To the tune "Crane Soaring in the Sky"—"On the golden title board" | 鶴沖天・黃金榜上

Text Information
Author | Liu Yong 柳永
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, 51-52.
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/liu_yong_golden_title_board/

Translation, introduction and notes by Dante Zhu.

Introduction to the Text
This *ci* was written by Liu Yong after he failed *keju*, and it is this *ci* that leads the Ren Emperor of Song 宋仁宗 to personally deem him unfit for imperial service, which further impedes his political career. In the first stanza of this *ci*, the poet explains his failing in *keju* as the emperor "miss[ing] out on the talented ones", and makes the unconventional claim that being the *ci* poet is a profession that is as important and praiseworthy as being a state bureaucrat. In the second stanza, the poet envisions a future filled with "romantic affairs and pleasures". This hedonistic outlook and cynicism towards the empire are very different from the views typically expressed in Chinese society at that time, which are largely influenced by Confucianism and propose a positive attitude towards making contribution to the empire and the people through becoming state officials and taking up responsibilities of different social roles. Compared to other ci featured in the Liu Yong collection, this piece is composed earlier, and is often considered as the starting point of Liu Yong's rebelliousness.

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.

Liu Yong was possibly the most widely-read *ci* writer in the Northern Song period, with fans ranging from courtesans to officials and critics. He excelled in writing love songs, portraying the emotions of lovelorn individuals in unprecedented detail and depth. Despite being born into a family of officials, he did not lead a successful professional life. After he failed *keju*, the Imperial Chinese civil service examination, he wrote the song "To the tune 'Crane Soaring in the Sky'", in which he claimed that ci poets are as important as prime ministers. This led the Ren Emperor of Song 宋仁宗 to personally deem him unfit for imperial service. The emperor suggested that if he really thought that way, he should just be a *ci* poet instead of pursuing the career of an official. The emperor went so far as to deliberately fail Liu Yong in his following attempt at the exams.

Liu Yong's continued output of poetry, deemed frivolous, trivial and vulgar by court officials, had a lasting impact on his professional life. He did not pass the civil service exam until he was 48 years old; before that, he spent much of his time with singers and courtesans, writing *ci* and living a hedonistic existence. After he finally passed *keju*, he worked as a

low rank official in several areas and sought to advance his career through the assistance of the prime minister of that time, Yan Shu, who was also a famous *ci* poet (and is featured in this collection). Yan Shu mocked the frivolity of Liu Yong's lyrics and refused to assist him, and the emperor, upon learning of his attempt, commented that Liu Yong, as a *ci* composer, should stick to composing ci. In response to the emperor's comment, Liu Yong, in typically rebellious fashion, began signing his *ci* "composer of *ci* by imperial decree". He made a final attempt to salvage his career by writing a complimentary *ci* to the emperor, but this was regarded as offensive and the emperor stripped him of his official titles and stated that he would never be accepted back at court. From then on, he returned to his previous lifestyle, indulging in the company of singers and courtesans.

Because of his unique life experience, the sentiments expressed in Liu Yong's *ci* are often very different from the views typically expressed in Chinese society at that time, with an especially cynical attitude towards serving the empire and a pronounced defense of hedonism. Nevertheless, Liu Yong's *ci* were extremely popular throughout the empire, giving rise to the frequently repeated observation that "if you can see a well in a place, you can hear Liu Yong's *ci* being sung there". As every tiny town had a well, this indicates the wide reach of Liu's lyrics.

Liu Yong is also notable for his many formal innovations to *ci* poetry. Before Liu, most *ci* were written to accompany short tunes, but he initiated a trend of writing lyrics for longer tunes, which allowed for more complex portrayals of human psychology. He was also less restrained by the tune, and often modified the traditional rhyme as well as the line breaks. For example, even when he wrote two ci to the same tune, they might sound very different from one another, with different rhymes, line lengths or numbers of lines. The tunes that Liu Yong used were also more diverse than those of his contemporaries: some were folk songs, and some he composed himself. Many of Liu Yong's *ci* have a stronger narrative element, probably due to the influence of storytellers whose street performances he would have watched. Liu received considerable criticism for his focus on love and for his use of commonplace language rather than a refined poetic vocabulary, but this did little to curtail his popularity or his influence on the development of the *ci* genre.

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.*

To the tune "Crane Soaring in the Sky"—"On the golden title board" | 鶴沖天・黃金榜上

鶴沖天	To the tune "Crane Soaring in the Sky"
黃金榜上。	On the golden title board[1],
偶失龍頭望。	I fortuitously lost my chance to be the top-ranked scholar[2].
明代暫遺賢，	Even in the era of wise emperors and judicious state bureaucracy, the emperors sometimes miss out on the talented ones.
如何向。	What should I do now?
未遂風雲便，	Given that I didn't get my opportunity[3],
爭不恣狂蕩。	how about indulging myself in travel and fun?
何須論得喪。	Why do I need to reflect upon gain and loss?
才子詞人，	A talented ci composer,
自是白衣卿相。	despite wearing white[4], is himself a prime minister.
煙花巷陌，	On the streets of smoke and flowers[5]
依約丹青屏障。	there are painted[6] screens.
幸有意中人，	Luckily, behind those live my lovers,
堪尋訪。	whom I can visit.
且恁偎紅倚翠，	Let me lie beside these beauties[7]—
風流事、	romantic affairs and pleasures
平生暢。	are the joy of my life.
青春都一餉。	Youth is just a fleeting moment.
忍把浮名，	I would rather exchange meaningless fame
換了淺斟低唱。	to drink wine and hum tunes[8].

Critical Notes

Translation

1 The "golden title board" refers to the pass list for *keju*, a civil service examination system in Imperial China for selecting candidates for the state bureaucracy. The pass list was called the "golden title board" because the names of successful candidates were written in the color gold. When the list was published, the names of all those who passed were read aloud in the presence of the emperor and recorded in the dynasty's archive.

2 The literal translation for "龍頭" is "the head of the dragon". Here, it refers to the title given to the scholar with the highest ranking in the exam, whose name would be at the top of the golden title board. This line indicates that Liu Yong has failed *keju*.

3 The literal translation for "風雲" is "the wind and the cloud" and it is an expression meaning "the good opportunity". Here, it refers to the chance of becoming a state official.

4 In Imperial China, wearing white means someone is not in the state bureaucracy.

5 "Smoke and flowers" refers to prostitutes and female singers. "The streets of smoke and flowers" refers to where brothels and song houses are located.

6 "丹青" is the ink used for painting. Here, using it to describe the screens means that the screens are painted.

7 The literal translation for "紅翠" is "the red and the green", which refers to prostitutes. This comes from a self-description by Li Yu 李煜 (c. 937 – 978) the last ruler of the Southern Tang state during imperial China's Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. Despite being an unsuccessful ruler, Li Yu was known as the "first true master" of the ci form, and he described himself as "the one who drinks wine and hums tunes, the master of lying beside the beauties (the red and the green), and the king of the temple of mandarin ducks" ("浅斟低唱，偎紅倚翠大師，鴛鴦寺主"). Note that the mandarin duck is also a symbol for marriage or romance. Liu Yong here is trying to compare himself to Li Yu. The final line of this ci also borrows a phrase from Li Yu's self-description.

8 See previous note.