



To the tune "Magnolia Flower"—"Xiaolian has yet to learn to unravel her heart's tangled feelings"

木蘭花 · 小蓮未解論心素

Text Information

Author | Yan Jidao 晏幾道

Language | Chinese

Period | 11th Century

Genre | Songs

Source | Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋 (ed.). *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞. Vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965, 233.

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/yan_jidao_xiaolian_yet_learn/

Translation by Qian Jia. Introduction and notes by Dante Zhu.

Introduction to the Text

Yan Jidao wrote this song for a courtesan named Xiaolian. The first stanza depicts her giving a musical performance which culminates in the departure of the audience and (implicitly) a private encounter between her and the speaker. The song attempts to convey both the poet's affection for Xiaolian and her own free spirit. Another song by Yan Jidao in this collection, "To the tune 'Partridge in the Sky'", also refers to Xiaolian.

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* (婉約, "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.

Yan Jidao 晏幾道 was the son of the eminent *ci* poet Yan Shu 晏殊. Together, Yan Jidao and Yan Shu are often referred to as "double Yan", with Yan Jidao being the "Little Yan 小晏" and Yan Shu being the "Big Yan 大晏", reflecting the fact that during their lifetimes they were both the iconic poets of the *wǎnyuē* (婉約, "graceful") subgenre of *ci*. Unlike his father, who held a prestigious state position alongside a blooming poetry career, Yan Jidao led a far more arduous life. As the seventh son of Yan Shu, he was born into a noble and wealthy family, and had little interest in officialdom at a young age. His lifestyle was extravagant, filled with luxurious banquets, joyous travels with friends, and beautiful courtesans.

After Yan Shu passed away in Yan Jidao's late teens, the young man realized the imminent financial difficulties which would befall him and abandoned his previously extravagant lifestyle, devoting himself to a political career. However, he struggled to replicate his father's success and was framed for his involvement in the movement against Wang Anshi's New Policies (a series of government reforms), which led to him being jailed. Even though he was quickly released, this incident did huge damage to both his political career and his finances. In his later years, he returned to writing *ci*, and started compiling a collection of his own works, called *Little Mountain Ci* (小山詞). In the prologue to this collection, he wrote: "I now think of the ones who once drank with me. Some of them have passed away; others fell prey to illness. I read through my collection as if reliving my past sadnesses, joys, separations and gatherings, which now are like fantasies, or a sudden lighting strike, or a faded dream. Thus I could only cover my pages and mourn, for time slips away too fast, and past joys are illusory and unreal."



As a poet of the *wǎnyuē* subgenre, Yan Jidao's lyrics pay great attention to romantic affairs with courtesans. Compared to his contemporaries, Yan Jidao focuses more on the existential and emotional aspect rather than the physical aspect of these affairs, and incorporates more introspection into his poems. Because of the occurrence of specific names and locations in his ci, some of his ci invite a biographical reading. However, as ci are song lyrics intended for multiple performances by different singers on different occasions, there is also a universal character to the sentiments evoked in Yan Jidao's ci which transcends the poet's personal experiences.

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 1. 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).*



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小蓮未解論心素。
狂似鈿箏弦底柱。
臉邊霞散酒初醒，
眉上月殘人慾去。

Xiaolian has yet to learn to unravel her heart's tangled feelings;
her feelings are as wild as the passionate music played on the thin
string of the zither.
The rosy clouds on her cheeks disperse; she sobers up.
Her crescent eyebrows fade; her guests are about to leave.

舊時家近章臺住。
盡日東風吹柳絮。
生憎繁杏綠陰時，
正礙粉牆偷眼覷。

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She used to live on Zhangtai Street,
where the eastern wind blew the catkins all day long.
She hates it the most when the apricot blossoms and green shade
become dense,
which hinders her from peaking over the white plastered wall.

Critical Notes

Translation

- Line 4** The "guests" in this line refers to other audience members listening to Xiaolian's zither performance. The implication is that while everyone else is about to leave, this does not include the speaker, suggesting that he and Xiaolian will now meet in private.
- Line 5** Zhangtai Street was the name of a redlight district in the Han Dynasty. It later became a euphemism for a brothel, so here it implies that Xiaolian is a courtesan.
- Line 6** The imagery of blown catkins (柳絮) suggests an unsettled, tragic life without a sense of belonging. Here it alludes to Xiaolian's life as a courtesan.
- Line 8** "Peaking over the white plastered wall" is an allusion to a story about one of the most handsome men in the Chinese history, Song Yu 宋玉 (c.298 BCE – c.222 BCE), who was also known for his literary talent. It is said that his neighbor's daughter, who was a great beauty herself, peeked at him over a white plastered wall for three years.