

Inheritance and Change in Li Bai's "Moshang sang"

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Abstract. This essay mainly focuses on the innovative approach taken by Li Bai to write his "Moshang sang." The poem receives scarce attention from critics throughout history, and among those who did comment about this poem, they either dismissed it merely as a trite imitation of Han yuefu "Moshang sang" or failed to notice its distinctiveness from other imitative poems. I shall argue that instead of simply imitating the Han yuefu "Moshang sang," Li Bai continues the legacy of Luofu's story by writing a sequel to it.

Keywords: Li Bai, Moshang sang; inheritance, change.

1. Introduction

Compared to Li Bai's other poems, his "Moshang sang" receives scarce attention from commentators throughout history and it is underestimated. Wang Yunxi, for instance, criticizes the poem as a trite imitation of the Han yuefu "Moshang sang." According to Wang, Li Bai adds nothing new to his version of "Moshang sang," and the depiction in the poem is abstract and banal [1]. Cui Weihuan, on the other hand, claims that Li Bai uses old materials from Han yuefu "Moshang sang" to build a new house [2], but Cui does not specify how the "new house" differs from the old version. The real and the fictional are merged and blurred, which demonstrates Li Bai's innovative adaptation of Han yuefu [3]. Nevertheless, the practice of blending the two stories is nothing new; Wang Jun from Liang Dynasty, for instance, has included the story of Qiu Hu in his version of "Moshang sang"— "Qiu Hu was just halting his mount, Luofu had not yet filled her basket" [4]. An Qi points out the poet's use of *jituo* [allegory] in this poem for self-expression. She argues that Li Bai compares himself to the beauty in the first line [5]. According to *Li Bai zhijie*, this poem is an allegory of the idea that a man who serves the world should not change his mind because of others' persuasion, and "Li Bai wrote this poem as a response to Prince Yong's (Li Lin) rebellion." However, the *jituo* approach is by no means innovative in Li Bai's time. Cao Zhi, for instance, takes this approach in his imitative poem "Song of Beauty."

In *Tangyin Gujian*, Hu Zhenheng writes, "Taibai is at his most profound in his yuefu. In enjoining the ancient tune titles, he is never remiss... where [old and new] merge, they seem to diverge; and where they diverge, they actually merge. [These] tunes exhaust the subtlety of 'enjoining the past' (*nigu*)." Paula Varsano shares Hu Zhenheng's opinion that Li Bai's uniqueness lies in his way of handling old materials in his poems. She argues that in "Moshang sang," the poet "enters into a dialogue with it [the past], imposing his present perspective on the old stories" by letting the main character walk out of her story and speak to the readers about her life. In doing so, she [the main character] "moves into a role that approximates that of the poet himself" [6].

In my view, instead of letting the main character play the role of the poet, Li Bai himself becomes the main character and acts in Luofu's story. It is the self-dramatization element that differentiates Li Bai's "Moshang sang" from other imitative poems. With the use of intertextuality in the poem, Li Bai manages to preserve the dramatic elements passed down from history that are related to Luofu. He comments on them and adds a new dimension to the character. In shaping the image of a "new" Luofu by the *Wei* River, Li Bai is shaping an image of himself.

This reading of Li Bai's "Moshang sang" will demonstrate how Li Bai's "Moshang sang" both merges and diverges with the Han yuefu tradition. Before a detailed analysis of this poem, Fu Xuan's "Yange xing", Wu Jun's "Moshang sang" and Cao Zhi's "Song of Beauty" would be cited

and analyzed for comparison, specifically, how they handle the old materials and imitate Han yuefu "Moshang sang" in the way that either fits with the poetic style of their time or facilitates the expression of their ideals. In addition, an analysis would be provided with respect to how Li Bai's "Moshang sang" is similar to and demarcated from the other imitative poems.

2. Imitative Poems of Han yuefu “Moshang sang” Before the Tang Dynasty

2.1 The Moralistic Approach by Fu Xuan

Fu Xuan's “Yange xing” is a straight imitation of the Han *yuefu* “Moshang sang” with regard to language. Critics point out that the poem stays too close to the original version to have any originality. Xie Zhen (1495-1575), for instance, criticizes “Fu Xuan's ‘Yange xing’ as a full copy of ‘Moshang sang’” [7]. According to Xie Zhen, even though the last line—“Heaven and the earth each have their own place. Hopefully you can change your plan”—is created by Fu Xuan himself, its meaning has already been indicated by the original version.

In “Yange xing,” on the one hand, Fu Xuan keeps the main storyline from Han *yuefu* “Moshang sang,” and copies the first four lines from the original version; on the other, he changes the charming and vivid image of Luofu to the stereotype of a humble and reserved woman by moving the setting from between mulberry trees to behind the locked door and altering Luofu's attitude towards the governor. One important identity of Luofu—a woman who likes picking mulberry leaves—disappears from Fu Xuan's poem.

The scene of picking mulberry leaves is symbolic in Chinese poetry, which echoes to *Shi jing* [*Book of songs*]. For instance, in “Xi sang” [8], the poet uses mulberry leaves as *xing* [stimulus] to introduce the happiness of a woman meeting her lover; and “The air of Wei fenjuru” [9] depicts the story of a woman who praises her lover when picking mulberry leaves. In *Chuci tongkao*, Jiang Liangfu writes, “in ancient times, poets referred to mulberry trees frequently when describing outing, singing and dancing, or lovers’ meeting” [10]. Women enjoy a certain degree of equality as man in these occasions, and they can be frank with their feelings and emotions. In Han *yuefu* “Moshang sang,” the open-air setting of mulberry fields serves as a natural stage for the encounter between Luofu and her admirers, and determines the parameters for Luofu's action. She confronts the governor with dignity --“How foolish is the governor!”-- and boasts her husband in an extravagant way. If the daring characteristic of Luofu and her dramatic conflict with the governor are the two most significant features of Han *yuefu* “Moshang sang,” Fu Xuan removes both in his “Yange xing.”

In Fu Xuan's story about Luofu, the location switches to a locked and quiet space, and the character loses her expressiveness and vitality in such setting. Kneeling and calling herself “humble concubine”, the Luofu in “Yange xing” turns into a humble and stodgy woman. She is reserved with her emotions, and her line “the heaven and the earth each have their own places” is simply a canned and moralistic reply. “Yange xing” is criticized for its lack of originality, but originality is not what the poet aims at in his poem. By rewriting Luofu's story, Fu Xuan restates the idea of “*Zheng quwei*” from *Shang shu*—each person should act according to his/her position [11], and he builds up the image of Luofu that meets with his ideal about woman. Rendered in this way, the character loses her self-awareness and distinct personality. She is reduced to a plain and stereotyped character, while the poem itself turns into a moralistic teaching.

This type of imitative poem reflects the trend in which poets are less concerned about creating a vivid woman character than using the image of woman to voice their moral concerns. The way Fu Xuan imitates the Han *yuefu* “Moshang sang” reveals his two-fold attitude towards tradition: at the same time showing respect to the traditional canon by demonstrating the imitative relation right at the beginning, he is critical of the values in the canons that do not meet with his moralistic teaching.

2.2 The Gongti Approach by Wu Jun

Wu Jun's "Moshang sang," by contrast, exemplifies another type of poetry about women: *gongti shi* [palace poetry], which focuses on describing "the emotions and ambience of a fair lady" [12]. Different from Fu Xuan's "Yange xing," the focal point of Wu Jun's "Moshang sang" is switched back to creating a dynamic female character. The poet pays close attention to describing the character's appearance, showing her actions, revealing her mental struggles, and giving the readers a taste of her language style. Yet, Wu Jun is remiss in preserving the dramatic element in the original "Moshang sang," and the main character's potential interlocutor recedes to the backstage, leaving the woman alone in her struggles.

This poem is noteworthy for the zoom-in effect achieved by the change of personal point of view. The first four lines are unfolded from the third person point of view as if they were written by an on-looker who stands afar and views the fields of mulberry trees along the pond. The panoramic view of the fields soon gives way to the close-up of a slim figure in-between the leaves. The line "delicate leaves enshroud an oriole's yellow" creates a suspension and rouses the interests of readers—is someone there? who is she? The next four lines of the poem, written from the perspective of the woman, can be interpreted as a direct response to the questions and invite the reader to walk into the inner world of the main character: this is a woman picking mulberry leaves, who is faced with her twofold struggles.

The word "again" in the fifth line—"the silkworms hungry, it overtakes my heart again"—demonstrates the woman's switch from her inner struggle (pining for her lover) to the struggle with life: she cannot simply give way to her sadness, but the hungry silkworms remind her to pick up what has been interrupted by her sadness. In other imitative poems of Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" cited in this essay, the silk worm is merely a symbol of women's virtue, but in Wu Jun's version, it becomes a genuine concern for the character and forces her back from her mourning to the reality. The simultaneous actions of wiping eyes and carrying the basket in the sixth line further reveal her intertwining struggles, and the scene of picking mulberry leaves, which is symbolic of the merry meeting of men and women in traditional Chinese literature, now sets a foil to the loneliness of the unnamed women in Wu Jun's "Moshang sang" and reinforces her sadness.

Wu Jun's "Moshang sang" presents a vivid and multi-dimensional depiction of a female character. Yet, the image of the woman occupies too much of the foreground to indicate any motives of the poet in writing this poem. Whether the poet writes about the woman simply for the sake of it or if there is any allegorical connotation behind the image, it can by no means be testified. Cao Zhi in his "Song of beauty," on the other hand, is more straightforward with his self-expression.

2.3 The Jito (Allegory) Approach by Cao Zhi

It is commonly agreed that Cao Zhi's "Song of beauty" is a *jituo* poem. Wang Yaoheng (dates unknown), for instance, argues that "Zijian (Cao Zhi) compares himself to the beauty, and he is unemployed just as the beauty is unmarried" [13]. According to *Cao ji quanping*, the beauty in the poem is a metaphor for a man with high morality, who desires to serve an enlightened emperor [14].

In "Song of Beauty," Cao Zhi imitates the way of presenting a woman in Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" by both direct description and reflecting her attractiveness from the reaction of her viewers. But compared to the latter, Cao Zhi pays more attention to showing the character's comeliness in a straight-forward manner. In addition to depicting her outfit, he delineates her delicate movement via the gentle movement of the mulberry trees ("The tender branches rustle, and the leaves fall gracefull), portrays the way she casts glance at people (her glance leaves a glamorous impression), and praises her orchid-like fragrance (her whistle smells like orchid). The image of beauty with orchid-like fragrance in Cao Zhi's "Song of Beauty" echoes to Qu Yuan's (340 BC? -278 BC?) "Li sao", in which beautiful woman and fragrant plants are symbolic of the poet's high morality. As with "Li sao," the beauty in "Song of Beauty" also alludes to the poet himself. She is unnamed,

indicating the distance the poet tries to keep from the original version and allowing the poet to depart from merely writing about a woman to arrive at his self-expression.

In the Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang," Luofu voices her volition directly, and her speech is similar to what Bakhtin terms as "the single-voiced discourse," namely, "the words of a character are not mediated by the intervention of the" the poet but "apparently speak for themselves" [15]. The poet focuses on imitating and presenting the voice of the female character, while his/her own voice is hardly heard. Wu Jun's "Moshang sang" is similar to the Han *yuefu* version in this sense. The beauty in Cao Zhi's "Song of Beauty," on the other hand, does not have her own voice. She remains silent when faced with the questions raised by her interlocutor, and the poet steps in and answers for her. The focus of the poem switches from the female character to the speaker, who explains the woman's mental activity from the perspective of a male literati. Admittedly, the longing for man of high moral and the desire to find a virtuous man can be the pursuit of a woman (yet, quite rare during *Wei* Dynasty), but they also fit into the life and ambition of the poet himself. The boundary between the character and the writer becomes less and less clear-cut as the poem is unfolded, and the last two lines are without subjects, enhancing the impression that Cao Zhi is talking about himself when he talks about the woman.

The symbolic image of a woman picking mulberry leaves and the way Cao Zhi depicts the woman's appearance (both directly and indirectly) indicates the influence from Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang," but Cao Zhi imitates the latter merely to enhance the impression of the woman's external beauty. In the second part of Cao Zhi's "Song of Beauty," the poet moves away from telling the story of Luofu, replacing the inner beauty of the character with that of his own, and unfolds it in front of his readers.

3. Li Bai's Unique Approach

Li Bai's "Moshang sang" shares similarities with the other imitative poems of Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" cited above. For instance, like Fu Xuan, Li Bai names his main character "Luofu" and keeps the storyline of Luofu resisting her suitor. He adopts some of the strategies used in Wu Jun's "Moshang sang": the zoom-in perspective, the switch from third person to first person point of view, and the multi-dimensional depiction of the main character. And like Cao Zhi's "Song of beauty," Li Bai's "Moshang sang" is a *jituo* poem, in which the poet's voice can be easily recognized.

Nevertheless, in Fu Xuan's "Yange xing," the image of Luofu is reduced to a humble, passive woman whose inner world is locked up (and the woman herself is locked up inside a building as well). She loses her self-awareness and resists her suitor only with a moralistic reply. Li Bai, by comparison, pays more attention to build up the distinct personality of Luofu. In his version of "Moshang sang," the character is straightforward with where her heart rests, allowing readers to understand her motivation to resist the suitor. Although Li Bai keeps a distance from the language style of Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang," the Luofu in Li Bai's version has a similar energetic and dignified air as the one in the original. In Wu Jun's "Moshang sang," the poet is meticulous with the character's psychological activities, while his own emotions are concealed from the audience. Cao Zhi, by contrast, replaces the woman's voice with his own voice. Different from both Wu Jun and Cao Zhi, Li Bai's keeps both the voice of the character and his own voice by double-voiced discourse, and his version of "Moshang sang" extends from Luofu's mindset to his self-expression.

This poem can be divided into two sections. The first section (line 1-6) seems like a synopsis of the first half of Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" (line 1-22), telling an encounter between a beauty picking mulberry leaves and her approaching suitor. Yet, Li Bai intentionally changes the setting of the story to the "east of the Wei Bridge," and he removes the famous depiction of the beauty in this section.

With respect to the location, An Qi posits that "Wei bridge is located at the northwest side of Chang'an, over Wei River. [Thus,] the east side of the Wei Bridge also refers to Chang'an." (873).

In *Gujin zhu*, on the other hand, Cui Bao (dates unknown) from Jin Dynasty writes, "'Moshang sang' is about the woman from Qin family. Qin Family are from Han Dan, and they have a daughter named Luofu"[16]. The discrepancy in setting suggests that Li Bai is not simply retelling the story of Han yuefu "Moshang sang," but is creating a new story about Luofu, who is set free from Han yuefu and arrives at Chang'an. The specific location gives the poem a concrete sense of reality and makes it easier for the poet to blend in the image of the beauty his own image.

The second important departure from Han yuefu "Moshang sang" in Li Bai's version is the removal of the depiction of Luofu from third person point of view; instead, Li Bai lets the main character introduce and describe herself in the second part of poem (line 7-18). In Luofu's self-depiction, she selects only one color: white ("face of [white] jade" and "hands silky white") as compared to the more colorful image in Han yuefu version: "in her ears, 'shining moon' pearls, pale yellow silk was her skirt, her tunic—purple silk." If the description of Luofu in Han yuefu reflects how the viewers see her, then the one in Li Bai's version is about how Luofu sees herself: purity as signified by the white color. The name of Luofu in Li Bai's "Moshang sang" reminds readers of the image of Luofu in the Han yuefu version; and the two images are complementing each other, leading to a multi-dimensional character.

Further, in Luofu's self-introduction, the depiction of her outfit and her luxurious ornaments has been removed, and so is her boast about her husband. Rendered in this way, the character's gender identity and social background are weakened, while her self-awareness, which disappears from the previous imitative poems, has been restored. By the dignified statement "it is I who am Qin Luofu" and by showing her morality via the way she delineates herself, Luofu is using her own reputation and moral pursuit to turn down the approaching suitor.

Compared to the Luofu in Han yuefu "Moshang sang," the one in Li Bai's version appears more mature. At the same time, she shares the defining qualities with the Luofu in Han yuefu--beauty and dignity--her repartee to the suitor sounds more in control. It leaves the impression that this story is a sequel to the story in Han yuefu and to the story about Qiu Hu's wife. This is further testified by the way character talks about those stories as if they were her own experiences--"I paid no mind to the princess' emissary, much less heeded that Qiu Hu!" This woman at Chang'an is now both Luofu from Han yuefu and Qiu Hu's wife; and the three images are merged into one. In doing so, the character not only reminds the suitor (as well as readers of this poem) of what happened before, but also develops a more comprehensive presentation of herself: it includes the beauty and dignity of Luofu, the loyalty of Qiu Hu's wife who is unpersuaded by the offer of gold, and her own determination to follow her heart.

On top of the three images, another image is added to the character, namely, the image of Li Bai, which gradually emerges itself as his own voice becomes clearer and clearer in Luofu's voice. For instance, Luofu's self-introduction--"it is I who am Qin Luofu" --echoes to Li Bai's self-introduction in "Lushan yao ji Lu shiyu Xuzhou": "I am the Madman of Chu." When the woman mentions the "calling phoenix," readers are immediately reminded of Li Bai, who frequently refers to himself as phoenix. In the same poem as cited above, Li Bai writes, "[I] sing like the phoenix and laugh at Confucius" [17]. The line "wintry cicadas love emerald green, the calling phoenix perches on verdant pawlonia." functions as what Bakhtin terms as "double-voice discourse," which "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions" [18].

For Luofu, she is showing the suitor her determination that just like the wintry cicadas and the calling phoenix, she has the place "where her heart rests " and she will not budge. For Li Bai, he is voicing his own pursuit, which is indicated by the symbolic image of phoenix. This image first came from *Zhuangzi*, in which the phoenix "rises from the Southern Sea, resting only on the sterculia tree [pawlonia], eating only the fruit of the bamboo, and drinking only from the sweetest springs" [19]. The sterculia tree, the fruit of the bamboo, and the sweetest springs share the quality of being pure, and by sticking with them, the phoenix, to which Li Bai compares himself, becomes

the symbol of purity and high moral. The line "wintry cicadas love emerald green, the calling phoenix perches on verdant pawlonia " fits well in both Luofu's situation and Li Bai's situation and hinges the voices of the two. Further, the joined voices lead to the joined images of the two speakers. Li Bai's phoenix-like image blends in with the image of the character, adding another dimension to the character on top of the image of the woman by the *Wei* River, the Luofu in Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" and Qiu Hu's wife. This multidimensional character is the image of Li Bai that he endeavors to present to his readers.

In line 16, Luofu says, " I [only blame] the foolishness of [others]." Yet, who are the "others"? Li Bai's "Moshang sang" involves only two characters--Luofu and her suitor. Apparently, the poet assumes that readers are well versed in Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" and the story about Qiu Hu's wife. The "others " can refer to the governor or the passers-by in Han *yuefu* "Moshang sang" or to the foolish and fickle Qiu Hu. Understood in either way, the word [others] shows that this line exceeds the domains of this poem, and the poem itself is a continuation of what has been written before. This line is also a double-voiced discourse, when Luofu is blaming the others who don't understand her; and so is the author, which is why he writes this sequel and uses the multi-images and double-voiced discourse to reach at a more comprehensive presentation of himself.

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