

LI QINGZHAO (1084?-1153?)

Zhu Shuzhen fared less fortunately than her near contemporary Li Qingzhao. Wealth, leisure, noble pedigree, an education few men could match, a father and a husband who admired and fostered her poetic development all set Li singularly free to grow as an artist.

About 50 lyrics probably by Li Qingzhao survive; they share a number of characteristic features. Any traditional scholar would first mention primacy of "oblique and concise/delicate and restrained" aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> Two of her tunes Sands of Silkwash Stream afford model examples.

2<sup>?</sup> Tune #1: Sands of Silkwash Stream (Li 1979: 18)

Calm & limpid Springtime light -- Cold Food weather.  
Jade censer's Sunken Fragrance whirls one last wisp.  
Dream over -high-pillowed- slumped on my flower-pin.

The sea-swallows aren't back, people tug at grass;  
Jiang mumes have gone by, willows grow new floss.  
In golden dusk, scattered raindrops dampen my swing.

I,1: During Cold Food (usually April 3-4) Chinese do not light cooking fires. It marks a kind of one-or-two-day Lent before Chinese "Easter" (Purebright Festival).

I,2: Sunken Fragrance translates the Chinese term for aloes-wood.

I,3: i have naturalized the Chinese "alp-pillow," actually a hard Chinese-style pillow **in the shape of** the graph for mountain! For **yin** "hide/slump on," i follow a gloss by Yu Pingbo.<sup>19</sup>

Multiple losses haunt this poem: hot food, fragrance, flowery adornment, mating birds, mume, amusements, and the golden Spring day herself. Dusk might well symbolize the **fin de tout** despair that stalks many Li Qingzhao lyrics. A midday nap obliquely conveys her distress; she sleeps badly and feels too disconsolate even to remove her hair-ornaments before napping. Our speaker, however, avoids a direct response. She balances a wistful, languorous mood with Spring's rejuvenescent growth. Though each stanza narrows scope to our ennuied subject's "erotic decor," she and her emotions never quite appear in focus.

Tune #2: (same title; Li 1979: 14)

Don't fill the cups too deep with heady amber-brew.  
Not yet sunken fully drunk, my mood's begun to melt.



poems can illustrate these strengths, although musical features disappear or distort in translation. Consider Tune #3: Southern Song (Li 1979: 3)

Up in Heaven, Starry River wheels;  
Here on earth blinds & curtain droop.  
Chill grows on pillow & mat, tearstains seep.  
Up; off with my gauzy robe.  
Idly ask: how's the night getting on?

Emerald applique lotos-pods shrunken;  
Golden-filigree lotusleaf threadbare.  
Same old-time weather, same old-time robe.  
Only feelings in my heart...  
Do not seem the same as in old times.

This lyric illustrates an enduring theme in Li's lyrics; as the famous maxim she quotes in #6 says: "Things persist, man is gone." She maintains opposition between Heaven/nature and our human world. Stars wheel regularly and weather maintains its cycle, though all this spells temporal change for our speaker. But she has aged and changed. Li skillfully knits together both stanzas with a clothing metaphor. Her robe, which belongs to old times, has worn badly. Its lotus-patterns, though they half belong to the "natural world," have faded until they can no longer enfold her in love's warmth. Still, she clings to her doffed garment --another worn memory she cannot throw away. Like the lyrics above, this one explores a world of cooling passion.

Stanza 2 opens with an implicit, Wen Tingyun-like image; then our speaker takes a more explicit tack. She does not break down, but her listlessness (falling asleep without bothering to undress), sadness (a wet pillow), and nostalgic unrest (understated by litotes) grow more than obliquely apparent. Li intensifies her unspoken pathos by expanding time, which passes as one night in stanza 1, then as one season and one whole life in stanza 2. Time's wane permeates both stanzas' parallel openings and the threefold repetition of "old" and "time," but Li's conclusion skews antithesis when she reveals now and then no longer match.

Tune #4: A Prunus Sprig (Li 1979: 23)

Pink lotus fragrance fades, my jade mat turns Fall.  
I gently doff my gauzy skirt,  
Alone, aboard Magnolia Skiff.  
Who will send a flowery note down from the clouds--  
When goose-graphs come back,  
Moonrays'll flood West Tower.

Flowers do their drifting, waters form their flow.  
One sort of mutual yearning,  
A couple sites of idle woe.  
These feelings -- there's no way I can dispel....  
Just come down from my brow,  
Yet alighting on my heart.

Li's first line announces the familiar theme of Eros lost. Plausibly, our speaker's mat rests shipboard, as she sails away from her husband.<sup>22</sup> The remaining lines trace out her theme with typically oblique melancholy (like a Spring of departed flowers) and atypically dynamic movements (airborne messages, a boat ride). These contrasts and Li's hopeless yearning for heavensent letters almost seem to place her lover in heaven, with mediation only possible where sky and water meet, in a high tower "flooded" by moonlight. Li's second stanza forsakes "oblique and concise" mode. Its colloquial diction and "plain-sketch" style strongly recall the lyrics of Li Yu. She intensifies lonely longings by contrast with paired images: line one's repeated "their" shuts out our speaker, while loneliness shared apart proves cold comfort. With demotic brio, Li's renowned conclusion carries her off on an emotional roller-coaster, yet conveys how sorrow weighs upon brow and heart. In her original, soundplay helped generate a momentum that propels this lyric well beyond accustomed boudoir precincts.

The colloquial flavor of stanzas like our last made Li Qingzhao famous. Indeed, for traditionalists who could not accept that a woman might speak plainly in verse if she was allowed to speak at all, this made her notorious.<sup>23</sup> Li's most famous "demotic" lyric also won renown for its reduplicative binomes. In medieval Chinese her first 3 lines abounded in "chilly"

aspirated affricates, cold liquids, and harsh voiceless stops:

zivm zivm mivk mivk  
lieng lieng ts'iang ts'iang  
ts'iei ts'iei ts'am ts'am ts'ivk ts'ivk.

Tune #5: Note After Note, Adagio (Li 1979: 64)

S-s-search S-s-seeK.  
C-c-cold Ch-ch-chill,  
S-s-sad L-l-lorn P-p-pain.  
Season of sudden warm, then chill again:  
Impossible to relax!  
Two -- or three -- glasses of weak wine:  
How can they ward off morning's harsh wind?  
The geese have gone,  
Now, while I grieve;  
And yet, from seasons past, I knew them.

Ground heaped high with yellow flowers.  
Haggard, worn away;  
These days, who'd care to pick you up?  
Keeping by my window  
All alone, how to hold out till dark?  
Paulownia leaves fall with fine rain  
Into yellow dusk, drip after drop after drip...  
At these moments,  
How c-can one word "s-sorrow" sum it all up?

1.7: A variant reads **evening**; Yu Pingbo provides a good justification for **morning**, the earliest text-reading.<sup>24</sup> We may recall Song 30's arousal: "Morning winds blow blustery," traditionally read as a lady's complaint against her lord's maltreatment.<sup>25</sup>

This artifact starkly reminds how much we lose in translation. Without the opening soundplay, our speaker's obsessive, fruitless searching gets attenuated. Without the Chinese final -k stop rhymes, our speaker's adversative relation to Nature appears somehow less intense.<sup>26</sup> Her daringly forthright speech in each rhymed line seems muted in English, though perhaps her time-haunted Fall sadness and her identification with doomed chrysanthemums survive intact. "Haggard, worn" **qiaocui**, by the way, is Li's favorite binome. At least we can trace her progressive waning with "morning," "till dark," and "dusk"; we can feel the dramatic intensity of her growing awareness with "season," "these days," "till dark," and "these moments," punctuated by rhetorical questions "How...," "who'd...," "how...," and "How." In frustration and in partial

compensation for what we have lost, i have replaced binomes with stutters and brought them back in the final line; Li's original reintroduces binomes in "drop after drip," not in her "one word" closing.<sup>27</sup>

Tune #6: Spring at Wuling [Utopia] (Li 1979: 61)

Winds subside, dust so sweet, flowers now all done;  
Sun sets -- too tired to comb my hair.  
Things persist, people gone, everything has ceased.  
I try to speak, but tears flow first.

I hear tell at Couple Creek Spring's lovely still;  
I too long to drift on a light skiff.  
But I fear to Couple Creek my grasshopper skiff...  
Can't haul away this freight of grief.

Due to a longstanding confusion about "peach-blossom" Utopias, this Wuling became associated with the lover's Shangrila found once by lucky Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao. Hence, the tune-title's denotation becomes poetically relevant (this feature, too, bears watching in Li's oeuvre). Her first stanza evokes a post-lapsarian world ruled by "tout passe, tout lasse, tout casse." Stanza two revives her vision of a Lover's Paradise where all stays young, light, alive, and coupled. But, as Eugene Eoyang perceptively comments, her "gravity of grief" outweighs the "buoyancy of spring."<sup>28</sup> Li's last line achieves a remarkable artistic paradox; it denies the imaginative leap sustained throughout stanza two with a dynamic, imaginative trope! Moreover, her conclusion employs the lively "Verb-Result" construction common in vernacular Chinese. Ironically, this denial by a speaker who cannot even "speak" colloquially asserts her poetic triumph. Hypotactic particles and deictics rendered as "all," "too," "everything has," "try to...first," "still," "too long," "fear," and "can't" help maintain her conversational tone.

Our last few examples have led us into poetic regions beyond the "oblique and concise" domain. Many of Li's verses project a strong lyric presence; they abound with figures of perception, cognition, and rhetoric, as well as with more or less oblique emotions. They will well reward close listening for her

distinctive voice:

Tune #7: Atop Phoenix Tower, Recalling Flute Music (Li 1979: 20)

Incense chills the gold lion,  
A coverlet tumbles red waves;  
I get up, lazy to comb my hair.  
Let: dust cover my jewelled case,  
sun climb up my blinds' hook.  
Sore afraid of sundered griefs, parting woe;  
So many things I wish to say, yet cease...  
Lately I've got gaunter;  
Not from sickness with wine,  
Nor from mourning the Fall.

Cease! Subside!  
This time he's really gone --  
A million refrains of Sunny Pass  
Could not make him stay.  
Think of my man far-off in Wuling,  
mists locking my Qin Tower.  
There's only flowing water before my tower  
Who'll think of me all day long in frozen stare.  
Here, by my frozen stare  
From today will pour forth  
Full measure of new grief.

I,2: Liu Yong wrote: The embroidered bridal-duck coverlet tumbles red waves. Here Li Qingzhao ironically invokes Liu's love scene to describe sleepless tossing and turning.<sup>29</sup>

This lyric recalls aspects of Spring in Wuling. Here, too, love lost makes a lover's Utopia inaccessible. This lyric, too, revives the story in its tune-title. Nongyu ("Jade Gigue"), a flute virtuoso, fell in love with Xiao Shi ("Mr. Syrinx"). A phoenix rescued Nongyu from her Tower in Qin and carried the lovers off together to Heaven. This fantasy-romance holds bitter irony for our unhappy speaker, a boudoir-bound prisoner of love. As in Sands of Silkwash Stream, Li arranges her lyric on the "cooling passion" pattern. She opens with burnt-out incense and with frustration that ironically recalls "red waves" of bedroom passion. Images of Fall sunshine and the farewell song Sunny Pass yield to closing cold waters and "frozen stare." Along the way Li conveys strong feelings with a gamut of rhetorical techniques: her startling initial verbs of transference; her explicit "lead-in words"; her first-half closing

somaticization of grief followed by a spate of poignant negatives, injunctions, and hyperbole; repetition --especially "cease," which occurs redoubled at the beginning of stanza two-- in vain; a second series of imaginative lead-in words whose pathetic fallacy conjures up an aqueous "empathizer"; and a final bit of hyperbole. All these expressive figures take shape from her master conceit: lovesickness courses ceaselessly, a torrent cooling from yang to yin. Thus, passion born in hot "red waves" and fed by liquor passes from "sunny" to misty; only cold waters can understand her and "thaw" her frozen feelings that outpour as new griefs. Li has neatly dovetailed her final words with her first stanza, whose last strophe begins with "new" *xin*, Englished as "lately." Characteristically, Li Qingzhao employs full poetic bravura to gain the right "aesthetic distance" on intense sorrows that might otherwise have proved too painful or bathetic.

Tune #8: As In a Dream (8)

Last night, sparse rain and gusty winds.  
 Heavy sleep didn't dispel the last wine.  
 Ask the one who rolls up my blinds,  
 But she says the crab-apple's unchanged.  
     Don't you know?  
     Don't you know?  
 Its green must be plump, its pink gaunt.

An entire subgenre of Chinese poetry explores the possibility of inferring large changes from minimal --even subliminal-- sensory cues. A typical example finds our literatus half-asleep and/or half-drunk, foggily and/or whimsically recalling a perception that helps him see a truth invisible to merely diurnal senses. Meng Haoran's famous quatrain, "Springtime Doze," provides a fine model:

Springtime doze, oblivious to dawn;  
 Everywhere I hear the crying birds.  
 During night, wind & rain's sounds;  
 Flowers fell: How many? Who knows?

Like Meng's poem, Li's lyric foregrounds verbs of perception and cognition.



Memory and two bits of sensory input mingle in reverie to produce a final supposition. Li's effort contributes two novel ingredients to Meng's recipe. First, her "Dream" relates a dramatic encounter. Our protagonist confronts a domestic adversary whose mundane "insentience" about crab-apples provokes her petulant outburst. Second, our subject is female; since Chinese habitually compare women and flowers, her conclusion expresses empathy. The large changes she intuits foreshadow not only Spring's demise but her own youth's as well. She evokes a well-known adage describing a young beauty's nap: "Crab-apple! Spring Sleep" --a phrase originally used to describe the notorious Noble Consort Yang-- to enhance this floral connection.

Our foregoing examples have suggested a number of "main themes" in Li's lyrics. At least two deserve further exploration. First, let's take another look at Li Qingzhao's relations to time.

Tune #9: As In a Dream (7)

Always recall Streamside Arbor at sunset.  
So deep-drunk we didn't know the way home.  
Our mood passed; returning late by boat  
We strayed off where lotuses twined thick.  
And how to cross?  
Oh, how to cross!  
Startling up a shoreful of herons & gulls.

This tune to As In a Dream, like the drowsy last example, suggests a connection with its tune-title. Li recalls her past -- especially in her final figure, an almost Poundian "composite image"-- with dreamlike vividness. Incidentally, the Chinese contained no pronouns; only a traditional habit of reading Li Qingzhao's marriage into her verse associates this memory with her honeymoon days and "Streamside Arbor" with the halcyon "Couple Creek." Straying off into lotuses strikes the right note of covertly naughty eroticism, a note Eugene Eoyang has cleverly intensified by mistranslating her colloquial "how to cross" as "thrashing through!" Some misreadings persist so strongly they enhance how we read a poem forever.<sup>30</sup> Li's conclusion wields a powerful

Verb-result" construction to drive home a temporal connection. She experiences time as a two-way stream that poetic fancy can renavigate at any moment.

Tune #10: Butterflies Linger Over Blossoms (60)  
"On Lustration Day, Inviting Relatives Over"

Sunk heartsick in endless night, little to cheer my mood.

Vain dreams of **Pax Eterne**,

Chang'an

Recalling the Pax Eterne Road.

I say -- this year the Springtime hues really are lovely.

Flowers' glow and moonbeams brighten to a fare-thee-well.

Tho' supper's cup & plate are filled with careless haste.

The brew sweet & plums tart

Perfectly match our hearts.

Tipsy, don't you wear flowers; flowers, don't you smile...

Poor ol' Springtime -- it's gettin' to look as old as us.

This lyric adopts a different stance to past joys. Our speaker sees them as a foreign country one can only recall in vain. She borrows "Pax Eterne" --the Tang capital-- as an ironical epithet for Kaifeng, the Northern Soong capital foreign invasions forced Li Qingzhao to flee in 1126. Aside from politics, "Pax Eterne" evokes youthful pleasures that seemed undying at the time.<sup>31</sup> Li's opening bears an ambiguous relation to the rest of her lyric. It seems to recall last night's disturbing dream, but her listless dejection colors tonight's party as well. Spring finery bridges an indeterminate transition from dream to banquet. Readers may choose to concretize "flowers and moonlight" as dream-images from the capital (possibly narrated to her party-guests), or as "real" images of southern Spring.

Our hostess makes a brave effort to smile her way through rejuvenescent Spring and forced festivities. On "Lustration Day" belles of Pax Eterne used to gather by the river and show off Spring finery, but she remains out of sympathy. Li expresses this discordance by banishing those insistent flowers, by reconceiving Spring as an **old** Spring. Her pathetic fallacy involves a word that **could** mean "affecting/lovely" but here takes on a tinge of "pathetic." Reduplication as poetic device reinforces our sense of two worlds, one sweet

but dead, one bitter and powerless to revive. Each stanza begins with a reduplicative binome: **yanyan**"sunk heartsick/unending" --cf. II,3; and **caocao**"slapdash/careless haste," which conveys an intimate lack of ceremony toward relatives. Spring, flowers, and the **former** capital all recur; so does her strong injunction "don't" and the word **ren**"human," here "our" and "us." The last operates as a keyword in Li's oeuvre; we will give it special attention below.

Li Qingzhao's relations with pleasure --usually, as in the last two lyrics, youthful pleasures recalled by a voice of experience-- offer a second theme worth revisiting. Both our examples feature **mei**"prunus/mume" which, thanks to its use in makeup and its medieval near-homonyms **mother** and **matchmaker**, grew redolent with sensuous associations for Chinese. Here we step into territory explored by Eugene Eoyang, whose criticism the readers should compare.<sup>32</sup>

Tune #11: Pure, Placid Music (47).LS1

Year after year in snow...  
Topsy, sticking mume in my hair.  
Crumpling every mume-petal ruthlessly...  
Gaining one lapful of their pure tears.

This year at ocean's edge, heaven's shore.  
My temples petalled white, bleak and sere.  
Seeing the awful force of evening's wind,  
It sure will be hard to watch mume petals.

At first glance this lyric makes stark contrast between emotional climates past and present. What goes around comes around; she who once ravaged flowers so thoughtlessly now falls equally subject to the unfeeling ruin of Time, concretized as "evening's wind." Associations between woman and flower imply the response she has obliquely displaced to dewy flowers at stanza one's close. Li's **present** grief tinges those "pure tears"; we should not follow those who violate stanzaic transition by reading 3-4 as a depiction of later griefs.<sup>33</sup>

We need to look closer, because at every step Li Qingzhao has interwoven past and present into a mutually implicating pattern. As Eoyang comments,

[Li Qingzhao] is preoccupied with time, like Marcel Proust, but whereas he tried to recapture lost time in verbal fictions of enormous amplitude, she captures both present and past in unforgettable lyrics of poignant brevity.

More concretely, Li recalls her youth in "snow" --a conventional epithet for white, early-Spring blooming pruni-- that corresponds to stanza 2's white-edged ocean, which belongs to the same phonetic/graphic family as **prunus!** White flowers in her hair modulate to white-sprinkled brows. And the merciless force of young hedonism transposes to the awful power of March winds. Now we see Li has described stanza one's world of innocence through eyes of experience; a consistent energy, a like momentum drives both halves. What force fuses both? A gusto that uses its vessels roughly but persists in seeking pleasure even against the dying of the light. Li's plain colloquial style --"crumple, ruthless, awful, sure be hard..."-- provides the right timbre to convey her ragged-edged sentiments.

Tune #12: Telling Innermost Feelings (40)

Got dead drunk tonight, slow to unmake my head:  
Mume sepals, stuck upon a withered limb.  
Brew cleared, their perfume dashed spring sleep:  
Dreams stray off, no way to get back home.

Everyone now silent,  
The moon lingers on.  
Virid blinds drawn.  
Again: stroke this fallen bud;  
Again: twist out fading scent;  
Again: hold on for a time...

Li's first stanza relates an unsuccessful attempt to take refuge in pleasure. When the party ends (alternatively, she may have gotten drunk alone), the wine wears off, and her dream fades, our speaker might well feel despair. But she responds with an unusually naughty resistance to boudoir ennui, a hardcore hedonism that defies age and pain. She persists, and pleasure intensifies with clearer sight of its evanescence. Li's lyrics abound with that aesthetic perception Japanese court poets so thoughtfully called "aware."

Eoyang has noted how stanza one features quasi-synaesthetic disorder, while stanza two displays perfectly post-inebriate lucidity.<sup>35</sup> But i cannot agree when Eoyang likens her "equanimity" to the fatalism of Ecclesiastes. Li Qingzhao will not restrict love and pleasure to their "season" but will grab them tight at any time, at any cost. Incidentally, the delicate eroticism implicit in Li's "stroke this fallen bud," like "crumple" from our last poem, could well tempt a certain Western translator to portray her masturbating.<sup>36</sup> Such hardcore hedonism would violate Li Qingzhao's delicate, refined aesthetic.

Some Chinese commentators read this lyric's tone as despairing; they observe that Li's perennially favorite prunus here only dispatches her fond dream. Compare her description of flowers in Li 1979:72 that:

Dash to bits the hidden heart's thousand-league dream:  
Really too unfeeling!

But these critics overlook the strength of Li's response.<sup>37</sup> We can see Li taking revenge on those mume by "stroking/crumpling" them. At the same time, their persisting perfume signals her determination to grip pleasure tight. Li's changing use of mume reveals the great artist's transforming touch. Her early poems more conventionally portray mume as lofty and elegant, but later characterizations metamorphose the flowers into a personal symbol whose tears and "temples petalled white" trace her own evolution.<sup>38</sup>

We might expect that the burdens of gender and genre would confine Li Qingzhao's lyrics strictly to her boudoir. Indeed, her range seems somewhat limited, but perhaps only the disappearance of her collected works creates this appearance. We just don't know what more adventurous, less conventional works may not have found approval --hence, survival-- in traditional literati eyes. Nevertheless, a few of her extant lyrics do transport us beyond the boudoir.

Tune #13: Burning Joss-sticks (40)

Crying cricket by lawn's border  
 Startle down paulownia leaves.  
 Just now -- on earth in heaven -- sorrows thicken.  
 Steps of cloud, lunar ground;  
 Barriers locked thousand-fold.  
 Altho'                 Drifting Raft comes,  
                           Drifting Raft goes;  
                           No way to rendezvous.

                          A starry bridge magpies guide,  
                           A whole year since last union;  
 Imagine: parting woe, sundered griefs interminable.  
                           Herd-boy and Weaver-maid,  
                           Could you two be parted?  
 And now                 a spate of sun,                         qing: love/clear weather  
                           a spate of rain,  
                           a spate of wind.

Herd-boy and Weaver-maid name personifications of Altair and Vega separated by the Starry River (Milky Way) who can cross it only once in early Fall (seventh eve of the seventh lunar month --Chinese Valentine's) upon a legendary bridge of magpies.

1.4 This line describes heaven's palace. It and several others work an allusive variation on Du Mu's famous "Lover's Eve" couplet:

Steps of cloud, lunar ground -- a single rendez-vous  
 Can't equal so many sundered griefs all thru the year.

Here Li Qingzhao treats us to a cyclical movement; her lyric begins and apparently ends on Earth, but her four middle strophes wax celestial. Thus, our speaker demonstrates that earthly woes expand up even into Heaven. She supports this conceit with covert allusion to the Moon Goddess, who pines within her Moon Palace like our speaker within her boudoir, and with overt apostrophe to the star-crossing lovers. Both Heaven and Earth suffer mutability, sorrows thicken with chilly Autumn gloom, and the asterism Drifting Raft offers no hope for reunion. Inspired by such whimsy, Li Qingzhao fancies that Heaven even shares our weather; clouds lock in the Lunar Palace, too, and concluding meteorological vicissitudes seem to affect stellar as well as sublunary space. A glance back at her opening "arousal" now reveals additional resonances. The cricket has another name --"weaver-hastener"-- and paulownia **wutong** plays on "our union." These inauspicious plays get amplified by the concluding rain and wind, which elicit sad cries and "startle down" more

heart-shaped paulownia leaves.

Tune #14: Fisherman's Pride (6)

Heaven joins cloud-billows & links with morning mist.  
Starry River near full-circle: a thousand sails whirl.  
It seems as if my dreaming soul returns to God's land...

Hears Heaven's voice

Very kindly asking me: to where would I return?

I say my road is endless and sigh that sun has set.  
Strain my verse in vain to wrest man-startling lines.  
Now within a million-mile wind, the Roc lifts off...

Winds, don't stop

Till my capsule craft's been blown away to Fairy Alp.

2.3: Cf. Li Bai's poem "To Li Yong":

One day the great Roc will arise with the wind  
And whirlwind straight up -- a million miles.

This lyric hurls a bolt from the blue exploding China's traditional bou-  
doir-caged gender-poetics. Not the love-object's impulse to submission, but  
the soul's subjective impulse to transcendence energizes it. Our speaker  
begins in dawn reverie, fancying Sky and Sea have merged; "cloud-billows,"  
"Starry River," and stars metaphorized as "a thousand sails" complete her  
trope. Her middle strophes present dramatic confrontation in a remembered  
dream. Heaven's solicitude contrasts with the dark night of a wayward soul.  
Li's anxious doubts about the efficacy of "man-startling lines" highlight the  
Heaven-storming power of her concluding lines. She returns us to dawn's etern-  
al present, to a mythic paradise where Sky and Sea conjoin. Rather like the  
star-crossing lovers in #13, Li embarks upon a celestial Drifting Raft. Li has  
often coupled boats and pleasure: compare her early outing in #9 with her  
longing in #7 for a "grasshopper skiff" that recalls "Peachblossom Source's"  
fishing-boat. Later boats become vehicles for separation, as in #4. But this  
Starry Raft realizes its full potential for joy, thanks to the transcendent  
power of Li's "capsule craft."

Stylistic devices mark Li's lyric mastery; like Su Shi in "banished sylph"  
mode, she uses and repeats simple words like "heaven," "return," and "wind."

Li chooses final allusions not just aptly --see her references to the first story in Zhuangzi and to the home of Daoist sylphs-- but with delightful musicality. In medieval Chinese "wind" sounds like **piung** (likely fricativized to **fung** for Li Qingzhao), Roc is **pung**, and capsule is also **pung**. "Fairy Alp" barely conceals yet another **Pung** --same graph as "capsule"-- the most famous peak of sylphs. Chinese aesthetics stress the beauty of "meaning beyond the words"; here meaning in reserve resonates with "music beyond the words." That unnamed word marks the goal of her transcendent impulse and tunes this unheard melody even sweeter. What a shock for traditional literati to find a poetess singing with the voice of a Li Bai or a Su Shi!

Even when we find Li Qingzhao in a stock boudoir setting, we can often expect a surprising twist. Our next two examples explore a world apart from the stereotyped lovesick young bride.

Tune #15: Eternal Happiness. "Lantern Festival" (53)

Setting sun smelting gold,  
 Dusky clouds perfect disk;  
 Wherever does he stay?  
 Mists dye willows thicker,  
 Flutes blow Prunus laments;  
 Springtime mood, who knows how long?  
 Lantern Eve: fine Festival,  
 Weather's mild and melting:  
 By degrees won't there fall wind & rain?  
 They've sent to fetch me  
 Scented shay, precious steed;  
 Thanks to my comrades in wine and song.

Salad days in **Middle Province**,  
 Much leisure inside boudoirs;  
 Recall when we celebrated **two** Lantern Eves.  
 Arranging kingfeathers for crowns,  
 Twisting gold for **snow-willows**:  
 Adorning hair to vie in loveliness.  
 But nowadays, haggard & worn,  
 Windswept hair & frosty locks;  
 Afraid to be seen heading out at night.  
 Better to head for  
 My place behind the curtains  
 And listen to their laughter.

**Kaifeng**, the No. Soong  
 capital

**hair ornaments**

2.3: **Pace** most translators, here we must read level-tone chong, meaning "redoubled." In fact, in Spring 1116 (during Li's heyday in Kaifeng) an inter-



calary first lunar month meant that the capital did celebrate **two** successive Lantern Eve holidays.<sup>39</sup>

2.9: As Yu Pingbo points out, here **jian** --a resultative ending-- does not really mean "see." In translation, "see" harms nothing, so i retain it.<sup>40</sup>

On the first full moon in Spring, China's Lantern Festival helps usher in the Lunar New Year. Its gaudy blend of lamps and costumes, wine and wassails, make it China's portable counterpart to Hanukkah, Mardi Gras, and New Year's Eve. It marks the night for love, youth, and release. Li Qingzhao's treatment singularly explores its effect on an older woman. Nearly every strophe involves two worlds: an outer realm of images and scenes; and an inner realm that informs and comments on the first. Every third line ends its strophe with a rhetorical question, a demurral, a memory, a fear, or a suggestion to "listen." In stanza two the action now takes place within --and upon!-- her head. When "sun/day (ri)," "gold," and "willows" recur, they do so in recollection; modulating weather now blows "wind" and "frost" upon her hair; and recognition of pleasure's transience reduces her to vicarious enjoyment.

Dramatic antithesis contrasts stanzas 1 and 2: in 1 her erstwhile "man"**ren** has gone, while "companions" remain; but in 2 past companions fade, while "they"**ren** remain. These contrasts help Li create her unprecedentedly sharp and subtle presentation of a mature woman's sensibility. She deftly, subversively twists conventional gender-poetics to convey a wretched plight. Our aging speaker suffers no longer merely from loss of a man but from loss of family, and she no longer even enjoys the imprisoning protection of her own golden cage. Unsurprisingly, traditional literati could not warm to this exploration of a homeless widow's bitterness; Xu Yangxiao derided the poem's "lowly air," and Zhang Yan belittled its "vulgar air."<sup>41</sup>

Scholars have questioned our next example's authenticity on textual grounds, but it certainly captures Li Qingzhao's mature style.<sup>42</sup>

Tune #16: Sands of Silkwashing Stream, Long Version (72)

Up from my sickbed, withered brows bleak and sere.  
Lie & watch the waning moon climb my window-gauze.  
Cardamom sprigs simmered whole in preboiled water:  
Undistinguished tea.

Verse and books on my pillow, better in idleness,  
Breezy scene outside my door, lovelier with rain.  
All day long you face me, so subtly reserved:  
Cassia flowers!

1.4: Considerable controversy exists about this line and **fen cha**. Some render the line "mustn't have tea," which medical and grammatical considerations make plausible. Still, Li Qingzhao, the most meticulous of prosodists, usually hews to parallelism between concluding lines of a "Long Version Silkwash Stream."<sup>43</sup> If parallelism holds here, then **mofen** must **modify** "tea." Indeed, **fen cha** names a kind of prepared tea; although we can no longer tell for certain which kind, it apparently involves whisking powdered tea into a frothy broth.<sup>44</sup> In this case, "non-**fen** tea" refers to a brew (perhaps her cardamom infusion) that dispenses with such gourmet refinements. Admittedly, this interpretation remains uncertain.<sup>45</sup>

This lyric, too, subverts our expectations. Gender and genre induce us to suppose that a waning moon, Fall rains, and old age would drive an ailing widow to grief. Cardamom recalls the adage for maidenly beauty: "cardamon years of glory." We might expect our subject would feel vexed by the irony of cardamom used as heart tonic and by her disparity with hale Autumn flowers. Instead, she swallows her medicine and heartily embraces what beauty Fall holds out to her. Li manages to celebrate the waning moon --likely, the setting moon's last rays climbing up her screen-- and the pelting wind and rain upon hardy flowers. Her lyric expresses the lucidity and tranquility of convalescence, but not its hollowness. Instead, night yields to day; maturity and serenity reign; both stanzas express hopes for health and zest for life. Li's "flowers" work a remarkable transformation; she begins with "petalled/ withered" brows, but by poem's end Li manages to identify with Fall blossoms. Li's cassia --not vernal cardamom-- proves her most salubrious tonic; in a sense, it symbolizes the regenerative powers of creative art.<sup>46</sup> Somehow, art and experience have set Li Qingzhao free and won her an all-too-rare self-esteem independent from that mirrored only in male eyes.

Li Qingzhao's strong, complex sensibility may form her most important

contribution to Chinese poetry. Since reading the Book of Songs we have too rarely encountered a woman who fully speaks her mind. Li Qingzhao nearly always offers a fresh, distinctive response to her settings. Thus, her two most famous boudoir poems can astonish readers with each unanticipated reversal of feeling or perception.

Tune #17: Charms of Niannu (49)

Again: A lorn, lonely inner courtyard;  
Slanting wind and misting rain;  
Doubled doors must stay shut.

Doted willows, pampered flowers, as Cold Food nears:  
So many sorts of vexatious weather.  
Rhyme-straining poem completed,  
Head-holding brew's dispelled;  
Leaving another sort of idle savor.  
When migrant geese all pass on:  
Heart's myriad matters- hard to convey.

Up in my room, how many days' Spring chill;  
Blinds droop on all four sides;  
Too lazy to lean on my marble rail.

Quilt cold, incense snuffed: new woken from a dream  
That won't let the sad one not get up.

Clear dews flowing at dawn,  
New **wutong**-buds first open; **wutong**> we two  
So many intentions of spring jaunts!

As sun ascends, mists retreat,  
Look again: will today be **sunny** after all? **qing**> love

1.7: Some opine "head-holding" wine refers to strong brew.<sup>47</sup> But Yu Pingbo claims it refers to weak wine often taken in the morning as a hangover remedy or (here) as a pick-me-up.<sup>48</sup>

In one sense, this poem's changing moods appear only natural. What could be simpler than to mirror fickle Spring weather with emotional caprices? The art lies in Li Qingzhao's arrangement of these movements, in the pulse of seen and imagined images. She begins --and ends-- with two strophes about weather. We catch Li's mood from her injunctions to shut out the Spring and from her vexed scorn for doting, pampered scenes. Li's "inner strophes" turn to personal moods. Stanza one runs up against a poetic block, against sorrows she "can't convey." Of course, references to messenger-geese and allusion to a Li Yu lyric about parting sorrow clue us in. Stanza two elaborates on her melancholy

and holds out visions of a conventionally miserable "boudoir lament." Then she looks outside, and her mood changes completely. Li pulls off a sudden transformation like those for which Xie Lingyun became famous.<sup>49</sup> Like Xie Lingyun, Li Qingzhao fashions a classical pretext (written by a contemporary of Xie Lingyun!) into the "trigger" for her landscape transformation. In the anecdotal anthology New Tales of the World lovelorn Wang Gong went roving in Spring to relieve his loneliness; his effusions included lines II,6-7 Li Qingzhao quoted above. To complete her modulation into "fifth-century Spring," Li even alludes to puns about wutong and **qing** (sunny/love), popular in fifth-century folk ballads.

Forgive me for repeating an opinion that Li's last two strophes mark "a triumphant transmutation of learning into vital art."<sup>50</sup> They also release Li from her boudoir back into transfigured Nature. Her opening "mist and rain" and her first mention of "sun/day ri" modulate to a new dawn, a rising sun, and a cadential pun. Her out-of-sorts "So many sorts..." gets triumphantly recapitulated by her in-the-mood "So many intentions..." The gloomy Spring weather that opens both stanzas gets recast in sunnier mode. 2.4's lugubrious "new woken" transforms to 2.7's "new **wutong**." And her final modified recurrence of the initial lead-in word "again" highlights Li's delightful cadence. That sad denouement foreseen by conventionally gendered poetics has vanished into oblivion. The bird in gilt cage has flown away to freedom, although --as her final coy references to love imply-- not necessarily to autonomy. No traditional Chinese poetess could march on her own out into men's world. But by appropriating literati worlds into her verse, Li transforms the topos she inhabits. By wielding every trope Ann Jones mentions --from parody and ambivalence to appropriation-- Li finds the stoutest possible lyric resistance to patriarchal domination.

Tune #18: Drunk in Flowers' Shade (34)

Thin mist dense clouds, fretful all day long.  
Dragon-brains sear in golden beast.  
Festival day: Double Yang again;  
To curtained alcove jade pillow  
Midnight's chill first penetrates.

Drinking wine by East Hedge after yellow dusk.  
Furtive fragrance filling sleeves.  
Don't say it doesn't sear the soul:  
When curtains furl in west wind  
One's gaunter than a yellow flower.

2: This describes Borneo camphor burning in an animal-shaped censer.  
3: Double Yang marks a farewell to the warm season, a time to drink with family and admire chrysanthemums ("yellow flowers").

6: In a famous poem "After Drinking Wine," Tao Qian fulfilled his eremitic yen picking chrysanthemums by his east hedge.

This poem also arouses apprehensions of a glum finish. It frustrates every expectation aroused by Double Yang: no climbing high, no companions, and no sunlight --only dusk or midnight. Even the title-word Yin"gloom/shade" presages bad weather. Our speaker's solitude gets insistently highlighted by opposing pairs: "mists and clouds," "Double Yang again," repetitions of "sear" and "yellow" (cf. incense modulating to "furtive fragrance"), "alcove and pillow," "sleeves," and "curtains." What, then, accounts for the stout resistance that defies her sad enclosure? For one, she has chrysanthemums --hardy Fall-blooming emblems for fortitude in adversity -- to admire. These flowers and their sensuously covert fragrance may well recall past garden outings with her husband.<sup>51</sup> But they appear only a little less gaunt and faded than she. More important, Li Qingzhao has appropriated "male" poetic resources to achieve aesthetic distance from her boudoir persona. She drinks, gets outside, and looks on, like Tao Qian with his chrysanthemums. When her blinds roll up, boudoir-voyeurs expect to look in at the forlorn love object. But here we meet a steady subjective gaze that looks out and simultaneously scrutinizes herself as "one." The voyeur's window has become a two-way medium for revelation and for a self-observation that obviates unselfconscious pining. Li's subversive

re-vision of a subject re-placed within her boudoir --somewhat like that in Cao Zhi's "Deserted Wife"-- guarantees greater depth for Li's "one" persona. )

That word "one" translates Chinese **ren**, "human." In poetry it can mean "myself/we" or "another/others," "that man" or "that woman." In boudoir verse it rarely marks subjective self-awareness; rather **ren** tags either the love-object or the much-yearned "he." In Li Qingzhao's lyrics, however, **ren** means all that it can. Sometimes, as in #1 "people" or when the lyric subject sets up a dramatic foil ("the one" in #8 or "everyone" in #12), Li uses **ren** for contrast. But in #10 "our" and "us" mark an enlarged **ren** through which subject speaks for guest and audience. Sometimes **ren** denotes her husband, as in #7 "my man." But in #16 **ren** is "me." In #17 **ren** modulates from "he" in stanza one to "their" in stanza two, because now her dear departed **ren** has passed away into a strange next generation that affords only vicarious pleasure. Compare the movement in #15 from "vexatious/vexing-one" and "sad one" to the final **wutong**/"two of us." In #6 "man" refers not only to her deceased husband but to any continuity in human affairs (except that of her lyric subject, or course!). Sometimes **ren** denotes "human realm," as in #3 and #13 "Earth"**ren-jian**. But at times this realm cannot suffice; in #12 "man-startling lines" prove insufficient to contain her transcendent impulses. So it seems less surprising that "one" in #10 --rather than sounding impersonal-- includes "me" and "she," or perhaps even "s/he."

One might object that Li's use of **ren** instead of a personal pronoun has a distancing effect, as in the end to #18. Indeed, aside from two uses in her dramatically "powerful and unrestrained" #14, only one of our selections uses a personal pronoun (#7). Still, i do not think this "oblique" feature impairs the impact of Li Qingzhao's subjectivity. Rather, i will venture to say that --of all Chinese poetesses from 500 B.C. to 1840 A.D.-- only Li Qingzhao's voice restored full humanity to women in Chinese verse. If she does this by

borrowing from male poetic personae, we need not belittle her feat. Recall that traditional Chinese female personae got impoverished not by opposing them to male personae but by restricting permissible roles and behaviors. When Li reappropriated a wider subjective repertoire from male poetry --not to imitate submissively but to make it her own-- she won a mind-expanding "liberation" all-too-rare in traditional China. You will not meet another person like Li Qingzhao in all of Chinese letters.

Nevertheless, the remarkable weight and density her repetitions of **ren** obtain do suggest one "man-startling" comparison. They recall a lyrical facet of Su Shi, usually considered the Soong's greatest poet. What could the great advocate of philosophy, wit, and art, the founder of "powerful and unrestrained" literati lyrics have in common with the technical virtuoso and exponent of "oblique and concise" boudoir laments? **Ren**, for one. Su, too, will repeat **ren** for contrast: in Divination Song "others" form a foil for the "hidden one";<sup>52</sup> in Joy of Eternal Union "no one" marks an opening eerie scene that seems witnessed by a courtesan's ghost, while in stanza two "lovely one" distinguishes her ghost from the final "me."<sup>53</sup> In Su's Water Song **ren** includes all; we encounter first "human realm," then "men," then a final "we" **ren** that invites his listener and extended audience to share the full moon's beauty.<sup>54</sup> In Charms of Niannu **ren** modulates from "men" of history to "people" of today to the concluding "man's life is like a dream"; it enforces a triple perspective on universe, history, and self.<sup>55</sup> In his Butterflies Linger Over Flowers **ren** segues from "someone" to "travelling man" (the lyric self) to the "lovely one." They join in a conclusion J.Y. Liu translates:

And the one who is all heart is angered by the heartless one.<sup>56</sup>

**Ren's** range, variety, and persistence reinforce Su Shi's justly-famous broad and profound human sympathy. Whether by genius or study, Li Qingzhao's **ren** complements him in a less "powerfully unrestrained" way. She may not have

"elevated and expanded" the lyric's scope as Su Shi did, and Li's personal style, with the sole surviving exception of Fisherman's Pride, hardly resembles his. But if she rarely matched Su's sublimity and breadth of spirit, she may have surpassed him for subtlety and psychological acuity. Li also performed creditably in the exclusively male precincts of Soong **shi** verse and prose. But the semi-popular lyric **ci**, sung from its very inception by women's and especially geishas' voices, afforded Li a larger opportunity. Arguably, Li Qingzhao stands closest Su Shi for preeminence in Soong lyrics.