



Review Article

War and Inner Peace: Li Qingzhao, Female Poet in Song China: A Biography, Poem, and Gender Analysis

Freerk Heule*

Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

***Corresponding author:** Freerk Heule, Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands. Tel: +31650534716; +31180613382; Email: fam.heule@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Chinese poet Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084-1155 lived during the Song Dynasty (宋朝, 960-1279), a period of fierce wars against attacking Jurchen (女真) hordes from the North. This article describes her curriculum and reception by means of authentic and recent material. She came from a leading family of writers and politicians, and married a husband of her class. Initially, she had a happy marriage, although her partner was often for work from home. When they had to flee for the enemy, their large collection of antiquities was lost.

Li had made poems since a young age. Approximately 50 so-called ci-poems (词) have been handed down from her. They show us a free woman who easily speaks about her body, sexuality, environment and work. Partly, her thoughts about her world and personal suffering come with great physical and mental pains, however, are also linked to dreams and flowers. In that she knows how to fully utilize common sense of symbolism in an original and feminine idiom. This is probably the reason that she has become an icon in traditional China, with dominating male preferences. She is placed in the socio-cultural framework of the Song Dynasty, and turns out to be child of her time. Chinese poetry, especially Li Qingzhao's lyric, is still an important field of research.

Keywords: Curriculum; Ci-Poetry; Floral symbolism; Gender; Li Qingzhao; Reception

Introduction

In this essay the results of academic studies and personal experiences with the person and works of the female poet Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084-1155) (Figure 1) are presented. While in Jinan (济南), China in 2013, it appeared that she still was a highly valued personality, who as a poet, took the freedom to express herself explicitly as a woman in her physical and mental status, or body and mind, her political commitment, and her feelings for beauty in nature. Today she has her Memorial Hall in the park of Jinan, the city where her cradle stood (Figure 2). Her writer's name Yi'an Jushi (易安居士) means 'Householder of Yi'an, and as such she did love the city with the sound of the water of the local sources, near her house.

Li lived about 900 years ago. From the material handed down, supplemented with more recent work, from critics and admirers, I investigated her life as a mental process. In the

biography the contours are sketched from an early period "a beautiful youth", after which an adult woman is living in "a time of chaos", and then ending in a stage of "silence and fame." Of course, it seems logical to speak about Li Qingzhao "as a woman", but I will expand that biological data and highlight in this essay the image of the poet Li Qingzhao from a gender (性别, xing bie) perspective. My proposition is that Li's poems, or better, the tradition, translation and interpretation of those poems, are based on a gender-driven construction of time-bound images of femininity and masculinity. "Gender" is an analytical concept that in women studies takes a position against "sex", however, in Chinese this is less discriminating. Gender distinguishes between biological differences between men and women, and on the other hand, socio-cultural and psychological aspects of masculinity and femininity. With this instrument of gender, Li Qingzhao's life and work will be studied in her socio-cultural environment because, after all, gender is a cultural mechanism that is determined by time and location while ethnographic perspectives on China are contextualized in comparison with general anthropological debates [1]. Li lived at the time of the Chinese Song Dynasty (宋朝, 960-1279 CE), where Neo-Confucianism was the ruling moral system.

A sketch of that period and the socio-cultural system is given here to provide the reader with a framework.

From the perspective of gender her life and poetry is analyzed to find symbolic representations of relationships. Li is initially in a relationship with her family and later with her husband according to the values of that time: the woman as an inferior being, more or less locked in her house, in a patriarchal upper-class ambiance. Later when she is restrained in a war situation, her husband dies. On the basis of some of her poems I will see which position Li claims in all these relations from the gender perspective.



Figure 1: Statue of Li Qingzhao in her pavilion in Jinan.

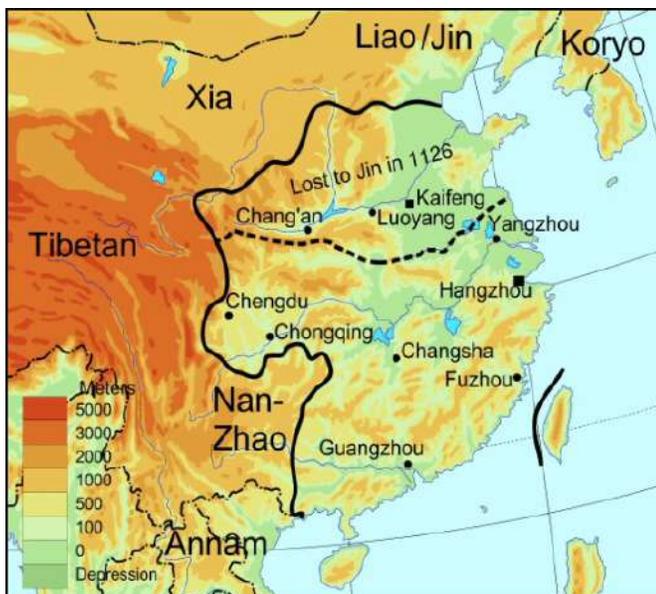


Figure 2: China in Sung times.

Biography of Li Qingzhao

Early period, “a beautiful youth”

Li Qingzhao was born in 1084 CE, in the city of Jinan (Shandong Province). She was the oldest child of a literary family [2]. Her father, Li Gefei (李格非, 1041-1106), a student of the eminent poet Su Shi (苏轼) or Su Dongpo (苏东坡) [3], was a scholar and writer. He wrote a book about famous Chinese gardens [4]. Her mother’s family was politically active and also showed literary talent. From 1086-1093 her father was a teacher at the Imperial Academy (国子监, Guozijian, litt. “School for the sons of the state”) in Kaifeng (开封), also called Dongjing (东京) or Bianjing 汴京, the thriving economic centre of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127CE), and hence he belonged to the “literati” (see further). In those seven years, Li studied classical Chinese literature and practiced writing under her father’s mentorship. With the exception of a short break in 1094, when her father got a position in provincial government, Li received such home education until her fifteenth year. She enjoyed a life of cultural sophistication and prosperity. As a teenager, she wrote two poems in the style of the famous Song poet Zhang Lei (張耒, 1054-1114), criticizing the corruption and rebellion before the restoration of the Northern Song, thus gaining some skills [5,6]. In those days, however, the rules of the philosopher Confucius (孔子, see below) prevailed and the ruling opinion was that a woman should not be allowed to participate independently in social activities [7]. After her marriage in 1101, her talent began to grow and she could come out with her work, initially under the name of her husband.

She married Zhao Mingcheng (赵明诚, 1081-1129) a writer and scholar-official, and the marriage inspired her to continue writing poetry. He would become an important person in her life. He was the third son of Zhao Tingzhi (赵挺之) who then lectured at the Imperial Academy. He became prime minister during the reign of the Song Emperor Hui Zong (宋徽宗, ruling period 1100-1125).

Adult woman, poet in “a time of chaos”

In 1102 a power struggle broke out at the imperial court and her father was dismissed for five years. Li tried to rescue her father as an “act inspired by love”, here meant as “filial piety” (孝道, Xiaodao), one of the Confucian values: the love from children for their father. She wrote a poem in the form of a petition to her respected father-in-law, Zhao Tingzhi. He ascended to be a deputy prime minister, but soon became involved in a political struggle. When Zhao eventually became the prime minister, Li once again wrote a poem to him, asking for attention from the dangers of such a high public position. In the midst of this political unrest, Zhao Mingcheng accepted a public service but this official career ended abruptly four years later when his father died in 1107. What Li had already expressed in her poetry happened: the Zhao family fell into disgrace [8].

In order to avoid prosecution, Li and her husband moved back to her native district Zhangqiu (章丘), Jinan Province, and stayed there for ten years. During this life in a state of seclusion, Li enjoyed the nuptial life. She and her husband had a common hobby, namely collecting and studying Chinese antiquarian artefacts, writing poems (though in a certain competition). During that time, they lived a relatively sober and sparing life. At that time, Zhao wrote his magnum opus: the “Records on Metal and Stone” (金石录, Jin Shi Lu, ca. 1135), regarding so-called “epigraphy” (金石学, jin shi xue) i.e. engravings in Chinese antiquarian material specifically involving ritual bronzes and stone stelae. This is a 30-volume catalogue of over 2,000 bronze and stone objects of ancient Shang and Zhou dynasties, by rubbings [9]. Remarkably, Li wrote the “Epilogue” of this work (后序, Houxu) and the piece is an important source of biographical information about herself [10-13]. Here she broke Confucius’ rule and published under her own name, as a woman, and by doing so, could gain more fame than her husband. She also owed him respect, not only because he was a morally good person (君子, junzi) the Confucian ideal of a “man of virtue”.

At the end of her “Epilogue to Records on Metal and Stone” (金石录后序, Jin shi lu hou xu), Li offers a meditation on the fate of the unique collection of books, manuscripts and inscriptions that she and her husband had amassed. This precious hoard was lost bit by bit in the heart-breaking chaos of war [14]. A quote:

然有有必有无，有聚必有散，乃理之常。人亡弓，人得之，又胡足道。

所以区区记其终始者，亦欲为后世好古博雅者之戒云。

When there is possession, there must be loss of possession; when there is gathering together, there must be a scattering - this is the constant principle in things.

Someone loses a bow; another person finds a bow; what’s so special in that?

The reason why I have recorded this story from beginning to end in such detail is to let it serve as a warning for scholars and collectors in later generations [15].

When the Jurchen armies fought the Northern Song state in 1126, and Kaifeng fell, the family fell victim of the so-called Jingkang Riots (靖康事变, Jingkang shi bian), (Figure 2). The soldiers recklessly demolished the art collections of Li and Zhao, and thus they lost their material goods. Eventually Li and her husband fled southwards, across the Yangtze River. They lived in Donghai (东海, Jiangsu Province) for two years. When the Northern Song Administration moved to the southern city of Hangzhou (杭州), on the beautiful West Lake (西湖, Xihu) in Zhejiang Province, they followed, and Zhao found a position again. Li wrote a letter against the government and accused politicians of cowardice to

flee to the south without resignation. This is a clear opposition to the Confucian code which demands respect for the prince and government.

In 1129 her husband died suddenly, and then she was 46 years old and childless. There is a tradition that Li Qingzhao married again in about 1132, and that her husband, a military man, named Zhang Ruzhou (張汝舟) abused her physically and mentally (“domestic violence” 家庭暴力, Jia ting bao li) so that she sued him for divorce. Though the suit was successful, the law required that any woman who remarried and sued her husband must be confined, and as a consequence Li was forced to spend some time in prison. Though lonely and bereft, Li continued to write poetry until her death. She is known to have been writing poetry for the court in the 1140s, and the last official record of her is dated 1149. She received much criticism because of her second marriage as it was not-done according to the rules of Confucius. Here she shows how independent she dared to act against the patriarchal opinion on women of the Middle Period [16].

A Period of “Silence and Fame”

Li fled after many wanderings to Jinhua (Zhejiang Province), where she died in c.1155, almost 20 years later, at the age of 71. An explanation for that silence cannot be given easily, but will be composed in the following text. I first consider the Chinese education program and moral laws at the time of the Song Period.

The Imperial Examination System

Li’s youth was characterized by long periods of (home) studies, where she was coached by her father. He came from a family of so-called “literati” (士大夫, shi da fu). In Song China there existed a discrepancy between the sexes in the respect of education: 40 percent of Chinese men and only 10 percent of Chinese women could read. “Literacy” meant that it was possible to read the Five canonical or classical texts (五经, Wu Jing); namely the Classic of Poetry (诗经, Shijing); Book of Documents (尚书, Shangshu); Book of Rites (礼记, Liji); Book of Changes (易经, Yi Jing); Spring and Autumn Annals (春秋, Chunqiu); and the Four Books (四书, Sishu); namely Great Learning (大学, Daxue); Doctrine of the Mean (中庸, Zhongyong); Analects (论语, Lunyu); and the Mencius (孟子, Mengzi).

In addition, a broad general education in science and arts such as poetry, calligraphy, music and painting was required. Government officials, scholars and artists could climb through the state exams to the (Imperial) Court or were connected to an Imperial Academy. Outside there were the “free artists” who were less known, although their achievements could be excellent and could still be in the formal codex. Access to state exams was also open to women in the Song Reformation (“New Policy” 新法, xinfafa) and later in the Qingli Reforms (庆历新政, Qingli xin zheng) but only a

minority participated. Li herself was also educated with the support of her father and husband, to the level of jinshi (进士), the highest degree, comparable to the doctor's title. The ultimate goal of the program was to train people for state administration. Private schools were also set up to prepare many pupils far beyond the capital, and a strong social mobility, mostly for men, was the consequence [17]. The system was in operation from 581 to 1911 [18-21].

The Doctrine of Confucius

In pre-Song time, the rules of Confucius gave shape to society. Confucius's students wrote his ideas in the Analects around 200 years later [22,23]. The essence of his message is that a human being is basically morally good. By discipline and study of the mentioned Classical Books the disciple finds the Way (道, Tao). In this concept the good man is the "nobleman or lord", see above. The relationship of son-father (regarding love and obedience) is a model for all interpersonal relationships; in short, in a gender perspective a one-sided set of moral and intellectual rules that governs society as a whole. Confucianism became the most intrusive teaching to crush the faith in women as equivalent human beings. Confucius himself did not inherently denigrate women, although he placed them at the bottom of the patriarchal family structure. But over the centuries the assumption grew that men and women with their social place and behavior were very different, based on Confucian hierarchical regulations. The role of the woman derived from them is based on the position of the husband, husband-son, official and ultimately the emperor himself. The women's place is at home: to direct the domestic staff, to get and raise children and to provide the ancestral worshippers (on the house altar and in the family temple, being the male line) [24,25].

Next to this rational concept, the more irrational model of Daoism existed of yin-yang (阴阳), for the equilibrium in the universe, consisting of resp. male and female relationships during the Song. Ensuing these female-unfriendly ideas, even more serious is the practice of "foot binding" (缠足, Chan Zu), as it placed the woman even more pronounced in a low position, because she could not walk well and became home bound [26]. This meant a limited role in public life, she was held subordinate, although that would be good for the status of the clan and her "beauty" (美女, Mei nu). Actually, she was dependent and completely subordinate to the man. She must respect the husband, and also the (clan) parents, the male acquaintances, her own sons; even after the partner's death, she should not remarry. "Better I could have committed suicide by hunger," said Cheng Yi (程颐, 1033-1107), the philosopher who was one of the "Six Masters" in the Sages' doctrine [27,28].

In the Song Dynasty there has been an array of ideologies that influenced Chinese society, apart from Confucianism, such as Folk religion, Buddhism, and Taoism (see further). Foreign contacts were the reason for reconsidering the old Confucian

values. Often, it was in response to the "strange" (xenophobia) [29]. From a gender perspective, interesting experiments are seen during that time, especially around the role of women.

The revival of Confucian values has been termed by Jesuit missionaries later as "Neo-Confucianism" (宋明理学, Song-Ming lixue). In fact, much of the above remains intact. The place of the woman was within the walls and gates of courts, to serve her husband, to please him and to give birth to sons, however there seems to be more room for learning, independent thinking and performing in public. This is evidenced, among other things, from books written for women. Women's unchanged roles though became obvious in titles such as "How do I serve my husband?" After marriage, her position was as in "the government officer in front of the ruler," her washing and eating as in the "father-child" role. Buddhist thought brought in the transcendental element, but also self-study and the service to society (social tasks) [30]. It was also a time that many educational institutions (e.g. schools, monasteries) were created. All this offered opportunities to reconsider life style principles. Women in these changing times sought with ruse to improve their position [31,32], however, not many Song reports exist about women, other than "Record of the listener" (意见志, Yijian Zhi) of Hong Mai (洪迈, 1123-1202), because he "loved the strange".

(Semi) Religious Elements

In China there is an old gender concept in which man-woman aspects are shaped in the Taoist symbolism of yin-yang. The dark side is then the passive, female yin; the light side the active, aggressive, male yang. One principle is not necessarily subordinate to the other but it is more about complementary roles. Within the doctrine of Taoism, women can seek spiritual fulfilment beyond their domestic duties. Some attended monasteries; others gathered with men to discuss philosophy and religion, a few became Taoist masters. Li later joined this romantic ideal of scholars (men, but also women) in China, fitting in the doctrine of Daoism as Despeux wrote: "Daoism offers a social alternative for women in that it opens paths to pursue their own goals as independent agents, be it the practice of self-cultivation, service as mediums, nuns, or priests, or the attainment of immortality" [33-38].

In ancient China the highest goddess in the bureaucratic Chinese pantheon was Queen-Mother of the West (西王母, Xi Wangmu). This also describes aspects of yin-yang relationships, respectively empathy, immortality and a force that has the power to disrupt the cosmic harmony. The (male) fear that a woman could bring a chaos, and steal away (sexual) potency, was an obstacle for women who wanted to enter men's roles. "When the hen crows, the house go to ruins" (当母鸡乌鸦, 房子去废墟) was the expression for that sentiment in the "New Book of Tang" (新唐书 Xin Tang shu) [39].

In Buddhism, Guanyin (观世音) was the most widely-honoured and most popular Buddhist bodhisattva in China. This is also the country where she, according to her tradition, walked a long time in her perfect, tangible body. She is often dressed in a white robe and is also called “the bodhisattva who sees everything on the world” or called “Goddess of Grace”. One believes that she shows herself among the people, in different ways, somewhat similar to the merciful Christian figure of Saint Mary. This Guanyin, as a role-model, gave women a chance of empowerment. They went on a pilgrimage to Buddhist temples, retreated into nunneries, sometimes gave public lectures, and led temple groups. Chinese Buddhism was at its peak during the reign of the Tang Empress Wu Zetian (武则天, 624-705 CE). When she was a senior figure at court, she attracted the “North Gate Scholars” (北門學士 *Bei men xue shi*) to produce the “Biographies of Notable Women” (列女傳 *Lie nü chuan*). “Let a hundred flowers bloom” was her invitation for capable women to participate in reigning; also the “Twelve Suggestions” written around 675 with the introduction of the “Thoughts of Laozi” (老子, c. 600 BCE); and the mourning period for a mother should be three years [40]. During Wu’s government, women enjoyed a relatively high status and freedom. Women soldiers on horseback, like Hua Mulan (花木兰), as administrators or as dancers, and musicians were well-known images. Poems and stories, such as those of female poet Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机, 844-869), also show the almost modern openness of the period. To that glorious time, Li Qingzhao has flash-backs in her verses repeatedly.

As a consequence of the Song-Jin Wars (宋金战争 *Song-Jin Zhan zheng*), the influence of the invading Mongols, a steppe people, became stronger, until Genghis Khan (成吉思汗, reign 1206-1227) founded the Yuan dynasty (元朝, 1279-1338) and this rude ethnic influence reduced the position of women even more [1,41]. Ideas about the husband’s faith and worship have potentially strengthened the binding of the feet [42], furthermore the sale of unwanted daughters and forced marriages became commonplace as “women trafficking” (妇女贩运, *Fu nü fan yun*) with the Tartar princes.

Thus the position of women during the Song Dynasty remained inferior to the status of men. However, they also gained social and legal rights. In this way they managed their households and could start business companies. They received a dowry and legal rights when it came to acquiring real estate, paying for inheritance rights and they received training for their children. The image was that of a rich and diverse culture after all; the Song “Reforms” showed various innovations: introduction of paper money, tax monopoly systems for land and salt, land tax, a good state administration with salaries for civil servants, funds for their education at state academies, ports and a fleet, including a big army, also social care for sick people, schools, temples and a

postal company. Meanwhile trade with surrounding countries and sciences flourished.

In the field of labour in China, gender differences have traditionally been visible. For example, women’s work was especially in the silk industry. In the Zhou period (1100-770 BCE), the saying was “Men plow and women weave” (男耕女织, *Nan geng nü zhi*). The legend tells that Xi Lingshi (西陵氏, c. 2600 BCE) began the cultivation of silkworms and invented the loom. During the expansion of the trade in Song times, many women were recruited to work in cotton and silk mills as spinners and weavers. Many of these workers were girls who left their poor rural homes to live in dormitories. They tried to improve their working conditions and with an independent income, some women managed to lead a more self-sufficient life. Their “marriage-resistance movement” in South China was a significant element in their emancipation (解放, *Jiefang*): “complaining as rhetoric”.

We already saw how Li Qingzhao exploited these opportunities as a woman: she studied, published and spoke out in the political arena. She also regarded her husband more as a “partner” for research, writing and nature tours than a superior being enforcing respect. Later she complains that her husband is fanatic about the artefacts, proceeds with buying, and collecting, thus creating a risk for their subsistence. Now about her work: How can we interpret gender-specific aspects in her poetry work?

The Works of Li Qingzhao; The Ci-Poem

China has a long and rich literary tradition, a major part of which includes many forms of poetry [20,43-46].

Works

Li produced six bundles of poetry besides seven books with essays. As Li Yi’an or short Yi’an ca. 1141 she published the “Book about poems and prose” (漱玉詞, *Shu yu ci*). Most of her work has been lost, only about 50 ci-poems (and a small number of so-called shi-poems) are left. She was also active as literary critic in her time, that is, she examined and assessed the ci-poems of her contemporaries. Her control of the metric rules of this poetry form was such that she could write a critical book, the “Dissertation on lyrics” (词论, *Ci Lun*) one of the first theoretical views on ci-poetry [2]. The poems have been widely translated in Western languages [43,44,46-49].

Form features of ci-poetry

Without going deep into the linguistic aspect, I mention a few characteristics of the ci-poetry here. It is a form that can be seen as a reaction to the very rigid style of the Tang Dynasty poetry (618-907 CE), with a fixed line length as the most common style. The Song Dynasty creates a new variant with a fixed rhythm/pace, fixed tone, and variable line length, based on popular tunes. About

800 of these melodies are known, each linked to a particular title (tune). Originally, the verses were written to be sung on a melody. There is no relation between the title and the thematic content, and it is common for multiple ci to share the same title. The title refers to their shared rhythmic and tonal patterns. Some ci have subtitles, but for practical reasons a ci-poem is listed under its title by its first line. There are two distinct schools: the female, euphemistic and the male heroic style. Li has used the euphemistic form and has articulated some of her own themes. She showed a great maturity and eloquence in her style, so her poems were to be appreciated later and categorized as the “Yi’an” style.

Content

Initially, Li wrote about love and her happy martial existence. Later she described also her sorrow when she was separated from her beloved partner when he had to go on a faraway voyage. At that moment she compared her loneliness with the fall of the flower leaves at the end of spring.

Were these early works characterized by carefree vitality, the pieces she wrote after her husband’s death and during her exile during the war were characterized by a gloomy mourning tone [50]. Li emerges as a charming but somewhat cuddly woman who was aware of her beauty. She not only compared herself with a flower, but also used the beauty of a flower like a metaphor to compete, to attract a man’s attention. Because her husband was often on missions, she felt loneliness. Consequently, her works of this age contain expressions of melancholy. In such texts, Li often refers to late spring and expresses sadness that her husband is unable to share the beautiful season with her. Thus, one sees that the beautiful nature in her poetry becomes a symbol of her own beauty, which awaits appreciation, but just like the flowers after maturation, sadly, is subject to aging and decay [51].

Other Poets in The Ci-Style

As mentioned, ci-verses often express feelings of desire for a (morally) good persona, but the male poets of this form such as Xin Qiji (辛弃疾, 1140-1207) and Lu You (陆游, 1125-1209) wrote complex poems based on their own situation, their dreams or (military) struggles of their society. The most famous poet of this time, Su Shi (see above), wrote beautiful poems about human themes like marital arts and patriotism, but also in a sophisticated style about picturesque landscapes. Together with three other poets he loved four flowers, hence the “four favorites” (四愛, shi-ai), and he left a rich oeuvre [44,47]. Some women then were active in this genre e.g. Madame Huarui (花蕊夫人, c. 940-976) and Zhu Shuzhen (朱淑真, c. 1135-1180). Zhu had a bad marriage, committed suicide and her work was (partially) burned. In her handed-down series of “Heart-breaking Verses”, she copied Li [12,52,53].

Symbolism: The Language of Flowers

The content of Li’s ci-poetry often deals with nature as a theme. Li had this interest in plants and gardens from her father Li Gefei, who wrote an essay about the famous gardens of the city of Luoyang (洛阳) [4]. She regularly mentions the subject of flowers in her poems because she loves flowers, and thus symbolically expresses her feelings [54]. Symbolic meanings play an important role in the life of the Chinese. The nature of their written and spoken language has contributed to the rich vocabulary of symbolism. The great number of homophones in Chinese language means that many words with different meanings are linked to each other by an equal verdict. Symbolic meanings form an intrinsic part of writing, visual art, and culture, and are readily understood by the Chinese [55-58].

In Chinese decorative arts, flowers, fruit and trees represent representations for different aspects of life. Knowing the symbolic meaning of an image makes it possible to understand the hidden message. Flowers are an indelible part of the collective consciousness of Chinese people, and whether or not arranged in gardens or pots, they speak a language that can convey positive (and sometimes negative) messages, which phenomenon plays an important role in daily life [59-63]. Traditional Chinese art and many habits are soaked with symbolism that relates to flowers. Many ancient paintings depict plum blossom and peony, but also orchid, chrysanthemum, bamboo, water lily, rose, azalea, camellia, osmanthus, and daffodils all having strong associations in Chinese culture and a function on various occasions [55,64].

Related flowers are known for the four seasons, for instance Spring: iris, magnolia; Summer: peony, lotus flower; Autumn: chrysanthemum; Winter: plum, bamboo. Chinese culture also has a number of flowers that represent the months: second lunar month: apricot blossom, third lunar month: peach blossom, sixth lunar month: lotus flower, eighth lunar month: cinnamon blossom, ninth lunar month: chrysanthemum. Some flower colors have a special meaning: pink and red: celebration, happiness and success, but white: death and spirits. Through her position in the elite world of her days, Li is familiar with all these meanings and applies the knowledge in her poems. Does this make her a typical female poet?

The Gender Aspect in Li’s Work

“Gender Studies” as a subject in China has emerged as a science of culture and other disciplines only after 1990 [20]. Emancipation gives the women a voice that is often different from that of the man. The feminist science practice covers many areas and “women (writers) in poetry” (女诗人, nü-shiren) is a good field for researching gender elements (Idema, personal comm.). Li Qingzhao can be studied as one of the great women of Chinese history. To hear her unique voice and have better access to her poetry for such studies, modern translations should be made available.

The female poet Li is a classic Chinese figure, with different feminine, sentimental and lyrical features. Other given names are “the grand lady of the boudoir” (lady of the chamber), and “talented woman” [65]. She is a stereotypical figure, sometimes trivialized but also canonized for many centuries as the “poet of aesthetics”. Too often, the male opinions about femininity, with the expectations of how women should write, especially in the reappraisal of the Confucian doctrine (see above) dominate [66].

These opinions were based on old prescriptive manuals such as “Admonitions for Women” (女誡, Nü jie) written by the female historian Ban Zhao (班昭, 45-ca.116 CE). Her book (actually said to be written by her father, *sic!*) is an important manual that recommends women in seven chapters to be subordinate with characteristics of “Humbleness (卑弱, Beiruo); the style to govern with “Dignity and Servitude” (夫婦, Fufu); Respect and Caution (敬慎, Jing shen); finally, Virtue, speech; appearance, and work fit for a woman (妇行, Fu xing)”. She became one of China’s most famous female writers (Ban). Such a directive for ladies of the upper-class was the “Admonitions of the Court Instructress” (女史箴图, Nü shi zhen tu) a Chinese narrative painting on silk, traditionally attributed to Gu Kai zhi (顧愷之, ca.345-ca. 406 CE). Poet Zhang Hua (張華, 232-300 CE) wrote the text at the request of Empress Jia (賈后) to formulate an “Etiquette” (礼仪, Liyi) for her court ladies. In the British Museum the version of the Song Dynasty is on display [67]. The status of women in the Song Dynasty was different from the previous Tang [68]. During the Song, their status weakened in the field of politics, and they were seen less in the public arena. The Neo-Confucians at that time believed, on the one hand, that women did not have to remarry, and then too began the binding of the feet (see above). On the other hand, the legal rules for women to own real estate were then improved, and older women were powerful figures in their families (circle of kinship). Girls left their family home after marrying and when they got a son, mothers and grandmothers could get a respected place there. By their sons, they were later honored as ancestors. The essence was that the respect of a human being for God, the love of the son for his father, and the subjection of the woman were aligned with her husband [65,69].

The female poet had to be sensitive and if she wanted to express that in a sensual way, she could easily be held guilty for sentimentality. She should certainly not change the (male) way of thinking, which was experienced as threatening. Female language artists themselves could not even write what their opinion was about sexuality and gender, after all, only fixed (male) notions about feminine beauty, sophistication and passivity, elegance and tender feelings were common [70,71]. Li therefore uses the flower symbolism to express herself. A critic said, “Perhaps by doing this she just stepped in “trap” of the male way of thinking; flowers and perfumes brought her comfort in her impotence. But we respect her when we see her: a woman writing melodies on the moon, the

flowers and the flowering trees, spring, rain, snow, and sadness about the departure of the lover” [72].

Li became the first in the tradition of female poems to be such a prototypical person. She formed an example by combining her literary and authentic skills and her gender with a sustained, self-conscious style [32,73-75]. By analyzing women like Li on aspects of activity, bodily presentation and sensuality, eroticism, social class, family values and sense of politics, the field of gender studies (in China and elsewhere, from then on) can be greatly enriched [76-80].

Emotions

In Li’s poems we find a range of emotions in her tormented existence [6,81-82]. She is a woman who in many situations in her life modulates a reaction of her sentiment to her work.

In her youth and the early days of her marriage it is happiness that prevails. About (unwanted?) childlessness we do not have a word from her, more fun is in the happiness of shared work with her beloved husband in collecting, analyzing and describing artefacts and long walks in nature [2], but his fanaticism in the hobby annoys her. If her husband is absent during his many travels and her kin members get involved in a politically stressed situation, feelings of loneliness and being hurt are taking over. The literary critics speak of “boudoir grief” (闺房悲伤, gui fang bei shang) [83], but it seems a male, denigrating term for real, though time-bound, female agility. The tension of the Jin-Song skirmishes and the need to flee in addition give very feasible feelings of fear. After losing her house and valuable collection of artefacts as a result of theft and fire, one reads about feelings of frustration that become manifest. After all these years together, her husband suddenly died, and she chooses the wrong guy as a partner. They separate after a short while, and she spirals down into a psychological depression [84]. From medical literature, women seem to be more sensitive to this reaction, or they are more likely to vent it. They are probably more sensitive to the demands that society makes on them, in “caring as a natural task” and meeting all sorts of other requirements. In many publications, attention is given to this problem in China [85-90], but also compared to the West [91].

A physician of Chinese antiquity addressed in such cases the following issues: energy balance (yin-yang and 气, qi); the five elements (五行, wuxing), the five organs (脏腑, zangfu,) and the meridian system (经络, jingluo). In addition, medical attention was paid to palpation of the pulse (切诊, qiezhen), inspection of the tongue (舌, she), the eight principle syndromes (八纲, bagang), auscultation (听诊, tingzhen), and “asking questions” [92,93].

The information provided about Li’s health is limited. We read her poems, and from these arises an image that looks like this with modern western terms: Loss of interest in things that were important before, or apathy (“I’m walking back and forth across

the balcony; I dislike taking care of myself, or I lack energy getting up”), weight loss (“I’m as thin as a chrysanthemum”), insomnia (“at midnight I’m sitting up straight”) and loss of all hope (“I’ve been invoking Heaven in vain with my questions), and a void (“I stare over the endless grasslands, the road remains empty”). The extreme anxiety sensations resemble a “nervous breakdown” with tense muscles, damp hands, tremor, dizziness or stomach ache (“I drink only herbal tea”). For her excitement she uses many a cup of wine, it appears in the verses, but let’s not forget it was an accepted practice of inspiration for poets, compare the notorious drinker Li Bai (李白, 701-762 CE) [37]. Her fear gives the feeling of more dependence, fear in the public space and in crowds (“I hid at the party”) [5].

Does Li feel that someone is watching her or commenting her lifestyle (the critics)? Then the question is whether these feelings are unreal or not. When social pressure is hurting, social interaction is also rejected: Li started to become isolated, especially from beloved friends and family. It is desirable that she is alone after all the problems, in order to recover from the stressful situation. First she hides away with her husband to a quiet place, away from the strain on her psyche; she resumes herself, but isolation (from her kinship) that lasts too long can give conflicts. After his death and the second, non-sanctioned marriage, she flees. Beyond that episode, we know almost nothing about her, while she’s roaming around. Li’s isolation is partly interpreted as the existence of a “hermit” (隐士, Yinshi), the spiritual ideal of that time for the (aged) scholar; it is a suggestive hypothesis and certainly gives her a special glory [65]. The possibility of a war syndrome (post-traumatic stress syndrome, PTSS, 创伤后压力症候群, Chuangshang hou yali zheng hou qun) would be the diagnosis for the whole gamut of psychological problems that burdened Li [94,95].

As the therapy of choice (in the atmosphere of women-friendly Traditional Chinese Medicine), for Li’s condition could be considered: phytotherapy (elixirs of herbs), acupuncture, massage, recreation in nature, meditation, and divination). She rests a lot and retires from social activities, uses various teas, keeps a diet, and burns incense [2]. If this approach is ineffective, we see after the episode of mental regression that the vulnerable, brilliant poet loses control of herself and disappears in a country torn by war. All these aspects, although implicit, can be read in Li’s poems.

Some Examples of Li’s Verses for Illustration

Tune: “Like a dream” (no. 49, ref. Wang J, 1989)

A memory

如梦令

常记溪亭日暮，沉醉不知归路。

兴尽晚回舟，误入藕花深处。

争渡，争渡，惊起一滩鸥鹭。

It was a day at ‘Brookside pavilion’

That I often fondly remember,

When, flushed with wine,

We could hardly tear ourselves away

From the beautiful view at sunset.

Returning late by boat

When we had enjoyed our fill,

We got lost and strayed

To where the clustered lotuses

Were at their thickest.

Pushing and thrashing,

Pushing and thrashing as best we could,

We scared into flight

A shore full of dozing egrets and gulls.

Notes to “Like a dream”

In this poem we see elements of Nature: the sunset, river, flowers (lotuses), birds (egrets and gulls), and the sky. We see the colors right away.

One notices places like the pavilion and home: locations that are associated with friendship, parties and fun, happiness, security, and stability, “a safe haven.” That is what a human being longs for, vulnerable women more than men in war-torn Song times.

Awareness of the Way (see above) is seen in the metaphor of the river, the endless free-flowing water. The freedom of the boat-trip that ends in the “Chaos” (乱世, luan shi) or mortal life of Buddhism symbolized by the twisted lotuses. The lotus has the white and pure flower in top, but the roots are seated deep in the dark mud; well-chosen opposites. A boat is a metaphor for a marriage. A small boat for a lonely trip, as Li has to make alone. Hard work is needed to escape from chaos along the way of Morality (德 de) as in 道德经 ‘Dao de Ching’ or the ‘Eightfold-Path’ of Buddhism (八正道 Ba zheng dao), and I am aware that the idea of “physical work” is not the most fitting word, for her class and gender, but mental exercises are meant here.

The birds are on the edge of the water, a spot where dark spirits are active; they are frightened by the noisy people and fly to the sky. This means in a tropic sense also Heaven (天堂, Tian tang), the ultimate place for human beings, filled with peace and rest, after the cycle of life and death or Reincarnation (转生 zhuan sheng) has ended into Nirvana (醍醐, tihu).

The title name ‘dream’ could refer to the wonderful story of the ‘Dream of the butterfly’, by the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi (莊子, c. 369 - c. 286 B.C.), about the passage of time/place and identity, and seeing life as an delusion.

Tune: “Pure serene music” (no. 77, ref. Wang J, 1989)

清平乐·年年雪里，
常插梅花醉。
授尽梅花无好意，
赢得满衣清泪。
今年海角天涯，
萧萧两鬓生华。
看取晚来风势，
故应难看梅花。

Year after year in the snow I used to get drunk
While picking plum blossoms to put in my hair.
Now twisting all the fallen petals to no good purpose,
I only drench my clothes with pure tears.
This year at the end of the earth,
My hair at the temples is streaked with grey.
Now that the evening wind is growing in force,
I shall be hard put to it to enjoy plum blossoms.
The hair at my sleep has become grey.

Notes to “Pure serene music”

In this poem again we see at the first level Nature. It is winter with the white snow, the pink plum blossom (2x), and strong wind. The winter of life comes with grey hair (aging). Plum blossom is one of the four “friends” with features of the Confucian “man of virtue”; the male content in that expression and ‘growing force of the wind’ add up in masculinity.

In the second level we feel a range of emotions: tears, crying, sadness, with the contrasting longing for Life and enjoying it. The use of alcohol may enhance or dim all emotions.

At the third level we find philosophical elements such as an empty space (end of the earth), transiency, the passing of time, and remembrances.

Where is Serenity or Peace? It is in the rhythm and love of Nature, in intoxication, moreover in trying again to live (a virtuous

life), learning to accept all the grievances. It is also in Hope: I’ll dare to put the blossom in my (grey) hair again, for my beloved one.

Tune: “Red Lips” (no. 33, ref. Wang J, 1989)

Dreams in the women’s residence

点绛唇·闺思

寂寞深闺，柔肠一寸愁千缕。

惜春春去，几点催花雨。

倚遍阑干，只是无情绪！

人何处？连天衰草，望断归来路。

Fine rain urges the falling petals,

And soon spring will be fled

Love it as I may.

A twinge in my aching heart,

And I am overwhelmed by a thousand sad thoughts,

Secluded in my lonely chamber.

Impossible to get out of this mood of depression,

Moving from one end of the balustrade to the other.

Where is he, the one dear to my heart?

The road by which he may return I cannot glimpse,

Withered grass stretching to the farthest skies.

Notes to “Red Lips”

In this poem three layers can be described. First. In the title we are aware of the red lips, full of sensuality, the beauty, the lust of physical and emotional contact between the lovers; it combines femininity with “clouds with fine rain” (翻云覆雨 fan yun fu yu) the expression for “making love”. Second, however, the woman feels caught in her home, in her own secluded room. This should be a place of comfort, happiness and security, but it is not. She is full of sad emotions. The question is why? What happened? Third. The several opposites, with supernatural aspects, are put forward: passing spring (youth, spring of life, love) and falling flowers are symbols for the ethereal life. The balustrade is a border of the house, a liminal gap, and the wider world, a transition where the spirits can be active. The mind is bursting with haunting thoughts. Where is the beloved partner? She then thinks of a huge space (referring to the open fields of the yellowish grass of the steppes of Mongolia under the blue sky where the beloved partner was sent by the Emperor) reaching as far as the horizon. In Daoism this void is called Emptiness (虛, xu) and Nothingness (无, wu) [96].

The awareness of the woman issue was low in Song time.

Here the lost love, loneliness in a man-made setting is important, besides the poems come to us from a male censorship over ages [97]. In the translation of Chinese poetry, we should not forget ‘Yi Jing’ (意境) meaning the “colorful painting of the scene and entourage” or artistic setting as Yanfang Tang, in line with David Hawkes explained. Understanding a poem’s meanings is enhanced by integration of emotion, and the scene with a reflective and meditative procedure [98]. These three poems alone under the umbrellas of “Song China, upper class, emotions, nature, femininity,” fuel Li’s poetry, but do not define limits to her work. And though Li and we are very different from one another, split by time and culture, still we share deep connections to one another and to place.

Conclusions

Literary talent (天才, Tiancai) that encompasses both lyrical, intellectual gift and analytical insight can be seen in both women and men, but in ancient China it was said that for women the saying “lack of literary talent is a virtue” (女子无才便是德, Nü zi wu cai bian shi de) held true. This woman-unfriendly vision shows that the literary science was a domain of men. In spite of that, works written by gifted women play an essential role throughout Chinese history. There were a number of female writers in the pre-modern era, respected by the literati of their days, probably because they valued the expressive style of typical feminine subjects such as romance, marriage and family, as well as gender roles [17,99].

We followed Li on her curriculum from an upper-class position, with good education, to her marital status and active writer’s existence. But then problems amount: in the family, political issues form a controversy, the Song empire is seriously threatened and falls apart, Li and her husband must flee and lose material (and immaterial) property. Her husband dies and she remarries. The Neo-Confucian “puritans” therefore condemn her. Her female desires are displaced by work, dreams and alcohol. She suffers psychologically in a severe way. In her poems she expresses herself: “Flowers speak a language”. That makes her role of a woman in this transition from loyal, married woman to solitary artist clearly manifest.

She is then tired and sick. Processing of sadness and mourning is instantly necessary [91,100,101]. In the twenty years that follow, the broken woman does not manage to find the connection with herself again, and cannot escape from a psychological suffering, which resembles the reliving of a war trauma. It remains open whether her literary production stops. There are no Posthumous Confessions left from Li’s hand. It is clear that a lot of material has been lost. Certainly, the process of canonization began soon after that period. The delivered material is read by many scholars and interested people, studied throughout the ages. The well-organized education system with national examinations contributing to rise to public functions smoothly included Li’s work as “subject matter”

in the literacy program. Some authors write “hagiographies” about this great woman, however, I have tried to critically judge from various angles [7]. Her poetry is known because she emphasizes personal emotional experiences, more than her (male) colleagues. Her poetic works thus reflects the drama-element of her life. Li used simple, informal words and expressions to present the emotions of a “real” woman. Her critics said she writes with warmth, vividness and elegance [11,102].

The Song Dynasty ci-texts consist of some of the most accessible and beautiful poems in the Chinese literary tradition. These poems usually refer to emotions rooted in human experiences, which makes them very apt of touching modern humans too. This treasure is not just finished, because there is patience and some knowledge of ancient Chinese culture needed to understand. In this article, an attempt has been made to dedicate the reader and to give him / her the pleasure. The question is whether Li was a good female author? We follow a model from gender literature tracing the historical and psychological paths that have drawn contemporary women poets toward the use of traditional formal structure, despite a lack of critical and theoretical attention [41,103], and related to work [104].

Strong points are: They wrote about two major social problems: war and the minor role of women. Literary, innovative, she was to focus on the position of women and to connect with abstract nature symbolism. Her poems have been cast into a delicate language full of ordinary words and playful repetitions. She was actively building an oeuvre (now called career motivation), wrote an autobiography and criticized the work of others. She joined her husband in a writing project (about art), and finally in her political views, she showed “male” qualities as ratio and strength.

Weakest points are: She admittedly belonged to the ci-poets, but it was not a physical group and she did not lead. Her poetry is in form, composition and style quite traditional, she follows male poets (there are also few female figures doing that, but copying is a Chinese habit, not fraud). She is a loner, the way as she joins the existing socially desired position. She is not the type that, with her conviction, entails the barricade to control male power, against the binding of feet, women’s labor or exploitation [105].

With this arbitrary classification, we can still find that according to modern standards Li would be among the laudable female authors. More research about her person and work, compared to other women in similar situations, would be interesting [106]. Around 1911, after China’s dynastic period, women at a time of revolution attempted to cast off the yoke of the patriarchal Confucian system: an “Umwertung aller Werte” [English: Revaluation of all values] (价值的再价值化, Jiazhi de zai jia zhi hua, Nietzsche) and Freudian psychoanalysis would help accelerate that process [107]. The birth of feminism (女权主义, Nü quan zhu yi) in China becomes a fact with four major female

writers: Lu Yin (卢隐, 1899-1934), Shi Pingmei (石评梅, 1902-1928), Ding Ling (丁玲, 1904-1986) and Zhang Ailing/Eileen (张爱玲, 1920-1995). The old male rhetoric must make room for a feminine story [108]. I hope this essay can shed light on Li's position in China's medieval world to advance East-West studies, especially of the female role within the Chinese literati tradition.

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