

A Feminine Expression Of Mysticism, Romanticism And Syncretism In *A Plaint Of Lady Wang*

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In 1996 the newly discovered Chinese classical poem *A Plaint of Lady Wang* drew the attention of many sinologists. One expert, Liu Yuqing, claimed that the newly discovered poem should now be regarded as the longest classical Chinese poem in Chinese history, though it had been previously ignored¹. According to Liu Yuqing, *A Plaint of Lady Wang* is longer than the two authoritatively accepted² longest classical poems: the Lefu poem *Kongque Dong Nan Fei* (A Peacock Flies East of South) of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE)³ and the famous lyric poem “Li Sao” in the *Chuci* (Chu Songs), which is traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan (c.340-278 BCE).⁴

Whenever I read the poem, what attracts me is not its length but its mysticism, romanticism and syncretism reflected in the feminine expression of Lady Wang. All of these permeate in a minute and exquisite narrative of a women’s struggle between *hun* (mind-heart/soul/spirit) and *po* (the body-person).

“The study of mysticism is fraught with peculiar difficulties” (Eliade, Vol.13, 1987: 87) The study of Chinese mysticism focusing on women’s experiences and their own writings not included in the classics, scriptures, and canons

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- 1 In July 1996 Liu Yuqing pointed out that all the scholars in previous historical periods ignored Lady Wang’s poem, *A Plaint of Lady Wang*, which was popularly diffused among the Nan Song people. It is as long as 500 sentences and consists of 2,534 Chinese characters, and is thus 749 characters longer than the *Kongque Dong Nan Fei* (A Peacock Flies East and South). It is also 57 Chinese characters longer than the celebrated longest lyric poem in the *Chuci* style, “Li Sao”.
 - 2 A Confucian scholar, Shen Deqian, of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) authoritatively stated that the longest classical Chinese poem is the Lefu poem *Kongque Dong Nan Fei*, which consists of 1785 Chinese characters. This conclusion has been widely accepted by twentieth-century Chinese experts such as Yu Pingbo, Liu Dajie, Tang Tao and Yu Guanying.
 - 3 *Kongque Dong Nan Fei*, the title of one of the Lefu style songs from a collection, *Zaunqueci*. the first line of the song is “A Peacock Flies East of South”. It was a folk song of the Han dynasty Jianan period (196-219). The author of the poem was Liu Lanzhi, the wife of a humble official, Jiao Zhongqing, who was a petty clerk of Lu Jiang county.
 - 4 Qu Yuan (c.340-278 BCE) was a poet and an official of the Chu state in South China.

remains a field in need of more research. The classical Chinese narrative poem, *A Plaint of Lady Wang*, is a detailed description of Lady Wang's mystical experience and her real life. Her mystical experience is similar to Daoist Shangqing "interior visualization" and "ecstatic journeying", but she did not experience it during meditation in the "purity chamber" (Robinet 1997:114). The transmitting of the poem promotes a form of popular religious practice linked to women. Lady Wang's dream and her direct encounter with the divine beings are the main features of her mystical experience. Her encounter results in a unification with the Dao which is not only beyond ordinary experience, but also different from men's mystical experience and expressed in a feminine way.

The poem and the story about the poem weave Confucian cosmic order and its parallel order in Confucian society and Confucian family system into a woman's life and her Shangqing-like ecstatic journey. It provides a syncretic point of view for us to observe the function of women in the conflict and syncretism of Neo-Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. With a blending together of Confucian ethical and social values, Buddhist and Daoist asceticism, rituals and divination, she could not make any choice to liberate either her *hun* or her *po*.

The poem contains some Romanticist expression of feeling and emotion in the spirit of "Yuan You," "Nan Feng" of Chu Ci, and also found in Zhuang Zi - a yearning for emancipation of *hun* and *po*. Historically, this romantic feature of Chinese literature began from the Book of Songs⁵ and continued in later literature such as the poems of Li Bai and Tu Fu⁶. It is no surprise that romanticism in a poem of Mao Zedong is called by many "revolutionary romanticism."

From a feminist perspective my study focuses on the two critical terms in Chinese philosophy and religion: *hun* (heart; mind; spirit; soul) and *po* (the body-person). What I am trying to do is to explore woman's mind, clarify the separation of her body and mind, and look out for the hope of future unification or 'Oneness' of mind and body in this world and the world beyond. "Oh, my void, empty soul and body," Lady Wang sighs. But whose body is it? Who cares more about the *hun*/soul: man or woman? What will the future concept of the soul be? ..., ... These are among the topics I am concerned with.

In order to analyze the poem I would like to discuss theories about a person's body/*po* and mind/soul/*hun* in Chinese history.

5 One of the Five Confucian Classics which contains 305 poems. Few of the poems are supposed to have come from the Shang dynasty (ca. 1200-1059) and others come from Zhou dynasty (1059-221 BCE). The Five Classics are: The Book of Changes/Yi Jing, The Book of Songs/Shi Jing, the Book of History/Shang Shu, the Classic of Rites (Liji, Yili and Zhouli) and the Spring-Autumn Annals/Chunqiu.

6 Li Bai and Tufu were great poets of the Tang Dynasty (618-917).

A COMPOSITE SELF: HUN AND PO

From a conversation recorded in *Zuo Zhuan*⁷ we are informed that as early as the sixth century B.C.E. people thought every person possessed *hun* and *po*: in men's life the first transformations are called the earthly aspect of the soul (*po*). After *po* has been produced, that which is strong and positive is called the heavenly aspect of the soul (*hun*). If man has abundance in the use of material things and subtle essence, his *hun* and *po* will become strong. From this are developed essence and understanding until there are spirit and intelligence. When an ordinary man or woman dies a violent death, the *hun* and *po* are still able to keep hanging about men and do evil and malicious things.⁸ Therefore, as philosophically understood, *hun* is the spirit of man's vital force, which is expressed in man's intelligence and power of breathing, whereas *po* is the spirit of man's physical nature, which is expressed in bodily movements. (Chan 1963:12) Alternatively, in religious teachings, everyone has two souls: *hun* is upper soul, or intellectual soul, which becomes the spirit (*shen*). After death it ascends to the world above. *Po* is a lower or animal soul which becomes the ghost (*kuei*) and descends with the body into the grave." (Ching, 1993:63) Because of these teachings, in Chinese religious tradition the physical body seems graded lower than the spiritual body.

According to early Confucian teaching a person (*ren*) as self (*wo*, *ziji*) refers to the entire person: one's rational, aesthetic, moral and religious dimensions in relation to the lived body through which these cultural interests are advertised and made know. Being a human really means doing, shaping or making a human. (Ames, in Kasulis, 149-151). At the same time the gendered body received a different treatment. In the *Analects* we read that a husband should attach importance to his wife's virtue rather than her physical beauty.⁹ There a woman is regarded as a limited moral agent and it was laid down that her spiritual aspect needed more efforts aimed at improvement (*Analects* 17:25). Mencius' concepts of "the way of a woman" (*qiefu zhitao*) and "the way of a great man" (*dazhangfu zhitao*) assigned an inferior spiritual nature to women (Mencius, 3B:2), even though he considered no one to be devoid of a mind sensitive to the suffering of others, and everyone as having a mind capable of the states of compassion, shame, courtesy, modesty, and a consciousness of right and wrong. This mind is the beginning of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom. (Mencius: 2A: 6) The Doctrine of the Mean laid out the spiritual dimensions of Confucian philosophy and religion. It declared that only those

7 *Zuo Zhuan*: Zuo Qiuming's commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals. Zuo Qiuming (fifth century B.C.E.)

8 *Zuo Zhuan*, "Duke Zhao", 7th year. English translation is adopted from Chan (1963:12) with a little change.

9 This translation of the first sentence of the *Analects* 1:7 differs from other translations, please see Yang Pojun, 1980:6.

who are absolutely sincere could fully develop their nature, which is imparted to them by Heaven. They can then fully develop the nature of others, and on that basis, can then fully develop the nature of things and then, assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth and thus ultimately become One with Heaven and Earth. (Doctrine of the Mean: 1 & 22) “It is the human being that broadens the Dao, not the Dao that broadens the human being.” (Analects 15:29). This is the Dao, or the Way designed for a superior man or a sage ruler; in the majority of cases they are envisaged as male, though there are some promises that “men and women of simple intelligence can share its knowledge.” (Doctrine of the Mean, 12).

The Dao discussed in the Doctrine of the Mean and the Analects is the same as the Dao in Daoist philosophy, though the Confucian Dao is more humanistic while the Daoist Dao is more natural.¹⁰ Both of them emphasize the development of the spiritual aspect while cultivating the whole personal life. The Taoist religion whose philosophy centers on Yin, Yang and wuxing in the Book of Changes as well as the Lao Zi and the Zhuang Zi, elaborated the cultivation of the physical body as potentially a “cosmic body”¹¹, becoming mystically One with the Tao. It is the crucial idiosyncratic point in Taoist thought, especially, according to Livia Kohn, in the Xi Sheng Jing (the Scripture of Western Ascension).¹² Developed from beliefs regarding the hun, the Taoist religion discusses immortality involving the experience of an immortal personality, as in the cases of Liu An and the Eight Worthies in Shenxian Zhuan (Biographies of Spirit Immortals); ascension to Heaven as immortals, as in the case of the Flower Maiden in Yongchen Jixianlu (Record of the Assembled Immortals of the Heavenly Walled City); or immortal life, as in the case of the life of the Hemp Lady, Magu described in Zengxiang Liexian Zhuan (Illustrated Immortals’ Biographies).¹³ All of these heavily depend on a Taoist body which shows people a way to the Tao while, at the same time, enabling people to overcome the confines of ordinary life in order to attain longevity and immortality. “Taoist religious thought can therefore be classified as mystical philosophy. It is a system of thought that claims to relate directly to the personal experience of Oneness with the Tao.” (Livia Kohn, 1991: 5) I intend to clarify these distinctive idiosyncratic elements in the poem of Lady Wang.

Buddhist truth, samsara, is not only compatible with the beliefs regarding the hun and po in Chinese tradition, but has also enriched the Chinese

10 See the *Analects*, 15: 29; *Dao De Jing*, 1:1, 1:5; and the comment made by Chan in Chan 1963:109. See also Waley, 1958: 141, 148.

11 See Schipper, 1993: 100-112 and Kohn, 1993: 161-188.

12 Xi Sheng Jing has survived in two Song dynasty editions. Consult Kohn, 1991.

13 About immortal personality, ascension and immortal life please consult Livia Kohn, 1993, chapter 10, 11, and 12.

concepts of Heaven and Hell, and extended the Journey of a soul vertically and horizontally in the universe.¹⁴ Unfortunately, not everyone could board the Mahayana “great vehicle” equally. In the Pure Land Sutra, a woman was subject to waiting for another rebirth as a male in order to be a Bodhisattva¹⁵. Some Mahayana sutras provided the opportunity for a woman whose virtues and merits were extraordinary and whose capability could not be ignored to become a Bodhisattva within her present life, but she would have to undergo a sexual change in the present life (Paul, 166-216). Only “an extremely small percentage of sutras” provided examples of the Bodhisattvas without sexual transformation; but either they are already in different places in the heavens, or else, in a metaphysical sense, sex is irrelevant, as in the case of the goddess in Vimalakirti. “Thus, Buddhism, like many other traditions, declares that men are really the normal human beings, while women are odd, and not full-fledged representatives of the human species.” (Gross, *Being Bodies*, 1997: 96) Buddhism certainly treats women’s body as problematic, if we are not to call this treatment out-and-out the misogynist.

THE SELF AS BODY/PO: THE BODY-PERSON AS AN OBJECT OF CULTIVATION

The story records the Poem of Lady Wang by an author whose family name was Shen and probably lived during the times of the Emperor Xiaozong (1190-1194) and Emperor Guangzong (1195-1200) of the Nan Song dynasty (1127-1279). Shen said that in the year of jiating wuyin (1218), when the Emperor Ningzong reigned, Shen was in the capital city. Therefore, Lady Wang possibly lived around the time of Zhu Xi’s life (1170-1200). The district Julu¹⁶ where Lady Wang and her natal family lived might have been in the area between today’s Hebei and Shandong provinces or she perhaps lived in Julu county, which is in the south of today’s Hebei province. The place has a very long history.

14 The two good examples for this are Foshuo Yulanpeng Jing, see Fan Wenlan, 1956: 567; Teiser, 1944: *The Ten Kings*, 1988: *The Ghost Festival*.

15 Gomez, 1996: 170 listed this principle. In Gomez’ book here are detailed interpretations about women’s status in the two Pure Land Sutras.

16 As the translator of the poem I want to introduce the historical background of the poem by explaining the place Julu. It was the name of an ancient prefecture in China. It was established in the twenty-fifth year of the Emperor Qinshihuang (222 B.C.E). Its administrative center was Julu County, which supervised the southern part of today’s Hebei province and the northern part of today’s Shandong. During the Jin Dynasty (265-420 CE) Julu became the name of a state. In the middle of the eighth century of the Tianbao period of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) the name of Julu prefecture was replaced by Xingzhou, which supervised the counties around Julu County. At the beginning of the Xuanhe period (1119-1124) of Northern Song this area was honored as Xingdefu. In Nan Song when Lady Wang lived, I suggest, the place was still named Julu as previously.

Prior to the time when Lady Wang lived, Neo-Confucian masters may have already selected the Great Learning as one of the Four Books.¹⁷ The practice of “cultivating oneself” was elaborated by Chu Xi (1130-1200) and other Neo-Confucian masters and became popularly understood. Versions of this practice of the Four Books designed for Women came one by one.¹⁸

In the Great Learning the body is directly linked to the moral and social project of *xiushen* (cultivating oneself): “From the Son of Heaven down to the commoner, all should take self-cultivation as their foundational concern”. Roger T. Ames argues that in classical China, in the absence of a commitment to a single-ordered world and the ontological disparities that follow from it, human realization is the fashioning and configuring of one’s entire person. Further, it is not only a practical project, but also importantly a “poietic” or productive one. It is person-making. In early Confucianism, the emphasis is on the shaping of one’s person in the context of one’s social, cultural, and importantly, one’s physical environments. (Ames, in Kasulis, 150)

Everything discussed here will help us understand how different a woman’s self-cultivation was from a man’s self-cultivation in medieval Chinese society, though recently more and more scholars have pointed out that the force of rigid precepts was undercut by a hierarchical concept of society that extended to women as well as men (Handlin, 1975:1). According to the author of the book, *Gui Dong* (Chinese Mysticism), which put the poem A Complaint of Lady Wang on record in the text of a story¹⁹, we only know that Lady Wang’s family name was Wang. She and her poor parents lived in Julu. Influenced by the way Buddhists wrote and taught sutra,²⁰ the author of the story used a few lines to tell us the story and then recorded the whole poem. Lady Wang was pretty and became a

17 14 The Four books are: the Analects, Mencius, the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean (the latter two were two chapters from the Book of Rites).

18 The four books for women (*Nu Si Shu*) are: Ban Zhao’s *Nu Jie* (Instructions for Women) of Han, *Nu Lunyu* (The Women’s Analects) of Tang, *Nei Xun* (Instructions for the Inner Quarters) of the early Ming, and *Nu Xiao Jing* (Classic of Filial Piety for Women). In the early seventeenth century, Wang Xiang substituted his mother’s book *Nu Fan Jie Lu* (A Record of Rules for Women) for *Nu Xiao Jing*. Liu Xiang’s *Lie Nu Zhuan* (Biographies of Model Women) of Han was popular and mentioned with *Nu Jie* frequently. While all of these books were for upper-class women readers, Lu Kun’s *Gui Fan* (Regulations for the Women’s Quarters) of Ming dynasty was for every woman, the poor as well as the rich. Consult *Qin Ding Si Ku Quan Shu Zi Bu* (*Nei Xun*); Handlin in Wolf, ed. 1975; Kelleher in Sharma, 1987.

19 This poem is contained in the Twelfth Volume of a *Zhibuzuzhai* series, *Guidong* (Chinese Mysticism). A few lines short story itself serves as a background introduction before the poem. It has been ignored, I think, mainly because that it is in a non-Confucian-classic book.

20 When Buddhist priests taught dharma they told stories from the sutras and chanted poems occasionally to attract an audience. In medieval China it became a style of Chinese literature, especially, for Buddhist sutras or popular stories. For details please see Zhou Ruchang in Li Baochu et al, 1993.

concubine of a gentry family. She survived a plot of the jealous wife to murder her and she became a Taoist nun. She addressed the poem to her husband in his dream and the next morning he found it beside his pillow. The appreciation of the poem spread rapidly.

The whole poem exhibits the distinct conflict of ideas among the Chinese people following the introduction and acceptance of Buddhism. In this poem it is the conflict between Confucian teaching which tortures Lady Wang's body and mind in this world, and Taoist teaching which emancipates her body and soul in the other world. Buddhism plays the role of revealing the teachings of karma, making her unable to choose either to live or to die. Literally, the title of the poem Jie Boming Tan means a sigh of a woman for her preordained fate. The poem begins from the moment she awakes from "death", having been tied and thrown off a cliff:

Rugged, oh, rugged,
the rough meandering trail I am struggling to put my "three-inch lotus" feet
on²¹.
Wailing, oh, wailing,
the sad wind is shaking and breaking the withered trees.

From the very opening of the poem we are shown one thing about Lady Wang's physical body - her bound feet

Foot binding was an alteration of the body that changed everything about a woman's physical being. She would move about less, sitting rather than standing, staying home rather than going out. With less exercise, she would be softer, more languid. From poetry we know of men's attraction to languid women, especially unhappy beauties longing for absent men. (Ebrey 1993: 40)

Therefore a woman in a rich family usually hires a servant to carry her move around.²² It is needless to mention objectification and commodification of Women's bodies when the diminutive size of their "golden lilies" feet were important criteria of their beauty in the period of economic growth from Song to Ming dynasty. (Ko 1994: 263)

With suitable small feet and a suitable education in music, chess-playing, poetry, calligraphy and painting, a young woman could change her situation through marriage: becoming a wife, a concubine or a prostitute. The growing market for concubines in the Song period is explained by the increasing numbers of men from gentry families who could afford them (Ebrey 1993: 42) In the poem Lady Wang tells us that she was good at composing verses and

21 By now it seems well established that the practice of foot-binding in China began in Song times. As a concubine of a gentry family Lady Wang's feet would have to be bound. The three-inch golden lotus (*san-cun-jin-lian*) is an idealized image of a woman's foot. Consult Fan Hong, 1997.

22 On page 118 of Jackson 1977 there is a picture illustrates this practice.

playing the music instrument zheng and at blowing the instrument sheng²³ when she was very young.

Her virtue in san cong (the three obedience) and side (the four virtues) is reflected in the events recounted in the poem: she followed her parents' will and became a concubine; then while following her husband's will, she was almost murdered by his other wives and concubines (qunchong), who put poison in her cup, but she did not complain to him and showed no jealousy to others so as to keep up the "harmony" of the regulated family. According to a parallel with Confucian cosmology, the husband is the Heaven of the family while the wife the Earth. The share allotted to Lady Wang might be the lowest part of the Earth, or hell.

Chastity was one of the norms which was most repressive of women. Lady Wang kept her unstained body for her husband only. The poem, absurdly, shows Lady Wang as both a sex object and a moral teacher of her husband! She repeatedly shows her "true love" for her husband by her chastity and tells him to follow the Confucian principles of self-cultivation in order to achieve a great social accomplishment. This dual function of women Dorothy Ko has discussed in detail. (Ko 1994:264) It seems that we are lucky to have this first-hand account of women's role by a woman rather than, as has more commonly been the case, by male scholar.

Having been nearly murdered and banished, the first question Lady Wang asks is about her body-person:

Tell me, father and mother,
Why was I born?

THE SELF AS MIND-SOUL: MYSTICISM, ROMANTICISM, AND SYNCRETISM

The struggle of Lady Wang's soul made her question her fate (ming), which was imparted by Heaven according to Confucian tradition.

First, she consulted the Confucian Goddess Banji,²⁴ who was the foremost Chinese woman scholar during her life time (c. 49 - c. 120) and was also called Ban Zhao or Cao Dajia. She was deified as a goddess later in Confucian temples and was famous for her Instructions for Woman (Nu Jie). In the poem we read:

Cold and hungry, I am tightening my clothes,
I do not know where to warm and feed my stiff body.

23 zheng, a 21- or 25-stringed plucked instrument, similar to the zither. Sheng, a reed pipewind instrument.

24 Banji (also called Ban Zhao or Caodajia), the most famous women scholar and educator in the Han dynasty about her please consult Swann, 1932.

Tottering along, I run into the Temple of Banji.
Reviewing her Instruction for Women in mind,
My chastity, virtue and obedience can match
those of the Woman Exemplars (Lie Nu),²⁵
Though they lived in different times.
Keep silence! I warn myself,
Who will listen to me?

Then, with the question about her preordained fate, she consulted a Buddhist nun. The nun performed a divination for her and taught her the principle of karma. The story tells us that in the end the first wife died naturally and Lady Wang returned to her husband. In this way Buddhism tries to defend its truths and to compromise with Confucianism: retaining her virtue and chastity will bring good fortune, and suicide will not help her escape the samsara. It is well known that the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi (1130-1200), when he was the magistrate of Zhangzhou, issued a public letter which urged Taoist nuns to consider their responsibility to bear children and go back to their homes; from the following day, no woman could be accepted by Buddhist Temples or Taoist Shrines without special permission. (“Quan Nutao Huansu Bang”, Chapter 100 in *Huian xiansheng Zhuwengong Wenji*). From this we can imagine the keenness with which women appreciated being a nun in the Nan Song period. Taoism attracted women for its “female worship” and its reverence of Yin. (See Zhan, 1988). Lady Wang becoming one of them shows us the reason behind this.

After that, with the same question about her preordained fate, Lady Wang encountered Lishan Laomu²⁶, a female Taoist immortal described by Li Quan of the Tang dynasty. This is the beginning of Lady Wang’s mystical experiences, and the mysticism of this poem is expressed in two descriptions of encounters by Lady Wang with the Queen Mother of the West and other goddesses and her experience of the unification with the One/Tao. Before I go further, let me clarify the two terms: “mystical experience” and “mysticism”.

Mysticism “is used to describe anything from an encounter resulting in unification with the divine to any experience slightly out of ordinary”; “basic to all types of mystical experience is an encounter with the divine or the sacred. Mystical experience in this sense is not confined to any particular religious tradition.” (Stewart, 1992: 7) The four characteristics which entitle any state to be called mystic, according to William James, are Ineffability which is more like a state of feeling; a Noetic quality, which means that this state of feeling for

25 Admirable women celebrated as exemplars in ancient China for their virtue, chastity, obedience and etc. please consult O'Hara, 1971.

26 Lishan Laomu, a woman immortal according to Taoist legend. See the preface of *Huandi Yinfulingxu* by Li Quan of Tang Dynasty.

those who experience it is felt to be also a state of knowledge; Transiency, the fact that the experience cannot be sustained for long; and Passivity. (W. James, 1961 edition of 1902). Lady Wang's experience exactly fits this four-fold description. In addition, it closely resembles a Taoist Shangqing mystical experience.

Under Lady Wang's request, the immortal Lishan Laomu, performed a divination for her according to the Yi Jing (The book of Changes). Her fortune is manifested by the hexagram 41, Sun, which is composed by two trigrams: the top one is a mountain (kan) and beneath it is a marsh (dui). This symbolism shows that if there be sincerity in one who employs it, there will be great good fortune (The Book of Changes: 41). Using a metaphor the woman immortal granted her some gifts, one of them a gourd²⁷ which is full of fresh air. We read,

In the first inhalation, I breath in the air in the gourd,
Suddenly, I cast off my old bones and take on new ones.
In the second inhalation, I draw in the air in the gourd again,
Spontaneously, my five orbs are cleaned.
Standing on my knees I want you to be my master,
Oh, where are you?
My eyes could only see the sky bright.

Now with a "cosmic body"(Kohn, 1993: 163-165), Lady Wang start to experience "Shouyi - preserving the One" (Robinet, 1993: 123-124). Her body and her soul are totally emancipated. This is articulated by her cheerful feminine actions:

Facing the morning sun
Pleasantly I gather the wild fruit of zhuyelian,²⁸
When it is twilight
Merrily I collect water-plants in a stream.

She tells us that she climbs the high mountains to pick herb and pluck flowers. She use them as fragrance to perfume her skin, skirt, and hair. She decorates herself using the jade flowers of fairy-land. She has found herself, with full self-admiration:

Using lotus and cotton-rose hibiscus,
I made my garment, dress and skirts.
Singing and dancing like a light whirlwind,
Oh, I am so young and pretty
Holding in both hands the clear spring-water,

27 The Chinese people used dried gourds as containers for medicine or wine. In a very popular symbolism, one of the Eight Taoist Immortals, Li Tie Guai, always carries a medicine gourd (Ho, 1990: 25).

28 zhuyelian (pollia japonica): a kind of lotus plant.

Let me wash my face and my heart.
Oh, I am so pure and clean,
No any mortal selfish stains on me!

This is the Mystical Romantic part in the poem. It is a state of ecstatic feelings and emotions such as William James described. Romanticism as a way of poetic and literary expression appeared in Chinese history as early as in the Book of Odes. It was also appeared in poems by Qu Yuan, Bai Juyi and Li Bai. Poets use Romanticism to display earnest pursuit of the ideal realm and to pose a sharp contrast with the realistic world. Imagination, passion, and enthusiasm, unrestrained, and completely free, are features of Romanticism in Chinese poetry and prose. When all of these reach the ultimate summit, mysticism is born. The mystical Romanticism in Lady Wang's poem is similar to that in Chu Ci (Chu Songs). Those poems are traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan (c.340-278 B.C.E.), a conscientious minister of Chu²⁹, who, was slandered and banished from the court. Despairing at the corruptness of the world, he drowned himself into the Milo River. In his poem we find the same expression as in A Complaint of Lady Wang:

Pacing with restlessness, I yearn to get away,
Confused and close to madness, I long for the eternal.
My mind goes wild, strays off without control;
My heart melancholy, I am ever sadder.
Suddenly my spirit, off, never to come back,
My body, like a withered tree, left behind alone.
(The Far-off Journey)³⁰

The mystical Romanticism in Lady Wang's poem is also similar to that in Chuang Zi, Xiaoyao You, though it lacks the "male passion" on a grand scale, bold, and lofty in quality. In Xiaoyao You the divine beings "with skin as pure as ice and snow" make excursion beyond the four seas with clouds as vehicles and flying dragons as their steeds. What a state of mind Zhuang Zi has! Does Lady Wang's poem perhaps expresses the feature of "feminine mystical Romanticism"?

The power of Confucian rites and teachings binds Lady Wang at every moment. From the towering peak of passion her soul falls back into a profound abyss. She yearns for the limited love her husband gave her and an ideal family containing only one wife. She blames herself and wants him to understand her. She asks:

29 A kingdom on the Yangtze River that was the southernmost of the states of northern China.

30 The English translation is from Kolm, 1993:252, with a slight modification. Please see also P. W. Kroll in Lopez, 1996:158.

Everyone has the same body,
why are their happiness and suffering so different?

We can understand her cry for equality and challenge to concubinage and polygamy, which could (in different social circumstances) lead to a demand for equality between men and women. But this suggestion in the poem is weak enough to enable her contemporary readers to count it to her credit. She uses almost one-third of the poem to express how eager she is to see her husband and explain all that has befallen her; she repeats the contents of the Great Learning so as to fulfill the function of a moral teacher for her husband while at the same time guiding her own self-cultivation. When feeling hopeless, she is determined to commit suicide; but the trees and grass hold back the knife and she is unable to do it. She cuts her arm and uses her blood to write this poem to her husband. The main contents of the poem, as I mentioned, are the essence of the Great Learning and how she would serve her husband according to the Instructions for Women. In her dream she gave him the poem. When he tries to hold her hand, she wakes up. She sighs: “Oh, my empty body and soul!” This is Lady Wang’s self-image in real life.

Whose body? The Confucian value system made her feel that without her husband and family she was not a person at all. In *The Second Sex* (1953) de Beauvoir argues that a women’s problem is her need for men to complete her “being”. It is not strange that Lady Wang has this idea. She did not show any criticism of the social system, nor did she say one word of complaint against anyone around her. A perfect woman, Ban Zhao taught, should understand that “to win the love of one man is the crown of a woman’s life; to lose the love of one man is her eternal disgrace” (Nujie:4). But she did not tell women how to win the love of one man if that one man has more than one woman. Ban Zhao taught, “The way of husband and wife is the great principle of Heaven and Earth, and the great basis of human relationships.” (Nujie:2) The social practice of Lady Wang’s time was that men such as her husband forgot the great principle of Heaven and Earth! Women’s self-cultivation had to fall in with men’s will.

Despairing in this world Lady Wang starts a new search in the other world. This time her journey is similar to the Taoist Shangqing “interior vision” or “ecstatic journey”. It is said that “During the year 364 to 370, Yang Xi, a medium employed by a southern gentry family, began to receive visits from a group of deities descended from the Heaven of Highest Clarity (Shangqing).” (Bokenkamp, in Lopez, ed. 166-167) Thanks to Yang’s literary skill, a corpus of the poetic and prose transcripts of his visions and many of the scriptures he received from the deities came to be treasured by a group of southern Chinese families. This initiated the Shangqing-Maoshan movement, which was theorized by Tao Hongjing (456-536) and enriched by legendary immortals,

local saints, such as the Mao brothers³¹, and gods or spirits unknown until that time, such as Wei Huacun (521-3340). According to Robinet, this movement retained most of the elements of Ge Hong's tradition; borrowed certain features, like "the purity chamber" from the Celestial Masters; and, for the first time in Taoism, adopted Buddhist practices. The Shangqing school emphasized interiorization during meditation, drastically modified alchemical procedures, stressed the deification and "cosmicization" of the adept, and valued the visualizing of images and ecstatic wandering. (Robinet 1997:114, 121-24)

Around the time of Lady Wang, new revelations emanated from Maoshan³². The forty-fifth patriarch of the school Liu Dabin (fl. 1317-1328), wrote a massive account of this mountain. (Robinet 1997:120). Therefore, it is natural that in the mountain wilderness Lady Wang encountered the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wangmu), and the female immortals the Hemp Lady (Magu), the Weaving Maid (Zhinu) and the Moon Lady (Chang O).

Lady Wang met the fairy Hemp lady during her wandering journey in the east heaven. She was invited to play chases with her. She was so happy that she forgot all her mortal misery. In the west in the Konglun Mountains, she entertained Xi Wangmu by playing the seven-string music instrument. Her music was so plaintive that Xi Wangmu was deeply moved and could not wait for her to finish her piece. Medieval Taoists considered Xi Wangmu to be "regal, female, and associated with the west. As a ruler she controlled creation, transcendence and divine passion. As a woman she was mother, teacher and lover." (Cahill 1993:3) She could be both threatening and compassionate. Her nurturing side functioned in relation to the women she protected. They are women who do not fit into the traditional Confucian family pattern. But in Lady Wang's case, in this poem, Xi Wangmu does not give her much help to change her situation. This reveals the nature of man-made Xi Wangmu, especially, from Confucian perspective. Wangmu is a euhemerized title "conferred on female ancestors in the father's line. ... Defining the queen mother in kingship terms in the context of the ancestral cult shows an attempt to incorporate her into the predominating view of the structure of the world." (Cahill 1993:18)

In addition to this, in the south heaven Lady Wang met the woman immortal Lingfei. She was shown Cao O's tombstone inscriptions from the Eastern Han dynasty, which expressed admiration for Cao O's filial piety and chastity.³³ In the north heaven she wandered among the Gushe mountains and

31 Mao brothers, the three brothers of the Mao family, who, in the first century B. C. E., retreated to the mountain that subsequently was named after them – Maoshan.

32 The Eighth Taoist Cave Heaven (*diba dongtian*) in the southwest of today's Jiangsu province. The three Mao brothers practiced there.

33 Cao O, a filial daughter, an exemplar woman of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Dushang erected a tombstone for her. But it was no longer there in Lady Wang's time.

met the immortal sisters³⁴. Not much help was offered, so she dried her tears and traveled to the Silver River where the Weaving Maid³⁵ weaving untiringly on a loom told her that she will forever keep her love for the Oxherd (Nulang) who was left behind with two babies on earth. Her journey brought her to the Palace of Guanghan in the Moon where Chang O³⁶ offered her the elixir of immortality. But she did not want to be an immortal alone - the first thought in her mind was how to present the elixir to her husband! So the supremely valued ultimate goal of the Taoists - immortality - immediately dimmed in the face of Lady Wang's true mortal love for her husband on the one hand, and the power of Confucian teachings on a woman's duty to her family on the other hand. The Confucian order of Heaven paralleled the order prevailing on Earth and dominated the Queen mother, the goddesses, and the immortal sisters in the poem. Where could Lady Wang go? The Buddhist teaching on the principle of karma does still manage to imply that she received the elixir of immortality, a reward perhaps, for her chastity and filial piety and following the Confucian line, she returned back to her family. All aspects of Confucian teaching for women were enhanced though Lady Wang's mystical journey. Confucianism won the ultimate victory here.

CONCLUSION

Historically, as I said before, Lady Wang probably lived shortly before the 1190-1224 period of the Nan Song dynasty, in the area of today's Hebei and Shandong provinces, in Northern part of China - not very near to Maoshan. During the Song dynasty Daoist practitioners benefited from the support of Song emperors, especially Zhenzong (r. 997-1022), who claimed a Daoist deity among his ancestors. A Daoist Canon (Daozang) was published in 1019 on imperial orders at the beginning of Song dynasty, and after that efforts were made to compile a complete collection of Daoist scriptures, the present Daozang, compiled in 1444-45. Moreover, from Zhu Xi's public letter calling on Daoist nuns to go back to their homes and family duties we could be well assured that Lady Wang's reading ability and poetic training could help her to use popular knowledge from Daoist teachings, and ancient mythology, and her imagination to write the poem. Footbinding, widow chastity, concubinage, polygamy practices and intense family conflicts could make a woman like her opt to become a Daoist nun.

34 The immortals described in Zhuangzi. Xiaoyao You. See Watson, 1968:29-35.

35 Zhinu (weaving maid) and Nu Lang (cowherd): allegedly Zhinu, the youngest daughter of the kitchen god, fell in love with a mortal Nu Lang, given only one reunion a year with him. She meets him on a bridge of magpies over the Milk Way on July 7 of Chinese lunar calendar.

36 Chang O: the Moon Lady who stole the elixir of immortality from her husband and took it, then she flew to the Moon. (*Huai Nan Zi*).

In a recently published book *Under Confucian Eyes* the Daoist female saint Wang Fengxian of the mid-ninth century attracted my attention (Mann & Cheng, 2001: 17-29). The biography of Wang Fengxian is similar to that of the Northern Daoist female saint Sun Puer (Wong, 1990). The stories of both of them supported my previously mentioned popular religious practice of women in medieval China. Lady Wang was not the only special case at that time. The only difference may be that Wang Fengxian and Sun Puer were consciously and conscientiously doing spiritual self-cultivation while Lady Wang was in a transition of her spiritual struggle.

The 1786 edition of the book which recorded the poem was published in July of the year of bingwu under the rule of the Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Therefore, scholars have reason to argue that it is actually a writing of Qing dynasty. During that period Neo-Confucianism was instrumental in regulating public morals and separating “Chinese” from “non-Chinese” practices. Chastity was still an important topic for women. More and more female images appeared in the art forms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including novels and poems. In contrast to later teachings for woman, such as Lu Kun’s *Guifan* (Ayscough, 1937: 267-303; Wolf 1975:13-38), Li Yu’s *Rou Putuan* (the Carnal Prayer Mat) provided images of women whose physical bodies were driven by sexual desires which were acted upon in various extremely exaggerated ways. Their actions criticized and satirized Confucian rites and teachings and emancipated the female bodies in a lustful way. Unfortunately, women again played the role of sexual instruments for gratifying men’s desires. The story itself provides a profound Buddhist lesson, using carnal to destroy carnal. As victims women’s bodies paved a path for one Confucian scholar’s enlightenment. Lady Wang’s poem describes the confined female body and mind and is different from the later writings.

Lady Wang’s poem makes us consider a topic familiar in women’s studies. Typically, Lady Wang understood her morality and her virtue in terms of her love, an outlook very widespread in Confucian teachings. Only during her ecstatic journey could she emancipate herself completely. Theoretically, in a traditional Chinese family, the wife is a female form of the master of the family. Her duty was to preserve the harmony of the family, and so she had to be a moral example for all of the family members. This made the love between husband and wife became rigid and lacking in mutual-attraction. The concubine as an instrument fulfilled men’s desire and, sometimes continued the line of the family if the wife did not produce a son. Lady Wang has only one man in her life and thinks that her virtue and chastity will make her husband love her, and that she must wholeheartedly embrace her share of his love.

Finally, “the personal is political” is a phrase coined by Carol Hanisch in 1970 and published in *Note From the Second Year* (see Hanisch, 1971) which

became a main slogan of 1970s feminism. In this regard Lady Wang's poem is a feminist one, though I argued before that it is a feminine writing rather than a feminist one, as the whole poem lacks any feminist consciousness of a right to equality as between men and women. The truth she told us about herself reveals the psychology of patriarchal oppression in this world and the world beyond, and points up the direct relation between subjectivity, sociality and the artificial structure of cosmology, so that to know the story of her personal life as it is recounted is to know the "politics" of the situation of women in the Chinese history. This account in keeping with what some feminists have written (see Catharine MacKinnon, 1979).

Some feminists argue, "Any woman who tells the truth about herself is a feminist." (Alice Munro, Sharma & Young ed., 1999: front page 6) This radical statement is not accurate. Logically, according to this statement: 1) No man can be a feminist; 2) Only a feminist can tell the truth about herself, others cannot; 3) A woman who only tells the truth about others is not a feminist. If we use this criterion to judge Lady Wang, she will be a feminist. But I suppose she would not be a feminist even though she questioned her life and fate and her complaint, in fact, is a criticism of society. She lived in about the tenth or eleventh century and she lacked the basic feminist consciousness of demanding equality between men and women. As I mentioned before, her poem is a feminine poem focusing on a typical female topic in medieval China. It is interesting that in twentieth century China, "a woman who tells the truth about herself," and whose writing has been regarded by Westernized scholars as "China's first feminist novel", herself denies that she is a feminist – "she writes on all manner of themes"! (Yang, in Zhang 1989: preface P. 2)

Related to this I want to say that the suffering experienced by Lady Wang is not limited to only women or to only early past historical periods. In Ha Jin's novel *Waiting*, from the last quarter of the twentieth-century China, a man waited for seventeen years to get approval from the government to divorce his bound-feet wife, needless to mention his wife's unlucky fate (Ha, 1999). The format of men's domination could be used by women against women. It was the first wife who attempted to murder Lady Wang, not her husband. Similarly, in Chang Eileen's *The Golden Canque*, it was the unhappy mother who directly destroyed her daughter's love and her daughter-in-law's inner-chamber happiness (Chang 1993). Those who have power control those who don't, no matter how limited the power is. A discussion of the *Plaint* may lead us indeed to link together issues of power, existential suffering and spiritual purification.

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