

THE AWAKENING SELF: LYRIC POETRY BY SONG WOMEN

Margy Chen
Emory University
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Under the control and regulation of patriarchal normativity, writing women in imperial China were underrepresented compared to their male counterparts due to the “naturalization and institutionalization of women’s exclusion from all intellectual activity.”¹ However, this state of being silenced was not expressed only by their underrepresentation, but also by the constant, seemingly paradoxical struggle they had to face when trying to voice their true selves. On the one hand, writing women need to be truthful to their styles and ways of perceiving the world to reflect their thoughts accurately and to ensure independence from the influences of masculine writing.

But on the other hand, the possibility of expressing sensitivity or delicacy in their writing could run the risk of their works being misinterpreted as a by-product of patriarchal normativity, which assumes inferiority and powerlessness for femininity. This was due to the highly gendered social system in imperial China. Besides biological differences, behavioral and attitudinal differences were “culturally given at birth”² and became integral to one’s social personhood. Therefore, writing women often needed to detach themselves from their socially constructed gender identity, reclaim their self-perception and voice their existential selfhood truthfully. More importantly, this explained why writing women often had to take on roles and construct identities that were considered atypical or deviant from femininity according to patriarchal normativity. This was not a loss of self-consciousness. Instead, it showed that women’s expectations for themselves significantly differed from their social dispositions. Hence their active attempts to overcome this predisposition and present their awakening selves.

¹ Robertson, Maureen, “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China,” *Late Imperial China* 11 (1992), no. 1: 64.

² Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine,” 67.

Based on this contextual framework, this paper seeks to address three writing women in the Song dynasty and discuss their active effort in voicing their authentic selves within their lyric poetry. The selection of this specific genre was due to its historical significance for feminine writing. *Ci* lyrics originated from early male poets writing lyrics for courtesans in entertainment quarters.³ By doing so, lyrics became a more ‘feminine’ poetic style supposedly expressive of typical female emotions and experiences.⁴ Therefore, lyrics tolerated and embraced a ‘feminine’ perspective, supposedly offering women a ready-made emotional vocabulary to reference. More importantly, unlike women writers in the previous dynasties who wrote in a variety of literary forms, women writers after the eleventh century began to focus on writing lyrics and poems, implying that they found more ease and perhaps greater freedom when engaging in this genre.⁵ Therefore, by concentrating on lyric poetry produced within this specific period, one could expect a more truthful representation of writing women’s selfhood. In particular, this paper wishes to showcase how they achieved this through innovating narratives in their literary compositions, aligning with roles traditionally monopolized by men, and challenging preexisting gender relationships according to Confucian values.

The innovation in literary approaches and narratives was essential to female authors’ originality and independence from their social dispositions. For instance, in Li Qingzhao’s lyric *To the Tune “Remembering the Prince,”* she took an unconventional approach to portray the seasonal scenery of late autumn:

Wind comes across the lake, waves stretch endlessly
At the end of Autumn

³ Wilt L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women in Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 199.

⁴ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 200.

⁵ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 6.

the red flowers are few, the fragrances slight.
 They befriend me, the water's glimmer and the hues of the hills—
 impossible to describe,
 the infinite beauty of the scene

The lotus seeds are formed, the leaves drop.
 Pure dew washes
 duckweed flowers and islet grasses.
 Sleeping gulls on the sand do not turn their heads,
 as if they begrudge me
 going home so early.⁶

Although this lyric was devoted to depicting the scenery of the end of autumn, it did not evoke the typical melancholy associated with the season or the mournfulness towards the passing of time. Instead, she chose to present the loving and affectionate side of the natural scenery. Furthermore, the imagery of the animals and plants also sets a vibrant and cheerful tone which goes against the common notion surrounding the motif of autumn: “autumn is a naturally gloomy time of year when nights grow longer and landscape features become barren”.⁷ Similarly, another female poet during the Song dynasty, Sun Daoxuan, also showcased innovation in her

Zui Si Xian:

Sunset clouds are red.
 Evening haze surrounds the mountain,
 fog separated pine trees.
 Wind brings my sleeves weaving,
 flying like a frightened swan goose.
 My heart is heavy as rock,
 my hair is white as cloud.
 My light image moves only in moonlight.⁸

⁶ Qingzhao Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, ed. Ann M. Shields, trans. Ronald Egan (Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 123.

⁷ Lara C. W. Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire: Gender and Interiority in Chinese Painting and Poetry* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 168.

⁸ Barbara Bennett Peterson, *Notable Women of China: Shang Dynasty to the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2015), 277.

Although this lyric was devoted to mourning the death of her husband, her self-image was not only grief or mental torment. Instead, she added a layer of detachment and spiritual transcendence with the misty scenery and tranquility in the last few lines. Her grief was genuine, but she implied that her husband's passing would not shatter her life. With this unorthodox narrative, she signified her self-reliance as an independent individual.

Another strategy that female authors chose to apply was aligning with roles traditionally monopolized by men to overpower the social constraints on their literary capacities. In traditional Chinese society, expressions used by male literati often went beyond human strength and physical limits to glorify and idealize their aspiration. However, women and especially elite women, had few opportunities to venture beyond their walls or expose themselves to broader horizons.⁹

As a result of this physical limitation, men used the inclination towards glorification and idealization in terms of literary expression more frequently. However, writing women's endorsement for such practice does not imply inspecting feminine literature through a masculine lens. Instead, it reflects women's bold defiance against their culturally given identity and strong desire to express their selfhood. Li Qingzhao was perhaps the most representative female author who was evocative of this trait. Her life played out against an epochal event in Chinese history, the fall of the Northern Song dynasty, providing a natural sense of drama, tension, and turmoil to her poetry.¹⁰

⁹ Francesca Bray, "The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?" In *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese*, ed. Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 259-79.

¹⁰ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 205.

Her daily responsibilities and marital status were also drastically different from ordinary women in traditional Chinese society. She “shared her husband’s intellectual interests,”¹¹ and her husband Zhao Mingcheng was also accommodating towards her literary passion. These unique experiences allowed her perspective and narrative to go beyond the social constraints and physical limitations of the inner chambers. For instance, *To the Tune “The Fisherman is Proud,”* she wrote:

The sky joins billowing cloud-waves to morning mists.
 The River of Stars begins to turn, a thousand sails dance.
 My dreaming soul seems to have gone to the Lord of Heaven’s place,
 where I hear Heaven speak.
 What is your final destination, it asks, showing real concern.
 The road is long, I say, and the day already late.
 I write poetry, but my startling lines are produced in vain.
 A wind blows thousands of miles, the giant phoenix will soon take flight.
 Oh wind, do not slacken!
 Blow my little boat to the distant isles of immortals!¹²

In this lyric, Li Qingzhao engaged in the same process of glorification and idealization of her ambitions. She abandoned the idea of powerlessness or subjectivity in femininity entirely by conversing with the Lord of Heaven. Scholars such as Ronald Egan have suggested that she echo Li Bai’s poem *Hearing Heaven Speak*. However, in Li Bai’s narrative, there was “no indication that the divine comment [was] even addressed to the speaker,” while in Li Qingzhao’s lyrics the heaven not only spoke but it also “ask[ed] the poet about the ultimate direction and...meaning of her life.”¹³ Moreover, she shared the feeling of self-doubt and frustration commonly expressed

¹¹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 206.

¹² Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 99.

¹³ Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 50.

among male literati, worrying about a lack of acknowledgment for her works using the metaphor “the day already late.”¹⁴

However, her frustration differed from the common concern about one’s work being dull or banal. She was aware that she had already produced original and quite “startling lines.”¹⁵ It was just that none cared. She was afraid that her effort was futile.¹⁶ This lyric not only showcased how female writers aligned with literary traditions typically associated with male authors in their compositions but also reflected how their struggles and concerns were inherently different from male authors’. Nevertheless, they shared the same ambition of devoting themselves to poetry and literature while voicing their fear of never being perceived due to the controversial nature of women’s writing during imperial China.

Furthermore, female poets such as Zhu Shuzhen also aligned with traditionally masculine roles by expressing social consciousness. For instance, she attended to farmers’ hardship in “All day long they hunger and thirst, their throats parched, / Sweating blood they labor and toil, but who speaks for them?”¹⁷ in *Moved by What I heard the Farmers Say during a Heat Wave*. Furthermore, she furthered her concern by addressing social hierarchy and the unequal distribution of income. This was evident in the following lines in which she spoke on the farmers’ behalf:

“Inquire on our behalf of these carefree rich young playboys:
What is good of your silken caps and feathered fans?
In the field the green rice plants are withered and brown—

¹⁴ Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 99.

¹⁵ Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 99.

¹⁶ Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, 51.

¹⁷ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 251.

Sitting comfortably in your high hall, what could you know?"¹⁸

Similarly, her care for commoners was echoed in another poem, *Delighting in the Rain*, which expressed her feelings of relief upon knowing that “each of the Nine Provinces is released from the fear of drought.”¹⁹ These examples illustrated that Zhu was deeply concerned with social issues and sincerely sympathetic toward commoners. This sense of social consciousness contrasted with the themes of longing or frustration commonly found in feminine poetry. It also indicated that Zhu was actively refusing the rules of inner chambers, which forbade females from having “any physical or even social contact”²⁰ by expanding her writings to more male-dominated, societal themes.

Other writing women also joined in extending their writing scope to more male-dominated themes. Li Qingzhao, for example, repeatedly presented her social awareness. Noticeably, her works also conveyed strong nationalist sentiment and “outspoken patriotism,”²¹ given the national peril and personal suffering that she felt. Her most explicitly political compositions were perhaps the two poems addressed to Han Xiaozhou and Hu Songnian, two court officials selected to complete a diplomatic mission to the Jin empire. In the first section of the first poem, Li Qingzhao made such comments:

It seemed that His Majesty spoke these words:
 “Titled lords, governors, and myriad officials:
 A worthy man appears very five hundred years.
 Out time has witnessed calamities for an eon.
 Let us not celebrate victories with a Yanran Mountain stele,
 Nor need we plant willows at Golden City.

¹⁸ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 252.

¹⁹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 252.

²⁰ Bray, “The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?”, 259.

²¹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 256.

Is there no perfectly filial subject,
 Who understands this frost-and-dew grief?
 Why must I set meat aside from the broth?
 Let us grease the carriage axels to quicken them.
 Our lands, we do not cherish them
 Jade and silk are dirt to us.
 Who is fit to convey our message?
 Gifts increase as our words become more humble.”²²

This excerpt showed how Li forwarded her criticism of the diplomatic strategies with great skills. At first glance, she was praising Emperor Gaozong’s filial devotion to his captive relatives. Still, she was questioning if the emperor was so overwhelmed by “his parents’ plight that territory no longer mean[t] anything to him.”²³ Therefore, he could not give enough “jade and silk”²⁴ to ensure their safety and perhaps win their release. By pointing this out, Li was able to forward her argument that the loss of the north was not only a personal tragedy for the imperial clan but also a national calamity that resulted in national abasement and agony.²⁵

Moreover, Li unambiguously focused on her reduced state as a wandering refugee in the closing part of the poem: “Their descendant crossed the river crossed the river south years ago / to drift aimlessly now as a refugee. / Take my blood-stained tears to those hills and rivers, / and sprinkle them on a clod of East Mountain soil.”²⁶ She referred to herself as the “descendant” of her father and grandfathers while also emphasizing her suffering, perfectly manifesting how women empowered themselves through making connections to other male figures when

²² Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 23.

²³ Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, 171.

²⁴ Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 23.

²⁵ Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, 172.

²⁶ Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 31.

writing.²⁷ When taking a public orientation and addressing military or political issues, they could also write themselves into pieces, referring to their aims and experiences. This new mode of expression allowed them to move beyond the tangible objects or events in their discussion to “develop new ways of projecting [themselves] as women of self-confidence and principle.”²⁸ This, again, reflected how female authors sought opportunities and found a new mode of expression when voicing their true selfhood by aligning with masculine literary traditions.

Besides aligning with roles traditionally monopolized by men by commenting on social and political issues, writing women also made solid attempts to express their selfhood by challenging preexisting gender relations established through Confucian canonical texts. The Confucian view outlined that men were *yang* or firmness while women were *yin* and defined by yielding.²⁹ And this view was widely accepted by writing women as well. Ban Zhao, for example, developed her guidance for married couples based on this view. She deliberated that licentiousness would result from “constant intimacy between a couple who stay[ed] too often in the confines of their own room.”³⁰ Therefore, she urged women to stay reserved in romantic and marital relationships. Otherwise, “self-indulgence” and “disrespect for one’s husband” would arise.³¹ Based on Ban Zhao’s moral teaching, women were to remain reserved in romantic

²⁷ Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, 173.

²⁸ Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, 163.

²⁹ Tak-ling Terry Woo, “Discourses on Women from the Classical Period to the Song: An Integrated Approach,” in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Ann A. Pang-White (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 43.

³⁰ Woo, “Discourses on Women,” 43.

³¹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 38.

relationships. Women were to conduct themselves with circumspection as excessive passion was viewed as problematic for maintaining the balance between the male-female dichotomy.

Many of Li Qingzhao's lyric poetry displayed descriptions of female narrators defying gender norms, such as the examples described. For instance, in her, *To the Tune "Dabbing the Crimson Lips,"* she characterized a girl who paused at the door to sneak a glance at the entering guest:

Seeing someone came,
in her stocking feet, gold hairpin slipping,
she runs bashfully away.
At the door she pauses, tuning to look back,
and sniffs the green plum in her hand.³²

Behaviors like such were discouraged based on the inner-outer distinction.³³ According to the *Women's Analects*, "inner and outer each have their place. Males and females gather separately. Women do not peek through the walls, nor step into the outer courtyard."³⁴ However, in Li's depiction, the girl was not only curious about the guest from the outer world but also attempting to make connections with the outer world by peeking through the door. The imagery of inner chambers occasionally also "serve as a metaphor for a woman's sexual organs, making them apt sites for the location of desire."³⁵

As the girl's gaze went beyond the physical constraints of the inner chambers, a sense of sexual anticipation and excitement built up. Furthermore, the girl's depiction of slight disarray,

³² Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 177.

³³ Bray, "The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?", 259.

³⁴ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 24.

³⁵ Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire*, 168.

given her hairpin was sliding and she was only wearing stockings instead of proper shoes. This state of slight chaos reminded one of the discussions about cloth-pounding in Song paintings, in which the women's description was “hair falling down, sleeves pushed up, even perspiring.”³⁶ It was believed that such a description could remind the audience of how women “would likely look after a sexual encounter, increasing their desirability.”³⁷ Therefore, Li was not only depicting the girl’s curiosity for the outer world but also potentially confounding the expectation of women’s subjectivity in romantic or sexual relationships by implying a sexual connotation.

Similarly, in Li’s *To the Tune “Magnolia Flowers, Short Version,”* her depiction of married life differed from the traditional view that marriage was hierarchical and patriarchal:

Afraid he might say
my face isn’t as pretty as the flowers,
I put some in my cloud-locks of hair,
so he’d be forced to look at us together.³⁸

In Li’s description, there was no sense of distancing or estrangement. Instead, the female narrator was passionate about winning her partner’s attention and affection, suggesting that women could also make advances in romantic relationships. If one read this piece as a projection of Li’s biographical circumstances, such defiance would make more sense. In the postface she composed for *Inscriptions on Bronze and Stone*, she recounted how she built the collection of inscriptions with her husband. She also talked about how they enjoyed playing memory games with the events in books. She would “raise her cup and laugh out hard, at times even spilling

³⁶ Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire*, 171.

³⁷ Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire*, 171.

³⁸ Li, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, 193.

[her] tea” when winning.³⁹ These incidences proved that their marriage was built on mutual love and dependence instead of mere subordination of the wife, as Li could share her husband’s interest and even compete with him intellectually. Also, these explained why Li’s depictions of the role of women in romantic or marital relationships diverged from preexisting gender relations regulated by Confucian values. Writings such as these again reflected how female authors were actively confronting societal expectations and gender norms to reflect their selfhood accurately.

Deviance from the Confucian gender norms was also evident in poetry by Zhu Shuzhen. In particular, she renewed her feminine voice as the passionate lover instead of the longing woman commonly presented in love poetry. Her *To the Melody of “Clear and Level” (Qingpingle): A Visit to the Lake on a Summer Day* was a perfect example of such practice. The female protagonist was “urged...to stay a little bit longer” by her partner. Bold expressions indicating physical intimacy, such as “holding hands...[and] not caring what people might think,” also indicated her ownership over her body and her defiance against the traditional expectation for women to be circumspect in their conduct.⁴⁰ In other words, Zhu presented the female protagonist as a passionate lover who shared an equal position with her partner in their relationship, rather than the typical image of a longing woman waiting to be gazed upon and caressed.

Of course, it was unclear whether Zhu was referring to herself. But since historical commentary suggested that “she never did find a true friend and she died depressed and full of frustration,” it could be inferred that she was describing the type of romantic relationship she

³⁹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 210.

⁴⁰ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 254.

wanted.⁴¹ These demonstrated how writing women endorsed an unorthodox view of women's roles in intimate relationships: they were not always virtuous wives diligently serving their husbands. Instead, they could also be passionate lovers asking for an equal say in romantic relationships.

In conclusion, writing women during the Song dynasty actively voiced their true selfhood by innovating their narratives, aligning with roles monopolized by male literati, and challenging preexisting Confucian gender norms in their lyric poetry. Specifically, analyses of lyrics written by three Song women showcased how female authors detached their writing persona from societal expectation by venturing beyond the conventions of inner chambers to seek greater literary space. However, this paper does not suggest that the 'feminine' persona or the traditional imagery of longing and desire associated with feminine poetry was trite or vulgar. Female-authored poetry with a feminine persona enjoyed "an aura of authenticity precisely because of the reader's and listener's willingness to collapse author and persona into a single identity."⁴²

And thus, one could not assume female subjectivity simply because their writings revolved around traditionally 'feminine' topics. Nevertheless, when female authors were able to detach themselves from their culturally given identity to voice their actual selfhood or when they were able to include unusual narratives into the already established feminine persona, their literature would become more powerful than ever.

⁴¹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 245-46.

⁴² Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire*, 19.

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