

ON LEAVES OF PRAYER
The Life and Poetry of He Shuangqing,
*a Farmwife Poet in Eighteenth-Century China.**

Elsie Choy**

ABSTRACT

Only in 1973, two and a half centuries after her death, was He Shuangqing recognized by a Taiwan historian as one of the three major women lyric poets in the Qing Dynasty. The author here outlines her impassionate quest in the United States for the life and poetry of the poet. Through her search she unearthed scholar-author Shi Zhenlin, whom the poet entrusted with her work for inclusion in his notebook, *West Green Random Notes*. This notebook also recorded pertinent glimpses of the poet's life as the daughter-in-law in a poor, uncaring farm family, and of her literary relationship with Shi and a group of scholars rallied by Shi as her audience.

At the British Museum is a fabulous Roman vase, with mythical figures in white glass on a background of blue, dating from Caesar's time. It was acquired by the Portland family of England and loaned to the Museum. In 1845, it was broken into two hundred pieces but repaired. A century later (1945), the museum bought the vase. In 1948, a package with thirty-seven missing chips materialized. Two subsequent reparations forty years apart finally incorporated nearly all of the two hundred chips to resurrect the vase in 1989.

* Paper presented at the Chinese-American Librarians Association Conference on International Access to Specialized Information, Chicago, U.S.A., June 1990.

** Writer and painter. The author's book *Leaves of Prayer, The Life and Poetry of He Shuangqing, a Farmwife Poet in Eighteenth-Century China*, is being published by The Chinese University Press of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Reconstructing a vase is analogous to the restoring of a life half buried by social expurgation. Please keep this story in mind, as I outline for you how I searched for the missing chips to reconstruct the life and work of our poet.

The poet's name is He Shuangqing. She was born in 1715 and died in approximately 1737. I first came across her in a 1978 article in the San Francisco *Tiansheng News*.¹ According to it, she was a beautiful, precocious farmer's daughter; she educated herself and learned to write poetry before she was eighteen, when she was married to an illiterate, ill-tempered farmer with a wilful mother. Her new family scoffed at her learning. They demanded a full day's work from her, even when she contracted malaria soon after her marriage. They ignored her illness; they also abused her. But through it all, she never complained and served them dutifully, as was expected of Chinese women in the old days; she was known as a filial daughter-in-law. Only in the wee hours of the night would the welling from her heart pour out into poetry she left us. She died young, about twenty-two.

Samples of her poetry in the article struck me; they showed great sensitivity and imagination. As a matter of fact, I was puzzled at how she could maintain her creativity in view of her hard life. The author of the article, Gao Shi, mentioned that the poet wrote on leaves, and this hastened my urgency to retrieve her work. To my knowledge, women's writing before modern times in both the East and the West was generally not taken seriously enough to be kept after their death. Consequently, I was also perplexed as to how He Shuangqing's work was preserved in the first place, as the article implied.

The repairers of the Roman vase had all the chips for their restoration jobs. They also knew how the vase should look from descriptions of it. In my case, I had only a few chips plus a reference from the article. How should I proceed? Naturally, the first step was to look into the reference. At the same time, I started background research on the life of women in China through the ages so that I would have a historical perspective against which the proprieties for women in the early eighteenth century could be measured.

My frustration in not being able to find that reference in the University of Michigan Asia Library should have been a warning that the road ahead might not be smooth. I finally cornered a librarian who kindly helped me look into the Union file, tracing that reference to the Library of Congress. When Washington finally agreed to send me photo copies of the book's pages for a price, I was elated. In this way I secured a small volume,

Poetry Collection of the Snow-Crushed Studio (1927), with a collection of the poet's work, containing no less than seven poems and fourteen lyric verses, which really was quite an offering from a belabored farmwife in the three or four years of her married life before she died.²

The editor of this volume, Zhang Shoulin, characterized the poet as being one of those ill-fated women under the restrictions imposed by society and abused by an uncaring family. He praised her womanly virtues and her poetry and mourned her early death. He attributed her use of leaves to her pessimism on life, but did not answer the question of how, in spite of her using this fragile medium, her work did survive. Indeed, he was the most sentimental person I ever came across in print over the restrictions on women in the old Chinese society. Little did I suspect that that was his way to deflect his readers from going to the source of the poet's life. As one of the victimized readers, I sweated over the references he gave, only to find them either too trivial to be found or circumstantial at best.

Puzzled but not discouraged, I shifted my attention to the poet's poetry, translating it for a start. Here I also ran into difficulties, for names would crop up with no reference to her life as told. When I checked the location of Danyang where she was born, and Jintan where she spent her short married life, I found them to be towns forty li apart in western Jiangsu province, whereas the editor said they are the same place. Such carelessness would not have bothered a casual reader, but it jolted me. I began to see that the poet's life as this editor had told it would also be accepted as the whole story, since it fitted perfectly into the mode of the ideal daughter-in-law of old. I began to see that my probing had upset that perfect story. In other words, all this time I had been trying to build in my mind a vase out of the chips from this reference, but the image they constituted came to nothing more than a common vessel, which lacks the capacity to support the first-rate poet that I recognized from the poet's work.

This challenged me to start my research from scratch again. Aside from carrying on with the reading on the life of women in China through the ages, I now roamed the stacks to look into other subjects that might shed light on my poet. Among the topics I investigated were: Chinese county histories and ancient chronologies and histories, critiques, and anthologies of Chinese poetry, especially those by women. The county histories confirmed the existence of the poet, attributing to her the same volume of poetry I had obtained from the Library of Congress. From the anthologists also I found that she was not completely forgotten. On the other hand, a new puzzle turned up: wherever the poet's life is mentioned, it is always the same story in

the very same wording as used by the editor of the reference and by the newspaper article.

So for a while, it seemed that the editor had the last say. But then I came across *Selections of Poetry by Women Writers*, a 1971 anthology by Tong Renlan and Sun Peicai.³ These co-authors, unlike all other anthologists on He Shuangqing, criticized her for not standing up for her own rights in her family. They derisively mentioned that the poet had communications with some "so-called scholars." This missing chip was like a bomb to me. Unfortunately, like so many books, this anthology carries no reference list. It was much later that I was able to confirm this fact, in Wang-Fanting's *Women in Chinese History*.⁴ Through such a tedious process, I finally located the original trove containing all the chips on He Shuangqing's life and work. This trove was found in the literary notebook of scholar Shi Zhenlin's *West Green Random Notes (Xiqing Sanji)*.⁵

With all the chips recovered from Shi's book, a Chinese vase of rare beauty materialized before my eyes. He Shuangqing's spirit shone beyond her assigned role of being just an obedient daughter-in-law. It became clear how the initiative she took when young, in acquiring an education for herself and in learning to write poetry, followed through in her later years. She did not let her heavy duties in her husband's home stand in the way of her personal cultivation. Her early creativity had actually endowed her with a will to seek for herself some order from her chaotic marriage; it had strengthened her confidence to listen to her own counsel in the face of the upheaval in her life. Hence, she had the resolve to keep to her calling in spite of her family's denunciation, her devastating illness, her work load, and the abuse she suffered at home. She had the courage to refuse to commit suicide, when that was the only recourse provided by her society for women in difficulties. She had the capacity to rise above such unreason and choose to live out her life purposely to provide an example through her work for other women in the same predicament, so that they "would not blame themselves" and could strive to live transcendently above their difficult lives.

To accomplish this goal, He Shuangqing wisely sought out scholar Shi Zhenlin for him to record her work in his literary notebook. Her unconventional action opened up her world, for, in spite of the differences in age and social standing between the older writer and the young poet, they were two thoughtful people sharing similar ideals and oriented toward a poetic vision which transcends conventions. Shi had the foresight to chronicle her life, in addition to recording her work for her. Furthermore, his empathy with her unhappy life made him rally his friends as her audience,

thus helping her break through her isolation. From this point on, a literary friendship between the poet and the scholars developed to bring a new dimension into the life of everyone involved. The hard fact was that non-familial relationships in any form between male and female were forbidden by the social mores of the time. But the beauty was that He Shuangqing made no secret about her communications with the scholars, nor did she let their praise of her work soften her fortitude.

The poet's work was very popular when it was first published in Shi's book in 1738, shortly after her death. However, after Shi's death, people began to lift her poetry out of his book to form independent collections under her own name. This is when her chronicle began to suffer social censorship, with the reference to its source removed. In this way, Shi Zhenlin and all his writings became conveniently forgotten.

It wasn't until 1973 that He Shuangqing was finally recognized as one of the three major women lyric poets in the Qing dynasty by a Taiwan historian, Han Shiqu.⁶ In the West, two of her lyric poems have been freely translated by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung.⁷ In *Leaves of Prayer* I have translated her complete work of eleven poems and fourteen lyric verses. These poems in their original Chinese are done in the calligraphy of scholar-author T. C. Lai for my book.

He Shuangqing's creative efforts helped somewhat to alleviate the pain she suffered under her family. But what superhuman effort enabled her to maintain her creativity in the face of her adversity? Through in-depth study of her life and work, checked against readings in Chan Buddhism and the psychology of creativity, I found that her capacity for understanding and her compassion enabled her to leap into transcendence, and thus to enlightenment. These achievements in turn placed her in a state of blessedness, by which her creativity could only grow. She proved that her courage to create gave her courage to be, and vice versa.

Shi Zhenlin's devotion to the poet no doubt added depth to his chronicle of her. His quiet sensibilities, keen observation, and creative imagination make his sketches of the poet come alive in his superb writing. They are replete with details and nuances that make us feel he was present in all the scenes, observing her life directly. This makes his story of our poet defy retelling in any way other than the way he told it. This tells us about the quality of Shi's writing, how it so mesmerized even the censors of He Shuangqing that they would throw caution to the wind when they used it verbatim in their truncated account of her. Finally, it is only Shi's sensitive

chronicle of the poet that enabled me to study her in depth so as to follow her every step toward enlightenment.

I feel it my duty to share all this with my readers in the best way I know. For this reason, aside from my own commentary and my translation of He Shuangqing's poetry in *Leaves of Prayer*, I have chosen to tell her story by using selected translations from Shi Zhenlin's *West Green Random Notes*. I also hoped that by so doing I could introduce to the twentieth century not only the one poet I originally set out to do, but two great writers from eighteenth-century China. To me they deserve our commemoration in this exquisite Chinese vase now restored in *Leaves of Prayer*.

NOTES

1. Gao Shi, "The Ill-Fated Poet, He Shuangqing," *Tiansheng News*, San Francisco, Sept. 19, 1978.
2. Zhang Shoulin, ed., *Poetry Collection of the Snow-Crushed Studio* (Beijing: Beijing Cultural Society, 1927).
3. Tong Renlan and Sun Peicai, eds., *Selections of Poetry by Women Writers* (Hong Kong: Lechi Publishing Co., 1971).
4. Wang Fanting, *Women in Chinese History* (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1966).
5. Shi Zhenlin, *West Green Random Notes (Xiqing Sanji)*, edited by Zhang Jinglu, Collection of Rare Manuscripts from Chinese Literature Series 1-5 (Shanghai: Shanghai Magazine Company, 1935). *Xiqing Sanji* was first published in 1738.
6. Han Shiqiu, *History of Literature of the Qing Dynasty* (Gaoxing, Taiwan: Baicheng Books, 1973), 189-192.
7. Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, translators and editors, *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972).