

The Works of Li Qingzhao

Translated by Ronald Egan

Volume edited by Anna M. Shields

De Gruyter

I ask that you confer your evaluations upon me and that you share with me your purifying influence. I swear that dressed in plain cloth and eating vegetarian meals, I shall devote myself to “knowing the new by keeping the ancient fresh in my mind.” If ever I get to see the old rivers and mountains, it will be as before, with a single pitcher and a single rice bowl. Should I be able to return to our ancestral home, I will be sure to bathe and perfume myself three times before proceeding in. I have brought shame upon my distant relative and have presumed to defile his name.

2.3

Afterword to *Catalogue of Inscriptions on Metal and Stone*

Aside from a few of her song lyrics, this is Li Qingzhao's most celebrated composition. Technically, it is her “afterword” to a catalogue of ancient inscriptions on bronze and stone compiled by Zhao Mingcheng, her first husband. The catalogue was in a sense Zhao's great devotion and his life work. It opens with a chronological list of two thousand inscriptions, dating from high antiquity down to through the Tang dynasty and Five Dynasties period, rubbings of which Zhao collected over several decades, from wherever he could. The bulk of the catalogue, which follows the list, presents Zhao's colophons or scholarly notes on some five hundred of the inscriptions, in which he comments on their provenance, contents, and historiographical value.

Li Qingzhao's “afterword,” probably written in 1134, takes as its subject something related but yet unexpectedly distinct from Zhao Mingcheng's epigraphical project. It presents a narrative of Li Qingzhao's and Zhao Mingcheng's life together as they built up a massive collection not only of inscriptions but also of books and other art works. The narrative carries down through Zhao's untimely death at age of forty-nine, during the chaotic years of their flight from the Jurchen invasion and Li Qingzhao's unsuccessful struggles thereafter to keep intact the couple's massive collection intact. Taken as a whole, the narrative stands out for its description of the idyllic early years of the marriage, before the invasion changed everything, and the inexorable process of the widow's loss of that collection that followed, bit by bit, as well as the lessons the author draws from that experience.

There was no tradition of writing such an extensive and intimate portrait of married life. That this composition came from the hand of the wife in that

marriage made it all the more exceptional, and it immediately attracted considerable attention. One naturally wonders about Li Qingzhao's motives in producing this work. We know that at some later date she undertook the very public act of presenting Zhao Mingcheng's Catalogue to the court, ostensibly as a contribution to historical knowledge, and presumably her afterword was attached to the copy she submitted. The afterword is normally read in a straightforward manner and assumed to be nothing more than the loving narrative, tinged with nostalgia and regret, that it first appears to be. I have discussed elsewhere the reasons to believe that such a reading is naive, overlooking what were probably the complex reasons Li Qingzhao wrote the piece and the unstated aims she had in doing so.

What is this book, *Catalogue of Inscriptions on Metal and Stone*, in thirty chapters? It is a work written by Zhao Defu [Mingcheng]. Taking as his subject two thousand inscriptions carved on bronze vessels and stelae dating from the Three Dynasties of high antiquity all the way down to the Five Kingdoms of recent times, including both interior and exterior inscriptions on bells, *ding* tripods, steamers, *li* tripods, basins, water vessels, wine beakers, and grain containers, as well as those concerning the lives of both eminent officials and obscure scholars found on rounded or rectangular stelae, he corrected their errors, distinguished the authentic from the spurious, and evaluated their historical value. He composed colophons on all those inscriptions that suffice either to affirm the Way of the sages or to emend mistakes in the historiographical record. The contents are rich indeed. The calamities suffered by Wang Ya and Yuan Zai show that there is no difference between hoarding works of art and hoarding pepper.¹ Likewise, both Changyu and Yuankai were sick men. What does it matter that one was obsessed with money and the other with the *Zuo Commentary*?² Their sicknesses went by different names, but their delusion was the same.

1 Wang Ya (?–835) and Yuan Zai (d. 777) were grand councilors during the Tang dynasty who both came to disastrous ends. Wang Ya was a collector of paintings, and Yuan Zai hoarded pepper.

2 Changyu is He Jiao 和嶠 (d. 292), who was so parsimonious that he was said to have “an obsession with cash.” It was none other than Yuankai (Du Yu 杜宇, 222–285) who said this, the man who by his own admission had “an obsession with the *Zuo Commentary*,” which he spent his life annotating.

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] was vice director of the Ministry of Personnel. My husband, twenty-one years old, 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.¹ Two years later, my husband came out to serve as an official. We then resolved to eat vegetarian meals and wear clothes of coarse cloth, so that we might fulfill our intent to gather from every distant place and remote region as many of the empire's ancient inscriptions and rare engraved works as we could. As the days and months passed, our collection grew. The grand councilor stayed in the imperial city, and many of our relations 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.² 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 [1102–6] someone brought a peony painting by Xu Xi [10th c.] 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.

1 A legendary ancient emperor, whose people lived in blissful peace.

2 The reference is to two famous discoveries of ancient writings. The first took place in the second century BCE, when walls in the former residence of Confucius (in Lu) were found to contain texts long hidden there, and the second took place in the third century CE, when the *Bamboo Annals* and other works were recovered from a Warring States period tomb in Ji Prefecture (Ji County, Henan).

Later, we lived in seclusion in our hometown for ten years.¹ By managing our expenses carefully, we had more than enough for food and clothing. Then my husband served successively as prefect in two separate places, and we devoted all of his salary to purchasing books and writing materials.² Whenever we obtained a new book, the two of us would collate together, comparing other editions, then produce a corrected copy with a new title page. When we obtained a calligraphic scroll, painting, or ritual bronze, we would also pore over it to amuse ourselves, identifying any defects we could find. Our custom was to limit ourselves to the duration of one candle per night. In this way, we were able to gather works with a quality of paper and completeness in their texts and brushwork that were superior to those of other collectors. It happens that I have a good memory, and in the evenings after dinner we would sit in our hall named *Returning Home* and brew tea.³ We'd point to a pile of books and, choosing a particular event, try to say in which book, which chapter, which page, and which line it was recorded. The winner of our little contest got to drink first. When I guessed right, I'd hold the cup high and burst out laughing until the tea splattered the front of my gown. I'd have to get up without even taking a sip. Oh, how I wished we could grow old living like that! So even though our lives were fraught with apprehensions and poverty, what we valued and strove for was never compromised. When our books were complete, we built a library in *Returning Home*, with large cabinets marked with numbers. We arranged the books accordingly inside. Whoever wanted a book to read would have to get a key and record the book's number in a log before taking it out. If the borrower made the slightest mark or smudge on a page, it was his or her responsibility to repair or clean it. We were no longer as easygoing as at first. In this way, what had started as an amusement turned into a source of vexation. I couldn't stand it, so I decided that we would eat no more

1 This setback in Zhao Mingcheng's career was brought about by the fall from power and death soon thereafter of his father, Zhao Tingzhi, in 1107. The hometown they returned to was Zhao's ancestral home in Qingzhou (Qingzhou, Shandong).

2 From 1121 to 1126, Zhao Mingcheng held appointments as prefect of Laizhou and Zizhou (also Zichuan), both in modern Shandong.

3 *Returning Home Hall*, named after Tao Qian's 陶潛 (365–427) famous rhapsody, was in the Qingzhou ancestral home. Thus with this sentence Li Qingzhao apparently reverts in her narrative to the time before Zhao Mingcheng's two provincial appointments in the early 1120s.

than one meat dish per meal and dress in no more than one colored garment at a time. I wore no pearls or feathers in my hair and kept no gilded or embroidered article in my household. Whenever we came across a book of any kind whose text had no lacunae and was free of misprints, we would buy it on the spot to use as a back-up copy. Our family specialized in the study of the *Classic of Changes* and the *Zuo Commentary*, and so our collection was particularly complete with regard to scholarship on those two works. Eventually, books were scattered all over our desks and were stacked in piles on our pillows and mats. Our thoughts met with those in the books, and our minds communicated with their authors. Our eyes went forth among their pages, and our souls were enriched by them. Certainly the joy that they gave us was superior to that of dancing girls or raising dogs and horses.

In the *bingwu* year of the Jingkan period [1126], when my husband was serving as prefect of Zichuan, we heard that the Jin armies had attacked our capital. We had no idea what to do. We gazed at our overflowing boxes and brimming trunks with both fond attachment and distress. We knew they would not be ours for long. In the third month of the *dingwei* year of Jianyan [1127], we hurried south for my mother-in-law's funeral. Realizing that we could not take all those superfluous things with us, we first set aside the large printed books, then we set aside the paintings with multiple panels, and then we set aside the ancient vessels with no inscriptions. Finally, we set aside books in National University editions, ordinary paintings, and all heavy vessels. But even after these many reductions, we still traveled with fifteen carts of books. When we reached Donghai, we crossed the Huai River in a string of boats. Then we crossed the Yangzi River and arrived at Jiankang [Nanjing]. We had left under lock and key more than ten rooms of books and other items at our old residence in Qingzhou. We planned to return the following year and transport them south by boat. But in the twelfth month, the Jin sacked Qingzhou. The more than ten rooms of belongings were reduced to ashes.

In the ninth month of the *wushen* year of Jianyan [1128], my husband came out of mourning and was appointed prefect of Jiankang. His appointment ended in the third month of the following year.¹ We prepared a boat to take us to Wuhu and into Gushu, intending eventually to find a new place to live along the Gan River. But in the fifth month, when we had reached Chiyang, my husband received an imperial command appointing him prefect of Huzhou and was summoned for an audience before the imperial throne.² So we decided to make our home in Chiyang, with my husband going on by himself in response to the summons. On the thirteenth day of the sixth month, he was packed and, having left our boat, sat on the bank. Dressed in coarse clothes with a kerchief around his head, his mood that of a tiger on the prowl, his eyes darting and flashing, he looked toward our boat and bid farewell. I was in a terrible state of mind and shouted to him, "What shall I do if I hear the town is threatened?" He pointed at me and answered from afar, "Go with the crowd. If you must, discard the household belongings first, then our clothes, then the books and paintings, and then the ancient vessels. But the ritual vessels, be sure to take them with you wherever you go. Live or die with them. Don't forget!" With this, he galloped off. Hurrying toward his destination, he paid no attention to the summer heat and, as a result, fell ill. By the time he reached the traveling court, his sickness was serious. A letter from him at the end of the seventh month informed me that he was confined to bed. I was frightened, knowing that, as he was high-strung by nature, any illness would be dangerous. If he developed a fever, he was bound to take cooling medicines, and then his condition would become worse. I had our boat untied and sailed day and night to be with him, covering three hundred *li* a day. By the time I arrived, he had in fact taken large doses of bupleurum and scutellaria.³ His fever was constant now, and he had also developed dysentery. His condition was

1 Li Qingzhao omits mention of the fact that her husband's appointment was terminated because he had disgraced himself by deserting the city when it was threatened by an armed uprising.

2 After Zhao Mingcheng's removal from office, the couplet traveled upstream on the Yangzi, intending to settle in Gan County (in modern Jiangxi). But Mingcheng was suddenly summoned back to the emperor in Jiankang (Nanjing) to receive a new appointment as governor of Huzhou. Naturally, Mingcheng jumped at this chance and made haste to return to accept his new commission.

3 Both herbal medicines were used in treating fevers.

beyond treatment. I wept bitterly and was too upset to ask what plans he had made for me after he was gone. On the eighteenth day of the eighth month [of 1129], he could no longer get up. He picked up a brush and wrote out a poem. When he finished the poem, he died. He had no final instructions regarding “dividing up the incense or selling sandals.”¹

After I buried him, I had nowhere to go. The court had dispatched the empress and palace ladies to a separate location, and it was said that crossing the Yangzi River would soon be prohibited. At the time, I still had twenty thousand books, two thousand folios of inscriptions on metal and stone, and enough utensils and bedding to receive a hundred guests. My other superfluous things were comparable in quantity. I myself was very sick, and my breathing was extremely weak. I thought of my late husband’s brother-in-law [Li Zhuo], who was vice minister of the Ministry of War and was then protecting the empress at Hongzhou. I dispatched two trusted clerks to him, sending along a portion of our possessions with them for safekeeping. In the twelfth month of 1129, the Jin armies sacked Hongzhou, and everything I had sent was lost. The books that had been ferried across the Huai River in a string of boats were turned into smoke and clouds. All I had left were a few small, light-weight scrolls of calligraphy inscriptions; manuscript copies of the works of Li Bai, Du Fu, Han Yu, and Liu Zongyuan; *A New Account of Tales of the World* and *Discourses on Salt and Iron*; a few dozen mounted rubbings of stone inscriptions from the Han through Tang dynasties; some ten bronze vessels from the Three Dynasties; and a few cases of manuscripts from the Southern Tang. From time to time I would amuse myself with these during my illness. These were the only remnants I had left, as I lay sick in bed.

It was impossible to go farther up the Yangzi River, and moreover the invaders’ movements were unpredictable. My younger brother Hang was serving as reviser in the Law Code Office, and so I decided to go seek refuge with him. By the time I got to Taizhou, the prefect there had fled. When I got to Shan, I proceeded over land. I discarded my clothes and beddings as I hurried to Huangyan, where I hired a boat and set out to

1 The language is taken from Cao Cao’s deathbed instructions to his wife and concubines—quoted in Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261–303) dirge for him—the latter of whom were told they should, if they had nothing better to do, content themselves with making sandals and selling them to support themselves.

sea, hoping to catch up with the traveling court.¹ At the time the emperor had docked at Zhang'an. I followed the imperial ship to Wenzhou and from there went back to Yue. In the twelfth month of the *gengxu* year [1130], when the officials were dismissed, I proceeded to Quzhou. In the third month of the *xinhai* year of Shaoxing [1131], I went again to Yue. In the *renzi* year [1132], I returned to Hangzhou.²

Previously, when my husband was extremely ill, a certain Academician Zhang Feiqing came to see him bringing a jade pitcher that he then took away with him. The pitcher was actually made of jade-like stone. I do not know who started the rumor, but it was falsely said that there was talk of "an imperial behest of gold."³ Some even said there was going to be a secret inquiry into the matter. I was terrified. I did not dare to speak out, but I also did not dare do nothing. I decided that I would take all my household's bronze vessels and other objects and present them to the traveling court. By the time I got to Yue, the emperor had already moved to Siming.⁴ I did not want to keep those things in my house, and so I stored them all in Shan, together with the book manuscripts. Subsequently, when the imperial army was rounding up rebels, what I had stored there was all taken away. Later, I heard that it ended up in the household of the old general Li. Of "the remnants I had left," fifty or sixty percent was now lost. All that remained were some six or seven boxes of calligraphy, paintings, inkstones, and ink. I could not bear to put them anywhere else, so I kept them beside my bed, where I'd open them occasionally. At Kuaiji (Yue), I resided in a place owned by a local named Zhong.⁵ One night, a thief broke in through a wall and carried five of my boxes off. I was so grief-stricken I thought I'd die, and I offered

Zhao Mingcheng died (only to be dissuaded from doing so by a memorial of protest about the unseemliness of this attempt), was about to start an investigation in her activities and wealth. This terrified her, as well it might have.

4 This sentence evidently refers to Li Qingzhao's arrival in Yue at the end of 1129. In fact, the narrative in this section of her frantic movement from place to place is difficult to follow or to plot on a map. Scholars have speculated that the text may be corrupt, making the list of places out of order, or that Li Qingzhao has misremembered her movements. Another possibility is that her movements were simply chaotic, as she crisscrossed the region, passing through certain places (e.g., Yue or Kuaiji) multiples times in search of a refuge from the fighting that swirled around her.

5 This may refer to her stay in Kuaiji late in 1131, when on her way back toward the capital.

a handsome reward to get them back. Two days later my landlord, Zhong, brazenly produced eighteen scrolls, asking for the reward. So I knew the thief was not far away. I tried everything I could to recover the rest, but nothing would free it up. Today I know that eventually Wu Shuo, the assistant fiscal commissioner, bought everything for a low price. At this point, seventy or eighty percent of “the only remnants I had left” was lost. What remained were just one or two random and fragmentary volumes that did not make any complete title or set, together with just a few common calligraphy manuscripts. Yet I still treasured them as if they were my life itself. How foolish I am!

Today when I chance to open one of my books, it is like meeting an old friend. I remember when my husband sat in Quiet Governance Hall in Donglai.¹ Each folio of an inscription was mounted on scented paper and tied with a silken cord. Ten folios were bound together as a single volume. Every day in the evening, after the clerks had gone home, my husband would add editorial collations to two inscriptions and would write a colophon for one. Of the total of two thousand inscriptions, only 502 have colophons. Today the brush strokes in his colophons still look freshly made, but the tree trunks beside his grave are already thick. How sad it is!

Formerly, when Xiao Yi was conquered at Jiangling, he did not regret the loss of his kingdom, but he did destroy his books and paintings [so that his enemies would not obtain them]. When Yang Guang was overthrown at Jiangdu, he did not bemoan his own death, but he did arrange to take his books and paintings with him into the afterlife.² Isn't it so that what a person naturally treasures he will never forget, even in death? In my case, is it that Heaven considers me too insignificant to possess these alluring things? Or is it that my husband has consciousness in the afterlife and still prizes these things so tenaciously that he won't let them remain behind in this world? Why else would they be so difficult to acquire but so easy to lose?

1 Donglai is Laizhou, where Zhao Mingcheng served as governor in the early 1120s.

2 Xiao Yi is Emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty (r. 552–555), and Yang Guang is Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty (r. 604–618).

Sunset mist fades.

- 4 After the crows have gone to roost,
in the evening sky comes the sound of a horn.¹

The incense is burned out, some wine remains, but my mood is foul.

The west wind hurries the paulownia leaves to fall.

- 8 The paulownia leaves fall.
Once more, an autumn scene—
once more, loneliness.

3.33

To the tune “Vile Charmer, Long Version”

Who planted a banana tree in front of the window?

Its shade fills the central courtyard.

Its shade fills the central courtyard.

- 4 Leaf after leaf, heart after heart,
folding and unfolding with an excess of feeling.

It grieves the heart, midnight rain heard from my pillow,
dripping leaf to leaf, through a steady drizzle.

- 8 Dripping leaf to leaf, through a steady drizzle.
The sadness overwhelms a northerner,
who's not used to awakening to this sound in the night.

¹ The horn is presumably from a military garrison, marking the sunset hour, and serves as a reminder of the ongoing military threat from the Jurchen and, by extension, their occupation of the Song heartland.

- 8 The lamp she just managed to light has burned out,
rains strikes the pear blossoms outside the closed door.¹

3.66

To the tune “Dark Jade Table”

How long does one spring season last?
Before you know it, you’ve passed
two parts in three.

- 4 Greens have darkened and reds faded, what does it matter?
In the green willow garden
as warm winds brush the blinds,
a person sits, dispirited.

- 8 We buy flowers and wine in the Chang’an market.²
How could it compare with viewing peach and pear blossoms in my
hometown?
Not in vain does the east wind blow the traveler’s tears.
But this longing is hard to express,
12 the dreaming soul finds no support—
the only answer is to return home.

1 This line is borrowed from a Tang poem, although the original poem does not survive. A Song period source tells us that the great statesman and poet Wang Anshi (a generation older than Li Qingzhao) was particularly fond of the line, and Li Qingzhao works it into her poem.

2 Chang’an, the Tang capital, is here a substitution for one of the Song capitals, either Kaifeng (until 1127) or Lin’an (Hangzhou) afterward.