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**Discourses on Female Bodily Aesthetics
and Their Early Revelations in *The Book of
Songs***

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Introduction

The famous Chinese ancient literary work, *The Book of Songs* (also named as *The Book of Odes* and *The Book of Poetry*), selected more than three hundred musical pieces and poems of nobles and laymen from the period of West Zhou (eleventh century B.C.) till the late Warring States period (sixth century B.C.). The work contains folk songs, songs of nobility, ritual hymns and ballads about significant events in the history of the Zhou people. The work is recognized as a significant creative record reflecting the wars, lives and large range of social changes as well as literary developments of those periods in China.

There are numerous pieces in *The Airs of the States* (國風). depicting male and female images of the time and a large amount focused on women in various kinds. These records or creative images have been important sources not only for the study of the rites, creativity and related humanistic thoughts of the pre- Qin period, but also for the aesthetics and ideals of people, men and women. While ethical cultivation had always been the tool of the tradition, one can find in these songs discourses of female ideals in emotional and spontaneous ways as well as in the moral constraints enhanced in the Zhou patriarchal era. That was an era when myths faded and monarchies strengthened and feudal and ritual practices dominated. Female beauties the book described were also the refraction and projection of the supreme aesthetic ideals of the time.

There have been debates on whether the edition was by Confucius, who chose them from more than three thousands pieces collected at King of Zhou's request and what the Han commentaries added to these works, and therefore the discussion in this study would take these debates into consideration, and I share the following conclusions with Stephen Owen.¹

1) Most of the songs seemed to have reached their present versions shortly before the anthology was assembled, probably around 600 B.C. The anthology belonged to the Zhou court and the courts of the feudal states into which the Zhou kingdom had disintegrated.

2) They were produced in a world in which people could speak about not only their desires but also the fulfillment of those desires, and joy and pain could be articulated with honesty.

- 3) **The Book of Songs** embraced the voices of common people, women and lovers, and those from all aspects of life outside the heroic ethos. The book also contributed a lot to Chinese myths and legends of the Zhou as the ideal polity.
- 4) The **Songs** later played a central role in the great Confucian project of education and self-cultivation. As in a Confucius saying that the book acted as paradigms of the moral heart: “There are three hundred Songs and one phrase covers them all: ‘No straying from the path’” (**Analects** 2.2). The songs also stated relations across social classes.²
- 5) Controversies arose when many of the songs seemed not to conform to certain aspects of Confucian morality; they were then reinterpreted to make them be in accord with their presumed moral perfection by the Traditionalists and the Han and the Sung commentators. Critics claimed that the implication of moral import represented the parameters for an understanding of the text close to their own time.³
- 6) When **The Book of Songs** became a standard of the Confucian scholastic curriculum and responded to the moral and social conditions of the age, it had a double function: it was both a live record and a boldly expressive literary text, and also a Confucian classic that articulated moral and political positions.
- 7) This study would use the title **The Book of Songs** of Arthur Waley’s translated version, as songs imply more primal and expressive materials. While this study broadly refers to commentaries to allow a larger spectrum of reading, it basically agrees with Haun Saussy’s admiration of the songs and delegates the “moral effusions” and “political significations” when appropriate.⁴ The study also agrees with Saussy that things might have turned out differently if the book has been read privately and for pleasure and not as a school text and practically a handbook of morality.⁵
- 8) The study agrees with Waley that these songs emerged from different performance contexts and melded with the formal demands of the genre, such as prosody and rhyme. The songs were produced within the sociopolitical framework of the time, and had leapt from performance environments of primary orality to those of secondary orality, and then on to more fixed texts beginning in the late Warring States period, betraying more complex political and social origins.⁶
- 9) Later it became the norm that the songs “serve as a rhetoric or source of usable phrases,” and they were quoted with recontextualized meanings till they became a classic or canon (**jing**) and came closer to the status of doctrine.⁷
- 10) This study also agrees with the observation that the Mao commentaries (150 B.C.) introduced self-referential moral-political stories to the “scandalous nature” of the poems and defused it, while Zhu Xi’s comments in the Song dynasty (960- 1260) encouraged a direct engagement of the poems and called upon the power of the subjective mind, and urged people not to give too much attention to those negative examples. The study sympathizes with Zhu Xi’s reading, which was distant from the moralizing maneuvers of the ancient Prefaces.⁸
- 11) The study is conducted between the dualistic thoughts of the Mao commentaries context that Waley described as moral-political order and elite culture with its “Small Prefaces” and the elaboration, and the thought of Zhu Xi, whose preface to the anthology emphasized that they were songs of village lanes and they were what men and women sang to each other, expressing their feelings [**qing**] in words.⁹

12) The basic belief of the study agrees with its Great Preface that poetry is the product of earnest thoughts and it expresses the intention of their authors and their inner lives.¹⁰ As Waley said, they read to feel the emotions and to know the authors who wrote about those emotions, and this is the true literary legacy of ***The Book of Songs***.¹¹

13) The study notes that while the gender of characters in some of the songs is not obvious, it may refer to women though translators and commentators referred some of the characters to men. The study discusses female beauty with this possible reading.

Female Bodily Ideals and Their Modalities

Besides the mother goddesses of the myths and the legends of the pre-dynastic Zhou and Shang-Yin periods mentioned in *The Major Odes* and *The Hymns*, the more vivid female images in *The Book of Songs* were the young ladies portrayed in *The Airs of the States* and *The Minor Odes*. They came from different regions and were related to various customs and traditions, manifesting a range of temperaments, physical attributes and manners. They were also members of different classes, including nobles, courtesans, young brides-to-be, middle-aged women, fisherwomen, laborers, silk workers, weavers and farmers. These women probably sung well and danced well, and their excellent performance and expression contributed to a country of songs and poetry. The works, as Zhu Xi recommended, were cultivation products of the Zhou's civilization, setting a contrast to the dark age of Shang-Yin and promoting the cultural quality and standard of the time.¹²

A large range of **adjectives** related to beauty and praise of femininity were projected on to female historical characters and figures of the songs. Examples are the famous phrase of **“the modest, retiring, virtuous and young lady,”** (“窈窕淑女”) in “The Ospreys Cry/ Guan Sui” (“關雎”) of the *South of Zhou*, which should have referred to queens and court ladies who have made the men seeking them and thinking about them while awake and asleep (輾轉反側); and the words **“beauty,”** (“美”) **“lovely,”** (“姝”) and **“handsome” or “good like”** (“嬋”) referring to both the body and the mind in “Of Fair Girls” (“靜女”) of *The Airs of Bei* (邶風) (the woman was referred to Lady of the Duke of Qi as the commentaries suggested).¹³ Other innovative phrasings were **“clear are her eyes; fine is her forehead,”** (“子之清揚、揚且之顏”) in “Companion of Her Lord till Death/ Jun Zi Xie Lao” (“君子偕老”) of *The Airs of Yong* (邛風), designating various physical appeals.¹⁴

Metaphors of nature were also used to describe female beauty. The favorite metaphors included **the sun and the moon in the East** (“Sun in the East,” *The Airs of Qi*, “東方之日,” 齊風),¹⁵ **gems** (e.g., “Bamboo Rod”, *The Airs of Wei*, “竹竿,” 衛風 & “In the Wilds is a Dead Doe, *The South of Shao*, “野有死麋,” 召南)¹⁶ and **flowers** (peach blossoms in “Peach-tree”, *The South of Zhou*, “桃夭,” 周南);¹⁷ the flower of the ephemeral hedge-tree in “There was a girl with us in the carriage”, *The Airs of Zheng*, “有女同車,” 鄭風)¹⁸ depicting the colors, the brightness and the freshness of young female bodies. In the poem “A Splendid Woman” in *The Airs of Wei*; (“碩人,” 衛風),¹⁹ one finds metaphors applied to female bodily parts: **the blades of the young white-grass representing her fingers;**

congealed ointment for her skin; tree-grub for her neck; melon seeds for her teeth; cicada for her forehead; and [the antenna of] the silkworm moth for her eyebrow and so on; and in others **clouds for black hair in masses** (“Companion of Her Lord till Death,” *The Airs of Yong* (“君子偕老”，*鄘風*).²⁰ These metaphors had meanings more than physical appeals, for they represented cleanness, tidiness, health and inner beauty as well.

Tidiness was essential, as manifested in the elaborated hair dressing with cross pins. Metaphors expressed “her black hair in masses like clouds, no false locks does she descend to. There are her ear-plugs of jade, her comb-pin of ivory...,” in the same song.

Inner qualities were implied in the good gems and jades, which multi-purposely acted as metaphors of wealth, class, fine taste, good fortune and personal virtues. When the metaphors applied to both gentlemen and ladies in the songs, the women who wore the gems were showing the merits of loyalty, purity and perseverance, as depicted in “Small War-Chariot,” *The Airs of Qin* (“小戎”，*秦風*).²¹

Some interesting points were noted about female physical appeals:

1) **In Praise of Majestic Physical Size:** There are descriptions of majestic beauty, with the size of big and tall in natural composure (“A Splendid Woman” in *The Airs of Wei*; (“碩人”，*衛風*))²²; “Swamp Shore” in *The Airs of Chen* (“澤陂”，*陳風*)²³ & “Axle-Pin of a Coach” in *The Minor Odes* (“車輦”，*小雅*).²⁴ These big ladies are also accompanied by strong horses and situated in enormous natural and artificial settings (river, marshes, suburbs, carriage). They are nobles with elegant dressing and elaborate accessories, which represent their wealth and power. The songs have their bodily parts (fingers, skin, neck, teeth, forehead, eyebrows, eyes) and even their relaxing manners all well defined, suggesting good health and strength. One could see them and smell them and hear them clearly when perceiving the works. One could also feel that they are proud of their good-size physiques, filled with feminine makeup and human vitality.

The aesthetic judgments could be read with practical considerations. The majestic size is related to productivity, wealth, health, strength and power, and it could be the result of group imagination of a peasant society. An example is the song “Pepper Plant” in *The Airs of Tang* (“椒聊”，*唐風*),²⁵ which celebrated productivity and associated it with majestic beings. Besides the court ladies and the nobles, there were other female characters in the songs who were hard laborers working diligently sewing and picking things and suggesting good physiques and sizes (“The Seven Month,” *The Airs of Bin*; (“七月”，*豳風*);²⁶ “In the Ten- Acre Field,” *The Airs of Wey*, (“十畝之間”，*魏風*)).²⁷ These healthy characters were expected to have strong offspring as well, which was a common social anticipation in peasant society (“Locusts,” *The South of Zhou* (“蝻斯”，*周南*))²⁸. It was suggested that these considerations may explain why big ladies were rated over small ladies and tenderness in these songs.²⁹

The word “beauty” in Chinese (“美”) also designates a big sheep and is clearly embedded with the meaning of utility. The question is in what way is this gender specific? Waley’s

translation of “Swamp Shore” in *The Airs of Chen* (“澤陂,” 陳風),³⁰ for instance, does not refer to a majestic lady but a fair man. The term majestic should apply to both men and women as a physical idealistic appeal of the era.

2) **In Praise of Whiteness:** white is the favorite and ideal female bodily color in *The Book of Songs*. White designated the color of female teeth, forehead, fingers and hands, as depicted in the phrases “**hands white as rush-down, skin like lard, neck long and white as the tree-grub, teeth like melon seeds**” (“手如柔荑, 膚如凝脂...”) in the song “A Splendid Woman” in *The Airs of Wei*; (“碩人,” 衛風).³¹ Dress was always in white, light and pure colors. The color represented refined aesthetic quality similar to the praise of whiteness in today’s cosmetics. It was also loaded with value, designated to women with excellent inner quality in terms of purity, loyalty and chastity.

3) **In Praise of Slenderness:** while the bodily size was praised for being majestic, certain parts of the female body were in the contrast. Fingers, for example, were praised for its slenderness. The phrases “**the delicate fingers of a bride**” (“摻摻女手”) in “Fiber Shoes” in *The Airs of Wey* (“葛屨,” 魏風)³² and “**her fingers were like the blades of the young white-grass**” (手如柔荑) in “A Splendid Woman” in *The Airs of Wei*; (“碩人,” 衛風)) are examples. And when entering the Warring States period, the slenderness and curvy movements of the female bodies were applauded, illustrating the changes involved. Songs like “Moon Rising” in *The Airs of Chen* (“月出,” 陳風)³³ and “There was a girl with us in the carriage” in *The Airs of Zheng*, “有女同車,” 鄭風)³⁴ captured the vivid and enlightened ways of the body maturing. There are also phrases hinting **slim waists**, like “moving at ease” (好人提提) in “Fiber Shoes” in *The Airs of Wey* (“葛屨,” 魏風).³⁵ This change in size suggested changes in economic growth and also in the mode of production when some people could have enjoyed the independence from labor.

4) **In Praise of Plain and Tidy Dress Codes:** one sees both colorful and elaborated dress codes and natural attributes in praise of beauty in the songs. There were green and red for ritual celebrations, as well as white for all purposes and elegant effects. They were all in pure colors and the dress codes demonstrate distinct social occasions and identities. Yet besides being a social language, the colors acted also as expressive tools. A good example is the lady in splendid green and yellow in “The Green Coat,” *The Airs of Bei* (“綠衣,” 邶風).³⁶ Here Waley’s translated version gave specific designation of speakers as in a male and female dialogue, in which the lady had purposely made a coat for her lover which is green on the outside and lined with yellow on the inside. The coat was sewn as a reminder of her devotion, which was just like bright and eye-catching colors and were effective in keeping the heart of her lover. Another example is in “Outside the Eastern Gate,” *The Airs of Zheng* (“出其東門,” 鄭風)³⁷ where a lady dressed in a white jacket, a grayish green scarf and a madder skirt dyed in plant red. The colors in the white base obviously made her most admirable and unforgettable. One can associate the purity of white and gray with **beauty, elegance and simplicity**, which represented a taste of sophistication and were assigned to women in particular.

5) **In Praise of Poetic Images and Mannerism:** the ways a woman carried herself were depicted in good amount of words in *The Book of Songs*, and emphasis put on smiling, laying and moving postures. The words and the four words phases describing these postures were both vivid and poetic, and they reminded readers of Chinese beauty portraits (mei ren hua) from which these songs inherited influences about appearances and acted as guidelines. These poetic depictions were plentiful, contributing to the abundant Chinese female imageries in its long history.

One's observation starts from head to toe is the tidiness in hair dressing, which is an important and usual composition in the mei ren hua. James Legge noted from the songs that men and women used pomade for their hair and wore at their side an ivory comb. Evidences show that ladies twisted their hair on the sides of the head or curried it, they would have only let it hang loose as a sign of sadness.³⁸ Down the line are the special movements and postures depicted in these songs. In addition to the famous phrase of "the modest, retiring, virtuous and young lady," ("窈窕淑女") in "The Ospreys Cry" ("關雎") of *The South of Zhou* are those found in the "Moon Rising" in *The Airs of Chen* ("月出," 陳風).³⁹ The tenderness, gracefulness, gentle softness and "the delicate yielding" succeeded in building the attraction and tangible imagination of a female body. Special terms were used to describe beauty in these songs, like "my lovely one" ("佼人") in "Moon Rising" in *The Airs of Chen*, "beauty" ("粲者") in "Fast Bundled" in *The Airs of Tang*, ("綢繆," 唐風)⁴⁰ and "a clever woman (tearing down a city)" ("傾城") in "High Regard" ("瞻印," 小雅)⁴¹ in *The Major Odes* and so on, all are depicting the manners of the woman characters.

6) **The Unreachables:** The beauties were those who could not be accessed or possessed. There are songs that expressed the despair of men who were obsessed by women they adored but ended up finding them inaccessible. These men could only miss these women, praise them, think about them all the time, and they sighed and suffered. A comment attributed these feelings to the pursuit of the metaphoric sense of rites and civilization, and stated that the beauties were idealized states, dreaming of a happy ending or loving union.⁴² Examples of these include the famous piece of "The Ospreys Cry" ("關雎") and "The Han is Broad" ("漢廣") of the *South of Zhou*;⁴³ and "Hollow Mound" of *The Airs of Chen* ("宛丘," 陳風).⁴⁴ The misery and anguish of the pining men projected quiet and cool images of the inaccessible beauties, who could easily destroy a man's heart. These depictions also made the women both illusory and eternal, within the poetic and aesthetic realm of imaginary settings.

7) **Sexual Expression:** Despite the fact that about a quarter of the songs in the anthology expressed scenes of marriage, demonstrating sexual labor division in the patriarchal Zhou period and the societies immediately after, one could still be enchanted by the explicit sexual suggestions made around the female characters. The Zhou period was a society in which polygamy was popular, forced marriages and wife abandonment were quite common, and sons were preferred over daughters, as reflected in many of these songs. Yet, there were also flirtatious scenes that depicted sexy and charming young women looking for love and

courtship, as vividly illustrated in the famous “The Ospreys Cry” (“關雎”) in *The South of Zhou* that indicated related longing. The sexual symbols of juicy peaches in the “Peach-tree” in *The South of Zhou* (“桃夭,” 周南) are also note worthy.⁴⁵ More explicit examples could be found in *The Airs of Zheng*, the “The Lady Says” (“女曰雞鳴,” 鄭風),⁴⁶ when the woman proposed dressing and undressing for her man; “In the Wilds is a Dead Doe, *The South of Shao*,” (“野有死麋,” 召南),⁴⁷ where a young girl with sexual longings and acts were mentioned; and “Sun in the East,” *The Airs of Qi*, (“東方之日,” 齊風)⁴⁸ which portrayed the voluntary sexual act of a woman. These songs suggested a space of sexual pleasure or instinctual enjoyment, where anxious, active and open attitudes prevailed among women in the context of social propriety. The women were beautiful in their daring passion and expressiveness,. But instead of acting as a direct deviation from the increasing Confucian control, there seemed to be an undercurrent in which women tried to keep safe while searching for a balance. The song “I Beg You, Zhong Zi,” in *The Airs of Zheng* (“將仲子,” 鄭風)⁴⁹ is one example where the lady expressed her fear while declaring her love.

8) **Beauty, the Water Culture and the Feminine Space:** The common association of women with water in Chinese poetry appears in some representative works of *The Book of Songs*. Statistics shows that twenty-eight songs in *The Airs of States* contain such association,⁵⁰ with water in the background of scenes when women were singing (“Gird Your Loins,” *The Airs of Zheng* (“褰裳,” 鄭風))⁵¹: lamenting (“Valley Wind,” *The Airs of Bei* (“谷風,” 邶風))⁵²; laboring (“Gathering White Aster,” *The South of Shao* (“采芣,” 召南));⁵³ or flirting (“The Zhen and Wei,” *The Airs of Zheng* (“溱洧,” 鄭風))⁵⁴. Water was either a direct aesthetic object associated with women or it acted as *bi* (譬) or an analogy, creating and enhancing the necessary atmospheric effects. The most popular example is the “Rush Leaves” in *The Airs of Qin* (“蒹葭,” 秦風)⁵⁵ in which the adoring person stood by the stream, kicking off “beauty by the autumn water” (秋水伊人), referring to the aesthetic distance necessary for male fantasy or imagining beauty.

Water as a metaphor in *The Book of Songs* is an early literary illustration of the primary and primal relationship of water and femininity, as it represented: 1) the origin of life and vitality, its nurturing function related to the lyrical effect of femininity; 2) a living essential that maintains and gives life, a reminder of female fertility; 3) elements of femininity as the cosmological principle of “yin,” referring to the potentiality of creation, “softness,” “tenderness” and “fluidity”. This notion is inspirational and the association contributed a poetic and aesthetic picture of women by water; 4) ritual constraints when water or a river acts as a barrier to a relationship or the physical and social distance that one could not cross over; 5) a setting for the joy and sadness of the female characters.

While water was the main metaphor, the natural setting of swamps and plants and peach trees dominated most of the feminine space in the songs and promoted a nature oriented beautifying effect and fairy atmosphere.

Male Bodily Ideals: A Comparative Reading

With the praise of women in the songs, there are also praises of men among the women. The men whom women adored are clichés. A representative example is “Shu is Away in the Hunting-Fields,” *The Airs of Zheng* (“叔于田,” 鄭風)⁵⁶ in which Shu represented the male ideals of being admirable, kind, good and martial. The key is a strong body that can ride, shoot and play excellently and morally with courage. The “Hey-ho’ in *Airs of Qi* (“猗嗟,” 齊風)⁵⁷ articulated the vivid male ideal of a magnificent bowman and dancer in exclamation sounds and rhythms, who cannot be mistaken as a wicked person. Again, majestic male bodies were praised for their quick and active attacks and responses. Qualities of strength, courage and skills were valued over the gentleness of women.

But the men were more like peacocks, playing the evolutionary game of selection according to sex (and gender). These men were admired for their powerful look and imperial demeanor. Martial strength was emphasized, in the wearing of decorative animal skin, such as the lamb’s fur and leopard’s cuff in “Furs of Lamb’s Wool,” *The Airs of Zheng*; (“羔裘,” 鄭風)⁵⁸ and the tiger-like look and strong reins in “So Grand,” *The Airs of Bei* (“簡兮,” 邶風).⁵⁹ While women were set beside water and streams, these adored men were set among hunting animals in these songs, presenting a fierce rather than aesthetic picture. Their forms of majesty were about muscles and body buildup, physical exercises, health and combat power. They were also heroic in gigantic gestures, striving for balanced walking postures and proper presentations, as vividly described in the phrase of “with step grave and slow” (“委蛇委蛇”) in “Young Lamb,” *The South of Shao* (“羔羊,” 召南).⁶⁰ One should note that the male heroic air also implied moral strength; their behavior proper and in control, even humorous, like those being described ideally in “Little Bay of the Qi,” *The Airs of Wei* (“淇奥,” 衛風).⁶¹

The other domain different from the women in the songs and in reverse were the colors of clothes. This domain showed that *The Book of Songs* reflected the situation before the gender construction of the increasing Confucian and political maneuvers of the era. Red and green and yellow are the colors of male peacocks, and these colors displayed their attraction based on an elaborate identity, shown sometimes as an individual, and sometimes as a group. Proofs could be found in the songs “The Seventh Month” in *The Airs of Bin* (“七月,” 豳風) when the women made big red cloths for men;⁶² “Gathering Beans” in *The Minor Odes* (“采菽,” 小雅) where the men wore red greaves on their legs, demonstrating capacity;⁶³ and in “The Closed Temple” of *The Hymns of Lu* (“閼宮,” 魯頌) in the seventh century when the soldiers dressed in red and green with their weapons as depicted.⁶⁴ Green color appeared twelve times in the Book and six of them referred to male dressing, acting as a proud color. Yellow was another favorite color for men, and women preferred them in yellow dresses.⁶⁵ The adorable male in the song “Knight of the City” in *The Minor Odes* (“都人士,” 小雅) showed off his yellow fox fur under the crowd’s gaze.⁶⁶ These proud men used to dress like a rainbow trout, and they wore splendid accessories, jewels and gems, demonstrating an appeal for more elaborate dressing than women, who regarded their own beauty as wrapped in white and fading colors.

It is interesting to compare these two representative portrayals of the genders regarding the dress codes. The first one is “Minnow-Net” in *The Airs of Bin* (“九罭,” 豳風) in praise of a man, whose dress was embroidered with the nine patterns of the dragon, mountain, cock, fire, tiger, weed, little rice, black and white and black and green as explained by Zhu Xi in his commentary.⁶⁷ The other is the song “A Splendid Woman” in *The Airs of Wei*; (“碩人,” 衛風) introduced earlier, where one finds common everyday plants working as metaphors for female bodily parts. The difference is an interesting demonstration that showed an earlier representation of gender and beauty in discourses before a later and current development that showed its reverse: that is, the Peacock theory in which women were colorfully and elaborately dressed, and the male look of males was cool and simple, associated with moral purity and strength.

The Mind and Body Coherence

While Greek goddesses were noted for their beauty, some of them remained wicked without being condemned. But this is not the case with the female characters of the songs, where the beauties were juxtaposed with virtues and merits of the subjects. The moral mind and the graceful body coherence have always been the theme and the standard, mirroring the classical postulate of the inner and outer beauty coherence. Physical exquisiteness were measured and checked with their inner temperaments, while inner perfection overshadowed outer appearance and built up the splendor.

There are songs loaded with moral acclaims and criticisms, accelerating or downgrading the attractiveness of the female characters. A well-quoted example is the sarcastic comment on the unmatched gorgeousness and the loss of chastity by a commentator to Lady Wei in the song “Companion of Her Lord till Death” in *The Airs of Yong* (“君子偕老,” 鄘風), which proposes an inner and outer incoherence. The song depicted the elaborate hair style and a detailed account of the wearing of jewels and dressing code, juxtaposed with her gifted physical and facial composure carried by the noble form of mannerism. The picture was indeed a grand one of the first lady who should have all the credits. Yet the people who knew what she did against woman chastity and faithfulness perceived an ironic scene instead of the aesthetic one so delicately described in the song.⁶⁸

On the other hand, loyalty and passion succeeded in enhancing the merits and hence the attractiveness of the subjects.⁶⁹ This was well illustrated in the song “My Lord in on Service” in *The Airs of the Royal Domain* (“君子于役,” 王風), in which one found a detailed sketch of the thoughts of a woman longing for her husband day and night. He was in the service, and she got rewarded for her love and genuine concerns with his well-being. This made her charming enough to be remembered even if nothing was written about her appearance.

Another form of coherence exemplifies female magnificence in the form of boldness, independence and in her striving for justice and fairness. The well-discussed example is “the song “A Simple Peasant” in *The Airs of Wei* (“氓,” 衛風),⁷⁰ a touching story self-narrated by a woman who gave detailed accounts of the history of her marriage, from the moment of their first encounter, then the proposal, then the anticipation, despair and suffering hereafter. She tried hard to maintain the relationship till she realized that it was

time to end it. This self-awareness and decisiveness made her outstanding, in the midst of numerous women of the time who would have chosen to stay in the relationship. While the lamentations in those songs of abandoned women suffering in all kinds of marital constrictions under patriarchy could have earned only mercy from others, this female character against the odds and constraints of loyalty imposed on her as a woman merited recognition for her self-awakening and determination.

There seemed no dichotomy of mind and body in culture since early eras, and this applies also to female beauty.

Sources for Aesthetic Representation: Visual Illustrations

Chinese female beauty has a long tradition of representing women within a feminine environment. One can start from here and check the fact that *The Book of Songs* exerted great influence on women portraits in China, especially those *meiren huas* in later development. The feminine space in recent centuries was replete with details of decorative items and architectural layouts with particular kinds of buildings, paths, railings, decorative objects, painting, and calligraphy; but the trees, flowers, plants, rocks, and personal attributes like clothes and ornaments, makeup, facial and bodily features; and finally tableaux of female activities were portrayals that echo those in some of the songs.⁷¹

Art historians suggested the concept of feminine space as a totalizing entity, and a beauty was essentially the sum of all the visible forms one expected to find in her space. One identified a woman as a beauty not by recognizing her face but by surveying her courtyard, clothes, her companions, and her idealized expressions and gestures.⁷² The outlook of Chinese beauties was epitomized in classical texts as a woman with star-bright eyes, willow-leaf eyebrows, cloud-like hair, and snow-white bosom, which were the signifiers described and recorded as early as in the songs.

One can also find similar depictions in *The Manual of Beautiful Women* by Xu Zhen around the mid-seventeenth century, which was a popular text that Chinese art critics used to refer to when discussing female beauty, as with those in the songs.⁷³ In Wu Hung's faithful translation of the ten-part iconography including physical appearance, style, skills, activities, dwelling, seasons and moments, adornment, auxiliary objects, food, and special interests that reflected the feminine ideal in that era, the proto-types and principles were in the songs. Following are the similarities as described in the manual:⁷⁴

1. *Physical appearance*: Cicada forehead; apricot lips; rhinoceros-horn teeth; creamy breasts; eyebrows like faraway mountains; glances like waves of autumn water; lotus-petal face; cloud-like hairdo; feet like bamboo shoots carved in jade; fingers like white shoots of grass; willow waist; delicate steps as though walking on lotus blossoms.
2. *Style*: Leaving her footsteps on green moss; leaning against a railing while waiting for moonrise; glancing back before departure; throwing out an artful, captivating smile; having just finished singing and becoming fatigued from dancing.
3. *Skills*: Whereas women in the seventeenth-century China were playing the lute; embroidering; weaving brocade; comprehending musical pitches and rhymes; swinging and playing the "double six" game; the women in the songs, as discussed above, were either doing hard laborers work, sewing and picking in the field, or the wealthier ones were singing and longing for their men. Yet one must say the female activities in the later portraits were more idealized and imaginary than being realistic, when the women were taking care of orchids; catching butterflies and fashioning clothes and so on.

4. *Seasons and moments*: Feminine space has become more artificial than that portrayed in the songs; like bright moon over a painted pleasure-boat; snow reflected on a pearled curtain and silver candles above a tortoise-shell banquet table; when the more natural scenes like fragrant plants in the setting sun and raindrops pelting banana leaves remind people of the background in the songs.

7. *Adornment*: Similarities were found in embroidered skirt; raw silk sleeveless dress; hairpins; jade pendants; “love birds” belt; gem earrings and “phoenix” head ornaments.

8. *Sexual Suggestions*: The related expression have become more repressed and calculated in the later developments while the basic gestures were the same as in the songs, like leaning drunkenly on her lover’s shoulder; laughing seductively; secretly exchanging glances and showing slight jealousy and so on.

These female portraits satisfied both the physical desire and spiritual demand of their times. But some of the main variations that developed were the vulnerability, passivity, excessive refinement, and the melancholic expression illustrated in the stereotypes of the beautiful characters in the later era.⁷⁵ With the background of the late Imperial time, these were read as imageries of a lost and subordinated country waiting for the power of a new foreign ruler. Yet the feminine ideals represented in the Zhou period, though they were advancing into the chaotic eras of the Warring States, have remained expressive, bold, tough and strong. Women lamented for love, but they were not vulnerable and passive. They took rites into consideration but were determined at the same time, and even if their deeds were right or wrong according to the commentaries, they illustrated vivid characters in their variety. Moreover, when the doubts of female authors are taken into account, the beauties in the songs were not enclosed in an isolated space as those depicted in the *meiren hua*, and they were not only ideal lovers of men but also idealized female beauties in the eyes of both genders.

Conclusion: The Lost Horizon?

One could see that female beauty (*meiren*) in classical Chinese referred to femaleness, the skin color and erotic qualities of a woman similar to those of today, which include bodily features, the shape of limbs, the gentleness of behavior, the charm of voice, the way she dresses and makes up, and so on. In addition to the visual sense, there is also the sense of touch, smell and also the sound of her voice. It is the vitality of the body that counted, and the sensuous qualities that were conceived by the integration of all our senses. One found these touch ups in *The Book of Songs* vibrantly described via the contents, rhythms and the texts in later forms.

According to most of the classical writings, a woman's beauty also had to be judged through sexual sensations, more often the heterosexual ones; that is, *meiren* is in the passionate eye of male lovers or admirers. The beauty of the goddess and *meiren* in classical myths and stories was basically grounded on male desire, fantasies, and devotion, though the notion of beauty later departed from physiological and sexual considerations and went into further cultural and normative constraints. However, arguably, the images of *meiren* were not only the projections of male fantasy but also the internalized values and self identifications of women of the time.

Zhu Xi regarded the first five pieces of *Airs of Bei* (邶風) as the works of Lady Zhuang Jiang (莊姜) of Wei (752 B.C.-) for reasons of historical and biographical correspondences. He himself attributed fifty-four poems to various women authors, including: Tai- si, Lady

Zhuang Jiang, Lady Qi Huan Gong (齊桓公), Lady Xu Mu (許穆夫人) and other courtesans and noble ladies.⁷⁶ Their works composed nearly one-third of *The Airs of the States* (國風). Instead of being regarded as women's laments, the contents showed the virtues of the mind and the practices of these ladies, fulfilling the functions of the "feng" or the "airs," giving instructions that aimed to transform people through their moving and touching stories and the demonstration of their moral dispositions.⁷⁷ The virtues set forth by the ladies in the 'South of Zhou' (周南) and the 'South of Shao' (召南) were highly recommended by the *Little Preface*, for example.⁷⁸

But one should not put these moral discourses over the daring emotional and erotic expressions that were embedded in these ancient songs. They are underscored and are there to be explored, which should act as valuable sources for the discussion of the Chinese female ideals. The songs recorded the vitality, the intuitiveness, the spontaneity, the joy, the passion, the variety and the potentiality. They form the map of a lost female horizon waiting for explorations as well as contextual studies.

Endnotes

¹ Owen, Stephen's foreword in Waley, Arthur (trans). *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry*, with additional translations by Joseph R. Allen, New York: Grove Press, 1996, pp. vii-xxv.

² *Ibid.*, p.xvi. Owen observed: "the living do homage to the ancestors and the ancestors watch over the living; the present acts with past examples in mind; men and women speak to one another in love or anger; the common people praise or blame their rulers, and the best rulers act in the interest of the common people."

³ *Ibid.*, p. 343. This should include Si-ma Qian who described the editorial process of the Songs in *Shi ji*.

⁴ Saussy, H. *The Problem of A Chinese Aesthetic*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, 49.

⁵ Saussy, 109.

⁶ Waley, A. "Postface: A Literary History of the *Shi jing*," in *Ibid.*, pp. 336- 343. Waley said the songs suggested "the range of possibilities and the accompanying sediments of primary and secondary orality that would be found therein: from the festival round dance with its "heave-ho" refrains and the antithetical courting songs with their formulas of romance, to the solemn dramas of the ancestral temple with their concern for models and prescribed rituals." Critics said that at the earliest level close in time to Confucius (551- 479 B.C.), most references were to music and musical performance, especially the propriety thereof; instead of to the words themselves.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 354. See also Saussy's translation of Zhu Xi's preface, "How did this come about? Most historians of the subject point to the philosopher and erudite Zhi Xi (1130-1200), whose edition of the *Odes* often distances itself, on grounds of verisimilitude, from the moralizing maneuvers of the ancient Prefaces. As Zhu Xi tells it, "When I began to write my *Annotations to the Odes*, I used the Little Prefaces as my guides to the literal meaning, and where their glosses would work, I twisted the sense in their favor. Afterwards, I felt uneasy, and when I redid the annotations, I kept the Little Prefaces but took issue with them here and there. Still, the ports' meaning came through. When you've discarded all the old explanations, then the meaning of the Odes comes alive again." Saussy, 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 346-350.

¹⁰ See the translation in Legge, James. *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. IV. Taipei: Southern Materials Center, Inc.,34.

¹¹ Waley, 374.

¹² Zhu Xi, <Shi Jing Ji Ti Zhen Bu>, Taipei: Xue Hai Press, 1991, 97.

¹³ Waley, 36. See also Legge, 69.

¹⁴ Waley, 39-40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51 & 20.

- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.
- ²⁰ See note 14.
- ²¹ Waley, 100-101.
- ²² Waley, 48 & Legge, 94.
- ²³ Waley, 112 & Legge, 214.
- ²⁴ Waley, 205.
- ²⁵ Waley, 93.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 120-122.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ²⁹ Liu Xia, "Exploration of Feminine Aesthetic Characteristics in 'The Book of Songs-Country Breeze' (Shijing-Guofeng)," *Journal of Hunan Institute of Humanities Science and Technology*, Chang Sha, (China): Hunan Institute of Humanities Science and Technology, Serial no.88, Feb, 2006, 95.
- ³⁰ See note 23.
- ³¹ See note 22.
- ³² Waley, 84.
- ³³ Waley, 111.
- ³⁴ See note 18.
- ³⁵ See note 31.
- ³⁶ Waley, 24-25.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ³⁸ Legge, 146.
- ³⁹ See notes 12 & 33..
- ⁴⁰ Waley, 93.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 283.
- ⁴² Zheng, Qun. "The Different Visual Angles and Aesthetic Features of "The Book of Songs' in the Description of the Females," *Journal of Yangzhou College of Education*, Yangzhou: Yangzhou College of Education, Vol. 23, No. 1, March 2005, 8-11.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ⁴⁵ As Saussy suggested that peach trees do flower in the spring; people got married when they were young, and often in springtime. See Saussy, 110.
- ⁴⁶ Waley, 69.
- ⁴⁷ See note 16.
- ⁴⁸ Waley, 79.
- ⁴⁹ Waley, 65.
- ⁵⁰ See Wang Ying, "< Shi Jing-Guo Feng >, Nu Xing Xing Xiang Yu Shui Wen Hua Yi Xiang Guan Xi Zhi Te Zheng," *Journal of Xu Zhou Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, Xu Zhou: Xu Zhou Normal University, vol. 28, no.1, March, 2002, 76.
- ⁵¹ Waley, 72.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ⁵⁶ Waley, 65.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*,
- ⁵⁸ Waley, 68.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁶² Waley, 120-121.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 210-211.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 313-317. James Legge noted that the kings of Zhou adopted the color of red for the garments of the princes and officers at their court. It was said that the popular garment worn uppermost was garnished with

cuffs of leopard-skin and fox-skin, and the robes of the feudal princes were generally of embroidered silk. They also wore caps with precious stones and shoes embroidered with gold. (See Legge, 145.)

⁶⁵ See Ma Fenghua, "Peacock Phenomenon and Sex Mismatch of Dress Color of The Book of Songs", *Academic Exchange*, China: Ha Er Bin, serial no. 148, July, 2006, 141.

⁶⁶ Waley, 214-215.

⁶⁷ Zhu Xi, <Shi Jing Ji Ti Zhen Bu> (詩經集體附斟補), Taipei: Xue Hai Press, 1991, 97.

⁶⁸ One can read from the notes of The Little Preface regarding the *South of Zhou*, which states that through women's freedom of jealousy, the heterosexual relationship were rectified, and marriages and pregnancy were celebrated, implying a direct link between women merits, female beauty and the prosperity of the state. (See Legge's translation and reading of the notes. Legge, Appendix 1, *The Little Preface*, 38.)

⁶⁹ An example is the fairness in "Of Fair Girls" ("靜女"), *The Airs of Bei* (北風) which denotes a lady who behaves correctly and quietly, and she acts according to law and rule, as James Legge had rightly put. See Legge, (Bk. III. Ode XVII., 69).

⁷⁰ Waley, 49-50.

⁷¹ Man, Eva K.W., "'Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty in China,'" in Brand, P. S. (ed.) *Beauty Matters*, Bloomington : Indiana University Press, April, 2000, 183.

⁷² See Wu Hung, "Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the Dreams of the Red Chamber" in Ellen Widmer, & Kang-i Sun Chang, *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 306-365.

⁷³ See *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.184-185. See Wu's translation of *Tanji congshu* (first published by Zhuo Wang & Chao Zhang in 1695, republished in Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1993, 141-2) in Widmer & Chang, 438-9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁶ The works that Zhu Xi assigned to women authors included:

⁷⁷ The Great Preface defined in this way: "Thus when the affairs of one state are embodied in the experience of a person, this is called a *feng* (air). But when they speak of the affairs of the entire empire or the customs (*feng*) of the four quarters, this is called a *ya* (ode).

⁷⁸ See James Legge's translation in Legge, 37-39.