To the tune "Immortal by the River"—"Beyond the willows there is light thunder"
臨江仙・柳外輕雷池上雨

Text Information
Author | Ouyang Xiu
Language | Chinese
Period | 11th Century
Genre | Song lyric (ci)
Source | Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋 (ed.). *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞. Vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965. 129.
Collection | Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia
URL | https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/ouyang_xiu_beyond_willows/

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

Introduction to the Text

The song lyric was allegedly composed in the following context: when Ouyang Xiu was a junior governor at Henan (a province in China), he had a romantic relationship with a local singer. At that time, Qian Weiyan was the lead governor of Henan. One day when Qian was hosting a party in his garden, Ouyang Xiu and the singer were late. Qian asked them the reason for their delay. The singer answered: "The weather is too hot, and I had heatstroke. I was sleeping in a cool room and lost my golden hairpin." When Qian heard these words, he laughed and said to the singer: "If Ouyang Xiu can write a ci about this, I will give you the money for your lost hairpin." Ouyang Xiu then wrote the following lyric, and Qian, satisfied, gave the singer money for her hairpin. The not-so-subtle cleverness of this lyric is that it describes the couple making love (in the second stanza), once they go inside and lower the curtain. So this is an alternate explanation of why the couple was late to the party, the suggestive indirectness of which would have amused everyone who heard the singer perform it.

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.

Ouyang Xiu was a highly influential politician, scholar, and historian of the Northern Song dynasty. He was revered as a grand master of literature and philosophy, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he laid the foundation for the literati mentality of the dynasty. When Ouyang was four years old, the death of his father, a fifty-seven-year-old military officer, left the family destitute. Poverty did not stop Ouyang's passion for reading: he would borrow books from his neighbors and make copies in order to study them further. Later, he became a bureaucrat and was posted to many cities as a prefect of the imperial court. In his political life, he was principled and solemn, and wrote a great deal in many genres. Much of his writing reflects his dignified character. His song lyrics, however, provide an interesting contrast. Their content may be drawn in part from the colorful private life he enjoyed in his younger years, including liaisons with many different courtesans. Interestingly, they are often written from the perspective of a lovelorn courtesan abandoned by an inconstant lover, in effect casting himself as the villain.

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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臨江仙	To the tune "Immortal by The River"
柳外輕雷池上雨， 雨聲滴碎荷聲。 小樓西角斷虹明。 欄干倚處， 待得月華生。	Beyond the willows there is light thunder, over the pond it rains. The tinkle of the rain shatters the sound of lotus leaves. At the western corner of the building, a rainbow appears. Leaning against the railings, I wait for the moonlight to emerge.
燕子飛來窺畫棟， 玉鈎垂下簾旌。 凉波不動簟紋平。 水精雙枕， 傍有墮釵橫。	Swallows fly by, peeking from the painted rafter. I let down the curtain from the jade hooks. The cool waves no longer move, the bamboo mat is still. Beside a pair of crystal pillows, a fallen hairpin lies.