

On the Much-Debated Remarriage Case of Li Qingzhao

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Abstract: This article examines Li Qingzhao's much-debated remarriage case. Rumor had it that the preeminent female *Ci* lyric writer once remarried to a corrupt minor official Zhang Ruzhou after her husband's death. However, by closely studying Li's biographical records and evidence unearthed by Qing textual researchers, we argue that Qingzhao was attacked primarily because of her satirical literary criticism; she was simply ill-tolerated by a male-dominant society.

Keywords: Li Qingzhao, Remarriage, Zhang Ruzhou

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Introduction

Li Qingzhao 李清照 (styled Yian 易安, A.D. 1093- 1136?), of the Song Dynasty, was one of the greatest *Ci* writers of Chinese literary history. By the voluminous works she bequeathed to this world, she had attained considerable fame. Nonetheless, her literary criticism, as was of a satiric style, had been ill-tolerated by the male-dominant society. A sizable group of Southern Song scholars and their disciples, often with scorn, recorded that Li Qingzhao had remarried to a corrupt minor official Zhang Ruzhou 张汝舟 after her husband's death. These records are often seen in sketchy notes. Due to the "weedy and scrambled" 芜杂 nature of the Song sketchy writings, represent-day researchers tend to deposit little faith on the creditability of these works, if not directly labeling them "fake." The situation calls for later scholars, especially those of the Qing Dynasty, to use textual criticism to defend her. Their impetus came mainly from an orthodox notion that an elite woman like Li Qingzhao, in a rigid new-Confucian society like the Song, should not and would not choose to remarry at all.

This author, too, is inclined to believe that the Southern Song statements about Li Qingzhao's remarriage were misleading and mistaken. Still, this judgment does not come from the ground of ethical consideration. It is now a well-established view that the Song people were relatively open-minded to women's chastity issues, while the Ming and Qing societies did impose strict moral codes upon women. To put it simply, verifying Li Qingzhao's status as a chaste widow will not result in any emotional fulfillment for this author. The zeal of Qing textual researchers in purging Qingzhao from the so-called "stigma" of remarriage is not shared by this author, for she does not see this event, should it have happened, as a "stigma." The study only intends to render some historical facts regarding the argued case.

Nevertheless, this author should like to unearth the underlying mechanism to impose moral judgments upon Li Qingzhao from a cultural perspective.

Hardly upon any English resource this paper can rely. Two crucial English works on Li Qingzhao, Hu Pin-Ch'ing's *Li Ch'ing-Chao* and Kenneth Rexroth's *Li Ch'ing-Chao: Complete Poems*, both deal with her literary

achievements and talk very little about the remarriage case. Therefore, this paper will primarily reference Chinese sources, and pay attention to the discrepancies in her biographical records.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first gives an outline of the life of Li Qingzhao; the second traces the origin of the slanderous records about her remarriage; the third examines the gender issues in traditional Chinese society, especially that of women's remarriage.

Family Background and Conjugal life

Li Qingzhao was born to a prestigious official family in Jinan 济南, Shandong province, in 1083. Her father Li Gefei 李格非 (styled Wenshu 文叔), Minister of Rite 礼部侍郎, was a *Jinshi* degree holder as well as a classicist. The literary grace demonstrated in his essay, *The Renowned Gardens of Loyang* 洛阳名园记, earned him fame and celebrity in the Song elite circles; he engaged in literary correspondence with Su Shi 苏轼, one of the greatest poets of the Song. Qingzhao's mother, nee Wang, who also composed poems and essays, was the granddaughter of the *Zhuangyuan* 状元 scholar Wang Gongchen 王拱辰. Both her parents being erudite and lettered, Li Qingzhao, the first and the most favorite child of the couple, was provided with the best education available to a girl in Song China.

The reformative measures initiated by Wang Anshi 王安石, Prime Minister of Emperor Shen Zong 神宗, caused a fierce bipartisan rivalry which was later to be known as China's worst dynastic strife. A steady member of the Conservative Party and antagonistic to Wang Anshi's Reformatory Party, Li Gefei nevertheless married his beloved 18-year-old daughter to Zhao Mingcheng 赵明诚, the third son of Zhao Tingzhi 赵挺之, a backbone figure of the Reformatory Party. In 1102, the second year of the wedding, Zhao Tingzhi was promoted to the office of vice-Prime Minister, his boss being the notorious Cai Jing 蔡京. Meanwhile, Li Gefei and 16 other conservative officials were expelled from the capital. In the climax of the political struggle, righteousness and concern for her father goaded Qingzhao to write a series of poems to admonish her father-in-law. One of them reads: "Your fingers are eager while your heart chills" 炙手可热心可寒. This statement shows Qingzhao's integrity and political awareness.

The marital life of Zhao Mingcheng and Li Qingzhao was delightful. They loved each other so profoundly that any temporary separation was unbearable. Qingzhao wrote a sizable amount of *Ci* poems to express her affectionate yet sentimental feelings when her husband was away from her; some became classics as love lyrics. The young couple were deeply devoted to poetry, painting, music, and antique collection. The following is an attempted translation of her account about their harmonious life, quoted from her *Jinshi Lu Houxu* 金石录后序:

My husband was twenty-one then, studying at the Imperial Academy. Neither the Zhao nor the Li family was wealthy. We modestly led our lives. On the first and the fifteenth days of each month, when leave of absence was granted, my husband would pawn his clothes for five hundred copper coins to buy fruit and rubbings of stone inscriptions from the market Xiangguo Sanctuary 相国寺. He brought them home, and we'd take delight in studying the rubbings while eating the fruit. We called ourselves the People of Ge TianL, the Ancient Ideal Land 葛天氏之民.⁽¹⁾

In 1121 Mingcheng was appointed to be the Magistrate of Laizhou 莱州, and then to various local magistrate posts in Shandong. He continued to exhaust his stipend to enlarge and enrich his collections.

(1) Li Qingzhao "Jinshi Lu Houxu 金石录后序," in *Li Qingzhao Ji Jiao Zhu* 李清照集校注, ed. Xuechu Wang (1979), 176-77.

A national catastrophe befell Northern Song Dynasty in 1127. The Jurchens, who had long been menacing the Empire from the north, looted the Song capital Bian Liang 汴梁, captured Emperor Hui Zong 徽宗, Emperor Qin Zong 钦宗 and the majority of the Royal family. The rest migrated south of the Yangtze. This year Mingcheng went to Jiankang 建康 (present-day Nanjing 南京) to take care of his mother's funeral, bringing with him the most valuable portion of their collections. Before long, Qingzhao was also forced to flee to the south because the Jurchen troops began to plunder Laizhou. Antiques, curio, and paintings went up in flames in the amount of ten storage rooms. In 1128 Mingcheng was appointed to the office of the Magistrate of Jiankang but soon got dismissed. In 1129 he was dispatched to Hu Zhou 湖州. On his way to the new post, he fell sick. About one month after Qingzhao managed to travel to his side, in the August of 1129, he died. After Mingcheng's burial, Qingzhao continued to flee south, following the route of the fleeing court. She encountered numerous annoyances and frustrations, most of their collections scattered or stolen during the journey. In 1132, the second year of Shao Xing 绍兴二年, at the age of 49, she finally settled down in the temporary capital Lin An 临安 (present-day Hang Zhou 杭州). It was during this year that the most argued case of her supposed remarriage happened.

The Controversial Case of Qingzhao's Remarriage to Zhang Ruzhou

Although the quantity of her *Ci* writings remains overwhelming, Li Qingzhao was, unfortunately, not a prolific prose writer who continuously narrated her personal experience in detail. Apart from the *Jinshi Lu Houxu*, the postscript for her husband's *Critical-Analytical Studies of Metal and Stone Inscriptions*, she penned very little on her life after she fled to the South. The insufficiency of her autobiographical details, along with the vagueness of Song dynastic history, availed an opportunity for sketchy-note writers to distort specific facts about her.

Of the Southern Song scholars who delivered the remarriage story, Hu Zi 胡仔, Zhao Yanwei 赵彦卫, and Li Xinchuan 李心传, were the earliest and should be held most responsible. The rest simply adopted their versions, sometimes reiterating the entire statements.

Hu Zi's *Shao Xi Yu Yin Cong Hua* 苕溪渔隐丛话 was completed in 1149 (the 18th year of Shaoxing 绍兴十八年), by which time Li Qingzhao probably had already died.⁽²⁾ Hu's note reads:

Among recent-year literary women, Li Yi'an 李易安 had written many elegant words. Unfortunately, Yi'an got remarried to Zhang Ruzhou, and they soon broke up. Her *Letter to Qi Chongli* 致綦崇礼启 reads: "I was deeply disgraced to be matched to this deteriorated little man at this advanced age." 猥以桑榆之晚景, 配兹赧侏之下材. None of those who had read this passage could refrain from laughing at her."⁽³⁾

In the same book, Hu Zi attacked Li Qingzhao's bitter literary criticism. He even quoted Han Yu's poem to denigrate her as "a ridiculous bug who overestimates its ability to shake a great tree." 蚍蜉撼大树, 可笑不自量⁽⁴⁾

(2) The year of Li Qingzhao's death is still uncertain. Zhou Mi 周密 noted in his *Hao Ran Zhai Ya Tan* 浩然斋雅谈 that at the Duan Wu 端午 Festival of 1143 (The 13th year of Shao Xing 绍兴十三年), Qingzhao submitted to the Southern Song court a *Ci* poem, "Tie Zi Ci" 帖子词, which was the last seen of her works when she was alive. By the time she was 61, and after that, no voice of her had been heard of. Li Qiqing and Zhou Mi, *Wen Zhang Jing Yi* (1975).

(3) "近时妇人, 能文词如李易安, 颇多佳句.....易安再适张汝舟, 未几反目, 有《启示》与綦处厚云: '猥以桑榆之晚景, 配兹赧侏之下材。' 传者无不笑之。" Hu Zi, *Shaoxi Yu Yin Cong Hua* 苕溪渔隐丛话 (Taipei: Shi jie shu ju, 1961). Vol. 60.

(4) "易安评诸公歌词, 皆摘其短, 无一免者。此论未公, 吾不凭也。此意盖自谓能擅其长, 以乐府名家者。退之诗云: '不用群儿愚, 哪用故谤伤。蚍蜉撼大树, 可笑不自量。'" Ibid., II, Vol. 3.

She always pinched on defects (of other *Ci* masters of the Song), and none ever escaped her censure. Her remarks were unfair, and I don't think I agree with her. She might feel that she was so consummate that she should be regarded as the only *Ci* master.⁽⁵⁾

Two other works came out in a later time: Zhao Yanwei's *Yun Lu Man Chao* 云麓漫钞⁶ in 1206 (the 2nd year of Kaixi of Ning Zong's reign 宁宗开禧二年) and Li Xinchuan's *Jiyan Yilai Jinian Yaolu* 建炎以来系年要录⁷ around 1253 (the Bao You Reign of Emperor Li Zong 理宗宝佑年间). Obviously, Qingzhao did not live long enough to witness the initial appearance of these attacks. The fact that she died without an heir or close relatives enhances the chance that these statements didn't get corrected even they were mistaken.

Yun Lu Man Chao made public the letter of Li Qingzhao addressing Mr. Qi Chongli 綦崇礼, a remote relative of the Zhaos and a crucial politician in the settled court of Southern Song. If the letter were not fictitious, the following information should get our attention:

1. Li Qingzhao got remarried to Zhang Ruzhou because of the pressure from the Southern Song government.
2. The marriage lasted for 4 or 5 months, during which time Zhang had verbally and physically abused her.
3. Li Qingzhao initiated a lawsuit against Zhang and pleaded for a divorce, which was granted, but she was also imprisoned for nine days.
4. Under Mr. Qi's help, she was spared of further detention, for which she was highly appreciative.
5. She felt ashamed about the whole thing.

According to *Jiyan Yilai Jinian Yaolu*, Zhang Ruzhou was a minor military official convicted of guilt because Li Qingzhao raised a lawsuit against him. She accused him of appropriating funds.⁽⁸⁾ As a result, an imperial edict was conferred concerning this financial crime: Zhang was sent into exile, his name removed from the official list. But, strangely enough, neither their divorce nor Qingzhao's imprisonment was recorded.

However, we have plenty of reasons to suspect the credibility of these documents. First, from all the existing works of Qingzhao written after 1132, the year of her supposed remarriage, there was no hint that she had lost her status as "the Zhao's widow," the term she always used to address herself. Secondly, from the works of her contemporaries, we find no clue that she had remarried. For example, Zhu Xi 朱熹, the Neo-Confucian master of Southern Song, once commented on Qingzhao, praising her literary expertise without mentioning her marital status. For all his famous intolerance towards women's remarriage, should Qingzhao fall in the category, Zhu Xi would not have talked about her in an appreciating manner.

Xie Ji 谢汲, son-in-law of Mr. Qi Chongli, in one of his articles in 1141 (the 11th year of Shao Xing 绍兴十一年), came across Li Qingzhao and her writings. He addressed her as "Zhao's wife, surnamed Li" 赵令人李⁽⁹⁾. By the time Li Qingzhao was already 59, she was still known to the world as "the Zhao's widow." If Mr. Qi Chongli had handled her divorce case personally, how could his son-in-law, obviously on familiar terms with Qingzhao, not know it at all?

(5) Ibid.

(6) Zhao Yanwei, *Yun Lu Man Chao* 云麓漫钞, 15 vols. (Taipei: Shang wu chubanshe, 1980).

(7) Li Xinchuan, *Jiyan Yi Lai Xi Nian Yao Lu* 建炎以来系年要录, 4 vols., Guo Xue Ji Ben Cong Shu. (Shanghai: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1937).

(8) "右承奉郎监诸军审计司张汝舟属吏, 以汝舟妻李氏讼其妄增举数入官业。其后有司当汝舟罪徙, 诏除名, 柳州编管。十月己酉行遣。李氏, 楮非女, 能为歌词, 自号易安居士。" Ibid. Vol. 58.

(9) "赵令人李, 号易安。其《祭湖州文》曰: '白日正中, 叹庞翁之机捷; 坚城自堕, 怜杞妇之悲深。' 妇人四六之工者。" Xie Ji, *Si Liu Tan Chen* 四六谈尘, vol. 1 (Taipei: Taiwan shang wu yin shu guan, 1983).

According to the Song code, a widow was required to mourn her deceased husband for three years before getting remarried. Zhao Mingcheng died in the August of 1129, while the supposed divorce of Li Qingzhao and Zhang Ruzhou happened in September of 1132. Given that the marriage lasted for 4 or 5 months, Qingzhao must have gotten married to Zhang around the April or May of 1132, by which time the requirement of the “three-year mourning period” 三年之丧 was not fulfilled. Although the “three-year mourning period” requirement sometimes did slacken, it was unlikely that Li Qingzhao, daughter of the Minister of Rites and daughter-in-law of the Vice Prime Minister, should risk breaking the law at her advanced age of 49.

We learn from *Jinshi Lu Houxu* that after Zhao Mingcheng’s death, Qingzhao was greatly perplexed by a slanderous charge that her husband and she once had a piece of precious jade kettle sent to the court of the Jurchens. Should the forged accusation, known as “Yu Hu Ban Jin”(玉壶颁金, “contributing a jade kettle to the Jurchen court”), prove true, Qingzhao could have been executed under the charge of treason. Mr. Qi Chongli, then an influential minister, helped Qingzhao remove the charge; the latter was then very grateful to him. She wrote him a letter, thanking him for clearing her name and saving her from the potential imprisonment.

We only have scattered information about how this letter and Mr. Qi’s reply were initially written. The two letters seemed to have provided her opponents an excellent opportunity to slander her. How ideal to have something written in her own hand to reveal a failed marriage! It would serve best to ruin her reputation. After all, for a woman in traditional China, nothing was more serious than losing her chastity. Therefore, on the content of Qingzhao’s original letter, they tampered and kept the format untouched to retain some fidelity.

Qing scholar Yu Zhengxie 俞正燮 pointed out that the writing style of *Letter to Qi Chongli* was ungraceful, mixed with erotic vocabulary. Considering the flourishing colloquial literature the Southern Song witnessed, it might be reasonable to surmise that the original forger, while forging the letter, may have had some erotic romance set in his mind. He did not mind borrowing clichés that Qingzhao would not have used in her writings. Yu Zhengxie also pointed out that Li Xinchuan, author of *Jianyan Yilai Jinian Yaolu*, had been previously found to be a forger of historical documents. Not only did he falsify the account about Han Zhongmiu 韩忠缪, but he also once counterfeited an article under the name of Xin Qiji 辛弃疾⁽¹⁰⁾.

That Li Qingzhao had received intensive attacks after her death might be attributed to various reasons, the most important one being her lampoons to her literary peers. For example, she teased the new *Jin Shi* scholar Zhang Jiucheng 张九成 by quoting his famous “the laurel fragrance is flowing” 桂子飘香,⁽¹¹⁾ causing the latter and his *Jin Shi* classmates to be deeply annoyed.

Under the prevailing social context “women’s virtue lies upon her ignorance” 女子无才便是德, the more talented a woman, the more she might be seen as lacking virtue. That Li Qingzhao was not defamed on her literary enterprise, but the side of her marriage status, indicates that a tightening patriarchal ethos was picking up in the Southern Song.

(10) “读云麓漫钞所载谢崇礼后，文笔劣下，中杂有佳语，定是纂改本……李心传建炎以来系年要录，采鄙恶小说，比其事为文案，尤恶之。后读齐东野语，云李心传在蜀，去天万里，轻信记载，疏乖固宜。又谢枋得集亦言，系年要录为辛弃疾造韩宅胄寿词，则所言易安文案谢启事可知。” Yu Zhengxie, “Yian Jushi Shi Ji 易安居士事辑,” in *Gui Si Lei Gao* 癸巳类稿 (1957).

(11) “张子韶对策，有‘桂子飘香’之语。赵明诚妻李氏嘲之，曰‘露花倒影柳三变，桂子飘香张九成。’” Lu You, *Lao Xue an Bi Ji* 老学庵笔记, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1979).

Women's Remarriage and Morality

Numerous records, legal and historical, show that Song women enjoyed a significant degree of freedom in remarriage. Patricia Ebrey, in her *The Inner Quarters*, remarks on the air of tolerance:

It was perfectly legal in Song times, as earlier and later, for a woman whose husband had died or to divorce her to marry again. Remarriage was undoubtedly the younger the widow, the fewer her children, and the greater the difficulties posed by staying where she was. Remarriage of widows was probably more common lower down on the social scale, but it certainly was not confined to the poor or uneducated.⁽¹²⁾

Despite the abovementioned, Ebrey acknowledges that an “emotional force of feelings against it” still existed. In the light of the social climate to disgrace remarried women, she comments, “Many felt that there was something intrinsically shameful, impure, or demeaning in leaving the family they have entered through marriage to enter a sexual union with a second man.”⁽¹³⁾

This was precisely the opinion most premodern scholars held towards Li Qingzhao. Having been discussed by historians, literary critics, and moralists for almost a millennium, her remarriage case had evolved into an intensified controversy about educated women. Readers and literary critics alike were more interested in poking around her anecdotes than appreciating her writings; moralists cannot wait to denounce her for her “moral blemish.”

Accordingly to Song scholar Wang Zhuo 王灼:

From the perspective of literary grace, (Li Qingzhao) was undoubtedly the Number One among women of our Dynasty. But, unfortunately, after Mr. Zhao's death, she remarried someone and got divorced from him through a lawsuit. As a result, her integrity in her later years was diminished... I never know any elite woman, from the highest antiquity on, has been as shameless as she was.⁽¹⁴⁾

Cai Yan 蔡琰 (styled Wen Ji 文姬) of the Eastern Han dynasty, another talented woman of Chinese history, married three times during her life, the second time as the consort of the Vice Attila 匈奴左贤王. After giving birth to two sons with the Vice Attila, she was taken back to China by Cao Cao, the then hegemon, and was remarried by the latter to a man surnamed Dong 董. She devoted the rest of her life to completing historic works unfinished by her father Cai Yong 蔡邕, an erudite historian. Ming scholar Lang Ying 郎瑛 compared the deeds of these two talented women and lamented, “(Qingzhao's virtue) was far away from that of Cai Yan!”⁽¹⁵⁾ Lang Ying delivered a tirade to present his logic: Cai Yan's second marriage was forced; leaving her “barbarian” husband to return to China, she made herself worthwhile to the writing project of Han history, which somehow alleviated her “blemish” of the third marriage. In contrast, Qingzhao's supposed remarriage and divorce were seen as no more than a laughable stock.

(12) Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

(13) *Ibid.*

(14) “若本朝妇人，当推文采第一。赵死，再嫁某氏，讼而离制。晚节流荡无归.....自古缙绅之家能文妇女，未见如此物顾籍者。”Wang Zhuo, *Biji Man Zhi* 碧鸡漫志 (Shanghai: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1927).

(15) “呜呼，去蔡琰几何哉！”Lang Ying, *Qi Xiu Lei Gao* 七修类稿, Di 1 ban ed., Li Dai Bi Ji Cong Kan (Shanghai: Shanghai shu dian chu ban she, 2001). Vol. 17.

Concluding of this paper, we shall like to turn to a certain modern view on this much-debated case. Li Ao, a Taiwanese scholar of radical inclination, in his textual research on the same topic, once commented:

For a woman (like Li Qingzhao), getting remarried or keeping her widowhood was merely her business. Nobody has the right to assault her in the name of moral terms, to say nothing making slanders. There is nothing wrong with getting remarried. However, if she did not get remarried but was rumored so, the whole matter was entirely wrong.⁽¹⁶⁾

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论颇具争议的李清照再婚一案

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提要：本文分析了颇具争议的李清照再婚一案。据传言，这位杰出的女词人曾在其夫死后改嫁给一位叫张汝舟的小官员。然而，在仔细探研李清照生平资料及清代文献考据的证据之后，我们认为，李清照之受攻讦，主要还是由于她曾写下过尖锐讽刺的文学批评；她无法被一个男性占主导地位的社会所容忍，如是而已。

关键词：李清照、再婚、张汝舟

(16) “一个女人，再嫁也好，守寡也罢，都是她个人的私事，别人没有用范道德的字眼乱骂的权利，更不可造谣。再嫁并没有什么不得了，可是没再嫁却硬说她再嫁，这就太不对了。” Li Ao, *Qie Cong Qing Shi Kan Qing Lou* 且从青史看青楼, Yuan liu 2 ban. ed. (Taipei: Yuan liu chu ban, 1988).

