

# City Life in the late Ming Popular Songs

## (Abstract)

OKI, Yasushi

(Institute of Oriental Culture, The University of Tokyo)

In this paper, I would like to examine popular songs of Suzhou from two different points of view. First, I examine what kind of songs was sung at what kind of place in the city of Suzhou. Then, I examine how city life was described in two collections of popular songs, "Mountain Songs" and "Guazhier" which Feng Menglong(1574-1646) edited.

### 1. Popular Songs in the City Life of Suzhou

In the late Ming Suzhou, many kinds of popular songs were born and sung. And they had even attracted attention of literati at that time. Feng Menglong, a man of letters in the late Ming Suzhou, edited two collections of popular songs on this background, the intellectuals' interest in popular culture.

Originally mountain songs were songs sung in a farm village, but in the late Ming, they could hear mountain songs even in the city of Suzhou. At that time, because of the development of the light industries, many people emigrated from farm villages to the city as labors. They brought their village songs (mountain songs) to the city of Suzhou and they sung these songs in the city. Sometimes, a large-scale mountain songs competition was held in the city. It was concerned with urbanization of Suzhou in the late Ming that they could hear mountain songs in the city.

Pleasure quarters were the base of production and enjoying of

popular songs. Not a few songs in Feng Menglong's "Guazhier" have notes saying that he learned this song by a courtesan. Also, some songs in Feng's "Mountain Songs" have notes like that. We can see mountain songs began to be sung at pleasure quarters.

We can see the fashion of popular songs in national scale in the late Ming. Pleasure quarters of each place seemed to function as relay stations of fashion.

## 2. City Life in the Popular Songs

In many songs of Feng Menglong's "Mountain Songs" manners and customs of the city life are lively described. Some songs have the place name of Suzhou, such as Tiger Hill, Tower of North Temple and so on. Some songs describe government offices, shops and factories in the city of Suzhou in the text. For example, the song of 'Imitation' in volume 1:

The girls who live next door and across the street, all have illicit affairs.

How can I endure my arousing desire?

I have seen how fine the peach blossoms are.

If I wash in an indigo pond, my whole body will be blue. (How will I get it clean again?)

Comment by Feng Menglong: It is like that, once you learn, you can do!

Dying was one of the important industries in Suzhou at that time. They could see dye-works and indigo ponds all around Suzhou. Indigo pond appears in this song. The song of "Gift" in volume 1 of "Mountain Songs" is as follows:

I have got a secret love, and nobody knows, neither men nor ghosts;  
But my lover visited me again, and he gave me rouge through the  
green screen window;  
If you brush things with your face upward, dust will fall into your  
eyes (relationship will be discovered by others);  
If you drop the abacus, it will break into peaces, and all street will be  
filled with scattered beads (everybody knows in the street).

The city was a place where many people gathered to live in. Therefore they were interested in action of others, and the rumor of love affairs spread out immediately.

Suzhou in the late Ming was the gorgeous place which could be compared with big cities of the present age. There appeared young girls such seen in the song of “Adulterine loves” in volume 2 of “Mountain Songs”:

She combs her hair until it shines like a lacquered bowl,  
And in the presence of others seduces a man with her small feet.  
Originally they said that it was a man who seduces girls,  
But now in this new world girls seduce men.

While “Mountain Songs” describes city life of Suzhou materially, the songs in “Guazhier” are completely different. Although the songs in “Guazhier” also are concerned with love affairs, they only pay attention to the feelings of lovers, and are seldom interested in the materials of the city life. Maybe it was because that “Guazhier” had much closer connection with pleasure quarters, which was a closed world of love affairs.