

Original Paper

The Influence of Female Socializing on Wu Meicun's Poetry and Prose Creation

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Abstract

During the late Ming period, the social interaction between male intellectuals and women became increasingly popular. Wu Meicun, as a prominent literary figure of his time, was no exception. Influenced by the social atmosphere and personal circumstances of his era, Wu Meicun's interactions with women became a significant aspect of his life. He engaged with women in poetry exchanges or indulged in pleasures, which not only affected his lifestyle and added interest to his life, but also expanded his social and literary circles. As a result, the themes and content of his works became diverse and rich. Therefore, exploring Wu Meicun's interactions with women provides a more comprehensive understanding of his life and offers deeper insights into his poetry and prose.

Keywords

Wu Weiye, Female Socializing, Meicun Style

1. Introduction

Influenced by the social trends and philosophical currents of the late Ming period, alongside the prosperity of the economy, a wave of commercialism and luxury swept society. The rise of luxury greatly contributed to the flourishing of the culture of male intellectuals frequenting courtesans. In this free and relaxed social environment, the intellectual landscape of the late Ming underwent significant changes. Particularly in terms of ideology, the once dominant Neo-Confucianism began to be questioned by enlightened individuals, and the desire for freedom became increasingly strong. This led to the emergence of a humanistic thought that adapted to the broader environment. Consequently, the thinking of scholars and women experienced significant liberation. However, this freedom gradually revealed its drawbacks, and the intellectual demeanor of scholars became more relaxed, unrestrained, and uninhibited. With the fall of the Ming period, the free and relaxed social atmosphere of the late Ming was criticized and reflected upon during the early Qing period, but to some extent, it still had

lingering effects, influencing the lives and literary creations of intellectuals, with Wu Meicun being a typical representative.

Wu Meicun's social circle was not only vast in number, but also spiritually rich, involving exchanges with talented women, literary figures, and leaders of the literary world. For instance, Wu Meicun maintained close relationships with several of the "Eight Beauties of Qinhuai," known for their beauty and talent, with four of them being documented. As for the other two individuals, Qian Qianyi and Gong Dingzi, known as the "Three Greats of Jiangzuo," Wu Meicun had more frequent interactions with them, which will not be detailed here. These three talents were renowned for their scholarship, wit, and talent, and their interactions with women further displayed their charming and romantic dispositions. Qian Qianyi's relationship with Liu Rushi, Gong Dingzi's with Gu Hengbo, and Wu Meicun's with Bian Yujing were all once famous topics of conversation.

The influence of intellectual women on Wu Meicun's literary creation is evident in that he wrote a large number of works on women from a unique female perspective. His works express the distinct literary charm of Meicun through three main aspects: female elegance, quiet sorrow under restraint, and the beauty of heroic spirit. The women Wu Meicun interacted with were mostly individuals of strong character, which not only enriched his poetic themes but also influenced his poetic style. In the sorrowful context of the fall of the Ming period, his detailed observations of the women around him helped him gradually develop a poignant and sincere poetic style.

2. The Female Perspective Influenced by Female Socializing

Influenced by his socializing with women, Wu Meicun, in his poetry and prose, adopted a unique female perspective, even sometimes from a woman's viewpoint. This perspective can be seen in three main aspects: female elegance, restrained sorrow, and the beauty of heroic spirit. Wu Meicun's early romantic poems and those depicting the tragic lives of court women both display feminine characteristics, making them distinctive in his poetry. From these works, we can perceive his female perspective.

2.1 Depicting the Diverse Elegance of Women

In Wu Meicun's early works, a group of captivating women is described. These women are portrayed as shy, with lines such as "relying on their delicate appearance, they softly approach, shyly hiding their allure" (Wu, 1990); graceful, "like twin swallows dancing lightly on a painted beam, their slender waists sculpted perfectly" (Wu, 1990); or charming, "the man may ask for sweet words, but it's better to taste the honey yourself" (Wu, 1990), among others. Wu Meicun, from a female perspective, paints vivid pictures of these women, showcasing their unique elegance. For example, in *The Song of the Painted Orchid*, he writes:

"The painted orchid girl is fifteen, strumming a small pipa, sighing in the spring rain.

I remember the first time I saw her with her makeup done, she gently pushed aside the curtain, gazing at me."

"The paper from Sichuan writes of orchids at the window, the scent of lip gloss drifting from the brush. Her wrist lightly smudges the dye, her fingers hesitating to loosen the collar of her gown." (Wu, 1990) This depicts the beauty and innocence of the painted orchid girl. The atmosphere gradually builds, evoking endless imagination. The simple yet detailed descriptions of "the scent of lip gloss" and "her wrist lightly smudging the dye" capture the girl's unique elegance, showing Wu Meicun's skill and distinctiveness in portraying women.

Similarly, in *Listening to the Female Daoist Bian Yujing Play the Qin*, he writes:

"In Zhongshan, there is a girl, unmatched in beauty, with clear eyes and bright teeth, and a pendant hanging down.

She once performed for a private banquet, and in the midst of the group, her glance caught my attention." (Wu, 1990)

"Clear eyes, bright teeth" is not only a description of the girl's unique elegance but also an expression of her intellectual beauty, as seen in "recognizing music and playing the melody." This represents the allure of courtesans, who are not only beautiful but also remarkably talented. This is one of the reasons why many late Ming and early Qing intellectuals frequented brothels. Wu Meicun captures Bian Yujing's charm with just a few strokes, portraying her elegance in vivid detail. In his depictions of female elegance, Wu Meicun proves to be a master.

2.2 Revealing the Enduring Sorrow and Resignation of Women

Chinese women have historically exhibited an inherent attitude of endurance. Traditional Confucian values of "male superiority and female inferiority" created extreme inequality between the sexes. From birth, women have been subject to discrimination and oppression, and throughout their lives, they have often faced invisible societal and male pressures. This suppression has made it difficult for women to fully recognize themselves or establish their own values and life philosophies. Over time, the voices of women in history have been minimal, even nearly silenced, with endurance becoming their personality and habit. Wu Meicun's works feature a group of representative women who embody this endurance and sorrow. For instance, in *The Song of Chen Yuanyuan*, he writes about the gentle sorrow of Chen Yuanyuan:

"Green leaves unfold red shoots, the moonlight shines through the gauze window.

Waiting for my lover, yet he does not come, the beauty's disappointment grows like a flower wilting." (Poem 4)

"Buddha's hand tree, with its compassionate touch, we spoke of life and death.

I count the days until my lover returns, and in this, I bend my fingers." (Poem 5) (Wu, 1990)

These women are typified by their passivity and constant waiting. They have no agency and are accustomed to enduring, their sorrow and resignation ingrained in their character.

Similarly, in *The Song of Chen Yuanyuan*, the sorrow of waiting is expressed:

"Sitting as guests, the red wine glass flying, the sun sets in the west,

One song of sorrow, who shall I confide in?"

"Once I released the bird from its cage, waiting for the river to cross. When will it pass?" (Wu, 1990)
The repeated questioning reveals Chen Yuanyuan's helplessness, involuntary feelings, and the fleeting nature of her youth, all expressed with a tender sadness and resignation.

In *The Song of Xiao Shi Qingmen*, he portrays the tragic mindset and life of Princess Changping after the fall of her kingdom:

"To sell pearls for rice and return to the gate of the humble home,
Who shall I confide in about the grief of my noble life?"

"Recalling the late emperor, tears are flowing, Changping, fragile and pitiable." (Qian, 1993)

Similarly, in *The Qin River's Nostalgia* (Poem 4), he writes:

"Often asking the east wind about the painted orchid,
The jade woman sighs lightly, leaning against the railing."

"She hesitates to start composing the melody, a small fold of fine silk, ink not yet dry.
Her frail leaves lazily stretch out, reluctant to face the midday heat."

"Who can I send my message to? I fear the desolate young man will not bear to read it." (Ji, 2000)

The words "sighs lightly" and "fear" describe the anxious and humble mindset of the woman as she waits for her lover. This sorrow reflects the plight of women in ancient times, who lacked independence, whether physically or mentally, and were often dependent on men. In the long life of shared existence between the sexes, women endured hardship and expressed emotions of resignation. Wu Meicun's poetry captures these women's expressions and emotions, highlighting their lives as tragedies. His focus on women's inner struggles in poetry history is of great significance.

2.3 Showcasing the Heroic Beauty of Women

In addition to depicting women's unique postures and the gentle sorrow of their resigned emotions, Wu Meicun also portrays the rare heroic beauty of women. For example, in *The Song of the Old Courtesan* in Linhuai, Liu Dong'er is described:

"Yang Kan's servant can ride a horse, Li Bo's little sister can bend a bow.

The silk ribbon on her light gown gracefully ends, racing toward the city south with an arrow drawn."
(Xu, 2001)

Actions like "riding a horse," "bending a bow," and "chasing fast" reverse the delicate and sorrowful demeanor of women often found in Wu Meicun's poetry. Instead, Liu Dong'er exudes a heroic, masculine beauty. This heroic beauty, combined with feminine traits like the "silk ribbon on her light gown," displays another side of femininity. Furthermore, the contrast between the "little sister" and the "bending bow" accentuates the harmony between the woman's grace and strength, highlighting her heroic beauty.

In conclusion, Wu Meicun employs delicate brushstrokes and a female perspective to create a series of poems celebrating youthful women. It is worth noting that the depiction of women's lives from a female perspective was common among late Ming male writers. Writers like Zhang Dai, Pan Zhiheng, Yu Huai, and Qian Qianyi also created numerous female images. They recorded their indulgent lives

through their poetry and prose, capturing the characteristics and status of women from various backgrounds, reflecting their own values, views on life, and attitudes toward love. What sets Wu Meicun apart is that he not only focused on external beauty, such as women's appearance and attire, but also acknowledged their inner grace, resilience, and their heroic side. From this perspective, his depiction of women is more thoughtful and humane.

3. The Influence of Female Socializing on the "Meicun Style"

Mr. Qian Zhonglian defined the "Meicun Style" as follows: "Wei Ye's poetry highlights two aspects: one is the selection of significant historical realities from the late Ming and early Qing periods as subjects, and the other is the creation of numerous narrative long poems in the seven-character ballad form, which earned the style the name 'Meicun Style.'" (Zhao, 2009) According to Mr. Qian's view, the "Meicun Style" refers to the seven-character narrative ballads based on historical facts from the transition between the Ming and Qing period, and these long poems best represent the stylistic features of Wu Meicun's poetry. The General Catalogue of the Siku Quanshu also considers Wu Meicun's seven-character ballads as the most representative of his works, stating, "The ballad form, especially his mastery of it, is rooted in the classical styles, but the emotional resonance is profound; his narrative is reminiscent of Xiangshan, yet more exquisite in elegance. His rhyme schemes harmonize with the tonal patterns, and the emotional impact is both lively and intense, marking an era-defining melody." (Lu, 2001) Wu Meicun's complete works include 1,163 poems, of which 103 are seven-character poems. However, if we strictly apply the rules of "phonetics and metrics," only 59 of his seven-character ballads qualify as "Meicun Style" poetry. While this number is small in comparison to his total output, these 59 ballads encapsulate the overall ideas and concepts of his poetic creation.

Regarding the structure of the "Meicun Style," Wu Meicun created many poems about women, such as *The Song of Chen Yuanyuan*, *The Song of the Female Daoist Bian Yujing*, *The Song of the Painted Orchid*, and *The Old Courtesan of Linhuai*, which are all significant works in his literary career. In his youth, Wu Meicun often frequented entertainment establishments and interacted with many courtesans and female entertainers. Through these broad and intimate connections, he used his sharp and sensitive eye to observe their lower-class lives. As his social interactions with women deepened, he gradually transferred these emotions into his literary creations.

Looking at the 59 poems in the "Meicun Style," many involve the portrayal and depiction of women, highlighting the significant impact that female socializing had on Wu Meicun's literary creation. According to the characteristics of the "Meicun Style," his interactions with women contributed to the creation of a poignant and sincere style. "Poignant" refers to the distinct style of the "Meicun Style," while "sincere" refers to Wu Meicun's genuine emotions toward people and things. Sun Hong once described his works as "emotionally charged and sorrowful." (Wu, 1990) The poet You Tong also commented: "Meicun's seven-character poems linger on scenes, full of sorrow and joy, making readers sigh in deep reflection."

3.1 The Poignant Style of the "Meicun Style" Influenced by Female Interactions

A series of women portrayed in Wu Meicun's seven-character ballads, along with their tragic fates, embody a poignant beauty. Figures such as Bian Yujing, Chen Yuanyuan, Liu Dong'er, and various unnamed courtesans are assigned tragic destinies in Wu Meicun's writings. These characters inherently possess a "tragic" nature, and Wu Meicun, through his interactions with them, was deeply affected and recorded their stories in poetry. Moreover, as a displaced subject, the fall of the Ming period profoundly impacted Wu Meicun, and his works were often filled with sorrow. His "Meicun Style" frequently employs the technique of contrasting past and present to express the sorrow of change and loss.

In *The Song of the Painted Orchid*, the poet uses a contrast between the past and present to depict the transformation of the painted orchid girl from her youthful beauty to her current state of decline. This technique, as Wang Fuzhi stated, "uses joyful scenes to express sorrow, and sorrowful scenes to express joy, intensifying the emotional impact." "The painted orchid girl is fifteen, playing a small pipa, lamenting in the spring rain. I remember the first time I saw her, her hand brushing aside the curtain to greet me," he writes, showing her youthful beauty and charm. But the next lines depict her current sorrow: "Her once brilliant beauty now wanes, with the pen's ink scattered over her bed of emerald," followed by "She returns, opening the chest, with tear stains and sorrow on her silk garments." The strong contrast between the past and present highlights the tragic fate of the painted orchid girl, who has become haggard due to the hardships of life.

In *The Old Courtesan of Linhuai*, Wu Meicun uses the life of the courtesan Liu Dong'er to tell the political rise and fall of General Liu Zhiqing. "The general of Linhuai opened his office, but instead of fighting, he indulged in songs and dances. What are bones worth after being abandoned on the battlefield? The beautiful young girl has already turned to dust." The poem begins with the general abandoning his duties and sinking into indulgence, while Liu Dong'er, once youthful and beautiful, becomes an elderly courtesan. "She wanted to sing, but tears flowed first," Wu Meicun writes, illustrating her deep sorrow. Later, the poem shifts to recount the tumultuous events of Liu Zhiqing's political career, with Liu Dong'er disguising herself as a man to seek out two royal figures. The final part describes her tragic fate, as she faces the political chaos and eventual betrayal: "The old woman's hair has turned completely white, the sorrowful scenes of the past are now gone, and the autumn leaves flutter as the spring grass grows." The poem ends with a deeply sorrowful tone, showing the combined tragedies of Liu Dong'er's personal suffering and the decline of the nation.

Similarly, *The Song of Chen Yuanyuan* tells the tragic love story between Chen Yuanyuan, one of the "Eight Beauties of Qinhuai," and the Ming general Wu Sangui, who famously betrayed his country for her. "On Mount Dinghu, he abandoned the human world, defeated enemies and captured the capital. He wept as he called for his soldiers to wear white mourning clothes, all for the love of a woman," the poem begins, setting the stage for their passionate but ultimately doomed relationship. The poem continues with a flashback to their first meeting, detailing their intense love and the subsequent hardships they faced, including her being forcibly taken to the imperial palace and later becoming a

courtesan again. "The beautiful girl's bright eyes and white teeth were forgotten by all in the palace," Wu Meicun writes, emphasizing her tragic fate as a pawn in the hands of powerful men. Ultimately, she dies in obscurity, and her tragic story highlights her inability to control her own destiny.

From the above examples, it is clear that Wu Meicun's poetry blends the tragic fates of women with the sorrow of the fall of the nation, creating a double tragedy. His keen observations of the women he interacted with, such as Bian Yujing, Liu Dong'er, and Chen Yuanyuan, allowed him to capture the tragic essence of their lives, establishing his position in "poetic history."

3.2 The Emotional Tone of the "Meicun Style" Influenced by Female Interactions

The emotional tone of the "Meicun Style" is sincere. Zhao Yi described Wu Meicun's works in Oubei Shihua as "emotion beyond words." His poetry is "a history of the heart," meaning that, while narrating stories, he imbues his work with his own emotions, expressing his "true nature." This sincerity is evident in the way he portrays his interactions with women, as mentioned in the first section of this chapter. As Wu Meicun engaged with these women, he gradually formed his own aesthetic and emotional views, which he reflected in his literary creations.

For example, in *Passing the Golden Willow Grove*, *Visiting the Tomb of Daoist Bian Yujing*, a poem written in memory of his beloved Bian Yujing, Wu Meicun expresses deep sorrow for her passing:

"Under Dragon Mountain, at the Festival of the Cornel Tree,
The springwater murmurs without end. But washing away the leaden sorrow,
My shadow and the empty room speak of our parting.
How many times have I looked back in hesitation?"

The entire poem is soaked with an unrelenting sadness. Even after three or four years since her death, Wu Meicun cannot let go. "The fragrant car once passed here, who knew it was the tomb of my beloved?" This line refers to a place where they once met, now turned into a permanent separation between them. "The empty shadow speaks of parting. How many times have I gazed back in hesitation?" Through this technique, the poet intensifies the sorrow, making it feel like a recurring sorrow. This poem also vividly expresses Bian Yujing's life of hardship and Wu Meicun's pain. "Her life was short, and her heart was broken, but who knew her beauty would not last? The birds fly alone, with no messages returned." Wu Meicun's deep emotion for her resonates strongly with the reader, making this poem an epitome of his heartfelt sincerity in his writing.

4. Conclusion

In summary, through his interactions with numerous women, Wu Meicun was subtly influenced by them, and this influence is reflected in his creative works. His poetry, written through the lens of women, features many captivating and memorable verses. These poems, with their poignant style and sincere emotions, carry the imprint of male-female interactions. The profound impact of his socializing with women on both his poetic style and emotional tone is evident, marking a significant feature of the "Meicun Style."

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