

The Callous Fate of Chinese Women During the Ming Dynasty—Explored Through Ostensibly Beautiful Paintings

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ABSTRACT

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) a significant theme of painting was the portrayal of beautiful women. These renderings have shown how women were considered inferior to men. The women were only valued for their physical appearance, subordinate actions, and suitable talents for. In order to analyze these paintings, it is necessary to gain knowledge about the period of time in which they were created. An examination of the past brings forth the meaning purveyed through symbolism, setting, and figures to realize the full spectrum of a Chinese woman's life displayed on the canvas. The subjugation of women will be identifiable and these paintings will signify additional information on the views of Chinese women. Chinese women in art are an important part of history, aiding in the interpretation of how they were treated as a gender. It is imperative to study Chinese women in all aspects of history to recognize the complete gamut of a Chinese woman's plight in life.

Introduction

All aspects of Chinese culture and its belief systems must be carefully examined to accurately understand the unfathomable adversity women have faced within Chinese society. Vital entities that require exploration include; religious beliefs, diverse socioeconomic standing, the treatment of various groups, and jobs women were obligated to partake in. These jobs or forced tasks entailed servitude, entertainment of various forms, childbearing and childrearing. During the Ming Dynasty, Chinese women had specific roles enforced upon them. Women's roles were determined when they were born, although many parents had chosen their fates before conception. Women were born to follow orders and expected to remain dignified if they opposed their inevitable destiny. The issue of sexism and the overt mistreatment of women is a cyclic problem, which was learned and passed onto future generations through collective thoughts and silently exposed in works of art. A treatise written by Lady Po Ho-pan speaks of the "proper condition" in which a woman survives:

"We occupy the last place in the human species, we are the weaker part of humanity; the basest functions are, and should be, our portion....Rightly and justly does the Book of the Laws of the Sexes make use of these words: 'If a woman has a husband after her own heart, it is for her whole life; if a woman has a husband against her heart, it is also for life'" (quoted in Durant 793).

Females in Chinese society were regarded as menial entities; continually demoralized, degraded, humiliated, ignored—which created intrinsic silence. The silence was second nature and women simply accepted mistreatment because they did not know anything different. This was a paradoxical situation since women were a remarkably prevalent motif in Ming Dynasty paintings. A woman could speak eloquently, sing, and play music, as shown in paintings, yet their individuality was stripped away, inevitably creating a conventional group of women. The Chinese belief system used numerous external methods to produce art themes revolving around the subjugation of women, and in turn, this portrayal kept women in a state of perpetual vulnerability and silence.

Analyzing Ming Dynasty art is a visual portal into China's past just as the past assists in the interpretation of art. Through the process of analyzing art, it becomes clear how artists and individuals within a society saw the world in which they lived. Just as religion, politics, and economics evolve, art styles and the artist's portrayal of these changes are modified. The process of interpreting specific

paintings, in relation to a nation's history, proves that societal norms influence the creative process of an artist and its onlookers. This process inevitably perpetuates the same societal norm.

The Restoration of Dynastic Rule

The Mongols, also known as the Yuan, were overthrown in 1368 and China returned to dynastic rule ("Dynasties of Later Imperial"). The leader of the rebellion against the Mongols was a man named Zhu Yuanzhang. He captured the Yuan capital at Dadu ("PUAM"). Zhu was honored with the title of founding ruler of the Ming Dynasty ("PUAM"). His time as the Hongwu emperor lasted from 1369-98 ("PUAM"). He decided to transfer the capital of China to the South at Nanjing ("Dynasties of Later Imperial"). Due to the continuous fear of invasions The Great Wall of China was built to ensure their safety from the Mongols and the Manchu ("Dynasties of Later Imperial"). There were factions of the wall remaining from earlier dynastic rule; however, the Ming rulers chose to expand the length and restore the remnants of the previous wall ("DLI"). The Ming Dynasty progressed in the cultural realm when the encyclopedia and a dictionary were written, but their greatest achievement was the creation of the novel ("DLI").

Daoism

Daoism's revival happened during the Ming Dynasty which led to the printing of, The Daoist Canon, a compilation of all the existing Taoist scriptures (Eichman 4). Daoism was cultivated around 2,500 years ago in China, and remains popular in China to this day (Miller 18). The word Dao means "way" or "the path" and its emergence came during a politically challenging time which led to China's golden age surrounding philosophical advancement (Eichman 4).

In Daoism, an ideal leader is called the Sage who possesses the attributes of being "wise and charismatic that he or she naturally inspires people to cooperate harmoniously with each other" (Miller 18). The aim of all Taoist followers is to practice the Dao—expanding and enhancing one's spiritual life (Miller 18). The Tao is unexplainable to its full extent because of its mysteriousness, which is anchored in the belief that nature equals women because they are the "mother to all things" (Sanna 48). Taoists believe that women should be respected, admired, and worshiped, for they are everyone's mother (Sanna 48). They also appreciate the beauty of a woman's body and regard it as sacred (48). This ideal leads to the notion of equality between both genders regardless of status (48). When Confucianism became the dominant belief system, women's sexuality took a downward spiral and pleasure was eliminated from the female's life (48).

Neo-Confucianism

Confucius lived before the Christian Jesus is said to have been born in a village called Zou; a part of China called the state of Lu (Sanna 41). The idea of Confucianism is philosophically based and caters to the behaviors of everyday living (Sanna 45). There are five specific relationships that Confucians believe must be valued for society to flourish. These include: ruler and advisor, father and son, husband and wife, eldest brother and youngest brother, and finally between friends, the only true relationship that bestows equality (Sanna 46).

The symbol of yin and yang represents two intermingling elements between men and women (Kang 23). Women are the yin and linked with the moon. Men, or the yang aspect, are connected to the sun (Kang 23). Yin and yang had originally considered men and women to be equals, but Confucius turned the attributes of yin and yang into a negative connotation rather than its intended positive nature (Kang 23). Women were seen as passive beings and weak in temperament opposed to men who are strong and encompass all positive energies such as heaven (23). These views have kept women and men believing that the patriarchal system is justified and that the natural order of gender is equality and inequality (23).

Adeline Yen Mah asserts that, "every Chinese person wears a Confucian thinking cap...just as foot binding once bound women's feet, Confucian's teachings have quietly and surely bound women's lives for centuries" (Sanna 51). Confucianism was at its peak centuries before Ming Dynasty rule;

however, the remnants of Confucius' teachings still loom within the minds of many Chinese people (Sanna 51). Fang Guo believes that Confucianism led women to be subdued to the point of brutality (2). The Confucian code of ethics severely repressed women so they were not individuals but simply an accessory for men to abuse and use (Guo 2). Confucianism revolved around the belief that a man was the leader and a woman's priority was to be obedient to that man (Kang 22).

Chinese society wanted to recreate their country thus; Confucianism was reintroduced and called Neo-Confucianism. Daily routines and societal norms changed in many ways due to this. Fu Hsuan wrote a song at the height of Confucianism that carried through into the ideals and practices of Neo-Confucians:

How sad it is to be a woman! / Nothing on earth is held so cheap. / Boys stand leaning at the door
/ Like gods fallen out of heaven. / Their hearts brave the Four Oceans, / The wind and dust of a
thousand miles. / No one is glad when a girl is born: / By her the family sets no store. / When she
grows up she hides in her room, / Afraid to look a man in the face. / No one cries when she leaves
her home— / Sudden as clouds when the rain stops. / She bows her head and composes her face, /
Her teeth are pressed on her red lips: / She bows and kneels countless times (quoted in Durant
793-94).

This song not only describes the effect Confucianism inflicted upon women, but shows how filial piety produced a meek and scared woman, knowing her life was limited and she was unwanted.

Filial Piety Stemming from Confucian Ideals

It was said that, "Filial piety is the basic principle of Heaven, the ultimate standard of earth, and the norm of conduct for the people" (Ching 329). This basis of filial piety was for all social classes, and was not discriminatory however, the guidelines were less austere for some particular groups (Ching 329-30). Filial piety held great importance to the people of China. Wants, dreams, and desires did not matter for children, especially young girls. Family was the most important element of their lives. It was assumed and expected that both genders would put their parents and family (for women this included their in-laws) before themselves. "Filial piety commences with service to parents: it proceeds with service to the sovereign; it is completed by the establishment of one's own personality" (Ching 327).

It was a harsh fate to be born a female. A child's life was determined before they were conceived and in accordance to their social status (Durant 791). Parents were in charge of their children's marriage, and had ultimate authority (791). If a woman or girl refused to marry, it was likely she would be forced to be a low class concubine or prostitute (Durant 789). Women were not allowed to have conversations with men. They had little chance, as they were confined to their home and the courtyard (Durant 793). They were kept in a separate part of the home with any children that had been born (Durant 793). If a woman conceived too many girls, she left them somewhere to die (789). This was common because females were a burden to their parents. They were unable to farm well, do demanding work to help the family survive, or fight in a war effectively (Durant 789). Durant explains that there was no shame felt when resorting to this disposal—one more mouth would be more of a liability than could be tolerated (789). A woman's duty was her "biological function" to have sons and continue her husband's bloodline (Bullough 98). Her psychological well being was not taken into account (Bullough 98). Once a woman gave birth to a son she gained more respect from her family and society (98).

Another form of filial piety was that a woman was required to remain chaste until she was married (Guo 9). The Chinese people did not believe in marriage because there was love or a strong bond (9). Marriage was enacted to enhance status and conjoin the names of both families, with the goal that everyone involved would benefit (9). These benefits would hopefully increase the families' social status, financial prospects, and growth of the family lineage (9). This form of marriage did not benefit women, "For females, feudal marriages were shackles in which they could only expect an unpredictable fate. However, love is romantic and beautiful, and females caught up in the shackles of marriage were nevertheless filled with yearning for the joys of love" (9). After her husband died, she was to remain a

widow and maintain her new chastity (9). The Ming Dynasty has the highest rate of suicide in Chinese history due to a widow's passionate desire to abide by the laws of chastity (7-9). Women during the Ming Dynasty were not allowed to partake in self-actualization if they were to survive in this feudal society and bound marriages.

Eunuchs

Eunuchs were men who had been castrated creating a new gender class of half man and half female (Nam). Eunuchs were employed to watch women and make sure they were not having any affiliations with other men (Nam). Eunuchs were trusted because they were impotent and could not impregnate a woman. This secured the purity of the master's lineage (Nam). For the exception of prisoners, becoming a eunuch was a voluntary decision for a man, or a boy's parents could make the decision to sell their children (Nam). Many young boys born into lowly social classes were sold by their parents to be castrated. This enabled the boys to gain higher positions in their adult lives (Anderson 15). The boys were seen as "pure" and highly favored, and if they were younger than ten years old they were classified as "thoroughly pure" (Anderson 15). The ladies of the palace doted on these boys as if they were their own offspring (16). When the boy was older they could be bribed by the woman who cared for him as a child (16). This produced more possibilities for the concubine to succeed and move to a higher position with her husband.

Gaining a higher position in their later life did not come without emotional consequences, due to the harassment they underwent. Eunuchs were called "crows" because of their soprano voices (Anderson 15). They were often made fun of when they were first castrated because they had decreased bladder control and smelled like urine (Anderson 15-16). Eunuchs were unable to grow beards and had a "bloated appearance" which changed as old age set in, and they eventually became gaunt and looked like women (Anderson 17).

The simplest way to identify a eunuch was by his physicality and mobility. "Eunuchs had such a peculiar walk that they could easily be recognized at great distances. They characteristically leaned slightly forward, their legs close together, taking short, mincing steps, with the toes turned outward. Whether this odd walk was a physical necessity, or was imposed upon eunuchs as a rule of conduct to denote the eunuch's station is not known" (Anderson 18). Clothing of a eunuch was also worn according to their class (17). Eunuchs of the lower class were required to wear long grey robes that were worn under a "dark blue coat" (Anderson 18). It was mandatory for these eunuchs to wear the designated hats and boots when they were working (18). Opposed to the lowly eunuchs, the highly ranked eunuchs were allowed to wear flamboyant robes with overstated colors and designs (18). Becoming a eunuch opened many doors for a man, but it was not a glamorous life, especially if he did not have a position of high status.

Concubines

Concubines were women who were married to men as secondary wives whose purpose was to produce sons for their husband, though they were not classified as prostitutes (Westheimer 5). Concubines were often sold by their parents either to brokers or to the intended master, to acquire money because of their poverty (6). Hsieh Bao Hua declared that, "commoditization of women was not necessarily synonymous with victimization...concubinage could perpetuate the existing male power alignments from which women derived social privileges...incentive to concubinage for the women from poorer, lower-class families" (263).

Buying women as concubines was appropriate and acceptable behavior in China because they believed in polygamy (Westheimer 5). Concubines were accumulated by men of power to show their status within society and their political power (Westheimer 5). "Polygamy was looked upon as eugenic" (Durant 791). This was accepted because the men could afford many wives and should increase the amount of children born into their bloodline. This showed that they were worthy men. Durant writes that a first wife may encourage her husband to buy concubines if she was unable to have children (791). When the concubine gives birth, the first wife would want adopt the child and raise it as her own (791).

A concubine was never able to become the first wife of her master even if the primary wife died (Westheimer 6). A concubine had no power or status in her life, but she was taken care of financially, which was a relief for most considering the poverty they were born into. Unlike a courtesan, the concubine was a married woman whose sole purpose was to have children.

Courtesans

The courtesan is a female who entertains men for a living. More so, she was a mistress who typically entertained a man who was rich, powerful, or belonged to the upper-class—in return she received luxuries and social status. She did not marry and is the most self-sufficient of all women, which gave her a “unique freedom” (Wetzel 646). Married women were forced to obey their mother-in-laws and husbands and bear children, but the courtesan was not homebound and was able to make decisions for herself (Wetzel 646). Wetzel emphasizes that this liberation was relative and there was a “continual dualism of courtesantry—at once free and bound, exhilarating and humiliating” (Wetzel 646).

The courtesan was a performer or an artist that was praised for her talents and beauty (Wetzel 647). She was a charmer and a professional hostess who was highly educated for a woman. She recited poetry and literature, played instruments, sang, danced, and created a fantasy world for her clientele (647). It was also anticipated she was skilled in the visual arts, mainly painting, needlework, and calligraphy (Wetzel 650). One of the courtesan’s main roles when she was entertaining a group of gentlemen was to alleviate any tension between officials or scholars, as she was advanced at creating a satisfying atmosphere (Wetzel 648). Though they had freedom, courtesans did not have an enchanting life and were stigmatized by society. Many times they were thought of as mere prostitutes.

Foot Binding and the Ideal of Beauty and Eroticism

The perception of beauty during the Ming Dynasty, first and foremost, revolved around the size of the female’s feet (Ko, “The Body as Attire” 13). Foot binding became a highly practiced procedure within the elite class (Ko “The Body as Attire” 13). Foot binding or hobbling, is the process of inhibiting a girl’s feet to grow, and was exceedingly popular during the Ming Dynasty (Sanna 11-13). A child’s mother or grandmother would start by pulling the toes back thereby, breaking her toes (with the exception of the big toe) and then tightly wrapping her toes underneath the bottom of her foot (11-13). The purpose of the wrappings was to break all the bones in the girl’s feet. The ideal size of an adult female’s feet was supposed to be three inches long. However, if a curvature existed on the bottom of the foot, commonly referred to as “moons forever new,” it increased her sexual desirability (15).

Dorothy Ko emphasizes that women were subjected to this practice to make movement difficult and at times painful. By doing this, they imposed domestic duties upon the women (“The Body as Attire” 8). Binding a woman’s feet was also accentuated in this time period because men found it sexually arousing and believed it signified a woman’s beauty and gender (Ko, “The Written Word” 98). A woman’s bound feet were an object for foreplay before intercourse (Ko, “The Written Word” 98). Many men saw them as “sex objects to satisfy certain perverted erotic fantasies” (Ko, “The Body as Attire” 8). The man would gawk at her feet and then fondle them to become aroused (98). Dorothy Ko asserts that a man could pay a courtesan a large price to unbind her feet for his pleasure (99).

A prospective husband could deny a girl whose feet were too long. They were forced to lift their dresses to show how beautiful their feet were, and it was acceptable for the man to end all connections if he was displeased (Ko, “The Body as Attire” 8-9). However, these women did not see themselves as victims. Rather they felt lucky for the prospects that the pain they suffered would bring to their futures (Ko, “The Written Word” 96-98). Little is known about the motivation or attraction to foot binding. There are few archives that enhance our understanding and the materials that remain are inadequate (Ko, “The Body as Attire” 8-9).

Instruments that Women Played

Music was an integral part of a woman’s life in China. Being able to play an instrument, or specific types of instrument, tells others what social class a woman is part of. Concubines usually did not

play musical instruments because they grew up in poverty and helped the family. Courtesans are considered a social step above the concubines for they were trained to be entertainers.

Courtesans were usually skilled at playing the pipa, classified as any plucked lute, which had four strings and a pear-shaped form (Myers 167). At the beginning, this instrument was recognized as a foreigners or evangelists instrument, it eventually was popular amongst roaming courtesans and entertainers (Myers 168). During the Ming Dynasty, it was expected that a courtesan knew how to play the pipa if she was to be marketable (Wong 402).

The Qin or guqin, which means “ancient qin”, is a zither, comprised of seven strings made of silk that are laid upon a long, shallow box (Yung 157). This was the most revered instrument a female could play and remains an elite talent in modern day China (157). There are an assortment of reasons for the qin’s superb reputation including: aesthetic value, its withholding throughout history, the status it has maintained throughout the centuries, and the additional art forms in which the instrument is depicted (157). There were few women privileged enough to learn this instrument, some were in the lofty class of courtesans. Typically, professional entertainers or the high class courtesans were the women who possessed this skill, and they played for the scholar-gentleman (Yung 160). The qin was rarely played outside of an intimate setting, usually the entertainer and her client were the only two that were present (160). When the qin was being played, there was no one in the room that was unable to play the instrument themselves (Yung 160). This elite instrument was more about the story or poem behind the music rather than the actual sound, and required a sophisticated ear to appreciate its dynamisms (Yung 160).

An Ideal Woman’s Face

The people of China have a strong admiration for beautiful women and there is a standard that women have continually been expected to uphold (“Traditions”). There are certain facial features that are considered divine and are held in high regard (“Traditions”). The favorite face shape of painters is an oval shape for its proportional qualities, which extends to the perfection of specific features (“Traditions”). Jiuwo, also known as pit of wines, are cheeks that have dimples and exudes even more magnetism to woman’s face (“Traditions”).

The lips, eyes, and eyebrows are revered in rating a woman’s beauty. The lips are deemed best if they are rosy, small in size, and softly turned upwards—called “Cherry-like-little mouth” (“Traditions”). As for the eyes, dark black pupils and a long tenderly up-curved eyelid are ideal to be considered a beautiful woman. Eyebrows or “rainbows of affection” have changed throughout the dynasties and it is alleged “that the eyes and eyebrows of a woman can speak her mind” (“Traditions”). During the Ming Dynasty, a model eyebrow was thin, barely curved, and long (“Traditions”). The website, Cultural China, asserts that a woman’s eyebrows were her “sexiest” attribute and an erogenous zone.

Hair Adornments during the Ming Dynasty

Women took pride in their hair along with the adornments they were able to acquire and utilize. Women and men would wear their hair in a bun with hair pins holding it up. The women’s pins, or ji, were more elaborate and flashy (“Traditions”). The buyao was a hair jewel that usually had moveable pendants that were shaped like flower branches. These would shake and make noises as the woman would walk. It was given the name buyao because its translation means “shake as you go” (“Traditions”). The most auspicious buyao was one that framed a woman’s face and had jewels and elaborately carved designs.

The Ji ceremony was a celebration that took place when a girl was fifteen years old. This marked proper age of marriage readiness. She received her hairpin to signify her life’s most important rite of passage (“Traditions”). It is also known as a lover token which keeps the two together though at a great distance. Before they parted, the lovers split the hair pin in half, and kept it with them until they were together once again (“Traditions”).

Colors in Attire

Clothing reveals an enormous amount of information about an individual. The colors of clothing denote different social classes and the type of work the wearer takes part in (Lu). Throughout China's traditional culture, the three main colors have been black, red, and white (Lu). Each color represents a different aspect of culture (Lu). Black, the color of negativity, typically represents bad fortune and is disgraceful if it is worn at a wedding or during a festival (Lu). Red is the color of blood and promotes good luck and the positive aspects in life including fame, money, and auspiciousness (Lu). White is commonly paired with a mother's milk and it symbolizes purity, moderation and life. White is often worn at funerals to synchronize all of these attributes revolving around life and new life. Each color represents a certain season. For example; red signifies summer, black with winter, and white with autumn (Lu).

Yellow is the most important color that an individual can wear due to its association with gold and in turn is used solely for those in the royal court. Commoners were forbidden to wear yellow because of its propitious nature ("Brief Introduction to Chinese"). The explanation for why yellow held strong symbolism stems from ancient Chinese emperors who claimed that yellow symbolized the earth ("Brief Introduction to Chinese").

Common styles of clothing women wore during the Ming Dynasty were pien-fu, the ch'ang-p'ao, and the shen-i (Lu). The pien-fu is a two-piece outfit that was worn during ceremonies (Lu). This costume could be recognized by the skirt or trousers that reach the ankles and a 'tunic-like' top that falls to the knees (Lu). Ch'ang-p'ao is one-piece and starts at the person's shoulders and goes straight to their heels (Lu). The most common and dynamic garment is the shen-i, a combination of the pien-fu and ch'ang-p'ao, which consists of the tunic and skirt or trousers that are connected to look like a one-piece outfit (Lu). This style flaunts large sleeves and is loose-fitting, generally enhanced with sashes (Lu).

Analyzing Paintings of Women

Analyzing Chinese painting is an art in which every detail contains specific symbolism and is often referred by the Chinese people as, "to read a painting" (Hearn). Ellen Laing says that it is most important to look at the "visual clues provided by the setting...and of what is known of other aspects of Chinese Culture" (Laing 284). This is exactly why we needed to examine all aspects of what it meant to be a woman during the Ming Dynasty. Without an understanding of the Chinese culture, there would be numerous misinterpretations (Laing 284). The subsequent paintings all represent beautiful women from different social classes and various settings.

Analysis of Paintings during the Ming Dynasty



Tang Yin “Tao Gu Presents a Poem”

This painting depicts the palace courtesan named Qin Ruolan, and the scholar Tao Gu. This painting contains numerous forms of symbolism throughout the garden setting. Nature is an integral part of Chinese history and their art.

Gardens in the Ming Dynasty were highly important and are a place to be social and participate in the arts (PUAM). Paintings of women were often set in a garden which denotes domestic space (Cahill 20). This is also called a “scholar’s garden” and is “influenced by Confucian and Taoist philosophy” (Department of Asian Art). Bamboo is a frequent visual in this painting, which is fitting because bamboo symbolizes a true gentleman with integrity (Munsterburg 215). A garden rock has also been linked to the integrity of a scholar (Blanchard 234). In the background of this painting, there stands a giant willow tree which may be a simile for a courtesan (234). The plum blossom and the leaves of a banana plant represent a woman of beauty pertaining to her physicality; furthermore Qin Ruolan is playing the pipa (Blanchard 235-36). The pipa is considered to be a courtesan’s instrument but lower in status than the qin; nonetheless, it is obvious that she is an educated courtesan because of Tao Gu’s status (Yung 157).

Blanchard states that the meeting could seem ‘decorous’ but the detail of the two painted screens purveys an intimate meeting, clearly enhanced by the eavesdropping child (236). Another attribute of the painting that implies a secret meeting is the lighted candle. It was probably night and may be a metaphor for a “smoldering love affair” (Blanchard 236). Tao Gu is visibly inspired by their meeting due to the paper and paintbrush on the bench beside him (Blanchard 236). The poem Tang Yin wrote in the upper right hand corner reads:

“After his night in the traveler’s lodge, / He sent a short poem. / If I had been the emissary Tao that day, / I would not have blushed when again we met!” (quoted in Blanchard 236).

This short verse adds further confusion surrounding the paintings mysterious meaning. It is unknown what Tang Yin was depicting about this meeting between Tao Gu and Qin Ruolan, but the connection between scholar and courtesan is unmistakably apparent.



Zhang Lu A.K.A. Chang Lu - “Su Tung-P’o Returning to the Han-Lin Academy”

This painting’s setting is at the Han-Lin Academy, the old center of culture and the arts before the Ming Dynasty (Munsterburg 219). The painters who were part of this academy were praised with military titles so they would not be confused with civil officials (Munsterburg 219). This acclaim came at a high price. Painters were stifled in their creativity by having enforced rules of the content and technique they were allowed to utilize (219). Su Tung-P’o was a scholar during the Song Dynasty—a dynasty that was against scholars and entertainers mingling. However, having been painted in the Ming period this liaison was completely acceptable behavior (Blanchard 194).

Su Tung-P’o is returning home and seen in a garden which is the “literal and figurative heart of the Chinese home” (“Chinese Gardens”). The courtyard or garden has water, trees, and plants, which is vital for balance and harmony in terms of Feng Shui (Peng). The water cannot be seen but the bridge indicates that there is a river below. Water is known for its yin energy “soft and yielding, yet capable of overcoming hard stone” (“Chinese Gardens”). When there is water present in a garden, it symbolizes “reflective light” (“Chinese Gardens”). Integrity and reflection is a cohesive bond in regards to Su and his return home. There is a bamboo tree which is symbolic of scholar’s possessing integrity (Department of Asian Arts). This is appropriate because Su Tung-P’o is triumphantly returning to a home where he was once banned for his personal morals and unwillingness to retract his beliefs (Blanchard 215).

It is obvious that Su Tung-P’o is a high ranking scholar by: the way he is standing, being the focal point of the painting, his official robes, and high hat (Blanchard 192). Only someone of importance would be surrounded by numerous entertainers playing music depicting an important homecoming or celebration (Blanchard 192). At the front of the crowd stands two eunuchs with two more seen in the back of the crowd keeping a watchful eye on the courtesans (192). The eunuchs in the background are carrying Su’s scrolls which display their allegiance to the scholar (192). The eunuchs at the front are of lower status and are identified by their plain long robes.

All of these attributes show that this scholar has allure and significance (Blanchard 192). In opposition, the women have identical facial features, similar hair styles, and comparable clothes. The women who stand in close proximity to Su have more elaborate clothes, hair adornments, and have instruments yet the differences are subtle. This represents their lack of importance, but further intensifies the scholar’s importance.



Tang Yin- “Concubines of Last Emperor Chu” or “Ladies in Royal Court”

This painting of four concubines illustrates women with little individuality. The two facing outward have the same facial features and expression. These women are socializing with each other which indicate that they have the same husband. Their high status for concubines is prevalent because of the clothes and hair adornments they possess. They do not carry instruments and there is not the typical background which would signify a courtesan.

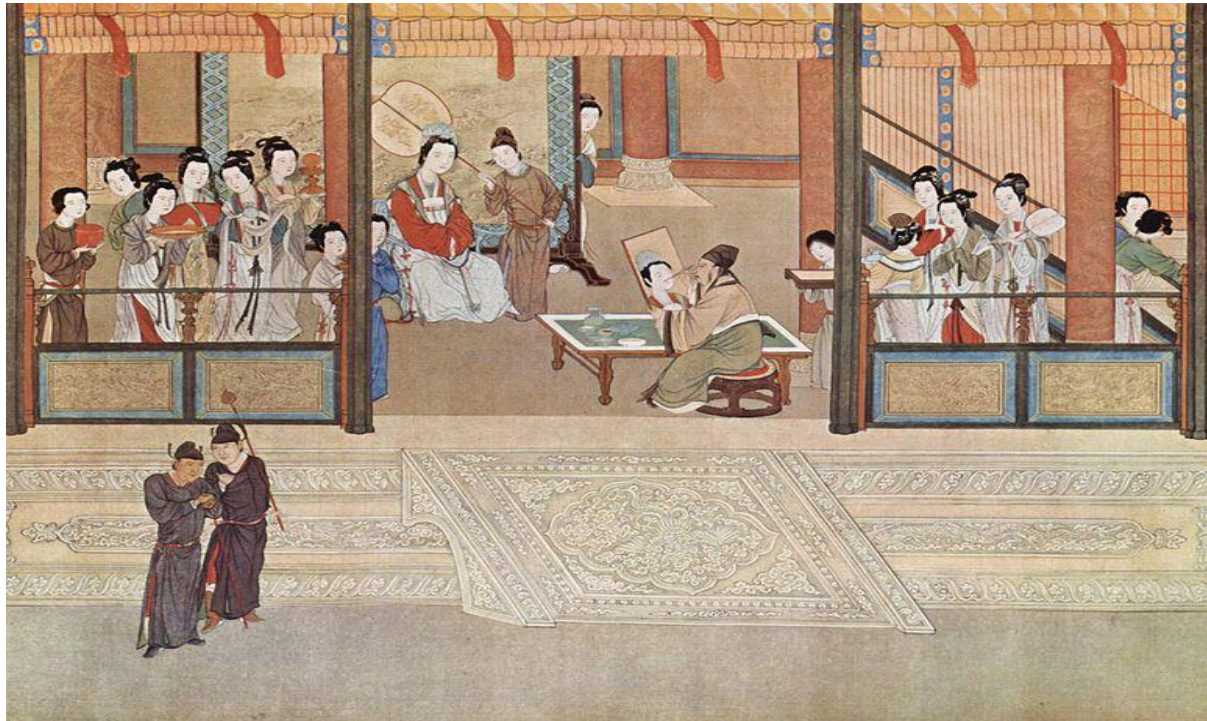
The women are wearing the pien-fu style of clothing and the colors (for the exception of the woman wearing blue) are mundane and simple, yet the embroidery shows elegance and social status. The pien-fu was typically worn to ceremonies or special events. It looks as if they are transferring gifts or showing each other their belongings indicating their status. Their hair is in a coiled position off of their necks which was common for men and women during the Ming Dynasty (“Traditions”). It is said that hair styles and adornments show off China’s beliefs, culture and social status (“Traditions”). A woman’s social status, by looking at hairpins, is determined by the patterns, materials, craftsmanship, and the number of hairpins in her hair (“Traditions”). The women are wearing the ji style hairpin. This shows they belong to a wealthy man because they flaunt elaborate flowers and one woman has jade and jewels on her ji (“Cultural China”).

Two paintings will now be examined that are extracted from different sections of the same handscroll by, Qiu Ying. Ellen Johnston Laing wrote that Qiu Ying, “pointed out correspondences between compositional arrangements and thematic interweavings and certain sequential structures and thematic devices found in some forms of descriptive poetry” (286). The long hand scroll depicts the everyday life of concubines at the Han Palace. These women want to be loved yet they are simply one of the numerous concubines for a single man. They will always be a figure rather than a person in their master’s eyes (Laing 288). Typical palace-style poetry and paintings derived from the poetry shows women pinning for admiration and love (287-88). It is many times a love that is unattainable. They are simply a marker of a man’s social status (288).

Wu Hung claims that, “the painted woman rarely exhibits her sexuality openly, her sexual allude and accessibility are represented through certain gestures...and sexual symbols” (350). Some of these gestures include skimming her cheek with her fingertips and fondling her belt (Hung 350). Likewise, the sexual symbols that a person from this era could detect are certain types of flowers, fruits, and other specific objects (Hung 350).

Oin Ying’s painting shows the various activities concubines participate in during their day to relax and pass the time. There were so many concubines that belonged to the Emperor Yuan-ti (r. 48-33 BC) that most of the women never even met him (Fung, Hung). Because of the women’s desire to meet

the Emperor many bribed the eunuchs and palace painters as to be selected when Yuan-ti called for one of them (Fung).



Qiu Ying- “Spring Morning in the Han Palace” or “Spring Dawn at the Palaces of the Han”

This portion of the handscroll depicts one of the concubines, Wang Chao-chun, having her portrait painted by the palace artist Mao Yen-shou (Fung, Hung). The theme behind this portion of the illustration is one of deceit and manipulation. The concubines wanted to be selected to meet the emperor so they all bribed Mao Yen-shou, except for Wang Chao-chun, which angered him to the point of revenge (Fung, Hung). It is said that he painted her to look grotesque so she would never be selected, and eventually Yuan-ti sold her to a barbarian chieftain who sought a wife. Yen-shou made the emperor think that Wang was the ugliest concubine he owned (Fung, Hung). When Yuan-ti saw that Wang was the most beautiful of all the concubines, he was enraged about the deception and had Mao Yen-shou executed (Fung, Hung).

The two eunuchs at the forefront of the painting show the typical stance of this group. Their feet are turned outward and their torso is slightly leaning forward. The second eunuch’s leg is forward with his right knee bent in a feminine manner. Their hands are together and they have smirks on their faces. This leads to the assumption that they are aware of the artist’s trickery. This explanation is plausible due to the eunuch’s job of being spies and also being known to accept bribes from the concubines. There are also other concubines spying and looking on while Wang is being painted, which leads to the possibility of their awareness. Since Wang was the most beautiful concubine jealousy was almost certainly prevalent among the other concubines.

The architecture of this palace is a typical style throughout this time period. Master Ong Thiam Peng says that, “the structural design and construction are based on the ‘column-beam frame’, guided by the Imperial system and controlled by the feudalistic system”. There are numerous columns and beams in this particular handscroll. They display the imperially auspicious colors including red, yellow, and greenish blue (Peng). Red is used to represent fire, yellow is emblematic of the earth’s supreme power, and greenish blue is symbolic for wood’s durability. This is drawn for the I-Ching principles of yin and yang (Peng). The roof and further foundation also shows these colors of wealth and power. However, the

beams are the traditional dark brown color of hardwood rather than the color of more modern architecture (Peng).

This is the beginning of Qiu Yin's masterpiece, and shows the negative aspects of a concubine's life and what must be done for a chance to meet her master. The next portion of the handscroll, shown below, is positioned towards the end, and demonstrates more positive nature of concubinage and female friendship.



Qiu Ying- “Spring Morning in the Han Palace” or “Spring Dawn at the Palaces of the Han”

The woman in the front towards the right and the woman climbing the staircase are prime examples of what foot binding does to a female's gait. They have been hobbled which has caused them to be physically unstable. Their lack of balance, caused by three inch long feet, is the source of their hunched posture. Nonetheless, this was seen as attractive. This made walking painful and was done only out of necessity.

The women have little facial expression and individuality even though they are supposed to be having fun in their activities. Their hair is the same style along with all their hair adornments. These hair pins are made of jade which is an extremely auspicious and expensive material. All the women have their pins on the side of their head next to their ear. If they were not concubines of elite status, their hair pins would not be made of jade.

Some concubines are playing music with instruments such as the lute, pipa, and zither. The instruments that these women are playing generally represent courtesans, although some concubines, as we can see, are also skilled in the art of music. This element of the painting demonstrates that these concubines are educated, cultured, and economically sound. Two women on the floor are playing a game to pass the time. Games such as chess are learned by educated women though men are thought to be the only ones to be skilled in such games.

Another activity of the concubines in the painting is the art of needlework. One woman is carrying a finished project while the others partake in the formation of the other task. This is a common job for all women, regardless of their social and economic status, and it is correlated with being a good wife. Needlework is also, “the symbol of diligent women and reflects female emotion and intelligence” (Cultural China).

The furniture during the Ming Dynasty is considered to be of high quality and adorned with stunning designs (Cultural China). Furniture made in the Ming Dynasty exhibits a, “precise structure, proper decoration, and elegant textures, which constitutes its natural and lingering charm with elegance and profundity” (Cultural China). These attributes are apparent in the painting. The designs of the tables do not exhibit garish colors or designs that distract from its chic structure. The objects sitting on the tables also have important meaning and symbolism. There is a bowl present on the front table in the shape of Buddha’s belly usually “associated with enlightenment” (“Chinese Gardens”). In addition, the different vases on all of the tables are considered to be precious. In China, the word vase is said “ping”, which has the same spelling as the word for the Chinese notion of peace (“Chinese Gardens”).

This painting has many facets and dimensions that describe and explain the women in the Ming Dynasty. Their activities and possessions make their status and roles evident. After interpreting this scroll it adds a heightened understanding of the gender barriers and Ming history.

Conclusion

Analyzing Chinese paintings is more than looking at its basic aesthetics. Symbolism of objects, textiles, and the surroundings is essential for the true understanding of a particular painting. Each culture and time period reflects the artist’s portrayal of reality. Therefore, we are able to understand the painting and the artist’s thoughts by studying the historical culture of a people. In this case, we have seen why the artist portrayed women in the way he did and what parts of his world affected his views. Likewise, we have a greater understanding of the adversity that women and girls faced attributing to their submissive nature and later portrayal in visual art.

Mary H. Fong wrote that Chinese women in paintings “should be portrayed as beautiful but submissive, demure and amiable, unassertive and pleasant, agreeable and good-natured” (23). Through the analysis of the previous paintings, it becomes apparent that the depicted women are exactly as Mary H. Fong says, they should be executed. Women are therefore seen in paintings produced by men as they acted according to the male’s rules during the Ming Dynasty. This is why it is necessary to understand the reality of the female genders various hardships during the Ming period to refrain from simply seeing a beautiful woman on a canvas.

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