



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

[Review of] Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire: Gender and Interiority in Chinese Painting and Poetry by Lara C.W. Blanchard

Citation for published version:

Virag, C 2019, '[Review of] Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire: Gender and Interiority in Chinese Painting and Poetry by Lara C.W. Blanchard', *NAN Nü*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 309-313.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685268-00212P06>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1163/15685268-00212P06](https://doi.org/10.1163/15685268-00212P06)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

NAN Nü

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Lara C.W. Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire. Gender and Interiority in Chinese Painting and Poetry*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018. xiii+319 pp. €116.00/US\$140.00 ISBN 978-90-04-36939-9

There seems to be something powerfully seductive about the image of a lovely, forlorn woman, pining away with longing and desire. That the image has a basis in historical fact is undeniable: one does not have to search far and wide to find cases of real heartbroken women, separated by circumstance or distance from their beloved, bearing the anguish of unfulfilled longing. But when that image gains in prominence as an object of visual representation by painters – as it did in the Song dynasty – the story becomes far more complicated and interesting. All the more so if such depictions are primarily produced by, and for, men. It is the intriguing history behind this artistic motif of the desiring female figure, captured in her state of yearning, that Lara Blanchard sets out to untangle in her book, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire. Gender and Interiority in Chinese Painting*.

The subject matter of Blanchard's study is a selection of Song dynasty *shinü hua* 仕女畫, a genre of figure paintings focusing on women – those of high status, but also educated courtesans. The paintings that Blanchard is interested in are those that depict the desires and longings of such female figures. Blanchard examines these paintings alongside textual sources such as poetry, song lyric (*ci* 詞), colophons, and letters, taking note of both important parallels as well as divergences between textual and visual representations. She sets out to provide an explanation of what might have prompted artistic depictions of this motif of desiring women, taking into account the possible motivations for their creation, their intended audience, and their qualities and uses as objects. Rejecting the widespread, naïve assumption that such paintings were “straightforward representations of women's lives” (p. 11), Blanchard proposes that these paintings, being the work of men, “tell more about how the culture viewed men in regard to their relationship with women than they do about the typical woman's experience” (p. 158). More to the point, they capture and express a complex of male desires: desire not only to be desired by such desirable women, but also men's own desire for women, and, even, their desire for political recognition. Such images, then, were inevitably bound up with the sexual dynamics of power and inequality, and the political dynamics of gender. Blanchard's objective is thus to pursue a more culturally-sensitive set of explanations that recognizes both the multiplicity of interests and functions behind these images, including those that had nothing to do with romantic relationships at all, and the role of gender in the construction of these idealized feminine images.

The book consists of four substantive chapters, each of which deals with a different angle of the complex story behind these paintings. The first chapter, “Gendered Subjectivity and Representing Interiority,” addresses two important topics that might perhaps have been dealt with separately, given their vast scope and the need for more historically nuanced discussion. The first part deals with the gender dynamics behind the construction of these portraits of the “interior” world of female desire, underscoring the fact that, being produced primarily by men, these paintings – like song lyrics – should be read as projections of male desire: “their desire for women who desire them, their longing for distant women, their expectation of their lovers’ loyalty, or their thoughts on other topics altogether” (p. 13). The second part of this chapter gives a somewhat generic account of the relationship between emotions and visual representation, based on the early Han Dynasty model of poetry as the “outer counterpart to an interior state” (p. 56).

The second chapter, “Political Interpretations of Desire,” is based on close analyses of the two famous handscrolls, *Goddess of the Luo River* (after Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之, ca. 345-406) and *Night Revels of Han Xizai* (after Gu Hongzhong 顧闳中, fl. ca. 943-60). The discussion centers on the long-standing cultural tradition of reading early poetry erotic poetry as allegories of the relationship between ruler and subject – that is, references to a woman’s yearning for her lover as an allegory of the official’s longing for recognition from his ruler. Blanchard does not reduce the paintings to the political allegories, however: in the case of the *Goddess of the Luo River*, she proposes that the surviving Song paintings depicting this theme arguably exhibit heightened attention to the feeling between narrator and the goddess, and thus departs significantly from Cao Zhi’s 曹植(192-232) rhapsody on this story; in the case of the *Night Revels of Han Xizai*, the highly sexualized scenes of the scroll are explained as playing into possible complex political motivations challenging the integrity of Han Xizai.

The third chapter, “Male Audience and Authorship: Projecting Desire and Longing onto the Female Figure,” focuses on the idea, central to this book, that *shinü hua* were primarily self-representations of men, who sought to project their own desires through by depicting women in female spaces. The main motif that occupies this chapter, traced in *Dao lian tu* 搗練圖(*Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*; attributed to Emperor Huizong 徽宗, r. 1191-25) and Mou Yi’s 牟益 (c. 1178-ca. 1242) *Dao yi tu* 搗衣圖 (Pounding Cloth), is that of preparing cloth through pounding – an activity that was associated with women longing for absent husbands and lovers, and that came to be regarded, especially in its visually depicted form, as a sexually suggestive activity.

The fourth chapter, “The Female Audience: Modeling Idealized Femininity,” considers the possibility that *shibūi bua*, though more often produced, collected and viewed by men, could also have been appreciated by women – the works under consideration here being fan paintings that both men and women could have carried around, and that might thus have been painted with an image that the bearer could identify with. These fans could have served a variety of uses, and the diverse scenes depicted on them capture different aspects of idealized femininity, but here, too, we are confronted with the feminine ideal as imagined and constructed by men – and that women were invited to model themselves after.

The book ends with a brief concluding chapter called “Interiority and the Value of Connection,” which emphasizes the wide-ranging effects, uses and interpretations of the Song trope of longing and desire in painting, demonstrating “multiple ways that art and interiority intertwine” (p. 252). Blanchard thus situates the emergence of romantically-themed paintings in the Song period within the narrative of a heightened concern with interiority more generally, which in literati society emphasized bonds among people beyond those of longing and desire. Thus it was that *shinūi bua* continued to be regarded with disdain among the literati elites, and remained the purview of the members of the court, while literati sought to capture intimacy of feeling in other kinds of relationships, especially homosocial friendship.

Blanchard’s book has a number of admirable qualities. It mobilizes fascinating textual and visual material from the Song period, and makes a persuasive case that the theme of female longing and desire was an important and real historical development in Song painting – and that this history is worth paying attention to. It thus sheds valuable light onto the history of emotional sensibilities in the Song period. It also situates the developments in painting practice within a number of broader contexts: developments in the discourse of longing and desire in contemporaneous texts; the long and varied history of conceptualizing desire and emotion, as evident in pre-Qin poetry, Han Dynasty and medieval poetics, and a diverse collection of later writings; and the distinct cultures of interaction between men and women, and the various institutionalized settings in which such interaction took place. Blanchard’s discussions of paintings are detailed, carefully contextualized and full of sensitive observations about their visual and compositional qualities. The book contains some splendid guided readings of a number of paintings, such as Mou Yi’s *Pounding Cloth*, and various fan paintings depicting women at their dressing table, engaging with mirrors and applying makeup – all of which showcase the multilayered meanings of these portraits beyond the terms of the driving narrative of the book.

There were some weaknesses as well. Most generally, given all of this rich material, more was expected by way of answers to posed questions, as well as a more rigorous conceptual treatment of the themes traced in the book. The author devotes considerable attention to pointing out that the erotic feminine image is not an “authentic” voice in the sense that it was a genuine expression of real women – that the image is in fact a construct. This is well and good, and perhaps would not come as much of a surprise to most readers. But what was not clear was why *this* particular model emerged at *this* particular time. If the developments in visual norms that Blanchard so effectively documents represents a specifically Song dynasty story, and this development comprises no less than a “revolution in the representation of women, which can be dated to the Tang-Song transition” (p. 7), then the answer to this question ought to address the historicity of this phenomenon: Why this fascination with capturing the desiring woman? Why are (some) men projecting their desires, aspirations, self-regard through specifically these kinds of feminine images? And what are the implications of their doing so?

A tantalizing proposal is raised briefly and somewhat casually on p. 66: “Because feeling is considered essentially inner in Chinese thought, I argue that the ‘inner quarters,’ or the women’s area of a wealthy household, are an especially appropriate metaphorical space for the exploration of interiority, and this may explain why poets and painters saw the female figure as ideal for the projection of desire.” This observation of the connection between emotions and the spatial imagination that governs gender relations is fascinating, but it begs further questions about the nature of these shifting ideas about space. Moreover, it is hard to know what to do with this kind of sweeping observation that feeling was regarded as “essentially inner.” Such generalities about how emotions were understood “in Chinese thought” put us on rather shaky ground, and the book does not really provide further explanations on this front. The theoretical discussion of emotions in its designated section in Chapter One reduces the entire history of this discussion to some vague observations about the correspondence theory articulated in texts like the *Li Ji* and the *Great Preface*.

In short, then, the material that Blanchard presents begs important, historically-sensitive questions, but the conceptual apparatus she provides for addressing them seem inadequate to the task. If this is a Song story, then the tools of analysis ought to be nuanced enough to capture, and make sense of, shifting norms and conceptions of emotions over time, and how things stand in the Song period. There is much relevant scholarship covering this topic, and some examination of this research would have been expected here. As it is, the terms of analysis drawn from the generic account of emotions that Blanchard relies on do not provide the means to access the far more

sophisticated and philosophically nuanced conceptions that emerged in medieval poetics or in the Song period. It is thus telling that the more intriguing points raised by writers like Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072), Li Qingzhao 李清照(1084-ca. 1155), and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), which in fact challenge the easy correspondence between feeling and expression, are quoted but go by unnoticed. What they suggest is precisely the new complexity of the conceptual landscape of emotions in the Song period.

These issues aside, this is a book with many great achievements – one that opens a window onto a fascinating slice of Song dynasty culture, as viewed from the perspective of shifting norms and practices of visual representation. The author successfully shows the complex gender dynamics behind the production, transfer and appreciation of the paintings, and her discussion gives much food for thought, not only for thinking about the dynamics of gender relationships in middle period Chinese history, but also about the meaning and fluid boundaries of gender more generally, and how these might play out in surprising ways in artistic expression.

Curie Virág
University of Edinburgh
curie.virag@ed.ac.uk