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II
The Dramas of Wang Zhaojun

By Lauren Nelson '14



The legend of Wang Zhaojun is one of the most infamous and beloved stories in pre-modern Chinese history. Tales of her great beauty and courageous heart have been passed down from generation to generation. With the many various adaptations and retellings of her story the line between fiction and truth has blurred together but by looking at each individual telling of the story we can see the influences and attitudes of the Chinese people during the time period the adaptation was written. Chinese drama, written works, such as poetry, epics, and plays, and oral traditions have become one of the most reliable ways to get a sense of what the society and culture was like during specific periods of time. The different interpretations of the Wang Zhaojun legend are a perfect example of how the culture of the time shines through the story.

It was during the time of the Han dynasty that the story of Wang Zhaojun originates. The Han Dynasty, a dynasty that last from 206 BCE to around 220 CE, had replaced the Qin Dynasty after the people's dislike of the harsh government system had created unrest in the empire. After facing a devastating civil war, the Han Empire was in a state of weakness which gave Xingu, a nomadic people from the Steppe, the opportunity to attack. After much destruction and fighting, the Han Empire began to negotiate with the Xiongnu in the hopes of keeping them from taking over completely. The Hans began the practice of sending princesses to the leader of the Xiongnu in the hopes he would take them for brides. The Hans saw having to do this as humiliating and after sixty years ended the practice when the empire was strong enough to resist the attacks.¹ In order to keep good political ties with the Xiongnu, the Han resumed the practice using women from the common class because "...exchange of gifts, including Chinese royal brides, ensured periodic peace and trade around the gates of the Great Wall."²

Wang Zhaojun was a member of an important family that lived in the south part of Nan County, which was located in the western part of the Han Empire. Wang Zhaojun was said to be exquisitely beautiful and was known to be a talented musician. When she became old enough her family sent her to live in the harem of Emperor Yuandi, where she served as a lady in waiting, in the hopes what she would one day become his bride. Wang Zhaojun lived in the harem for a number of years where she was never called upon by the Emperor and became rather depressed. During diplomatic trip to the Han Empire, the Xiongnu leader Huhanye asked Emperor Yuandi

¹ Xinro Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4-5.

² Ibid.

for a Han princess to make his bride as a way of strengthening the alliance between the two empires. Yuandi refused to give the Xiongnu leader a princess, but instead offered to give him five women from his harem. The Xiongnu chief agreed and five women were selected, one of them being Wang Zhaojun. It is said that the Xiongnu chief was captivated by Wang Zhaojun's beauty and married her almost immediately after his return to the steppe. Together they had a number of children but only one son is believed to have survived into adulthood. Huhanye died a few years after his marriage to Wang Zhaojun leaving the kingdom to his oldest son, one born of one of his first wives, who took Wang Zhaojun as his wife and produced two daughters.³ Both the Han and the Xiongnu people fell in love with Wang Zhaojun because of her beauty, courage to live in a foreign land, and her unending devotion to the Han people even after her marriage to the Xiongnu leader. After her death he built a number of temples and monuments in her honor along the Silk Road and immortalized her forever in the form of songs, art, and literature.⁴

By looking at the different works about Wang Zhaojun's life we can decipher the beliefs, customs, and social culture of the time period for which it was written for. The first telling to be examined comes from a song the second century CE, whose composer is unknown, which has a different take on how things happened after the death of the Xiongnu leader who originally brought Wang Zhaojun to the steppe. In this version after the death of her husband Wang Zhaojun's oldest son Shiwei becomes leader and asks to marry her, his mother. Before she gives him an answer she asks him if he believes himself to be Xiongnu or Chinese. When her son answers Xiongnu Wang commits suicide and after her burial the grass that lies on top of her grave never dies.⁵

In this version of Wang Zhaojun's life the main themes for the story are national pride and complete devotion to one's country. By asking her son this question Wang Zhaojun is testing to see where her son's loyalties lie and when he answers that he considers himself to be Xiongnu she believes that it would be the greatest dishonor to her people to marry him. She sees suicide as the only option that will show her devotion to her country. By depicting her this way the author is showing us that in his society honor and national pride are considered of the utmost. By also writing the grass on her grave never dies shows that they have beliefs in metaphysical and spiritual sense. He also has a messenger from Xiongnu say "...our women are ugly and inferior to Chinese Women"⁶ which, again shows pride in their country but also shows feelings of superiority over other countries.

The next version is a drama titled *Hangong qui*, written in the thirteenth century by author Ma Zhiyuan. In this adaptation a crooked politician convinces Emperor Yuandi to take a bride and the Emperor orders him to paint a picture of every available girl. All of the girls bribe the politician to make their pictures beautiful, all except Wang Zhaojun, whose portrait is disfigured in anger. The Emperor looks past Wang sending her to the harem, where ten years later he hears her playing her lute and is captivated by her beauty. They fall in love and the Emperor banishes the politician who flees to Xiongnu where he shows the chief Wang's portrait. He falls in love with her demanding her hand in marriage and the Emperor is forced to comply to

³ Susan F. Henssow, Lambert M. Surhone, and Mariam T. Tennoe, *Wang Zhaojun*, (Betascript Publishing, 2010)

⁴ Xinro, *The Silk Road in World History*, 6.

⁵ Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, "Wang Zhaojun on the Border: Gender and Intercultural Conflicts in Premodern Chinese Drama", (Asian Theatre Journal, 1996) 4.

⁶ Ibid.

keep the peace. Wang says goodbye to the Emperor and on her way to the Xiongnu throws herself in the river.⁷

This version of the story was written during the Mongol rule of China, where the Chinese people were considered to be the lower class. Her suicide shows how frustrated the people were being under Mongol control, who they believed to be barbaric and uneducated. The Chinese were at a point of weakness and the “Chinese cultural and moral superiority over the barbaric neighbor tribes has to be reinvented and reaffirmed whenever China is militarily weak.”⁸ Meaning when they are at their weakest they must find ways to show they are superior to the ones holding them down. Her suicide represents her courage in standing alone and fighting against the enemy, showing an independence and strength not normally associated with women during this time.

During the time that Wang Zhaojun would have lived women were not very highly regarded in society. They were seen only as property to their husbands or fathers and were only worth how pretty they were. Women live in an “a subordinate position in the family” and their day to day chores around the house were seen as “unimportant when compared to those of their ancestors or their husbands”.⁹ The way Wang Zhaojun has been remembered and regarded shows a change in how society viewed women. By hearing Wang’s story and seeing the love and support she received from the Chinese people, women of pre-modern had someone be inspired by. They began to see that women were not as inferior as society told them they were and realize they are capable of doing anything they want to. Wang helped a country begin to move forward towards equality and provided millions of people with hope, entertainment, and a way of expressing themselves.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Deng Xiaonan, “Women in Turfan during the Sixth to Eighth Centuries: A Look at Their Activities Outside the Home”, (Association for Asian Studies, 1999), 89.

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