

The Images of the Courtesans in Liu Yong's Vulgar Lyrics

Shuoyao Ni^{1, a}

¹Chinese Literature, Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan, 111002, China

^aCorresponding Author's Email: 08111601@gm.scu.edu.tw

Abstract: Liu Yong was originally known as Liu Sanbian, but later changed his name to Yong, also named Qiqing, born in Chong'an. He was an influential contributor to the Song dynasty lyric literature. Influenced by the culture of the marketplace, Liu Yong's lyrical works reflect the characteristics of Slang and vulgar. Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics are dominated by the erotic words of men and women, with numerous depictions of women in the capacity of courtesans. The courtesans in Liu Yong's lyrics are portrayed with a female form in a male aesthetic, boldly breaking away from the traditional sense of love and also the women with male-dominated fidelity. Compared with the ancient boudoir women, the personalities of courtesans are free and bold, and they tended to reveal their love and admiration for men in a straightforward manner. Liu Yong reaches out and understands women intimately, presenting a different image of the courtesans than the traditional boudoir women.

Keywords: Liu Yong, Vulgar lyrics, Courtesans, Female Images, The distinction between elegance and vulgarity.

1. Introduction

In the Northern Song Dynasty, poetry declined and lyrics flourished. Liu Yong was a talented writer and enjoyed writing Song lyrics. However, he encountered many barriers on his way to becoming an official. Liu Yong had lyrics that read, "Replace fame and fortune with a gentle singing voice." It was only in the first year of JingYou that he was finally successful in his examinations. But he was reprimanded by Emperor Song Renzong for his bad conduct and frivolous and vulgar language, which led him to indulge in whorehouses, and to devote himself to lyrics [1]. Most of Liu Yong's works were written in brothels, mainly with erotic lyrics, of which there are as many as 146 describing and recording the love affairs of courtesans. The courtesans were a special group of women in the Tang and Song dynasties who lived in brothels and had frequent contact with men. Unlike the traditional Chinese image of a lady in a boudoir who was introverted in her emotions and uphold the idea that men and women are different and need to have less contact with each other. What's more, because of the influence of the marketplace culture, some of Liu Yong's works exhibit a distinctly slang character. These works called vulgar lyrics. Besides, the vulgar lyrics composed by Liu Yong have been controversial throughout history. Because of the dominance of elegant words in traditional Chinese literature, the value of Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics, which stand in opposition to elegant words has often been dismissed, and even those works have been considered vile and shallow. However, these vulgar words had a certain impact on traditional Chinese elegant literature and contributed to the development of vulgar literature to a certain extent. And this dichotomy between elegance and vulgarity is an important component in the history of Chinese literature, known as the distinction between elegance and vulgarity. Therefore, the study of vulgar words is of great importance.

2. Liu Yong's Vulgar Lyrics

Liu Yong wrote a large number of vulgar lyrics, most of which are about flirtatious love affairs. This type of literary

vulgar lyric is a distinctive piece of lyric writing from the elegant ones. The elegant lyrics tend to make use of abstract expressions to express emotions in a subtle way. On the other hand, vulgar words are more concrete, explicit and direct expressions of sex and love. They are characterized by the use of slang, colloquialisms and meaningless auxiliaries, and by the use of personal pronouns such as Yi, Nu, and You and also the content tends towards eroticism and banter [2]. In terms of the aesthetic perspective of elegant literature, Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics have traditionally been disparaged as being despicable and superficial. According to Wu Zeng, "Liu Sanbian, preferred to make obscene and lewd lyrics." [3]. Cai Song says: "Liu Yong is a famous composer of the Northern Song Dynasty, whose words are a mixed bag of merits and demerits, and yet the vulgar words he wrote in the brothels have been criticized by subsequent ages and should not be emulated and studied." [4]. Chen Zhengsun comments, "Liu's lyrics are not refined, but they have a gentle rhythm." [5].

Some lyricists have dismissed and resisted Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics, others believe that Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics have a unique style, and also some desirable features. The language of Liu Yong's popular lyrics is plain and natural, so they are easy to spread among the people, and there is a saying that "wherever there is water from a well, people can sing Liu Yong's works". [6]. At the same time, Liu Yong expresses his meaning in a forthright and obvious way, unlike the traditional elegant works which are subtle and polite. In addition, the composition of vulgar words allows Liu Yong to have an independent style without falling in line with previous authors [1].

Liu Yong's composition of vulgar lyrics is related to his unsuccessful career, his long exposure to the culture of the marketplace, as well as his debauchery in brothels. Liu Yong's explicit and direct portrayal of women and the detailed depiction of love affairs between men and women are the main content of Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics. There is a lyric called *Chuanhuazhi* which expresses his own assessment of himself. It says: "I'm frisky and talented. I sang new words I had written and modified old musical pieces. I am so famous that everyone sings my songs. I have an attractive charm both

outside and inside. Whenever I met an acquaintance, I set up a banquet to sing at the banquet. Everyone complimented me. Unfortunately, I am still going to be old, and when I pass away, I will tell the ghosts that one lives a life without worrying or worrying about things. It is far better to live happily in the good times and enjoy the beautiful scenery than to live for a hundred more years.”

This lyric is Liu Yong's interpretation of himself. He considers himself talented and flirtatious. Also, he pursues open-mindedness, believing that life does not need to worry, but to be happy all the time. As Liu Yong lived in a brothel for a long time, the images of courtesans in his lyrics are shaped by Liu Yong's personal contact over a long period of time. And the images all have specific reference objects. For example, in *The second lyrics of Zhouyele*, he writes about the courtesan named Xiuxiang, and there are over 18 other famous courtesans such as Shishi, Yaoqing, Anan, Chongchong and Xiangxiang in his works [7]. However, what Liu Yong portrays in his popular lyrics are still generalized images, lacking distinctive personality and characteristics. And the descriptions are often too exposed, which makes them seem too superficial and overly ornate.

3. The Image of Courtesans in Liu Yong's Writings

Liu Yong's creations are deeply influenced by women, and also portray a large number of abundant and diverse female figures. Liu Yong's style shows directness and expressiveness, without concealing true feelings or displaying shyness. His works show not only the external image of women from an aesthetic point of view, but also the diverse characters and rich emotional experiences of women. In addition, Liu Yong shows his admiration for women and his sympathy for women's lovesickness in his lyrics. The women in his lyrics are not women who are virtuous and obey the traditional concept of morality in the society. Rather, they are mainly courtesans, showing their sincere characters who are both free and daring in love and also caught up in infatuation. Liu Yong devoted his life to the creation of his lyrics. He applied his long experience with courtesans to understand women deeply. Through his works, he reflected the inner feelings of women and expressed the strong desire of lower-class women to boldly pursue worldly love.

3.1. Women's Appearance and Figures

Liu Yong writes a lot about the beauty of women's bodies, showing the beauty of women's forms from their appearance, shapes and movements in an explicit and direct way. It shows Liu Yong's appreciation and praise of female beauty, but also reveals that Liu Yong evaluates and judges them based on the male aesthetic perspective. Liu Yong puts emphasis on the appearance of women, focusing on the face, waist, eyes, neck, hands and other body parts to show the charm of women.

For example, in the work called *Liuyaoqing* says:

The woman's figure was very beautiful and her waist was so soft that it was as slender as a willow branch, also just like the waist of Zhao Feiyan, who was a highly famous beauty in Chinese. The pretty woman was dressed in gorgeous clothes and was the most striking beauty at the grand banquet. She played a traditional Chinese orchestral instrument and danced with the breeze, the ornaments hanging from her clothes swayed gently as well. Suddenly the dance music began to play. The woman draped her long colorful sleeves

lightly and nimbly, moving her feet quickly, sometimes with her body forward and sometimes backward, all presenting different dance postures. She has a superb appearance, and as soon as she turns around, countless people will be intoxicated by her beauty.

In the first line of the work, he writes about the soft and narrow waist of the woman, showing the delicate physique of the courtesan when she dances. At the banquet and reception, the woman dances attractively. Her appearance is extremely beautiful, and she dances with light and fast steps, accompanied by a light breeze. The moment she turns around attracts the crowd to be immersed in it. This piece portrays the physique of the courtesan while dancing, with particular emphasis on the waist, face and feet of the woman.

Also, a lyric named *The second lyrics of Zhouyele* mentions that:

A courtesan named Xiuxiang lives in the peach blossom alley. She is as beautiful as a fairy, and talented. Her eyes are moist like you can see the water flowing inside, bright and charming, her neck is delicate like round and smooth jeweled jade, touching it like silky silk. She likes to sing, her beautiful singing voice as her instrument. There are dark clouds gathering in the sky. Her voice and words are like a delicate yellow warbler, and each sound is very moving. Drinking wine in the room, holding her warm body, feeling the ultimate happiness. The smoke from the incense burner rose slowly, and the red bed tent showed two swaying figures under the candlelight. They took advantage of the excitement of drunkenness, there is infinite joy, and gradually immersed in it. Only complained about the rooster, still kept chirping down in this pleasant time.

The lyric takes Xiuxiang, a courtesan, as its subject. Liu Yong portraying the bright and vivid eyes of Xiuxiang and her delicate neck like pure silk. The beauty of her is depicted through specific parts such as eyes and neck, revealing the beauty of Xiuxiang. In addition, the singing voice of the courtesan is also described to show the courtesan's singing skills and talent. At the end, Liu Yong reveals the sexual affairs in a specific and direct way, which is very rare among ancient Chinese writers.

3.2. The Consciousness of Pursuing Love Boldly and Freely

While Liu Yong tried his best to show the shape of women in his lyrics, he also devoted himself to expressing the personality of courageous and open-minded women. The courtesan's view of love differs from that of traditional boudoir women. They show their love audaciously and do not care about others' opposition. For example, they meet with men in private late at night, seeking true love and excitement as well as showing their sexuality boldly. They were not the traditional women who obeyed the rituals, virtuous and educated, but they had a strong desire to express their feelings and showed their love frankly.

For instance the content of *Yanguiliang* shows that:

A woman gently took shoes on the trail at night. The woman and the man finally met in the garden and spoke to each other, pouring out their recent pain. The woman's voice is soft and has a seductive charm. Suddenly they were able to see each other, and their spirits flowed. There is no interest in parting in a hurry, and it is boring to go home, so it is much more fun to make love together.

When a woman meets a man alone late at night, she takes off her shoes and comes gingerly to her date. The two of them

tell each other their emotions, linger when they part, and finally are bold enough to reveal their desire for sex. The courtesan's desire for love is not as shy as traditional women. She reveals her love and desire directly, hoping that her romance with a man could have an end. This kind of women who pursues love directly and boldly is much different from the image of women under the traditional concept, which can be mainly attributed to the vulgarity and frankness of Liu Yong's style and the openness and daring of the courtesan's emotional consciousness.

3.3. The Image of A Faithful Woman In Love

Liu Yong's lyric works also depict a lot of images of women who are immersed in thinking of their lovers, who are persistent and determined, waiting for their lovers for a long time at the cost of their years. They are faithful to their lovers, expecting and believing in their return. They take men as the support of their lives and wait with stubbornness for the hope of being loved again. They cling to the idea of male dominance, attaching themselves to men who have left or abandoned them. They are obsessed with loving people, and their love is so deep that the place of men in their hearts is irreplaceable.

There is a lyric called *Liangzhouling* says:

When I wake up from a dream, the moonlight shines in the window. The remaining lamp shines dimly. I was bound by the memory of the past because I was thinking of the one in my heart, and how sad and painful the separation was like a river without end. Perhaps I am selfish and petty, so that I am now so troubled. How melancholy this life. The moon will not always be round, and my appearance cannot resist time will gradually aging.

Under the ties of love, women are so deeply in love that they constantly worry themselves in their thoughts. The time is passing in waiting, the face becomes older, the woman sighs when the sorrow will have an end. And although there is no hope, they still remain.

But there are also women who show some complaints because of the man's departure. Take *Zhumating* as an example:

The big red bed is covered with our quilts and pillows. In the past two or three years, we have loved each other like fish meeting water. The weather and the scenery are beautiful. Thank you for loving me so much, and all I can do to repay you is to always follow you. Unfortunately for you, you have a flirtatious personality. There are no things to lock you up to keep you by my side. How could you bear to part with me for so long. Now you and I are getting farther and farther apart, I gradually feel remorse gradually. I have been constantly sending messages to you, but always receive no reply. I also want to fall in love with you again, but unfortunately, I toss and turn to think. I'm afraid that even if we meet again, it will be difficult to have the same feelings as before.

The woman misses the two or three years of mutual support and knowledge and the deep love between them. Therefore, she is unwilling to separate. However, the relationship between the two of them is getting distant now, and it is difficult to restore the past affection. Even if they meet again

in the future, the feelings between them may not return to the sincere and deep feelings they had at that time. The woman is in love with her partner and revels in the sweetness of their relationship. But she also sorrowfully suggests that even if they meet again their feelings may not be as strong as they were at that time, because of their separation. The woman has the emotions of reluctance, sorrow, and resentment, and she soberly realizes that the separation now can only await the coldness of the future. However, despite her grievances, the courtesan's emotions are mainly focused on her sorrow for her fate rather than on her resentment of her lover's departure.

4. Conclusion

As a writer who has made important contributions to the history of lyrics, Liu Yong takes vulgarity as his style with unique significance and characteristics. The construction of the image of courtesans in Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics is based on his own real life and emotional pursuits. Liu Yong's vulgar lyrics depict and portray a lot of women, especially courtesans, showing the styles and images of this special group of women. Liu Yong's vulgar style and the identity of courtesans complement each other, expanding the image of courtesans' beautiful appearance, their bold love pursuit and also faithful love attitude. By writing in a concrete and direct way, Liu Yong expresses the woman's appearance and emotions in a revealing way, portraying an abundant figure of courtesans. The courtesan's bold expression of emotion is effectively combined with Liu Yong's direct and revealing writing style to achieve better artistic effect. However, in fact, Liu Yong and most of the song lyricists depict courtesans more from their own and male perspectives, and thus tend to show the woman's loyalty and constancy to the man. This was a common phenomenon and mainstream thought in the Song Dynasty, which was dominated by male lyricists.

References

- [1] Ye, Q.B. (1987) History of Chinese literature. student book co., ltd, Taipei.
- [2] Chen, K.L. (2005) Song dynasty literati colloquial words - textual texts under oral thinking. Dong Wu Zhong Wen Journal., 2005,(11): 103-121.
- [3] Wu,Z. (1990)The criticism of Nenggaizhai. Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing.
- [4] Cai,S.Y., Tang,G.Z.(1990) The criticism in Keting. Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing.
- [5] Zhang,M.J., Zhang,Z.L.(2004) Selected commentaries on Tang and Song lyrics. Hua Zheng Book Company, Taipei.
- [6] Ye,M.D.(1990) The Comments of Shilinbishu. Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [7] Liu,Y.,Xue, R.S.(1994) The commentary of Yuezhangji. Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing.
- [8] Long, K. (2022) The New Changes in the Writing of Women in Su Shi's Words and Their Historical Significance--A Comparison with Wen Tingyun and Liu Yong. Journal of Hubei University of Arts and Science., 43(04):58-62.