

Classic Poetry Series

**Ssu-mu Hsiang-ju**  
**- poems -**

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## Ssu-mu Hsiang-ju(179 BC - 117 BC)

During the Han period elaborate rhyming prose (fu) dominated the world of poetry, and Sima Xiangru was its most able practitioner. Sima was born in Chengdu, and showed his special talents in composing poetry since early ages. However, his literary talent attracted no attention from the government. He remained obscure all the time. One day, when passing a crowded bridge, he etched some words on its railing, saying: "I will never step on this bridge in obscurity." Years later, he composed a poem to describe the breath-taking beauty of the imperial garden. The emperor was so fascinated with this poem and the talent of its writer that he sent for Sima Xiangru, and warmly received him in the imperial palace. After that, a rebellion broke out in ancient Sichuan, Sima's homeland. The emperor sent him back to quell it. He did it successfully. Everything suggests that he was going steadily towards the height of his career. However, the affairs of the world are unpredictable. Shortly after his successful mission in Sichuan, he was accused of taking bribes, and was removed from his position. Although innocent, he was forced to leave the imperial capital, living in poverty and obscurity again. Years after that, he was found innocent, and was summoned back to the imperial palace. He was put in a very high position again after a years' exile.

The romance between Xiangru and Wenjun is one of the oldest love stories in China. One version of the story that seems to be most popular is the following one. Early in his career, the great prose poet, Sima Xiangru of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24 ) found himself in the service of Emperor Jing (156-140 BC). Unable to fulfill his literary ambitions, Sima Xiangru resigned from his post and returned to his native home of Linqiong (present-day Ya'an) in Sichuan province.

On one occasion, he attended a banquet hosted by one of Sichuan's wealthiest and most powerful men, Zhuo Wangsun. Wangsun had a daughter named Wenhou alias Wenjun (150-115 BC) who had been divorced at the age of seventeen. Zhuo Wenjun was fascinated by Sima Xiangru's renowned literary talent. To satisfy her curiosity, she peeped at him from behind a screen during the banquet. Sima Xiangru had long been interested in her. Although he pretended to be unaware of her presence, he took the opportunity to woo her by singing "the Male Phoenix Pleads with the Female Phoenix" when he was asked to play the qin.

Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun lost their hearts to each other and decided to elope together that very night. Zhuo Wenjun's father was enraged by her

immoral conduct and refused to give her any money. As Sima Xiangru was also penniless, they were left destitute. They sold the few possessions they had and returned to Linqiong where they opened a small wine shop. Each day, Zhuo Wenjun sold wine in the shop while Sima Xiangru hired himself out as an odd-job man. Eventually Zhuo Wangsun was moved by the devotion his daughter and her husband showed for each other; and took pity on them. He gave them a fortune in silver and one hundred servants.

Thus Sima Xiangru became a wealthy man and, in time, even gained imperial favour. He became the favourite court poet of Han Emperor Wu (140-86 BC). As a man of exalted social status, Sima Xiangru decided it was right that he should visit prostitutes and keep a concubine, paying no heed to the objections of his wife.

# Male Phoenix Pleads With Female Phoenix

This male phoenix has returned to his old home,  
from roaming the four seas searching for his mate.  
Time was not yet ripe, there was no way to meet her;  
then what a surprise: this evening I come up to this hall,  
and there's a dazzling maiden in the women's quarters.  
The room near but she far: this poisons my guts.  
How can we entwine our necks like mandarin ducks?  
How can we flutter about, and together soar?

Lady phoenix, lady phoenix: come with me and nest,  
be supported, breed with me, forever be my wife,  
exchange love in the usual way, our hearts harmonious:  
at midnight if you follow me who will know?  
Our wings together will rise, fluttering as high we fly.  
If you are unmoved by my feelings, I will be miserable.

Ssu-mu Hsiang-ju