

## Interlude: 趙 宋 Li Qing-zhao's Epilogue to *Records on Metal and Stone*

Li Qing-zhao (1084–ca. 1151) was not only one of the finest lyricists of the Song Dynasty, she also left one of the most remarkable accounts of domestic life, the fall of the Northern Song, and the Song passion for collecting books and antiquities. The account was appended to her late husband's monumental collection of old inscriptions, *Records on Metal and Stone*. Her "Epilogue" is a work that unites both love and deep resentment; it commemorates her husband, Zhao De-fu's scholarly labors while at the same time warning her readers of the folly and danger of too great an attachment to mere things.

Literary Chinese generally omits pronouns, which are usually clear from context. In Li Qing-zhao's "Epilogue," however, this omission creates a significant problem: we cannot tell the first-person plural ("our collection") from the third-person singular ("his collection"). We can see how the couple's antiquarian interests gradually passed from a shared pleasure to the husband's personal obsession, an obsession from which Li Qing-zhao felt increasingly excluded; at a certain point in the translation, it thus seems appropriate to shift from "we" to "he."

What are the preceding chapters of *Records on Metal and Stone*?—the work of the governor Zhao De-fu. In it he took inscriptions on bells, tripods, steamers, kettles, washbasins, ladles, goblets, and bowls from the Three Dynasties of high antiquity all the way to the Five Dynasties (immediately preceding our Song); here also he took the surviving traces of acts by eminent men and obscure scholars inscribed on large steles and stone disks. In all there were two thousand sections of what appeared on metal and stone. Through all these inscriptions one might be able to correct historical errors, make historical judgments, and mete out praise and blame. It contains things which, on the highest level, correspond to the Way of the Sages, and on a lower level, supplement the omissions of historians. It is, indeed, a great amount of material. Yet catastrophe fell on Wang Ya and Yuan Zai alike: what did it matter that the one hoarded books and paintings while the other merely hoarded pepper? Chang-you and Yuan-kai both had a disease—it made no difference that the disease of one was a passion for money, and of the other, a passion for the transmission of knowledge and commentary. Although their reputations differed, they were the same in being deluded.

In 1101, in the first year of the Jian-zhong Reign, I came as a bride to the Zhao household. At that time my father was a division head in the Ministry of Rites, and my father-in-law, later a Grand Councilor, was an executive in the Ministry of Personnel. My husband was then twenty-one and a

student in the Imperial Academy. In those days our two families, the Zhaos and the Lis, were not well-to-do and we were always frugal. On the first and fifteenth day of every month, my husband would get a short vacation from the Academy; he would "pawn some clothes" for five hundred cash and go to the market at Xiang-guo Temple, where he would buy fruit and rubbings of inscriptions. When he brought these home, we would sit facing one another, rolling them out before us, examining and munching. And we thought ourselves persons of the age of Ge-tian.<sup>1</sup>

When, two years later, he went to take up a post, we lived on rice and vegetables and dressed in common cloth; but he would search out the most remote spots and out-of-the-way places to fulfill his interest in the world's most ancient writings and unusual script. When his father, the Grand Councillor, was in office, various friends and relations held positions in the Imperial Libraries; there one might find many ancient poems omitted from the *Classic of Poetry*, unofficial histories, and writings never before seen, works hidden in walls and recovered from tombs. My husband would work hard at copying such things, drawing ever more pleasure from the activity, until he was unable to stop himself. Later, if he happened to see a work of painting or calligraphy by some person of ancient or modern times, or unusual vessels of the Three Dynasties of high antiquity, he would still pawn our clothes to buy them. I recall that in the Chong-ning Reign, a man came with a painting of peonies by Xu Xi and asked twenty thousand cash for it. In those days twenty thousand was a hard sum to raise, even for children of the nobility. We kept the painting with us a few days, and having thought of no plan by which we could purchase it, we returned it. For several days afterward my husband and I faced one another in deep depression.

Later we lived privately at home for ten years, gathering what we could here and there to have enough food and clothing. Afterward, my husband governed two prefectures in succession, and he used up all his salary on "lead and wooden tablets" for scholarly work. Whenever he got a book, we would collate it with other editions and make corrections together, repair it, and label it with the correct title. When he got hold of a piece of calligraphy, a painting, a goblet, or a tripod, we would go over it at our leisure, pointing out faults and flaws, setting for our nightly limit the time it took one candle to burn down. Thus our collection came to surpass all others in fineness of paper and the perfection of the characters.

I happen to have an excellent memory, and every evening after we finished eating, we would sit in the hall called "Return Home" and make tea. Pointing to the heaps of books and histories, we would guess on which line of which page in which chapter of which book a certain passage could be found. Success in guessing determined who got to drink his or her tea first. Whenever I got it right, I would raise the teacup, laughing so hard that the tea would spill in my lap, and I would get up, not having to been able to

drink any of it at all. I would have been glad to grow old in such a world. Thus, even though we were living in anxiety, hardships, and poverty, our wills were not broken.

When the book collection was complete, we set up a library in "Return Home" Hall, with huge bookcases where the books were catalogued in order. There we put the books. Whenever I wanted to read, I would ask for the key, make a note in the ledger, then take out the books. If one of them was a bit damaged or soiled, it would be my responsibility to repair the spot and copy it out in a neat hand. There was no longer the same ease and casualness as before. This attempt to make things convenient led instead to nervousness and anxiety. I couldn't bear it. I began to plan how to make do with only one meat dish in our meals and how to do away with all the finery in my dress. For my hair there were no ornaments of bright pearls or kingfisher feathers; the household had no implements for gilding or embroidery. Whenever he came upon a history or the work of a major writer, if there was nothing wrong with the printing and no errors in the edition, he would buy it on the spot to have as a second copy. His family always specialized in the *Classic of Changes* and *The Zuo Tradition*, so the collection of works in those two traditions was the most perfect and complete. Books lay ranged on tables and desks, scattered on top of one another on pillows and bedding. This was what took his fancy and what occupied his mind, what drew his eyes and what his spirit inclined to; and his joy was greater than the pleasures others had in dancing girls, dogs, or horses.

In 1126, the first year of the Jing-kang Reign, my husband was governing Ze-chuan when we heard that the Jin Tartars were moving against the capital. He was in a daze, realizing that all those full trunks and overflowing chests, which he contemplated so lovingly and mournfully, would surely soon be his possessions no longer. In the third month of spring in 1127, the first year of the Jian-yan Reign, we hurried south for the funeral of his mother. Since we could not take the overabundance of our possessions with us, we first gave up the bulky printed volumes, the albums of paintings, and the most cumbersome of the vessels. Thus we reduced the size of the collection several times, and still we had fifteen cartloads of books. When we reached Dong-hai, it took a string of boats to ferry them all across the Huai, and again across the Yangzi to Jian-kang. In our old mansion in Qing-zhou we still had more than ten rooms of books and various items locked away, and we planned to have them all brought by boat the next year. But in the twelfth month Jin forces sacked Qing-zhou, and those ten or so rooms I spoke of were all reduced to ashes.

The next autumn, the ninth month of 1128, my husband took charge of Jian-kang Prefecture but relinquished the position in the spring of the following year. Again we put everything in boats and went up to Wu-hu and Gu-shu, intending to take up lodging on the river Gan. That summer in the fifth month we reached Chi-yang. At that point an imperial decree arrived, ordering my husband to take charge of Hu-zhou and to proceed to an audience with the Emperor before he took up the office. Therefore he had the

<sup>1</sup>Ge-tian was a mythical ruler of high antiquity, when everyone lived in a state of perfect contentment.

household stop at Chi-yang, from which he went off alone to answer the summons.

On August 13, he set off to carry out his duty. He had the boats pulled up onto the shore, and he sat there on the bank, in summer clothes with his headband high on his forehead, his spirit like a tiger's, his eyes gleaming as though they would shoot into a person, while he gazed toward the boats and took his leave. I was terribly upset. I shouted to him, "If I hear the city is in danger, what should I do?" He answered from afar, hands on his hips: "Follow the crowd. If you can't do otherwise, abandon the household goods first, then the clothes, then the books and scrolls, then the old bronzes—but carry the sacrificial vessels for the ancestral temple yourself. Live or die with them; don't give *them* up!" With this he galloped off on his horse.

As he was hurrying on his journey, he suffered sunstroke from the intense heat, and by the time he reached imperial headquarters, he had contracted a malarial fever. At the end of September, I received a letter that he was sick in bed. I was very alarmed, considering my husband's excitable nature and how nothing had been able to prevent the illness from deteriorating into fever; his temperature might rise even higher, and in that case he would have to take chilled medicines; then the sickness would really be something to worry about. Thereupon I set out by boat and traveled three hundred leagues in one day and one night. At the point when I arrived he was taking large doses of *chai-hu* and yellow *qin*; he had a recurring fever with dysentery, and the illness appeared mortal. I was weeping and in such a desperate state I could not bring myself to ask him what was to be done after his death. On October 18 he could no longer get up; he took a brush and wrote a poem. When he finished it, he passed away, with no thought at all for the future provision of his family.

After the funeral was over, I had nowhere to go. His Majesty had already sent the palace ladies elsewhere, and I heard that future crossings of the Yangzi were to be prohibited. At the time I still had twenty thousand *juan* of books, two thousand copies of inscriptions on metal and stone with colophons, table services and mats enough to entertain a hundred guests, along with other possessions equaling those already mentioned.<sup>2</sup> I also became very sick, to the point where my only vital sign was a rasping breath. The situation was getting more serious by the day. I thought of my husband's brother-in-law, an executive in the Ministry of War on garrison duty in Hong-zhou, and I dispatched two former employees of my husband to go ahead to my brother-in-law, taking the baggage. In February that winter, the Jin invaders sacked Hong-zhou and all was lost. Those books which, as I said, it took a string of boats to ferry across the Yangzi were scattered into clouds of smoke. What remained were a few light scrolls and calligraphy pieces; manuscript copies of the collections of Li Bo, Du Fu, Han Yu, and Liu Zong-yuan; a copy of *Current Tales and Recent Bon-mots*; a copy of

<sup>2</sup>A *juan*, originally a "scroll," came to be something like a chapter. The size of a library was measured not in volumes but in *juan*.

*Discourses on Salt and Iron*; a few dozen rubbings of stone inscriptions from the Han and Tang; ten or so ancient tripods and cauldrons; and a few boxes of Southern Tang manuscript editions—all of which I happened to have had removed to my chambers to pass the time during my illness, now a solitary pile of leftovers.

Since I could no longer go upriver, and since the movements of the invaders were unpredictable, I was going to stay with my younger brother Li Hang, a reviser of edicts. By the time I reached Tai-zhou, the governor of the place had already fled. Proceeding on to Shan through Mu-zhou, we left the clothing and linen behind. Hurrying to Yellow Cliff, we hired a boat to take us toward the sea, following the fleeing court. The court halted a while in Zhang-an, then we followed the imperial barge on the sea route to Wen-zhou and Yue-zhou. In February, during the fourth year of the Jian-yan Reign, early in 1131, all the officials of the government were released from their posts. We went to Qu-zhou, and then that May, now the first year of the Shao-xing Reign, we returned to Yue-zhou, and in 1132 back again to Hang-zhou.

When my husband had been gravely ill, a certain academician, Zhang Fei-qing, had visited him with a jade pot—actually it wasn't really jade but alabaster. I have no idea who started the story, but there was a false rumor that they had been discussing presenting it to the Jin as a tribute gift. I also learned that someone had made formal charges in the matter. I was terrified and dared say nothing, but I took all the bronze vessels and such things in the household and was ready to turn them over to the imperial court. But by the time I reached Yue-zhou, the court had already gone on to Si-ming. I didn't dare keep these things in the household any longer, so I sent them along with the manuscript books to Shan. Later when the imperial army was rounding up defeated enemy troops, I heard that these had all been taken into the household of General Li. That "solitary pile of leftovers," of which I spoke, had now been reduced by about fifty or sixty percent. All that remained were six or so baskets of books, paintings, ink and inkstones that I hadn't been able to part with. I always kept these under my bed and opened them only with my own hands.

At Kuai-ji, I chose lodging in a cottage belonging to a local named Zhong. Suddenly one night someone made off with five of the baskets through a hole in the wall. I was terribly upset and offered a substantial reward to get them back. Two days later, Zhong Fu-hao next door produced eighteen of the scrolls and asked for a reward. By that I knew that the thief was not far away. I tried every means I could, but I still couldn't get hold of the rest. I have now learned that they were all purchased by the Circuit Fiscal Supervisor Wu Ye. Now seventy or eighty percent of that "solitary pile of leftovers" is gone. I still have a few volumes from three or four sets, none complete, and some very ordinary pieces of calligraphy, yet I treasure them as if I were protecting my own head—foolish person that I am!

Nowadays when I chance to look over these books, it's like meeting old friends. And I recall when my husband was in the hall called "Calm Gov-



ernance" in Lai-zhou: he had first finished binding the volumes, making title slips of rue leaves to keep out insects and tie ribbons of blue silk, binding ten *juan* into one volume. Every day in the evening when the office clerks had gone home, he would do editorial collations on two *juan* and write a colophon for one inscription. Of those two thousand inscriptions, colophons were written on five hundred and two. It is so sad—today the ink of his writing seems still fresh, but the trees on his grave have grown to an armspan in girth.

Long ago when the city of Jiang-ling fell, Xiao Yi, Emperor Yuan of the Liang, did not regret the fall of his kingdom, yet destroyed his books and paintings [unwilling to see them fall into the hands of his conquerors]. When his capital at Jiang-du was sacked, Yang Guang, Emperor Yang of the Sui, wasn't concerned with his own death, only with recovering his books [demonstrated when his spirit overturned the boat in which they were being transported so that he could have his library in the land of the dead]. It must be that the passions of human nature cannot be forgotten, even standing between life and death. Or perhaps it is Heaven's will that beings as insignificant as ourselves are not fit to enjoy such superb creatures.<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps the dead too have consciousness, and they still treasure such things and give them their devoted attention, unwilling to leave them in the world of the living. How hard they are to obtain and how easy to lose!

From the time I was eighteen [two years younger than Lu Ji was supposed to have been when he wrote "The Poetic Exposition on Literature"] until now at the age of fifty-two [two years after the age at which Chu Boyou realized the error of his earlier life]—a span of more than thirty years—how much calamity, how much gain and loss have I witnessed! When there is possession, there must be loss of possession; when there is a gathering together, there must be a scattering—this is the constant principle in things. Someone loses a bow; another person finds a bow; what's so special in that? The reason why I have recorded this story from beginning to end in such detail is to let it serve as a warning for scholars and collectors in later generations.

—Written this second year of the Shao-xing Reign (1132), the first of October.

Li Qing-zhao

<sup>3</sup>"Superb creatures," *you-wu*, here figuratively applied to books and antiques, usually refers to dangerously beautiful women, who inspire destructive passion in those attracted to them.