To the tune "Southland Song"—"Phoenix-like bun and gold-pleated ribbon" | 南歌子 · 鳳髻金泥帶

Text Information
Author | Ouyang Xiu
Language | Chinese
Period | 11th Century
Genre | Song lyric (ci)
Source | Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋 (ed.). *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞. Vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965. 140.
Collection | Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia
URL | https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/ouyang_xiu_phoenix-like_bun/

Translation by Qian Jia. Introduction and notes by Nina Du and Runqi Zhang.

Introduction to the Text
This song lyric portrays scenes in the life of a newlywed couple, focusing on the emotions of the wife. In the first stanza, she is putting on her makeup and styling her hair. In order to win the favor of the husband, she dresses carefully and asks him his opinion. The next stanza depicts her doing embroidery, a traditional hobby for women at that time.

The *ci* genre of Chinese poetry first emerged in the Sui dynasty (581-619), was further developed in the Tang dynasty (618-907) and matured in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127). *Ci* is usually translated into English as "song lyrics". This is because *ci* were composed by poets to fit pre-existing tunes. The number of lines, the line lengths, and the tonal and rhythmic patterns of *ci* vary with the tunes, which number in the hundreds. One common occasion for composing *ci* would be a banquet: song lyrics would be scribbled down by guests and then sung by musical performers as entertainment. Other occasions for composing and enjoying *ci* would be more casual: the poet might sing the lyrics to himself at home or while travelling (many *ci* poets were civil servants of the Imperial Court and often had to travel great distances to carry out their work). Sometimes the lyrics would be sung by ordinary people in the same way as folk songs. This oral and musical quality sets it apart from other genres of poetry in China during the same period, which were largely written texts with more elevated objectives. There are two main types of *ci*: wǎnyuē (婉约, "graceful") and háofàng (豪放, "bold"). The wǎnyuē subgenre primarily focuses on emotion and many of its lyrics are about courtship and love, while the háofàng subgenre often deals with themes that were considered more profound by contemporary audiences, such as ageing and mortality, or the rewards and disappointments of public service.

Ouyang Xiu was a highly influential politician, scholar, and historian of the Northern Song dynasty. He was revered as a grand master of literature and philosophy, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he laid the foundation for the literati mentality of the dynasty. When Ouyang was four years old, the death of his father, a fifty-seven-year-old military officer, left the family destitute. Poverty did not stop Ouyang's passion for reading: he would borrow books from his neighbors and make copies in order to study them further. Later, he became a bureaucrat and was posted to many cities as a prefect of the imperial court. In his political life, he was principled and solemn, and wrote a great deal in many genres. Much of his writing reflects his dignified character. His song lyrics, however, provide an interesting contrast. Their content may be drawn in part from the colorful private life he enjoyed in his younger years, including liaisons with many different courtesans. Interestingly, they are often written from the perspective of a lovelorn courtesan abandoned by an inconstant lover, in effect casting himself as the villain.

About this Edition
The original text of this *ci* is based on the edition by Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋 (Quan Song Ci 全宋詞. Vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965). Punctuation follows the edition. Since ci poetry rarely includes personal pronouns, and gender-differentiated pronouns did not exist in Classical Chinese of this period, the gender of the speaker as well as their perspective (e.g. first, second or third person) must often be deduced by the translator from context.

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Further Reading

Chang, Kang-i Sun. The Evolution of Tz'u Poetry: from Late Tang to Northern Sung. Princeton UP, 1980.

- *A standard survey of the early history of Chinese song lyrics (romanized as both ci and tz'u).*

Egan, Ronald. "The Song Lyric." The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, vol. 1, edited by Stephen Owen, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 434-452.

- *An overview of the genre.*

Owen, Stephen. Just a Song: Chinese Lyrics from the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries. Asia Center, Harvard UP, 2019.

- *A recent new history of the genre.*

Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋, editor. Quan Song Ci 全宋詞. Zhonghua shu ju, 1965. 5 vols.

- *A comprehensive edition of ci from the Song dynasty and the source text for the ci in this collection (introductions and annotations are in Chinese).*

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玉樓春	To the tune "Phoenix-like bun"
鳳髻金泥帶。	Phoenix-like bun and gold-pleated ribbon,
龍紋玉掌梳。	Hand-shaped jade comb with dragon pattern.
走來窗下笑相扶。	Running over to the window in laughter and snuggling up to her husband,
愛道畫眉深淺，	Fondly asking him whether her the shade of her painted eyebrows,
入時無。	is fashionable or not.
弄筆偎人久，	Playing with the brush and leaning into him for a long time,
描花試手初。	She tries to trace the embroidery with her hand for the first time.
等閒妨了繡功夫。	Casually, she delays the time for embroidery work.
笑問雙鴛鴦字，	Smiling, she asked: "the two characters of *yuan* and *yang*,
怎生書。	How should I write them?

Critical Notes

Translation

Line 9 "Yuanyang" means mandarin duck. The character "yuan" refers to the male one, and "yang" the female. As mandarin ducks are often in pairs, they are regarded as a symbol for couples and marriage.