



Heroines of the Everlasting Tales:

A Comparative Study

# 中西方“和亲”女人之比较

## ——永恒的传说

徐冬梅 著



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## 内 容 简 介

对于古英国文学和中国古代文学中的和亲公主,本书试图从文学形象、现代批评家对她们的鉴定赏析、以及大众对她们的认知这三个角度进行比较分析,通过三者之间千丝万缕的联系,揭示这种文学现象存在的意义,从而达到引导跨文化交流和映射传统认识误区的目的。

通过分析和亲公主这一专有名词在两种不同文化背景下衍生及被再创的相似情境,作者认为这一群体往往被剥离其特定的历史身份、地位甚至性别角色而被格式化、典型化,成为一种舆论导向明显的文化符号,从而导致这些妇女的主体意识被漠视,个体存在的积极意义缺失。同时,通过重新审视著名的女性贩卖理论,作者试图说明和亲公主的典型化在很大程度上来源于对传统女性社会角色的误解和歧视。

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# INTRODUCTION

Since 1999, every summer in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia witnesses a grand gathering: Chinese and international people of various professions fly in from all directions to visit scenic spots of the city, engage in forums on local customs, explore business opportunities, and seek for economic and cultural exchange and cooperation. This gathering was originally named the Grassland Cultural Festival, since Hohhot is known for its vast expanse of grasslands, but the sponsors were sensible enough to realize soon that the city was better known for something else. A woman. A historical figure whose name resounds in every ear, whose story is familiar to every household, whose transnational marriage is now recognized as a display of ethnic unity and friendship, who in a word is famous enough to attract visitors and suits well the purpose of the meeting.

That woman is Wang Zhaojun<sup>①</sup>. She was married to the Xiongnu<sup>②</sup> leader during Emperor Yuan's reign (49-33 B. C. E) of the West Han Dynasty (25-200 B. C. E) as the royal court's strategic plan to cement peace between the two bordering nations, and in fact is the most renowned of her kind throughout Chinese feudal history—the so-called *heqin gongzhu* [wed-for-peace princesses]. No one knows exactly when she died and how, but in the southern suburbs of Hohhot, on the bank of the Great Black River is a small hill believed to be her burial mound. It is said that the grass on top of the hill is always fresh green, even in winter time

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① Eugene Eoyang in his essay "The Wang Chao-chun Legend: Configurations of the Classic," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 4 (1982): 3-22 gives a useful introduction to the historical sources for the story of Wang Zhaojun and he also translates selections from poems and plays which deal with her. However, his selection process and emphasis are different from mine.

② A nomadic nation in northern China that dates back to the Xia Dynasty (about 2070-1600 B. C. E). Many believe that a branch of the Xiongnu people later became the Huns whose west immigration led eventually to the fall of the Roman Empire. During the West Han Dynasty, Xiongnu's territory included what is now Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Hebei, etc. Border clashes were frequent, and at times when Xiongnu's militia posted a serious threat, the West Han court would marry off royal women to Xiongnu to cultivate their good will or to seek temporary peace. For a historical record of Xiongnu's origin and its relationship with the West Han Dynasty, see Sima Qian, "Xiongnu Lie Zhuan" [An Account of the Xiongnu], Shi Ji [The Records of the Grand Historian] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Ancient Books P, 2000), 110; 872-883.



when grass elsewhere in the northern land appears white.<sup>①</sup> This legendary spot has attracted waves after waves of visitors from the outside and has indeed become a signboard of Hohhot.

Thus the grand gathering, thereby named the Zhaojun Cultural Festival, proved hugely successful immediately and has done so year after year. People's interest in this outstanding and mysterious woman from the remote past is, like the grass around her resting place, ever green. Wang Zhaojun's name was but briefly mentioned in the historical records,<sup>②</sup> yet not only does her grave in Hohhot receive numerous visitors each year, but her story has inspired a huge literary corpus ever since the Han Dynasties, including several hundred poems, dozens of plays and novels, and innumerable folk songs and legends. It is perhaps in view of this productive fervor on Wang Zhaojun throughout the centuries that Dong Biwu, a modern politician and scholar,

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① “边地多白草，昭君冢独青”。[Grass in remote areas is usually sandy; only that on Zhaojun's grave is green.] Qiu Zhaoao, Du Shi Xiang Zhu [Detailed Annotations on Du Fu's Poetry] (China Books Company, 2004).

② Wang Zhaojun's marriage was first recorded in *Han Shu* [History of the Former Han Dynasty], an extensive account of Chinese royal history from 206 BC to 25 AD, the first 230 years of the Han Dynasty. Both entries concerning Wang Zhaojun here only mentioned her name in passing to provide necessary political background of her transnational marriage. See Ban Gu, “Yuan Di Ji” [An Account of Emperor Yuan], *Han Shu* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Ancient Books P, 2002), 9: 68; and “Xiongnu Zhuan” [An Account of the Xiongnu], *Han Shu*, 94 II: 1135.

inscribed such a poem on her tombstone:

昭君自有千秋在，  
胡汉和亲识见高。  
词客各抒胸臆懣，  
舞文弄墨总徒劳。

Zhaojun's image has survived the ages;  
the marriage between Han and Hu shows her sensibleness.  
Men of letters pour hearts out in indignation for her,  
yet their phrase-mongering is nothing but useless.<sup>①</sup>

Dong's sarcasm is not unjustified. Despite the heart-pouring, phrase-mongering enthusiasm about Wang Zhaojun, her poetic image turns out surprisingly mundane. The

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① The poem was carved onto the white marble tombstone when Wang Zhaojun's burial mound was renovated in 1965. *Hu* here refers to the Xiongnu nation. The second verse could also be interpreted as "the marriage between Han and Hu shows the wisdom of the Han regime." According to another account of Wang Zhaojun's marriage in *Hou Han Shu* [History of the Later Han Dynasty], fed up with the depressing, lonely life in the imperial harem, she volunteered to be sent to the Xiongnu nation to start a new life. See Fan Ye, "Nan Xiongnu Zhuan" [Stories of the Southern Xiongnu], *Hou Han Shu*, 2941. Considering that the poem was composed to memorize Wang Zhaojun rather than to sing the praises of the feudal regime, I think the first interpretation is more appropriate.

The English translations of all Chinese poems quoted in this discussion are mine if not otherwise specified.

overwhelming majority of poems written about her portrays her as beautiful but melancholy: she either sits with knitted brows, playing a tune of “resentment and bitterness” on her *pipa*<sup>①</sup>, or looks out to the direction of her home country through tearful eyes, loathing her cruel fate of being an outcast in a foreign land. The claim of Wang Zhaojun’s “resentment and bitterness” is nothing but speculation, and yet the fabrication of her tragic tale is tirelessly pursued and the more or less distorted image has struck root in people’s mind.<sup>②</sup>

In fact, almost all wed-for-peace princesses share this literary representation of hapless and hopeless women victimized by their transnational marriage. Time and again

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① *Pipa*: a plucked string instrument with a fretted fingerboard. The image of Wang Zhaojun plucking the *pipa* is common in poems about her, the most famous example being “千载琵琶作胡语，分明怨恨曲中论” [The thousand-year-old *pipa* produces music of the barbarous people; her resentment and bitterness are so obvious in the melody] from Du Fu, “Yong Huai Gu Ji” [Poems on Historical Sites III], *Quan Tang Shi* [Tang Poetry], 230.

② There’s no denying the fact that there have been poems that portray Wang Zhaojun from other perspectives. Instead of sympathizing with her tragic fate, they sing praises of her beauty, her political and cultural contributions to the nation and the historical importance of the transnational marriage itself. But such poems are incomparable in both quantity and degree of recognition to those that celebrate her victimhood. The victimization of Wang Zhaojun in classic poetry, especially Tang poetry whose artistry is considered unprecedented and impassable by generations to come in Chinese poetic tradition, formed the sentimental keynote of representations of Wang Zhaojun in later literary works.

masters of poetry seemed so struck by the peculiar misfortunes these women had to face that they imitated the elegiac tone in portraying Wang Zhaojun and her like, trying to reproduce in poetic realm the supposedly desolate atmosphere in which those marriages took place and to express sympathy for the brides. From a modern perspective then, given that hardly any woman in the feudal society could be considered lucky, how do we approach the wed-for-peace princess tale? Does the literary sentimentilizing of their life validate the perception of them as particularly miserable and powerless?

Thought-provoking as the question is, it's even more interesting when juxtaposed with Andrew Welsh's notion on a strikingly similar literary phenomenon in another culture. "There may be successful peaceweavers—perhaps Hygd, Hygelac's queen, is an example—but in that case there is no story. A Peaceweaver tale seems always to be a tragic tale, the story of a woman ambivalently situated between two peoples, belonging to both and yet completely to neither, and finally unable (in the imagery of the *Beowulf* poet) to stop the fires of old feud from flaring up again and consuming both."<sup>①</sup> Peaceweaver, as the widely accepted

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① Andrew Welsh, "Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale," *Viator* 22 (1991): 8.

translation of the Old English word *freoðuwebbe*, refers to “daughters of kings who were given in marriage to the king of a hostile nation in order to bring about peace,”<sup>①</sup> the scope of the definition being almost identical to that of the wed-for-peace princess. Meanwhile, Welsh’s observation on the royal bride’s dilemma is echoed by Cui Mingde in his study of the diplomatic nature of the Chinese transnational marriages: “wed-for-peace princesses had to obey the Emperor’s order, instead of ‘the command of parents and the good offices of a go-between’ for ordinary women in that society when it comes to contracting a marriage. They acted as invisible weapons, invisible fortresses, invisible bonds or forces of disintegration. Therefore, marriage for them is a political mission.”<sup>②</sup> And indeed, there may be successful wed-for-peace princesses from Chinese history, but in that case there are few verses chanted. A poem written for a wed-for-peace princess always depicts a tragic figure.

Welsh’s notion is therefore the point of departure for

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① *Beowulf*, trans. E. Talbot Donaldson (NY, 1966), 34. Qtd. in Larry M. Sklute’s “‘Freoðuwebbe’ in Old English Poetry,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 71 (1970): 534-41 at 535.

② “和亲公主遵从的是比‘父母之命，媒妁之言’更为悲惨的君权之命，她们所充当的是无形的兵戈、无形的城堡、无形的纽带和无形的分化剂。所以，她们的出塞是一种政治使命。” Cui Mingde, *History of Peace Marriages in Ancient China* (Beijing: People’s, 2005), 34.

this discussion about the questionable representation of the transnational royal brides in both Chinese and Old English contexts, and more importantly about the convenient sentimental perception of them which has thus evolved and spread widely. Either way, the wed-for-peace princess or the peace-weaver impresses many as a plaintive creature, anxious and vulnerable in an alien land. Whereas the political nature of their marriage might put them through the dilemma of torn fidelity, and life in a strange environment could cause considerable unpleasantness, undue emphasis on their tragic fate nevertheless results in overlooking their capability as individual women. The tale of the transnational royal bride deserves a closer look than it has received in discussions of the tragic woman archetype.

The archetype has been challenged in both cases. Despite the wide-spread tendentiousness to minimize the importance of women in medieval society and emphasize their passivity,<sup>①</sup> the work of several critics forms the foundation of scholarship on the peace-weaver that acknowledges

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① Alexandra Hennessey Olsen gives a chronology of scholarship on women in *Beowulf* up to 1992 in "Gender Roles," Robert E. Bjork & John D. Niles ed., *A Beowulf Handbook* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997), 311-324. According to Olsen, most Anglo-Saxonists before 1970 assumed that women were passive in the social world depicted in *Beowulf*.

the woman's agency and empowerment, rather than viewing her simply as an innocent victim of the male-dominant, war-ridden society. Without denying the limitation of women's power in the militant Anglo-Saxon society, they believe that a peace-weaving figure like *Wealhtheow* in *Beowulf* is active in her struggle in maintaining that power.<sup>①</sup> She asserts her influence as counselor to her husband, protector of her children, and solicitor of the oath of loyalty from the thanes in the mead-hall. Her efforts may be idiosyncratic rather than typical. In other words it remains the bride's choice to be passive about her fate or to fight for her authority and rights, in which sense she has more autonomy than most critics would acknowledge before 1970.

There are also articles affirming the *heqin gongzhu*'s subjective initiative and achievements for sure. Most of them are on Wang Zhaojun, thanks to the "heart-pouring" enthusiasm of poets which contributes gradually to her unsurpassable popularity. These critics see through the pipa-plucking, tearful image and eulogize her courage and

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① See for example Brian McFadden, "Sleeping after the Feast: Deathbeds, Marriage Beds, and the Power Structure of Heorot," *Neophilologus* 84 (2000): 629-46; Helen Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984).

intelligence in performing her role.<sup>①</sup> There have also been creative works about Wang Zhaojun that retell the story of her transnational marriage ever since the Yuan Dynasty. The most recent ones that are considered exceptionally successful in re-creating the transnational bride's image are *Wang Zhaojun*, a play written by modern historian and scholar Guo Moruo in 1923, and another play of the same title by the dramatist Cao Yu in 1978. Both provide fresh viewpoints into the issue.

However, in both literary contexts the recognition of one woman's empowerment is sometimes accompanied by the assumption that such a role is inherently tragic. The importance of her role is thus often emphasized based on her national identity. McFadden says that "the end by death of a royal line denies identity to the whole people, which makes the role of peace weaver important only to the society, not to the individual woman."<sup>②</sup> When she fails to maintain long-lasting peace between the two nations, then, she is valueless to the society and therefore a personal tragedy too. The

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① See for example Zhang Yiping, "Wang Zhaojun and the Policy of Peace Marriage in the Han Dynasty", *Journal of Suihua Teachers Training Institution* 24/2 (2004): 87-89. Wang Hongzhi, "Does Zhaojun have 'resentments'?" 2 (2001).

② McFadden, 631.



implication is that Wealhtheow's active participation in the comitatus does not change the fact that most women like her are inevitably silenced and forced into passivity. It is even more obvious in the treatment of the *heqin gongzhu*, where Wang Zhaojun is often symbolized and sublimed into a national hero deprived of her individual identity. Indeed, the images of Wang Zhaojun in the reconstructed narratives of Guo and Cao are almost unrecognizable. She is armed with modern revolutionary ideals so as to fight against the dark feudal authority. Such distortion of her mentality shows the scholars' ingrained belief in the essential doomedness of her original role and their attempt to liberate her from the ill fate even at the cost of authenticity.

Thus the stereotype of the transnational royal bride is still worth re-examining. Appreciation of the woman's agency and empowerment should not be made in negligence of the specific social reality in which she is situated. Some questions remain interesting: what are the challenges and advantages of her role? Given that the woman operates within the social system, wouldn't she recognize these challenges and advantages and persevere in pursuit of a goal despite the possibilities of failing? From her perspective then, does a life of such pursuit indicate passivity and tragedy? Among the critics who seem to commend the high