

The Awakening of Female Self-consciousness in Han Dynasty from the Perspective of *Mulberry Tree of the Path*

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Abstract: *Mulberry Tree of the Path* created the image of an intelligent and brave woman advocating self-esteem and self-improvement by describing Luo Fu, a girl picking mulberry. It approached the image by features such as her living environment, clothing, physical appearance, and in particular her intelligence when confronting the governor. The prototype was from girls picking mulberry in the real world. The awakening female self-consciousness pushed the girl to focus on things other than the perception of romance and love. Instead, their spiritual world started to mature with pursuit of independence. Another prototype of Luo Fu is the *Wife of Qiuhui* in the Western Han Dynasty. However, *Mulberry Tree of the Path* focuses not on the moral theme of "guarding chastity until death", but the rebellion and maturity of women's thoughts under the restriction of the so-called "three obedience and four virtues" under Confucianism in the Han Dynasty. Prior to the poem, we could not find a woman with such independence and confidence in the ancient Chinese literature. Since then, Luo Fu, with her beauty, generosity and wisdom, has become the subject of Chinese literature.

1. Introduction

Mulberry Tree of the Path is one of the most striking poems in Yuefu Songs of the Han Dynasty. It was first collected by Shen Yue in *Book of Song-Music*, and was named *The Song of Luo Fu*. After being collected into the *Yutai New Songs* by Xu Ling, it was renamed *A Trip to The Southeast at Sunset*. It finally got the name *Mulberry Tree of the Path* when being collected into the *Yuefu Songs* by GuoMaoqian in the Song Dynasty. From then on, researches on this topic has been going on till today. A very typical view that originates from cognitive value holds that the *Mulberry Tree of the Path* was a story in which Luo Fu, a mulberry picking girl, bravely and intelligently resisted the governor for sexual harassment, revealing the dark side of top officials and praising the wisdom and virtues of ordinary girls. Scholars holding this view concluded that the *Mulberry Tree of the Path*, under the influence of Confucianism, represented the morality of women in Han Dynasty ^[1], therefore making Luo Fu the symbol of virtuous women of the Han Dynasty. The song, with Luo Fu - the model of "virtue and loyalty to her husband", overrides morality with the love theme. The author also thinks the *Mulberry Tree of the Path*, by describing Luo Fu's living environment, clothing, physical appearance, and in particular, her confrontation with the governor, presented the beauty of morality and created a female image of industriousness, simplicity, self-esteem, courage and intelligence. This is exactly the core and connotation of the *Mulberry Tree of the Path*. However, Luo Fu should not be taken as a role model of "virtuous women" in the Han Dynasty, a tool to preach Confucianism whose personalities such as confidence, independence and maturity were ignored. This was strangling Luo Fu as a living character. The *Mulberry Tree of the Path* is not only about "virtue and loyalty", but also a representation of resistance and maturity of women under the constraints of three obedience and four virtues proposed by Confucianism. It marks a deviation from the traditional view of chastity in Confucianism. Before the birth of the *Mulberry Tree of the Path*, we can't find in ancient Chinese literature such an independent and confident woman of self-values with a distinct perception of love. Since then, Luo Fu, with her beauty, generosity and wisdom, has become the subject of Chinese literature.

2. Mulberry-picking girls before Luo Fu

Previous researches on the *Mulberry Tree of the Path* successfully traced back the prototype of Luo Fu- women dating their boyfriend in the mulberry woods. Their love was originally linked with primitive sacrifice and people's worship to the mysterious mulberry woods. However, in *The Book of Songs* when the mulberry woods shed mystery, it was no longer used as a holy place to pray for rain, but rather a dating place for mulberry-picking girls and their men. Just as the *Mo-tse: Ghost* put it: "The Zuze of Yan State, like Sheji of Qi State, the mulberry woods of Song State, the Yunmeng of Chu State, is a popular dating place."^[2] Love was born in these places. It can be seen that the mulberry woods are ideal places for women to find their love. A large number of mulberry-picking women encountered, experienced love and sorrows in the mulberry woods, forming the most gorgeous scenery in *The Book of Songs*.

In terms of expression, most of these poems share the characteristics of simplicity, frankness and boldness. The inner world of mulberry-picking women was presented fully to their lover, who never hesitated to speak out and invite the man they loved. Just as *Yongfeng*^[3]

爰采唐矣？沫之乡矣。云谁之思？美孟姜矣。期我乎桑中，要我乎上宫，送我乎淇之上矣。

爰采麦矣？沫之北矣。云谁之思？美孟弋矣。期我乎桑中，要我乎上宫，送我乎淇之上矣。

爰采葑矣？沫之东矣。云谁之思？美孟庸矣。期我乎桑中，要我乎上宫，送我乎淇之上矣。

Yongfeng: Mulberry Woods stated, the woman who met her lover in the mulberry woods never hide her feelings and passion when inviting or sending him away.

隰桑有阿，其叶有难。既见君子，其乐如何。

隰桑有阿，其叶有沃。既见君子，云何不乐。^[4]

In *Xiaoya: Wet Mulberry Woods*, the woman, seeing the flourishing mulberry woods where she was about to date her beloved one, was too happy to express her feelings with words. The love was so strong that she just couldn't help speaking it out.

十亩之间兮，桑者闲闲兮。行与子还兮。

十亩之外兮，桑者泄泄兮。行与子逝兮。^[5]

Meeting her love in the mulberry woods and go home together with him, she never tried to inhabit this passion and love, revealing the very essence of love.

In the late spring, the girls were picking mulberries. They were sad, worrying that the prince would take them back. " (*Binfeng: July*). *Stories of Mao* stated: " How sad they are! The spring is a sad season for women while the autumn witnessed the sorrow of men. They are sad because the world is undergoing constant changes. The *Interpretation of Stories of Mao* stated:" In spring, women desire for men because of the masculinity the comes along the season; in autumn, men, affected by the femininity of the atmosphere, long for women. The changes of the world induced sorrow and sadness, which aroused the desire of woman to go with her lover and be his wife."^[6] The affections and feelings of girls induced by the advent of spring represent the most original and touching experience of love.

After breaking through the imprisonment of all sorts of mysterious sorcery forces, the women felt beauty, freshness, pain and hesitation with their sensitive and free heart for the first time. On the one hand, the *Book of Songs* showed the strong vitality of self-consciousness among women. On the other hand, it also reveals that there was little rationality and restraint in love at this time, and women's love was mostly perceptual and emotional experience, without forming a mature and independent view of love.

In addition, we should also see that women's desire, expectation and yearning for love essentially reflected their dependence on men without pursuit of personal independence.

The love originating from mulberry wood didn't fulfill the spiritual needs of women, but rather aimed at reproduction. The *Rites of Zhou: Officials* stated: "In the middle of spring, men and women are allowed to have sex in the wild. For men who didn't have a wife, they shall find one as soon as possible, or they would be punished by the government." The purpose of this was to increase the population and strengthen the national power. During the Spring and Autumn Period, wars were frequent and the population decreased sharply. Despite that these poems brought the mulberry love beauty, passion and romance, this seemingly pure and sincere love was produced more for physical

purposes than love itself, where women were in a passive position to accept what they were given, or serving as a political tool. This reflected women's ignorance of their own values, freedom and independence.

3. The image of Luo Fu

From the *Mulberry Woods* to the *Mulberry Tree of the Path*, the leading role was still the mulberry-picking girl who interpreted the romantic legend of mulberry woods. However, her female self-consciousness was awakened, showing the maturity and independence of women's spiritual world. According to the female consciousness by Qiao Yigang: "Firstly, the female vision is used to understand herself, determine the essence and meaning of life and her status in the society; Secondly, it examines the external world from the perspective of women to understand and grasp the characteristics of women." [7] If we look at Luo Fu from this perspective, we can see that she had a strong sense of gender, self-evaluation on marriage etiquette and a clear understanding of self-values.

First of all, the stunning beauty of Luo Fu is a strong representation of female self-consciousness.

日出东南隅，照我秦氏楼。秦氏有好女，自名为罗敷。
罗敷善蚕桑，采桑城南隅。青丝为笼系，桂枝为笼钩。
头上倭堕髻，耳中明月珠。缃绮为下裙，紫绮为上襦。
行者见罗敷，下担捋髭须。少年见罗敷，脱帽著幘头。
耕者忘其犁，锄者忘其锄。来归相怨怒，但坐观罗敷。

The presence of Luo Fu, set at the sunrise and around tall buildings, formed a grand and marvelous scene. And the poet described the beauty of Luo Fu in great details, from the hair to the earrings, from her light-yellow dress to her pink-purple jacket, creating a fabulous female image that attracted all the men around, including passersby, the young and farmers. The exaggerating descriptions gave a full display to her beauty and confidence, marking an accurate understanding of the characteristics of women. Therefore, Luo Fu became a cultural image that is commonly accepted by people from different levels of society in traditional Chinese culture. [8]

On the other hand, the mulberry-picking girls in the *Book of Song* are quite ambiguous in terms of the image. In *Yongfeng: Mulberry*, the three chapters of *Beautiful Meng Jiang*, *Beautiful Meng Yi*, and *Beautiful Meng Yong* used only the word "beautiful" to summarize the beauty of women, while the *Weifeng: In the Fields* used only words such as "idle" for these girls. In the *Beifeng: Vagrant*, words like "the mulberry leaves, though vibrant on the tree, turn yellow and die off the tree" portrayed the mulberry girls from youth to being old, presenting the self-repression and the inability to control life of women.

So, the beauty of Luo Fu, not only added vigor and vitality into the mulberry girls, but also reflected the confidence of women in themselves. Luo Fu found herself in her beauty and stood out among the crowd, while the external environment, artifacts, clothing, others (especially men) were just the background to highlight her beauty.

Secondly, Luo Fu has her own attitude towards the marriage etiquette, and she had a rational and sober understanding of self-values, which was displayed mainly through her confrontation with the governor.

使君从南来，五马立踟蹰。使君遣吏往，问是谁家姝？
“秦氏有好女，自名为罗敷。”“罗敷年几何？”“二十尚不足，
十五颇有余”。使君谢罗敷：“宁可共载不？”
罗敷前致辞：“使君一何愚！使君自有妇，罗敷自有夫。”

Shi Jun was also conquered by the elegant demeanor of Luo Fu, who abruptly invited her to his carriage, an experience similar with those mulberry girls in the *Book of Song*. However, Luo Fu's reaction was very opposite to her predecessors. In the face of love from the handsome and rich man followed by five carriages and a crowd of servants, she didn't respond with passion, but rather refused him with strong words like "How can you be like this? You've already got a wife. And I

have been married. " The tone was strong and firm, showing an optimistic and confident female image of self-esteem, intelligence and bravery. She always maintained the personality of independence and equality, which is indeed respectable.

Then she praised her husband with every possible word:

“东方千余骑，夫婿居上头。何用识夫婿？

白马从骊驹；青丝系马尾，黄金络马头；腰中鹿卢剑，可值千万余。

十五府小吏，二十朝大夫，三十侍中郎，四十专城居。

为人洁白皙，鬢鬢颇有须。盈盈公府步，冉冉府中趋。

坐中数千人，皆言夫婿殊。”

Her husband was not only handsome, but also extremely talented. The way she praised her husband was a representation of wisdom and talents in itself. As a girl under 20, she used every word within her reach to praise her husband, fully displaying her talents. In addition, her appreciation of her husband was also a symbol of self-recognition, revealing her maturity and awakening consciousness of love.

4. Sublation of Chastity in Confucianism

Luo Fu in the *Mulberry Tree of the Path* not only originated from mulberry-picking girls, but also from *The Wife of Qiu hu*:

鲁秋胡洁妇者，鲁秋胡子妻也。秋胡子既纳之五日，去而宦于陈，五年乃归。未至家，见路傍妇人采桑，秋胡子悦之，下车谓曰：“……力田不如逢丰年，力桑不如见公卿。吾有金，愿以与夫人。”妇人曰：“嘻！夫采桑力作，……奉二亲，养夫子，已矣，吾不愿金。但愿卿无有外意，妾亦无淫佚之志，收子之贵与笥金！”秋胡子遂去，至家，……使人唤其妇，妇至，乃向采桑者也。秋胡子惭。妇曰：“……今也乃悦路傍妇人，下子之粮，以金予之，是忘母也，忘母不孝；好色淫佚，是污行也，污行不义。夫事亲不孝，则事君不忠；处家不义，则治官不理。孝义并亡，必不遂也。妾不忍见，子改娶矣，妾亦不嫁。”遂去而东走，投河而死。（《列女传》第5卷）

During the throne of Emperor Wu in Western Han Dynasty, the Confucianism was the only school recognized and advocated by the emperor. The scholars at that time despised the luring and obscene loving scenes in *The Book of Songs*. To promote the so-called “morality” keeping men and women away as well as the three obedience and four virtues, stories like *The Wife of Qiu hu* emerged to enhance Confucianist teachings, which asked women to safeguard their virtues and endowed them with the so-called title of “virtuous woman”. These practices constrained the mind of women. Women were no longer loyal to love, but become the appendices of men and victims of ethics.

Based on the above cultural background, many scholars believe that the theme of the *Mulberry Tree of the Path* was actually a reconstruction of mulberry woods, evolving from the theme of love to the moral theme containing the Confucian concept of chastity.

From the above analysis, the Confucian virtuous ethics obviously couldn't completely cover the spiritual world of Luo Fu. The way she dressed and publicized herself as well as her acceptance of appreciation from men marked a deviation from the traditional virtuous women. Besides, the way Luo Fu confronted the governor and the confidence she showed was a complete violation of traditional humble women.

These restraints on women set up by the Confucianism oppressed tens of thousands of women, forcing them to suppress the desire for love and for being themselves. They never found a way out. However, this kind of emotional depression induced rebellion among women, as reflected in two forms in the literature: one form is represented by *Silver Threads among the Gold* and *The Peacock Flies Southeast*, ended with the failure of women; the other, represented by the *Mulberry Tree of the Path*, concluded with a happy ending for women.

Confucianism in Han Dynasty really made an impact on these works, but more importantly, it had a counter-productive effect on women, who, in the resistance of moral codes, were no longer simple and intuitive. Their female consciousness awakened rapidly, and their thoughts began to mature, with a profound reflection on love. "I heard you are seeing other girls, so I burned the pledge you gave me." "I heard you are also in love with someone else, so I came to break up with

you." "I'd love to be someone forever and ever". Works like these showed that women came to realize that men and women were equal, and they were independent. Once they were encountered with betrayal, they would leave immediately. They asked for loyalty. This was not only a discipline for them to obey, they wanted that from their men, too. This is obviously not in line with the thoughts of Confucianism. After the awakening of women's consciousness, they had more mature understanding of love and the Confucian concept of chastity.

The most important part of the *Mulberry Tree of the Path* is the creation of Luo Fu, a perfect woman. In the eyes of moralists, she is a virtuous woman, while in the eyes of lovers, she is a romantic legend. However, neither of them can fully show the connotation and values of Luo Fu. After all, they ignore the continuous awakening and progress of female consciousness in the historical development. Han Dynasty followed only Confucianism, which exerted all kinds of constraints on women in social and economic terms as well as in their family. They had to depend on men for survival. These social and mental oppression will inevitably lead to women's resistance and mature. The awakening and development of female consciousness that we found in Luo Fu, a woman of confidence, beauty, wisdom and bravery, marks an ideal reflection of awakening female consciousness as well as the charm and female characteristics of Luo Fu.

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