

= Xue Susu =

Xue Susu (Chinese : 徐 淑 ; also known as Xue Wu , Xuesu , Sunjung among other pen names) (c.1564 ? 1650 ? C.E.) was a Chinese courtesan . Known as one of the " Eight Great Courtesans of the Ming Dynasty " , she was an accomplished painter and poet , and was noted for her skill at mounted archery . She was particularly noted for her figure paintings , which included many Buddhist subjects . Her works are held in a number of museums both in China and elsewhere . Her archery was commented upon by a number of contemporary writers , as were her masculine , martial tendencies ; these were regarded as an attractive feature by the literati of the period .

She lived in Eastern China , residing for most of her life in the Zhejiang and Jiangsu districts . After a career as a celebrated courtesan in Nanjing , Xue married several times , but none of these unions lasted . During her later life , she eventually opted for the life of a Buddhist recluse .

= = Biography = =

Xue was born in either Suzhou or Jiaxing (contemporary sources disagree) . According to the historian Qian Qianyi she spent at least some of her childhood in Beijing . She spent her professional life in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter of Nanjing in the 1580s , where she became something of a celebrity among the literati and government officials who frequented the " flower houses " there . She was highly selective in her clientele , accepting only learned and scholarly men as her lovers and declining to proffer her affections for mere financial gain ; suitors might spend thousands of taels on her to no avail .

In the 1590s she returned to Beijing , where the parties and literary gatherings that she hosted , as well as her archery demonstrations , further cemented her reputation . Xue referred to herself as " a female knight @-@ errant " , and took her name from a famous woman warrior from history ; she also chose the sobriquet Wulang ?? (" fifth young gentleman ") as a nickname . The " female knight @-@ errant " epithet was reiterated by both the bibliophile Hu Yinglin and Fan Yulin , Secretary to the Ministry of War . Apparently fond of martial causes , she was not above using her position to influence military affairs , on one occasion abandoning her lover Yuan Baode when he refused to fund an expedition against the Japanese in Korea .

At some point after 1605 her career as a courtesan came to an end when she married the playwright and bureaucrat Shen Defu . She was married several times (making many of the proposals herself) but none of these unions lasted . As well as Shen Defu , her husbands included General Li Hualong , art critic Li Rihua and , in later life , an unnamed (but wealthy) merchant from Suzhou . Although she wanted children , she was never able to have any .

In later life she converted to Buddhism and remained single thereafter , largely retiring from the world . Even in her eighties , however , she was still active in the literary world , entertaining female artists such as Huang Yuanjie and Yi Lin at her home on the West Lake after the collapse of the Ming Dynasty . With her Buddhist friend Yang Jiangzi (the sister of Xue 's fellow courtesan Liu Yin) , she made pilgrimages to sacred sites such as Mount Lu and Mount Emei . The date of her death is uncertain ; some sources suggest that she may have lived into the 1650s whilst others put her death in the late 1630s or early 1640s . Qian Qianyi mentions her death in a work published in 1652 , so it is evident that she must have died before this date .

= = Paintings = =

Already an accomplished painter in her teenage years , Xue was well known for her artistic talent . Her work was considered similar to that of Chen Chun . One of her paintings was considered " the most accomplished work of its kind in the whole of the Ming period " , and contemporary art critics regarded her as " a master of technique " . Hu Yinglin considered her to be at the pinnacle of contemporary painting , asking , " What famous painter with skilled hands can surpass her ? " and claiming that " ... [she] surpasses anyone in the painting of bamboo and orchids . " She was also keenly admired by eminent painter and art critic Dong Qichang , who was inspired to copy the entire

Heart Sutra in response to Xue 's painting of the bodhisattva Guanyin ; he claimed that " None [of Xue Susu 's works] lacks an intention and spirit that approaches the divine . " Although she painted the standard subjects of landscapes , bamboo and blossoms (being particularly fond of orchids) , Xue was noted for her work in figure painting , which was a comparatively unusual artistic topic for courtesans to address . Examples of her paintings are displayed at the Honolulu Museum of Art and the San Francisco Asian Art Museum .

= = Poetry = =

Xue regularly accented her paintings with her own poems , and published two volumes of writing , only one of which is still extant . Hua suo shi Chinese : ??? (Trifles about Flowers) is a collection of short prose essays and anecdotes about various flowers , whilst Nan you cao Chinese : ??? (Notes from a Journey to the South) , which has been lost , apparently contained a selection of her poems regarding life as a courtesan . A number of these were collected in various anthologies from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties .

Hu Yinglin wrote that " Her poetry , although lacking in freedom , shows a talent rare among women . " Moving in literary circles , Xue also provided the subject matter for many contemporary poets . Xu Yuan , another female poet of the period , describes Xue 's allure :

Hu Yinglin wrote of Xue :

Xue 's own works deal with a variety of themes , from the mildly erotic :

to the romantic :

to the whimsically philosophical :

Xue often exchanged poems and paintings with her clientele , receiving their own artworks in exchange .

= = Archery = =

Whilst she excelled at poetry , painting and embroidery , the skill that set Xue apart from other courtesans and created a cult of celebrity around her was her talent for archery . Her mastery of a traditionally masculine art gave her an air of androgyny that was considered highly attractive by the literati of the time . Having practiced in Beijing as a child she furthered her skills during a sojourn in the company of a military officer in the outlying regions of China . The horsemen of the local tribes there were impressed with her shooting , and she became something of a local celebrity . Later in life she gave public demonstrations in Hangzhou , which drew large audiences . Hu Yinglin describes one such performance :

" She is able to shoot two balls from her crossbow one after another and make the second ball strike the first and break it in mid @-@ air . Another trick she can do is to place a ball on the ground , and , by pulling the bow backwards with her left hand , while her right hand draws the bow from behind her back , hit it . Out of a hundred shots , she does not miss a single one .

The poet Lu Bi recalls another trick shot performed by Xue : " When the servant girl takes a ball in her hand and places it on top of her head / She [Xue] turns around , hits it with another ball , and both balls fall to the ground . "