

Classic Poetry Series

Li Ching Chao
- poems -

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Li Ching Chao(1084 - 1151)

She was born into a literary family and became an antiquarian, book collector, and calligrapher. Of her six original volumes of lyrics, only about 50 lyrics remain.

In Stephen Owen's chapter, "The Snares of Memory," it concentrates on Li Ch'ing-Chao's *Afterward to Records on Metal and Stone*. He believes that Chao's account is filled with memories of her happy times in her married life and her tremendous bitterness toward her husband for the excessive value he placed on this material collection.

Chao opens the *afterward* with a comparison of two men, Ch'ang-yu and Yuan-k'ai, deluded by the importance of their possessions. She refers to their love of collecting as "hoarding," as a "disease." Using this as a backdrop, a reader can understand Chao's ambivalent feelings toward her husband's love for his collection of the inscriptions and vessels.

In relating their experience of collecting their treasures, Chao initially emphasizes the experience of sharing their passion for knowledge and beauty. She relates how Chao Te-fu brought home the rubbings and fruit and they would then sit together and munch on the fruit and admire his latest find. They would savor the treasure, the fruit, and their time together.

One of the few works Chao mentions by name is the painting of peonies by Hsu Hsi. Yet this is the work they could not afford to purchase. Owen calls attention to the idea that by not acquiring this work, it is recorded in memory. The possessions they acquired are left unmentioned.

As Chao records the details of their growing library and museum, she also records their losses. She must reduce the amount of meat in their meals and do away with all the "finery" in her dress. The result of her husband's passion for acquisition is that a "nervousness and anxiety" enters their life. Chao's resentment toward her husband's growing passion for acquiring material possessions is by now apparent.

Owen details the importance of the Chinese inclusion and omission of the personal pronoun. By excluding the pronoun, Chao sometimes covers the different values she and her husband place on their growing collection. However, when she includes her comment, "I could not bear it," she leaves no doubt that her dedication to their pastime is more casual than is his.

After Chao Te-fu dies, Li Ch'ing Chao experiences the dissolution of their treasure as their collection is burned and stolen. The transitory nature of possessions acquired on this earth is never more apparent.

Li Ch'ing Chao ends her afterward much as she began, with the remembrance of their collection as a living experience. She speaks of how her husband would edit the collations and write a colophon. The importance for her is not to view their collection as possessions but to view them as events, similar to their eating the fruit as they used to look over their acquisitions. These actions serve to retain in her memory their love for each other and their love for knowledge and beauty.

A Friend Sends Her Perfumed Carriage

A friend sends her perfumed carriage
And high-bred horses to fetch me.
I decline the invitation of
My old poetry and wine companion.

I remember the happy days in the lost capital.
We took our ease in the woman's quarters.
The Feast of Lanterns was elaborately celebrated -
Folded pendants, emerald hairpins, brocaded girdles,
New sashes - we competed
To see who was most smartly dressed.
Now I am withering away,
Wind-blown hair, frost temples.
I prefer to stay beyond the curtains,
And listen to talk and laughter
I can no longer share.

Li Ching Chao

A Morning Dream

This morning I dreamed I followed
Widely spaced bells, ringing in the wind,
And climbed through mists to rosy clouds.
I realized my destined affinity
With An Ch'i-sheng the ancient sage.
I met unexpectedly O Lu-hua
The heavenly maiden.

Together we saw lotus roots as big as boats.
Together we ate jujubes as huge as melons.
We were the guests of those on swaying lotus seats.
They spoke in splendid language,
Full of subtle meanings.
The argued with sharp words over paradoxes.
We drank tea brewed on living fire.

Although this might not help the Emperor to govern,
It is endless happiness.
The life of men could be like this.

Why did I have to return to my former home,
Wake up, dress, sit in meditation.
Cover my ears to shut out the disgusting racket.
My heart knows I can never see my dream come true.
At least I can remember
That world and sigh.

Li Ching Chao

As In A Dream

To the melody of "Ru Meng Lin"

Last night in the light rain as rough winds blew,
My drunken sleep left me no merrier.
I question one that raised the curtain, who
Replies: "The wild quince trees -- are as they were."
 But no, but no!
Their rose is waning, and their green leaves grow.

Li Ching Chao

At A Poetry Party I Am Given The Rhyme Chih

Although I've studied poetry for thirty years
I try to keep my mouth shut and avoid reputation.
Now who is this nosy gentleman talking about my poetry
Like Yang Ching-chih
Who spoke of Hsiang Ssu everywhere he went.

Li Ching Chao

Autumn Love

Search. Search. Seek. Seek.
Cold. Cold. Clear. Clear.
Sorrow. Sorrow. Pain. Pain.
Hot flashes. Sudden chills.
Stabbing pains. Slow agonies.
I can find no peace.
I drink two cups, then three bowls,
Of clear wine until I can't
Stand up against a gust of wind.
Wild geese fly over head.
They wrench my heart.
They were our friends in the old days.
Gold chrysanthemums litter
The ground, pile up, faded, dead.
This season I could not bear
To pick them. All alone,
Motionless at my window,
I watch the gathering shadows.
Fine rain sifts through the wu-t'ung trees,
And drips, drop by drop, through the dusk.
What can I ever do now?
How can I drive off this word —
Hopelessness?

Li Ching Chao

Last Night

Last
night
thin
rain,
gusty
wind.

Dense
sleep
doesn't
fade
a wine
hangover.

I'm talking
to her
who
rolled up
the curtains.

Are you
blind!
I
say.

By now
they're
fat
green
and skimpy
red.

Li Ching Chao

Our Boat Starts At Night

Our boat starts at night
from the beach of Yen Kuang.

Great ships sail only for profit
Only small boats come here because of your fame.
The passers-by are embarrassed by your virtue.
So in the night we steal by the place where you used to fish.

Li Ching Chao

Sorrow

To the melody of "Sheng Sheng Man"

I pine and peak
And questless seek
Groping and moping to linger and languish
Anon to wander and wonder, glare, stare and start
 Flesh chill'd
 Ghost thrilled
 With grim dart
And keen canker of rankling anguish.

Sudden a gleam
Of fair weather felt
But fled as fast -- and the ice-cold season stays.
How hard to have these days
In rest or respite, peace or truce.
Sip upon sip of tasteless wine
Is of slight use
To counter or quell
The fierce lash of the evening blast.

The wild geese -- see --
Fly overhead
Ah, there's the grief
That's chief -- grief beyond bearing,
Wild fowl far faring
In days of old you sped
Bearing my true love's tender thoughts to me.
Lo, how my lawn is rife with golden blooms
Of bunched chrysanthemums --
Weary their heads they bow.
Who cares to pluck them now?
While I the casement keep
Lone, waiting, waiting for night
 And, as the shades fall
Upon broad leaves, sparse rain-drops drip.
 Ah, such a plight
Of grief -- grief unbearable, unthinkable.

Sorrow Of Departure

Red lotus incense fades on
The jeweled curtain. Autumn
Comes again. Gently I open
My silk dress and float alone
On the orchid boat. Who can
Take a letter beyond the clouds?
Only the wild geese come back
And write their ideograms
On the sky under the full
Moon that floods the West Chamber.
Flowers, after their kind, flutter
And scatter. Water after
Its nature, when spilt, at last
Gathers again in one place.
Creatures of the same species
Long for each other. But we
Are far apart and I have
Grown learned in sorrow.
Nothing can make it dissolve
And go away. One moment,
It is on my eyebrows.
The next, it weighs on my heart.

Li Ching Chao

The Double Ninth Festival

To the tune of "Intoxicated Under the Shadow of Flowers"

Light mists and heavy clouds,
melancholy the long dreary day.

In the golden censer
the burning incense is dying away.

It is again time
for the lovely Double-Ninth Festival;

The coolness of midnight
penetrates my screen of sheer silk
and chills my pillow of jade.

After drinking wine at twilight
under the chrysanthemum hedge,

My sleeves are perfumed
by the fragrance of the plants.

Oh, I cannot say it is not endearing,

Only, when the west wind stirs the curtain,
I see that I am more gracile
than the yellow flowers.

Li Ching Chao

The Sun Sets In Molten Gold

The sun sets in molten gold.
The evening clouds form a jade disk.
Where is he?
Dense white mist envelops the willows.
A sad flute plays "Falling Plum Blossoms."
How many Spring days are left now?
This Feast of Lanterns should be joyful.
The weather is calm and lovely.
But who can tell if it
Will be followed by wind and rain?

Li Ching Chao

To Lord Hu

We shall not ask for the precious pearl of the Duke of Sui,
nor for the priceless jade disk of Master Ho.
We merely ask for the recent news of our homeland.
The Palace of Spiritual Illumination must be still there,
surrounded by desolation.
What's happened to the stone statues buried deep in the grass,
still guarding the Imperial tombs?
Is it true that our people left behind in the occupied territories
are still planting mulberry trees and hemp?
Is it true that the rear guard of the Barbarians
only patrols the city walls?

This widow's father and grandfather were born in Shantung.
Although they never held high office, their fame spread far and wide.
I remember when they carried on animated discussions
with other scholars by the city gate.
The listeners were so crowded that their sweat fell like rain.
Their offspring crossed the Yangtze River to the South many years ago.
Drifting in the rapids, they mingled with refugees.

I send blood-stained tears to the mountains and rivers of home,
And sprinkle a cup of earth on East Mountain.
I imagine when Your Lordship, His Majesty's envoy, upholding the Imperial spirit,
passes through our two capitals, K'ai Feng and Lo Yang,
Thousands of people would line the streets and present tea and broth
to welcome you....

Announce that the Emperor's heart aches for the suffering people---
they are his own children.
Let them understand that the Will of Heaven remembers all living beings.
Our sagacious Emperor offers his trust which is as brilliant as the sun.
There is no need to negotiate many times after the long chaos of the years.

Li Ching Chao

To The Tune

Breeze soft, sun frail, spring still early.
In a new lined dress my heart was refreshed,
But when I rose from sleep I felt a chill.
I put plum blossoms in my hair.
Now they are withered.
Where is my homeland?
I forgot it only when drunk.
The sandal wood incense burned out while I slept.
Now the perfume has gone,
But the wine has not gone.

Li Ching Chao

To The Tune Of

The fragrance of the pink lotus
fails, the jade mat hints of autumn.
Softly I unfasten my silk cloak,
Who is sending a letter from
among the clouds?
When the swan message returns,
the balcony is flooded with moonlight.

The blossoms drift on, the water flows.
There is the same yearning of the heart,
But it abides in two places.
There is no way to drive away this yearning:
Driven from the eyebrows,
It enters the heart.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 1

To the tune "Courtyard Filled with Fragrance"

Fragrant grass beside the pond
green shade over the hall
a clear cold comes through
the window curtains
crescent moon beyond the golden bars
and a flute sounds
as if someone were coming
but alone on my mat with a cup
gazing sadly into nothingness
I want to call back
the blackberry flowers
that have fallen
though pear blossoms remain
for in that distant year
I came to love their fresh fragrance
scenting my sleeve
as we culled petals over the fire
when as far as the eye could see
were dragon boats on the river
graceful horses and gay carts
when I did not fear the mad winds
and violent rain
as we drank to good fortune
with warm blackberry wine
now I cannot conceive
how to retrieve that time.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 10 (Exile)

To the tune of "Bodhisattva Aliens"

Soft breezes, mild sunshine,
spring is still young.
The sudden change of the light
brightened my spirit.

But upon awakening from slumber,
I felt the chill air;
The plum flower withered in my hair.

Where can I call my native land?
Forget - I cannot, except in wine
when I drown my care.

Incense was lighted when I went to sleep;
Though the embers are now cold,
the warmth of wine still burns on.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 11

To the tune of "Lamentation"

It was far into the night when, intoxicated,
I took off my ornaments;
The plum flower withered in my hair.

Recovered from tipsiness,
the lingering smell of wine
broke my fond dream
before my dreaming soul could find
my way home.

All is quiet.
The moon lingers,
And the emerald screen hangs low.
I caress the withered flower,
Fondle the fragrant petals,
Trying to bring back the lost time.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 12

To the tune of "Happy Event Is Nigh"

The wind ceases; fallen flowers pile high.
Outside my screen, petals collect in heaps of red
and snow-white.

This reminds me that after the blooming
of the cherry-apple tree
It is time to lament the dying spring.

Singing and drinking have come to an end;
jade cups are empty;
Lamps are flickering.

Hardly able to bear the sorrows and regrets
of my dreams,
I hear the mournful cry of the cuckoo.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 13

To the tune of "Song of Peace"

Year by year, in the snow,
I have often gathered plum flowers,
intoxicated with their beauty.
Fondling them impudently
I got my robe wet with their lucid tears.

This year I have drifted to the corner
of the sea and the edge
of the horizon,
My temples have turned grey.

Judging by the gust of the evening wind,
It is unlikely I will again
enjoy the plum blossoms.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 15

To the tune of "Rinsing Silk Stream"

Thousands of light flakes of crushed gold
for its blossoms,
Trimmed jade for its layers of leaves.
This flower has the air of scholar Yen Fu.
How brilliant!

Plum flowers are too common;
Lilacs too coarse when compared.
Yet, its penetrating fragrance
drives away my fond dreams
of far away places.
How merciless!

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 16 (Bajiao)

Who planted the Bajiao tree under my windows?
Its shade fills the courtyard;
Its shade fills the courtyard...

Leaf to leaf, heart to heart,
folding and unfolding,
It expresses boundless affection.

Sad and broken-hearted, lying awake on my pillow,
Late into the night
I hear the sound of rain.

It drips and splashes, cool and melancholy;
It drips and splashes, cool and melancholy....

Lonely for my beloved, grief-stricken,
I cannot endure the mournful sound
of rain.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 17 (He Is Gone)

To the tune of "Wu Ling Spring"

Wind ceased, the dust is scented
with the fallen flowers.

Though day is getting late, I am too weary
to attend to my hair.

Things remain as ever, yet he is here no more,
and all is finished.

Fain would I speak, but tears flow first.

They say that at the Twin Brooks
spring is still fair.

I, too, wish to row a boat there.

But I am afraid that the little skiff
on the Twin Brooks

Could not bear the heavy load of my grief.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 18

To the tune of "Intoxicated in the Shadow of Flowers"

Thin mist, dense clouds, a grief-stricken day;
auspicious incense burns in the gold animal.
Once again, it is the joyous mid-autumn festival,
but a midnight chill
touches my jade pillow and silk bed-screen.

I drink wine by the eastern fence in the yellow dusk.
Now a dark fragrance fills
my sleeves and makes me spin.
The bamboo blinds sway in the west wind.
And I am even thinner than a yellow flower.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 2 (Wine Joy)

To the tune "As in a Dream"

I have long remembered
the pavilion
on the stream
the falling sun
so deep in wine
we did not know
the way home
how pleasure spent
late returning
the skiff
thoughtless
entered
a lotus deep place
and struggling through
struggling through
we scared up
from the sand
gulls and herons.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 3

To the tune "Red Lips"

Tired of swinging
indolent
I rise with a slender hand
put right
my hair
the dew thick
on frail blossoms
sweat seeping through
my thin robe
and seeing
my friend come
stockings torn
gold hairpins askew
I walk over
blushing
lean against the door
turn my head
grasp the dark green plums
and smell them.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 4

To the tune of "Like a Dream"

Last night a sprinkling of rain,
a violent wind.

After a deep sleep, still not recovered
from the lingering effect of wine,
I inquired of the one rolling up the screen;
But the answer came: "The cherry-apple blossoms
are still the same."

"Oh, don't you know, don't you know?
The red must be getting thin,
while the green is becoming plump."

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 5

To the tune of "Like a Dream"

I always remember the sunset
over the pavilion by the river,
so tipsy we could not find our way home.

Our interest exhausted, the evening late,
we tried to turn the boat homeward.
By mistake, we entered deep within the lotus bed.

Row! Row the boat!

A flock of herons, frightened,
suddenly flew skyward.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 6 (Waiting For You)

To the tune of "Red Lips"

Lonely in my secluded chamber,
A thousand sorrows fill every inch
of my sensitive being.

Regretting that spring has so soon passed,
That rain drops have hastened the falling followers,
I lean over the balustrade,
Weary and depressed.

Where is my beloved?

Only the fading grassland
stretches endlessly toward the horizon;
Anxiously I watch the road for your return.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 7

To the tune of "Rinsing Silk Stream"

Let not the deep cup be filled
with rich, amber-colored wine;
My mind was eased of sorrow
even before I was drunk.
Distant bells have already echoed
in the evening breeze.

My dream is broken
as the scent of incense vanishes.
Too small, the hairpin of the gold
of warding-off-cold
loosens its hold of my tresses.

I awake to find myself blankly facing
the red flickering glow
of the candle.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 8

To the tune of "Rinsing Silk Stream"

My courtyard is small, windows idle,
spring is getting old.
Screens unrolled cast heavy shadows.
In my upper-story chamber, speechless,
I play on my jasper lute.

Clouds rising from distant mountains
hasten the fall of dusk.
Gentle wind and drizzling rain
cause a pervading gloom.
Pear blossoms can hardly keep from withering,
but droop.

Li Ching Chao

Tz'U No. 9 (Weary)

To the tune of "Rinsing Silk Stream"

Saddened by the dying spring, I am too weary
to rearrange my hair.

Plum flowers, newly fallen, drift about the courtyard
in the evening wind.

The moon looks pale and light clouds float
to and fro.

Incense lies idle in the jade duck-shaped burner.

The cherry-red bed-curtain is drawn close,
concealing its tassels.

Can Tung-Hsi's horn still ward off the cold?

Li Ching Chao

When Night Comes

To the tune of "Telling My Most Intimate Feelings"

When night comes,
 I am so flushed with wine,
I undo my hair slowly:
 a plum calyx is
 stuck on a damaged branch.
I wake dazed when smoke
 breaks my spring sleep.
The dream distant,
 so very distant;
 and it is quiet, so very quiet.
The moon spins and spins.
The kingfisher blinds are drawn;
 and yet I rub the injured bud,
 and yet I twist in my fingers this fragrance,
 and yet I possess these moments of time!

Li Ching Chao