

Document 2.11: Poems written by women during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

By and large, women “did not count” in traditional Chinese society. In fact, toward the end of the Ming dynasty, the attitude arose that “in a woman, stupidity is a virtue.”¹ Nevertheless, some scholarly Ming families did provide the women of the household with a basic literary education, and in a number of cases, the parents and/or husbands were very supportive of the women’s literary talents. Poetry, in particular, was considered a respectable literary pursuit for a woman. By one estimate, ninety-nine percent of all Chinese female writers were poets.² Many courtesans and concubines also wrote poetry, some of it quite sad, like the poems by Kuaiji nüzi (“the woman from Kuaiji”).

The following selection of poems from the late Ming dynasty, all by female poets, gives us a glimpse into the lives of women at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

A. Poems Written on the Wall of New Blessing Station

A man from northeast China took “the woman from Kuaiji” as his concubine and it is there, away from Kuaiji where she was born, that she wrote her poems. No further information has been found about her.

Preface to poem

I was born and raised in Kuaiji, and in my youth I studied the Classics and Histories. When I came of age, I was married to a northerner. I grieved that my “Bamboo Grove manner” now serves “a general whose belly has betrayed him.” To make matters worse, the lioness of Hedong roars several times each day. Today, when I went to tell him of my plight, she confronted me in anger. The blows of her whip rained down on me, abusing

¹ Lin Yü-tang, “Feminist Thought in Ancient China” in Li Yu-ning, ed., *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992) 37.

² Hu Shih, “Women’s Place in Chinese History” in Li Yu-ning, ed., *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, 12.

me as if I were a servant. Feelings of anger and bitterness filled my breast, and I found it nearly impossible to stand up again. How awful! I am a person caught in a cage. What would there be to regret about my dying? Yet I fear that if I gave my body to the grasses and weeds, I would vanish and be forgotten. That is why I have chosen to forgo death a little while.

Tonight, having waited until the other concubines were sound asleep, I stole out to the rear courtyard. Using tears to moisten the inkstone, I have inscribed three quatrains on the wall and given this account of their origin. If persons of understanding read them as they pass by, they will grieve for my untimely life. Then, although I die, I shall not be forgotten.

I

My pink gown is half covered with dirt,
A single lamp is my only companion.
I resemble pear blossoms after a rainstorm, pitifully fallen, spring of the past.

II

My days are spent in the company of tigers and wildcats,
I sit silently, not showing my bitterness that knows no end.
Heaven had its reasons for giving me this life—
To make me an entertaining topic of conversation!

III

Ten thousand sorrows, but whom can I tell?
Facing others I force a smile, behind them I grieve.
Don't think these poems are just the ordinary kind,
Each line is a thousand tears shed.

Source: Kuaiji nūzi, "Poems Written on the Wall of New Blessings Station." *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang et al. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999. 200–201.

B. “When I Hired a Teacher to Instruct the Girls, Someone Ridiculed Me, So as a Joke I Have Written This Retort to Explain Matters,” by Gu Ruopu

Gu Ruopu was born in Guangzhou in 1592. She married a scholar, and after he died in 1619, she never remarried, as tradition dictated. Her poems were published in 1651, and she is believed to have died around 1681.

Since first the Primal Forces were discrete and human relations,
 engendered thus, complete,
Men must be the arbiters of Right and in the home all virtuous women Chaste.
But if we fail to practice poetry and prose, how shall we display our natural gifts?
An elder woman scolded me for this: “You don’t pursue the true and wifely way,
 engaging teachers to instruct the girls as if they sought to win the world’s regard.
They put aside our normal women’s work and waste their efforts to recite and learn.”
I listened well to what she said but it left me unimpressed.
In human society sexes segregate, and yet preserving chastity is hard;
How can we in women’s quarters fail to take the ancients as our teachers?
Yi Jiang and Da Si, royal women of Zhou³, both were praised for their sold virtue.
Ban Zhao wrote *Instructions for Women* that we might know the code of proper conduct.
I am ashamed of my own stupidity, unable to correct my faults,
Yet I pity those today who cultivate appearances—they are only pretty dresses.
Not treating moral training seriously will visit shame upon the family name.
Bring girls together, let them study, debate the issues, inquire into fine points.
The Four Virtues⁴, the Three Obediences⁵—make the ancient ways their standard.
Prune their character, refine and beautify; make their persons fine and good.
Who expects them to be famous?
Seek only that the bad will be restrained.
Do this, then test them, and if something is amiss, take your complaint
 to the worthy men of old.

Source: *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 303.

³ The Zhou dynasty from around 1050 to 256 B.C.E. is considered one of the high points of Chinese civilization.

⁴ Respectful speech, chaste conduct, appropriate women’s work, and modest behavior

⁵ First to her father, then to her husband, and should her husband die, to her eldest son

C. “Hardships of the Road,” by Lu Qingzi

“During her lifetime, Lu Qingzi was widely recognized as an outstanding poet. She was among the few Ming women whose work was selected for anthologies devoted predominantly to literati poetry.” She was from Suzhou in Jiangsu Province and was the daughter of a scholar-official. She was married at fifteen and moved with her husband to Cold Mountain. They were seen as “a model companionate couple, sharing a passion for literature and a leisurely private life.” Lu’s first collection of poetry was published when she was in her mid-twenties. Judging by her husband’s enthusiastic preface to a later collection published in 1600, he was very supportive of her talents. (Women Writers of Traditional China, 239)

With orchid and musk tapestried quilts perfumed;
Behind silk screens breezes of spring still cold.
When I bound up my hair and became your bride
We were always together like a bundle tied:
 You were my heart’s beloved.
We were lacquer and glue; who could come between?
We were metal and stone, enduring to the end.
Then a mere word, by chance caused the ruin of all my hopes;
Your angry glance was the first sign of ill will.
The lady’s beauty gradually faded away;
The shining mirror took leave of the soaring phoenix.
I mounted the carriage, went out the gate and left.
The knot of our bond for a thousand miles unraveled.

When I was young, I enjoyed your loving favor;
Who could know then my road would be hard to travel?
Though it hasn’t been long they speak of someone new;
Your generous love for me is truly already spent!

Source: *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 256.