

Love Cannot Reach the West: The Image of the “Girl” in Wang Luobin's Lyrics

Ruiman Han

School of Humanities, Beijing Dance Academy, Beijing, China

Abstract

Through an analysis of the Girl imagery in ten of Wang Luobin's lyrics, this paper explores its symbolic significance within both the textual structure and the psychology of creation. It argues that the Girl in Wang Luobin's songs always remains in a state of “not-yet-arrived”--an unattainable and ever-elusive phantom. The constellation of related images surrounding the Girl--such as the moon, the rose, the whip, and the grave--collectively constructs a symbolic system in which life and death, power and pain are intertwined. The relationship between the young “I” and the Girl is not merely a romantic narrative; rather, it embodies an unconscious projection between the creator and the self, the ideal and the act of creation. Through the repeated depiction of “love that cannot be possessed,” Wang Luobin transforms his obsession with creation and freedom into a symbolic process of self-redemption. Hence, “love” in Wang Luobin's work functions not only as a creative motif but also as a metaphor for his lived experience and inner spiritual struggle.

Keywords

Wang Luobin; psychology of creation; narrative structure; psychoanalysis; unconscious desire; structuralist textual analysis.

1. Introduction

In Wang Luobin's numerous adaptations and original compositions, **love** stands as one of the themes he revisits most persistently, both in reflection and in expression. Indeed, it may be said that his delicate and nuanced portrayals of love have come to define the distinctive texture of his artistic style. Yet, beyond love itself, there exists another recurring creative subject closely intertwined with it—the *Girl*. The *Girl* is not only a central figure in Wang Luobin's lyrical world but also one of the most vital poetic images structuring his imagination[1].

However, when we turn to a closer reading of this figure, an intriguing phenomenon emerges throughout Wang Luobin's corpus, the *Girl* never truly appears. She never actually arrives, nor does she ever conform to anyone's expectation[2]. In all ten songs selected for this study¹, descriptions of the *Girl* are consistently associated with notions of distance yearning and waiting. She is heard but unseen², elusive, withdrawn³, concealed⁴—always about to appear yet never fully present. In contrast stands the young *I*, a figure of unrequited devotion, endlessly clinging to the unattainable object of his desire. This relational dynamic between the yearning youth and the absent *Girl* runs through almost all of Wang Luobin's most representative works. Whether in the lyrics of adapted folk tunes or in his entirely original compositions, the motif of “love unfulfilled: and the sentiment of one-sided affection remain his enduring aesthetic preoccupations. What, then, does the *Girl* symbolize within his lyrical imagination? How are the images surrounding her assembled into a coherent symbolic network? And what meanings do they reveal—textually, structurally, and psychologically—for both the work and its creator? These questions constitute both the starting point and the ultimate horizon of this inquiry.

2. The Superimposition of the Girl's Imagery

In the ten songs by Wang Luobin examined in this study, a constellation of images emerges around the figure of the *Girl*: the moon, the sun, the rose, the lilac, the watermelon, the apple, the whip, and the candle. The spatial settings associated with her include autumn, the treetop, and the grave. Each of these individual images carries a deeper, more concealed layer of meaning[3]. A detailed explanation and interpretation of these single images can be found in Table 1 below.

(Table 1)

The imagery representing the <i>Girl</i>			
Sun—New life	Moon—Decay	Whip—Pain or Power	Rose—Blood
Lilac—Life	The Candle—Not sure	Ripple—Not sure	Apple or Watermelon—Fineness
Floating cloud—Not sure	Grave—Death	Autum—Before the end	Treetop—Non-place

2.1. The Sun and the Moon: The Cycle of Life and Death

The specific images within the lyrical text can, in fact, be further deconstructed within their contexts. In songs such as “The Song of Youth” and “A Half Moon Rises,” the imagery of the sun and the moon appear repeatedly. Both belong to the natural world and cannot be separated from it. The appearance of the sun always signifies the beginning of a new day; it symbolizes light, hope, and rebirth. The moon, by contrast, marks the end of the day—the coming of night, the passage of time, and decline. In Wang’s lyrics, both the sun and the moon are symbolically linked to the *Girl*. Their conjunction binds together the notions of birth and death, beginning and fading, forming a continuous cycle. The *Girl* thus embodies both the hope of life and the shadow of decay; she signifies the eternal recurrence of existence, a ceaseless alternation between vitality and dissolution.

2.2. Candlelight, Ripples, and Floating Clouds: Unstable Phantoms

In songs such as “Under the Silver Moonlight” and “The Tall Poplar,” the *Girl* is also associated with the imagery of candlelight, rippling water, and drifting clouds. These three images seem unrelated and resist classification into any fixed category, yet they share one essential quality: none of them possesses a stable or solid form. In physical reality, it is nearly impossible to define the precise shape of a flame, a ripple, or a cloud. Each maintains an insurmountable distance from human grasp. One may light a candle but never touch its flame; one may row upon the water but never enter its ripples; one may gaze up at clouds but never pluck a single wisp from the sky. Candlelight, water, and clouds are all *unpossessable*—they cannot be held or owned. They share a common essence of transience, insubstantiality, and instability. When such imagery converges with the figure of the *Girl*, she becomes a phantom—appearing and disappearing, endlessly desired yet perpetually absent. Like the Freudian *death drive*[4], she manifests as a presence that is both irresistible and unattainable, a haunting repetition that cannot be subdued.

2.3. Autumn and the Treetop: Indefinable Thresholds

The imagery of *autumn* and the *treetop* represent particularly unique scenes and settings. Here, they are not to be understood as mere seasonal markers or natural objects, but as *liminal* environments. Autumn precedes winter; if winter signifies an ending, then autumn represents

the uncertain interval before that end—a temporal space of suspension. It is neither a beginning nor an ending, but an ambiguous in-between. Similarly, the treetop occupies a threshold position: it grows from the tree, belonging to it, yet simultaneously extends beyond it, reaching into the open sky and engaging with what lies outside. Both autumn and the treetop thus signify indeterminate boundaries, points of transition that defy fixed definition[5]. When these liminal images merge with the *Girl*, she herself becomes a figure of ambiguity—neither dark nor bright, neither wholly yours nor entirely beyond you. She embodies the paradox of the threshold: a being that perpetually hovers between possession and loss, between the self and the other.

2.4. The Whip, the Rose, and the Grave: Power Leading to Pain

The image of the *whip* appears twice among the ten selected lyrics, and in both instances, it is held by the *Girl*. What does the whip signify? In “*In That Faraway Place*,” it evokes a scene of intimacy and playfulness—a moment of tenderness between the “I” and the *Girl*⁵. Yet in “*The Girl from Daban City*,” the whip becomes the price that must be paid for love⁶, a sign of submission and suffering.

Regardless of context, the whip’s meaning cannot remain on the surface. Its very act of striking implies a dynamic of injury and domination—a relationship between the active wielder and the passive recipient. On a deeper symbolic level, the whip points toward *power* itself: the hand that holds it becomes the embodiment of authority and control.

A comparable metaphorical object is the *rose*, often used to describe the *Girl*’s beauty and allure. Yet the rose’s very form—its red hue and its thorns—conjures the imagery of blood and pain. The *grave*, in turn, represents a sealed and airless space, the emblem of death and finality. When these three images—the whip, the rose, and the grave—are read together, a symbolic sequence emerges: the whip signifies the power that inflicts pain; the rose, the beauty that suffers it; and the grave, the destination of that suffering. Thus, when these images converge upon the *Girl*, she assumes an uncanny duality: she is at once the agent who wields power and the victim who endures it, both the origin and the expression of pain. The *Girl* thereby becomes the locus where desire, violence, and mortality entwine—a paradoxical figure through whom Wang projects the entanglement of love, power, and death.

3. The Romantic Relationship Between the I and the Girl

In Wang Luobin’s lyrics, a recurrent model of romantic relationship emerges: the young *I* admires the *Girl*, yet love remains unfulfilled, or the *I* experiences a one-sided, unrequited affection. Across the ten selected songs, the young *I* is almost always depicted as *passive* in the presence of the *Girl* (see Table 2), while the *Girl*, in turn, exhibits passivity when faced with the young *I* (see Table 3). Why does the author portray mutual passivity as a symbol of idealized love? The answer appears straightforward: only through the passivity of both parties can the current state persist, uninterrupted and unaltered. But why would he design the narrative in this manner?

(Table 2)

States of the <i>I</i> toward the <i>Girl</i> in the Lyrics			
Possession	Being hurt	Submission	Anticipation
Betrayal	Longing	Seeking	Yearning

(Table 3)

States in which the <i>Girl</i> Appears in the Lyrics			
Absent	Forsaking	Hiding	Almost seen
Death	Not emerging	Whipping	Voice alone

As discussed in the previous section regarding the superimposition of the *Girl's* imagery, the *Girl* is not a concrete person. She embodies everything the creator subconsciously desires. She is omnipresent, elusive like the death drive, and all artistic works can be regarded as the creator's dreams—a conduit for the expression and relief of the unconscious. From this perspective, the romantic relationships depicted in the lyrics can be analyzed along multiple dimensions: the connection between the young *I* and the *Girl* is, in fact, a symbolic reflection of Wang's own experiences of life.

The textual portrayal of love reveals a persistent yearning for completeness and beauty. Within this desire, the creator establishes a rule: the *Girl* will never come fully to the young *I*, and the young *I* will endlessly await her arrival. This design mirrors his own emotional life—his two marriages were fraught with incompleteness; he divorced his first wife, and his second wife passed away. In his lived reality, love could never remain whole. Consequently, the love depicted in his lyrics is always imminent, always suspended in the realm of the unknown. Only the *waiting* endures, eternal and unchanging[6].

4. The Self-Destructive Conclusion of the I and the Girl

In the lyrics of the ten songs, the depiction of love is clearly only the most superficial layer; exploring the romantic relationship is merely the first step in textual analysis. Following the argument presented earlier—that the *Girl* embodies everything the creator subconsciously desires—it becomes apparent that many more complex factors hide beneath the guise of “love,” eluding the defensive mechanisms of the work's dream-like structure[7].

For example, in “*The Girl from Daban City*,” the young *I's* desire to possess the *Girl* and the ultimate cost of receiving lashes⁷ are organized in a manner worthy of close consideration. Why must the enjoyment of love and the possession of a beloved always correspond to pain and suffering? The author of this study suggests that, in this context, the *Girl* no longer simply represents a lover but rather stands for the act of *creation* itself. The young *I's* desire to possess the *Girl* reflects Wang's craving for creative work; the *Girl* is simultaneously the object of romantic longing, the ideal to which Wang remains steadfast, and the source of the suffering and confinement that he must endure[8].

Thus, in Wang's lyrics, the pursuit of artistic creation is masked as the pursuit of a lover, and the harm brought by creation is similarly concealed as the *Girl's* infliction of pain upon the *I*. This pattern recurs across his songs, gradually forming a distinctive characteristic of Wang Luobin's creative style[9]. He embraces this suffering, repeatedly revisiting it to articulate the complex relationship between himself and his art, which gradually develops into a *self-destructive psychological tendency*[10].

Even in the face of pain, he persists; in persisting, he suffers again. This cycle repeats endlessly[11]. The self-destructive individual exposes their vulnerability to the utmost, thereby restoring a sense of wholeness prior to the infliction of harm. Reviewing Wang's life, it is evident that he lived for creation. Even during the fifteen years in which he was effectively confined, deprived of freedom, he never abandoned his creative work. His devotion to creation cannot be adequately described by mere “love”; it is more accurately understood as the condition through which he could preserve himself[12].

Within this cycle of intertwined pleasure and pain, Wang Luobin substitutes the *Girl's* imagery for countless realities that are otherwise difficult to express, thereby achieving a degree of liberation from the hardships of life. Wang Luobin never truly glorifies romantic love. Though he understood its beauty, his depiction of love is always fundamentally unattainable. Like Sisyphus and his stone that can never reach the mountaintop, the love he writes about can never arrive in the West; the *Girl* in his lyrics exists eternally only in that faraway place.

Notes

The eleven songs selected for case analysis in this study are: “*The Song of Youth*,” “*Lift Your Veil*,” “*The Girl from Daban City*,” “*In That Faraway Place*,” “*A Half Moon Rises*,” “*The Tall Poplar*,” “*Under the Silver Moonlight*,” “*Where the Camel Caravan Comes From*,” “*Mayila*,” “*I Wish to Become a Cup of Fragrant Tea*,” and “*A Lovely Rose*.”

The specific lyrics cited in this study are drawn from “*Where the Camel Caravan Comes From*,” which includes the lines: “The camels carry cool, clear water (Sharhongbarei); The prospecting Girl sings aloud (Ayali mei, ayali Mei); Never again shall the desert doze (Sharhongbarei).” and from “*A Lovely Rose*,” which reads: “That day I was hunting on the mountain, riding my horse, While you were singing below, your melody winding into the rosy clouds.”

The specific lyrics are drawn from “*Under the Silver Moonlight*,” which contains the lines: “The traces of the past have grown dim, like an illusory dream. My forsaking Girl, where are you hiding?”

The specific lyrics are drawn from “*A Half Moon Rises*,” which reads: “A half moon rises—yi la la—rises. Why does my Girl not come out—yi la la—not come out?”

The original lyrics from “*In That Faraway Place*” read: “I wish, I wish I were a little lamb, Sitting by her side. I wish she would take a slender whip and gently, gently strike my back.”

The original lyrics from “*The Girl from Daban City*” read: “Even if I must endure sixteen thousand lashes, I would still do so of my own accord.”

The original lyrics from “*The Girl from Daban City*” read: “If you are to marry, do not marry anyone else— You must marry me” and “Even if I must endure sixteen thousand lashes, I would still willingly do so.”

References

- [1] Roland Barthes. *Writing Degree Zero* [M]. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2008.
- [2] Zhang Weidong. *A Study of Roland Barthes' Textual Theory* [D]. Nanjing Normal University, 2013.
- [3] Xie Longxin. *Literary Narrative and Speech Acts* [D]. Central China Normal University, 2011.
- [4] Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams* [M]. Jilin: Jilin Literature and History Press, 2017.
- [5] Dong Longchang. *A Study of Claude Lévi-Strauss' Thoughts on Art Anthropology* [D]. Shandong Normal University, 2013.
- [6] Du Yaxiong. *Oral History from Thirty-Nine Years Ago: An Interview with Mr. Wang Luobin* [J]. *Music Creation*, 2021, (01): 172–184.
- [7] Josh Cohen. *Death Is the Purpose of Life* [M]. Beijing: CITIC Press, 2016.
- [8] Chen Furong. *A Study of Female Narratives in Narrative Folk Songs* [D]. Inner Mongolia Normal University, 2013.
- [9] Li Luankun. *Research on Intersubjectivity in Psychoanalysis* [J]. *Medicine and Philosophy*, 2023, 44(24): 56–59.
- [10] Lu Yi. *The Emergence, Structure, and Ethical Status of the Freudian Subject* [J]. *Ethics Research*, 2023, (01): 102–108.
- [11] Roland Barthes. *Mythologies: Interpreting Popular Culture* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1999.
- [12] *Elements of Semiology: Selected Essays on Structuralist Literary Theory* [M]. Translated by Li Youzheng. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1988.