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# Adaptation and Authorship in Xiangyan Congshu: Tracing the Origins of Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji and Its Modern Historical Fiction Influence

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**Abstract:** In the late Qing period, literary scholar Ping Buqing asserted that the inclusion of Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji (Account of Beautiful Women Through the Ages) in Xiangyan Congshu was entirely a creation of the Shenbao Publishing House, dismissing it as a "fabricated work" that dishonored past dynasties. This view has been widely accepted by later scholars. However, upon examining Xue Fucheng's Yong'an Notes, it becomes evident that Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji is more likely an adaptation by the editors of Shenbao of Xue's original work Huxian Tan Lidai Liren. Through analyzing the editorial choices and tendencies in the adaptation, we may infer the identity of the adapter, suggesting an attempt to subtly expand upon the conventions of historical fiction in modern times.

**Keywords:** Xiangyan Congshu; Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji; Zhang Tinghua; late Qing; historical authenticity; literary anthology

## 1. Introduction

*Xiangyan Congshu*, a comprehensive anthology of nearly 340 works, was compiled by Zhang Tinghua, known as the "Insect Emperor", during the late Qing period. The collection spans twenty volumes, each containing four books, totaling eighty volumes, and was printed and published by the Shanghai Guoxue Fulu Society. According to Zhang's preface, written on December 8, 1909, in the first year of the Xuantong reign, *Xiangyan Congshu* was likely published between 1909 and 1910. The preface reveals the anthology's purpose and editorial philosophy [1], stating that the compilation includes a wide range of literary forms, poetry, lyrics, music, and fiction, particularly those works which are "intoxicating and captivating". Zhang notes that the collection is not confined to any particular dynasty but includes works from all periods, even some recent pieces that have not been published before. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the books are based on rare, privately held editions and manuscript copies, with an emphasis on preserving their original form without unauthorized alterations.

In the preface, Zhang also presents the guiding principles for the selection of works: 1) The anthology draws from various eras, including contemporary pieces, many of which were unpublished or obscure at the time of compilation. 2) The works selected are those with sensual and captivating themes, aiming to stir the emotions of readers. 3) The texts included are based on rare manuscripts, some of which may contain questionable elements, but Zhang refrains from making any changes to preserve their authenticity.

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Despite Zhang's efforts to maintain the integrity of these works, *Xiangyan Congshu* has been subject to criticism for its indiscriminate inclusion of works from different periods, including some of dubious historical accuracy. The ambitious scope of the collection is evident in the preface, where Zhang states that the anthology also aims to "mourn the lost glory of past empires" and "chronicle the tales of prosperous dynasties". This ambition reveals a subtle historical agenda embedded in the compilation, reflecting Zhang's desire to use these exquisite works to offer a historical reflection, juxtaposing the "glory of the past" with the present.

This historical perspective is reinforced by the preface's explicit reference to the "victorious nation" and the "prosperous dynasty". These terms likely refer to the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty, respectively. Given that the preface was written in 1909, just two years before the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, this temporal context suggests that Zhang, despite living through the end of the Qing and the beginning of the Republic of China, was still nostalgically aligned with late Qing intellectual traditions.

Furthermore, while the collection's inclusion of contemporary works adds a layer of complexity, it also raises questions about the authenticity of the material. This issue was notably critiqued by the Qing scholar Ping Buqing, who argued that similar works, such as *Yi'an Huanghou Wai Zhuan* and *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji*, were written under false names and fabricated to flatter contemporary tastes while dishonoring the Qing dynasty. These critiques highlight the tension between literary creation and historical truth during a period of profound political and social change in China.

Thus, *Xiangyan Congshu* serves as both a literary anthology and a subtle historical document, offering insights into the intellectual climate of the late Qing period. Through its selection of works that blend sensual themes with reflections on past glories, the anthology captures the contradictions and complexities of a society on the brink of modernization.

## 2. The Adaptation of *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji* in *Xiangyan Congshu*

The question arises: is *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji Through the Ages* truly, as Ping Buqing claims, entirely the work of the Shanghai *Shenbao* publishing house? If not, what characteristics must the so-called "Goose Lake Recluse" possess to be the true author?

First, it is evident that *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji Through the Ages* has a direct connection to Xue Fucheng's *Yong'an Notes*. In Volume 5 of Xue's *Yong'an Notes*, under the section "You Guai" (The Strange and the Unusual)[2], there is an entry titled *Huxian Tan Lidai Liren Ji* that narrates an event in which a scholar from Qianzhou, who failed the imperial exam, encountered a fox spirit named Hu during a visit to the ruins of Weiyang Palace on the Mid-Autumn Festival. Laohu, who had cultivated herself for over two thousand years, explains that the secret to her transformation was the imitation of "great women of the past", those of exemplary beauty and virtue. Laohu begins her tale with Queen Wei, the wife of King Wu of Qin, and continues through to more recent figures such as Wu Zetian and Yang Yuhuan. Xue Fucheng comments on these figures, acknowledging their beauty but critiquing their lack of moral excellence. In his postscript, Xue notes that this work, after being published in the *Shenbao* and included in the *Yinghuan Suoji*, was altered by the editors at the publishing house, and Xue himself re-recorded it in its original form to preserve the authenticity of the text.

Turning to *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji* as included in *Xiangyan Congshu*, the text remains mostly unchanged across different versions of the anthology. The narrative begins with a scholar from Suzhou, who, while reading the *Wu Yue Chunqiu*, dreams of Xi Shi, the famous beauty of the Spring and Autumn period, and encounters Hu, who claims to be the incarnation of Xi Shi. She recounts her long history of imitating the beauty of various historical women, from ancient dynasties to the Tang and Ming periods. The story follows a traditional "meeting with an immortal" trope but diverges from this format by focusing not on the relationship between the scholar and Laohu but rather on Laohu's cataloging

and evaluation of these beautiful women. Hu divides these women into three categories: "transcendent beauties", "timeless beauties" and "peerless beauties", offering specific examples from each period.

When compared to *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji*, *Xiangyan Congshu* version makes some distinctive alterations and additions, especially in its treatment of the identities of the listed women. While the original text refrains from providing full names for many of the women, *Xiangyan Congshu* version includes specific names, many of which are either entirely new or provide additional details not found in earlier texts. For example, the second daughter of the Han Dynasty's Princess Lu, who is only referred to as "Princess Peiwan" in *Xiangyan Congshu*, does not appear in historical records [3], suggesting that this name may have been invented by the compiler. Similarly, the name Ying'e, the older sister of Empress Li Zu'e, the daughter of Emperor Li Xizong of the Northern Qi, is also not found in historical sources, suggesting that this is another fictional addition by the compiler [4].

Furthermore, some of the names included in the *Xiangyan Congshu* version, such as "Empress Fu Daiyun" or "Empress Zhu Peilan" of the Han Dynasty, appear to be more speculative or fictive, and are likely part of the compiler's creative reinterpretation of history, drawing parallels to historical figures like the "two Qiaos" of Jiangdong. This imaginative approach reveals the compiler's tendency to create connections between famous historical beauties, reinterpreting them to fit his vision of "timeless" beauty.

Despite these additions and imaginative reworkings, some of the women listed in *Huxian Tan* can be traced to historical figures, such as Empress Zhang of the Ming Dynasty, whose inclusion and characterization closely mirror the portrayal of her in *Ming Yi'an Empress's Biography*. This comparison suggests that while the author of *The Account of Beautiful Women* drew heavily from historical and literary sources, he also adapted these sources to fit his own narrative and thematic goals.

In conclusion, the text in *Xiangyan Congshu* is a modified version of earlier works, particularly Xue Fucheng's *Yong'an Notes*, incorporating new material and presenting an altered version of historical beauty. The compiler, using a combination of historical records and creative imagination, constructs a narrative that is as much about the concept of beauty as it is about the evolution of historical memory itself.

### 3. The Reinterpretation of *Liren Ji*

In general, the approach of the compiler of *Huxian Tan* aligns with that of the author of *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji Through the Ages* in maintaining the traditional societal emphasis on the chastity and moral integrity of women. This can be observed in a key dialogue between the protagonist and Hu, which reflects the compiler's adherence to traditional values regarding women's virtue:

"At the beginning of my cultivation, I heard from my elders that Lady Zhuang of Wei, Lady Jia of Jin, Lady Wen of the Wen family, Lady Nongyu of the Qin state, and Xi Gui, who was captured by Chu, were all unparalleled in beauty and virtuous in character. Yet, I was never able to see them in person. I have only heard about their efforts and have tried but failed to imitate them".

The protagonist responds: "Lady Jia was burned by Duke Hui of Jin, and Xi Gui was the wife of King Wen of Chu—weren't they both chastely unfaithful?"

Hu then clarifies: "That is a misunderstanding in the records of the *Zuo Zhi*. The person who was burned by Duke Hui was Lady Jia's niece, and Xi Gui was the younger sister of Xi Gui, the wife of King Wen of Chu. If Lady Jia had truly been the wife of Duke Hui, and if Xi Gui had killed herself after being captured, these events are confirmed in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and Liu Xiang's *Liexu Zhuan*."

Despite Hu's initial explanation that her imitations of beauties such as Xi Shi were part of her quest for immortality, it becomes evident through these dialogues that even a non-human spirit like Hu still feels compelled to defend the chastity of women when moral accusations are made, even if such defenses seem weak.

In *Huxian Tan*, Hu, more so than Laohu in *Laohu Tan*, seems to exhibit more human-like qualities. This contradictory stance runs throughout the text: on the one hand, the compiler, through the voice of Hu, enforces traditional ethical expectations regarding women, conferring the title of beauty and virtue on women who were not traditionally regarded as such, even inventing new attributes to justify the dignity of those who were previously criticized. On the other hand, due to the changing times or personal beliefs, the compiler refrains from further condemning women who had already been morally discredited or stigmatized as "beautiful but deadly". Instead, they focus on discrediting figures such as Zhao Feiyan, Zhao Hede, and Wu Zetian for their "jealous" and "conniving" natures, while celebrating women of virtue and chastity, such as Empress Zhang of the Han Dynasty and Empress Zhang Baozhu of the Ming Dynasty.

This contradiction reveals the compiler's dual role as both a traditionalist upholding moral standards and a product of a changing era. It underscores the complexity of historical narratives regarding women's beauty and virtue, as well as the ongoing tension between preserving traditional values and acknowledging evolving perceptions of gender and power.

#### 4. Reinterpretations in *Huxian Tan*

Apart from beauty, an overt criterion largely shaped by the adapter's imagination, and chastity, an implicit standard rooted in Confucian cultural values and likewise subject to the adapter's discretion, the author's additional criterion for evaluating women, namely, their capacity for governance, became obscured under the guise of "virtue" within the period's ideological framework, blending with the concepts of "chastity" and "fidelity". As discussed earlier, following alterations by the "Erudite of Ehu", certain imperial consorts who were neither renowned for beauty nor notably chaste unexpectedly appeared in *Liren Ji*, clearly reflecting the adapter's particular admiration. This is most prominently illustrated in the case of Empress Xia of Emperor Wuzong of the Ming dynasty, who, along with figures such as He Fani and Xiao Guanyin, was classified within the category of dignified individuals. Examination of her life reveals that, unlike other consorts listed by the author, Empress Xia neither exercised evident influence over the imperial harem, as did figures such as Lady Xing of Emperor Wu of Han [5], nor exhibited steadfast chastity or served in the political role of regent for a young ruler, as did Empresses such as Shangguan of Emperor Zhao of Han, Wu of Shu, He Fani of Emperor Mu of Jin, Meng of Emperor Zhezong of Song, or Zhang of Emperor Xizong of Ming. Nor did she embody the sympathetic qualities of Xiao Guanyin, who may have suffered unjustly [6]. Empress Xia's sole qualification for her inclusion among these figures is her role as consort to Emperor Wuzong, traditionally regarded as an emperor inclined toward indulgence over governance. Although her influence on court affairs during Wuzong's reign was modest, her placement in the dignified category evidently reflects the adapter's appreciation of her minimal, albeit slight, capacity for governance.

One of the most notable examples of this evaluation criterion is the inclusion of Empress Xia of the Ming dynasty (the wife of Emperor Wuzong) in the same esteemed category as figures such as Lady He of Jin and Lady Xiao of Liao. A thorough examination of her biography reveals that, unlike other empresses listed by the compiler, Empress Xia did not demonstrate the kind of influence over the imperial harem that would have won the hearts of the other concubines, like Lady Xing of the Han Dynasty [Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*]. She did not possess the historical accomplishments of figures like Empress Zhang of the Han Dynasty, Empress Wu of the Three Kingdoms, or Empress Zhang Baozhu of the Ming Dynasty, who upheld their chastity or assisted the young emperor as regents. Nor did she share the tragic fate of Empress Xiao of Liao, who was possibly wronged in death, thus evoking sympathy from the compiler. The only qualification that Empress Xia shared with these women is that, despite Emperor Wuzong's reputation for neglecting governance, the dynasty did not fall into ruin during his reign. Empress

Xia's role within the court, though limited, was celebrated by the compiler and placed among the respectable figures due to her perceived ability to support and correct the imperial administration, however small her contributions may have been.

Simultaneously, of the thirty-five women classified under the highest category of beauty, four are from the Ming dynasty, with Empress Zhang Baozhu of the Ming dynasty even being listed among the "Eternal Beauties". This proportion is not only different from that in *Laohu Tan Lidai Liren Ji*, but also unparalleled across all dynasties. While the compiler's preference for Ming figures can be attributed to their temporal proximity and the availability of more historical materials, it also reflects a sympathetic stance towards the Ming period. The women praised in *Huxian Tan* from the Ming era include Empress Zhang Baozhu of the Ming dynasty, who embodied chastity and virtue, challenging the eunuchs of the Tianqi period and supporting the imperial family during the Chongzhen era, and later sacrificing herself for her country despite posthumous slanders; Empress Xia of the Ming dynasty, who, though having minimal political influence, was credited with some role in the stabilization of the dynasty; Consort Fei of the Ming dynasty, who, despite her low rank, died for the country and had her name immortalized in the *Iron Crown Play*; and Xu Yaoying, the wife of Prince Fu, who remained largely anonymous in history but was likely remembered for her self-sacrifice. Apart from Empress Xia, all these women were either politically problematic or censored under the Qing dynasty, yet the compiler deliberately preserved their names. This inclusion demonstrates a certain sympathy for the Ming dynasty, which would have been uncharacteristic even during the late Qing period, when literary censorship had relaxed.

Finally, a crucial alteration made by the compiler, identified as the "Goose Lake Recluse", concerns the identity of the novel's protagonist. In *Laohu Tan*, Xue Fucheng clearly states that the protagonist was a scholar from Guizhou who failed his civil service exams and encountered the Laohu spirit at the Weiyang Palace ruins. In *Huxian Tan* as published in the *Xiangyan Congshu* series, the protagonist's identity changes to a young scholar from Suzhou who meets Laohu Hu at the Guanwa Palace. Additionally, Laohu's original model of imitation shifts from the Queen of King Wu of Qin to Wu Mengzi, the eldest daughter of King Fuchai of Wu. Xue Fucheng's self-annotation in *Laohu Tan* suggests that the version in *Xiangyan Congshu* was altered by editors at the Shanghai News Agency, and Xue Fucheng could not have originally intended the protagonist to be a scholar from Suzhou. Despite the implication of the name "Goose Lake Recluse" suggesting a possible connection to Jiangxi, this key alteration indicates that the compiler may have had a special affinity for the Wu region. This may explain the compiler's particular attention to figures such as Xi Shi and Wu Mengzi, indicating a potential connection to the region and its historical figures.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Xiangyan Congshu* stands as both a literary anthology and a reflection of the intellectual climate during the late Qing period. Compiled by Zhang Tinghua, the collection merges works from various dynastic periods with a particular emphasis on "sensual" and captivating themes, aiming to evoke strong emotional responses from readers. Zhang's editorial philosophy, as laid out in his preface, underscores his commitment to preserving the authenticity of the original texts, even at the risk of including dubious works. While this approach allows for a diverse and expansive representation of historical and literary traditions, it also invites criticism for its lack of discernment and the inclusion of potentially unreliable texts.

Despite the controversy surrounding its authenticity, *Xiangyan Congshu* offers invaluable insights into the ideological and cultural tensions of the time. The juxtaposition of works from different periods, particularly those reflecting on the "glory of past empires", reveals Zhang's historical agenda. His nostalgic admiration for the Qing Dynasty and the Ming Dynasty, reflected in his comparison of the "victorious nation" and the "prosperous

dynasty", signals a desire to preserve traditional values amidst the sweeping social and political changes that were taking place in China during the early 20th century.

The anthology's inclusion of contemporary works further complicates its status as a historical document, raising questions about the boundary between historical truth and literary invention. Critics like Ping Buqing raised concerns about the authenticity of some texts, which were seen as fabricated to cater to contemporary tastes. This tension between literary creation and historical accuracy highlights the complexities of preserving cultural heritage during a period of profound transformation. Ultimately, *Xiangyan Congshu* serves not only as a rich literary collection but also as a subtle commentary on the cultural and political shifts occurring at the twilight of imperial China.

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