

THE VOICE OF FEMALE
OPPRESSION AND THE TRAGEDY
OF LI QINGZHAO

CHINESE AND WESTERN POETRY FINAL REPORT

by

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INTRODUCTION

ISOLATION, OPPRESSION, AND LOSS , were themes synonymous with the identity of literate women in the Song, yet Li Qingzhao stood out, being the only successful and famous female poet of the time within the male dominated social structure that prevented success of literate women with even a portion of her poems surviving to our time. Thus, her works offer an unique anthropology in which to view the struggles of women in the Song, but also a case study for the life of Li herself. We will be analyzing two of Li Qingzhao's poems that I presented, using the translation from *Anthology of Chinese literature*: "Note After Note" (Sheng-sheng man) and "Like a Dream" (Ru meng ling), in the context of female oppression during the Song, but also recognizing that she is unique in her role as a female, Song poet since her poems were the only ones accepted and respected by male scholars of her time, so her voice in the poems may not represent the common Song women, but will still have intersectionality with the struggles of literary females. I will not analyze the third poem I presented since this analysis will mainly touch upon her poems of the feminine style, which the majority of her works and which the third poem was not, and the difference of her works before and after the tragedies in her forties with her first husband dying.

We want to explore how loss affected her works and themes in her poems, as the Stanford Global Medieval Sourcebook's introduction to Li's poems states, "Following the invasion of Kaifeng, she moved first to Nanjing and then to Lin'an, where she spent the remaining decades of her life; her husband died in 1129. In contrast to the love themes of her earlier ci, much of her later poetry is concerned with the sorrow of her forced migration and her personal loneliness in her new surroundings."The third poem is written in a masculine voice that diverges from her main feminine style that share similar themes and symbols, thus the two poems act a controlled way to see how suffering affected her works and what messages and ideas remained with the first being from her younger years and the second in her 40's .

In my presentation, my analysis of Li Qingzhao's poems were only of the perspective of a general female voice, but in this essay I will go deeper and analyze the poems with separate perspectives of analysis with not just female historical connotation, but also interpret and analysis poems based of her personal life and connect female identity, personal struggle and cultural context together. First, I want to establish an understanding of semiotics, which will be the basis of my connotative mode of analysis; semiotics is the study of signs and the representation of meaning, and for my analysis of her poems I will use Roland Barthes' denotation and connotation as highlighted by his essay "Myths Today" in the book *Mythologies*. First we must form a basis of understanding of semiotics which connotation relies on, specifically the structuralist school of thought, that of the Swiss linguist Saussure, which establishes the study of signs rigorously, saying that signs are arbitrary, non-absolute since we can different

words in different languages meaning the same thing, but the meaning of signs can be split into two components: the signified (the concept and meaning the sign represents) and the signifier (the concepts that that you visualize that points to the signified. For example, the symbol that is a stop sign is formed by the signified concept of stopping and the signifiers of the color red, being on a crossroad, and the literal English word STOP. Now Roland Barthes establishes a mode of analysis on a border cultural level, saying that signs and media have a literal meaning (denotation) and a broader cultural meaning (connotation) that is formed by using the denotation as a signifier to the signified connotation. So to find the cultural, connotative meaning of Li Qingzhao's poems we need to establish the historical and cultural context of Li Qingzhao.

So now, I will briefly present, since I will go deeper in the actual analysis, the historical and cultural setting of Li Qingzhao but also her personal context. We know that Li Qingzhao grew up in a literary family, she learned the craft at a young age, from a father who was a student under the famous Su Shi and from her mother who had literary talent herself. In her youth she was already a talented poet, having her poetry circulating around, but it was after her marriage in adulthood did her talents truly shine with the support of her husband. The Song dynasty had improvements in female rights with wealthy and noble families allowing women to be literate, but there was still push back for women to be able to write. Reading had less of a social stigma due to the courtesan culture of the Song; everywhere in society courtesans acted as forms of entertainment, performing the popular Ci-poems, "In the Song period, most of the references to such women's writing concern the song lyric rather than shi poetry. This reflects the abun-

dance of courtesans or singing girls, who performed song lyrics, in Song society” (Eagan 15). This period where Li lived was also filled with war, with her home in the North being the site of multiple wars, forcing Li to flee while losing many of her literary antiquities, this personal struggle being a possible motive for her poems.

My argument is that there exists two distinct voices/meanings that can be found in the poems of Li Qingzhao, that of the female struggle and that of her own personal struggle with both being founded on the interplay of collective symbols and common themes of nature, birds and flowers. Both the female voice and Li’s voice are full of struggle and eventual tragedy, coming from a historical context and her own experiences respectively; while themes of female oppression remain both before and after her tragedies in midlife, her personal voice becomes noticeably more sorrowful and pained after her major sufferings.

ANALYSIS OF LI QINGZHAO

Like a Dream (Ru Meng Ling)

I will always recall that day at dusk,
the pavilion by the creek,
and I was so drunk I couldn't tell
the way home. My mood left me,
it was late when I turned back in my boat
and I strayed deep among lotuses-
how to get through? how to get through?
and I startled to flight a whole shoal
of egrets and gulls.

In this and many of her other poems, there is a common theme of flowers. Here we see the use of lotus flowers which are a holy symbol in Buddhism, representing purity and mortality, “The freedom of the boat-trip that ends in the “Chaos” (luan shi) or mortal life of Buddhism symbolized by the twisted lotuses” (Heule). There are other themes common in her poems, alcohol, darkness, time, and birds. So the denotation and literal meaning is that she was drinking in the shade by the creek and getting lost among the lotus while startling a flock of birds, with a few more subtleties. To analyze this poem’s

meaning we must ask who is presenting this poem, Li Qingzhao herself, her servants, or maybe no one. We know that Li Qingzhao had a relatively high social status, growing up in and marrying into a literate family; we also know that the courtesans of the Song were not noble women, but instead girl from poorer families that did not write their own poems or song, performing the works of mostly men, and may gain the respect to write their own poems later in their careers. Thus, there are two possibilities, that these poems by Li Qingzhao were not performed or performed by courtesan girls, as Egan but it, “is extremely unlikely that someone of the stature of Lady Wei would ever have performed her own songs in front of people. That would hardly befit the madam of a highly distinguished household. No, if her songs were performed, and it is likely that they were, they would have been performed by professional female entertainers”(Egan 29) , but due to the survival of her works, and the fact that her works were widely circulated as printing stated to be popularized in the Song, it would seem strange for her works not to be preformed. So, knowing that her works were most likely performed by courtesans, we can see how her poems could act as a voice for all women, literally coming from the mouths of various women from different sectors of society, and thus her motivation and meaning could embody this representation of women and their following struggles. So, when I refer to the voice of the poems as a “she” or “her” is am referring to Li herself but also the courtesans/ women of the Song. We know from many historical accounts of the conservative establishment pushing back on women being able to write, as the influential historian, scholar and politician Sima Guang stated, “Today some people teach their daughters how to write poetry and perform popular songs; it is not right at all” (Egan 12). We know that Li Qingzhao was alone as a women poet, with no females

reaching nearly the respect, talent, or circulation, giving her life a sense of isolation after her husband's death. Now, when we read the first line about being in a pavilion by a creek, drinking, this can represent the indulgence of earthly desires, the mindless chasing of sufferings like alcohol, as water (representing life in Buddhism) is flowing past her in a river, she is literally watching her life flow away. In the next line we see that her drinking has left her unable to know where she is, but she decides to leave but is lost, searching among the lotuses (holy symbol of Buddhism) she startles a flock of birds. The literal meaning of the poem, though elegant, does not seem to have much substance, but as we analyzed the poem on a wider cultural understanding, we find meanings from Li's culture and her personal life. Drinking is the ultimate indulgence, a form of addiction that also subdues your thinking, a way to dull sorrow and suffering. This sorrow she feel could result from her isolation in the literary world with no solidarity from other literary women since this was before her own major personal suffering in life, as Egan writes, "Song period women who were literate and chose to write did so almost entirely on their own, without the comfort and encouragement of other women and sympathetic men, who lent their support to literary women of later centuries. Everything we know about Li Qingzhao points to this being the case with her. She was not a member of a group of literary women" (Egan 10). So she sulks in her isolation as a talented female, but when she says her mood left her and decides to go home, she is rejecting the isolation and mindless indulgences and instead gets lost among lotuses which represents the purity and enlightenment of poetry, losing herself in the craft. The birds that she startles represent the men of the establishment, how her success and presence as a female poet disrupts the birds. Now, an alternative understanding of this poem can be found in a

different translation by Jiaosheng Wang where the singular first-person pronouns of “I” are replaced with the plural pronoun of “we”, and this change re-contextualizes everything.

Like a dream

It was a day at ‘Brookside pavilion’
That I often fondly remember,
When, flushed with wine,
We could hardly tear ourselves away
From the beautiful view at sunset.
Returning late by boat
When we had enjoyed our fill,
We got lost and strayed
To where the clustered lotuses
Were at their thickest.
Pushing and thrashing,
Pushing and thrashing as best we could,
We scared into flight
A shore full of dozing egrets and gulls.

Here we can analyze her personal voice come in, where the “we” is most likely Li and her husband with them searching through lotuses together, representing their literary relationship. We know Li and her husband had a strong relationship, sharing hobbies and we see her affection for him in her earlier poems, “more fun is in the happiness of shared work with her beloved husband in collecting, analyzing and describing artefacts and long walks in nature” (Heule). The birds in this interpretation are still men from the literary world, but this time it is a joint effort in which they startled them together as they explore poetry (represented by lotuses), and this idea that this was a love poem is

re-enforced by the first line that says how fondly she remembers this memory. Thus, we see the existence of a general female voice speaking of the oppression of literate females and a personal voice of Li's own experiences that is amplified by these two different translation, and we will compare how these voices change later on in Li's life with the next poem.

Note After Note (Sheng-Sheng man)

Searching and searching, seeking and seeking,
so chill, so clear,
dreary,
 and dismal,
 and forlorn.

That time of year
 when it's suddenly warm,
 then cold again,
now it's hardest of all to take care.
Two or three cups of weak wine
how can they resist the biting wind
 that comes with evening?
The wild geese pass by
that's what hurts the most-
and yet they're old acquaintances.

In piles chrysanthemums fill the ground,
looking all wasted, damaged-
who could pick them, as they are now?
I stay by the window,
how can I wait alone until blackness comes?
The beech tree,
 on top of that
 the fine rain,
on until dusk,

the dripping drop after drop.
In a situation like this
how can that one word "sorrow" grasp it?

This poem is also in a feminine style, with the denotative meaning of her searching in the cold and drinking wine while watching wild geese fly by with themes of darkness and descriptions of nature. Again, the literal story presented by the poem is not overtly meaningful, only vague, cold descriptions of nature and only describing her own feelings at the end with "sorrow." Now, understanding the general cultural context of women, we see that the beginning of the poem that describes depressing and dreary weather can describe the environment for literate women, who were isolated from one another with no support from the status quo. Then with the line, "how can they resist the biting wind that comes with evening", we might ask she talking to? Just like the first poem dusk and the sun setting creates a transition, in "Like a Dream", where it is only after dark when she gets lost in the lotus, which represents her pursuit of enlightenment through poetry, here she is talking to other women about the biting cold of evening which represents the push back from men. We see this in the next line where wild geese fly by, which is similar to the birds of the previous poem, can represent men who are "old acquaintances", personifying the birds, making them seem like former friends of Li's who did not accept her role as a prominent female poet, thus flying by and hurting her. Now, the symbol of flowers reoccurs with chrysanthemums, not the religious connotation of a lotus, but still represents poetry with the nature, beauty, and symmetry of flowers paralleling Chinese poetry. Thus, the destruction of said chrysanthemums could represent the destruction of poetry and specifically female poetry that was common in the Song:

“The motif of destroyed manuscripts is one that we repeatedly encounter in accounts of women’s writing from the Song period. Burned manuscripts, lost writings, poems that survive only in fragments or only because they are quoted in an anecdote, these sorts of circumstances are the norm with women’s writing in the Song” (Eagan 14). Flowers in her poems could also be personifications of herself and her beauty as Freerk Heule writes about Li, “She not only compared herself with a flower, but also used the beauty of a flower like a metaphor ... Thus, one sees that the beautiful nature in her poetry becomes a symbol of her own beauty, which awaits appreciation, but just like the flowers after maturation, sadly, is subject to aging and decay” (Heule), thus we can see the line about the destruction of flowers to be about her own sadness of her literary loneliness or her falling apart over death of her husband. Then the final lines about waiting alone until blackness comes denotatively references the time of day, but connotatively could also be talking about mortality, and the darkness of death, with the rain (water again being life) falling drop by drop, representing the slow passage of time for her. This isolation and despair in darkness seems to parallel the first poem by representing the isolation and despair that literate women face, but again there is a personal interpretation of these symbols using Li’s own experiences. Now, since this poem is written after her husband’s death, we can see that Li’s personal voice is a lot more depressing. Instead of the “fond memory” of the previous poem, this poem has despairing descriptions of nature that match the emotions of her loss and sorrow; this poem could be interpreted as an expression of the sorrows of war with Li having to escape south from her the fighting in the Northern Song states across the Yangtze river and losing her collected antiquities, represented by the line about the chrysanthemums

which represent poetry. The birds are still people acquaintances, but in this interpretation they are a representation for death, flying away to the heavens or maybe moving far away to never be seen again to escape wait, and thus making sense of why she is hurt the birds flying away. A different perspective of this personal analysis is her remarriage which caused her great amounts of suffer and aligns with the mood of the poem, "There is a tradition that Li Qingzhao married again in about 1132, and that her husband, a military man, named Zhang Ruzhou abused her physically and mentally ("domestic violence", *Jia ting bao li*) so that she sued him for divorce. Though the suit was successful, the law required that any woman who remarried and sued her husband must be confined, and as a consequence Li was forced to spend some time in prison. Though lonely and bereft, Li continued to write poetry until her death." So, when she is "searching and seeking", she may be referring to searching for partner to curb her loneliness and with the line "when it's suddenly warm, then cold again" can represent her finding a new partner, but then divorcing and being alone again. Now due to her age at this point the geese that fly by, that are acquaintances, which hurt are literally acquaintances of hers that she had to see leave, dying or otherwise throughout her life. We also see how the water drips slowly for her, not the rapid rivers of the first poem, showing how her flow of life is slowed, stunted, and depressed. Thus, the final lines are even more tragic, she is alone waiting for darkness to take her, watching her life go by one small drop at a time.

CONCLUSION

We have shown the possibility of two interpretations of Li Qingzhao poems in our analysis, the possible general voice/commentary of the suffering and isolation of literate women and the personal voice of Li from her own experiences. We established each with a historical, cultural, and personal context to which we found meaning beyond the literal meaning of poems in a semi-rigorous process. We see how the suffering later on in her life changed the themes from almost romantic to depressing and dreary, from the "fond memory" of the first poem to the "sorrow" of the second. Since Li is a woman herself, these two interpretations could be seen as a single voice, a single interconnected argument for the suffering of Li Qingzhao since her isolation and abuse all stemmed from her identity as a woman. Therefore, her poems are both a voice for female oppression and a tale of personal tragedy.

The Voice of Female Oppression and the Tragedy of Li Qingzhao

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