

[Abstract]

The Literary Works and Poems of Tang Dynasty Women Poets

— The Poems of Shangguan Zhaorong 上官昭容 (Wan'er, 婉兒), Li Ye 李冶,
Xue Tao 薛濤, and Yu Xianji 魚玄機 —

YOKOTA Mutsumi

Nü Lunyu (女論語 Analects for Women), a Tang Dynasty book on the education for women with examples of the proper code of conduct, cautioned against reciting poems lest the verses provoke lewd thoughts. In a society where *shidafu* (士大夫 scholar-officials) held the dual role of politician and poet, women seldom composed poetry with the exception of high-ranking ladies at court or those from prominent literati families. Against this backdrop, it was courtesans and Daoist nuns in the Middle Tang period who opened the door to creative writing for women.

This paper looks into how courtesans and Daoist nuns learned to compose poetry and whether their works had a gender-specific style that influenced the poems of the *shidafu* with whom they associated. The poems of these women provide insight into the characteristics of women poets in the Tang Dynasty and their place in the literary canon.

This five-chapter dissertation in three parts discusses poetry by court ladies, poetry by courtesans and Daoist nuns, and, the creation of a new genre of love poems. Part 1 and Part 2 consider the works of women poets in chronological order from Early to Late Tang. Part 1 looks at the Early Tang poems of Shangguan Zhaorong 上官昭容, the late High Tang to early Middle Tang poems of Li Ye 李冶, the Middle Tang poems of Xue Tao 薛濤, and the Late Tang poems of Yu Xianji 魚玄機. Part 3 discusses the novel love poems by the three poets Li Ye, Xue Tao and Yu Xuanji, in which the word *xiangsi* 相思 (yearning) frequently appears. Conclusions are drawn from the associative links in the evolving art of these four Tang poets.

The main characteristic of Tang Dynasty women poets is that courtesans and Daoist nuns from Middle Tang onwards produced a prodigious number of works. Shangguan Zhaorong composed 32 poems; Li Ye, 18; Xue Tao, 89; and, Yu Xuanji, 49. Approximately 120 women poets are included in *Quan Tangshi* (全唐詩 Complete Tang Poems). Most of them are represented by only one or two works, with very few having more than two dozen poems quoted in the tome. In the years from the Han Dynasty up to the Tang, there were women poets such as Bao Linghui 鮑令暉, Shen Manyuan 沈滿願, and Liu Lingxian 劉令嫺, but in the Tang Dynasty women poets were far more prolific.

What prompted courtesans and Daoist nuns to compose poems? Their works suggest that courtesans started writing poems to entertain their literati clientele, and the nuns, when they met *shidafu* at Daoist temples.

Faith in Daoism flourished during the Tang dynasty, nuns often serving as head abbesses in the numerous convents of the era. *Shidafu* frequented these monasteries, where they socialized with nuns and composed poems. At the zenith of the Tang, courtesans became a social institution, an indispensable part of the life of the literati in the flourishing capital. Furthermore, the imperial examination, initiated in the Sui Dynasty and institutionalized in Early Tang as a tool of selection, required scholars to compose original poetry. As social cachet grew for poetic talent, composing poetry became a popular pastime for courtesans and Daoist nuns who appreciated and applied poetic techniques. Reveling in the literati's compositions at entertaining venues and in the temples gradually became a vehicle for the women's own creations.

Chinese poetry of this era was commonly composed by emulating extant works. Women poets also borrowed vocabulary and style from poems by the literati, gradually creating works of their own. This led to the birth of a new genre of literature by women.

Shidafu developed a close relationship with women poets through poetry readings and composition. As their trajectories intertwined in the pursuit of literary refinement, some of the literati became romantically involved with their poetic companions. Scholar-officials bound by Confucian orthodoxy eschewed writing about their emotions of love, but the courtesans and nuns who were free from these literary strictures did not shy away from capturing their rapturous passion in verse. Not only had the women entered the realm of belle-lettres that had been limited to the privileged few, their influence was instrumental in expanding the subject matter of the scholar-officials' poetry, inspiring the literati to explore themes of love.

Each woman poet left her footprint in Tang literature, but their greatest achievement was to pave the way for the creation of amorous verse, a legacy passed on to the present day. It can thus be concluded that from the Middle Tang onwards, women poets played a crucial role in literary development, first by becoming a sounding board for the literati's verses, then creating their own poems.