

# A Study on the Historical Depictions of Chu Women in Pre-Qin Literature

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## Abstract

The study of the images of Chu women in Pre-Qin literature is an important aspect of Chu culture research. This paper examines the scattered depictions of Chu women in key Pre-Qin texts such as *Zuo Zhuan*, *Chuci*, and *Warring States bamboo slips*, analyzing their characteristics in terms of political strategy, shamanistic spirituality, and diverse secular life. It reveals the status and roles of Chu women in social history and explores the profound influence of their literary portrayals on later generations.

## Keywords

Pre-Qin literature; Chu women; historical narrative

## Introduction

The Pre-Qin period was a critical era in Chinese history, with rich literary forms including historical works like *Zuo Zhuan*, *Guoyu*, and *Strategies of the Warring States*; literary works like *Book of Songs* and *Chuci*; philosophical prose such as *Analects* and *Zhuangzi*; and excavated texts like the *Tsinghua Bamboo Slips*. These documents record various aspects of society, among which the depictions of Chu women, though fragmented and sparse, constitute an important yet understudied component. These portrayals not only reflect the lives and spiritual outlook of Chu women but also embody the cultural values and social norms of the time, warranting in-depth exploration.

## 1. Classification of Chu Women's Depictions in Pre-Qin Literature

### 1.1. Historical Accounts of Chu Women

Pre-Qin historical works such as *Zuo Zhuan*, *Guoyu*, and *Strategies of the Warring States* contain fragmented but crucial records of Chu women, offering insights into their societal roles. These accounts blend factual documentation with cultural con-

structs.

### 1.1.1. Deng Man

Deng Man, the wife of King Wu of Chu, appears in Zuo Zhuan (13th Year of Duke Huan):

Deng Man said: "The minister's words do not concern the size of the army, but rather how the ruler should govern—reassuring the common people with trust, instructing the officials with virtue, and restraining Mo'ao with punishment. Mo'ao, complacent after the victory at Pusaoxiao, will act arrogantly and underestimate Luo. If you do not discipline him, will he not remain unprepared? Indeed, it is said that a ruler must guide his people and maintain order, summon his officials and encourage them with virtuous deeds, and warn Mo'ao that Heaven's favor is not easily granted. Otherwise, how could he not know that the entire Chu army is mobilized?"

In the spring of the 13th year of Duke Huan of Lu, Qu Xia of Chu led an attack on the State of Luo. Dou Bobi, upon seeing the troops off, predicted that Mo'ao (Qu Xia's title) would be defeated. He thus requested King Wu of Chu to reinforce the army, but the king refused and later recounted the matter to Deng Man. Deng Man pointed out that Dou Bobi's intention was not about increasing troop numbers but rather advising the ruler to reassure the common people with trust, instruct officials with virtue, and instill fear in Mo'ao through punishment. She explained that Mo'ao, complacent after the victory at Pusaoxiao, would underestimate Luo and fail to prepare adequately. Despite being confined to the inner court, Deng Man astutely discerned Mo'ao's arrogance, analyzed the true intent behind Dou Bobi's request for reinforcements in light of the military situation, and proposed a countermeasure—demonstrating her exceptional wisdom and strategic acumen.

Another record of Deng Man appears in Zuo Zhuan (4th Year of Duke Zhuang). When King Wu fell ill and died during the campaign against the State of Sui, Deng Man took charge of the political crisis, stabilizing Chu's governance and once again showcasing her military strategizing prowess.

### 1.1.2. Xi Gui

Xi Gui, the wife of King Wen of Chu, became embroiled in conflicts among the states of Xi, Cai, and Chu due to political marriage alliances. Her story is recorded in Zuo Zhuan (10th Year of Duke Zhuang), Zuo Zhuan (14th Year of Duke Zhuang), and Zuo Zhuan (28th Year of Duke Zhuang).

Zuo Zhuan (10th Year of Duke Zhuang) records:

*"Duke Ai of Cai married a woman from Chen, as did the Marquis of Xi. When Xi Gui was returning [to Xi], she passed through Cai. The Marquis of Cai said, 'She is my sister-in-law,' and received her without proper respect. The Marquis of Xi, upon hearing of this, grew angry and sent word to King Wen of Chu, saying, 'Attack me, and I will seek aid from Cai—then you may attack them.' The King of Chu agreed. In the autumn,*

*in the ninth month, Chu defeated the army of Cai at Shen and took Duke Ai of Cai (Xian Wu) captive."*

This passage describes how Xi Gui, while traveling to her marital home, was harassed by the Marquis of Cai during her stopover. In Zuo Zhuan (14th Year of Duke Zhuang), it is further recounted that the Marquis of Xi, upon learning of this humiliation, conspired with Chu for revenge. King Wen of Chu seized the opportunity to capture the Marquis of Cai and, upon learning of Xi Gui's beauty, personally led a campaign against Xi to claim her. Xi Gui thus became Queen of Chu and bore King Wen two sons.

After King Wen's death, Zuo Zhuan (28th Year of Duke Zhuang) documents:

*"Prime Minister Zi Yuan of Chu sought to seduce the widowed queen. He built a residence beside her palace and performed the Wan dance there. When the queen heard it, she wept and said, 'The late king used this dance to train for battle. Now the Prime Minister directs it not toward our enemies but beside this widow—is this not perverse?' Her attendants reported this to Zi Yuan, who replied, 'A woman does not forget vengeance, yet I had forgotten!'"*

Here, Zi Yuan attempted to woo Xi Gui by performing the martial Wan dance near her palace. Her tearful rebuke—that the dance belonged on the battlefield, not as courtship—demonstrated her rejection of his advances and her commitment to the state. Later, her son King Cheng of Chu ascended the throne, ruling vigorously to expand Chu's territory ("a thousand miles of Chu land") and gain recognition from Central Plains states like Zhou and Lu—achievements partly attributed to Xi Gui's upbringing.

The Guoyu (Discourses of the States) also briefly mentions Xi Gui and Deng Man:

*"Of old, the fall of Yan came through Zhongren, of Mixu through Boji, of Kuai through Shuyun, of Xi through Chen Gui (Xi Gui), of Deng through Chu Man..."*

This passage, from a remonstrance by the Zhou official Fu Chen to King Xiang of Zhou, cites historical examples of states ruined by rulers' infatuation with foreign women. It warns against repeating such mistakes, reflecting the Zhou political wariness toward marriage alliances.

### 1.1.3. Zheng Xiu

Zheng Xiu, the favored consort of King Huai of Chu, is documented in Strategies of the Warring States: Chu Ce:

*"Knowing the king believed her to be free of jealousy, Zheng Xiu said to the new beauty: 'The king adores your beauty. Yet he dislikes your nose. When you see him, cover it.' The new concubine obeyed. The king asked Zheng Xiu, 'Why does she cover her nose in my presence?' She replied, 'I know why.' The king insisted, 'However unpleasant, tell me.' Zheng Xiu said, 'She seems to recoil from Your Majesty's odor.' Enraged, the king cried, 'How dare she!' and ordered her nose cut off, brooking no defiance."*

Zheng Xiu feigned friendship with the Wei beauty while orchestrating her down-

fall—first persuading her to cover her nose, then convincing the king it signaled disgust. After this cruel scheme secured her monopoly on the king's favor, Zheng Xiu collaborated with the corrupt minister Jin Shang to marginalize Qu Yuan. Accepting bribes from Zhang Yi, she advised King Huai to release him under the pretext of "Qin's strength overpowering Chu," causing diplomatic setbacks (Records of the Grand Historian ). These accounts cement her legacy as an archetype of harem intrigue and political meddling.

Beyond these three women, Zuo Zhuan (13th Year of Duke Zhao) records how Ba Ji participated in King Gong of Chu's "jade burial" ritual to select the crown prince—her role in this succession rite underscores her exceptional status. Other influential Chu women like Fan Ji (in Biographies of Exemplary Women), Queen Xuan, and You Meng's wife (in Records of the Grand Historian) appear in Han-era texts, proving their enduring historical impact despite sparse pre-Qin documentation.

## 1.2. The Literary Portrayal of Chu Women in Ancient Texts

The literary classics of the Chu region during the pre-Qin period centered primarily on the Chuci (Songs of Chu), while also incorporating Chu folk songs from the Book of Songs and references to Chu women in philosophical prose. The Chuci vividly demonstrates the sacred status of women within Chu's "shamanistic culture," presenting a divine pantheon of goddesses that embodied the harmonious union between mortals and deities. The Book of Songs reflects the marriage customs and romantic traditions of the Yangtze River region through its Chu-related folk ballads. Philosophical writings frequently employed Chu women as metaphorical figures to illustrate political ideals or critique contemporary realities. These literary representations provide crucial insights into understanding the cultural context that shaped the identities and societal roles of Chu women, highlighting their significance in both the spiritual and socio-political spheres of ancient Chu civilization.

### 1.2.1. The Goddess Imagery in Chuci

As a literary gem of Chu culture, Chuci features numerous depictions of goddesses in various forms, serving as a crucial entry point for studying female imagery in Chu literature.

*In Nine Songs: The Lady of the Xiang River, Qu Yuan writes:*

*"The princess descends to the northern shore, / Gazing afar, filling me with longing. / The autumn breeze sighs softly, / Dongting's waves rise, leaves flutter downward."*

These lines create an ethereal and melancholic atmosphere through the Xiang Lord's anticipation and subsequent disappointment at not meeting the Lady of the Xiang River. Though her physical beauty is not directly described, her grace is palpable. Against the backdrop of rustling autumn winds, rippling lake waves, and falling leaves, her presence evokes a poignant beauty. The Xiang Lord's meticulous preparations to welcome her further hint at her desirability, while also capturing the ro-

mantic melancholy characteristic of Chu's divine-mortal love stories.

*In Nine Songs·The Mountain Spirit, another vivid portrayal emerges:*

*"Like a maiden in the mountain vale, / Clad in fig vines, girt with ivy. / With coy glances and winning smiles, / 'Do you love me for my grace?'"*

The Mountain Spirit, draped in wild vines with beguiling eyes and an enchanting smile, embodies the untamed beauty of a half-divine, half-mortal being. This reflects the natural purity of Chu women, who harmonized with their mountainous surroundings, unconstrained by rigid social conventions and radiating primal vitality.

Additionally, Qu Yuan's "three quests for the goddess" in Li Sao—pursuing the Luo River Goddess Fufei, the lost maiden of Yousong, and the two daughters of Youyu—established the romantic tradition of using feminine beauty as a metaphor for virtuous ministers.

Similarly, Song Yu's Gaotang Fu immortalized the Goddess of Mount Wu. The text recounts how King Xiang of Chu, while touring Yunmeng Terrace with Song Yu, noticed swirling clouds atop Mount Gaotang.

Song Yu then narrated how King Huai once dreamed of a goddess there during his travels. She proclaimed: "At dawn I am morning clouds, / At dusk I am passing rain. / Morning after morning, dusk after dusk, / Beneath the sunny terrace." This passage not only pioneered the "divine-mortal love" motif but also crystallized the romantic essence of Chu's ancient shamanistic culture.

### 1.2.2. Secular Women in the Book of Songs

References to Chu women in the Book of Songs are scarce, appearing only in Zhou Nan·Han Guang and Zhao Nan·Jiang You Si, which focus on the Jiangnan River region. Nevertheless, these two poems offer glimpses into the authentic lives of ordinary Chu women. Unlike the shamanistic romanticism of Chuci, the Chu-related poems in the Book of Songs adopt a realist tone, centering on the secular aspects of women's romantic and familial experiences.

*Zhou Nan·Han Guang reads:*

*"Tall trees grow in the south, / But no shade rests beneath them. / A wandering maid by the Han River, / But none may pursue her."*

This poem depicts a man's unrequited love for a maiden from Chu. Though deeply enamored, he finds his affections unanswered, leaving him entangled in longing. Facing the vast river, he pours out his melancholy in song, vividly portraying the romantic lives of Chu men and women.

Another poem, Zhao Nan·Jiang You Si, states:

*"The river has its tributaries, / She returns home, but not with me. / Without me, she will regret.*

*The river has its islets, / She returns home, but not beside me. / Without me, she will linger.*

*The river has its bends, / She returns home, but passes me by. / Without me, she will*

*sigh and sing."*

Scholars predominantly interpret this as a lament by a rejected concubine. The repeated phrases—"not with me," "not beside me," and "passes me by"—describe her exclusion, reflecting the yingqie system. As secondary brides, yingqie held low status, and the poem's speaker may voice resentment at her marginalization. Alternatively, Wen Yiduo in *Mythology and Poetry* proposed it as a heartbreak poem: here, "zhi zi" refers to a lover, and "gui" denotes marriage—the speaker grieves as her beloved weds another. This reading downplays ritual context to emphasize personal emotion.

Both poems depict Chu romantic life through a secular lens, their verses brimming with a timeless yearning for love as free-flowing as the rivers. Simultaneously, they attest to the Chu people's primal reverence for waterways.

### 1.2.3. Women as Political Metaphors in Philosophical Prose

References to Chu women in the philosophical writings of the pre-Qin period are relatively sparse, primarily appearing in works such as Han Feizi and Zhuangzi. While these accounts share some commonalities with historical records, they diverge in purpose: where historical texts emphasize factual documentation, philosophical treatises employ Chu women as rhetorical devices to illustrate theoretical arguments or political viewpoints.

For instance, Han Feizi's *Nei Chu Shuo Xia* revisits the Chu noblewoman Zheng Xiu, recasting her as the archetypal schemer behind the "Covered Nose Ploy":

"When the King of Chu acquired a new beauty, Zheng Xiu advised her: 'The king particularly adores when women cover their mouths in his presence. You must do so when near him.' The new concubine complied. When the king inquired why, Zheng Xiu declared: 'She claims to loathe Your Majesty's odor.'"

Here, Zheng Xiu's historical political acumen is reduced to the trope of the "jealous woman." Han Feizi uses this episode to expound the Legalist principle that "if a ruler does not conceal his inclinations, subordinates will exploit them"—asserting that monarchs must mask their preferences to prevent manipulation and maintain authority. This reflects the Legalist school's moral critique of Chu women's political involvement.

Similarly, Han Feizi's *Er Bing* references King Ling of Chu's obsession with slender waists—"When King Ling favored narrow waists, many in his court starved themselves"—though no specific women are named. This anecdote critiques how rulers' whims distort subjects' behavior, simultaneously exposing the Chu court's bodily discipline of women and condemning its extravagance. It serves as a cautionary tale for the Legalist doctrine of "guiding actions through circumstances."

In contrast, Zhuangzi's *Free and Easy Wandering* presents: "On distant Mount Miaoguyue, dwell divine beings with skin like ice and demeanor of unwed maidens."

While not explicitly referencing Chu women, this ethereal figure embodies Chu-style

mysticism. The goddess-like image merges the graceful beauty of Chu femininity with Daoist ideals of wuwei(non-action), symbolizing transcendent detachment. Philosophical prose prioritizes abstract reasoning over concrete portrayal. Yet its selective depictions reveal how Chu women functioned primarily as moral allegories or political symbols—whether as warnings against desire or embodiments of spiritual purity.

### 1.3. Depictions of Chu Women in Excavated Texts

Bi Li, the wife of Yuxiong (a progenitor of the Chu state), receives no specific mention in pre-Qin historical records. However, the 2008 Tsinghua Bamboo Slips—particularly the section Chu Ju—provide detailed accounts:

*"Lord Xiongyan migrated to Jingzong, where he encountered Bi Li. Against the current they ferried her; her ears hung pendulous. He married her, and she bore Washu and Li-ji. During Li's birth, he ruptured from her flank. Bi Li ascended to heaven, and the shamans bound her wound with thorns (chu)—hence the people became known as 'Chu.'"*

This passage recounts how Yuxiong married Bi Li, who died during a traumatic childbirth where her son, Xiong Li, was delivered via abdominal rupture. The term bi denotes a deceased ancestress in pre-Qin genealogy, while li may derive from a posthumous title or represent a homophone like lì ("pestilence"), alluding to her fatal labor.

After Bi Li's death, shamans bound her torn abdomen with thorny vines. The clan later adopted "Chu" (meaning "thorns") as their name, memorializing this maternal sacrifice. This narrative underscores Chu's veneration of both shamanic practices and matrilineal authority—distinct from the patriarchal dominance of Central Plains culture—highlighting persistent matriarchal traditions and reverence for fertility.

The Baoshan Chu Slips, excavated in Jingmen, Hubei, further document female diviners like Wu Zhi and Wu Kui. The frequent use of characters with the female radical in these texts emphasizes the gendered role of diviners, confirming women's participation in Chu's theocratic governance.

## 2. Characteristics of the Depictions of Chu Women in Pre-Qin Literature

### 2.1. Political Narratives of Power and Strategy

An analysis of pre-Qin texts reveals that Chu women, particularly those of noble birth, played significant political roles in state decision-making, even influencing national development. This represents the most distinctive feature of Chu noblewomen in historical records. These women served as instruments of marital diplomacy while simultaneously emerging as political actors within the royal court.

Deng Man demonstrated her strategic acumen by analyzing military and political situations for King Wu of Chu during the campaign against Luo, proposing crisis

management strategies. Following King Wu's death, she assumed control of the government, stabilizing Chu's rule. Xi Gui, entangled in the conflicts between Xi, Cai and Chu through political marriage, bore two sons for King Wen of Chu. Though she maintained silent resistance, after King Wen's demise, she firmly rejected Prime Minister Zi Yuan's advances, prioritized state affairs, and meticulously educated her son King Cheng of Chu. The *Guoyu* cites both Deng Man and Xi Gui as cautionary examples warning rulers against favoring foreign consorts and creating power imbalances - the resulting "femme fatale" discourse reflects Central Plains' criticism of both political marriages and female political participation, while simultaneously highlighting Chu women's relative political agency.

Zheng Xiu, notorious for the "Covered Nose Ploy," was characterized by Han Feizi as the archetype of self-serving political manipulation. Her frequent political interventions and the courting of her favor by Chu ministers and nobles demonstrate the substantial political influence wielded by Chu noblewomen. Furthermore, the abundant "fragrant herbs and beautiful women" political metaphors in *Chuci* underscore the significant status of Chu women.

## 2.2. Divine Narratives: Shamanic Spirituality and the Sacred Feminine

The Chu people revered shamanic practices, with *Guoyu*·Chu Yu recording: "All, from rulers to subjects, pleased the spirits by following their desires and aversions, ensuring no divine resentment toward Chu." This shamanic culture permeates pre-Qin literary and excavated texts, where goddesses and female shamans emerge as transcendent mediators—embodying the spiritual core of Chu's religious traditions.

From Qu Yuan's Xiang Furen (Lady of the Xiang River) and Shan Gui (Mountain Spirit) to Song Yu's Goddess of Mount Wu and Zhuangzi's "divine beings with skin like ice", these sacred feminine figures cloak Chu women in mysticism and romantic idealism.

The goddess archetype further bifurcates into maternal worship. The *Tsinghua Bamboo Slips*·Chu Bi Li, wife of progenitor Yuxiong, who died during childbirth. Shamans bound her ruptured abdomen with thorns (jing), later naming the tribe "Chu" (meaning "thorns") to honor her sacrifice. Unlike Central Plains cultures that erased matrilineal ancestors, Chu's veneration of Bi Li as a state-origin symbol highlights its shamanic recognition of maternal authority.

Female shamans' roles are equally evidenced in Li Sao: "The shamaness Xü, gentle yet stern, rebuked me fervently." *Nine Songs*·Honoring the Dead: "Rituals ended, drums echoed; / Passing flowers, they danced in turns— / Beautiful priestesses led the solemn rite." *Baoshan Chu Slips*: Multiple female diviners conducting state prognostication. These accounts collectively affirm Chu women's unique theopolitical status—as both mortal conduits to the divine and living manifestations of sacred power.

### 2.3. Secular Narratives: The Pluralistic Lives of Chu Women

For ordinary Chu women, pre-Qin texts predominantly document their quotidian existence. The Book of Songs poems Zhou Nan·Han Guang and Zhao Nan·Jiang You Si vividly portray Chu romantic customs - from bold courtship to the melancholy of unrequited love. Unlike the ritual-constrained Central Plains, Chu's folk culture celebrated free love, granting women remarkable autonomy in choosing partners.

Chuci further corroborates this social liberty: Li Sao: "I harmonized my adornments for joy,/ Wandering freely to seek my beloved." He Bo: "We clasp hands as you journey east;/ I escort my beauty to southern shores." Chu couples also practiced jieyan (pledge-giving) rituals, exchanging fragrant herbs and jade ornaments as tokens - epitomized by Li Sao's "I broke jade branches to adorn her girdle."

Moreover, Chu's cultural openness facilitated female education. The rich feminine archetypes in Chuci likely inspired women's literary pursuits, while shamanesses' requisite knowledge of astronomy, agriculture, and society promoted broader learning. The Shanghai Museum Chu Bamboo Slips include Ge Tan: "I inform my instructress,/ Beg leave to return home./ To wash my linens clean,/ And visit my parents." This depicts a woman temporarily leaving her embroidery studies - tangible evidence of Chu women's multifaceted secular lives.

### 3. The Legacy and Contemporary Relevance of Chu Women's Depictions

The portrayals of Chu women in pre-Qin literature hold not only significant historical and literary value but also profound social relevance. These narratives have profoundly influenced later literary traditions while offering enduring insights into contemporary gender discourse, feminist consciousness, and creative writing.

The political archetype embodied by Deng Man inspired subsequent models of sagacious femininity, as seen in the Han dynasty's Biographies of Exemplary Women. Xi Gui and Zheng Xiu became focal points for later debates surrounding the "femme fatale" trope and female chastity cults - the Records of the Grand Historian's wariness toward women's political involvement directly references Zheng Xiu's legacy.

The Chuci tradition of "divine-mortal romance" inspired Cao Zhi's Ode to the Goddess of Luo, perpetuating the "fragrant herbs and beautiful women" allegory that used feminine imagery to express political sentiment. Its shamanistic motifs - from spirit mediums to mountain deities - resurfaced in Six Dynasties zhiguai tales, Tang romances, Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio's fox spirits, and Li He's shamanic poetry, demonstrating Chuci's enduring aesthetic influence.

These depictions reveal Chu women's remarkable participation in politics, sacred rites, and social life, achieving unusual autonomy within patriarchal structures. The unyielding, even "barbaric" strength of Chu femininity, often expressed through mythological frameworks, constitutes an early feminist paradigm that challenges traditional "gentle and meek" gender norms. This legacy provides invaluable re-

sources for gender studies and women's literature - from modern "elite female" characters to web-novel "strong female protagonists," all trace their lineage to Chu representations. Globally, these narratives offer unique perspectives for transnational feminist discourse, illuminating alternative models of female agency in ancient societies.

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