

Banished Immortal

BANISHED IMMORTAL

*Searching for Shuangqing,
China's Peasant Woman Poet*

PAUL S. ROPP

Ann Arbor

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TO MARJORIE
*for hearing
and reading
everything
ten times over
and still smiling*

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Preface

He Shuangqing (1712–?) was a native of Jiangsu Province, and came from a family of farmers. She learned to read and write from her uncle, a teacher in a country school. She exchanged her embroidery for books of poetry. At eighteen she married a farmer of the Zhou family in a nearby town. Her husband was illiterate, had a bad temper and treated her cruelly, and her mother-in-law often tortured her.

—Kenneth Rexroth and Chung Ling,
The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China (1972)

This short biography is the first thing I ever read about He Shuangqing. In the mid-1980s, I was just starting to study writings by women in the Qing period (1644–1911), and this anthology of English translations was the easiest place to begin. Intrigued by the idea of a peasant woman poet, I soon found a few more of her poems in Liang Yizhen's Chinese book, *A History of Women's Literature in the Qing Dynasty*, originally published in 1925 and reprinted in Taiwan in 1958. In China, Su Zhecong published a valuable anthology of Chinese women's writings in 1987. She offered a still more detailed picture of Shuangqing's life:

He Shuangqing, style name Qiubi, was from Danyang (in the southeastern part of what is today Jiangsu Province) and lived in the vicinity of Xiaoshan [in Jintan County]. Her family had been farmers for generations. She was very beautiful, multitalented, and physically frail, and she had a gentle disposition. In 1732, when she was seventeen years old, she was married into a poor family of woodcutters, surnamed Zhou, who lived at Xiaoshan. Her husband was over ten years older than she was. Her mother-in-law was wicked; her husband had a violent temper, and she suffered from

chronic malaria. From the time she was very young, she loved to study, and whenever she heard books being read aloud, she would break into a smile. Her uncle was a village tutor who used to teach next door to her house. When she heard him reciting from books, she would diligently and secretly write everything down. She had no writing materials, so to write her poetry and song lyrics, she would use powder to write on leaves. She eventually died from overwork and illness. Later someone collected her writings under the title *Lyrics from the Snow-Crushed Studio*. (Su Zhecong 1987, 408. All translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.)

Professor Su Zhecong included in her anthology seven song lyrics and one nine-verse poem by Shuangqing, and she listed two sources for her poems, an anthology of song lyrics and a book called simply *Random Notes from Xiqing*.

Having previously ignored the voluminous historical record of Chinese women's writings, I was anxious to believe that a peasant woman in eighteenth-century China might have the talent, the educational opportunity, and the personal experience to write great poetry. A more personal reason for my curiosity about He Shuangqing was that I grew up on a farm myself, raising corn and dairy cattle in central Illinois. I had long noticed—but never shared—the common assumption of city folk that rural people are by definition provincial, ignorant, and unsophisticated. My own grandfather, who died twelve years before I was born, was a poor farmer in two ways: he was not very good at farming *and* not very wealthy, in large part because he spent much of the family's money on books, and the rest to publish at his own expense two small volumes of his own poetry. So, the existence of a peasant poet in China seemed quite possible to me. I took all these poetry anthologies at face value and included several poems by Shuangqing in a paper for presentation in 1987 at the American Historical Association and a bit later at a seminar at Harvard University.

I quoted two poems by Shuangqing, citing her work as further evidence of the spread of female literacy in the Qing period and as a typical example of the expression of female unhappiness in women's writings. I argued that literacy in fact raised women's horizons and expectations in ways that Qing society was not prepared to accommodate. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find women expressing their sadness or unhappiness in poetry.

Having come of age in America in the 1960s, I have always been drawn to the dissatisfied and the dissenters in studying Chinese history.

I just assume that the eccentrics, the outsiders, and the misfits are more interesting as subjects of research, and more likely to be insightful social critics, than the wealthy, successful, and prominent scholar-officials who are at the center of most studies of Chinese history. It makes sense to me that powerless people, of necessity, understand the powerful better than the powerful understand the powerless.

My interest in gender relations also grew naturally out of the 1960s. My wife, Marjorie, and I had read and admired Betty Friedan in the early sixties, just before we got married, went off to graduate school, and started having children. The role of societies in shaping gender relations and expectations became something of an obsession for both of us, as it did for many in our generation. So He Shuangqing, whose life and poetry raises so many issues of class, power, gender relations, and literary creation, seemed a natural topic to explore in detail.

My general thesis on the rising but frustrated expectations of women was politely accepted at the AHA convention and at Harvard, though clearly some of my colleagues seemed unimpressed and puzzled by my decision to focus my research on writings by women. After all, so these (male) scholars seemed to think, men ran Chinese society and made the “big decisions,” both in politics and in culture. Why study the writings of women? Didn’t they just write about birds and flowers, boudoir daydreams, and domestic concerns? I also took some heat as a historian dabbling in literature. Historians tend to be suspicious of literary sources, and literary specialists often suspect that historians lack the specialized training to understand and interpret literature.

I was pleased, but also nervous, when invited to give a seminar presentation at Harvard on my research on women’s writings. In a hot and crowded seminar room, I talked for about an hour and felt relieved on finishing my presentation. Ten minutes into the discussion period, Michael Fuller, a young assistant professor of Chinese literature, raised his hand at the other end of the long table. He asked with a hint of mischief in his voice, “What makes you believe your sources on the poet He Shuangqing? It seems highly unlikely that a peasant woman would ever have the time, energy, or opportunity to become literate, let alone write such highly stylized forms as regulated verse and song lyrics in classical Chinese.” Touché! The question fairly knocked the wind out of me. I stammered something to the effect, “Well . . . I’ve seen poetry by He Shuangqing quoted in three separate sources. Given the nature of Chinese sources available in this country, we are heavily dependent on anthologies of women’s writings. I just assume that these anthologies of Chinese poetry are based in historical fact.” Michael kindly dropped the

subject, but the half smile on his face let me know that he was not in the slightest convinced by my feeble answer to his question.

A few months after my Harvard experience, at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, *the* important scholarly meeting in our field, I met Dorothy Ko, a young rising star in Chinese women's history. I told Dorothy I was particularly intrigued by He Shuangqing, the peasant woman poet, partly because I found her poetry very interesting and partly because I had already run into serious skepticism about her very existence. I still believed my anthologies but knew that I would have to find more original sources if I was to convince others of her historical reality. I would need to know much more about this peasant woman if I was to have any hope of winning over those who doubted the value of women's literature in the first place.

A few months later, Dorothy sent me several notes on sources on He Shuangqing, and she mentioned that all the sources seemed to be based on a book called *Random Notes from Xiqing* by an obscure scholar, poet, and painter named Shi Zhenlin (1693–1779). Not long after that, in December 1990, while on sabbatical in Taiwan, I received a package from Dorothy, who was then living in Tokyo. Much to my surprise and delight, she had found a newly reprinted version of Shi's *Random Notes* in Tokyo; she immediately bought two copies, one for me and one for Grace Fong, another scholar with an interest in He Shuangqing. She enclosed a letter outlining her initial impressions of the book, giving me a preview of what I would find there:

Much of the encounter between Shi Zhenlin/his friends and the peasant woman seemed platonic—the male literati were truly impressed by her talent, but much of it seemed sensuous if not erotic—men visiting her in her farm house, alone, and talking for hours; they kept going back for visits and maintained close communications via exchange of poetry. The peasant women were either immune from the norms of behavior that governed gentry women, or we are reading a scandalous tale. Interestingly enough, the authenticity of the Shuangqing story was, similar to the Xiaoqing story [another popular tale of a talented woman doomed to suffering], contested. I tend to believe that Shi Zhenlin did not make up the story. Real or imagined, we have here a rare glimpse into an interaction between the male, literati world and the female, peasant existence—a classic example of the interaction between class and gender. (Letter of Dec. 2, 1990)

What a godsend! Dorothy had sent me the key source I had been unable to find, and concisely outlined a research agenda for me. Her letter sent me rifling through the book to see what she might have found scandalous in the story. Much to my chagrin, I discovered Shi's memoir to be written in an extremely difficult classical Chinese prose style, full of obscure characters and arcane references. Many modern editions of classical Chinese texts include modern punctuation and annotations explaining allusions and particularly difficult passages. This work had none of that: no commas, no quotation or question marks, and no annotations or explanations of any kind. It had been reprinted in Beijing in 1987, from a 1907 version, with no crutches provided for the novice reader of obscure classical texts.

Back home in the states, the linguistic obstacles alone should have sent me looking for another topic, but as luck would have it, I just happened to be spending my sabbatical at the Inter-University Program for Chinese Language Studies in Taipei, popularly known as the Stanford Center. I had originally studied Chinese as a graduate student at the Stanford Center, and I now had a fellowship to spend the year in residence there, both to revive my spoken Chinese and to have expert help with my own Chinese research materials. I was doubly blessed that year with two talented teachers who functioned in effect as my personal tutors for the entire year.

As soon as Shi Zhenlin's *Random Notes* arrived in my mailbox, I read it with my senior teacher, Liu Chunhua, whom I called "Liu Laoshi" (Teacher Liu). My task each day was to read one or two pages, look up the characters I did not already know, and come to class prepared to explain in vernacular Chinese the meaning of the classical prose and poetry I had read. Many days I came to class with more questions than answers concerning the meaning of what I had read. We might get through a page in an hour, but some days we would only manage a few sentences, or perhaps one poem. After class, I would rush back to my office and type out in English my understanding of what we had just discussed in Chinese. Taking my fresh English translation back to class the next day, I would raise any lingering questions from the previous day's work, and because poems are so tricky, I usually explained one more time, in Chinese, how my English translation of the poem now read. Only after clarifying unresolved questions from the previous day's discussion would we proceed to new material.

Liu Laoshi was born into a wealthy family in China before the Communist revolution. Having received a classical education, including a

master's degree in Chinese poetry, she astonished me with her knowledge of classical Chinese. She was an enthusiastic and demanding teacher. The words I most dreaded to hear from her were a sarcastic "Luo Jiaoshou!" (*Professor Ropp!*) in response to my mistaken explanation of a term, or my confession of complete ignorance over something she thought I should know. Her chiding was all in my own interest, she and I both knew, and together we proceeded to be delighted by what we found in Shi Zhenlin's memoir. Her main field was the classical poetry of the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), and she had never heard of He Shuangqing. I was consequently pleased to discover that I could serve as her informant on Chinese culture in the eighteenth century. She was in a sense an amateur reader of Shi Zhenlin, but a native wholly at home with the text at hand. By her own reactions to Shuangqing's poetry and her story, Liu Laoshi taught me more about Chinese culture than I ever could have learned from books alone. Thus, she became an important participant in my own search for Shuangqing.

In Shi Zhenlin's account, Shuangqing is so beautiful and talented that he and his friends regard her as a "banished immortal." Chinese people in the eighteenth century believed that extraordinarily talented people could achieve the supernatural status of an immortal, divine beings that live on forever in Heaven, a perpetually happy realm unlimited by the finiteness and suffering of human life. Shi and his circle, including Shuangqing, also believed in Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation. Sometimes an immortal might offend the higher powers of Heaven and be banished to live an incarnation in the "red dust" of the mundane material world. Since Shuangqing seemed too beautiful and too talented to be a mortal human being, it was assumed that she must have been an immortal banished to the human realm for one incarnation.

When I started reading Shi Zhenlin's memoir, I never dreamed what it would lead to: my dabbling in this topic for nearly a decade before getting my thoughts in publishable form; my raising doubts about Shuangqing's historical existence at a conference at Harvard in 1992; Du Fangqin and Elsie Choy writing books on Shuangqing soon thereafter, arguing that she was indeed a real historical figure; and my eventual teaming up with Professor Du herself and with Professor Zhang Hongsheng to travel to the rural county of Jintan in Jiangsu Province, where Shi Zhenlin once lived, to look for traces of the world he described as Shuangqing's. After an exhilarating trip to Jintan in October and November 1997, I turned to the task of writing a short book for a general audience. The adventure of this trip crystallized in my mind

something I had not understood before: that the most interesting part of this project has been the process of discovery along the way. I want to try to recapture for the general reader the pleasures and pitfalls of an American scholar trying to understand and interpret a tiny piece of Chinese culture. The result is a memoir of my own, describing my quest to make sense of—and find truths in—the story of Shuangqing.

In *The Great Cat Massacre*, Robert Darnton suggests the value of historians' studying the past as anthropologists study alien cultures. Such an approach seems doubly appropriate when one is studying the past of an alien culture. Darnton illustrates with wit and wisdom what wonderful surprises one can find in dusty archives on eighteenth-century France. "When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is at its most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view" (5). I read these lines just as I was starting to read Shi Zhenlin's *Random Notes* with Liu Laoshi. They seemed a written prescription for what I should set about doing. On almost every page I found comments or actions that seemed strange, odd, puzzling. If I could understand these and make them familiar, I could perhaps illuminate aspects of life in eighteenth-century China that have been overlooked in studies of the famous and successful movers and shakers of that time.

The main threads running through this book are (1) my reading of Shuangqing's story in Shi Zhenlin's *Random Notes*; (2) the poetry and song lyrics of Shuangqing and their place in Chinese culture; (3) the evolution of opinion on Shuangqing and her poetry from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, including debates over whether she really lived or was just the fictional creation of Shi Zhenlin; and (4) my trip to Jintan and Danyang with Professors Du Fangqin and Zhang Hongsheng, in search of information about the vanished worlds of Shi Zhenlin and Shuangqing. I begin with my departure, accompanied by Professor Du Fangqin, from Beijing on the trip to Shi Zhenlin's home county in October 1997. Following Shi Zhenlin's own penchant for random wandering and travel writing, I intersperse chapters on the trip here and there throughout the book.

I have come to see Shi Zhenlin's memoir as a window on one part of eighteenth-century Chinese literati culture. It is not always a clear window, to be sure. As Robert Darnton would say, there are many "opaque points" in the text. That is what makes it so interesting. In each chapter on the memoir I take one particular topic or approach and try to clean that bit of the window from that particular angle, for a clearer look.

After getting each piece of the window as clear as I can, in chapter 14, “Reincarnations,” I trace the evolution of Shuangqing’s image in Chinese culture, from the first publication of *Random Notes* in 1737 down to the present day. That too is a fascinating story, because much of Shi Zhenlin’s original narrative was left out of the accounts of Shuangqing that got passed on to later generations. And some details that have no basis in Shi’s memoir got added to her later biographies.

Shi Zhenlin related Shuangqing’s story in a very fragmentary and circuitous memoir of a decade of his life. After he passed from the scene, Shuangqing’s story made its own way into Chinese culture in equally fragmentary and circuitous ways. She gradually became a cultural icon herself while Shi Zhenlin and much of his original story was ignored or forgotten. My own investigation into the Shuangqing story occurred in fits and starts, in bits and pieces, amid many other distractions, over more than a decade. This book is thus the story of three exploratory journeys through Chinese culture: Shi Zhenlin’s, Shuangqing’s, and my own.

Note on Pronunciation

Chinese names present a challenge to the English speaker for three reasons: (1) Chinese is a tonal language, so inflection is far more important in Chinese than in English; (2) Chinese includes some sounds for which we have no ready equivalent in English; and (3) the pinyin romanization system used in China and in most newspapers and scholarly publications has some peculiarities that are not very user-friendly. Leaving the subtleties of Chinese pronunciation (tones and tongue position, etc.) to qualified language teachers, I list here a few of the idiosyncrasies of the pinyin romanization system. Many words in pinyin are not misleading to the English speaker: Beijing, Ming dynasty, and Zhou Enlai, to name a few. For the others, a few rules will help.

c = ts

cao = tsao

q = ch

qing = ching

qi = chee

x = sh

xi = she (with a hint of *see* thrown in)

xiao = sheow (in one quick syllable)

u = ü (with the German umlaut)

yu = ü

xue = shüeh

shi = shr (or *sure* with a hard midwestern *r*)

Important examples (surname first, usually one syllable; given name follows, usually two syllables):

He Shuangqing	Huh Shwang (<i>a</i> as in <i>father</i>) ching
Shi Zhenlin	Shr Zhen (rhymes with <i>fun</i>) lin
Liu Laoshi	Lēō (in one compact syllable) Lao (rhymes with <i>cow</i>) shr
Du Fangqin	Dū Fang (<i>a</i> as in <i>father</i>) chin
Zhang Hongsheng	Zhang Hong (<i>o</i> as in <i>hoof</i>) sheng (rhymes with <i>flung</i>)
Xiaowan	Sheow (in one quick syllable) wan (<i>a</i> as in <i>father</i>)

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