



**To the tune "Vile Charmer, Long Version"—"Who planted the banana trees in front of the window"**  
**添字醜奴兒·窗前誰種芭蕉樹**

**Text Information**

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, 927.

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-who-planted-banana-trees/](https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/li-qingzhao-who-planted-banana-trees/)

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

**Introduction to the Text**

Ask any Chinese person to name a female poet from imperial China and the answer you will hear is "Li Qingzhao." 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.

In this *ci*, Li Qingzhao employs the image of banana trees to obliquely convey the speaker's state of mind. In the first stanza, she considers their visual impact: how the trees block the sunlight; the way their leaves resemble hearts. The speaker's own heartbreak is signalled at the start of the second stanza, in which the poet evokes the sound of rain dripping from the banana leaves and the discontent that it provokes. The characterization of the speaker as a "northerner" suggests that this ci may be conveying the poet's own feelings: she was forced to migrate to the south following the conquest of Kaifeng and the collapse of the Northern Song Dynasty.



### 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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添字醜奴兒

To the tune “Vile Charmer, Long Version”

窗前誰種芭蕉樹，

Who planted the banana trees in front of the window?

陰滿中庭。

The shade fills up the courtyard.

陰滿中庭。

The shade fills up the courtyard.

葉葉心心

One leaf after another, one heart after another,

舒捲有餘情。

5

folding and unfolding, with too much feeling.

傷心枕上三更雨，

Heartbroken on the pillow, the rain in the third hour

點滴霖霖。

drips on and on,

點滴霖霖。

drips on and on.

愁損北人，

It saddens the northerner,

不慣起來聽。

10

who is not used to listening and thus rises from her bed.

**Critical Notes**

*Line 6* The third hour of the traditional Chinese clock refers to the period between 11pm and 1am.

*Line 9* The poet-speaker refers to herself here.