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Poetry's Fall From Grace

A look at the palace poetry of the Southern Dynasties and its lasting effects on Chinese
poetry

After the fall of the Han dynasty, the Southern Dynasties period took place, and along with it, the emergence of an early form of Chinese love poetry, the 'palace poem.' Unlike any style of poem before, the palace poem was odd in that it was completely formulaic. This style of poetry was criticized in later Chinese history as being decadent, implying a fall from grace as to what poetry is supposed to represent. However, is this criticism of the palace poem valid? It is the intention of this paper to show the deep influence and importance that the palace poem had in later eras of poetry, specifically the Late Tang era and poets such as Li He. It can be said that Li He's poetry would not have been what it was without facilitation from palace poetry.

It is important to first understand what palace poetry was, and why it was different from previous styles of poetry. Palace style poetry began in the Sixth Century, and thrived with the support of royal patronage. These poems were seen as a decadent form of poetry, not representative of what proper Confucian poetry should be. Palace poems most often dealt with one-sided love affairs, describing a woman in love, ever waiting for her absent lover who will likely never return. However, it must be understood that the

women being portrayed in the poems were not realistic descriptions, but rather an idealized stereotype. A depiction of the women found in the palace style of poetry can be seen in the words of Ellen Johnston Laing:

The poet preferred to see [the woman] as a courtly lady, languished away. Her ‘personal décor’ included fine jewels, costly silk clothes, and elaborate make-up. She was obsessed with her personal appearance. Spring and autumn were the two most important seasons in love poetry, for feminine beauty is like a flower: lovely and desirable in spring, faded and pathetic in autumn. Description of sexual pleasure was taboo in this type of poetry, but physical contact was decorously suggested through hints and innuendo: filmy sleeves worn by an otherwise fully-covered woman hinted at the bare flesh of arms, and the sleeves themselves suggested entrée to concealed parts of the woman’s body.¹

In contrast, the classic definition of a well-written and effective poem comes from several sources. The *Shang Shu* stated that, “Poetry expresses one’s will, song prolongs one’s words... . . .when the eight tones are all balanced and do not encroach upon one another, spirits and human beings will be in harmony.” Fusheng Wu describes poetry as movement from the internal to the external. It comes from the poet’s heart, and it establishes the role that poetry plays in regulating human affairs.² From the Great Preface to the *Book of Songs*, “Poetry is where one’s will goes. In mind [or heart] it is will; coming out in language, it is poetry.” This passage can be interpreted as meaning that poetry comes from one’s internal source brought about by an external stimulus. It is

¹ Ellen Johnston Laing, ‘Chinese Palace-Style Poetry and the Depiction of a Palace Beauty’, *The Art Bulletin* (1990) 284-295

² Fusheng Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (State University of New York Press, 1998), 9-10

automatic and natural, a necessary vessel for humans in order to maintain a balance between body and mind. Additionally from Fusheng Wu:

Any response that is forced or faked is not natural and hence cannot bring about the desired therapeutic result. It also implicitly mandates the linguistic style best equipped to fulfill such a task. Only the most straightforward, the most transparent, verbal medium can articulate one's thoughts... ..poetry is not viewed as a craft to be mechanically pursued. To the contrary, tinkering with the product can only betray insincerity on the part of the poet.³

The common theme derived from the above definitions is that any form of poetry other than the canonical form would be contrary to the reason of a poem's existence. It is apparent that these two styles of poetry would clash, as the very purpose for each form of poetry is different. Palace poetry existed as a game to be held in the court, and the poets were merely players trying to win the emperor's favor. They were not concerned with expressing their emotions, thoughts, and feelings.

If the motives behind the development of palace poetry were better understood, then it wouldn't be as criticized. During the Southern Dynasties period, new literary thought and traditions were being developed that contradicted the previous assumptions of poetry. With these classic views in the back of their minds, literary theorists began to emphasize the style and ornamental aspects found in literary writing. Later it is believed that this was the beginning of decadence in poetry, but litterateurs at the time saw style as an essential aspect in the communication of meaning.⁴ The reason for styles 'emergence'

³ Fusheng Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (State University of New York Press, 1998), 10

⁴ Paul F. Rouzer, 'Watching the Voyeurs: Palace Poetry and the Yuefu of Wen Tingyun', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (1989) 13-34

and its perpetual gain in strength is easy to see based on the historical events at the time. Northern nobility was forced to flee southward because of attacking barbarians, and were trying to maintain a distinction between themselves and the Southern nobility. As a result, they continued to place strong emphasis on the classic views on poetry. However, with the decline of political and military prestige in the Southern courts, the emphasis on style and ornament in writing was increased. As Rouzer explains, “one of the few possessions they could claim as a sign of their own continuing superiority over the northern ‘barbarians’,” and “Thus, the full mastery of the ornamental style was a symbol of cultural mastery as well – a sign of solidarity within the governing class and an affirmation of their continuing right to rule.”⁵ Through these circumstances, the aspect of eroticism was also beginning to play a heavier part in poetry throughout the Southern Dynasties. In the Qi dynasty, love poems inherited traits that were based almost purely on themes in Chinese folk tradition. Then, in the Song dynasty, the *yuefu* quatrains that used a female voice became very popular among an elite group of imitators. In their imitations of this style of poetry, authors made changes to keep up with their own cultural concerns. This and the continued evolution of the palace poem is described by Rouzer:

First, as Joseph Allen has noted, narrative poems were turned into a more lyrical, descriptive verse in which the original narrative was altered... ..in [Southern] Dynasties literati *yuefu* portrayed women as less independent and either as more passively virtuous (in keeping with Confucian mores) or – as is characteristic of the Qi-Liang period – as more coy and flirtatious. In turn, more space was given

⁵ Paul F. Rouzer, ‘Watching the Voyeurs: Palace Poetry and the Yuefu of Wen Tingyun’, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (1989) 13-34

to erotic descriptions of the woman's desirability. The female characters...
...went from peasant girl to court lady.⁶

Continuing in this style, eroticism was being introduced and emphasized in the *yongwu* or 'poem on things'. The southern court poets were primarily concerned with finding an accurate descriptive equivalent for every phenomenon, and these objectives naturally extended to the description of women and the objects around them. Also, although it is not a strong or valid expression of oneself as seen in the 'classic poem', palace poetry still expresses the thoughts and feelings of its character in response to their external circumstances, with the most common being the absence of a lover. With a better understanding of the roots and natural progression of the palace poem, it becomes harder to criticize it.

Palace poetry not only had a lasting importance on future Chinese poetry that was based on its style, but it also influenced a number of great poets such as Li He. Palace style poetry died out with the start of the Tang dynasty, but it enjoyed a revival in the Late Tang due to poets such as Li He. As described by Fusheng Wu:

[Li He], seemingly obsessed with the culture of the Southern Dynasties court, wrote about it extensively. Unlike the historians of the Sui and Tang, however, [he] had little interest in its political and moral ways. Rather, what fascinated [him] were precisely those aspects of culture that had been repeatedly condemned as decadent: its sensuality, its eroticism and its treatment of poetry as a sophisticated craft.⁷

⁶ Paul F. Rouzer, 'Watching the Voyeurs: Palace Poetry and the Yuefu of Wen Tingyun', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (1989) 16-17

⁷ Fusheng Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (State University of New York Press, 1998), 77

Li He even tried to identify himself with one of the prominent Southern Dynasties poets, Yu Jianwu, in a preface he wrote for his poem 'Song: Return from Kuaiji':

During the Liang dynasty, Yu Jianwu used to write songs in Palace Style to match those of the crown prince [that is, Xiao Gang]. When the state was subverted, Jianwu fled to hide from the danger in Kuaiji... ..I thought that he would have left some poems on this subject, but none of them have been found. So I wrote this 'Song: Return from Kuaiji' to express his sadness for him.

Attempts to re-create the palace style of poetry were not without their differences. These differences were mainly due to the strong relationship between the emperor poets that was prevalent during the Southern Dynasties period. Poets of this time were highly regarded in the royal court. In the Late Tang, this was not the case. Poets had to continuously struggle to get their voices heard. Palace poetry of the Southern Dynasties was a form of entertainment and was facilitated by those in power. Conformity based on the emperor's taste was valorized, but it is an entirely different scenario in Li Shangyin's biography of Li He:

[Li He] would often go out on a bony donkey with a young servant. On his back he would carry a tattered brocade bag, and whenever he got some [lines of poems] he would write them down and put them into the bag... ..[Li He] would take what he had written from the maids, prepare some ink and paper, complete them, and put them into another bag.⁸

⁸ Fusheng Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (State University of New York Press, 1998), 78-79

With no place for courtly regulations and formulas, Li He was able to establish his own unique style. This led to a blossoming of an increasingly private style of poetry. Li He had taken his own personal approach to palace style poetry, and it is acclaimed critically.

As Stephen Owen explains:

In his brief life, Li He produced some of the most remarkable poetry in the Chinese tradition... ..Li He's work is best known for its brilliant images, morbidity, and fascination with the supernatural... ..Li He was most drawn to what was beyond the immediate and everyday world... ..to the sensuous world of the woman's bedchamber.⁹

It is apparent that Li He drew inspiration not only from the palace style poetry as seen in his fascination of the woman's bedchamber and the style of his poetry, but also from opposing Southern Dynasty poetry with his description of non-worldly things and his methods of writing.

For a long time and by many people, the Southern Dynasties palace style poetry has been condemned as being decadent and not meeting the criteria of what is considered proper poetry. This condemnation is not justified. Palace Style poetry came about as a result of the natural progression of style based on the historical influences of the time. It also helped to inspire and influence many of China's later great poets. It is reasonable to maintain that, if not for the palace style poetry, poets such as Li He and others might not have produced the great works they did.

⁹ Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (W.W. Norton & Company Ltd. Inc., 1996), 489

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