Introduction

This is a study of the woman poet in Chinese history that people think they know best. Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–ca. 1155) was famous for her literary skill in her own lifetime, nine centuries ago, and has remained so up to the present day. She is often referred to as China’s greatest woman poet. She may or may not be that, but, at the least, she has name recognition that no other Chinese woman writer can match. It would also be hard to think of another woman whose most celebrated poetic lines are as widely known and quoted, even today.

For a writer so renowned and beloved in China, there is conspicuously little written about her in English. The only book-length discussion of her life and works is a slim volume that was published nearly fifty years ago. It is a sympathetic account, and one that will strike many readers today as uncritical. Li Qingzhao’s poetry has fared better with translators, of whom it has attracted many. English renderings of her poems turn up regularly in anthologies of Chinese poetry. There are even some translations of her complete poems. But since only a few dozen of her works survive, even a “complete translation” yields but a small quantity of work. As effective as some of the translations are, it must be difficult for English readers to understand how this writer of so few and generally very short poems, which seem to be mostly about loneliness, nostalgia, and regret, could have won such acclaim in her native culture.

Yet it is not only the dearth of English-language writings about her life and work that this study seeks to redress. The Chinese scholarship on Li Qingzhao is vast, so much so that the quantity is overwhelming. It has been estimated, for example, that more has been written about her in Chinese since the founding of the People’s Republic than about any other single poet
of her dynasty (the Song dynasty, 960–1279), including such protean figures as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210), Fan Chengda 范成大 (1126–93), and Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 (1140–1207). Such is the intensity of the enthusiasm for her best-known compositions that it would be easy to find dozens if not hundreds of short articles on each one of them. But the enthusiasm is not always joined by critical acumen. The redundancy in this vast modern scholarship devoted to her writings is considerable.

Li Qingzhao has always been a great exception in Chinese literary history. She is the lone woman to have achieved canonical status among poets of her time or, as many would say, in the entire sweep of Chinese history. Yet it is not enough simply to recognize her as an exception, the one woman who has been vaulted into the inner sanctum of “great writers,” and to leave it at that. It turns out that the tradition did not make an exception so readily or innocently. For a woman to be allowed into such company, who she was and what she stood for had to be changed in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways. These changes are as much the subject of this book as is the task of trying to peel back the overlays, imposed on her through the centuries, to see what we can say about her once we dispense with them. The act of peeling back is itself no simple matter. Nearly everything that is ordinarily said about Li Qingzhao is a product of the refraction of what she originally wrote through the prism of elaborate interpretive schemes devised to make her acceptable to dominant cultural values. To further complicate the situation, there is every reason to think that her works, as they have been constituted since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), are a messy hodgepodge of authentic compositions, later imitations, and outright fabrications made, in part, to reinforce conventional images of her.

Chapter 1 (“Women as Writers in the Song Dynasty”) presents a survey of women’s writing generally as it existed in Li Qingzhao’s time. Unlike in later imperial times, women’s writing was extraordinarily marginalized during the Song period. We know from anecdotes, mostly, about the occasional singing girl who could compose her own lyrics to the songs she performed. But such women were rare, and their lyrics, if they are recorded at all, survive only because they were viewed as anomalies. One also encounters reports of educated ladies, gentlewomen, who could compose poetry, although such reports are few. It turns out that one of the best known among these women, apart from Li Qingzhao, may well have been a complete fabrication and the poems attributed to her written by men. With that woman poet, Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑真, we encounter a problem that will recur several times in
later chapters and one that may be acute in Chinese literary history. Men
had long since cultivated the technique of writing in the guise of women.
This tradition of male writers adopting a female persona complicated the
challenges for the unusual woman who came along and sought to write “in
her own voice.” This chapter’s discussion of the paucity of women’s writing
at the time as well as the way such writing was often destroyed by women
themselves—who were only too aware of the social taboos it violated—or
manipulated by male anthologists who preserved it is intended to lay the
groundwork for a historicized reappraisal of Li Qingzhao. While her status as
a staple of China’s literary history as written in modern times may in many
ways be well-deserved and admirable, it also runs the risk of undermining
a historicized appreciation of her accomplishment. In modern literary
histories, Li Qingzhao has become a given: there were the great male writers,
and then, oh yes, there was that one woman too. It is only when we recon-
struct the social and literary world in which Li Qingzhao lived and wrote,
and apprehend the gender biases applied to women writers—biases that
are almost inconceivable by modern standards—that we are in a position to
gauge accurately Li Qingzhao’s achievement.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn to Li Qingzhao herself. The first of these (“Writing
and the Struggle for Acceptance”) begins by looking at references in her
writings to the act of writing, which show how central the activity was to her
life and self-image. The chapter then takes up the earliest critical assessments
of Li Qingzhao, some written while she was still alive, which reveal an inter-
esting disparity between praise for her writing and reservations about her
conduct. The shi 詩 poetry that she wrote in a distinctly masculine style is
examined next. Such writing was in part her reaction to the skepticism she
faced as an aspiring writer and a means by which she sought to create space
for herself in the male domain of writing. Finally, Li Qingzhao’s audacious
essay on the song lyric form (ci 詞) is discussed. Here she claims special
understanding of the form and denigrates the work in it by the most famous
writers of the preceding generations (all male). If the essay is considered
from the standpoint of gender, its opening section can be seen as a veiled
expression of the author’s own aspiration that she be taken seriously as a
writer.

Chapter 3 takes up issues that need to be discussed as preliminaries to
an examination of Li Qingzhao’s own output in the song lyric form, the cor-
nerstone of her work as a writer. Foremost among these are the questions
concerning the integrity of her corpus of song lyrics. More than one-half of

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the compositions attributed to her are of questionable authenticity. They did not appear until centuries after her death, and their provenance is unknown. Given what we know about the way famous persons in Chinese literary history “attracted” later attributions to them, and especially about the vogue of writing song lyrics “in the style” of Li Qingzhao, we have good reason to be skeptical about the authenticity of these works. It is not only the reliability of particular song lyrics that is in question. The haphazard mixing of authentic and probably inauthentic compositions together has affected the overall impression conveyed by her “corpus” as it is usually read. Another issue is the habit of reading Li Qingzhao’s song lyrics autobiographically, as if they could be nothing other than simple first-person statements that reflect her personal circumstances. The effects of this way of reading Li Qingzhao are explored in conjunction with an examination of the contradictory findings of the latest Chinese-language scholarship concerning Li.

It was my initial plan to move straightaway to Li Qingzhao’s song lyrics after the discussion of these knotty problems. Instead, I take up in chapter 4 (“Widowhood, Remarriage, Divorce”) the momentous events that overtook Li Qingzhao when she was in her early forties and changed her life forever: the Jurchen invasion of North China, her flight southward with tens of thousands of compatriots, the death of her husband during that flight, her desperate wandering in the years that followed, and her remarriage and hasty divorce thereafter, which involved a court trial and brief imprisonment. This chapter includes discussion of a remarkable letter that Li Qingzhao wrote to the high official who intervened and secured her release from prison, in which she describes how she was tricked into her second marriage and the humiliation it occasioned her.

The following chapters (5, “Writings from the Aftermath,” and 6, “The ‘Afterword’”) present and analyze a sudden burst of writing that followed her divorce. Li Qingzhao threw herself back into writing, producing an astonishing variety of texts in multiple forms. The writings include, in addition to the letter just mentioned, poems on contemporary politics addressed to emissaries who were about to go on a mission to the enemy Jurchen court, other poems with political themes, and a remarkable collection of writings on a board game called Capture the Horse that was conceived as a contest of military strategy. Chapter 6 is devoted to Li Qingzhao’s best-known prose work, also from this period, the lengthy biographical afterword she wrote to her first husband’s (Zhao Mingcheng’s 趙明誠 [1081–1129]) scholarly notes on his collection of rubbings of ancient inscriptions. This afterword is
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analyzed not simply as a nostalgic commemoration of her marriage, the way it is usually read. Instead, it is situated in the context of the difficulties Li Qingzhao faced after her divorce. Such a reading allows us to discern new meanings and motives in this celebrated text.

Chapters 7 through 9 take up the reception of Li Qingzhao from the period right after her death through the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) (7, “The Beginnings of ‘Li Qingzhao’”), the Ming-Qing period (1368–1911) (8, “Saving the Widow, Denying the Remarriage”), and the twentieth century down to the present day (9, “Modernism, Revisionism, Feminism”). In the first of these we see the beginnings of the process whereby the historical writer and person, who was in many ways unconventional and threatening to prevailing notions of how a woman should behave, was refashioned into someone more acceptable to cultural norms. The process is one in which both identifiable literary critics and more amorphous forces of legend and hearsay played a role. In the Ming-Qing period, two separate developments affected the ways that Li Qingzhao was viewed and further reformulated. In literary circles, writing by women gradually became more widespread and acceptable, at least in certain quarters. As this happened, Li Qingzhao’s stature was enhanced as a leading precedent and even inspiration for aspiring women writers. But during the same centuries, tolerance for remarriage by widows diminished, as the state-sponsored cult of “widows’ chastity” gained ground. As applied posthumously to Li Qingzhao, these two developments came into conflict with each other, and by late Ming times critics begin to express dismay that such an exceptionally talented woman poet could have violated womanly virtue by marrying again after she was widowed. Scholars who could not accept such deviant behavior then took it upon themselves to undermine the several Song dynasty sources that record her remarriage. A peculiar scholarly campaign was undertaken to purify or vindicate Li Qingzhao from what were said to be slanderous Song dynasty reports that she had remarried. A newly reformulated Li Qingzhao as virtuous widow devoted to the memory of Zhao Mingcheng emerged from this campaign by the late Qing period.

It was this image of Li Qingzhao that the modern age inherited, when the first modern histories of Chinese literature were written by May Fourth era scholars. Chapter 9 follows this story of Li Qingzhao’s elevation in twentieth-century literary history to the status of lone canonical woman poet. Her seemingly secure stature was abruptly jolted in 1957 by two lengthy studies by a young scholar who challenged the Qing denial of her remarriage, refuting
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These studies touched off a furious controversy that raged back and forth for the remainder of the century, pitting older and more traditionally minded scholars, some of whom had a vested interest in preserving the May Fourth narrative, against those who now saw the weaknesses of the Qing scholarship. The controversy, which quickly devolved into heated arguments between the “remarriage camp” and the “anti-remarriage camp,” has its own interest for what it shows about the malleability of the biographical past, the way Qing “evidential scholarship” was anything but objective, and the enormous appeal and staying power that accrues to certain fabricated images of iconic historical figures, not to mention the confounding of scholarship with perceived moral imperatives. Although there are still, today, those who hold adamantly to the earlier view, the scholarly consensus has reversed, and it is now generally accepted, especially by younger scholars, that Li Qingzhao’s remarriage is historical fact.

The advantage of putting the two chapters on Li Qingzhao’s song lyrics at the end of the study, after the contentious story of her reception has been told, paradoxically, is that we can read these works with certain preconceptions and images already in mind. Her celebrity in literary history has long since been transported into cultural history. As loving, long-suffering, talented, and wholly devoted wife, “Li Qingzhao” has become an essential part of modern China’s sense of its cultural past and values, as one perceives from the several memorial halls dedicated to her today (three in her native Shandong and one in Zhejiang), the modern musical settings of her song lyrics, the numerous imaginary portraits of her circulating in print and digital form (which conventionally depict her as a wispy, vulnerable, and hypersensitive lady), and the endless telling and retelling of her “biography” in popular forms.

The largest of the Li Qingzhao memorial halls today is that situated in Leaping Spring Park 趵突泉公園 in the city center of Jī’ān, Shandong. It is a complex of buildings, including a “former residence.” Visitors to the memorial hall are greeted by two calligraphy inscriptions displayed just inside the main entrance that read “The Poet of Her Time” 一代詞人 and “Her Works Transmitted and Recited for a Thousand Autumns” 傳誦千秋. The inscriptions are written in the calligraphy of Guo Moruo, the first president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a man who played the role of cultural czar for much of the Mao period in the People’s Republic of China. Just behind the entrance, one comes upon a larger than life-size statue of our poet, standing some ten feet high, done in alabaster white. Behind the
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statue is the entire poem Guo Moruo wrote for the memorial hall, from which the entrance inscriptions are taken. This is the poem:

一代詞人有舊居 The poet of her time,
her former residence is here.
半生漂泊憾何如 For half a lifetime she drifted haplessly about,
such regrets she had!
冷清今日成轟烈 But her loneliness and neglect has today
become towering fame,
傳誦千秋是著書 Transmitted and recited for a thousand autumns,
the writings she composed.

In the poem and the inscriptions lifted from it, we see official government approbation of Li Qingzhao aligning itself with and reinforcing popular images of her. The memorial hall itself contains several rooms displaying “scenes” from Li Qingzhao’s life. Wax statues representing her and those close to her are arranged in theatrical poses. Prominently featured in these scenes are images of Li Qingzhao’s wifely devotion to Zhao Mingcheng and her courageous steadfastness as widow after his death.

The truth about Li Qingzhao is both more interesting and more elusive than such popular images. But it is so difficult to extricate ourselves from the accretion of her legend through “a thousand autumns” that it is best to deal with that accretion first, in all of its layers and internal tensions, before finally coming to the literary work for which she is best known, her song lyrics. It is naive to think that anyone who knows anything about Chinese history can come to Li Qingzhao’s song lyrics free of preconceptions and assumptions about their author and what she expresses in them. It is preferable to educate ourselves first about those preconceptions, to see how they came about and what needs they cater to, many of which are certainly contrary to what Li Qingzhao sought to convey through her writing. The hope is that once we do this we will be in a better position, returning finally to Li Qingzhao’s works, to give them a fairer and less prejudiced reading. For all the books and articles that have been written about Li Qingzhao’s song lyrics, there is very little discussion of them as literary works independent of her biography, which is seen as a melodrama of virtue in the face of tragedy. As one of the first women writing in a poetic genre that already featured women and women’s personas, Li Qingzhao produced strikingly distinctive and effective compositions, as Chinese readers have sensed for centuries. There is much to say in the final chapters about the interest of her work and her achievement
as a writer without confounding these with her life circumstances in a reductive way. Chapters 10 and 11 also treat the divergences between the early song lyrics that have a strong claim to authenticity and much later attributions that do not.

The reconsideration of Li Qingzhao’s life and works presented in this volume owes a substantial debt to feminist literary criticism and scholarship as it has developed in recent decades outside of Chinese studies. Discoveries about the meanings found in writings by women of Europe and America before the twentieth century, including well-known writers and those long neglected, have been valuable in clarifying gender dynamics and biases against women who write that are certainly not unique to China. Thus I have profited from reading studies by Rita Felski, Sarah Prescott, Paula Backscheider, and others. In addition, new insights developed during the past twenty-five years in the burgeoning fields of Chinese women’s history and women’s literary history, mostly focused on the Ming-Qing period, have also helped to shape my understanding of what questions to formulate and how to go about answering them. Still, I have tried to remain cognizant of the special circumstances and challenges that Li Qingzhao faced as a woman writer of her time, long before there emerged in China communities of women writers who mentored and encouraged each other, and I do not assume that the issues and concerns relevant to women writers in premodern Europe and America are wholly relevant or transportable to twelfth-century China. One of the goals of this study is to contribute to the fields of women’s literary criticism and women’s history by bringing to them a new case study with its own dynamics and circumstances, to enlarge the discussion and perhaps even to recenter it to a certain degree.