To the tune "Drunk under the Shadow of Flowers"—"In thin fog and heavy mist"

醉花陰 · 薄霧濃雰愁永晝

Text Information

*All Li Qingzhao documents share the same Text Information, Introduction, About this Edition, and Further Reading. See li_qingzhao_courtyard_deep for edits to those sections.

Author | Li Qingzhao 李清照
Language | Chinese
Period | 11th Century
Genre | Songs
Source | Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋 (ed.). *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞. Vol 2. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965, 929.
Collection | Songs of Love and Loss: Lyrics from the Chinese Song Dynasty, Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia
URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/li_qingzhao_in_thin_fog/

Translation by Qian Jia. Introduction and notes by Nina Du and Runqi Zhang.

Introduction to the Text

Li Qingzhao wrote this *ci* during her marriage, which was marked by long separations from her husband due to his work. Like other ci which she composed, it captures the loneliness of a speaker whose feelings jar against the happy scenes around her. In this case, the mention of the festival of Double Ninth (a harvest festival associated with expressions of gratitude) emphasises her alienation. Festivals such as this were occasions to gather together and socialize, but here we encounter the speaker entirely alone.

Italicize

The *ci* genre of Chinese poetry first emerged in the Sui dynasty (581-619), was further developed in the Tang dynasty (618-907) and matured in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127). *Ci* is usually translated into English as "song lyrics". This is because *ci* were composed by poets to fit pre-existing tunes. The number of lines, the line lengths, and the tonal and rhythmic patterns of *ci* vary with the tunes, which number in the hundreds. One common occasion for composing *ci* would be a banquet: song lyrics would be scribbled down by guests and then sung by musical performers as entertainment. Other occasions for composing and enjoying *ci* would be more casual: the poet might sing the lyrics to himself at home or while travelling (many *ci* poets were civil servants of the Imperial Court and often had to travel great distances to carry out their work). Sometimes the lyrics would be sung by ordinary people in the same way as folk songs. This oral and musical quality sets it apart from other genres of poetry in China during the same period, which were largely written texts with more elevated objectives. There are two main types of *ci*: wǎnyuē (婉约, "graceful") and háofàng (豪放, "bold"). The wǎnyuē subgenre primarily focuses on emotion and many of its lyrics are about courtship and love, while the háofàng subgenre often deals with themes that were considered more profound by contemporary audiences, such as ageing and mortality, or the rewards and disappointments of public service.

Li Qingzhao was probably one of the most prominent female poets in Imperial China. Born into an elite family of imperial bureaucrats, Li Qingzhao aspired to become a writer even though literature was considered a male domain. She quickly gained fame for her poetic talent and became not only a celebrated composer of *ci* but also an important critic of the genre. In her view, the male poets composing lyrics for female singers struggled to convey these women's thoughts and voices convincingly. In her song lyrics, Li Qingzhao offers the modern reader something rare and precious: the inner world of women in medieval China, as imagined by a woman poet. Her songs are often considered to be among the most affecting of the genre.

In 1127, when Li Qingzhao was in her forties, the capital city of the Song dynasty (present-day Kaifeng)—the city where Li Qingzhao lived—was conquered by the Jin dynasty in the Jin-Song Wars, along with the northern half of the Song dynasty's territory. The surviving members of the dynasty consolidated their regime in the south, establishing a new capital city, first in Nanjing, then in Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou). The conquest of Kaifeng marked the end of the Northern Song dynasty and the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty: two distinct eras in the political history of China, and two distinctive periods in Li Qingzhao's own poetry. 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.

About this Edition

The original text of this *ci* is based on the edition by Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋 (Quan Song Ci 全宋詞. Vol 2. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965). Punctuation follows the edition. Since ci poetry rarely includes personal pronouns, and gender-differentiated pronouns did not exist in Classical Chinese of this period, the gender of the speaker as well as their perspective (e.g. first, second or third person) must often be deduced by the translator from context.

Further Reading

Chang, Kang-i Sun. The Evolution of Tz'u Poetry: from Late Tang to Northern Sung. Princeton UP, 1980.

- *A standard survey of the early history of Chinese song lyrics (romanized as both ci and tz'u).*

Egan, Ronald. "The Song Lyric." The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, vol. 1, edited by Stephen Owen, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 434-452.

- *An overview of the genre.*

Owen, Stephen. Just a Song: Chinese Lyrics from the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries. Asia Center, Harvard UP, 2019.

- *A recent new history of the genre.*

Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋, editor. Quan Song Ci 全宋詞. Zhonghua shu ju, 1965. 5 vols.

- *A comprehensive edition of ci from the Song dynasty and the source text for the ci in this collection (introductions and annotations are in Chinese).*

Egan, Ronald. The Works of Li Qingzhao. De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 94-198.

- *A bilingual edition, with Chinese and English translations on facing pages.*

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*Formatting issue: English translation is positioned slightly lower than Chinese poem.

醉花陰

薄霧濃雰愁永晝。
瑞腦銷金獸。
佳節又重陽，
玉枕紗廚，
半夜涼初透。

東籬把酒黃昏後。
有暗香盈袖。
莫道不銷魂，
簾卷西風，
人比黃花瘦。

~~To the tune "In Thin Fog"~~ To the tune "Drunk under the Shadow of Flowers"

In thin fog and heavy mist, I am dismayed by the eternal daytime.
The dragon-brain incense melts in the metal beast.
It is again the festival of Double Ninth.
Jade pillow and gauze canopy;
at midnight, a chill starts to pierce through.

Capitalize "At" to conform with GMS practice of capitalizing first word of new line

By the eastern fence, I drink after dusk.
There is a faint fragrance filling up my sleeves.
Do not say that it does not consume the soul:
the western wind rolls up the curtain; Capitalize "The" to conform with GMS practice
I am thinner than the yellow flower.

Critical Notes

Translation

Line 2	The "metal beast" refers to the incense holder, many of which were shaped like animals.
Line 3	The Double Ninth Festival is one of the most important traditional festivals in China. It takes place annually in early fall, the traditional harvest time, and thanks is given for nature's bounty.
Line 4	In this period, wealthy individuals would sometimes sleep on a hard pillow made of carved jade.
Line 10	The character 人, translated here as "I", literally means "the person", but refers to the speaker.