

The Deeper Beauty of the Tang Dynasty: A Socio-Political Examination of Zhou Fang's Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair

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Introduction

Secluded away in his study, the artist Zhou Fang, carefully laying out silk across a felt pad, brush with ink stone and stick placed beside it, prepares to capture a moment from the ancient Chinese Tang imperial court. Using linear lines of ink and brilliant colors, the handscroll painting of *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair* is brought to life in this likely setting. The painting depicts women in a garden, a snapshot-like image of their secular activities in court life. Considered to be a part of the “Beautiful Women” genre for which Zhou Fang is associated, the painting has a far deeper meaning than what meets the eye. *Ladies Wearing Flowers in Their Hair* not only exemplifies the pinnacle of the “Beautiful Women” genre of the Tang Dynasty, but also offers important ethnographic and cultural details relating to the status of women during the period in which it was produced. Furthermore, the painting may show influences from sculptural and Buddhist art in its fluid lines and voluptuous forms. To fully grasp the significance of the painting, a brief history and examination of the piece must be given.

Historical Context

Most scholars agree that the painting was produced around the late eighth to early ninth century CE and attribute its creation to Zhou Fang, although some have purported a later date of creation around the tenth century.¹ This was during the height of what is known as the Tang Dynasty in China (618-906 CE). Known as China's “golden age”, this period was one of unparalleled political stability and prosperity, with one scholar describing it as what “the Han was to the Warring States...as Rome was to ancient Greece: a time of

¹ Ellen J. Liang, "Notes on Women Wearing Flowers in their Hair," *Orientations* 21, no. 2 (February 1990): 32.

consolidation, of practical achievement, of immense assurance.”² The Tang dynasty was also incredibly cosmopolitan, with extensive trade and foreign travelers coming into China from as far away as Arabia and Turkey.³ This sense of political balance mixed with lively cultural activity can be seen in the art of this era; the atmosphere produced a love for beauty and refinement in art as embodied in the female form and secular activities. Specifically, the “Beautiful Women” genre reached its height of expression during this time, and *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair* epitomizes this style.

Formal Elements

The handscroll features five palace ladies and one maid-servant across its composition (Fig. 1). There is no ground line or horizon line and yet a sense of depth and believable space is achieved by placing the figures at slightly different levels to one another. The use of size to denote status is employed here, as seen with the maid-servant holding the fan for her mistress in the center foreground. However, size does not always indicate status in this painting; as the second women from the left illustrates. She is approximately the same size as the maid-servant, and yet her vibrant red clothing, elaborate hair piece, and general demeanor suggest a woman of higher status. In this way, the size of the figure could denote spatial separation into the background and thus imbues the scene with a sense of depth. Aside from the figures of the work, much of the



Figure 1 Attributed to Zhou Fang, *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair*, late 8th, early 9th century C.E. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. <https://smarthistory.org/zhou-fang-flowers/> (accessed November 22, 2016).

composition is empty, or negative, space. At first glance this negative space could be seen to position the female figures as somewhat floating, scattered forms in a flat, two-dimensional world. As is common in many Chinese paintings, both figural and landscape, the negative space is employed here to persuade the viewer’s imagination to create a background for the scene; combined with the size and placement of the figures, the negative space allows for the illusion that there may be a world beyond the foreground of the painting. The general mood is one of playfulness and tranquility wrapped in a showcase

². Michael Sullivan, *Arts of China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 131.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

of elegant beauty (as seen in the female figures, flowers, and the small dogs and crane). The figures are both active and static; they are admiring the flowers and playing with their dogs but remain somewhat motionless and strategically posed. Zhou Fang came from an aristocratic family in Chang'an (modern day Xi'an) and was a famous painter in the imperial court.⁴ Having most likely witnessed such behavior from the women of the court, Zhou Fang nonetheless wanted to create a stylized interpretation of the women and their activities. This is seen in the way the women are depicted—none are individualized portraits but rather embodiments of the ideal feminine aesthetics of the time. They all share similar white-powdered faces, hairstyles, small noses/mouths, eyebrows shaped like butterfly wings, and heavier, curvaceous bodies, all of which were attributes of Tang beauty ideals.⁵ More minute detail was paid to the women's loose, diaphanous shawls, richly painted dresses, and hair accessories, as seen below in fig. 2. Each lady is distinct in her clothing and hair jewelry/flower, with reds, creams, golds, and tan being the predominant colors. Zhou Fang's brilliant use of linear ink lines, vibrant color, and detail (along with the focus on beautiful ladies' leisurely activities), has made this painting one of the finest examples in the "Beautiful Ladies" genre.



Figure 2 Attributed to Zhou Fang, (Detail) *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair*, late 8th, early 9th century C.E. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. <https://smarthistory.org/zhou-fang-flowers/> (accessed November 22, 2016).

⁴ Nina W. Lai-na, "Attributed to Zhou Fang, Ladies Wearing Flowers in Their Hair," in *Smarthistory.org*, May 1, 2016, accessed October 24, 2016, <https://smarthistory.org/zhou-fang-flowers/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Stylistic Markers and Evolutions

The painting was identified as a piece from the Tang Dynasty through various comparisons to burial and religious art. A tomb in Hebei province dated to around 923 C.E.



Figure 3 *Musicians*, from the tomb of Wang Chuzhi (d. 923). Painted marble relief. 82 x 139 cm. Hebei. <http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/736x/fff3/27/fff327f90afd15280877c16478d2f03b.jpg> (accessed November 22, 2016).

displays a relief panel depicting women musicians (Fig. 3).⁶ The women on the panel have similar graceful, voluptuous bodies and fluid clothing lines like the figures in *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair*. Additionally, the *Musicians* have hairstyles and hair accessories that seem to mimic the ones on Zhou

Fang's painting, especially the figure second from right in Fig. 3. Another contemporary piece that shows similarities to Zhou Fang's work is a banner called *Guide of Souls* from Dunhuang (Fig. 4). The lady being escorted to the Western Paradise by a bodhisattva has a similar garment, heavy face, posture, and high hairstyle with flowers as the ladies in Zhou Fang's painting.⁷ What is fascinating about this painting/banner is its religious theme. Although *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair* is a purely secular painting, it appears that its figural style may not only mirror the contemporary religious/ceremonial art of the Tang but may in fact have been an evolution from past sculptural and religious art traditions synthesized into the newer, secular "Beautiful Ladies" genre that rose to prominence during that time.



Figure 4 *Guide of Souls*, Dunhuang, late 9th century. Banner, ink and color on silk. Stein Collection, British Museum. http://idp.bl.uk/pages/collection_s_en.a4d (accessed November 22, 2016).

⁶ De-nin D Lee, "Fragments for Constructing a History of Southern Tang Painting," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, no. 34 (2004):10. <http://0-www.jstor.org.skyline.ucdenver.edu/stable/23496260>.

⁷ Liang, "Notes on Women Wearing Flowers in their Hair," 34.

Culture and Ideologies

The painting's attributes above have led some scholars to conclude that the piece, and the genre as a whole is more of a superficial rendering of idealized women intended for the male gaze's enjoyment. In a sense, it objectifies women and enforces their submissive status in society. Mary Fong illustrates this point as she details the historical rise of the genre. Pinpointing Confucianism's influence on gender ideology during the Han Dynasty (filial piety, for example), Fong writes, "the female was represented not as a real person but as a product of male construction, depending on the gender ideology of the time, but rooted in the patriarchal ethos of the Confucian age."⁸ According to Fong, the first female representations can be categorized as the "Exemplary Women" genre, in which women enacted virtuous deeds based on Confucianism principles (a good example could be Gu Kaizhi's (ca. 344-406) didactic handscroll painting, *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Ladies of the Palace*).⁹ Painting styles changed along with the cultures of each dynasty, but according to Fong, the same pictorial principles she lists above for female images remained. Into the Tang Dynasty, the "Exemplary Women" genre was replaced with the "Beautiful Ladies/Beautiful Women" as tastes changed toward appreciating daily life, especially women's secular activities.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the "Palace Ladies" in this genre, including Zhou Fang's work, could still be seen as generalized and nonspecific, which symbolically reinforces masculine power and superiority.

At first glance, it is understandable to see Zhou Fang's painting within the objectifying lens Fong and other scholars have viewed it from. However, a deeper examination of the piece and its coded elements reveals a more complex cultural understanding of it. By only examining the formal elements of a piece, a person runs the risk of developing "westernized notions" on the genre of the beautiful women, and hence misunderstanding it because of the absence of culturally imbued meanings.¹¹ Instead of being merely a "secular pleasure" picture for the male elite, it actually shows women engaged in a long cherished cultural tradition. The scholar Ellen J. Laing succinctly sums up the common misconceptions of the work, stating, "Since many "beautiful woman" pictures never had a concrete identity, they can readily be appreciated merely as a candid glimpse of an attractive woman... But there is often another, more sophisticated significance, one that must be decoded."¹² The event depicted is women participating in The Birthday of the Flowers or Flower Morning, a social

⁸ Mary H. Fong, "Images of Women in Traditional Chinese Painting," *Woman's Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1996): 26. <http://0-www.jstor.org.skyline.ucdenver.edu/stable/1358525>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ Ellen Johnston Laing, "Chinese Palace-Style Poetry and the Depiction of a Palace Beauty," *The Art Bulletin* 72, no. 2 (1990): 284. doi:10.2307/3045734. <http://0-www.jstor.org.skyline.ucdenver.edu/stable/3045734>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 284.

event/festival celebrated during the second lunar month of the new year.¹³ The festival could include activities in which both sexes went out into nature to “tread the green” or simply observe the blooming flowers.¹⁴ However, festival activities were highly associated with fertility and women. Various clues help to identify this painting with the Flower Morning festival. In many “Beautiful Women” paintings, the hair accessories (jewelry and flowers) are, small, inconspicuous blossoms that conform to the smooth silhouette of the hair.¹⁵ In Zhou Fang’s work, the flowers and hair ornaments are ostentatiously clustered with red and white flowers, some speckled with gold (Fig. 1 and 2), suggesting a special occasion. The gold wash on the leaves and flowers on the left figure in Fig. 2 could also indicate the presence of fresh and artificial flowers, a common practice during the festival.¹⁶ However, the presence of the fan held by the maid-servant and the butterfly held by the woman on the far left next to the flowing magnolia bush (Fig. 1) are two features that cement the occasion of the festival. The fan has a peony painted on it, and from ancient Chinese palace poetry sources, during the festival the fan would attract the butterflies and women would perform a rite in which they try to hit them.¹⁷ The equation of beautiful women with flowers and the pursuit of the butterfly is obviously why the festival is associated with fertility. One ancient source, Wang Rengu, even reported that during the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Minghuang would release a butterfly during the springtime rite. Whichever woman, with flowers in her hair, the butterfly landed on had the honor of sharing his bed that evening (in this way, men symbolized the butterfly, women the flower).¹⁸

Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair does not only offer ethnographic detail in dress and beauty ideals in the Tang court, but it also documents a cultural event, one that positioned women in a prominent role. The evidence above suggests that this painting is not a generalized, nonspecific depiction of women intended to submit them to patriarchal authority/pleasure. Although the painting was meant to be enjoyed (likely by a mostly male audience) and evoke the beauty of women, the fact that women during the Tang dynasty experienced more freedom than other time periods seems to correlate with their greater presence in secular art and the popularity of the “Beautiful Women” genre. Many sources mention how women enjoyed more visibility at the imperial court and in society, that it was a more liberal and overall “better” time to be a woman. Sadly, most of these sources only give vague or cursory sentences relating to this topic. However, by looking at the influences of Empress Wu Zetian (624-705 C.E.), a greater understanding of women’s shifting social status can hopefully be attained. In relation to art, Wu may have paved the way for women

¹³ Liang, “Notes on Women Wearing Flowers in their Hair,” 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

to have a greater social presence in court and thus indirectly influenced their pictorial representations, as seen in Zhou Fang's painting.

Cultural Shifts

Wu Zetian was the only female Emperor in Chinese history. Her role in the Tang palace was as a Cairen, a fifth ranked concubine, to the Emperor Taizong when she was just fourteen years old.¹⁹ After Taizong's death, his son, Emperor Gaozong, took Wu as his empress in 655 C.E. After Gaozong's death, and through deposing and manipulating multiple sons, Wu herself became Emperor of China in 690 C.E.²⁰ Although Wu Zetian, to put it mildly, is regarded as a negative figure in history, certain scholars consider her a proto-feminist, and much of her regime does illustrate positive shifts in status for women. During the era of Wu Zetian, the patriarchal society that surrounded her reigned supreme, with gender discrimination dominating every aspect of a women's life.²¹ However, society during the Tang Dynasty was more tolerant in regards to women than other periods. This open-mindedness manifested itself in women's ability to dress in a more sexually explicit manner and a Tang law that decreed women's rights to divorce—in fact, it was not uncommon for women to divorce and remarry.²² It was in this liberal society that a woman like Wu Zetian could insert her dominance, and in doing so, she also further effected women's status and rights both within the royal court and beyond.

Wu herself emulated her male predecessors in power and sexual relations; she had several male concubines and formed her own dynasty, Zhou.²³ Politically, she changed laws concerning women. In 674 C.E., she made it official that a deceased mother will be mourned for the same amount of time as a deceased father—she stated:

A mother is great because she contributes [to social life] by giving birth to and raising children. No mother, no children. If we do not treat mother the same as father, we are not good children, and are even worse than animals who know how to thank their mothers.²⁴

In addition, Wu Zetian employed female officials, encouraged women to enter into religious and political meetings, and converse with men in public, thus, in effect “Facilitating the ability of women to talk equally with men and to express their own opinions may, arguably have increased women's consciousness and

¹⁹ Niya Peng, Yu Tianyuan, and Albert Mills, "Feminist Thinking in Late Seventh-Century China," *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 34 (1) (2015): 75, <http://0-search.proquest.com.skyline.ucdenver.edu/docview/1650545414?accountid=14506>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 75-76.

²² Ibid., 76.

²³ Ibid., 75-76.

²⁴ Ibid., 74.

social status to some extent.”²⁵ Not everyone in the palace nor in society condoned Wu Zetian’s actions, and she garnered much criticism and hate. This negative image can still be seen today in most general descriptions of her in academic texts.²⁶ In 705 C.E., Wu was overthrown in a coup, and her third son, Zhongzong, returned as Emperor, although Wu held the title of “Emperor” until her death that same year.²⁷

A New Perspective

Wu Zetian’s contributions to the status of women would surely leave a lasting influence on the Tang Dynasty. Painted around a hundred years after Wu Zetian’s death, *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair* may show her influence, even if it is in a subtle fashion. Because of Wu, women’s presence at the imperial court and in society was intensified. Because of Wu’s political changes, women enjoyed a greater level of social equality than at any time prior. These developments could have indirectly led to the “Beautiful Women” genre, and more importantly, the depiction of women in their secular activities as opposed to showcasing their “exemplary” deeds as dictated by a patriarchal society. Instead, they are shown enjoying their high status and public presence. This is particularly true for Zhou Fang’s painting, for the women are participating in a cultural event that men enjoyed as well, yet Zhou focuses on the women--their active engagement with society--and not as mere decorations for men behind closed doors.

Zhou Fang’s painting, *Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair* does indeed fill the requirements of the “Beautiful Women” genre; everything about it evokes an elegant and tranquil femininity, from the flowers, the clothing, the animals, and, of course, the women themselves. All of these elements are done through a master’s hand at the peak of his skills. Because of this façade of beauty, some have simply focused on the formal elements and deduced this work to be yet another representation of simple female submissiveness (albeit one in a very skillful manner). On a closer investigation of the painting, it reveals a deeper cultural significance. It offers a glimpse at the ethnographic detail of the Tang imperial court, a social festival that women played a large part in, and women’s more prominent role in society during that time. This work is a contribution to not only the history of Chinese figural painting, but an important visual representation of the evolving lives and circumstances of women in the ancient world.

²⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁶ Sullivan, *Arts of China*, 133.

²⁷ Peng, Tianyuan, and Mills, “Feminist Thinking in Late Seventh-Century China,” 75.

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