

THE MULBERRY TREES BY THE PATH

AN ANONYMOUS HAN POEM

This poem from the Eastern Han period was one of many that were collected by the "Bureau of Music," a government agency that was charged with transcribing and preserving popular chants and songs. The idea behind this was that the rulers needed to know what was on the minds of their subjects, and nowhere did people speak more frankly than in the lyrics of songs. (This is a notion that modern scholars of folk music are quick to confirm.)

"The Mulberry Trees by the Path," apart from its considerable charm, is a commentary on the relationship that China's ruling class established with the population it controlled. The encounter between a young peasant girl collecting mulberry leaves to feed to silkworms and an official whose overbearing and licentious conduct belies his standing as a representative of the "Confucian" government shows how the gap between official morality and official conduct was keenly perceived by the Han people.

(It may be good to note that the "Qin family" of the poem bears no relationship to the dynasty of that name. Qin is a common surname. Here, it may also denote the region of Qin, but without suggesting the dynasty.)

The southeast rising sun
Shines on our Qin family's home.
The Qins have a beautiful daughter,
She calls herself Luo Fu.
Silk making Luo Fu loves,
South of town amidst mulberry leaves,
Blue-green silk for her basket string,
For its handle a cassia twig,
Her hair bound up above her head,
Gleaming pearls below her ears,
Bright yellow silk for her skirt,
Rich purple the silk of her blouse.
Men who pass and see Luo Fu
Lay down their loads and stroke their beards.
Boys who pass and see Luo Fu
Snatch the caps off their cloth-wrapped heads.
Hoers forget their hoes,
Ploughmen forget their ploughs.
They argue as they come and go,
But sit and gaze at Luo Fu.

An officer comes from the south,
 His five steeds prance as they stand.
 Off he sends a runner:
 — Find out what beauties live here!
 — The Qins have a beautiful daughter,
 She calls herself Luo Fu
 — And how old is Luo Fu?
 — Twenty not yet come;
 Fifteen not long gone.
 The officer says to Luo Fu,
 — Won't you ride off by my side?
 Before him Luo Fu speaks:
 — Lord Minister, how foolish you are!
 My lord, you have a wife.
 I, Luo Fu, have a husband.

In the east ride a thousand horsemen,
 In front, there rides my husband.
 How shall you know him?
 White horses follow his glistening black,
 Blue silk thread through its tail.
 A bridle of gold frames his horse's head,
 And the deer-sword at my husband's waist
 Is worth ten million cash.
 At fifteen a ministry scribe,
 At twenty a minister of court,
 At thirty a palace aide,
 At forty a governor of state.
 As a man he is pure and bright,
 His long beard flowing down.
 Stately his steps at court,
 Graceful he makes his way.
 He sits in ranks of thousands,
 And all sing praise of my husband.