

Spring Languor: A Typology of Women in Ming Dynasty Drama

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ABSTRACT Spring languor (chunyun 春困) is a mode of emotional portrayal that drama from the Ming dynasty onward attached specifically to women. This important and typical image of classical Chinese literature has yet to receive systematic scholarly attention. Research reveals that an imagining of the female body lies concealed behind the image: the female body, confined within the inner chambers, is denied any outward capacity for action. The introverted, demure ideal of womanhood that male authors crafted in Ming drama is in fact a male society's construction of the female subject. As a figurative image of "spring idleness," "spring sorrow," and "spring longing," it reflects the aesthetic of women within a traditional, male-dominated society. An examination of the dramatic writing of women's spring languor in the Ming thus discloses the gains and losses of the female image within the discursive context of male power in pre-modern China, and carries significant meaning and insight for understanding the observing perspective embedded in traditional Chinese literature and culture and the cultural connotations of women.

INDEX TERMS Female Image; Imagery; Ming Drama; Spring Languor; Subjectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender expression is an important dimension of literary creation. Within the traditional society of male superiority and female subordination, women drew the attention of mainstream literary production and carried a wealth of meaning. Scholarship on the female discursive system in pre-modern literature has long flourished under such rubrics as social duty (for example, critical reflection on writings that enjoined women to uphold the cardinal moral bonds and to guard their chastity), emotional need (for example, analyses of how the various literary genres gave voice to women's feelings), and conditions of existence (for example, studies linking pre-modern women's circumstances to the construction of traditional space, particularly those that probe the meaning of women's conduct through the lens of the garden). The metaphorical pairing of women's conduct with the seasons, however, constitutes one further convention of pre-modern gendered writing—one that no study has yet addressed in its own right.

Spring languor is a physiological commonality shared by humankind from remote antiquity to the present day. As the spring climate begins to warm, people grow more somnolent than in other seasons, feeling especially drowsy, fatigued, and heavy-lidded during the daytime. Lu You's poem "Recording Affairs at the Start of the Year" contains the line, "Children rise at the fifth watch to sell their languor," to which the poet appends his own note: "Before dawn on the first day of spring, people call out to one another, 'Selling spring languor!'—this too is an old

custom." [1] Because spring languor wasted the daylight hours, children would rise early and cry "Selling spring languor!" as a customary game. Spring was a major image in pre-modern letters, and spring languor, as a physiological phenomenon that commonly arose in spring, accordingly became a frequent subject as well, depicted across shi poetry, ci lyric, fiction, and drama. Yet the literary expression of spring languor developed differently across genres. In particular, once it entered the composition of Ming chuanqi (romance plays), spring languor crystallized into a conventional formula for portraying women and took on a specific textual significance—a development that has gone unnoticed. Taking spring languor as its point of departure, this article excavates the coupling between the phenomenon of spring languor in Ming chuanqi and the critique of women in Ming literature, in the hope of opening a more multidimensional path toward understanding what is implied when the female image is written from a male perspective in pre-modern Chinese literature and culture.

II. DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN'S SPRING LANGUOR IN MING DRAMA

In the literati drama of the Ming—Ming chuanqi above all [2]—female roles, and the dan (female lead) in particular, are frequently given a passage of spring languor. Such passages typically open with the lovely weather of a warm spring sun and gentle, misty rain, before turning to the character's own languid, oppressed mood, the brush lavishing charm upon her. "Spring languor" became one of the formulaic

set-pieces for boudoir women in Ming and Qing chuanqi, presenting us with a leisured and elegant typology of women in pre-modern society.

In Ming love-themed chuanqi, the most common writing of women's spring languor falls, by content, into three principal types. The first type casts spring languor as the prelude to a boudoir maiden's yearning for love. In such "releasing one's longings in the spring chamber" passages, spring is the season in which love between man and woman germinates: before the heroine has met the hero, she is forever growing languid on spring days—moved by the boundless spring light even as it wearies her. In scene five of *The Tossed Peach* (Toutao ji), for instance, as Huang Shunhua passes a spring day in her flowering chamber, she sings to the tune "Huanxisha":

Deep within the curtained bed I sleep and cannot wake; outside the window the roving oriole tries its fresh notes. A stick of incense slants its wisp, the seal-script smoke rising faint. By hand I grind the phoenix-cake tea to slake my thirst, and sit watching the swallows, my feelings stirred alone. Now clear, now rainy, as Qingming draws near... How can it be helped—these past days the daylight lengthens, the spring scenery is at its loveliest, and oh, how it makes one languid!

The second wife of the play's Huo Zhongru, Lady Yu, makes her entrance with a still more direct avowal of longing for her future companion. In scene four, "Dreaming of the Match," the xiaodan (Lady Yu) sings to "Zhu Yingtai jin": "My dreaming soul stirs awake; I rouse from spring slumber; outside the window there comes a cry." And to "Rumengling":

Now rain, now clear—such is the weather; as if drunk, as if dazed—such is my mood. In the little chamber the embroidered curtain hangs low; too listless to chase after games on the swing... I am Lady Yu. Unhappily my father passed early, and I lean upon my widowed mother alone. Because she has no son to carry on the ancestral line, she wishes to summon a worthy son-in-law for me; yet though I await my "mounting of the dragon" [a fine husband], the phoenix augury grants me no match.

Yet the marriage-bond does not arrive; the months and years slip by. By late spring, listless and dispirited, Lady Yu sleeps the whole day in her chamber; the xiaodan sings to "Yijiangfeng": "The demon of sleep teases me; I sit up, then sink back down, feeling my very spirit drained" (scene thirteen, "No Bond"). [3] By now the melancholy of spring languor has ripened into a hopeless anxiety.

Consider, again, *The Lion's Roar* (Shihou ji). In late spring, in the fourth month, when the Qingming rains have just cleared, Su Dongpo's serving-girl Xiuying sings with feeling to "Yi Wangsun":

The wind sets the cattails rustling by the little pond; after the rain the lotus fills the court with fragrance; sunken plums and floating melons are cool as ice and snow. On the square bamboo couch, too languid to take up needle and thread, my midday dream grows long.

She then introduces herself: "I am Xiuying, serving-maid to His Honor Su. Raised in his house since childhood, I am now twice eight. Though I dare not presume to wait upon him by night, I have learned a little of needlework and the sewing of robes. And so my master—[to 'Weifan xu']—with refined regard he doubly cherishes talent, and among his serving women he favors me with a kindly eye; he fancies himself a Zheng Kangcheng and takes me for a maid of the Zheng house. Cherished so, I merely attend his morning and evening toilet, ashamed that I can scarcely be counted among his three thousand powdered beauties. When I think of Luoxiu of old, who stooped from her station, my heart aches with grief." When Su Dongpo saw her giving voice to her feelings alone and asked the reason, Xiuying replied: "Because the long day is as a year and I have wearied a little of my needlework, I strolled a while to ease myself—there was no other meaning in it." [4] As a maidservant, she dares entertain no presumptuous hopes toward her master Su Shi and remains wholly uncertain of her future; such thoughts can only be shut up within her, turning to languor amid the sorrow of a spring at once warming and rainy.

When the boudoir maidens of Ming love-chuanqi encounter the man of their hearts, the lovesickness of new desire deepens their spring languor; this constitutes the second type of spring-languor writing. In scene fourteen of *The Tossed Peach*, "Boudoir Instruction," at the turn from spring to summer, Huang Shunhua so longs for the young scholar Pan that she finds the daylight wearisome: "It is only that the long day makes one languid—so hard to pass the time," and "Seated before the damask window, no sooner do I take up needle and thread than the demon of sleep entangles me again." In scene ten of *The Painted Boat* (Caizhou ji), "The Annotated Reply," after the maiden Wu has sent her annotated letter to Jiang Qing and waits anxiously for his answer, listless and at a loss, she can only sigh: "Spring deepens, the day grows long; little by little I feel the languor—so hard to while away." And in scene thirteen the old serving-woman, too, perceives the young mistress's heart: "She is no daughter of Chen Tuan [the legendary sleeper]—how then is she so beset by the sleep-demon? I have a scheme to steal a little ease: let her drift into a Nanke dream."

In *The Cherished Fragrance* (Huaixiang ji), Jia Wu (dan) has set her heart on Han Shou and falls lovesick for him. It is the very season of spring yearning, yet Jia Wu passes the daylight in a daze, listless and dispirited. In scene eight the dan sings to "Linjiangxian": "Sleep melts into the spring day; I rub the gold threads of my robe; idly I listen to the orioles' talk. Before long my phoenix hairpin tilts awry, my drooping tresses sink like clouds, and a fresh sorrow is

added; leaning here and there, alone I heave a sigh.” She then sighs: “Too listless to climb the dressing-tower and learn to paint my brows; just risen from spring sleep, the embroidered curtain hangs low. The east wind cares nothing that the flower has no master—who understands me in this moment when I stay my needle and fall silent?” [5] Stricken with longing, Jia Wu loses all interest in adornment and embroidery alike; only in unbroken drowsiness can such feeling find release.

Depictions of this kind are far from rare in the “gifted scholar and beautiful maiden” encounters of Ming love-chuanqi. The unmarried life of these women is presented under a single, monotonous aspect—plying the needle, painting the face—accepted as a matter of course. Only when the man of her heart appears does the heroine begin to feel the tedium of that unmarried life. And the more uniformly these passages depict a woman entering the threshold of spring languor upon meeting the man who captivates her, the more they tacitly cast the male as the wellspring of vitality that will guide the next stage of her life.

Under the control of male discourse, a woman must pass through the seeking and the waiting that precede marriage. And after marriage she must still endure the loneliness of the empty chamber, centering her life upon a spatial longing for the man far away. A married woman pining for a husband gone to the capital to sit the examinations likewise falls into a desolate spring languor; this is the third type of spring-languor writing. In scene twelve of *The Pearl Shirt* of Gao Wenju (Gao Wenju zhenzhu ji), “News Received,” Wang Jinzhen, after Gao Wenju has departed for the examinations and sent no word, guards the empty chamber alone and laments:

[To “Wang yuanxing”] My husband has gone far and not returned; all day I gaze until my eyes break upon the rainbow. [To “Xiao Chongshan”] Red fills the boughs, green fills the boughs; after the night’s rain, listless, I rise late from sleep. I would hide my sorrow but cannot, longing for the date of his return; though I see him often in dreams, our waking meetings are rare—this lovesickness only I can know.

She continues: “Ever since my husband left, the examinations have now ended, yet I do not know whether he has passed; no word at all has come home. When I saw him off, blossom and willow were in fragrant bloom; now the green has darkened and the red grown sparse—just at the season that makes one languid. Truly it is wearisome to the heart.” [6] Again, in *The Purple Hairpin* (Zichai ji), after Li Yi has gone to Luoyang for the spring examination, another spring comes round, and Huo Xiaoyu is left to the sorrow of longing: “(dan) Huansha, Li lang has gone to sit the examination—how does he fare, I wonder? How it oppresses me! [To ‘Bang zhuangtai’] By the dressing-tower, the sun high over the flowering pavilion, too listless to comb my hair. I have not yet lived through the depth of spring, and

already spring sorrow seizes me. My face flushes warm, my brows knit tight. Cooing doves and nestling swallows—my youth is at its most secluded; drifting gossamer and falling catkins—the east wind at its softest. In such days I cannot but repent of having urged my husband to go seek a marquis’s seal” (scene twenty).

Having long lost word of Li Yi at the examinations, Huo Xiaoyu sinks amid her longing into regret: more than rank and title, she wishes for Li Yi by her side. With the coming of the examination society, pre-modern marriage acquired a built-in separation; for a wife to wait at home for a husband gone far to the examinations was a thing hard to bear—and how to reinforce a woman’s fidelity across an uncontrollable distance was likewise a problem the men faced. In truth, whether a woman’s desire for her husband’s pursuit of office outweighs her desire for his daily companionship is difficult to judge within the male narration. Yet, to fix the image of woman’s dependence upon man, her unwavering fidelity had to be guaranteed across the long, distant journey to the examinations. And so, in speaking for women, the drama strips these women who keep the empty chamber of any larger scope for endeavor, while endowing them with the more ardent and faithful a heart.

As regards the structural function of plot, the depiction of spring languor serves chiefly as a transitional episode. Commonly it bridges into a dream sequence, so that day-dreaming does not seem abrupt and the writing of the dream may go forward. Du Liniang, for instance, dwelling deep in her chamber, awakens to her own primal, natural desire only after setting foot in the spring garden behind the house; borrowing languor, she slips into a dream and there meets the young scholar Liu. In the “Startling Dream” scene of *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang, having stolen a stroll through the rear garden, returns to her room, sets herself to rights, and sighs: “Quietly I have wandered through the spring and come back, lightly trying on my spring-becoming face. O spring—if only you and I might linger together; once you are gone, how shall I bear it? Ah, in weather such as this, how it makes one languid!” [7] Du Liniang then falls asleep, and only so does the spring dream come to pass; on waking she sighs with feeling, “Languid with the stirrings of spring and weary of sightseeing, I have no need even of the incense-scented quilt.”

Earlier scholarship has dwelt on how the spring garden behind the house awakens Du Liniang’s feelings, but has overlooked how the author links the spring scene to the dream—and it is precisely “spring languor” that Tang Xianzu uses to build the bridge, joining the garden stroll seamlessly to the dream of Liu. In scene fourteen of *The Jade-Hairpin Romance* of He Wenxiu (He Wenxiu yuchai ji), the dan sings to “Yexingchuan”: “The sun not yet high, wearily I lean on the railing; the Xiang-bamboo blind is rolled up; the swallows fly home.” Awaiting the maid’s return with the bought needlework, she cannot help growing drowsy and sleeps a while; in the dream she meets a divinity, and on waking sings to the same tune: “Listless and weary before

I knew it, languid I leaned beside the dressing-table; in a daze a divinity passed me word within a dream—that I should meet and be joined in marriage; with whom else could such a bond be shared?” [8] In the dream a deity discloses to her He Wenxiu’s origins and misfortunes and reveals that she is his destined match, laying the ground for Qiongzhen’s later aid to He Wenxiu.

Spring languor may also provide the transition into the next episode, sending the dan into spring sleep before the brush turns to other persons and matters. In *Planting Jade* (*Zhongyu ji*), before Wei Shao’er meets Huo Xiuwen, orphaned and without kin she often rises late and sighs at the spring; in scene three, “Encounter in the Garden,” she sings to “Xiang bianman”: “Green clouds heap on my temples; a faint dust gathers on the tasseled bed-curtains; risen from sleep, my faded makeup has shed its powder. I pace about with none dear to me, and laugh, scattered and forlorn, at this body of mine.” [9] No sooner has Wei Shao’er voiced her sorrow than the household’s other maids pull her off to tour the garden, where she meets Huo Zhongru, and the plot turns from the lassitude of spring languor to the tryst of spring. Here spring languor serves as the entrance-piece for a spring-grieving woman, while also laying the ground for the lovers’ meeting.

From the foregoing it is clear that, in Ming drama, the image of spring languor stands for a broad gallery of spring-yearning and husband-longing women, woven into many facets of women’s married life—so much so that, in writing cast in the male idiom, it became a reproducible, imitable device applied as part of the compositional formula. This literary phenomenon did not spring up overnight but had its own course of development. The next section accordingly analyzes that development, which will help us see how it complemented the growth of the love theme in Ming drama and exhibited a discernible trajectory of change.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPRING-LANGUOR DEPICTION IN DRAMATIC LITERATURE

As a universal natural-physiological phenomenon turned literary discourse, spring languor entered the pre-modern literary system well before drama reached maturity. Two moods generally attend the writing of spring languor in Tang and Song poetry. The first is leisure and ease, as in Lu You’s “Year’s End”: “In youth I coveted empty fame, a hundred kinds of folly; grown old, I know the world’s affairs are all child’s play. Henceforth I need not ‘sell’ my spring languor—I shall sleep till the sun stands thirty feet high,” [10] or Meng Haoran’s “In spring sleep I miss the dawn; everywhere I hear the crying birds.” The second expresses sorrow, melancholy, and oppression, as in the suite of “Huanxisha” lyrics on women’s spring languor by Zhang Mi of the Southern Tang, which Li Bingruo, in *Random Notes from Xuzhuang*, praised as “depicting the very mood and manner of spring languor with incisive, penetrating truth.” [11] Su Shi’s “Shuilong yin: Matching the Rhymes of Zhang Zhifu’s Lyric on Willow Catkins” writes a husband-

longing woman’s spring languor to lodge his own sense of a hard, lonely fate: “Like a flower, yet not like a flower; none pity it, and it is left to fall. Cast from home beside the road, when you reflect, it seems heartless, yet it has its longing. It coils and frets the tender heart; it deepens languor in the lovely eyes that would open yet close again.” [12] On the whole, though poetry already contained exquisite depictions of women’s spring languor, there spring languor was the poetic lodging of an objective phenomenon and carried no fixed gendered implication.

In the course of dramatic literature’s development, however, the depiction of spring languor gradually acquired a definite gendered tendency, and subjective presupposition came to overwhelm objective expression. Spring-languor depiction is uncommon in the earlier Yuan *zaju*. The late-Yuan, early-Ming *Story of the Lute* (*Pipa ji*) does write of spring oppression, spring sorrow, and the long spring day, yet it contains no stroke of spring languor proper; instead it depicts Cai Bojie and Wen Qianjin growing drowsy in the long days of summer [13]—a scene that serves to set up Cai Bojie’s playing the zither in homesickness, bears no direct relation to the later *chuanqi* pattern of women’s spring languor, and shows no gender preference in its “drowsiness in the long day.” In Ming *chuanqi*, by contrast, spring languor developed into one of the fixed typologies for delineating women (the dan especially), and the gendered significance of spring-languor writing reached mature development. Taking the Ming *chuanqi*’s rewriting and recreation of Yuan *zaju* as an example, the following explores the pivotal role of Ming *chuanqi* in the history of spring-languor writing.

First, Ming love-*chuanqi* added depictions of women’s spring languor. Ma Zhiyuan’s Yuan *zaju* *Tears on the Blue Gown* (*Qingshan lei*), adapted from Bai Juyi’s “Song of the Pipa,” dramatizes the love between Bai Juyi and the pipa-player Pei Xingnu. Under Ma Zhiyuan’s brush, the female lead Pei Xingnu makes her entrance under a scolding from Madam Pei of the Music Office, who harshly admonishes her to rise early and get to work. The author shapes the image of a registered courtesan oppressed and toiling in the Music Office—a woman who must be up at first light to work, and to whom the idle stroke of languid spring languor would ill suit. This changes in the Ming *chuanqi* adaptation. Gu Dadian’s Ming *chuanqi* *The Blue Gown* (*Qingshan ji*), [14] adapted from the *zaju* *Tears on the Blue Gown*, [15] keeps the theme unchanged, but because the *chuanqi* form runs longer, the plot is expanded. In scene three of *The Blue Gown*, Pei Xingnu makes her entrance brimming with spring melancholy, singing to “Huanxisha”: “The kingfisher screen stands open, the embroidered canopy red; rising without strength, too listless for morning toilet. In the brocade curtains and mandarin-duck quilt last night’s perfume hangs heavy; a fine rain on the little court—spring lies hushed and still; swallows fly and orioles call beyond blind and lattice; the apricot blossom, brimming with resentment, leans into the east wind”—a borrowing of Zhang Mi’s “Huanxisha”

of the Southern Tang, [16] painting the woman's spring languor. Then, building on the arias of Tears on the Blue Gown, Pei Xingnu speaks of her bitterness in the Music Office and her longing to leave the courtesan's life; and because Madam Pei has been cross with her for some days, she feels the spring scene the more oppressive. Madam Pei goes on to enumerate the perils of leaving the trade and urges her to give up the thought, which only the more inflames Pei Xingnu's longing for an ideal husband. The same *dan* entrance that, in the *zaju*, is a quarrel over rising early becomes, in the Ming *chuanqi*, a debate over leaving the courtesan's life—serving, in substance, to build the image of a Pei Xingnu yearning for a fair love. To round out the character, the *chuanqi* adds the stroke of “spring languor” to paint Pei Xingnu's beauty and melancholy, advancing the female image in drama.

Second, in Ming *chuanqi* spring languor is concentrated in the service of shaping female characters. Yuan *zaju*, too, writes spring languor, but it plays only a slight role in characterization. In the first act of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*), Old Madam lodges the company at the Monastery of Universal Salvation, and Cui Yingying, seeing the temple, sighs: “Just here, at the late spring east of Puzhou, behind the double-barred gate of a desolate monastery: blossoms fall, the water bears off their red; ten thousand kinds of idle sorrow; wordless, I resent the east wind.” Seeing her oppressed, Old Madam says: “Today's late-spring weather makes one truly languid. Hongniang! See, there is no one burning incense in the Buddha-hall; go take your young mistress to stroll and ease her mind a while.” [17] Here the spring languor is plain objective description, the physiological sensation of Old Madam; it is mere pretext serving plot, with no characterological import.

Li Kaixian's Ming work *A Noon Dream in the Garden* (*Yuanlin wumeng ji*), a blend of *The Western Chamber* and Li Yaxian at the Winding River of Wine and Flowers, tells of a fisherman who, having read the tales of Cui Yingying and Li Yaxian, dreams of the two women quarreling over their respective merits; on waking he realizes it was but a “yellow-millet dream” and thereupon makes light of worldly fame. In the play the fisherman drifts into the dream from a midday drowsiness; within the dream the dream-figure of Yingying enters singing, to “*Jishengcao*”: “With intent I would greet the immortal guest, yet have no heart to rouge my lips. The ground-sweeping wind blows the spring blossoms to fading; the one at the railing leans until spring's light is spent; trimming the silver lamp, she trims her slender fingers into languor. The powdered butterfly busies itself for spring in vain; the yellow oriole knows not how to bear spring's tidings.” [18] The play states outright that Yingying has fallen into spring languor, conjuring this idle, slack atmosphere to express her inner emptiness and to set up the pointless quarrel with Li Yaxian that follows. The fisherman's drowsiness, coming at midday, is of a different nature from spring languor.

The depiction of women's spring languor that flourished

in Ming drama developed further in the page-oriented (*an-tou*) drama of the Qing, where the languid, melancholy boudoir image of women was generally intensified across both *zaju* and *chuanqi*. Wang Yingpei's *No Drooping Willow* (*Buchuiyang*) introduces the chaste and ardent heroine Yang Dani thus: the *xiaodan* Yang, a maiden awaiting betrothal, has been promised to the Tao family; but because the household has fallen on hard times, her father wishes to force her to remarry. Vexed at heart, she cannot help sighing at the spring scene: “Weary in thought and out of sorts, I may as well go back to my room and lie down a while. Truly, the lotus seed, full of ‘heart,’ must bear its bitterness to the end; the spring silkworm, heavy with silk, indulges its sleep.” [19] In scene seven of Li Yu's *Cautious in the Phoenix Match* (*Shenluan jiao*), “Refusing the Charge,” the famed courtesan Wang Qiang likewise sings to “*Hu daolian*”: “Who comes rapping, breaking my secluded sleep? It must be my companions come to drag me to the garden. Tell them sorrow has turned to a timid illness; languid with spring, I have no strength to mount the swing.” [20] That a young woman should fall into spring languor whenever care and sorrow beset her had become a standard convention of the drama.

By the high tide of fiction in the Qing, the depiction of women's spring languor reached the acme of aesthetic pleasure. Chapter twenty-six of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, “In the Xiaoxiang Lodge, Spring Languor Stirs Hidden Feeling,” has Baoyu come to the Xiaoxiang Lodge and first hear from within the window Daiyu's long, soft sigh: “Day after day, my tender thoughts leave me drowsy and dazed.” Hearing it, Baoyu felt an itch rise unbidden in his heart; looking again, he saw Daiyu stretching herself on the bed. [21] This scene of unguarded, self-forgetful spring languor is at once languid and exquisite; twice afterward Baoyu wishes to ask why she said “tender thoughts leave me drowsy and dazed,” and each time Daiyu gives no direct answer. Beyond Daiyu—of frail health and a somnolent constitution—the boudoir maidens of the Grand View Garden lead lives steeped in poetic feeling; the most classic instance is Shi Xiangyun's charming, insouciant spring sleep beneath the peony blossoms. So spirited a scene of spring languor stands in sharp contrast to Daiyu's forlorn one, and under Cao Xueqin's brush the intent of using spring-languor scenes to shape character emerges all the more clearly: by now the depiction of spring languor had passed from rigid insertion to full integration within a compositional design serving subjective purpose.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WRITING WOMEN'S SPRING LANGUOR IN MING CHUANQI

Spring languor goes hand in hand with spring sorrow and spring grief. The spring-languor scenes of Ming *chuanqi* always serve to express a woman's spring-yearning sorrow and spring-stirred grief: whether or not she has a sweet-heart, whether or not she is wed, her expectation of and longing for a man form an inextinguishable melancholy of

her boudoir life. Spring is a season brimming with vitality, all things sprouting forth, the heart easily stirred; for the young maiden in her chamber, the feelings stored within are readily summoned by nature—yet the teeming spring, seemingly within arm's reach, cannot be set foot in, for she is bound to the inner chambers. Constrained by feudal family ritual and social morality, these women have no right to pursue spring freely; and with the destined man slow to appear, their expectation of love is worn away, until they can only confront the lovely scene in languid helplessness—cherishing spring, grieving over spring, sorrowing at spring, emotions of an inner consistency. Moreover, the seasonal expression of pre-modern literature took the form “women mostly grieve in spring, men mostly lament in autumn”; [22] as the *Huainanzi*, “On the Erroneous Designation of Things,” says, “The maiden longs in spring, the scholar grieves in autumn—and so we know the transformation of things.” [23] This too lends spring languor, of a kind with spring grief, a marked gendered tendency of expression.

Yet as a particular descriptive device, spring languor carries its own distinctive social meaning. In Ming love-chuanqi, the sheng (male lead) enters first lamenting the splendor of spring against his own unaccomplished career, while the dan enters more often sunk in languid reverie before the wreathing spring colors—a typical opening convention that springs from the fact that the makers of Ming drama were, in essence, men. Under the late-Ming tide of intellectual liberation, understandings of love and of women grew more open and self-aware. Even so, for feudal patriarchal society, men still treated women as a kind of appendage, holding that before a woman met a man her boudoir life consisted of receiving boudoir instruction and diligently practicing needlework—of no substantive significance to the workings of society; her life had to revolve around men, and acquired social meaning only in forming a family with one. Men could not, as a rule, look into women's boudoir lives, and largely supplied a presumptuous conjecture in their stead; but since the makers and the readers of Ming drama were alike predominantly male, the female images shaped in the chuanqi readily became the projection of male subjectivity—men conceiving female roles according to their own needs and expectations, in keeping with the reading expectations of a chiefly male audience.

Thus arises a paradox: women are an important content shaped within Ming drama, yet that very content foregrounds the “aphasia” of women in feudal society. Driven by this creative impulse, male authors objectified through their writing the female image of their hearts, and the writing of women's spring languor became an utterance of male discourse, the “wishful sensual fancy” of the feudal male mind. In the late Ming, the circulation of capital, the growth of the market economy, and the rise of the cult of native sensibility (xingling) together fostered the vogue for gifted-scholar-and-beautiful-maiden love-chuanqi. Even as the chuanqi authors strove to incite the breaking of certain feudal obstructions for love's sake, the boudoir women they

chose were not fully emancipated from the male gaze: they might take some rebellious action for love, yet could not shed the ossified traits of feudal womanhood, and the staging of spring-languor scenes manifests the passive normalcy of women before their awakening, freighted with the meaning of compromise.

The negative meaning of the spring-languor image is, like the foot-binding then prevalent among Ming women, in truth a subjective will to fetter women's capacity for action and to weaken the diversity of their social life—an indirect manifestation, too, of women's dependence upon men. The early-Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang declared: “Men and women must be kept distinct. Womenfolk should keep solely within doors and must not come out; should they show their heads and faces and venture forth, they will surely invite licentious affairs.” [24] This is but the garb of ritual propriety; in essence it remains the male need to suppress women's social capacity. In fact, women of Ming society were not merely confined to embroidery in the chamber; their occupational participation in society had long permeated every domain—commerce, government, the army, literary creation, and more [25]—as when Qin Liangyu of the Ming took her husband's place in office and on campaign, becoming a woman general entered into the official histories' biographies of generals and ministers. [26] The literary creation of Ming women, too, entered the mainstream view and exerted some influence upon the literary world. [27] But dramatic works that shaped the female image from this angle belonged to a zone avoided by a literary creation ruled by male discursive power, and were uncommon in the Ming. The Ming drama's positioning of women runs rather to the “beautiful maiden” and the “virtuous wife”—of a piece, internally, with the spring-languor entrance convention the drama set for women. The depiction of women's spring languor in Ming drama thus opens for us a hidden window onto the critique of women within the male discursive system, the better to interpret the implicit relation between Ming drama and the expression of social gender.

Why, then, did pre-modern chuanqi tend to assign the “spring-languor” episode to women? First, women's status in pre-modern times was generally lower than men's; apart from a few dynasties in which women could take part in government, most women had domestic affairs for their main occupation, forming the so-called “four-without” woman—“without occupation, without learning, without will, without personhood.” [28] The unmarried maiden in her chamber, too, practiced needlework and family precepts, her ten fingers never touching spring water; she might, by virtue of her family's standing, gain a chance to study, but only at home under the private tutelage of a schoolmaster. The greatest task of these boudoir maidens was to marry and bear children, taking no part in the affairs of family-state; in a patriarchal society the stereotype that “a woman without talent is virtuous” readily attached to them, and people naturally assumed the daily life of women—especially

boudoir maidens of official and gentry households—to be rather idle. Although, under the male brush, to satisfy a self-consolation and compensation for careers out of balance, such women were commonly fashioned into talented ladies versed in literature and accomplished in poetry, [29] the underlying assumption remained that women were society's appendage, lacking the initiative to intervene in male power.

Likewise, the married woman often faced the bitterness of separation when her husband went up to the capital for the examinations. In the Ming, the metropolitan and palace examinations were generally set in the capital; the metropolitan examination fell in the second month of the year following the provincial examination, and was called the "spring examination" (chunwei), [30] followed by the palace examination. Candidates would generally set out early on the examination road, though whether they hastened straight to the hall was not fixed; some would lodge a year or two in advance at a nearby temple or academy to review. In spring the candidate was generally not at home, and this became the concentrated season for the young wife's longing in her chamber. Hence the drama's depiction of spring languor is concentrated upon women.

Second, it accords with the developmental tendency of Ming literati drama. The literati brush prized poetic beauty, and the ideal female image in the pre-modern male eye had always been chiefly one of gentle softness; as the Book of Changes says, "Man is yang, woman is yin." The languor and ease a woman displays through spring languor accentuate all the more this tender, soft image. At the same time, the spring-languor depictions of Ming drama are generally joined to the lovely scenery of spring, composing an aesthetic pleasure rich in poetic feeling, in keeping with the poetic aesthetic of Ming literati drama. The earlier Yuan zaju, prizing stage-worthiness and performability and contending for a popular market, would not lavish ink on so poetic, so delicate a scene as "spring languor"; but as Ming chuanqi and zaju grew increasingly page-oriented, literati drama came to prize the literariness and readability of the text, and the depiction of poetic language and poetic scenes became an important content of dramatic expression. The portrayal of spring languor, generally joined to the depiction of spring scenery, concentrates the display of women's poetic, exquisite tableaux and lends a humanistic coloring to natural scenery, thereby becoming a habitual stroke of post-Ming drama. Thus the early-Ming Liu Dui, in his zaju *The Golden Lad and Jade Maid: The Tale of Jiaoniang and Feihong*, inscribes at the head of the upper scroll the lines, "Languid with spring, no zest to coil the phoenix chignon; the day being long, no mind to paint the moth-brows," and has Wang Jiaoniang compose and sing: "The ninety days of spring light pass as if crowding by; already half the orioles and blossoms have flitted past my eyes. At dusk behind the curtain the wind blows cold on my dawn-dream; spent and faltering, I rise from sleep too listless to dress and groom." [31] This languid bedchamber scene, though it can hardly match the radiance of full adornment, makes the woman

the more endearing. Sustained by such literary grace, the writing of women's spring-languor scenes became a favored formula of page-oriented drama.

Furthermore, from the standpoint of literary creation, Liu Xie observes: "Spring and autumn succeed one another; yin and yang now darken, now relax. As the colors of things stir, the mind too is moved." [32] This discloses how personal feeling and creation are readily swayed by the natural environment: under the suffusion of fair natural scenery, the creator's mood is generally bright and glad. But the "spring languor" of the chuanqi reverses this, foregrounding instead the influence of personal mood upon the spring scene; the spring scene serves "spring languor" chiefly to set off the character's dejected feeling. Scene and feeling are by nature a coupled pair; only, in fiction and drama, scene serves character, and so the outward motive force of scene is weakened. This subjective creation's presupposition of the objective environment discloses a further development of the autonomous consciousness of pre-modern dramatic creation.

V. CONCLUSION

As a classic dramatic type, Ming love-chuanqi takes the depiction of the female image as a major content. Yet the writing of the female image is not presented only in the salient main plot; in fact many formulaic details of depiction are likewise an indispensable window onto the gallery of women displayed in this dramatic genre. Against a backdrop of social creation dominated by male authors, Ming love-drama shapes the female image throughout within the discursive context of male power; and Ming love-drama, by common accord, employs the image of spring languor to fashion the figures of the spring-yearning and husband-longing woman, running from a woman's adolescence through her married life, displaying an idealized female aesthetic from the male vantage and proclaiming woman, as a subordinate social group, in her inevitable dependence upon man. At the same time, the reproducibility and collective endorsement of this writing mode were continually reinforced and developed; from the angles of social background, women's status, and the development of dramatic literature alike, they point together to the role and meaning of women within a history constructed by male writing. What deserves reflection here is this: faced with the present impasse of research on the canonical texts of pre-modern literature, might we expand beyond the saturated study of canonical depiction and turn toward exploring the collective psychology and compositional techniques embodied in the writing of other textual details? On this basis, by viewing the female image of Ming drama through the large-scale writing of the single detail of the spring-languor image, this article may perhaps provoke further reflection on the male-perspective writing of women in pre-modern times.

FUNDING

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