

Protest and Silence in the Peking University Manuscript *Wang Ji* 妾稽 (‘Ms. Baseless’)

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Abstract: This article discusses the Western Han manuscript *Wang Ji* obtained by Peking University, which consists of a narrative poem relating the life of Wang Ji, a woman of utterly repulsive appearance, and her bitter conflicts with her husband Zhou Chun and his concubine Yu Shi. By delving into the complex socio-political landscape embodied in the text’s narrative structure, this article explores themes of marital conventions, gender roles and silence within the domestic sphere. The author argues that the *Wang Ji* poem is particularly notable for its portrayal of silence as a multifaceted tool of communication and resistance. The in-laws’ ignoring of Wang Ji’s protests against the acquisition of Yu Shi, as well as their inability to address Wang Ji’s violent abuse of the concubine, underscore the nuanced power dynamics at play within early Han society. This analysis not only sheds light on the contradictions between gender conventions and the lived realities of the time but also on the influence women wielded in navigating these complexities. Attempting to contribute to our understanding of early Han society, this article offers insights into the intersection of legal, social and personal spheres through a singular narrative. It highlights the enduring human struggle for autonomy and respect within the constraints of societal and familial expectations, providing a rich narrative for exploring the intricate balance between conformity and resistance.

Keywords: Wang Ji, female protest, gender roles, domestic relations, jealousy

Introduction

The Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) is often seen as a period when wives (*qi* 妻) held considerable domestic power compared to later eras.¹ As central figures in their households, wives openly competed with their in-laws and played decisive roles in managing their spouse's family estate. However, with the rise of Confucian interpretations of gender segregation in subsequent periods, women's rights, both within the family and in broader society, gradually declined.

The *fu* 賦 ('rhapsody') narrative poem at the centre of this article, entitled after its female main character Wang Ji 妾稽 (or Wu Ji 無稽),² offers fascinating insights into the lives and rights of wives during this earlier epoch. Written on a bamboo manuscript dated towards the end of Emperor Wu's 武 reign (r. 141–87 BC),³ the *Wang Ji* was bought as part of a larger bamboo manuscript collection at an antique market and donated to Peking University in 2009. However, possibly due to the unprofessional circumstances under which it was excavated, *Wang Ji* arrived significantly damaged and incomplete.⁴ Scholars have repeatedly revised the order of the bamboo slips and estimated that at least ten per cent of the manuscript is missing.⁵

Yet the remaining ninety per cent still manage to portray Wang Ji, the wife of a wealthy aristocrat, in an unconventional and strikingly dynamic manner that sharply deviates from the typical depictions of wives and women in traditionally-transmitted literature.⁶ Wang Ji, who bears the telling name 'Baseless' or 'Unverified' to underscore the fictional nature of the poem, is depicted as an utterly hideous yet profoundly self-assured and complex figure. Married to Zhou Chun 周春 ('the Spring of Zhou'), an accomplished and handsome man, Wang Ji finds herself locked in a struggle to compete with Zhou Chun's concubine (*qie* 妾), Yu Shi 虞(娛)士 ('Pleasing-the-Gentleman'). The turbulent and tense interactions between Wang Ji and the other members of her household, marked by the shocking physical abuse

¹ Cf. Ikeda Yūichi 池田雄一 (2008: 517–31); Hinsch (2011: 15–33); Gu Lihua 顧麗華 (2012: 3–17); Tian Yanxia 田艷霞 (2013: 183–85); Huang and Goldin (2018: 18–21); Kinney (2022).

² Early Chinese manuscripts commonly use *wang* 亡 where traditionally received literature has *wu* 無, which is why the former can be transcribed as the latter. The additional graphic component *nü* 女 ('woman, wife, daughter') might have been used to indicate the gender of Wang Ji.

³ Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚, Han Wei 韓巍, Chen Kanli 陳侃理 (2011: 53). Note that Gao Zhongzheng 高中正 (2018: 71–74) has argued that the market on which Yu Shi is bought appears to be that of Chenliu 陳留, which could indicate that the *Wang Ji* poem predates 122 BC, when Rongyang and Chenliu still belonged to the same commandery (*jun* 郡).

⁴ The authenticity of the manuscript collection is thoroughly examined in Foster (2017).

⁵ See the most recent attempt to reconstruct the original order of the bamboo slips by Yang Qian 楊茜 (2018; translation: 2023). I will follow Yang Qian's order in this article.

⁶ Interested readers are encouraged to compare this article's findings with the depictions of 'good' and 'evil' women in the slightly earlier manuscript *Jiao Nü* 教女 (*Instructing Women*), discussed and translated in Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚 (2015) and Milburn (2019).

Wang Ji inflicts on Yu Shi,⁷ offer a graphic and provocative portrayal of female agency, which is rarely seen with such intensity in texts transmitted from the same period, be it with regard to conflicts between women or men.

In this article, I highlight how the plot of the poem features several moments of silence, which are rooted in conflicting domestic roles and hierarchies. Particularly revealing is the behaviour of Wang Ji's in-laws, who initially respond with silence to her protest against their plan to purchase a concubine, only to dismiss it later with personal attacks. While Wang Ji raises legitimate concerns, the in-laws exploit their formal superiority and refuse to consider her warnings, knowing that she has no power to stop them. However, after the concubine, Yu Shi, is purchased, the in-laws' uncooperativeness takes a tragic turn, as they appear condemned to stand by 'silently' while Wang Ji tortures and nearly kills Yu Shi. As I will argue, their inaction suggests that, while Wang Ji had no authority to prevent the purchase of Yu Shi, she was nonetheless entitled to treat her as she pleased, whereas her husband and in-laws, despite their higher status, were not permitted to intervene.

Genre and content of the *Wang Ji* poem

Perhaps the most notable feature of the poem is its lengthy and vivid descriptions of the protagonists and individual events. This narrative style, common to *fu* poetry of the Han dynasty, reveals that *Wang Ji* was probably written for oral performance in front of an audience. Its graphic and detailed representations bring the narrative to life, enabling the audience to visualise the events told. While the manuscript itself contains no direct clue as to its author or target audience, *fu* audiences generally consisted of members of the middle and upper classes (both male and female).⁸ This probably also applies to the *Wang Ji* poem, given that its plot is set against a corresponding social background.

The poem begins by introducing Zhou Chun, whose demeanour and reputation are praised in the highest terms.⁹ He is described as a young man from a 'reputable clan' (*ming zu* 名族) in Rongyang 滎陽 (modern-day He'nan 河南) and as one whom no one else in the entire region matched in manners and morals (鄉黨莫及, 於國無論 [倫]).¹⁰ He diligently took care of his parents, respected the local elders, and as a result, 'he was loved everywhere' (邑國蓋 [闔] 鄉, 撫於鄉里) and 'everyone wanted to have him as their son' (眾人願以為

⁷ For a discussion and translation of these accounts, see Milburn (2021: 565–71).

⁸ On Western Han *fu* culture, see Kern (2003). For a detailed list of social groups associated with *fu* 'consumption' in received sources, see Kong Deming 孔德明 (2020: 203–5).

⁹ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu* (si) 北京大學藏西漢竹書 (肆) (2015: 59, slips nos. 1–5). While Zhou Chun is also said to have been strong (力勁夫 [決] 船) and handsome (顏色容貌, 美好夸 [夸] 麗), the focus of his description clearly lies on his moral character and how he was perceived by others.

¹⁰ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu* (si) (2015: 59, slip no. 1).

子).¹¹ Thus, when the time came to find Zhou Chun a wife, his mother told the matchmaker confidently, 'As long as she matches up to my son, I do not worry that she might be not worthy!' (句[苟]稱吾子, 不憂无賢!),¹² implying that if the woman was truly as good as Zhou Chun, she was bound to be worthy. Following her instructions, the matchmaker found Wang Ji, who then became Zhou Chun's wife.

However, as we learn immediately afterwards, Wang Ji turned out to be extremely hideous:¹³

妄稽為人, 甚醜以惡。	【鐸】
種(腫)脰(肌)廣肺(輔), 垂頰折髁。	【鐸】
臂胚八寸, 指長二尺。	【鐸】
股不盈拊 ¹⁴ (型), 脛大五擡(度?)。	【鐸】
曠疹(疹)【6】領亦(腋), 食既相澤。	【鐸】
勺乳繩縈, 坐肄(肆)於席。	【鐸】
尻若取筍, 膊(膊)臄(膈)格格。	【鐸】
目若別杏, 逢(蓬)髮頰白。	【鐸】
年始十五【7】, 面盡鮐臙。	【盍】
足若縣(懸)櫃(薑), 脛若談(椽)株。	【侯】
身若胃(狷)棘, 必好抱區(軀)。	【侯】
口臭腐鼠, 必欲鉗須。	【侯】
周春見之, 曾【8】弗賓(頻)視。	【脂】
坐興大息, 出入流涕。	【脂】
辯(遍)告鄉黨, 父母兄弟:	【脂】
「必與婦生, 不若蚤(早)死。」	【脂】

By nature, Wang Ji was ugly and disgusting,	(*?âk)
She had swollen cheeks and broad cheekbones.	
She had a protruded forehead and crooked bones.	(*khrâk)
Her arms were eight inches, and her fingers two feet long.	(*thak)
Her thighs were not fully developed,	
and her lower legs were five times longer.	(*dâk)
Her eyes were pussy, her lips had pustules, her throat leaked,	
and wherever she ate looked like a swamp afterwards.	(*drak)
Her breasts were hanging down,	

¹¹ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 59, slips nos. 2, 3).

¹² *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 59, slip no. 5).

¹³ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 60, slip nos. 6–9). All phonetic reconstructions used in this article are based on Schuessler (2009).

¹⁴ See Xiao Xu 蕭旭 (2016).

and when she sat, they would touch her chair.	(*s-lak)
Her bottom looked like a point quiver,	
and her thighs were so skinny that one could see the bones.	(*grâk)
Her eyes looked like two differently shaped almonds,	
and her hair was shaggy and white.	(*brâk)
When she had turned fifteen,	
her face had become greasy and scaly.	(*râp)
Her feet looked like differently shaped ginger roots,	
and her lower legs looked like tree stumps.	(*tro)
She had the physique of a hedgehog and loved to hug others.	(*kho)
Her mouth smelled of rotten rats,	
and she liked talking close to others' faces.	(*sno)
When Zhou Chun met her, he barely looked at her.	(*gî?)
He sat down, sighed and cried.	(*thî?)
He told everyone in his village, his parents and brothers:	(*dî?)
'I would rather die young than live with this woman'.	(*sî?)

The passage contains numerous rare characters and words, presenting a challenge to the understanding of individual phrases and sentences.¹⁵ But it is evident that the passage describes Wang Ji's extremely hideous appearance and physical form in every conceivable way.

He Jin 何晉 argued that Wang Ji's 'disgusting' (e 惡) appearance also reflects her inner 'evil' or 'bad' (e) nature, which would imply that the matchmaker failed to do her job (He Jin 何晉 2018: 116). However, not only is there no sign that Zhou Chun's mother felt deceived by the matchmaker's choice, but it is far from certain that Wang Ji is introduced to us as morally corrupt person. As He Jin himself acknowledges, the idea that physically repulsive individuals could nonetheless be excellent and virtuous was a well-established literary topos in early China (2018: 118). This gave rise to numerous narratives about cultural heroes who, despite being born with bizarre and hideous features, went on to do great deeds, effectively turning physical ugliness into a symbolic marker of wisdom and sagacity. As Wang Ji points out later in the narrative, this tradition also included examples of outwardly repulsive but inwardly virtuous women,¹⁶ which allows the thought that the matchmaker had in fact found a woman truly worthy of Zhou Chun.

One might even ask whether Wang Ji's worthiness exceeded what Zhou Chun deserved, as he reacts solely to her appearance, disregarding any consideration of her inner potential

¹⁵ I have tried my best to produce a translation that makes sense to me. For alternative readings, see Fang Yong 方勇 (2013: 65–66); Xiao Xu (2016); Luo Tao 羅濤 (2018: 164–65); Xu Yunhe 許雲, Zheng Qingxin 鄭晴心 (2019: 36–38).

¹⁶ See the reference to Pisui 毗隄 and Momu 嫫母 translated below.

(cf. Milburn 2019: 569). Alarmed by his response, Zhou Chun's parents decide to find him a beautiful concubine to secure their lineage,¹⁷ prompting Wang Ji's vehement yet disregarded protest. When visiting a local market, the mother discovers Yu Shi in an enclosure (*xian* 閑), surrounded by a crowd who cannot get enough of her beauty. The mother buys her and brings her home. For Yu Shi her new status as a concubine in a wealthy household apparently meant a radical improvement of her living conditions. Not only is she reported to have been provided with all sorts of luxurious clothing and jewellery,¹⁸ but she is also said to have been granted her own hall (*tang* 堂) and side chambers (*xiang* 廂).¹⁹

Wang Ji first responds to the purchase of Yu Shi by dressing up and trying to appeal to Zhou Chun. However, her desperate attempts to compete with Yu Shi effectively drive Zhou Chun away from her into Yu Shi's arms.²⁰ After his first chance to be alone with her, Zhou Chun grasps Yu Shi's hand and sighs, 'On which day and in which month will you and I finally have each other?' (何然日月，與女[汝]相得?).²¹ But their time together flies by ('seventy days were like one night' 七旬為夜),²² and before they know it, they have to part with each other with heavy hearts. Here, a practical aspect of gender segregation that is easy to overlook comes to light: even though Yu Shi is Zhou Chun's concubine and must, therefore, be sexually available to him, the two are bound to live separate and usually do not see each other except for occasional (and probably even scheduled) visits.²³

This separation from Zhou Chun, however, proves to be Yu Shi's undoing, as she is helplessly at Wang Ji's mercy. After Wang Ji realises that she has lost the competition against Yu Shi, she soon sets about maltreating her by every conceivable means. The poem contains two separate scenes which describe how Wang Ji physically abuses and humiliates Yu Shi in a detailed and highly graphic manner.²⁴ A third scene seems to have fallen victim to material decay.²⁵ Claiming that Yu Shi intends to betray her husband, Wang Ji beats Yu Shi to the brink of death.

¹⁷ While this specific purpose is not explicitly stated in the text, producing male offspring was regarded as the primary *raison d'être* of concubines, as noted in Huang and Goldin (2018: 17).

¹⁸ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 66, slips nos. 34–8).

¹⁹ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 66, slips nos. 33–4).

²⁰ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 66, slips nos. 32–3).

²¹ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 66, slip no. 39).

²² *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 66, slip no. 39).

²³ The 'Domestic Rules' (*nei ze* 內則) of the *Liji* 禮記 (*Rites Records*) state that a concubine under fifty 'must accept being driven (i.e. have sexual intercourse) every five days' (必與五日之御) and 'if the wife is not there, a concubine does not dare to spend the night' i.e. with the husband? (妻不在，妾御莫敢當夕). *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (2008: 28.10a-b). Nothing suggests that Zhou Chun and Yu Shi's sex life was regulated in the same precise manner. However, farewell scenes like the one cited strongly indicate that they were not usually allowed to spend much time together.

²⁴ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 68–71, slips nos. 47, 50, 53–7). The two scenes are quoted and translated in Milburn (2021: 574–76).

²⁵ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 76, slip no. 83). This slip appears to have belonged to a separate passage consisting of approximately nine bamboo slips of which eight have been completely lost. See Yang Qian (2018: 103; 2023: 81).

From the very beginning of the poem Wang Ji is accused of acting out of jealousy. These accusations start when Wang Ji protests against her in-laws' plan to buy a concubine (see slips nos. 17–18 translated below), and they are repeated later after Wang Ji begins to maltreat Yu Shi.²⁶ However, at no point in the preserved text does Wang Ji seem to accept these allegations. She neither acknowledges that she is jealous nor does the impartial and omniscient narrator explicitly describe her as such. While she appears to confess her jealousy towards the concubine of her father (*shao mu* 少母) at a later point in the narrative, her true motive there is to lure Yu Shi back so that she can continue to abuse her, which casts doubt on the genuineness of her confession.²⁷ It is only at what seems to be the end of the narrative that Wang Ji appears to acknowledge her true feelings. Wang Ji is described as having become terminally ill (*da bing* 大病). On her deathbed, she seems to repent her actions and admits she has been jealous of Yu Shi. However, due to a lacuna in the manuscript text, some degree of uncertainty remains:²⁸

妄稽將死，乃召吏【73】而遺言，	【元】
曰：「淮北有惡人焉，中淮踰（蹲）。	【文】
洎（涕） ²⁹ 則入口，淫（涎）則入鼻；	【脂】
鞠（掬）李而投之面，李盡不棄。	【脂】
暝（安）可攬而【74】	【?】
□□□□□，施肩者四。	【脂】
然與夫生，終身无惡。	【魚】
何則？我妬以自敗也。」	【魚】
妄稽遺一言而智（知）志，說……【82】	

When Wang Ji was about to die,	
she called a scribe and told him her last words:	(*ŋan)
'In the north of Huai there was an ugly woman,	
and she squatted in the Huai River.	(*dzûn)
Her nasal mucus flowed into her mouth,	
and her saliva flowed into her nose.	(*bits)
She grabbed plums and drowned them in her face,	
continuing relentlessly until every plum was gone.	(*khis)
How could one take and	
[lacuna] those shouldering [her?] were four.	(*sis)
Yet, she lived with her husband without hatred until death.	(*?âkh)

²⁶ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 71, slip no. 60).

²⁷ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 75, slip no. 75).

²⁸ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 75, slips nos. 73–4, 82).

²⁹ Based on Chen Jian's 陳劍 comment on July 10, 2016 found in the comment section of Chen (2016).

Why? I have ruined myself because of my jealousy.’ (*brâts)
 Wang Ji left behind one last word and understood her intentions, explaining...

Wang Ji begins her last words by telling an anecdote about another ugly woman who once lived north of the Huai 淮 River, whose complete account will probably remain unknown to us. Citing the fitting end rhyme and the fact that it seems to mention the final sentences of her last words, Chen Jian has argued that instead of slips 75 to 81, which the Peking University editors had originally placed after slip 74, slip 74 should be followed by slip 82, whose upper part, however, is damaged and missing approximately five characters (Chen Jian 2016; see also Yang 2018: 105–106; 2023: 83–97). If we follow this reading, Wang Ji ends her last words by asking herself why the woman in her anecdote (unlike herself) was able to live happily with her husband, concluding that she and her jealousy are responsible for her fate. Given that she is the main character, it is plausible that her deathbed scene ended the narrative.

However, the gap between slips 74 and 82 was probably significantly larger than Chen Jian suggests. Based on the average line length, the phrase ‘how could one take and’ (曠 [安] 可攬而) at the end of slip 74 must have been followed by at least four additional characters. These characters could not have been on the lost top of slip 82, as that portion must have belonged to the next line ending with ‘four’ (*si* 四). This indicates that at least one slip is missing between slips 74 and 82. Chen Jian and scholars after him have assumed that the verso line found on the tops of slips 72 to 74 continued onto the missing top of slip 82. Yet, the size of the missing part is sufficient to accommodate one additional slip between slips 74 and 82.³⁰

This gap, along with the loss of the actual ending, leaves us with significant uncertainty regarding the complete content and structure of the text. While I do not wish to challenge in principle the notion that Wang Ji plays the role of the jealous housewife, it is crucial to highlight the hypothetical nature of this reading, as it has a considerable effect on how we interpret Wang Ji and her actions. Since the narrator states explicitly that the in-laws intend to ‘replace’ (*dai* 代) Wang Ji with the concubine,³¹ jealousy is not the only way to explain her response. Although there is no indication that Yu Shi was to replace Wang Ji immediately in her role as Zhou Chun’s wife, the possibility that Yu Shi, rather than Wang Ji, would become the mother of Zhou Chun’s children meant that sooner or later Wang Ji’s position within the household and her life after her husband’s death were at stake.³² Wang Ji’s extreme actions and her increasingly psychopathic behaviour may therefore have less

³⁰ Compare the graphic reconstruction of the verso line in Yang Qian (2018: 104; 2023: 82).

³¹ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 60, slip no. 10).

³² As Huang and Goldin (2018: 21–25) have noted, the status of concubines within a household could undergo significant changes, largely depending on their relationships with the husband and the parents-in-law.

to do with her (unrequited) romantic affection for her husband than with her fear of a sudden loss of social status.

Much hinges on this point. If we accept her in-laws' accusations, Wang Ji becomes a hypocrite, disguising her true motives under the pretense of concern for her husband and the family's prosperity. From this perspective, He Jin's argument that Wang Ji's jealousy reveals her inherently evil character does indeed seem plausible (He 2018: 119), though one could still object that she initially entered the family as a worthy woman, who was then tragically corrupted by her jealousy.³³ However, if we consider the accusations unjustified and assume that Wang Ji was not jealous at all, she is essentially a victim of her husband's and in-laws' ignorance, who desperately tries to protect herself or perhaps even them from harm, but receives nothing but suspicion and indifference.

Depending on how we answer this question, we will come to very different interpretations of the poem. It is, therefore, all the more frustrating that the unknown circumstances under which the text was 'excavated' will probably mean that this issue will never be definitively resolved. In what follows, I will stick to the standard line of interpretation and assume that Wang Ji becomes jealous as soon as she hears about her in-laws' plan to buy a concubine, as it provides the narrative with a straightforward morale that would have resonated with many (male) members of its audience. However, given the incompleteness of the text, this reading is nothing but a working hypothesis.

The diegetic role of silence

Silence affects the narrative of the poem in two different ways. Silence first appears at the beginning of the story, immediately after Wang Ji finds out that her parents-in-law are planning to buy a concubine because their son is unable to develop a liking for her. Wang Ji, we read, 'did not sleep until dawn' (*bu wo ji dan* 不臥極旦) after learning about her in-laws decision and then confronts them the following day by formally remonstrating (*jian* 諫) against their decision:³⁴

曰：
 「吾不單（憚）買妾，君財恐散。」 [元]
 姑咎（舅）弗應。妄稽有（又）言【11】： [元]
 「凡人□產，必將相間（諫）。 [元]
 君不兼（議）聽買妾，家室恐畔（叛）。 [元]
 吾直愛君財，不然何惡焉？」 [元]

³³ Cf. Milburn (2021: 571), who argues that Wang Ji is presented as 'a good person who has done bad things'.

³⁴ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 60–1).

姑咎（舅）弗應。妾【12】稽有（又）□[言]：	【元】
「吾暨（既）執箕帚，幾（豈）能毋稽（善）？」	【元】
美妾之禍，人必筭（矜）式。	【職】
君固察吾言，毋及（急）求媵。」	【蒸】
姑咎（舅）弗應，妾【13】稽曰：「嗟！	【歌】
皆得所欲，莫得所宜。	【歌】
誠買美妾，君憂必多。	【歌】
今不蚤（早）計，後將奈何？」	【歌】

[Wang Ji] said,
 'I am not concerned about buying a concubine,
 but only that you may lose your riches.' (*sâns)
 The in-laws refused to respond, and Wang Ji spoke again, (*ŋan)
 'As a matter of principle,
 those who live [lacuna] must remonstrate against each other. (*k^ɿran?)
 You should not discuss buying a concubine,
 as your house and chambers may rebel. (*bâns)
 I only care about your riches; why else should I object?' (*ʔan)
 The in-laws refused to respond, and Wang Ji spoke again, (*ŋan)
 'I already carry the dustpan and broom of this house.
 How could I have bad intentions? (*dan?)
 One must beware of the evil
 that the purchase of a concubine may bring. (*lhək)
 You should listen to my words
 and not immediately look for a concubine.' (*lɔŋh)
 The in-laws refused to respond, and Wang Ji said, 'Alas! (*tsai)
 When everyone gets what they want, nothing is as it should be. (*ŋai)
 If you really buy a beautiful concubine,
 then you will have much to be worried about. (*tâi)
 If one does not take precautions today,
 how will one be able to cope with tomorrow?' (*gâi)

Wang Ji claims to be worried that the concubine might bring trouble to the household by taking advantage of her beauty and cheating her husband and his family out of their fortune. In doing so, she apparently tries to take advantage of prejudices to which concubines at that time were often exposed (Hinsch 2011: 41; Gu Lihua 2012: 348). Since concubines usually came from poor backgrounds, they were often treated with suspicion and rejection. Had the concubine been brought up properly? Could she resist the sudden material temptations? Did she respect the role assigned to her? Or would she capitalise on her husband's

affection to undermine the family hierarchy? Wang Ji's in-laws, however, do not seem to be bothered by these questions, as they ignore her warnings. They are hierarchically superior to Wang Ji, and even though she emphasises that the instrument of remonstrance (*jian*) allows her to express her concerns, her in-laws are not obliged to follow her recommendation.³⁵

However, her claim that the in-laws risk bringing chaos to the household ('nothing is as it should be') merely to satisfy their own desires seems to be more than they can tolerate. At last, they break their silence, responding to her protest in the following manner:³⁶

姑咎（舅）胃（謂）妄稽：	
「女（汝）【14】貌狀甚惡，口舌甚詛（粗）。	【魚】
吾自為買妾，終不決（決）女（汝）。」	【魚】
妄稽曰：「怀（否），何極之有？」	【之】
以君之智，糶（悉）决（決）於婦。	【之】
庶人【15】有言：『謀毋失彥（黠）子。』	【之】
若人言不行，民稱將止。	【之】
殷紂大亂，用被（彼）亶（姐）己。	【之】
殺身亡國，唯美之以。	【之】
美妾之禍，【16】必危君子。	【之】
若此不憂，不為羊（祥） ³⁷ 父母。」	【之】
姑咎（舅）胃（謂）妄稽：「璽（爾）不自量。	【陽】
璽（爾）貌可以懼魁，有（又）何辯傷？」	【陽】
璽（爾）自妒【17】第（議）買妾，乃稱殷王。	【陽】
吾子畜（蓄）一妾，因何遽傷？」	【陽】
妄稽曰：「怀（否）！小妾不微（嫩），	【微】
陵且（祖）微父，猶有與賁（憤）。	【文】
毗休（毗淮）得生，【18】漠（嫫）母事舜。	【文】
妾亦誠惡，未以取寤（寤）。	【文】
君欲買妾，不愛金布。	【魚】
小快耳目，不念生（往）故。	【魚】
小妾忠間（諫），乃以為妒。	【魚】
請毋敢覆言，走歸下舍。」	【魚】

³⁵ In traditional China, remonstrance (*jian*) was the socially accepted way of subordinates to 'speak truth to power'. Although ignoring remonstrances or even silencing the 'remonstrators' was morally condemned, the privilege to accept or dismiss a remonstrance ultimately rested with its recipient. A survey of the early history of the Remonstrance is found in Crone, Fahr, and Schwermann (2023).

³⁶ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 61).

³⁷ See Chen Jian 陳劍 (2016).

The in-laws said to Wang Ji,
 ‘You are hideous, and your mouth and tongue are insulting. (*tshâ)
 We are buying a concubine for ourselves.
 This ultimately is not your decision to make.’ (*na?)
 Wang Ji said, ‘No, how can that be? (*ɣʷu?)
 You know well that this is entirely decided by the wife. (*bə?)
 The people have a proverb,
 “When plans are made, the masses must not be ignored.” (*tsô)
 If the advice of others is not followed,
 then the praise of the people will stop. (*tə?)
 The rebellion against Shang Zhou
 started with his concubine Daji. (*k(r)ə?)
 He was killed and lost his kingdom just because of her beauty. (*lə?)
 The mischief of buying a concubine
 will put my husband in danger. (*tsô)
 If I do not worry about that, I would not be good to his parents.’ (*mə?)
 The in-laws said to Wang Ji, ‘Look at yourself. (*raŋ)
 Your appearance can frighten even demons.
 How dare you speak of warding off harm? (*lhaŋ)
 You are jealous that we are discussing the purchase of a concubine
 and therefore bring up the King of Shang. (*waŋ)
 If our son has one single concubine, what harm might it cause?’ (*lhaŋ)
 Wang Ji said, ‘No! I am not beautiful. (*mui?)
 I have brought shame on my father and ancestors
 and caused much anger. (*bən?)
 But Pisui bore children, and Momu served Shun. (*hjuŋ)
 I am indeed ugly, but so far
 I have not caused any hardship because of it. (*guŋ?)
 You want to buy a concubine because you do not value money. (*pâh)
 You are only interested in the happiness of your ears and eyes
 and have forgotten the lessons from the past. (*kâh)
 I remonstrate with loyalty, and you think I am jealous.
 Allow me not to repeat what I said and leave your chambers.’ (*lha?)

Her in-laws retort sharply and insist that she has no say in this matter. Wang Ji, however, rejects their claim arguing that her in-laws know well that she, the wife, has to be consulted before a concubine is bought. By quoting a proverb, she alludes to the fact that ignoring the opinions of subordinates like herself could have severe consequences for the in-laws and

her husband. Citing Daji, the infamous concubine of the last king of the Shang Dynasty, who allegedly cost the Shang the Heavenly Mandate, Wang Ji accuses her in-laws of ignoring the lessons of history. Her in-laws, now clearly infuriated by the stubbornness and impudence of Wang Ji, reject her comparison and instead accuse her of jealousy. Wang Ji acknowledges her ugliness but insists that ugliness alone is not a shortcoming. Far from it: referring to Pisui and Momu, two famously ugly but talented women from times long past,³⁸ she points out that an ugly housewife has all that is needed to bring harmony and prosperity to a household. She criticises the in-laws for unjustly accusing her and, knowing full well that she cannot force them to change their minds, chooses to end the conversation on her own initiative.

Judging from the cultural and literary horizon of an early Han reader, Wang Ji appears to make a strong case. If we were to read about Wang Ji's advice in an early Chinese text such as the *Guoyu* 國語, the in-laws' ignorance would most likely lead to the downfall of their house.³⁹ Wang Ji, demonstrating that she is well-versed not just in the cultural history of her gender but also in how to submit a well-crafted and persuasive remonstrance, skilfully uses transmitted authoritative lore and other forms of 'inherited language' to create an argument that is difficult to reject (Schaberg 1997). Regardless of whether she is jealous, the in-laws take an unnecessary risk by bringing a beautiful concubine into the household. In other words, the initial silence of the parents-in-law not only reflects their formal superiority, but also serves as an indirect admission that they were unable to justify their decision adequately. Lacking a substantive response, they resort to ad hominem attacks to undermine Wang Ji's position.

This initial, explicitly mentioned (*fu ying* 弗應) but brief moment of silence from the in-laws toward Wang Ji is then followed by an implicit and prolonged silence regarding Wang Ji's violence against Yu Shi. This is not to say that the in-laws never discuss Wang Ji's actions among themselves or with others, but they never verbally intervene or attempt to stop her (cf. Milburn 2021: 574), even though Yu Shi's suffering is obvious and known to even the neighbours and other people of the village.⁴⁰ The same applies to Zhou Chun, who seems deeply in love with her. Rather than confronting Wang Ji and ordering her to stop abusing Yu Shi, Zhou Chun responds defensively by constructing a secret shelter for Yu

³⁸ Apart from her reputed ugliness, extant sources provide little information about Pisui. As for Momu, she is generally described as a virtuous concubine of the Yellow Emperor, a portrayal that seems to diverge from the account cited by Wang Ji. How Momu was believed to have 'served' (*shi* 事) Shun thus remains an open question.

³⁹ A detailed analysis of narrative schemes in *Guoyu* remonstrance narratives is found in Bohlen (2023: 70–87). As Bohlen notes, without exception, the rejection of well-meant and wise advice is punished with consequences of catastrophic proportions, which points to an authorial 'preselection' (*Vorselektion*) and 'molding' (*Formung*) of the narratives. Applying his findings to the *Wang Ji* story, we may conclude that the fact that a female protagonist's remonstrance ultimately leads to sickness befalling her could indicate that the author was male and had moral reservations about Wang Ji's defiant behavior.

⁴⁰ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 69, slips nos 51–2).

Shi, complete with guards and escape corridors.⁴¹ Of course, these security measures prove insufficient: Zhou Chun has to go on a trip at some point, and the guards fall asleep.⁴²

At the same time, Yu Shi never turns to Zhou Chun or his parents for help. Instead, she seeks support from her 'friends' (*pengyou* 朋友), who, since they are mentioned alongside 'ordinary people' (*zhong ren* 眾人), were probably individuals outside the household.⁴³ But even though her supporters angrily reason with Wang Ji that she must not fear the competition of a concubine, it is fairly straightforward that their hands are tied.

Their passiveness, and even more that of Wang Ji's in-laws and Zhou Chun, strongly suggests that as the wife (*qi*), Wang Ji was granted considerable autonomy in managing the internal (*nei* 內) affairs of the household, to the extent that few, if any, were permitted to interfere. Contrary to the Confucian principle that a family cannot have two heads (*jia wu er zhu* 家無二主),⁴⁴ Wang Ji's behaviour indicates that there was at least a grey area in which responsibilities were not clearly defined or even at odds with each other so that certain decisions had to be made jointly if conflicts were to be avoided.

This also aligns well with the stated requirement of Zhou Chun's mother that the matchmaker may choose any woman, as long as she is as worthy (*xian* 賢) as her son.⁴⁵ The narrator explicitly says that the matchmaker followed (*sui* 隨) the mother's instructions,⁴⁶ and the eloquence of Wang Ji's protest further underlines that she is indeed skilled and educated (Milburn 2021: 568–9). Indeed the entire narrative seems to be based on the unstated premise that the position of the wife is to be occupied by a capable (but not necessarily physically attractive) woman. These silently accepted requirements indicate that the position of the wife entailed duties and powers, for which it was better to select someone educated and qualified than someone whose looks might impress external visitors but who would let the place sink into ruin on the inside.

Moreover, Wang Ji herself seems to allude to these powers bestowed upon her in different parts of the narrative. This starts with the fact discussed earlier that she criticises her in-laws for not involving her in buying a concubine. While she is incapable of challenging her in-laws' authority, her reaction suggests that they should at least have consulted her and come to an agreement before making up their minds. After all, the privilege of giving birth to the official heir of the ancestral line had been granted to Wang Ji, which could now be called into question by the arrival of another woman. There were also the related issues of inheritance and residence rights after Zhou Chun's death, which could equally pass to

⁴¹ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 70, slips nos. 52–3).

⁴² *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 70, slip no. 53).

⁴³ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 68, 75, slips nos. 47–8, 75–7).

⁴⁴ *Liji zhengyi* (2008: 51.11b).

⁴⁵ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 59, slip no. 5).

⁴⁶ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 59, slip no. 5).

the concubine if Wang Ji failed to conceive a son (Gu Lihua 2012: 94–8; cf. Kinney 2022: 228–36).

A second passage suggesting that Wang Ji had considerable leeway over the management of internal affairs is found towards the end of the narrative. By that time, Wang Ji had already abused Yu Shi several times, but without much success, as the bond between Yu Shi and Zhou Chun appears to be stronger than ever. Trying to find a different, less violent way to remove Yu Shi from the family, Wang Ji pretends to regret her actions and calls Yu Shi to come back to her:⁴⁷

念女（汝）之事我，亦誠苦勞矣！	【宵】
不忍隱，何不走？	【後】
不勝堇（勤），何不逃？	【宵】
為告周春，必不【78】女（汝）求。	【幽】
居外三月，可以左右。	【之】
與為人下，寧為人子。	【之】
女（汝）面目事人，誰事不喜？	【之】
錯（措）氏（是）而弗為，安辟（避）蕙答【79】？	【之】
吾請奉女（汝）以車馬金財，	【之】
暴（纂）組五采。	【之】
盡盡來取，不告無有。	【之】

I feel sorry that you have to serve me;	
your suffering and toil are great indeed!	(*râu)
If you cannot bear them, why do you not go?	(*tsô?)
If you cannot withstand the hardships,	
why do you not flee?	(*lâu)
I will tell Zhou Chun not to look for you.	(*gu)
When you have been gone for three months,	
you may resume being a servant.	(*wə?)
[That said,] compared to serving someone,	
it is better to become someone's daughter.	(*tsâ)
Your eyes and face are ravishing;	
who would not be happy to have you?	(*hə?)
If you stay here and refuse to act,	
how will you escape the whip?	(*rhə)
I offer you a cart, horses, riches,	(*dzâ)
and beautiful clothes of all colours.	(*tshê?)

⁴⁷ *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (si)* (2015: 75).

Come and take as much as you want.

I will not tell you I do not have it.

(*wəʔ)

In a thoroughly cynical manner, Wang Ji tries to convince Yu Shi that things would be easier for her if she left the family. Here, she would only be at risk of more beatings, whereas her beauty would probably allow her to find work elsewhere quickly, possibly even as a husband's wife. Wang Ji also promises that she will support Yu Shi to the best of her ability, not only with money and goods but also by telling Zhou Chun not to look for Yu Shi. After three months, she would acquire the status of a commoner and be able to rebuild her life.

The casual way in which Wang Ji states that she will ask Zhou Chun not to look for Yu Shi appears to confirm that he probably had little say in the matter, in particular since this detail contributes little to the plot (Yu Shi naturally declines Wang Ji's offer). Wang Ji's suggestion, therefore, indicates that Zhou Chun would have had no adequate reason to search for Yu Shi if his wife did not wish that Yu Shi, whom she explicitly describes as her servant, was brought back. In line with this, Wang Ji makes a clear distinction between serving someone (*wei ren xia* 為人下) and being someone's daughter (*wei ren zi* 為人子). This contrast generates the impression that becoming the latter would entitle Yu Shi to a lot more, which is reinforced by the decisiveness of Wang Ji's actions.

Hence, there is much in favour of the view that the silence of Zhou Chun and his parents regarding Wang Ji's violent outbursts reveals a helplessness on their part. Even though they had successfully brought another woman into the family, she was de facto at the mercy of Wang Ji. In hindsight, Wang Ji's decision to withdraw from the dispute with her in-laws signalled that the last word in the matter had not yet been spoken. She ended their conversation (and decided to keep quiet for the time being) because she knew she had many more ways and means at her disposal. The in-laws had reckoned without their host. And if Wang Ji had not fallen ill (presumably because of her jealousy), she might even have been able to oust Yu Shi from the Zhou family.

Conclusion

The *Wang Ji* poem offers a rich tapestry for understanding the complexities of gender roles, marital conventions and the dynamics of power within the family structure during the early Han period. The fictional story serves as a window into the socio-political norms of the time and challenges our perceptions of these norms through its characters and their actions.

Seen from this perspective, the erratic and wayward behaviour of Wang Ji becomes cent-

ral to understanding the shifting dynamics of gender roles during the early Han period, as her actions straightforwardly challenges the notion that societal norms exclusively relegated women to subordinate positions. Her struggle within the family and her assertive behaviour highlight the tensions between traditional roles and individual agency. At the same time, the juxtaposition of Wang Ji's repulsive appearance with her considerable inner strength and intellect underscores the multidimensional portrayal of women in Han literature. Her character disrupts the simplistic binary of passive women and dominant men, illustrating a more nuanced reality where women could exert significant influence and navigate power structures to their advantage.

The poem also sheds light on the complexities of marital conventions and familial dynamics. Wang Ji's vocal opposition to her husband's acquisition of a concubine illustrates the conflicts inherent in polygamous family structures. Her use of historical precedents, such as the rebellion against King Zhou of Shang due to his concubine Daji, to argue against the concubine's purchase reveals the strategic use of cultural narratives to negotiate power within the household. This highlights how women could leverage historical and cultural knowledge to assert their positions and influence familial decisions.

The response of the in-laws to Wang Ji, who criticise her appearance and accuse her of jealousy, underscores the societal pressures women faced and the limited avenues for dissent available to them. Nevertheless, Wang Ji's persistence and the in-laws' ultimate inability to restrain her demonstrate a significant degree of agency and resilience. This dynamic reflects broader societal tensions between maintaining patriarchal order and accommodating individual agency within the family.

One of the most striking aspects of the narrative is the use of silence as a form of power and communication. The in-laws' refusal to engage with Wang Ji's protests and their failure to protect Yu Shi reveal the complex power dynamics within the domestic sphere. In this context, silence is not merely an absence of speech but a deliberate strategy that underscores the limitations and subtle forms of resistance available to individuals. Wang Ji's decision to withdraw from the conflict temporarily, knowing she has other means to achieve her goals, further emphasises the strategic use of silence and non-verbal cues in navigating familial disputes.

In conclusion, the *Wang Ji* manuscript is a testament to the intricate balance between conformity and resistance within early Han society. Through its rich narrative and complex characters, it provides a window into the lived realities of the time, challenging our perceptions of gender roles and power dynamics. The story of Wang Ji, with its detailed exploration of family life and societal norms, offers a valuable perspective on the intersection of individual agency and social expectations. It reminds us of the enduring complexities

of human emotion and social structure, encouraging us to consider the nuanced ways in which individuals resist and conform to the expectations placed upon them.

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