

Male Critics and Poets

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c.23. Zhong Rong (469–518)

The *Shi pin* (Poetry gradings) of Zhong Rong, an early masterpiece of Chinese criticism, ranks the poets of China and accounts for its rankings with pithy analytical comments. Reproduced here are the statements concerning women poets.¹

c.23.1. *From Shi pin, Preface A*

The period from Li Ling [d. 74 B.C.E.] to Lady Ban [P.I, ca. 48–ca. 6 B.C.E.] spans roughly a century; but a woman being among their number, there was only one poet for the period.

(Zhong Rong, *Shipin zhu*, 2)

par. 1, “but a woman being among their number”: Compare *Analects* 8.20.

c.23.2. *From the Shi pin section on poets of the Upper Grading:
On Ban jieyu [P.I]*

Lady Ban’s poetry derives from that of Li Ling. Her short piece about the round fan [P.I.1] is pristine in language and clever in conception. Her disaffection is deep-seated, expressed in language that is beautiful. She succeeds in capturing a woman’s sentiment. From this one fragment, one can appreciate her skill.

(*Shipin zhu*, 12–13)

*c.23.3. From the Shi pin section on poets of the Middle Grading:
On Qin Jia [fl. 147] and Xu Shu [fl. 147]*

The story of Qin Jia and his wife [Xu Shu] is lamentable; similarly, the language of his poems is sorrowful.

- (2) Those who know how to write pentasyllabic verse are few, but they include two women. Xu Shu's poetry on the sorrow of separation is second only to that about the round fan [by Lady Ban].

(*Shipin zhu*, 19)

par. 1: On Xu Shu and her husband, see P.54a.4.

*c.23.4. From the Shi pin section on poets of the Lower Grading:
Bao Linghui (p.4) and Han Lanying*

Frequently Linghui's songs and poems quite jut forth, and are pure and well-wrought. Especially successful are her poems in imitation of the ancient style. Only her "Hundred Wishes" is impure. Her brother, Bao Zhao, once responded to Emperor Xiaowu of the Song [r. 454-65]: "Your servant's younger sister is second in ability only to Zuo Fen; your servant's talent does not match that of Zuo Si."

- (2) Lanying's poetry is one of fineness and detail and includes quite a few famous pieces. She was also skilled at witty causerie. Emperor Wu of the Qi [r. 483-93] called her "Master Han" and once added: "If you two ladies had been alive during the Han, then Ban *jiayu*'s rhapsody of the jade steps and song of the round fan would lose some of their preeminence!"

(*Shipin zhu*, 49)

par. 1, "poems in imitation of the ancient style": These include poems P.4.1, P.4.2, P.4.4, and P.4.6 in this anthology.

par. 1, "Hundred Wishes": No poem by this name is presently found in Bao's poetic corpus.

par. 1, Zuo Fen and Zuo Si: On this famous sister and brother from the Jin dynasty, see P.3.

par. 2, "rhapsody of the jade steps and song of the round fan": See P.1.2 and P.1.1.

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