

**POETESS LI QINGZHAO:
FIVE POEMS COVERED HER WHOLE LIFE**

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Abstract

Li Qingzhao (1081-1155) is an outstanding female writer and poetess in China's Song Dynasty (960-1127-1279). She is praised as the ancestor of gracious poetry. As a female, she still had the most normal life experience as a woman, which is considerably rare during that period. All the poems selected here reflect the special emotional experience of a woman who was beyond the limitations of those times. Her life experiences were reflected in her poetry one by one. This paper does not focus on that part of her poetry which reflected the social reality, but on her special emotion from the female perspective. The creation style and content were diverse and come from the five particular periods of her life: the childish little girl, the unmarried young girl, the newly married bride, the married young woman missing her husband and the wandering middle-aged woman. In addition, as an influential poetess, Li Qingzhao has left a large number of other remarkable poetry for us which is popular generation after generation.

Key words: Li Qingzhao, poetry, life experience, emotion.

1. Introduction

In the ancient history of China, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD) and Song Dynasty (960-1127-1279AD) the Chinese literature and art reached the peak. The art of poetry especially, where the number of poetry, the level of poetry, or the style of creation had been unprecedentedly promoted. The poem featured from the Tang and Song dynasties are unique and distinctive. Comparatively, the differences are in structure, rhyme, and artistic characteristics, as well as theme and topic. The Tang poetry is mainly based on the expression of social group emotions; while the Song poetry is mainly based on the self-emotion of the human; the Tang poetry generally expresses more orthodox thoughts, such as the ambition of serving the country, realizing the ideal of life, etc., while the Song poetry originated from a kind of folk music style, therefore they expressed more private, secret emotions generally speaking. Coincidentally, the perception and attention to the individual's emotional consciousness during the Song dynasty coincided with the humanism which advocated to care

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of human personality and to preserve the human dignity during the European Renaissance. We intend to analyze five poems written by the famous poetess Li Qingzhao in her various periods in the Song Dynasty, so as to show how the Song poems expressed the unique personal and emotional characteristics of the author.

Li Qingzhao (1081-1155) was an outstanding female writer and poetess in China's Song Dynasty. She has been praised as representative of the gracious poetry style. As Yang Shen in *Ci Appreciation* said, "Yian (Li Qingzhao)'s poetry was competitive not only for poetesses but also for poets" (Yang, 2009). In the first half of the 20th century, Zheng Zhenduo said, in *History of Chinese Literature*, that Li Qingzhao is not only one of the greatest poetess in the Song Dynasty, but also the greatest female literary person in the history of Chinese literature (Zheng, 2009). "Li Qingzhao's works expressed her true feelings for her experience of the life; with exquisite consciousness of life and persistent pursuit of life, which sends out a distinct spiritual personality" (Chen Y.L., 2015: 7). Furthermore, in 1987, the International Astronomical Society named the first craters on Mercury, and fifteen other craters after Chinese celebrities. One of them was named Li Qingzhao. As a woman, especially as a woman who lived in the feudal era, Li Qingzhao is even more eye-catching. She is like a dazzling pearl shining with extraordinary splendor. Such a versatile female writer was rare in the history of Chinese literature and just as rare in the gallery of world literature. She was learned, intelligent, talented, skilled in poetry, good at writing, proficient in phonology, and good at painting and calligraphy. Meanwhile, as a woman, Li Qingzhao had many characteristics that women shared. Her life had a lot of emotional changes with ups and downs. When she was a girl, the influence of family and natural environment helped her cultivate her literary knowledge, and brought up her frank and natural personality and soul, as well as established her independent and free writing style. Her poetry of this period had a distinct personality and was full of romanticism, which fully showed the author's love for nature, yearn for love and missing her husband. The poetry in the early stage had the characteristics of fresh style and youthful vigor. Later, Li Qingzhao experienced the loss of her husband and the disasters of her country, which rapidly transformed her poetry from youthful vigor to deep sorrow and pain, even made her more miserable. Her poetry expressed not only her own personal feelings, but also profoundly reflected the social reality at that time.

2. Five typical poems about her emotion in her life

The change of time and personal experiences made Li Qingzhao's mentality show different characteristics in different periods from a simple and lovely young girl to a lonely woman, while her writing style was affected by her mentality and emotion. She experienced a lot of changes as time passed, which resulted in great shifts in her feelings and attitudes towards life. This emotional change was real, natural and delicate, and unintentionally revealed the change in the process of her poetical creation, and finally formed the different styles of her works in different periods. Due to the life experience and independent life stated in her creation, Li Qingzhao's creative style was constantly changing, as well as her expression of emotion and content. She presented the delicate and graceful inner world of women with specific words, opened up a unique cultural landscape. She provided valuable materials for us to study the poetry, literature and even the society at that time.

2.1 The Childish Little Girl---To the Tune of Ru Meng Ling/Dream Tune

Li Qingzhao was born in a literary and art loving scholar-official family. Her father, Li Gefei, was a student of Su Shi (the most famous and popular man of the time). He was an official in

the Ministry of Rites and had a large collection of books. Her mother, surnamed Wang, was the granddaughter of Wang Gongchen. Wang Gongchen was a Number One Scholar (title conferred on the one who came first in the highest imperial examination). In such a good family environment, she learned to write poems since childhood and she had a good literary background. As a young girl, Li Qingzhao had a lively and cheerful personality and she enjoyed life with great enthusiasm. Unlike most girls from respectable families whose life circle was confined within the boudoir and embroidery housework, she often went out of her family manor to experience nature, including the hills and lakes, showing her youthful vigor. Her love for life and nature is reflected in her poem *Like a Dream*, written by Li Qingzhao in her teens:

《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。（Chen, 2015: 3）

The dusk at the river arbor I often recall.
Blind-drunk, our way back we remembered not at all!
Having had much fun, we paddled home bound
And strayed into lotus flowers profound.
Tried to get through,
Tried to get through!
So startled, all egrets from the shoal flew. (Zhao, 2012)

The few words seem to come out at random, but are meaningful like gold. The first two sentences are about excitement after “blind-drunk”. The following sentences read “Having had much fun”, and on the way home, “Strayed into” the depths of the lotus pond. The last sentence shows her pure and naive personality. From this poem, we can clearly understand the lively and cheerful personality of Li Qingzhao in her childhood. She was free and open, grew healthily like a seed of freedom. There was little trace of feudalism and ritual shackles in her, while the famous nature scenes of sunset, green water, red lotus and gull-heron, left a mark of natural simplicity and freedom on her. The life of her early years reflected in the poem was somewhat free and easy to a noble girl, but the vitality and sincere love for nature are vividly revealed at the same time. The unrestrained and pure image of a teenage girl can be clearly found between the lines. This poem of merry style became one of her early representative works, which brought her fame.

2.2 The Unmarried Young Girl---To the Tune of Dian Jiang Chun/Red Lips Tune

When Li Qingzhao was a young girl, her family status was quite superior. Born in a scholar's family, Li Qingzhao was blessed with a unique social environment, family environment and relatively superior personal conditions, which enabled her mental and emotional development to be sound and less hampered. This relatively sound and harmonious state had fully displayed in her early poetry. As a woman, especially a woman in ancient China, when she was 17 or 18 years old, marriage was inevitable to come. Li Qingzhao in this period, naturally, also yearned for love. The poem *To the Tune of Dian Jiang Chun* describes her girlish feeling incisively and vividly.

《点绛唇》

蹴罢秋千，起来慵整纤纤手。露浓花瘦，薄汗轻衣透。
见客入来，袜划金钗溜，和羞走。倚门回首，却把青梅嗅。（Chen, 2015: 17）

Off the swing, on the ground she lands
But too languid to knead her dainty hands

While dews turn thick and flowers fade
Slight sweat wets her clothes silk-made

Since seeing a stranger coming in
To rush away so shy she has been
In stockings and with slipped hairpin
She looks back on the door to lean
Pretending to smell the plum green (Li, 2018)

There she was, a pure girl with beautiful hair and a flower-like face. It was hard to resist the sprouting of her love. She laid in her boudoir, or foolishly watched the incense curling up, or went to the yard for gardening and swinging. She was still an active girl, and she still liked to do naughty things. When she was “Off the swing”, she felt excited, and her light clothing were wet with thin sweat. “Since seeing a stranger coming in”, she hurriedly “Rush[ed] away so shy she has been”, but a hairpin slipped. She was a little frightened and a little ashamed. Out of a girl’s curiosity, she leaned back to see who the visitors were. In a few words, the picture of a lively and shy girl leaped on the paper. The most wonderful verse is “She looks back on the door to lean, pretending to smell the plum green”. It was not a direct description of the guest, but from the reaction of the poetess we can suppose that he could be a handsome young man. She pretended to smell the green plum, because she wanted to see but she was shy to see the guest. She pretended that nothing happened in order to cover up her blush, only to peep at him. This was a young girl's typical mentality towards love, both flustered and curious, both expectant and disturbed. The subtle psychology is presented vividly, which lets people feel the reality and are strongly moved. We can even presume that the “Guest” who made her completely lose her elegance, could even be her sweetheart. Unmarried, she still had the exquisite and liveliness of a young girl, with a life of luxury and unbridled joy. She was full of anticipation and curiosity about the future life, i.e. the “Lover” who would share life with her, and the upcoming married life. We can imagine how shy and lovely she was at that time. The whole poem is characterized by a lively style and relaxed rhythm, and portrays a pure, passionate but reserved young girl figure only in 41 Chinese characters. With simple language and vivid description, this poem not only has a psychological description, but also a profound meaning, which was a good description of a girl in the feudal society, as well as a good self-portrait of the poetess.

2.3 The Newly Married Bride---To the Tune of Jian Zi Mu Lan Hua /Magnolia Tune

Love is the best section of life. It seems a ferry port, from which a person will start. From adolescence to youth, breaking away from the overall parent concern, life will change. Beginning to live independently, with a stranger, was a big leap of faith especially in ancient time. Therefore, the anxiety of expectation and the collision of love perform the most complex and affecting symphony. Becoming a maiden from a teen girl filled Li Qingzhao with happiness; she encountered her lover, which led and accompanied her life to a higher level of emotional experience. Her husband, Zhao Mingcheng, was a knowledgeable and handsome young man and a government official. With the same savor, they became not only a couple but also two literary friends after marriage. It was a perfect match for them to have such an ending since free love was forbidden and the marriages were usually arranged through parents and matchmakers in the feudal society of China. The following poem could show the sweetness and happiness after she married:

《减字木兰花》

卖花担上，买得一枝春欲放。泪染轻匀，犹带彤霞晓露痕。

怕郎猜道，奴面不如花面好。云鬓斜簪，徒要教郎比并看。（Chen, 2015: 25）

From the pole of the flower vendor
I bought a spring of spring about to bloom.
Tear-speckled, slightly sprinkled
Still touched by rose mist and dawn's early dew.

Should my beloved chance to ask
If my face is as pretty as a flower's
I'll put one aslant in my hair
Then ask him to look and compare. (Eugene)

Li Qingzhao was immersed in the boundless happiness under her married circumstance of romance and harmony. As the poem narrated, she bought a delicate and gorgeous flower which she loved in the early morning. With her anxiety, she presumed that “Should my beloved chance to ask if my face is as charming as the flower’s”. It vividly portrayed a newly married woman who was proud and delicate. So she wore the flowers on her head, “and then asked her husband to observe and compare.” It expressed the sweetness of their marriage and the confidence in her being pretty. The flowers in buds suggest the awakening of the poetess’ life consciousness. We also see her naive nature, the mood of chasing goodwill and a competitive temperament from this poem. The image of a newly married woman was portrayed in the most vivid way. By way of a series of actions, such as buying flowers, appreciating flowers, wearing flowers and comparing herself with flowers, the whole poem vividly expresses the genuine pursuit of a better and more competitive temperament of the young poetess. The language of this poem is lively, plentiful and exquisite.

2.4 *The Married Young Woman Missing Her Husband---To the Tune of Yi Jian Mei/ Plum Flower Tune*

After their honeymoon, Li Qingzhao’s husband, Zhao Mingcheng, often went out to work as an official, so the couple had to endure the pain of separation. During the long period when her husband left her, Li Qingzhao would inevitably have endless feelings of parting sorrow. During this period, the couple often wrote letters to each other to express their love and how much they missed each other. The emotion that she looked forward to the reunion with her husband was considerably intense and overflowing. The following poem, named *A Spray of Flowering Plum* is, typical of these feelings:

《一剪梅》

红藕香残玉簟秋。轻解罗裳，独上兰舟。云中谁寄锦书来？雁字回时，月满西楼。
花自飘零水自流。一种相思，两处闲愁。此情无计可消除，才下眉头，却上心头。（He, 2001: 114）

The fragrant red lotuses have withered away,
My jade-like mat turns cool on autumn day.
Lightly unbutton my skirt or silky coat,
Alone I boarded on the pretty boat.
Looking back, the wild swallow fly,
Who's to send me a letter through clouds' sky?
My west chamber window's full of moonlight.

Flowers drift alone out of the smell,
The creek running alone is natural.
There's one kind of love sickness,

Coming from two places with sadness.
No way could cure such a sickness,
Just falling down from my eyebrows,
Into my heart with sorrows. (Zhu, 2012)

Bidding her husband farewell, she could not help but feel a sense of loss. Whatever she saw, whether it was white clouds, flying geese, bright moon, or falling flowers and flowing water, she always connected them with her husband. This kind of feeling was both persistent and lingering. “No way could cure such a sickness, just falling down from my eyebrows, into my heart with sorrows.” The love between husband and wife was described in a delicate and euphemistic way, since we seem to notice the poetess’ frown on a single trifle, developed to stir up feelings. Therefore her grief at parting rushes onto the paper, since their separation comes shortly after marriage. The feeling of love is one of the most common human emotions. It was shown in her image, seen in her eyes, felt in her heart. Li Qingzhao had a unique and detailed understanding of this emotion. From here it was obvious to comprehend Li Qingzhao, as a woman who is not only tender and kind, but also sentimental. Throughout the whole poem, the poetess expressed her emotion to her husband in a delicate and euphemistic writing style, and displayed novel situations with ordinary statements. With the precisely revealed emotion between husband and wife and their melancholic separation, Li Qingzhao could create such a touching creation. This poem is the best interpretation of Li Qingzhao's delicate and profound style, which makes *A Spray Of Flowering Plum* be regarded as one of her representative works.

2.5 The Wandering Middle-Aged Woman--- To the Tune of Sheng Sheng Man/Slow Tune

As the time elapsed, there came the middle age of the poetess when the Northern Song Dynasty perished by the attack of enemies. Meanwhile her husband had also died of illness. In the process of escaping to the south of China, most of the couple’s collections of ancient books, poems, paintings and antiques were destroyed and lost. The series of disasters made her suffer from the pain of loss. In the middle and old age of her life, Li Qingzhao was in a depressive mood because of all the hardships of the destruction of both the country and her family. By indulging in drinking, the poetess frequently struggled to extricate herself from painful memories so as to relieve her mental pain. It was considerably difficult for her to extricate herself from the embarrassment of wandering about with a terrible loneliness, as if in an endless abyss. Consequently, she wrote this poem *Slow, Slow Tune*:

《声声慢》

寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。乍暖还寒时候，最难将息。三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他、晚来风急？雁过也，正伤心，却是旧时相识。
满地黄花堆积。憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？守着窗儿，独自怎生得黑？梧桐更兼细雨，到黄昏、点点滴滴。这次第，怎一个、愁字了得！（Hu, 1961: 71）

So dim, so dark,
So dense, so dull,
So damp, so dank,
So dead!
The weather, now warm, now cold,
Makes it harder
Then ever to forget!
How can a few cups of thin wine
Bring warmth against
The chilly winds of sunset?

I recognize the swallow flying overhead:
My old friends,
Bring not the old memories back!

Let fallen flowers lie where they fall.
To what purpose and for whom should I decorate?
By the window shut,
Guarding it alone,
To see the sky has turned to black!
And the drizzle on the kola nut
Keeps on droning:
Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat!
Is this the kind of mood and moment
To be expresses
By one word "Sad?"(Lin, Y.T)

Through the description of the autumn scenery and her lonely life, this poem *Slow, Slow Tune* expresses the distress and sorrow of fading and falling. At the beginning of the poem, under the gloomy environment that the leaves of autumn fallen in the bleak and cold north wind which symbolized the life approaching the end, the poetess missed her husband who had passed away even more. Even the strong alcohol failed to resist the coldness in her heart. Afterward, she turned her eyes out of the window, although the geese, which used to send letters for them before, still stayed in the sky, but her husband, the person who received her letter had left her. Time slipped away and the sky gradually darkened. At dusk, the chrysanthemums in the yard were blown away by the wind, and the poetess herself still stayed alone at the window, looking outside - the phoenix tree leaves fallen, the flowers broken and the rain trembled. Throughout the whole poem, by the scenery of the fall depicted, the poetess attempted to express her life experiences. It is unique that the poetess expressed her intense grief through fourteen overlapped words in this poem. Although this kind of writing style was applied before, but with so many overlapped words to express fierce emotion, it is rare to implement this high skillful method to express grief, desolation, helplessness and painfulness for the atmosphere. With the delicate emotional expression and extraordinary writing skills, this poem established a prominent position for Li Qingzhao in the history of literature.

3. Conclusions

Through the above-mentioned poems written by Li Qingzhao in different periods, we have comprehended a unique life experience of the poetess. Li Qingzhao was not only a famous poetess with talent, but also an ordinary woman. In the society dominated by patriarchal rule, she impressed with her own delicate and sensitive feelings to confess her affection for nature and her desire for love, as well as the dependency on her husband and the helplessness of the fate and lament of reality. The hardships of life had forged Li Qingzhao into a mature and tenacious woman. Her creations also evolved from expressing the romantic emotions of a pure girl to seriously thinking and sighing about the reality of social life. The emotions that Li Qingzhao displayed in her creations affected readers not only by her outstanding language ability, but also by the authentic emotion in her poems. After experiencing social and personal life transformations, she poured her own unique emotional experience into her creations and expressed her happiness and sadness from various periods of her life. From the vivid and profound emotional images in her poems, the poetess existed as an individual in the different social backgrounds. Moreover, she displayed a real female emotional world as a female

identity which was considerably rare at that time. It is precisely because Li Qingzhao has incorporated her unique experiences and emotional vicissitudes into her poems, which made her works sent forth the humanistic spirit. It is inevitable that her poems spread generation after generation.

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² All English translations of the titles were made by the author.