To the tune "Picking Mulberries"—"Back then I met with her in the western building"
採桑子・西樓月下當時見

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, 324.
Collection | Songs of Love and Loss: Lyrics from the Chinese Song Dynasty, Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia
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Translation by Qian Jia. Introduction and notes by Dante Zhu.

Introduction to the Text
This song commemorates a past affair between a man and a courtesan by recalling their first meeting. Yan Jidao uses a detailed description of the courtesan's appearance to establish a melancholic tone, and the natural imagery of the changing leaves of the willow trees subtly suggests the passage of time. The willow tree is a common symbol of farewell and separation in Chinese poetry, since in ancient China there was a tradition of giving a willow branch to a person before their departure.

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.

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* (婉约, "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* (小山词) . 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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西樓月下當時見， 淚粉偷勻。 歌罷還顰。 恨隔爐煙看未真。		Back then I met with her in the western building beneath the moon; she secretly smoothed out the tear-streaked powder. After singing, she still frowned. I regret that through the smoke of the incense burner I did not see her face clearly.
別來樓外垂楊縷， 幾換青春。 倦客紅塵。 長記樓中粉淚人。	5	Since we parted, the willow trees outside the building have drooped down. How many times have they changed their green leaves in spring? This weary traveler in the dusty world will always remember the one with tear-streaked powder in the western building.

Critical Notes

Translation

Line 1 The "western building" (西樓) is often used as a symbol for separation and loneliness. It can also refer to the private rooms of women in a household.

Line 5 See Introduction for a discussion of the image of willow trees.

Line 7 The literal translation of 紅塵 is "red dust". It refers to the dust scattered on the road when the carriages and horses pass through, and is used to describe the noisy and bustling city. It is a metaphor for a society filled with distractions and false appearances. 紅塵 is often used with a sentiment of rejecting or being bored by this kind of lifestyle, and wanting to have something truthful (love, tranquility, or religious belief) that is beyond the pursuit of money or fame. The translator chooses to translate 紅塵 into "dusty world" to preserve the metaphorical implications of this word.