a glimpse of the spiritual struggles and adaptive wisdom of literati in an era of collapsing values, offering a unique window into the survival strategies of ancient Chinese scholars in times of chaos.

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