

Why Didn't Zhao Mingcheng Send Letters to His Wife, Li Qingzhao, When He Was Away?

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This paper concerns the relation of poetry to biography in the song lyrics (*ci* 詞) of Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1150s). My aim is to call into question expectations that readers bring to Li Qingzhao's poetry, expectations that have affected and been reinforced by scholarship on her in recent years. I focus on periods of separation from her husband that Li Qingzhao is said to have endured during her twenty-seven years of marriage. We begin with the following song by her:

To the tune "A Single Cutting of Plum Blossoms"	一翦梅
The scent of red lotuses fades, jade bamboo mat autumn.	紅藕香殘玉簟秋
Lightly she unties her gauze skirt	輕解羅裳
To board the magnolia boat alone.	獨上蘭舟
Amid the clouds, who sends a brocade letter?	雲中誰寄錦書來
As the wild-geese character comes back	雁字回時
The moon fills the western tower.	月滿西樓
Blossoms fall on their own, the water flows by itself.	花自飄零水自流
One type of longing	一種相思
Idle sadness in two places.	兩處閑愁
There's no means to get rid of this feeling.	此情無計可消除
As soon as it leaves the brow	纔下眉頭
It surfaces in the heart. ¹	却上心頭

In the first stanza, "wild-geese character" refers to the configuration of the birds in flight, likened to the Chinese character *yi* 一 "one," if it is a straight line, or *ren* 人 "person" (or *ba* 八 "eight") if it is a "v" formation.

By legend, wild geese were said to be bearers of letters from loved ones far away. Because of an allusion, a “brocade letter” specifically implies a missive from a distant spouse.² In song lyrics “western tower” is by convention the dwelling of a woman, and it is where we often find a solitary woman whose lover has left. Here, even though the migratory geese are returning, raising hopes for the delivery of a letter, the question in line four is best understood as rhetorical, meaning that no letter has come. That is the way the line is normally read.³

The Yuan dynasty miscellany, *Langhuan ji* 瑯嬛記, by Yi Shizhen 伊世珍, quotes this song lyric by Li Qingzhao and provides an explanation of its origin. Not long after Li Qingzhao was married, her husband, Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081-1129), “went off on distant travels bearing a chest of books” (*fúji yuanyou* 負笈遠遊). Li Qingzhao could not bear to see him leave and so she found a length of brocade and wrote out this song lyric on it and gave it to Mingcheng as a farewell present.⁴ Yi Shizhen identifies the source of his information as something called an “*Unofficial Biography*” (*waizhuan* 外傳), which presumably was a fictionalized account of Li Qingzhao’s life, or perhaps of the lives of Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng together. It is, first of all, interesting to see that such an “unofficial” and probably romanticized account of our poet’s life existed as early as Yuan times, though unfortunately it did not survive.

Scholarly opinion of Yi Shizhen’s work is not high. It is often denigrated as being full of unreliable or spurious accounts. The *Unofficial Biography* that is Yi Shizhen’s source here is one of these works whose credibility is low. Immediately preceding the account of the origin of this song lyric, the same source records a story about a prophetic dream Zhao Mingcheng had about his future wife before his betrothal. In his dream Mingcheng was reading a book, and when he awoke he remembered three lines from it, but their meaning eluded him. When he repeated the lines to his father, the father decoded them—by splitting up and recombining graphic elements, and by identifying sound puns—reducing them to “husband to a literary woman” (*cinü zhi fu* 詞女之夫). Soon none other than Li Qingzhao was selected to become his wife. This story is likely part of a legend that had grown up around the famous couple.

Despite the dubious character of the information in the *Langhuan ji*, the notion that Zhao Mingcheng went off on a distant journey soon after Li Qingzhao married him evidently had considerable appeal. The *Langhuan ji* passage was quoted in numerous Ming and Qing period collections of song lyric criticism and anecdotes. It is also cited and accepted as fact in the long and influential account of Li Qingzhao’s life by the Qing scholar Yu Zhengxie 俞正燮 (1775-1840).⁵ It is even repeated in recent scholarship on Li Qingzhao, including Xu Peijun’s 徐培均 authoritative annotated

edition of her complete works, published by the Shanghai Ancient Texts Publishing Company in 2002.⁶

The durability of this idea of Zhao Mingcheng's early absence from his wife is not due solely to *Langhuan ji*. It also owes something to a few words from Li Qingzhao herself, contained in her famous "Afterword" 後序 to Zhao Mingcheng's *Records on Metal and Stone* 金石錄. This is what she says:

Two years later (after her marriage), my husband came out to serve as an official, whereupon we ate vegetarian meals and wore clothes of coarse cloth, intent upon obtaining from every distant place and remote region as many of the world's ancient inscriptions and rare engraved words that we could.⁷

Mindful of these words, Xu Peijun "corrects" the *Langhuan ji*. It was not to find a teacher or pursue his general studies (which is what the phrase *fuji yuanyou* 負笈遠遊 implies) that Zhao Mingcheng left, but rather to collect the rubbings that would eventually constitute the contents of *Records on Metal and Stone*.

Yet the "Afterword" passage lends itself to more than one interpretation. If the sentence above is read by itself, taken out of context, it does indeed seem to suggest that Zhao Mingcheng went off on far-flung travels to collect ancient inscriptions. But it looks different in the original context, as seen below:

It was in the *xinsi* year of the Jianzhong period (1101) that I married into the Zhao family. At that time, my late father was serving as vice director of the Ministry of Rites, and the grand councilor (her father-in-law, Zhao Tingzhi 趙挺之) was vice director of the Ministry of Personnel. At the time my husband was twenty-one years old and was a student in the National University. The Zhaos and Lis are undistinguished families that have always been poor. On the leave days of the first and fifteenth of every month, when he requested holiday leave, we would pawn some clothes to raise five hundred cash. Then we'd walk to Xiangguo Monastery to buy fruits and rubbings of inscriptions. We'd take them home, sit down together and spread them out, savoring them. We felt that we were living in the harmonious era of Getianshi.⁸

Two years later, my husband came out to serve as an official, whereupon we ate vegetarian meals and wore clothes of coarse cloth, intent upon obtaining from every distant place and remote region as many of the world's ancient inscriptions and rare

engraved words that we could. As the days and months passed, our collection grew. The grand councilor (Zhao Tingzhi) resided inside the imperial compound, and many of our relatives and friends worked in the palace libraries and archives. They had access to lost odes, little-known histories, and such books as those recovered from the walls of Lu and the tomb of Ji.⁹ When we came upon such rare works, we exerted ourselves to make copies of them. Once awakened to the flavor of this activity, we could not stop. Later, whenever we came upon a piece of calligraphy or a painting by a celebrated artist, whether ancient or recent, or a precious vessel from the Three Dynasties, we would take off a layer of clothing to pawn for it. I remember that once during the Chongning period (1102-06) someone brought a peony painting by Xu Xi (10th century) to show us. He was asking two hundred thousand for it. In those days it would have been hard even for young persons in eminent officials' families to come up with such a sum. The man left it with us for two days, but we finally decided we could not purchase it and returned it to him. Afterward, my husband and I looked at each other dejectedly for several days.¹⁰

Seen in this light, it appears that Zhao Mingcheng never left the capital, and indeed that he, with the assistance of his wife, used his proximity to the palace archives and his personal ties through his father and other high-ranking friends and relatives to build their collection of rare books, rubbings, and antiquities. The chronology is important. Li Qingzhao was married in 1101, when Zhao Mingcheng was still a student in the National University. It was, according to her, two years later (1103) that Mingcheng began his official career. We do not know in what office or capacity that career began. But we do know that in the tenth month of 1105 he was appointed vice minister of the Office of State Ceremonies (*honglu shaoqing* 鴻臚少卿).¹¹ This was a surprisingly eminent court appointment for such a young man, and surely came to Mingcheng because by then his father was so eminent in the early years of Huizong's reign (his two older brothers also received prestigious appointments at the same time).

Actually, Huang Shengzhang 黃盛璋 addressed the issue of Zhao Mingcheng's purported early departure from the capital in his 1957 seminal study of Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng.¹² Huang rejected the tradition that Zhao Mingcheng ever left the capital (or his wife) during those years, and he even proposed an explanation of how the erroneous understanding had come about. The language Li Qingzhao uses in her afterword is that Zhao Mingcheng "*chu shihuan*" 出仕宦. Huang says that *chu* 出, which Yi Shizhen (following the *Unofficial Biography*) took to mean "went out [to

the provinces]" to take up office, should be understood as "*chu er shi yi*" 出而仕矣, meaning that Zhao "came out [from the National University]" or "went out [into the world]" to join officialdom. Huang finds support for this reading in the transcription of the afterword by the early Southern Song scholar Hong Mai 洪邁. Hong Mai's version of the afterword text simply says that Zhao *cong huan* 從宦 (or in some editions *cong guan* 從官) "joined officialdom."¹³ Huang Shengzhang goes on to find fault with the *Langhuan ji*'s claim that Li Qingzhao's "A Single Cutting of Plum Blossoms" could have been written as a farewell song to Zhao Mingcheng, noting several features of the piece that make it implausible to fulfill such a role.

Several of the scholars who have published accounts of Li Qingzhao's life and works in recent years accept Huang Shengzhang's argument and new understanding of the whereabouts of Zhao Mingcheng during the early years of his marriage, including Wang Xuechu 王學初 (Wang Zhongwen 王仲聞), Chen Zumei 陳祖美, Yu Zhonghang 于中航, Zhuge Yibing 諸葛憶兵, and Deng Hongmei 鄧紅梅.¹⁴ As mentioned above, however, the traditional view of the early departure of Zhao Mingcheng from his wife is still accepted by some. Xu Peijun's support for it factors into his dating of two of Li Qingzhao's song lyrics (including "A Single Plum Cutting") that refer to separation from a loved one to the period.

Yet when we look at those scholars who agree with Huang Shengzhang on this point, we find an interesting phenomenon. Most of them suggest another type of separation that Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng had to endure early in their marriage. There are two features of these alternative separations that are immediately striking. The first is the variety of them that have been suggested, all subsequent to Huang Shengzhang's publication, and most in the past ten to fifteen years. Each scholar has his or her own suggestion for a separation, and each tends to be supplanted by the next publication that posits a new one. In other words, there is no clear consensus about exactly how the young married couple was separated and for what reason. The second, which is probably related to the lack of a clear consensus, is that each suggestion has certain weaknesses and might readily be challenged. I will briefly summarize three of these suggestions, and points that might be raised against them, below.

Chen Zumei maintains that it was Li Qingzhao who left the capital and returned to her natal home in Zhangqiu 章丘 (Shandong). She was forced to leave because of the decrees banning Yuanyou party officials and their offspring from office and from residence in the capital in 1103, and she was not able to return for good to the capital until that ban was lifted in 1106. Yet in between, during certain periods that the political feuding subsided and the ban was relaxed, Li Qingzhao managed to come back to the capital

for brief periods (e.g., in 1104), only to be forced to leave again when the political situation worsened again.¹⁵

We know that Li Qingzhao's father, Li Gefei 李格非, was listed on all of the various lists of Yuanyou faction "traitors" issued at the instigation of Cai Jing 蔡京 between 1102 and 1104. That was only natural, because he had served as professor in the National University during the Yuanyou period and was associated with the literary circle of Su Shi. It is also true that certain decrees in the persecution campaign of those years specified prohibitions to be imposed not only on the Yuanyou officials but also upon certain members of their families. A decree issued in the third month of 1102 orders that the "sons and younger brother" of Yuanyou officials must live in the provinces and prohibits them from entering the capital.¹⁶ A decree issued in the ninth month of the year prohibits imperial clan members from marrying the "sons and grandsons" of Yuanyou faction members, adding that if such a marriage is promised but not yet carried out, the betrothal shall be terminated.¹⁷ It is these decrees that Chen Zumei cites as the cause of Li Qingzhao's departure from the capital.

It is not at all certain, however, that such prohibitions would have applied to the daughters of Yuanyou faction officials. Such application would have greatly multiplied the number of persons affected by the ban. The low status of daughters in clans also argues against them being included along with "sons and grandsons." It seems particularly improbable that the ban would have applied to daughters who were already married. The wording of the second decree mentioned above, which concerned imperial relatives (Zhao Mingcheng's family was not one of them), implies that nothing was to be done in the case of marriages already formalized, as Li Qingzhao's had been. Besides, this particular daughter happened to have a father-in-law who in 1102 became vice grand councilor, that is, next to Cai Jing the second highest official in the empire. Even in the unlikely case that daughters were included in the ban, if an exception were going to be made for any of them, it might well be one with such lofty connections. Another consideration is that in her own narrative of her married life of this period, Li Qingzhao says nothing about separating from her husband and returning to her parents' home. Actually, as we see in the passage quoted earlier, Li Qingzhao's memory of these years (the "Chongning period") appears to be of an integral time when she and her husband were together. She represents the years as contended ones, when she and Zhao Mingcheng were busy in their leisure time assembling their collection. The only disappointment she registers from the years is over the Xu Xi peony painting they could not afford, even though they were "young persons in an eminent official's family." If Li Qingzhao herself was affected by the Yuanyou persecution, she gives no hint of it in her afterword, even though

that narrative was written thirty years later, when that period of persecution had come to be widely condemned and its victims thought to have been vindicated by subsequent events.

Another scenario of early separation of the married couple is put forth by Zhuge Yibing, in his literary biography of Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng published in 2004. Zhuge reminds us that when the couple was first married Zhao Mingcheng was still a student in the National University.¹⁸ As such, he points out, Mingcheng would have been obliged to reside in the dormitories at the university and would only have been allowed to return home to visit his new wife on the first and fifteenth of every month. There is a problem, again, of reconciling this account of early separation with the way Li Qingzhao herself describes the early days of her marriage (“We felt that we were living in the harmonious era of Getianshi”). Li Qingzhao does refer to the free time she and her husband had together on the first and fifteenth of every month, when they would go to the Xiangguo Monastery market to buy books and rubbings. But that might simply mean that those were the holidays on which Zhao Mingcheng had no obligations at the university. It does not necessarily mean that Mingcheng only spent two nights at home per month. One would think that the son of the vice grand councilor might have some special privileges his classmates would not enjoy. Nevertheless, Zhuge uses the purported university residence of Zhao Mingcheng to account for Li Qingzhao's song lyrics on separation that he dates to the period. In one of them, the speaker complains, as she stands on a high balcony looking out, that she is receiving no “distant letters” (*yuanxin* 遠信).¹⁹ To accept Zhuge's understanding of the provenance of this song, we must believe Li Qingzhao is exaggerating her separation to quite an extreme extent.

In Deng Hongmei's *New Biography of Li Qingzhao* 李清照新傳, published in 2005, one more early separation of the young married couple is posited.²⁰ This one, she argues, came after Li Qingzhao's return to the capital in 1106, at the end of the Chongning period persecution of Yuanyou partisans. At the court, these years were marked by intense rivalry and infighting between Cai Jing and his former assistant, Li Qingzhao's father-in-law, Zhao Tingzhi. Tingzhi had briefly been elevated to the post of grand councilor in 1105, which he shared with Cai Jing. (It is because Tingzhi finally achieved this post, the highest possible, that Li Qingzhao refers to him by this title in her afterword.) But their co-incumbency of that highest post lasted but one month, whereupon Tingzhi requested permission to resign. The emperor, evidently pitying him, presented him with an estate in the capital to reside in during his “retirement.” In early 1106, the sighting of a spectacular meteor helped to change Huizong's mind about the wisdom of the persecution. Soon, Cai Jing was removed from office, and Zhao Tingzhi

was reinstalled as sole grand councilor. But this arrangement was also short-lived. Cai Jing was back in favor by the beginning of 1107 (the first year of the Daguan period). Back in power, Cai Jing took revenge upon the man who had become his nemesis. Zhao Tingzhi was stripped of office in the third month. Five days after this humiliation, Zhao Tingzhi died at his residence in the capital. Unfortunately, we do not know the particulars of his death. Three days later, Cai Jing took action against Tingzhi's three surviving sons (including Zhao Mingcheng). They were charged with being implicated in their late father's corruption in office. A case was mounted against them, and they were eventually arrested and imprisoned. The charges proved impossible to substantiate, however, and by the seventh month they were exonerated and released.

The standard account of Li Qingzhao's life says that in the final months of 1107 she and Zhao Mingcheng left the capital to return to the late father's home in Qingzhou 青州 (Qingzhou, Shandong), where they would remain for over a decade, the first few being spent in mourning for Zhao Tingzhi. But Deng Hongmei has discovered a poem that, she contends, requires a different scenario. The poem was written by Xie Yi 謝逸 (1068-1113), a Jiangxi poet who befriended several of the literati of the day. The poem is entitled "Sending Off Zhao Defu (Zhao Mingcheng) to Accompany his Parent(s) in Huaidong" 送趙德甫侍親淮東. Based on this poem, Deng Hongmei hypothesizes the following elaborate narrative: struck by the double tragedies of her husband's sudden death and the criminal charges against her sons, Mrs. Zhao (née Guo) left the capital at the time of her sons' arrest and sought refuge in the southern city of Nanjing, not far from where her husband had once served (elsewhere in the Huaidong circuit). When the charges against him were dropped in the seventh month, Zhao Mingcheng left the capital to go fetch his mother and bring her back up north to Qingzhou, to commence the mourning period. But he did not travel directly there or go with haste. Taking advantage of the opportunity to add to his collection of rubbings by visiting distant regions, he traveled overland southwest into Sichuan, then down the Yangzi River through the Three Gorges and on to Nanjing. Xie Yi's poem makes mention of the Qutang Gorge 瞿塘峽 and its famous Yanyu Reef 灘頭堆 as places Zhao Mingcheng will sail past. Zhao Mingcheng did not return to the capital with his mother until the summer of 1108, after which mother and son, together with Li Qingzhao, went into mourning at Qingzhou.

Deng Hongmei deserves credit for uncovering a poem addressed to Zhao Mingcheng that has never been noticed before. Yet the conclusions she draws from it are problematic, in several respects. Aside from the poem, there is no reason to think that Mrs. Zhao suddenly decided to remove herself from the capital and embark on a distant southern journey to

Nanjing. It seems inherently improbable that she would do so, when she was still waiting to learn the outcome of the charges against her three sons, whose fate was now tied inextricably to her own. It stretches credulity even more to suppose that, if Zhao Mingcheng did need to go south to retrieve his mother, he would have indulged himself by going hundreds of miles out of his way into Sichuan and then sail leisurely down the Yangzi all the way to Nanjing. The family had just been plunged into mourning, coupled with tremendous setbacks in its official standing and the prospects for the sons' future careers. What son would go sauntering so far out of his way if the immediate task were to bring his mother home for mourning?

Second, Deng assumes that Xie Yi was in the capital when he wrote his poem, bidding farewell to Mingcheng. In fact, it is clear that at this late stage of his life, Xie Yi had already returned to his native Linchuan (modern Fuzhou shi 撫州市, south of Nanchang in central Jiangxi), where he spent his final years. Xie Yi had been in the capital years before, when he tried without success to pass the examinations and become an official. Eventually, he abandoned the pursuit, and returned to Linchuan, where he evidently supported himself by taking students. Several tomb inscriptions that Xie Yi wrote for Linchuan natives from the period 1103-1109 make it clear that he was back in Linchuan both before, during, and after 1107, the year of Zhao Tingzhi's death in the capital. (In some of these inscriptions, he describes the relatives of the deceased personally coming to his house to ask him to compose an elegy.)²¹ The most one can say, in other words, is that at some time Xie Yi sent off Zhao Mingcheng on a trip from Linchuan east to Huaidong (modern Jiangsu). Incidentally, for Mingcheng to have visited Xie Yi in Linchuan means that he took another detour of a couple hundred miles, southward, if he was boating down the Yangtze from the Three Gorges to Nanjing.

Finally, the poem by Xie Yi does not fit the circumstances of Zhao Mingcheng's life in 1107. The poem makes no reference to the recent death of his powerful father or the fact that Mingcheng was now in mourning. Quite to the contrary, the poem is forward-looking and buoyant. It speaks of Mingcheng as a talented young man with a splendid future, akin to legendary steeds in divine stables, who should not, as he goes off to make his way in the world, be in any hurry to "sell himself" to just any patron. The poem belongs, in fact, to a well-known type of verse addressed to young men, celebrating their early achievements and promise. It would be inappropriate as something written for Mingcheng when he was in the throes of the events that befell him in 1107.

The poem remains something of an enigma. Perhaps it was not written for *this* "Zhao Defu." (Xie Yi left no other works addressed to Zhao Mingcheng or to "Zhao Defu".) Or if it was, it must have been written at an

earlier stage of his life. The poem mentions the addressee's unusual level of maturity "before he reached twenty years of age." Perhaps, the poem was written during a youthful southern tour that Zhao Mingcheng took before his marriage at the age of twenty-one and entry into the National University. At this point we cannot know. But the poem certainly does not appear to be what Deng Hongmei would make it to be.

At this point, it will be useful to take a step back from various conjectures and ask why it is that scholars writing about Li Qingzhao, even in the latest studies, are so eager to establish that husband and wife were separated early on in their marriage, even when the evidence for such separation is sparse and the findings mutually contradictory. There are several reasons. The first is the perceived need to spread Li Qingzhao's surviving song lyrics more or less evenly throughout her adult life in the dates assigned to them. The problem here is that the great majority of her pieces are written in the voice of a lonely woman, and in many of them it is clear that the man in her life is not with her. With certain pieces, especially those in which reference is made directly or indirectly to the advanced age of the woman speaking or being described, it is assumed that the composition happened during the years of her widowhood, after Zhao Mingcheng died when she was forty-six. But it would be awkward to assign all of the solitary woman poems to those years, because that would make for a very uneven distribution, leaving too few poems for the early years. To make matters worse, there are several poems featuring loneliness that make it clear that the absent loved one is still alive—they mention recent parting scenes or expected letters—so they cannot be dated to the years of Li Qingzhao's widowhood.

There are other factors at work here, less obvious than the satisfaction that comes from a neat and more or less balanced distribution of her surviving song lyrics through all the periods of her life. Li Qingzhao's song lyrics contain, as we have said, a preponderance of compositions that present images of female loneliness, yearning, and sometimes even hints of bad temper or bitterness. Readers are hard put to imagine that Li Qingzhao could feel this way when Zhao Mingcheng was with her. With a modern poet, of course, we have no trouble accepting the idea that she or he may feel isolated, lonely, or frustrated in love even when the lover or spouse is in the next room. But somehow with Li Qingzhao that possibility does not occur to us. Partly, I think, it does not occur to us because we tend to make blanket assumptions that people who lived in pre-modern times were not as psychologically complex as we are. This assumption, with which we flatter ourselves, needs to be questioned. But with Li Qingzhao there are, in addition, special considerations at work in our reading and reaction to whatever she says.

The marriage between Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng has long been idealized as a rare pairing in pre-modern China between two persons of learning and sentiment who were genuinely devoted to each other. It is not just in modern times that the marriage has been thought of this way. It was already considered so from at least the early Ming period, if not before.²² Of course, this image of the marriage can be traced back to Li Qingzhao herself, as she described it so effectively in her afterword. But there have been no shortage of later elaborations of what Li Qingzhao began, as we glimpsed in the *Unofficial Biography* above. It is fair to say that, through the centuries, hers became one of the most celebrated marriages in Chinese history, admired for the loving devotion of the two partners from the time they first came together and made all the more poignant by the awareness that the marriage was cut short by an untimely death, so that the surviving partner was doomed to an old age of nostalgia and regret. This image of the marriage is certainly intact today, propagated not only at the level of popular culture (for example, in the several Li Qingzhao Memorial Halls in Shandong and Zhejiang) but also in scholarly writings.

Owing to what we know or think we know about the marriage, there is a strong impulse to read everything Li Qingzhao wrote in the light of her purported marital devotion. Doing so reinforces the image we already have of the marriage before we approach her writings in any detail, and we welcome such reinforcement. Doing so also makes each individual composition more moving and effective. When we read Li Qingzhao's song lyrics we think we are hearing expressions of her devotion to her husband or of longing for him when the two had to be apart. The impression of authenticity of expression enhances the impact of each song. When Liu Yong 柳永 (*jinshi* 1034) or Yan Jidao 晏幾道 (ca. 1030-ca. 1106) presents in a song lyric the complaints or yearnings of a lonely woman, we know that there is a divide between male author and female persona. At some level we are aware that there is artifice in what we are reading. With Li Qingzhao we are apt to think that artifice has vanished. For once, we tell ourselves, we are privy to the unmediated emotional expression of an historical woman, addressing the man who really was her husband.

The scholarly preoccupation with separations during the years of Li Qingzhao's marriage is not confined to the early years of her life together with Zhao Mingcheng in the capital. It extends to the period of their forced "retirement" to Qingzhou. That period began soon after Zhao Tingzhi's death in 1107 and seems to have lasted fourteen years. So far as we know, Mingcheng was not reinstated to official service until the autumn of 1121, when he was posted as governor to Laizhou 萊州 (Yexian, Shandong). There is some speculation that Mingcheng's reinstatement may have come a

few years earlier, but there is no source confirming any such earlier appointment, as we would expect if there had been one.

The scholarly literature gives much attention to Zhao Mingcheng's absences from home during these Qingzhou years. He regularly went off, we are told, to climb distant mountains and scour the countryside in search of ancient inscriptions to add to his collection. Many of Li Qingzhao's song lyrics that speak of her lonesomeness or of parting scenes are consequently dated to these years. Such was her literary reaction, we are supposed to believe, to Zhao Mingcheng's antiquarian perambulations about the region.

Yet when we look with a more critical eye at the evidence for Mingcheng's absences, we are apt to conclude that, just as with the preceding years in the capital, scholars have stretched minimal evidence to maximum inferences. Mingcheng did indeed take several trips during these years. But there is little reason to think that he was absent often or for long periods of time. Thanks to notations Mingcheng made on certain inscriptions in his *Records on Metal and Stone*, explaining how he acquired them, or to stone inscriptions he left at the places he visited, which have been preserved in the original or in rubbings, we know the date and destination of several of his outings during these years. He had two favorite destinations. The place he visited most often was Heaven View Mountain 仰天山 south of Qingzhou. The mountain was known for its Luohan Grotto 羅漢洞, a deep cave that had a crack in one part of its roof through which the moon shone on the Autumn Moon Festival. It was from this fissure that the mountain got its name. Heaven View Mountain was about forty miles from Qingzhou. We know of altogether four trips that Zhao Mingcheng made there. These took place in 1108 (on the Double Ninth Festival in the ninth month), 1109 (on the Duanwu festival in the fifth month), 1111 (on the Mid Autumn Moon festival in the eighth month), and in 1121 (in the fourth month; perhaps this last visit was precipitated by his appointment in that year to Laizhou, which lay in the opposite direction from his favorite mountain). There is one other inscription he left there that is undated, next to the inscription of 1108, and this may have come from a fifth trip.²³

Aside from Heaven View Mountain, Zhao Mingcheng also liked to travel to Lingyan Monastery 靈巖寺 in Changqing County 長清縣. Changqing was south of the city of Jinan 濟南, and was located some 108 miles from Qingzhou. Mingcheng visited this monastery three times, as he records in an inscription he left there on his last visit.²⁴ He went there in the ninth month of 1109, in the summer of 1113, and in the third month of 1116. On the second of these visits he continued on to Tai Mountain 泰山, which he climbed together with friends.²⁵ Tai Mountain was close-by. It stood another twenty-five miles to the southeast of Changqing County, so that it would have been on Mingcheng's way back home.

We have, then, seven or eight trips, scattered over a period of fourteen years. The furthest of the trips was just over one hundred miles. As for their duration, we cannot be certain, but what evidence there is suggests the trips did not last long. We note that most of the trips to Heaven View Mountain coincided with seasonal festivals, suggesting that their duration was short. Only one of Zhao Mingcheng's site inscriptions specifies the duration of a visit. That is the one from the 1109 trip to Lingyan Monastery. Mingcheng says "In all we stayed two days and then went home" (*fan su liangri nai gui* 凡宿兩日乃歸). The schedule of the 1113 trip seems to have been similarly brief. Mingcheng was at Lingyan Monastery on the sixth day of the intercalary month (June 22). Two days later he stood on top of Mount Tai.²⁶

When we compare what is claimed by scholars about song lyrics by Li Qingzhao that are conventionally dated to these years with what can be verified about Zhao Mingcheng's actual absences, a certain discrepancy is apparent. It is difficult to reconcile the concentration of the songs on the problem of loneliness, not to mention the depth of the despondency they contain, with what we know about Mingcheng's travels. We are talking here not about a discrepancy between the song lyrics and what we can construct about Zhao Mingcheng's travels, but rather about the gulf between what scholars claim the song lyrics express or react to and those travels.

Consider the following composition, one of Li Qingzhao's best known ones. It is assigned by Xu Peijun to the year 1109 and said to have been inspired by Zhao Mingcheng's trip that year to Lingyan Monastery.²⁷ That was the trip on which, according to Mingcheng's own account, he spent two nights at the monastery before going home.

To the tune "On top of Phoenix Tower, Recalling
Flute Music"²⁸

鳳凰臺上憶吹簫

Incense lies cold in the golden lion
The bedcover is tossed crimson waves.
Arising, she is too languid to comb her hair,
And lets the jeweled make-up case gather dust.
The sun climbs to the curtain hook,
She fears nothing more than longing for a distant one
and parting pain.

香冷金猊
被翻紅浪
起來慵自梳頭
任寶奩塵滿
日上簾鉤
生怕離懷別苦

How many things have happened!
About to speak, she stops.
Grown thin of late
Not from sickness over wine
Or from sadness over autumn.

多少事
欲說還休
新來瘦
非干病酒
不是悲秋

No more, no more!
 When he left this time
 A thousand verses of "Yang Pass"
 Would not have detained him.
 The Wuling man is distant now
 Clouds lock shut the tower in Qin.
 It's just the flowing river before the tower
 Should remember me
 Staring transfixed there, all day long.
 At the spot where I stood and stared
 Today are added
 Some layers of new sorrow.

休休
 這回去也
 千萬遍陽關
 也則難留
 念武陵人遠
 雲鎖秦樓
 唯有樓前流水
 應念我
 終日凝眸
 凝眸處
 從今又添
 幾段新愁

Naturally, we cannot *prove* that Li Qingzhao did not write this just as Xu Peijun imagines that she did, speaking in her own voice and describing her longing for Zhao Mingcheng when he was off on his short trip to Lingyan Monastery. Yet we can readily observe that several of the statements of the composition are at variance with its purported provenance and purpose. The woman in the song, who alternates in the song between speaker and a subject who is being observed or described, seems to be enduring a distant and long-term separation, so much so that she claims to have grown thin from her longing, and the box that contains her make-up has dust accumulated on its cover. "Yang Pass" is a parting song sung when someone is going off on a journey rather than on a pleasure outing or excursion. If the traveler could not be persuaded to delay his departure no matter how many times implored to do so, it is plausible to think that this was more than a whimsical outing.

Sensing, probably, the awkwardness of connecting such a composition to a local sightseeing outing, other scholars have recently suggested a different provenance for the song.²⁹ It was written, they assert, when Zhao Mingcheng was reinstated to official service and left Li Qingzhao behind in Qingzhou to go assume a new assignment elsewhere. But this scenario brings its own set of problems. We know for certain, thanks to Li Qingzhao's and Zhao Mingcheng's own writings, that Mingcheng served as governor in Laizhou from the autumn of 1121 to the autumn of 1124, that is, he fulfilled the standard three-year stint. We also know that he next served in the same capacity in Zizhou (淄州), from 1124 until 1126, when the impending Jurchen invasion changed everything. Some scholars want us to believe that Mingcheng left Qingzhou a few years before he assumed his post in Laizhou in 1121, and then these same scholars date compositions such as "On Top of Phoenix Tower" to those years. But there is no evidence of that early departure, nothing that establishes Mingcheng anywhere else or

holding any other office before 1121. The only sources are such literary compositions as the one under discussion that scholars date to this period, without external support, and then discuss as if they were “evidence” of the marital separation they posit. The circularity of such reasoning is clear.

There is a way out of this problem, and indeed a way out of the problems posed by all the contradictory separations of Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng that have been proposed, discussed earlier. The solution is to dispense with the assumption that whenever Li Qingzhao wrote song lyrics she wrote in a narrowly autobiographically way, so that any woman we find in her compositions corresponds to the historical Li Qingzhao and anything that woman says to a beloved is a statement addressed to Zhao Mingcheng. If we understand instead that Li Qingzhao, like every other important song lyric writer of her time, relied heavily upon conventional voices and images of lonely lovers with which to present and fill her songs, then what we will be apt to hear in “On Top of Phoenix Tower” is just such a conventional persona speaking rather than the historical Li Qingzhao. We could easily find similar voices of women protesting the departure of the man they love in song lyrics by Liu Yong, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072), Qin Guan 秦觀 (1049-1100), or for that matter by nearly any other male song writer of the era. Viewed this way, the project of locating “On Top of Phoenix Tower” in the chronology of Li Qingzhao’s life becomes quite meaningless, as does the need to link it to an actual separation between husband and wife.

We could have reached this point in the argument by more direct reasoning, yet that approach would have the disadvantage of failing to engage the vast native scholarship and criticism on Li Qingzhao, which as learned and valuable as it may be is also often fraught with questionable claims. One could simply say that we should recognize in Li Qingzhao the same ability to create and manipulate literary personas and fictive subjects that we regularly accept in the works of her male counterparts. That she is female and the other important writers male is no reason for making autobiographical assumptions about her works that we would be reluctant to adopt for other writers. It is unacceptable to contend that she would have been incapable of writing in a voice other than her own, when we recognize that male authors did that regularly. Furthermore, to think that Li Qingzhao wrote solely as devoted wife to Zhao Mingcheng and was unable to write otherwise is to reduce her literary identity and self-image to that of wife to Zhao Mingcheng. It would be problematic to do this with any woman, and it seems particularly so with a woman as outspoken and talented as Li Qingzhao. Yet that is exactly what the bulk of Li Qingzhao criticism has always done.

In closing, I will discuss one more composition by Li Qingzhao by way of illustrating the difference made once we dispense with the assumptions normally applied to her writings.

To the tune “Low Rows of Hills” ³⁰	小重山
Spring returns to Long Gate, spring grasses are green.	春到長門春草青
The Yangzi plum is beginning to open	江梅些子破
But not fully in blossom.	未開勻
In the emerald clouds basket, jade is ground into dust.	碧雲籠碾玉成塵
The lingering morning dream	留曉夢
Is broken by a cup of spring.	驚破一甌春
Flower shadows weigh down the double gates.	花影壓重門
The thin curtain is covered with pale moonlight.	疏簾鋪淡月
A lovely evening it is.	好黃昏
Three times in two years I have neglected the Lord of the East.	二年三度負東君
——	歸來也
——	著意過今春

The basket mentioned in the first stanza is the container for tea leaves or cakes of ground tea (“emerald clouds”), which were infused as a powder (“jade ground into dust”) into hot water for drinking.

Our understanding of this piece is bound to affect the way we read the last two lines, which can be taken in radically different ways. The way the composition has normally been understood is that Li Qingzhao is alone, once again, in the springtime and waiting for Zhao Mingcheng’s return.³¹ The theme of loneliness is already broached in the opening line, since Long Gate is the name of the Han Palace in which Empress Chen was confined after she lost Emperor Xiaowu’s favor. In this reading, the reference in the second stanza to neglecting the Lord of the East (the god of spring) three times in two years alludes to husband and wife being separated for long periods during the past two spring seasons. The last two lines then become Li Qingzhao’s plea to her still absent husband: “Come home now / Let us make a point of enjoying this spring.”

Some recent scholars, who prefer to construct a more independent and self-reliant Li Qingzhao, have proposed an alternate reading, although the standard reading remains the one already described.³² The composition, this revisionist opinion says, was written upon Li Qingzhao’s return to the

capital at the end of the Chongning period in 1106. She has rejoined her husband now and is determined not to waste this spring as the last two were wasted when she was alone in her natal home. Thus the last lines should be read, "Now I have returned / Let us make a point of enjoying this spring." One obvious objection to this reading, however, is that it is hard to reconcile the opening line with it. If Li Qingzhao had just rejoined her husband, why does she begin by alluding to an empress who was living in solitude? To solve this problem, it is suggested that the first line refers to the Yuanyou faction members, who had fallen out of favor. But now "spring" (i.e., political favor) has returned to them. This introduction of a political element into the poem is awkward (now we have dual subjects, the returned Li Qingzhao and the Yuanyou faction members) and ultimately unpersuasive. Moreover, it seems that the woman in the song, confined to Long Gate Palace, has not just returned from some place outside the capital. She's been there all along. Another problem is that throughout the composition it continues to sound like the woman we are viewing and eventually hear speak is alone. There is no hint of anyone being with her. Indeed, the reference to a dream implies that the one the woman is thinking of is accessible only in a dream, not in waking moments.

Different as these two readings are, they both assume that it is Li Qingzhao who is speaking in the song, and that the issue mentioned in the closing line—the key issue in the poem—broaches one way or another the reunion of Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng.

Yet another reading of the song is possible, but it has never been suggested before because it abandons the presumption that the "return" mentioned at the end must refer to Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng getting together after a period of separation. We notice, first of all, that the composition begins with a borrowed line from a song lyric by Xue Zhaoyun 薛昭蘊 (10th century) found in *Among the Flowers* 花間集.³³ That composition remains true to the allusion to Empress Chen in the sense that the entire piece is devoted to an extended description of a solitary woman who is consumed by longing, who cannot even achieve the dream she wants to dream, who weeps as she walks aimlessly about the courtyard. One of the things that Li Qingzhao liked to do as a writer was to borrow lines from earlier poets and recast them, putting them into a new setting or otherwise transforming them. Borrowing, specifically, an opening line from an earlier song lyric and then dramatically recasting the composition that follows it is something Li Qingzhao did with an opening line she took from one of Ouyang Xiu's songs (*tingyuan shenshen shen jixu* 庭院深深深幾許).³⁴ Having begun with this line and its allusion to a woman who lost favor in ancient times, what is striking in what follows is the insistence upon how pleasant everything is. The spring scene is lovely. The plum blossoms are

not, as so often in these songs, already starting to fade and drop. They have yet to fully open, suggesting that the scene is only going to become more attractive than it already is. The woman does not even seem to care much about her dream. The tea to which she helps herself wakes her up so thoroughly that there is no longer any possibility of recapturing the dream. And there is no suggestion that this is something she regrets.

The opening lines of the second stanza emphasize the beauty of the scene as evening descends. The shadows of the flowers are made to sound more substantial than the double gates themselves, and moonlight streams toward her room, flooding the blinds. No wonder the speaker observes that it is, indeed, a lovely evening. The “Lord of the East,” already personified in this appellation, is often spoken of in song lyrics as someone who comes and goes, bringing the spring with him or taking it away. Compare these examples: “She resents the Lord of the East / For being in such a hurry, / He’s just like a man on his travels in the mortal world” 怪東君，太匆匆，亦是人間行客；³⁵ “May the Lord of the East soon devise a plan for his return” 東君早作歸來計。³⁶ The second of these (which predates Li Qingzhao’s composition) applies the same phrase, *guilai* 歸來, to the Lord’s movement that is found in Li Qingzhao’s poem, and in both cases it is of course spring’s return that is meant. Li Qingzhao’s song opens with the report that spring has indeed returned. It is very natural, then, to read her last two lines this way: “Now that he (the Lord of the East) has returned again / I will make a point of enjoying this spring.” The woman in Li Qingzhao’s song may not have a mortal companion, but the Lord of the East has come back and she is determined to enjoy the spring that he has brought. This is utterly different from the mood that pervades Xue Zhaoyun’s song. As often, Li Qingzhao has transformed the poem with which she began.

No doubt there will be readers already familiar with this song in the conventional reading who will be unwilling to accept the new interpretation. For many readers, hearing a loving Li Qingzhao implore her husband to return home in the spring will seem so “right,” matching all that we think we know about her, it will be impossible to read the song any other way. No matter, the key point is not so much to argue the relative merits of the two (or three) readings, or to supplant an established one with a new one. It is more important to see what a difference it makes if we drop the assumption that Li Qingzhao is always speaking as “Li Qingzhao” in her song lyrics and always addressing the man who was her husband in real life. That the alternate reading has apparently never even occurred to anyone or been discussed in the scholarly literature speaks volumes about the weight of traditional images of Li Qingzhao and the impact and limits of Li Qingzhao criticism.

Endnotes

1. Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu* 李清照集箋注, ed. Xu Peijun 徐培均 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 1.20; cf. *Quan Song ci* 全宋詞, ed. Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋, 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 2: 928.
2. The allusion is to the famous palindrome in brocade that Su Hui 蘇蕙 sent to her distant husband, see *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 96.2523; from *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu* 李清照集箋注, 1.22, n. 4.
3. See, for example, the explanation of the line in Xu Beiwen 徐北文, *Li Qingzhao quanji pingzhu* 李清照全集評注, 2nd ed. (Jinan: Jinan chubanshe, 2005), p. 7.
4. Yi Shizhen 伊世珍, *Langhuan ji* 瑯嬛記, quoted in Chu Binjie 褚斌傑, et al., *Li Qingzhao ziliao huibian* 李清照資料彙編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), pp. 28-29.
5. Yu Zhengxie, “Yian jushi shiji” 易安居士事輯, *Guisi leigao* 癸巳類稿 15, quoted in Chu Binjie, *Li Qingzhao ziliao huibian*, p. 107.
6. Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 1.22, and also in Xu's chronological biography, pp. 423-24.
7. Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 3.309.
8. Getianshi 葛天氏 is a legendary king whose reign was marked by harmony and peace.
9. The reference is to two famous discoveries of ancient writings. The first took place in the second century B.C., when walls in the former residence of Confucius (in Lu 魯) were found to contain texts long hidden there, and the second took place in the third century B.C., when the *Bamboo Annals* 竹書紀年 and other works were recovered from a Warring States period tomb in Ji Prefecture 汲郡 (Ji County, Henan).
10. Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 3.309-10.
11. See Xu Peijun's chronological biography, Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, p. 427.
12. Huang Shengzhang 黃盛璋, “Li Qingzhao shiji kaobian” 李清照事跡考辨, *Wenxue yanjiu* 文學研究 3 (1957): 177, reprinted in Zhou Kangxie 周康燮, ed., *Li Qingzhao yanjiu huibian* 李清照研究彙編 (Hong Kong: Chongwen shudian, 1974), p. 197.
13. Hong Mai 洪邁, *Rongzhai suibi* 容齋隨筆, ed. Kong Fanli 孔凡禮 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), “Sibi” 四筆 5.684.
14. Wang Xuechu 王學初, *Li Qingzhao ji jiaozhu* 李清照集校注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), p. 25; Chen Zumei 陳祖

- 美, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan* 李清照新傳 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2001), pp. 64-65; Chen Zumei, *Li Qingzhao ci xinyi jiping* 李清照詞新譯輯評 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 2003), pp. 50-51, Yu Zhonghang 于中航, *Li Qingzhao nianpu* 李清照年譜 (Taipei: Commerical Press, 1995), p. 47; Zhuge Yibing 諸葛憶兵, *Li Qingzhao yu Zhao Mingcheng* 李清照與趙明誠 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), pp. 47-49; Deng Hongmei, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan* 李清照新傳 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005), pp. 47-55.
15. Chen Zumei, “Li Qingzhao nianpu jianbian” 李清照年譜簡編, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan*, pp. 274-75; cf. Chen Zumei, “Li Qingzhao nianpu” 李清照年譜, in *Li Qingzhao pingzhuan* 李清照評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1995), p. 291.
 16. Yang Zhongliang 楊仲良, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian jishi benmo* 續資治通鑑長編紀事本末 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2003), 121.13a/p. 3773.
 17. Yang Zhongliang, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian jishi benmo*, 121.16a/p. 3779.
 18. Zhuge Yibing, *Li Qingzhao yu Zhao Mingcheng*, pp. 38-43.
 19. Li Qingzhao, “Yulou chun” 玉樓春 (紅酥肯放瓊瑤碎), *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu* 1.27; *Quan Song ci*, 2: 926.
 20. Deng Hongmei, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan*, pp. 59-66.
 21. Xie Yi 謝逸, “Chen fujun muzhiming” 陳府君墓誌銘, “Gu Chengfeng lang Wang Jizhi muzhiming” 故承奉郎王及至墓誌銘, “Jiang jushi muzhiming” 江居士墓誌銘, and especially “Wu furen muzhiming” 吳夫人墓誌銘, *Quan Song wen*, 2877.3.254-55, 257-58, 262, and 2878.4.268-69. In this last piece, the place name Linru 臨汝 is the name of a former county in Linchuan.
 22. As seen in the poem on a portrait of Li Qingzhao written in the early Ming by Wu Kuan 吳寬, quoted in Chu Binjie, *Li Qingzhao ziliao huibian*, p. 31.
 23. On these visits to Heaven View Mountain, see Yu Zhonghang, *Li Qingzhao nianpu*, pp. 60-61 (1108), 61 (1109), 65 (1111), and 84-85 (1121).
 24. The inscription, a rubbing of which is held in the Beijing Municipal Library, is recorded in full in Yu Zhonghang, *Li Qingzhao nianpu*, pp. 62.
 25. Yu Zhonghang, *Li Qingzhao nianpu*, pp. 67-68.
 26. Yu Zhonghang, *Li Qingzhao nianpu*, p. 68.
 27. Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 1.61.

28. Adopting the version of the text in Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 1.57-58, which incorporates several textual variants not followed in the *Quan Song ci*, 2:928 version of the piece.
29. Chen Zumei, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan*, pp. 96-97, Deng Hongmei, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan*, pp. 85-87, Zhuge Yibing, *Li Qingzhao yu Zhao Mingcheng*, pp. 91-93.
30. Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu* 1.94; *Quan Song ci*, 2:929.
31. This is the way that Xu Peijun and Zhuge Yibing both understand the piece. Xu assigns the piece to the year 1128, after Li Qingzhao arrived in Jiangning, see Li Qingzhao, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 1.94. Zhuge Yibing dates the piece to 1119, when Li Qingzhao was still in Qingzhou, her husband, as Zhuge would have it, having left two years before, see *Li Qingzhao yu Zhao Mingcheng*, pp. 88-89.
32. See Chen Zumei, *Li Qingzhao ci xinyi jiping*, p. 72, and Deng Hongmei, *Li Qingzhao xinzhuan*, pp. 55-56.
33. Zhao Chongzuo 趙崇祚, *Huajian ji zhu* 花間集注, ed. Hua Zhongyan 華鍾彥 (Henan: Zhongzhou shuhua shu, 1983), 3.90.
34. Li Qingzhao, "Linjiang xian" 臨江仙, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu* 1.105; *Quan Song ci*, 2:929.
35. Chen Ji 陳紀, "Juan xunfang" 倦尋芳, *Quan Song ci*, 5:3392.
36. Shen Tang 沈唐, "Shuangye fei" 霜葉飛, *Quan Song ci*, 1:171.