



4. Li Qingzhao

Li Qingzhao's Life

Li Qingzhao was a native of Shandong province. Shortly after her birth, however, her father Li Gefei was appointed Erudite at the National Academy in the capital and the family moved to Kaifeng. Li Gefei was a very learned man; one of his works was an extensive commentary on the *Notes on the Rites (Liji)*. He also befriended such eminent poets and statesmen as Su Shi (1037–1101) and Zhang Lei (1052–1112). Li Qingzhao's mother, the granddaughter of a chancellor, was also highly educated.

Li Gefei's later official career suffered from the factional struggles within the bureaucracy during the last decades of the eleventh century. But by 1101, when his daughter married Zhao Mingcheng (style name Defu; 1081–1129), he had attained the rank of vice-director in the Ministry of Rites. Li Qingzhao's father-in-law, Zhao Tingzhi, was also a native of Shandong, and belonged to the bureaucratic faction that was in power in the early years of the twelfth century. In 1101, he was vice-minister in the Ministry of Personnel. In 1105 he was appointed chancellor alongside Cai Jing (1046–1126), although in the following year Cai was cashiered, leaving Zhao the sole occupant of this office. In 1107, it was Zhao Tingzhi's turn to be dismissed, while Cai Jing was reinstated in the position of chancellor. Zhao Tingzhi died soon after this event. Zhao Mingcheng had received his first official appointment in 1105, but following the death of his

father he retired with his wife to the ancestral estate in Qingzhou for the prescribed period of mourning.

After the requisite three-year mourning period, Zhao Mingcheng and Li Qingzhao continued to live in Qingzhou for another ten years. Zhao did not go back into active service until 1121, when he was appointed prefect of Laizhou (or Donglai, in Shandong). One of the few preserved *shi* poems written by Li Qingzhao, entitled "Emotions," describes the couple's life shortly after their arrival in their new home:

On the tenth day of the Eighth Month of the *xinchou* year of the reign period Proclaiming Harmony [Xuanhe, 1101–1125], we arrived in Laizhou. We sat all by ourselves in a single room, without any of the objects that we had been used to seeing around us all our lives. There was nothing on the table but a copy of the *Ministry of Rites' Rhyming Dictionary*. So I opened it at random with the agreement that we would each write a poem using the rhyme of the page to which the book opened. The character *zi* fell to me, and so I used words from that rhyming category in the rhyming positions of my poem, which is a poem of emotions.

A cold window and a broken table without any books,
How sad that in your career you had to end up here,
Where all day long Clerk Alcohol and Bully Money
Delight in stirring up a motley crew of troubles.
I kick them out and lock the gate so I can write my poem,
Inside this "palace," a frozen fragrance elicits fine thoughts.
The silence allows me to seek out my trusted friends,
Master Mere Imagination and Sir Fantasy.

In 1124, Zhao Mingcheng was appointed prefect of Zizhou (also in Shandong). During these years in Qingzhou, Laizhou, and Zizhou, Zhao Mingcheng could devote all his time to his greatest passions, archaeology and epigraphy, which at that time in China were young and exciting branches of scholarship. Li Qingzhao shared her husband's intellectual interests, and over time the couple built up an impressive collection of books, paintings, rubbings, and antiquities.

This idyllic existence was brutally shattered when in 1126 the armies of the Jürchen thoroughly defeated the troops of the Song before going on to conquer northern China. The Jürchen had proclaimed their own Jin dynasty in what is today Manchuria in 1115. The Song dynasty then allied

itself with this new power in northeast Asia to fight their common enemy, the Liao dynasty. The Liao dynasty had been founded by the Khitan; throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries it was a major power in southern Manchuria and northern Hebei. All of the earlier Song dynasty attempts to dislodge the Liao dynasty had ended in failure and, ultimately, in the payment by the Song court of a humiliating annual tribute to the Liao to maintain the peace. When the Song and the Jin combined forces against the Liao, the Jin quickly destroyed the Liao and then turned on the Song and invaded northern China. They met with very little resistance, and in the spring of 1126 their troops showed up at the gates of the capital Kaifeng, but left after having been promised a large tribute. The art-loving Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1126) then retired in favor of his son, Emperor Qinzong (r. 1126). But in the autumn of the same year, the armies of the Jin again showed up right outside Kaifeng. This time they took the two emperors captive and embarked on a systematic conquest of the Song empire.

The years that followed were chaotic ones. Northern China was quickly subjugated by the Jin, but in southern China one of the younger sons of Emperor Huizong was placed on the throne by Song loyalists. Initially the chances of this regime's survival seemed slim, as Emperor Gaozong and his court were chased by Jin troops all over southern China and at times had to flee to the high seas for safety. Gradually, however, the resistance against the Jin gathered strength, and eventually the river Huai came to mark the borderline between the two competing empires. Despite the stiff opposition of the refugees from the north, who continued to hope for the reconquest of their home districts, the Southern Song in 1141 concluded a peace with the Jin, and agreed both to recognize the Jin emperor as the "elder brother" of the Song emperor and to pay a large yearly tribute.

By that time, Zhao Mingcheng had been deceased for many years. In 1127 he had traveled to Jiankang (Nanjing) because his mother had passed away there. Soon afterwards, Li Qingzhao followed him with part of their possessions—the books alone filled fifteen carts. Before the end of the prescribed period of mourning, Zhao Mingcheng reentered government service. After having served as prefect of Jiankang, he was appointed prefect of Huzhou, but on his way to his new post he fell ill and died. For

his widow, there followed a period of trekking back and forth across southern China, in constant flight from enemy raids and local rebellions. Over the years, her riches melted away like snow in the sun as a result of plundering, theft, and false accusations. Only in 1132, when she followed the court to Hangzhou, would her life settle down a little, although by then she was living in very reduced circumstances. She had hoped to be invited into the Inner Palace as a teacher, but this never happened, although once in a while she was invited to supply songs and couplets for court festivities.

Our most important source for the life of Li Qingzhao from her marriage in 1101 to Zhao Mingcheng to the mid-thirties of the twelfth century is the postface she composed for her husband's *Inscriptions on Bronze and Stone* (*Jinshi lu*). This work originally consisted of the texts of two thousand inscriptions ranging in date from the second millennium BCE to the tenth century CE, together with 520 appended notices (only the table of contents and the appended notices survive). Li Qingzhao's postface is a description of how she and her husband had built up this collection, as well as how it was later scattered and lost. But the preface's many details about their married life and her travels through southeastern China make it a major autobiographical document. To a modern Western reader it may be surprising to find Li Qingzhao's account of her eventful life in the interstices of a description of her husband's library and other collections. One should keep in mind, however, that China at this time did not have much of a tradition of autobiographical writing. Our most important autobiographical statements in prose from the preceding centuries are postfaces to books, in which the authors explain how and why they felt moved or compelled to write the work concerned. By writing this postface in which she reveals her husband to have been a slave of passions that ultimately ended up as fruitless and futile, and by inserting herself into the narrative, Li Qingzhao may well have demonstrated even more originality than she did in writing her lyrics.

What is this *Inscriptions on Bronze and Stone* in thirty scrolls? It is the work of his lordship Zhao Defu [Mingcheng]. It brings together two thousand rubbings of inscriptions on bells, tripods, steamers, pots, plates, basins, beakers and vessels, as well as of the records of the deeds of eminent personalities and obscure gentlemen carved on large steles and tall columns—whatever may be found

inscribed on bronze or stone—from the period beginning with the Three Dynasties and ending with the Five Dynasties.¹ For each of these texts mistakes have been corrected, and everything has been included that, following a critical selection, sufficiently accords with the Way of the Sages or might serve to remedy the omissions of the historiographers—it is truly voluminous!

Alas, ever since the disasters that befell Wang Ya and Yuan Zai, manuscripts and paintings have shared the same fate as pepper.² And what is the difference between Changyu's obsession with money and Yuankai's obsession with the *Commentary of Mr. Zuo*?³ The labels may have been different, but both were equally addictions!

I married Zhao Mingcheng in the *xinsi* year of the reign period Established Mean [Jianzhong, 1101]. At that time my late father was a vice-director in the Ministry of Rites, while the chancellor [my father-in-law] was vice-minister in the Ministry of Personnel. His lordship was twenty-one, and was a student of the National Academy. Both the Zhaos and the Lis were families of modest origins, poor and frugal people. On the first and fifteenth of every month his lordship was allowed to visit his family, at which time he would pawn his gown, take the five hundred copper coins, and walk over to the Assisting-the-State Monastery [Xiangguosi] to buy rubbings and fruit. When he returned home, together we would pore over the rubbings and nibble on the fruit, certain that we were as [carefree as the] subjects of the [ancient emperor] Hetian.⁴ Two years later, when he first served in a provincial post, he would, as soon as we had supplied ourselves with the minimum daily necessities, roam though the farthest and remotest regions, collecting records of ancient writing and unusual characters from all over the world. As time went by, his collection gradually grew and expanded. When the chancellor held the post of prime minister, our friends and

1. The Three Dynasties are the Xia (traditional dates 2207–1766 BCE), the Shang (also known as Yin; traditional dates 1765–1122 BCE), and Zhou (traditional dates 1121–249 BCE). The Five Dynasties refer to the sequence of five dynasties that ruled Northern China from 907 to 960.

2. When the house of the murdered chancellor Wang Ya (d. 835) was plundered, all the objects of gold and silver were taken away, but the books and paintings were simply tossed out on the street. When the corrupt chancellor Yuan Zai in 777 was allowed to commit suicide and his possessions were confiscated, the authorities found no less than eight hundred large sacks of pepper in his house.

3. He Qiao (style name Changyu; d. 292) was known as a miser, while Du Yu (style name Yuankai; 222–284) devoted all his life to the study of the *Commentary of Mr. Zuo*.

4. Hetian is said to have ruled in an ancient time when people, living simply, were happy.

relatives often served in the government archives and libraries. They would repeatedly bring us lost odes and neglected histories and all sorts of texts not to be found among the books recovered from the wall [of Confucius' home] in Lu or from the [royal] tomb in Ji.⁵ His lordship would then copy them as fast as he could, and eventually he came to find such pleasure in this kind of work that he could not make himself stop.

Later as well, whenever his lordship would happen to see a piece of calligraphy, a painting by a famous master past or present, or an extraordinary vessel from some early dynasty, he would take off his gown and hand it over in payment. I remember that once during the years of the reign period Exalted Peace [Chongning, 1102–1106] someone brought us a painting of peonies by Xu Xi, for which he asked two hundred thousand copper coins.⁶ But in those days even the scions of noble houses would have found it difficult to come up with two hundred thousand copper coins! So we kept the painting for two nights but in the end had to return it as we had no way to come up with that amount of money. For several days the two of us, husband and wife, were filled with regret and disappointment.

Later, during the ten years we lived in retirement in the countryside, we had to scramble to make ends meet, but at least we were well supplied with food and clothing. When his lordship then served as prefect of two prefectures in succession, he spent all of his income on the collation of books. Whenever he would acquire a text, the two of us would immediately compare it to other editions, incorporate it in our collection, and provide it with a title slip. And whenever we obtained a piece of calligraphy, a painting, a vessel, or a tripod, we would hold it in our hands in appreciation or unroll it if it was a scroll, and point out any flaw or defect. It was our rule that we could go on at night until a single candle had burned down to the nub. When it came to the quality of the paper [of our books] and the complete accuracy of their characters, we were able to surpass every other book collector.

Now I happen to have a good memory, and each time when we would sit in the Hall of Returning Home after dinner, we would point to the pile of books and histories and say which event was found in which book, in which chapter,

5. When the house of Confucius was torn down to make way for an extension of the palace of the prince of Lu in the second century BCE, a number of manuscripts were found in one of the walls. It was believed these manuscripts had been hidden there after "the burning of the books" by the First Emperor in 213 BCE. In 281 CE, a number of hitherto unknown texts were discovered in Ji when the tomb of one of the kings of the pre-imperial state of Wei was opened.

6. Xu Xi is one of the most famous painters of the tenth century.

on which page, and in which column of text—the person who made no mistakes would win and was allowed to drink his or her tea first. Whenever I hit the mark, I would raise my cup and laugh out loud, at times even spilling my tea on my clothes, and would stand up without even having had the opportunity to drink a drop! I would have been happy to be allowed to grow old in this realm! And so our resolve was not affected even though we were living in a time of sorrow and hardship.

When our collection of books was complete, we built a book vault in the Hall of Returning Home. The big chests were recorded in a register and we prepared a list of the books. When we wanted to teach or read a book, we had to ask for the key and have our name recorded in the register, after which the relevant scrolls were located and brought out. If there was some slight damage or soiling, we were always required to have the book cleaned or repaired, and the ease and informality of earlier times was gone. So, while our desire was to seek enjoyment, we actually created trouble and worries for ourselves. I could not bear this, and so I started to deliberately omit the second meat from my meals; I also stopped wearing clothes of more than one color; in my hair I no longer wore any ornaments of bright pearls and kingfisher feathers, and in my rooms I kept no utensils that were painted in gold or decorated with embroidery. Whenever I came across one of the Classics or Histories or one of the Hundred Philosophers, as long as the characters were not defective and the edition was without mistakes, I would immediately purchase the book to keep as a second copy. In our family there was a tradition of studying the *Book of Changes* [*Yijing*] and the *Commentary of Mr. Zuo*, and so the texts relating to these two Classics were the most complete. As a result the books lay arranged in rows on tables and desks and were strewn in disorder on mat and pillow. They satisfied our minds, our hearts, our eyes, and our spirits, and the pleasure was beyond any provided by music or sex, hounds or horses.

In the *bingwu* year of the reign period Quiet Force [Jingkang, 1126], his lordship served as prefect of Zichuan. When he heard that the Jin bandits had invaded the capital, he looked all around him in desolation. The stuffed cases and overflowing chests filled him with longing and with desperation, as he realized that most certainly they would soon be his possessions no longer. The following spring, in the Third Month of the *dingwei* year of the reign period Established Upsurge [Jiayuan, 1127], he had to hasten to the south because of the demise of my mother-in-law. As we were unable to transport all our luxury goods, we first put aside all the big and heavy books as well as those that were printed editions; next, we put aside the paintings on many sheets of paper, and finally we put aside all the ancient vessels without inscriptions. In addition, we later put aside

those books that were directorate editions, run-of-the-mill paintings, and the large and heavy vessels. After all these various sortings, we still had fifteen cartloads of books. When we came to Donghai, we crossed the Huai with a string of boats. We then again crossed the Yangzi and arrived in Jiankang. In our old home in Qingzhou we had left behind under lock and key more than ten rooms of books and sundry objects, and we had intended to transport them by boat [to the south] as well in the spring of the following year, but in the Twelfth Month the troops of the Jin conquered Qingzhou and the "more than ten rooms" were reduced to ashes.

That autumn, the Ninth Month of the *wushen* year of the reign period Established Upsurge [1128], his lordship reentered active service and served again as prefect, this time of Jiankang prefecture. The following spring, the Third Month of the *jiyou* year [1129], he was cashiered. We went up to Wuhu by boat, and then entered Gushu where we planned to settle down on the bank of the river Zhang. That summer, in the Fifth Month, we arrived at Chiyang. There his lordship received his appointment as prefect of Huzhou, with the order to proceed to the palace for an audience with the emperor. We temporarily made our home [on the river] in Chiyang, since he would be going by himself to the imperial court. But it was not until the thirteenth of the Sixth Month that he shouldered his luggage and left our boat. As he sat on the bank in his ramie gown with his cap pushed back, he exuded a tiger-like spirit, and his eyes flashed. Gazing into the boat he bid me goodbye. I felt extremely uneasy, and called to him: "What should I do in case I hear of some disturbance in the city?" With his hands on his hips he answered me from a distance: "Just follow the crowd! If worse comes to worst, first throw away the household goods, then the clothes and bedding, then the books and paintings, and then the ancient vessels. But the vessels for the ancestral sacrifices you must carry with you and guard with your life. Don't forget!" Then he galloped away.

Hurrying along the road, he exposed himself to extreme heat and fell ill. By the time he arrived at the Temporary Residence, his illness had taken a turn for the worse, and toward the end of the Seventh Month, I received a letter informing me that he was bedridden. I was alarmed and distressed, because I knew that his lordship had always been of an impatient nature—so what to do? If his illness was a serious one, he might run a fever, and in that case he would have to take cold medicines, which would make his illness even more worrisome. So I unmoored our boat and traveled downstream, covering three hundred *li* in a single day and night. When I arrived, I found he was indeed taking large quantities of medicines such as *chaibu* and *huangjin*; he suffered from bouts of fever and diarrhea, and his illness was so critical that he was on the brink of death.

Shedding tears of sorrow and filled with panic I could not bring myself to inquire about what he thought should be done after his death. On the eighteenth day of the Eighth Month, he was no longer able to get out of bed. He grabbed a brush and wrote a poem. He died immediately after having finished it, without leaving any instructions as to what to do upon his death.

After his burial, I had nowhere to go. The imperial court had disbanded the Inner Palace and sent its palace women away; it was also rumored that it was forbidden to cross the Yangzi.⁷ At that time I still had twenty thousand scrolls of books and two thousand rubbings of bronze and stone inscriptions, and sufficient cups and plates, carpets, and cushions to entertain a hundred guests—as well as comparable quantities of other luxury items. Now it was my turn to fall seriously ill and I survived by only a single breath. As the political situation became ever more pressing, I remembered that his lordship had a brother-in-law who held the position of vice-minister in the Ministry of War and was serving in the imperial guard in Hongzhou.⁸ I therefore dispatched two trusted clerks to go on ahead with my luggage as I intended to take refuge with him. But that winter, in the Twelfth Month, the Jin bandits conquered Hongzhou, and so all my goods were lost. The books that had once crossed the Yangzi “in a string of boats,” were now once again all scattered like clouds and mist. The only things that still remained were a few small and lightweight paintings and calligraphy pieces, manuscript editions of the collections of Li Taibai, Du Fu, Han Yu, and Liu Zongyuan, a *Tales of the World* and a *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, some twenty or thirty copies of rubbings of bronze and stone inscriptions from the Han to the Tang, twelve or thirteen large and small tripods from the Three Dynasties, and some baskets filled with manuscripts from the Southern Tang, things I had amused myself with when I was ill and had been storing in my bedroom—this was all that survived of all that wealth.

It was now impossible to travel upstream on the Yangzi [to Hongzhou], while the might of the renegades was beyond calculation. My younger brother Hang was serving as an editor in the office of imperial edicts, so I joined him. When we arrived in Taizhou, the prefect of that city had already fled. When we arrived in Shan, we traveled overland . . .⁹ We then threw away all our clothes and bedding and fled to Huanyan, where we hired a boat, and taking to sea we fled with the Traveling Court. At that time His Majesty had made a stop in Zhang'an. Following the imperial fleet, we traveled over the open sea to

7. Li Qingzhao had probably hoped for an appointment in the Inner Palace; she also found it impossible to return to Qingzhou.

8. Hongzhou refers to modern-day Nanchang in Jiangxi province.

9. Here there appears to be a gap in the text.

Wenzhou, and then went to Yuezhou. In the Twelfth Month of the year *gengxu* [1130] the court dismissed all of its officials, and so we went to Quzhou. That spring, in the Third Month of the *xinbai* year of the reign period Shaoxing [1131], we went again to Yuezhou. In the *renzi* year [1132] we went again to Hangzhou.

Earlier, when his lordship had been critically ill, he was visited by Secretary Zhang Feiqing who brought along a jade vase. After he had seen his lordship, he left taking the vase with him. Actually the vase was made of nephrite. This became the subject of gossip, and later it was even falsely rumored that he had offered it to the Jin, and I was also told that a censor had submitted a secret memorial of accusation. I was overcome with fear and did not dare to speak out, and so I collected all the bronze vessels and other objects in our house in order to present them to the court as soon as I arrived. But when I arrived in Yuezhou, the court had already moved to Siming. I did not dare keep these objects at home, so I sent them with a letter to Shan. Later, when government troops subjugated some mutinous soldiers, they took all of these things with them, and I have heard that they all ended up in the home of the late general Li. Of "all that survived of all that wealth," now some fifty to sixty percent had disappeared.

I now had only about five or seven baskets of calligraphy pieces and paintings, inkstones and inksticks. I could no longer bear to store them elsewhere, and so I kept them always under my own bed, and I always unlocked and locked the bedroom myself. While in Guiji, I lodged with a local family surnamed Zhong. But one night someone made a hole in the wall and carried off five baskets. I was inconsolable and offered a large reward for their recovery. Two days later a neighbor, Zhong Fuhao, appeared with eighteen scrolls demanding the reward. In this way I knew that the thieves had been local people. Despite all my efforts to recover my possessions, the other things were never returned. I now know that they were all purchased for a very low price by Transportation Commissioner Wu Yue. So now of "all that survived of all that wealth," seventy or eighty percent had disappeared. But yet I love and cherish the few scattered and incomplete books and quite ordinary pieces of calligraphy in my possession as I do my life—what foolishness, is it not?

When today I happened to read through this book, it was as if I saw the departed one before me. And I thought back how his lordship in the Hall of Tranquil Governance in Donglai, when the scrolls had first been mounted, provided them with a title strip and binding string, and wrapped every ten scrolls together in a single cover. Each day, after the end of the evening watch, he would collate two scrolls and write a postface to one. Of the two thousand

scrolls in this collection, five hundred and twenty have such a postface. Now the work of his hands is still fresh, but the trees on his grave have already grown tall. How sad!

Long ago, Xiao Yi upon the collapse of Jiangling paid no heed to the collapse of the dynasty and destroyed all of his books and paintings, and Yang Guang, after the collapse of Jiangdu, did not grieve over his death, although he did come back to reclaim his paintings and books.¹⁰ Can it be that even in death one cannot forget the objects to which one is attached by nature? Is it perhaps the case that Heaven deems us unworthy of enjoying such extraordinary things because of our insignificance? Or could it be that the dead retain their mental powers and, still devotedly loving and cherishing these things, are unwilling to leave them behind in the world of men? How is it possible for them to be scattered so easily when they had been acquired with such difficulty?

Alas! From the age of eighteen, two years younger than Lu Ji when he wrote his *Rhapsody [on Literature]*, to the age of fifty-two, two years older than Qu Yuan when he acknowledged his mistakes, during all these thirty-four years, I have been endlessly worried about gain and loss.¹¹ But where there is possession, its opposite must follow, and where there is collection, dispersal must follow: this is the cosmic law. If one man loses his bow, another man will find it—no need to waste words on it. The only reason why I have recorded the course of events in such detail is in the hope that it may serve as a warning for all those in later ages who love antiques and strive for erudition.

Written in the Studio of Simple Peace, on the first day of the Eighth Month of the second year, a ren year, of the reign period Continued Restoration [Shaoxing, 1132].

There is an important incident in the life of Li Qingzhao that is not mentioned in her postface to *Inscriptions on Bronze and Stone*. In the early summer of 1132, shortly after the end of the prescribed mourning period for her first husband, Li Qingzhao, then forty-nine years old, married a

10. Xiao Yi reigned from 552 to 554 as Emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty in Jianling (in Hubei province); following the collapse of the dynasty, he set fire to his extensive library. Yang Guang was the last ruler of the Sui dynasty (581–617); following a life of debauchery he was killed in Jiangdu (Yangzhou). When the new authorities tried to transport part of his collection back to the capital, the boat sank: the ghost of Yang Guang had reclaimed his books.

11. The famous Tang dynasty poet Du Fu states in one of his poems that Lu Ji (261–303) wrote his magisterial *Rhapsody on Literature* at the precocious age of twenty. Qu Yuan (not the famous poet but the noble officer of Wei also mentioned by Ban Zhao) is said to have realized at the age of fifty all the mistakes of his preceding forty-nine years.

low-ranking official named Zhang Ruzhou. This second marriage was a total disaster: within a hundred days she had not only filed for divorce, but also formally accused her husband of corruption. For a woman to apply for divorce represented an act of insubordination, and it landed Li Qingzhao briefly in jail. In a letter to the high official Qi Chongli, a distant relative by marriage who had helped her out in this affair, she wrote that she had been misled by the glib talk of Zhang Ruzhou, who turned out to be a corrupt official interested only in her money. Moreover, she claimed, he had physically abused her when he found out that most of her wealth had disappeared.

Li Qingzhao's letter to Qi is riddled with allusions, so we limit ourselves here to a translation of one section of it:

Since youth I have been versed in the norms of righteousness and have had a rough understanding of the *Odes* and *Rites*. Not long ago, because of a serious illness, I was hovering at the brink of death, unable to even distinguish between buffaloes and ants, and my casket had already been prepared. Even though I still had my weak younger brother to taste my medicine for me, we had only one old soldier to guard the gate. In my panic, I acted too rashly; I believed Zhang's stories which were as glib as a bamboo reed, and was misled by his words which were as beautiful as brocade. As my younger brother was easily deceived, he took the man at his word as soon as he showed him his letters of appointment. As I myself was about to die, I had not the slightest suspicion that Zhang would not be "a jade mirror stand." He brought unspeakable pressure to bear on us and we found ourselves in an insoluble quandary. Even before I had recovered from my illness, he had taken me by force to his home.

As soon as I could again see and hear clearly, I realized it would be impossible for me to live with him. How could I, in the twilight of my life, bear to be married to such a greedy scoundrel? While I myself had earned public contempt for my disgusting behavior, he was determined not only to carry off the prize but also to kill me. And so he gave free rein to his brutal violence, and each day I suffered his beatings. You will understand that the arms of [a peaceful person such as] Liu Ling were no defense against the fists of [a barbarian rebel such as] Shi Le!¹² I complained to Heaven and Earth, but how could I dare imitate

12. Liu Ling (mid-third century) is best known for his love of wine, but one anecdote has him refusing to fight a challenger with the words: "How could my chicken breast be a worthy match for your noble fists!" Shi Le (274-333), one of the fourth-century war-

Tanniang and complain to all and sundry!¹³ Yet I was also unwilling to resign myself to my terrible fate and take my misery for happiness. As outside help was nowhere to be found, there was no harm in lodging a complaint myself. But how could I have predicted that such a trifling affair would come to the notice of the emperor! A decision was taken in the Palace that this case was to be assigned to the highest court. Shackled hand and foot I gave my deposition, and was forced to make my case together with the worst criminals. I felt deeply ashamed, just as did the young scholar Jia Yi when he had to stand in the same row as [old army men such as] the Marquis of Jiang and Guan Ying, or the Old Master [Laozi] because he shares the same chapter [in the *Records of the Historian*] with [the legalist] Han Fei.¹⁴ I only prayed for escape from death, I did not hope for a restitution of my money.

It was not Heaven's punishment that I was forced to live with this cruel and violent man for a hundred days; it was not the doing of someone else that I had to spend nine days in prison. If one tries to chase away a sparrow by throwing gold at him, what profit will come of it? If one smashes a disk of jade with one's head, one is bound to suffer a loss. I have only myself to blame for this stupid mistake and it was my lot that I should come to know the inside of a jail . . .

Li Qingzhao's second marriage was common knowledge among her contemporaries, but from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the present, critics have tried to prove time and again that the letter to Qi Chongli was a fake and that the second marriage never actually took place. The stridency of their arguments can be attributed to the increasingly tight grip of a neo-Confucian morality that condemned the remarriage of widows. In traditional China, poetry was read as a reflection of the author's character, which meant, by extension, that only a high-minded person could produce fine poetry. To these critics, then, it was inconceivable

lords of northern China, in his youth had been a local thug who would beat up his neighbors in fights over fields.

13. Tanniang is one of the main characters in a popular Tang dynasty skit about a drunkard and his wife: when he comes home drunk and beats her up, she runs off to the neighbors to complain.

14. The Marquis of Jiang (Zhou Po) and Guan Ying were old soldiers who had assisted Liu Bang in founding the Han dynasty, whereas Jia Yi was a brilliant young scholar. When Jia Yi's proposals of reform threatened their position, they engineered his banishment to Chang'an. Laozi is considered the founder of Daoism, while Han Fei is one of the representatives of Legalism, a political theory that through most of Chinese history has been condemned as amoral.

that a great poet like Li Qingzhao could have remarried after the death of her husband; that she could have initiated a divorce was completely beyond their imagination. During the Song dynasty, when ideas on the remarriage of widows were still somewhat more liberal than they would become later, it was not Li Qingzhao's remarriage as such, but rather her quick divorce that was considered scandalous.

Little is known about the final years of Li Qingzhao. Following a stay in Jinhua, in 1138 she returned to Hangzhou. The last date in her life that can be ascertained is 1149, and she probably died soon thereafter, since she is referred to as deceased by 1151. She left a voluminous collection of writings, most of which has been lost. All that remain are a few prose texts, a handful of *shi* poems, and some fifty lyrics, collected from a wide array of anthologies and other sources. It is especially these song lyrics that have earned her the title of China's greatest woman poet.

Li Qingzhao's Poetry

The Rise of the Ci

The latter half of the Tang dynasty saw the rise of a new genre of poetry, originally called *qǔzǐ ci* (lyrics for songs), but later simply known as *ci* (lyrics). The Tang dynasty was characterized by its cosmopolitanism. One area of the culture of this period that was especially open to foreign influence was music. Orchestras and individual performers from Central Asia acquainted China with a wide variety of new musical instruments and melodies, which interacted in numerous ways with China's indigenous musical traditions, resulting in a host of new and popular tunes to which lyrics might be written. As in premodern Europe, it was quite common for songwriters to write new lyrics to existing melodies. Each of these melodies would have its own title, often taken from the words of the song that first made it popular.

Needless to say, given their origin in popular song, these lyrics made abundant use of formulaic motifs and images, and they used a register of language that is quite distinct from the one usually employed in *shi* poems.

Each individual melody imposed its own requirements on the songwriter. Whereas the older *shi* poems were made up of lines of equal length, with a requisite rhyme at the end of the even lines, *ci* lyrics could

have any number, even or uneven, of lines, and the length of each line could be different, all depending on the melody to which the song was written. The melody also determined the prescribed word tones within each line as well as the placement of the rhymes. While in the earliest *ci* lyrics it is sometimes still possible to discern a link between the name of the individual melody and the content of the *ci* lyrics that were written to that tune, later this link was often lost.

Although originally the number of lyric melodies was rather limited, new melodies continued to appear throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries. Because the original melodies have almost all been lost, what we have now are the metrical patterns that still carry the names of the original tunes. Later handbooks that codify these metrical patterns list more than a thousand different tunes; if we also count the variations, they include more than sixteen hundred different patterns.

The earliest lyrics are relatively short, and consist of only a single stanza. An example of such a single stanza melody is "Dreaming of South of the River" (*Meng Jiangnan*). Each lyric written to this melody consists of only five lines: an opening line of three syllables, followed by one line of five syllables, two lines of seven syllables each, and a concluding line of five syllables; the rhyme is carried by the final syllables of the second, fourth, and fifth lines. An example of a song to this melody is the following lyric by Yu Xuanji's one-time friend, Wen Tingyun, who in his works often adopts a feminine persona:

To the Melody of "Dreaming of South of the River" (*Meng Jiangnan*)

After completing my toilette
 All alone I lean from the riverside tower:
 A thousand sails pass by but still no sign of the right one!
 The setting sun slowly sets and the river flows on and on,
 Breaking my heart at White Rushes Bank.

Another example of a single-stanza melody is "As in a Dream" (*Rumengling*). In this case, the lyric required seven lines: two of six syllables each, one of five syllables, one again of six syllables, two of two syllables each, and a final line of six syllables. All of the lines except the third line

rhyme. Li Qingzhao wrote several lyrics to this melody, one of which reads:

To the Melody of "As in a Dream" (*Rumengling*)

I often recall that night in the pavilion by the brook:
 We were so drunk that we forgot how to get home.
 The mood over, we returned by boat in the dark,
 And got lost by mistake in a jungle of lotus flowers.
 We struggled to cross,
 And struggling to cross
 We stirred from their sleep a bank full of herons and gulls.

Before long, however, it became common to repeat the melody and to have lyrics consisting of two stanzas, between which one can usually discern some kind of contrast. One of the most popular two-stanza melodies from the earliest years of the genre was "Bodhisattva Barbarian" (*Pusaman*). In this melody, both stanzas consist of four lines, but whereas the first stanza consists of two lines of seven syllables followed by two lines of five syllables, the second stanza consists of four lines of five syllables; the rhyme scheme is aa bb//cc dd. An early example of a lyric to this melody is provided by Wen Tingyun:

To the Melody of "Bodhisattva Barbarian" (*Pusaman*)

Once darkness falls, the bright-white moon climbs to its zenith,
 Silence reigns behind closed gates and no human voice is heard.
 In the hidden room the musk-incense lingers,
 I lie down without removing rouge and powder.

Oh, how I still cherish those years gone by—
 Unbearable those memories of the past!
 The dew on flowers and the fading moon:
 The brocade coverlet knows the chill of dawn.

One of Li Qingzhao's lyrics to this melody may be translated as follows:

To the Melody of "Bodhisattva Barbarian" (*Pusaman*)

A tender breeze, the sun still weak as spring has just begun,
 It feels so good to be able to again wear only a lined jacket.

When I wake up, I feel a slight chill;
The plum blossom in my hair has wilted.

My old home—where is it to be found?
The only way to forget is by drinking.
The aloeswood was burning while I slept,
Its fragrance is gone—I still feel the wine.

The most important performers of these new songs were professional female entertainers, the courtesans. While it is not inconceivable that some of the anonymous lyrics of the ninth and tenth centuries may have been composed by these women, all the known authors of the ninth to eleventh centuries are male. Though the earliest preserved anonymous lyrics were quite direct in their expressions of rage and despair, male literati songwriters preferred a highly suggestive and indirect language when dealing with the same themes. During the tenth century the genre enjoyed a growing popularity at the courts of the southern kingdoms: the earliest anthology was compiled at the court of the Early Shu in Chengdu, and the most famous *ci* poet of this period, Li Yu (937–978), was the (last) emperor of the Southern Tang in Nanjing. In the eleventh century, many of the leading literati wrote lyrics, but given the still relatively low status of the genre, few cared to include them in their collected works. If an author's lyrics were collected, they would circulate as a separate collection. Even though the genre had become more respectable by the second half of the eleventh century when even women of elite families wrote *ci* lyrics, authors and readers alike were still very much aware of the close link between the genre and musical entertainment, if not with the entertainment quarters.

Given the origins of the lyric, it is no surprise that love has been one of its most important themes. In some of the earliest examples of the genre one may find lyrics in which the implied speaker is a man, but the overwhelming majority of lyrics, intended to be sung by a woman, adopt a female voice and comment on love from a supposedly female perspective. All aspects of love are dealt with, from the very first exchange of glances to the implied consummation of passion, but the genre manifests a distinct predilection for the description, directly or indirectly, of the despair and ennui of the abandoned woman. Often her loneliness is con-

trasted with the luxury of her surroundings: a boudoir filled with painted screens and golden animal-shaped incense burners, looking out into a small, enclosed courtyard. Or the abandoned woman has climbed to the highest floor of a tower or pavilion from where she looks out over the fields and gazes into the distance, following with her eyes the river or road along which her husband or lover may one day return. Only occasionally is the unremitting gloom relieved by a memory of happier days together.

Lady Wei's Lyrics

Fairly representative examples of the genre are provided by the ten or so surviving lyrics of Wei Wan (better known as Lady Wei). Wei Wan was the wife of Zeng Bu (1036–1107), a younger brother of the famous prose writer and one-time prime minister Zeng Gong. No less an authority than Zhu Xi pronounced: “Lady Wei and Li Qingzhao are the only two women of the present dynasty who can write.” Later critics, however, agreed that “while she [Lady Wei] was no match for Li Qingzhao, she did demonstrate a rare talent.” A brief look at some of Lady Wei’s lyrics will give us some idea of her talent; it will also allow us to appreciate Li Qingzhao’s far greater originality.

To the Melody of “Master Ruan Returns” (*Ruanlanggui*)

Beyond the tower at dusk fallen blossoms drift,
The azure of the clear sky drapes down on all four sides.
The departing sail in the blink of an eye reaches heaven’s edge—
A single plume of smoke spirals up into the empyrean’s blue.

A traveler atop this tower—
My hair has turned gray.
No date has been set for your return.
Feeling lost I dare not descend the steep stairs—
In the shade of the *wutong* the moon’s shadow shifts.¹⁵

15. The name of the *wutong* tree is homophonous with the expression *wutong* (we together).

To the Melody of "Bodhisattva Barbarian" (*Pusaman*)

The hills in the river appear, then disappear in the light of the setting sun,
When the mirrored image of the tower moves, the mandarin ducks are
startled.

On the opposite bank a handful of houses,
Above their walls red apricot blossoms.

The road below the dike of green willows
Goes all day long by the bank of the river.
Three times I've seen the willow floss drift,
But the one who left has still not returned.

To the Melody of "Bodhisattva Barbarian" (*Pusaman*)

The east wind has already colored green the grasses on the immortals' isle,
In the painted tower the screens are rolled up on this clear frosty morning.
Purer even than the flowering plums of West Lake,
The blossoms open but as yet don't fill the branches.

An endless sky—no news or letter has arrived.
Again I see the geese making their way south.
Where does one most feel separation's sorrow?
In the capital, on a full moon night, atop a tower.

To the Melody of "Bodhisattva Barbarian" (*Pusaman*)

The red tower slanting and leaning by the bend of the river,
The river's water in front of the tower was frozen cold jade.
Punting our boat of magnolia wood,
We in that boat were still so young.

The lotus flowers charmingly made as if to speak,
As smiling we entered the mandarin ducks' channel.
Over the waves a dark mist descended—
Singing a song by moonlight we returned.

To the Melody of "Magnolia Flower Abbreviated"
(*Jianxi mulanhua*)

A full moon above the western tower:
The pear blossoms appear, then disappear: a thousand trees of snow.

To the top of the tower I return,
And filled with sorrow listen to the lone goose above the orphaned city.

Where could he be, that man of jade?
Again I see the spring coming to an end here, south of the River.
News from you is nowhere to be had—
Since you left, peach blossoms have blanketed the flowing stream.

To the Melody of "Tying Up My Skirt" (*Xiqunyao*)

The light of the lamp flickers weakly as the hours drag on and on.
Since you left me,
The nights are cool.
The western wind moans desolately as I wake from my dream:
Who thinks of me,
Alone in my bed,
With knitted brows?

The brocade screen and the embroidered drapes conspire with autumn:
My heart is about to break,
Tears furtively trickle down.
Again the full moon appears to the west of my small window.
Oh, how I hate you,
Oh, how I love you,
But what do you care?

To the Melody of "Dotting Red Lips" (*Dianjiangchen*)

Over the waves a clear breeze:
A painted boat, the full moon, after he has returned.
Slowly the after-effects of the wine fade away,
And all alone I lean for a long while against the balustrade.

Union and separation all happen so fast,
This pain I carry with me year after year.
Again I look back:
A light mist and sparse willows,
And the indistinct calls of the watchman on the wall.

To the Melody of "Little Town on the River" (*Jiangchengzi*)

How easy it was to say goodbye, how difficult to meet with him again!
 And so, whatever one may say,
 I have no desire to look into the mirror.
 My figure has wasted away
 And suddenly I notice my clothes fall too loosely.
 Outside the gate the red plum is about to wither—
 Who would have thought
 I never even saw it bloom?

My morning toilette done, from the tower I gaze toward the capital city,
 But fearing the light chill,
 Do not lean on the balustrade.
 How I hate you, eastern wind,
 For blowing resentment onto my brows!
 Go and tell him that he should hurry and come home,
 So he won't waste my
 One spring of leisure!

To the Melody of "Springtime in Wuling" (*Wulingchun*)

The little courtyard: no one around, the screen half rolled up—
 All alone I lean on the balustrade.
 Too loose by far my goldthread gown of spring!
 Wasted away—but no one knows!

Lately letters from the man of jade have been few,
 It must be they are delayed because of my resentment.
 When will he return from Chang'an in my dreams?
 With tear-filled eyes I watch the setting sun.

The lyrics of Lady Wei are almost perfect illustrations of the generic characteristics of the lyric. While one of the lyrics is devoted to the evocation of a happy memory, the majority of them focus on the stock situation of the abandoned woman longing (in vain) for the return of her husband or patron. Lady Wei restricts herself to a limited number of melodies and develops her theme by relying on a small set of stock images. In fact, her lyrics are so conventional that few critics would be tempted to confuse the persona in her lyrics with the historical author. Li

Qingzhao, however, shows a much greater individuality even when she treats the same themes as Lady Wei. Moreover, she uses a greater variety of melodies, shows a more creative use of language, and on occasion inserts what appear to be personal details. This latter characteristic of her work invites critics to read not only some, but all of her lyrics as direct expressions of her personal and deeply felt emotions.

Li Qingzhao's Lyrics

Though Li Qingzhao's style is unique, her lyrics generally adhere closely to the thematic conventions of the genre, so well exemplified by the preceding lyrics of Lady Wei. In the following lyrics, for instance, Li Qingzhao makes use of two very common motifs: the scene inside the boudoir and the vista from the tower.

To the Melody of "Dotting Red Lips" (*Dianjiangchen*)

The silent and lonely inner chamber:
Each inch of my tender innards a thousand threads of sorrow!
I cherish spring but spring departs,
As drops of rain hasten the blossoms' fall.

I lean against the balustrade
And am filled by feelings of listlessness.
Where is he?
Fragrant grasses up to the horizon:
I gaze at the road along which he'll come home.

To the Melody of "Remembering the Flute-Player on Phoenix Terrace" (*Fenghuangtai shang yi chuixiao*)

The incense chilled in golden lions,
The coverlet rumpled like red waves:
I get up but am too lazy to comb my hair.
Let the precious mirror be covered with dust,
And the sun climb as high as the curtain hook,
I'm so frightened of the bitter loneliness of separation!
There are so many things like this
That I would like to say but don't.
The reason I have grown so skinny lately

Is not because of too much wine,
Nor is it due to autumn sadness.

Over! It's all over!
When you left this last time,
Not even a thousand, ten thousand "Yang Pass" songs
Could keep you here.¹⁶
Remembering my Wuling fisherman now so far away,
Mist locks in the tower.¹⁷
None but the flowing stream in front of the tower
Seems to remember me
As all day it fixes me with its gaze.
And fixing me with its gaze,
As of now it adds
Yet a new sorrow.

A theme that is quite common in song lyrics is the complaint about the passing of time and the brevity of human existence. Such feelings are easily aroused by autumn, when all of nature seems to be dying. One of Li Qingzhao's best-known works is the following autumn lament:

To the Melody of "Reduplications, Extended"
(*Shengshengman*)

Seeking, seeking, searching, searching:
Chilly, chilly, cheerless, cheerless,
Dreary, dreary, dismal, dismal, wretched, wretched—

16. "Yang Pass" songs are songs of parting. The term originally referred to a poem by the Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei entitled "Sending Mr. Yuan on his Way on a Mission to Anxi," the last two lines of which read: "I urge you to finish one more cup of wine: / Once you travel westward beyond Yang Pass you'll be without friends." This poem was widely sung as a parting song.

17. Tao Qian (365-427), in his *An Account of Peach Blossom Spring*, tells the story of a fisherman from Wuling who, passing by a grove of blossoming peach trees and entering into a cave, discovers a paradisiacal community—but once he returns to his own village, he is unable to find the Peach Blossom Spring again. In later tellings this story was conflated with another legend of woodcutters who deep in the mountains accidentally come across a community of immortals. The woodcutters spend some time with a few lovely female immortals, who are left desolate when their lovers return to the world of men.

The weather suddenly warm, then cold again
 Makes it hard to regain strength.
 How could two or three cups of weak wine
 Be a match against
 The gusting winds as darkness falls?
 Migrating geese fly by—
 What pains me now:
 Once long ago they were my friends.

Chrysanthemums cover the ground in heaps:
 Wilted, withered, damaged.
 But who today takes pleasure in them and will pick them?
 Sitting by the window
 All by myself, I wish it would turn dark!
 The *wutong* tree, and then that drizzling rain,
 That—into dusk—
 Drip-drops, drip-drops!
 How can all of this
 Be disposed of by
 The one word “sorrow”?

Chrysanthemums, which flower in autumn, are often used in Chinese poetry as a symbol of loyalty in adversity, so perhaps this lyric also invites a political reading. In yet another autumn lament the sadness of autumn is linked to the pain of parting:

To the Melody of “One Cut-Out Plum” (*Yijianmei*)

The red lotus has lost its fragrance, the jade mat feels autumnal—
 I slightly loosen my gauze skirt,
 Alone I board the orchid boat.
 Who will send me from the clouds a letter of brocade?
 As the V-shaped formations of geese return,
 The moon fills the western tower.

Blossoms tossed and scattered, the river flowing on—
 One and the same: the longing,
 In two places: the idle sorrow.
 This feeling—I simply don’t know how to make it go away:

Barely has it descended from my brows,
Then it ascends again into my heart!

Spring as well as fall evoked deep feelings of sadness, either because the new blossoms of spring made the observer aware of the contrast between the cyclical renewal of nature and the irreversible fading of youth, vigor, and beauty, or because the fading or falling blossoms remind the observer of the ephemeral nature of existence. Li Qingzhao's most famous spring lyric is probably the following one-stanza song:

To the Melody of "As in a Dream" (*Rumengling*)

Last night the rain was scattered, the winds blustery,
Even a deep sleep has not cleared my head of wine.
I ask the girl who is rolling up the blinds,
She answers: "The crab apple is the same as it was before."
Doesn't she know?
Doesn't she know?
She should've said: "The green is fatter, the red skinnier!"

The following spring song by Li Qingzhao is said to date from her stay, late in life, in Jinhua in 1135:

To the Melody of "Springtime in Wuling" (*Wulingchun*)

The breeze has dispelled the dust, all the fragrant blossoms are gone:
The day's half passed but I'm too lazy to comb my hair.
The time is right but he's not here, nothing's worth doing—
Before I can speak, the tears flow down.

I've been told that spring on Couple Brook is still fine,
I too would like to boat there in a scull.
But I'm afraid that such a tiny boat on Couple Brook
Wouldn't be able to move
with all my sorrows.

Of course, despair caused by the absence of a loved one and frustration over the irreversibility of time often go together. These feelings are experienced even more intensely on seasonal festival days such as Double

Three and Double Nine. Double Three was celebrated on the third day of the Third Month, the last month of spring according to the traditional Chinese calendar. Tall swings sometimes would be erected in the garden, allowing girls to catch a glimpse of life outside the garden walls—or to be seen by passers-by. Double Three was also associated with the ancient Cold Food Festival, during which no fires were to be lit for three days, and which was celebrated one hundred and five days after the shortest day of the year:

To the Melody of “Niannu’s Charms” (*Niannujiao*)

The courtyard desolate,
 Again that slanting wind and drizzling rain—
 The double gates securely locked.
 Pampered willows, charming blossoms: Cold Food draws near
 With many kinds of annoying weather!
 The rhymes were hard but the poem is done,
 Propping up my head, clearing it of wine:
 This moment holds a special flavor!
 The migrating geese have all passed by,
 Impossible now to send you the thousand, ten thousand secrets of my
 heart.

Atop the tower, spring these few days has been cold,
 The blinds hang down on all four sides,
 And I’m too listless to lean on the jade balustrade.
 The coverlet is chilly, no incense burns as I wake up from my latest
 dream,
 And although filled with sorrow I still must get up.
 Clear dewdrops form at dawn,
 The new *wutong* has started to grow,
 Giving rise to thoughts of spring excursions.
 When the sun rises higher and the mist disperses,
 Let’s see whether we will have a clear day today!

The following lyric by Li Qingzhao does not so much describe the feelings occasioned by the day of Double Three itself, as those evoked by the evening following it:

To the Melody of "Resentment against My Prince"
(*Yuanwangsun*)

In the Capital spring draws to a close—
A deep courtyard behind double gates:
Grasses have turned green around the steps,
Under the evening sky the geese are gone.
Atop this tower—who'll bring a letter from far away?
My pain lingers on and on.

Passionate as I am, I just bring it all on myself!
I simply cannot give him up!
Once again it is the Cold Food Festival:
The swings deserted, the streets empty, no one about,
The pure-white moon about to set
Drenches the pear tree blossoms.

While the preceding Double Three lyric may well date from sometime before 1126, the following Double Three song was most likely written during Li Qingzhao's later years:

To the Melody of "The Butterfly Loves Flowers" (*Dielianhua*)
On Double Three I Invited My Relatives to a Banquet

The endless night stretches on and on, my pleasures are few.
To no avail I dream of Chang'an,
And recognize Chang'an's streets.¹⁸
People tell me this year the spring colors are fine—
Flowers' luster and moon's shadow surely shine on each other.

Even though the makeshift cups and plates are nothing special,
The wine is good, the food is fine,
Just the thing to delight the heart.
But don't stick flowers in your hair when tipsy, and flowers do not laugh:
While spring may be the same again, people grow old.

Double Nine was celebrated on the ninth day of the Ninth Month, the last month of autumn in the traditional Chinese calendar. Friends and fam-

18. Chang'an was the name of the capital of the Western Han and the Tang dynasties. In Song times, the term was often used to refer to the new capital of Kaifeng.

ily would gather to ascend to a high place together to enjoy the moon and drink wine scented with the petals of chrysanthemum flowers. The following lyric by Li Qingzhao, however, reflects a more solitary and melancholic experience of this particular holiday.

To the Melody of "Tipsy in the Shade of Flowers"
(*Zuihuayin*)

Light mist and heavy clouds: depressed all through the day,
As ambergris dissolves in golden beasts.¹⁹
A festival: again it's Double Nine—
A jade headrest, gauze curtains,
Penetrated only after midnight by the chill.

By the eastern hedge I poured the wine even after dusk,
And the chrysanthemums' dark fragrance still fills my sleeves.
Don't say that this will not dissolve your soul:
The curtain lifted by the autumn wind,
And I more skinny than those yellow flowers!

This lyric would later give rise to an extremely popular, if most likely apocryphal, anecdote about an exchange of poems between Li Qingzhao and her husband, probably when he was away from home studying at the National Academy:

Yi'an [Li Qingzhao] sent her lyric on Double Nine written to the melody of "Tipsy in the Shade of Flowers" in an envelope to Mingcheng. Mingcheng sighed in admiration. He felt ashamed that he was not her equal and wanted desperately to surpass her. For three full days and nights he refused to see any visitors and forgot to eat or sleep. After he had written fifty lyrics [on the same subject and to the same melody], he inserted Yi'an's lyric in with them as well, and showed them all to his friend Lu Defu. After the latter had read them carefully a number of times, he said: "There are only three lines that are of exceptional beauty." When Mingcheng pressed him to tell him which three, he said: "Don't say that this will not dissolve your soul: / The curtain lifted by the autumn wind / And I more skinny than those yellow flowers." These were the lines from Yi'an's lyric!

19. "Golden beasts" are animal-shaped incense burners made of bronze or sometimes even more precious metals.

One of the other major yearly festivals was First Night, which was celebrated on the fifteenth (also called "Three Times Five") of the First Month, the first full moon night of the year. The festival marked the end of the many activities surrounding New Year. In Song dynasty times, the festival of First Night was celebrated with elaborate displays of lanterns and men and women would stroll along the streets and admire them. Li Qingzhao describes this festival in a lyric that must have been written sometime during the latter part of her life, after she had fled the north and settled in Hangzhou:

To the Melody of "Eternal Pleasure" (*Yongyue*)
First Night

The setting sun melts into gold,
The evening clouds merge into a disk of jade,
But where on earth is he?
The mist that dyes the willows is so heavy,
The flute that plays "The Plum Tree" sounds resentful—
God knows how many, many thoughts of spring!
The festival of the First Night,
A weather that is nice and pleasant—
But later there is bound to be some wind and rain.
People come to fetch me—
Fragrant carts and finest horses—
But I decline the invitations of those companions of poetry and wine.

In those glory days of Kaifeng
Leisure reigned in the inner quarters
And I remember how we relished the Three Times Five:
Kingfisher-feather little chaplets,
Snow-willow hairpins rolled of gold,
As each tried to outdo the other with her headdress!
But now I am a bag of bones,
My hair disheveled and turning gray—
You'd be afraid to see me out at night.
Far better I should from
Behind a lowered blind
Just listen to other people's laughter.

The onset of spring was marked by the beautiful sight of the bare branches of the plum tree suddenly dotted with white blossoms, occasionally even before New Year. Li Qingzhao shows a special affinity to plum blossoms in a number of her lyrics.

To the Melody of "Pride of the Fisherman" (*Yujia'ao*)

Despite the snow I know that news of spring has arrived:
 Blossoms of winter plum adorning branches sleek with ice.
 The fragrant cheeks half-opened, seductive in their charms,
 Across the courtyard:
 A jade-white beauty who has just emerged from her bath.

Creation has no doubt purposely on her behalf
 Ordered the full moon to illuminate her with its soft light.
 So together let's savor the "green ants" in golden cups
 And drink till we are tipsy:²⁰
 These blossoms are quite different from ordinary flowers!

To the Melody of "Venting My Innermost Feelings"
 (*Suzhongqing*)

Last night I was too tipsy to remove my headdress,
 In my hair I still wear a branch of blossoming plum.
 When I wake, its fragrance shatters my spring dream,
 Leaving my soul stranded far away.

Everyone's still asleep,
 The moon still lingers,
 The screens hang down.
 Once again I rub the plum's remaining petals,
 Once again I press out its leftover fragrance,
 Once again I enjoy it for one moment more.

To the Melody of "Orphaned Goose" (*Guyan'er*)

Whenever people of the present generation try to write lyrics on the plum blossom, as soon as they put brush to paper their works turn out to be

20. The "green ants" refer to the froth on the wine.

vulgar. As I have also tried my hand at writing such lyrics, I have come to realize that the above words are true.

Rattan bench and paper curtains, I wake at dawn,
 Unable to express all my unhappy thoughts.
 The aloeswood incense sputters, the jade burner has grown cold,
 And the feelings that won't leave me are like water.
 After three tunes of the flute the plum-heart is startled
 By these countless spring feelings.

A slight breeze, a light rain's desolate drizzle
 Again impel me to shed a thousand tears.
 The one who played the flute is gone, the jade tower is empty,
 My heart is broken—with whom to climb it?
 I have plucked a branch,
 But on earth below and in heaven above
 There is no one to whom I can send it.

Li Qingzhao's Ci-Criticism

One of Li Qingzhao's preserved prose writings is entitled *On Lyrics* (*Cilun*) and is a short essay on the art of the song lyric. In it, Li Qingzhao stresses the musical requirements of the genre. She also briefly discusses two developments in the genre that took place during the course of the eleventh century. The first of these was the growing popularity of longer and longer melodies, occasionally in three stanzas, requiring longer texts. This development is often attributed to the songwriter Liu Yong (987?-1053?), whose sensitivity to the genre's musical requirements is highly praised by Li Qingzhao. At the same time, she condemns the vulgarity of his language (a criticism later Song dynasty critics would also level against Li Qingzhao herself). In her own lyrics, Li Qingzhao continued to prefer the shorter melodies.

The second development was the tendency of many poets of the second half of the twelfth century (most famously Su Shi, 1031-1101) to use lyrics to treat subjects that had been traditionally restricted to *shi* poetry. Li Qingzhao protested strongly against this tendency, which she felt would reduce the lyric to a genre that differed from *shi* solely in terms of form. She argued that the lyric constituted a separate genre because of

both its subject matter and its formal requirements, and criticized some of the leading poets of her age for departing from the genre's conventions. In later centuries, some of the greatest names in the history of Chinese literary criticism held this against her, even though her remarks were no more outspoken than those of some of her male contemporaries. Li Qingzhao's (conservative) insistence on the "feminine" characteristics of the genre, however, should perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to protect the lyric from being subverted by the male-dominated *shi* genre and to ensure that women had "a genre of their own."

Li Qingzhao opens her brief essay with a story illustrating the power of song:

Ballads and song-poems emerged simultaneously and flourished especially during the Tang dynasty. During the reign periods Reopened Beginning [Kaiyuan; 713–741] and Heavenly Treasure [Tianbao; 742–755] there lived a certain Eighth Master Li, whose singing was the best in the whole world. Once, on the occasion of a celebration banquet for the newly passed graduates at Serpentine Pond, a famous gentleman on the list summoned Li ahead of time and ordered him to change into different clothes and not to reveal his name. Li put on an old, shabby gown and cap that made him look very pitiful. The gentleman took him along to the banquet, and said: "Please let my cousin sit at the far end," after which no one paid attention to him. When the wine had been passed and the music had begun, the singers entered, among whom were Cao Yuanqian and Niannu, the most famous singers of the day. After they had sung their songs, all present sighed in admiration and voiced their praise. Then the gentleman pointed to Li and said: "Please let my cousin sing a song!" Everybody smiled in derision and some even got angry. But then Li cleared his throat and started to sing, and after only one song they were all in tears; gathering around him, they bowed and said: "You must be Eighth Master Li!"

Ever since that time the tunes of Zheng and Wei have become more popular daily and the changes in ornamentation daily more elaborate.²¹ At the time there already existed lyrics for tunes such as *Pusaman* [Bodhisattva Barbarian], *Chun-guanghao* [How Fine is Spring], *Suoji zi* [Sedge-Chicken], *Genglouzi* [The Watches of the Night], *Huanxisha* [The Sands of Washing Brook], *Meng Jiangnan* [Dreaming of South of the River], and *Yufu* [The Fisherman]—too many to list in their

21. "The tunes of Zheng and Wei" is a general designation for popular songs on erotic themes.

entirety. The Five Dynasties [907–960] was a period of warfare, during which the world was cut up like a melon and divided like beans, and the Way of “This Culture of Ours” was in shambles. Only the rulers of the Li family and their ministers south of the Yangzi venerated literary elegance, and so they produced lyrics with lines such as “On the small tower one blows forth the cold of the jade flute,” and “This blows all the water of the spring pond into crackle patterns.”²² Such lines may be extremely unusual, but they partake of the “mournful sadness of the sounds of a decaying state.”

Once the present dynasty was founded, rites and music, culture and might were grandly established. But it would take another one hundred years of nurturing to produce a Liu Yong, who changed the old tunes and turned them into new ones. He authored *A Collection of Texts for Music* [*Yuezhang ji*], and in his time was greatly renowned for his tunes. But although he adheres to the notes and scales, his words and phrases are vulgar and common. After him appeared men like Zhang Xian, Song Qi and his brother Song Xiang, Shen Tang, Yuan Jiang, and Chao Duanli, but even though they may from time to time have produced marvelous lines, such lines are too incidental to earn these poets the appellation of “famous masters.” As for Yan Shu, Ouyang Xiu, and Su Shi, their learning encompassed both Heaven and Man, so when they composed a short song lyric, it was just as if they had poured out a ladleful of water from their great ocean. Their lyrics, however, are all nothing more than *shi* poems but with lines of unequal length. They also often fail to adhere to the tones and scales. Why is this? Now *shi* and prose only distinguish between level and oblique (in word tones), but song lyrics distinguish among the five notes, among the five tones, among the six scales, and between high and low, light and heavy. Moreover, recent tunes such as *Shengsheng man* [Reduplications, Extended], *Yuzhonghua* [Flowers in the Rain], and *Xiqianying* [Joy at the Moving Oriole] not only have rhymes in the level tone but also in the entering tone. *Yulouchun* [Jade Tower Spring] not only has rhymes in the level tone, but also has rhymes in the ascending and leaving tones, and also in the entering tone. Originally it had rhymes in the oblique tone, but it only fits if one uses rhymes in the ascending tone—it is impossible to sing the tune if one uses entering tones.

The prose of Wang Anshi and Zeng Gong reads like that of the Western Han, so whenever they wrote short song lyrics, everyone would fall over laugh-

22. The court of the Southern Tang dynasty (936–975) in modern-day Nanjing was renowned for its elegance. The last ruler of that dynasty, Li Yu (937–978), is one of the most famous authors of lyrics.

ing because they were impossible to read out loud. From this we know that the lyric is a genre unto itself and that there are few who really understand it.

Later, only Yan Jidao, He Zhu, Qin Guan, and Huang Tingjian were capable of understanding the genre. Even so, Yan Jidao suffers from a lack of developed exposition, and He Zhu is deficient in classical decorum. Qin Guan focuses on the delineation of feeling but does not employ enough allusions. His works may be compared to a beautiful woman of a poor family: she may be exceedingly voluptuous and dazzling, but in the end she does not have the bearing of one born to wealth and status. Huang Tingjian loves allusions, but his works contain many faults and failings; they may be compared to a beautiful jade, the crack in which diminishes its value by half.

In her own lyrics, and in keeping with her own argument, Li Qingzhao largely limits herself to the conventional themes of the genre, lamenting her loneliness and the brevity of youth. On occasion she also expresses the desire to leave this world behind forever:

To the Melody of "Pride of the Fisherman" (*Yujia'ao*)

Cloudy waves to the horizon merge with the morning mist,
The River of Stars about to turn, a thousand sails dancing.
It is as if in a dream my soul had returned to God's abode,
I heard the words of Heaven,
Which kindly inquired where it was I intended to go.

And I replied: "The way was long, alas, the evening draws nigh.
I practiced poetry but few of my lines were startlingly new.
A wind of over ninety thousand miles that lifts the giant roc:
Please, let that wind cease not
But blow my little boat straight to the Isles of the Immortals!"

Li Qingzhao and her Critics

If the lyrics of Li Qingzhao are so self-consciously conventional both in form and subject, why then are they so highly regarded by both traditional and modern Chinese critics? First of all, these critics praise the authenticity and depth of the emotions she expresses. As we have stated before, the lyric as a genre originally was very fictional in character, written largely by male authors who gave expression to the supposedly

typical feelings of women in a supposedly typically "feminine" language. The writers of song lyrics did not even pretend to describe their own feelings; like songwriters all over the world they were providing performers with the words to voice typical feelings in typical situations. However, the Chinese reader of poetry of imperial times assumed that the poet and the "I" in his (or her) poems were one and the same; any perceived discrepancy between the historical author and the "I" in the poem was regarded as a sign of frivolity and bad faith that detracted from the value of the poem. This is why in imperial China, literary critics usually reserved their highest praise for those authors whose compositions, whether *shi* poems or *ci* lyrics, could be read as autobiographical statements. Traditional critics have, for example, insisted on reading the lyrics of Li Yu, the last ruler of the Southern Tang, as just such autobiographical statements, even though his works hardly depart from the thematic conventions of his time. But for the majority of male-authored lyrics such a reading was very difficult (an important Qing dynasty school of criticism insisted on reading such lyrics allegorically in order to safeguard them for literature). In contrast, it was generally considered that lyrics written by women could be more easily read as being spontaneous and authentic, direct and unmediated, and expressive of deep feeling.

Traditional Chinese critics, therefore, read Li Qingzhao's lyrics as truthful expressions of her rich emotions. Some of Li Qingzhao's lyrics invite such a reading as they often carry a short preface specifying the occasion for which the lyric was written or contain explicit references to her own life. However, many of her other extant lyrics are highly generic and do not provide such autobiographical information. Yet this does not stop critics from attempting to determine which works date from which period in her life—although they by no means agree on the dating of each individual work. Another problem these critics encounter is that the original collection of Li Qingzhao's lyrics compiled shortly after her death has been lost, and that the collection we have today has been reconstructed on the basis of much later anthologies, which do not always agree in the ascription of authorship. Some of the lyrics that were traditionally ascribed to Li Qingzhao may well have been the work of earlier, male poets. Among these contested pieces are some of Li Qingzhao's best-known works, such as the following:

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To the Melody of "Dotting Red Lips" (*Dianjiangchen*)

After exerting herself on the swing,
She gets off, too tired to redo her toilette—
Such delicate hands.
Heavy dew on a skinny flower:
Her light gown damp with beads of sweat.
The moment she sees the guest enter,
She, in her stockings, gold hairpins slipping,
Feels embarrassed and runs off.
But leaning on the gate she glances back,
And takes a whiff of the green plum in her hand.

In some cases the willingness of critics to reject the authenticity of a lyric is motivated primarily by their conviction that a great poet such as Li Qingzhao could not possibly have written such light and frivolous, even flirtatious, songs as the above or the following:

To the Melody of "Magnolia Flower Abbreviated"
(*Jianzi Mulanhua*)

Out of the basket of the flower-seller
I bought one single branch that was about to bloom:
Lightly and evenly dyed by tears,
Still bearing the traces of rosy dawn and morning dew.

Afraid that he might wonder
If my face is perhaps not as lovely as that of this flower
I'll stick it in my cloudy locks,
And have him compare the two of us whenever he looks!

The modern Chinese literary historian Su Zhecong, a specialist in Chinese women's poetry and the author of a monograph on women's literature of the Song dynasty, praises Li Qingzhao above all for her ability to make abstract concepts such as sorrow almost tactile by her use of concrete images. As an example, she quotes Li Qingzhao's lyric to the melody of "Springtime in Wuling," in which the weight of sorrow is described as being such that it can sink a boat. She also praises Li Qingzhao's ability to fuse the description of scene and emotion, and her skill in delineating complex emotions. Other aspects of Li Qingzhao's

that elicit this particular scholar's praise are her original comparisons ("And I more skinny than those yellow flowers!"), her subtle use of personification, her deft handling of parallelisms, and her spectacular (and later often imitated) use of reduplicated words (as in the lyric to the melody of "Reduplications, Extended"). And finally, she notes Li Qingzhao's capacity to surprise her readers by inserting into a rather bland style such startling lines such as "Pampered willows, charming blossoms," and "The green is fatter, the red is skinnier."

Critics also praise Li Qingzhao for her daring inventiveness in incorporating colloquial words into the conventional idiom of the lyric. However, this willingness to make use of "vulgar" language was criticized by certain contemporary writers who wanted to elevate the status of the genre. For example, in 1149 Wang Zhuo wrote the following in his survey of contemporary lyric writing:

Yi'an jushi [Li Qingzhao] is the daughter of the late judicial intendant for the eastern circuit of the capital, Li Gefei [style name Wenshu], and the wife of the late prefect of Jiankang, Zhao Mingcheng [style name Defu]. From her youth she has been famous for her *shi* poetry; her talent and forcefulness are rich and ample, and she is a close match to earlier generations. Even among gentlemen and high officials such qualities are rarely to be found. Among women of the present dynasty her literary brilliance has to be ranked as number one. After Zhao died, she remarried, but obtained a divorce from her second husband after a court case. Now in the evening of her life she drifts about without a home.

In writing song lyrics, she is able to analyze the human mind in minute detail. Her works are light and artful, sharp and fresh, and can assume a hundred different postures. She makes use of the wild and lascivious words of alleys and lanes with abandon. Since ancient times, never among the literate women of gentry families has there ever been anyone who showed such disregard for propriety.

Reading such a comment one can understand why Li Qingzhao failed in her attempts to find a safe haven in the Inner Palace, but it is difficult, apart perhaps from the frequent references to wine and drinking, to discern in her extant lyrics any trace of the unrestrained licentiousness referred to by Wang Zhuo.

Li Qingzhao's Poems

In her own lifetime, as Wang Zhuo's appreciation makes clear, Li Qingzhao was known primarily for her *shi* poems. Only a handful of these poems, however, has been preserved, among them the following quatrain entitled "The End of Spring":

Why do I suffer from homesickness as spring draws to a close?
 Feeling ill, I comb my hair and my despair could not be greater.
 That pair of swallows on the rafters chatter all through the day,
 The faint breeze from yonder roses fills the door with fragrance.

This poem elicited from a later critic the following dismissive note:

The *shi* poems of Qingzhao are not very beautiful, but she excels in lyrics, which are outstandingly elegant and merit recitation. A line such as "The faint breeze from yonder roses fills the door with fragrance" from her quatrain, "The End of Spring," may be well crafted but really belongs in a lyric.

Modern Chinese anthologies rarely fail to include the following poem as an example of Li Qingzhao's staunch patriotism:

In life one should be a hero amongst men,
 Then in death a stalwart amongst ghosts.
 To this day everyone remembers Xiang Yu,
 Who refused to cross to south of the Yangzi.

Xiang Yu (232–202 BCE) was born to a noble family in the ancient southern state of Chu. Following the death of the First Emperor of Qin in 210 BCE and the subsequent collapse of his empire, he recruited three thousand young men in the area south of the Yangzi and fought other contenders for the spoils. Initially he achieved great success, but ultimately he lost out to the low-born Liu Bang, who eventually emerged victorious because of superior planning (whereas Liu Bang surrounded himself with capable advisors, Xiang Yu failed to make use of the talents of the strategist Fan Zeng). When in the end, Xiang Yu was left without any troops, a boatman offered to ferry him back to south of the Yangzi River so he could recruit fresh soldiers. Xiang Yu, however, could not bear the thought of having to face the parents of the young men he had led into battle. Instead, he turned back and fought his foes one more time, until,

surrounded by enemy commanders, he finally took his own life. It is clear that Li Qingzhao's poem was meant to be read as a reproach to those in the Southern Song government who preferred to enjoy the "stolen peace" in southern China rather than fight to the death for the recovery of the north.

Yet another of Li Qingzhao's poems, "Dawn Dream," can also probably be read as a satire of these peace-loving gentlemen:

My dawn dream follows the sounds of bells,
 And airily I tread the colored clouds.
 By chance I meet there Master Anqi,
 And also happen to run into Elühua.²³
 Just now the autumn wind is naughty,
 And blows away the Jade Well flowers.
 Together we see lotuses as large as boats,
 And we eat dates that are as big as melons.
 Dashinglly elegant: the guests in attendance
 Are marvelous of mind and fine of speech.
 With jesting words they debate and dispute,
 Over the fire they brew the freshest tea.
 This may not be of any use to one's Lord,
 But still the pleasures are without limit.
 If one can live out one's human life like this,
 What need is there to return to one's old home?
 But I stand up, straighten my gown, sit down,
 Cover my ears, disgusted by their clamor.
 I realize I will not see my home again,
 But every memory still makes me sigh.

In the People's Republic of China the works of Li Qingzhao have engendered considerable discussion. In the decades when literary criticism was dominated by Marxism her writings were often condemned as reactionary; critics found it difficult to ideologically justify the sentimental laments of a wealthy upper-class gentry woman. But since the early eighties of the twentieth century the verdict has been that "the songs from the

23. Master Anqi is a famous immortal who has a short entry in *Biographies of Immortals* (*Liexian zhuan*), the earliest collection of hagiographical sketches of immortals. Elühua is a female immortal who in the middle of the fourth century appeared to Yang Quan.

earlier period show a warm love for life, while their basic attitude is healthy, and the songs from her later period manifest a patriotic thought that is deeply moving," which then leads to the conclusion that there exists an affinity between Li Qingzhao and the laboring masses. This opened the way for the construction of a beautiful museum in her memory in Ji'nan, and an unending stream of annotated editions and other publications.