

Who Did What in a Chinese Lady's Autobiography?

*A Text and Lesson Plan on
Li Qingzhao's Ambiguous Narrative*

By Sarah Schneewind



Students eagerly ask about women in Chinese history and literature. The Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911) provide plenty of primary sources in translation, but only one woman poet and critic of Song times (960–1279) has won lasting fame, Li Qingzhao (1084–1150s). Her autobiography touchingly portrays her relationship with her husband, his untimely death in 1129 amidst the Jin invasion of Northern Song, and her troubles thereafter, including a failed second marriage. Yet because Classical Chinese does not always specify the subject of a sentence, details of the companionate marriage appear quite different in different translations. This lesson leads students to actively think through the issues that the ambiguity of missing pronouns raise: questions about Li's experience and voice, gender roles in Song times, and present-day assumptions about gender roles. Practice has shown that the teacher need not know Chinese for the lesson to work, since expert translators themselves do not agree.

Li Qingzhao was born into a high-ranking family and married into the family of a Prime Minister when she was about seventeen. Together, she and her husband collected many rooms full of books, paintings, bronze vessels, and other objects, but in the dislocations caused by the Jin conquest, Li lost the collection. She still had the comments her husband had written on each of the pieces in the collection, and she later published them as *Records on Metal and Stone*. The book itself is lost, but Li's autobiographical *Afterword to Records on Metal and Stone* (1132) appeals to students who want to hear the real voices of the past. The essay has been translated three times by highly accomplished Sinologists Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, Ronald Egan, and Stephen Owen.¹ I read the translations several weeks apart, and so striking was the divergence in feeling that I thought I had misremembered who did what. Looking at the translations side by side, I realized that what varied were the pronouns in the description of Li and her husband creating and enjoying their collection. Classical Chinese sentences often have no grammatical subject, and the verbs reveal little about tense, number, mood, or aspect. The translators' various choices make the couple's activities and their relationship look quite different.

For my class on Chinese, Japanese, and Korean history from 1200 BCE to 1200 CE, I have used the three translations and the original text to create a version of the first part of the autobiographical postface that omits the pronouns when the original does not specify. Sometimes, Li Qingzhao says that “he, my husband” 侯 did something, and sometimes she speaks of herself as “I” 余, but usually she uses no pronoun. The exercise asks students to fill in the pronouns—in pencil—on their own, and then with a partner or two in class, followed by discussion by the entire class. Students try to figure out what Li meant: which pronoun she would have put in had she been writing in English. I added section numbers and a few questions to guide discussion. In the text below, [] means that the subject of the verb is unclear in the original text. If context makes it pretty clear who did the action, I have supplied it inside the [] brackets. As student comments show, the class exercise leads to discussion and learning about the problems of translation, the bias of the historian, the role of gender expectations, and the things we share and do not share with people of the distant past and far away.

The Text for the Exercise

1. The preceding thirty chapters, *Records on Metal and Stone*, what is it? It is a book written by Mr. Zhao Defu [Li Chingzhao’s deceased husband]. He chose inscriptions from the Three Dynasties [Xia, Shang, and Zhou] down to the Five Dynasties [between Tang and Song], inscriptions on bells, tripods, steamers, kettles, washbasins, ladles, goblets, and bowls; and the surviving traces of the affairs of eminent men and obscure scholars that can all be seen inscribed on grand steles and great stone disks—all together 2,000 sections.

[] corrected errors, distinguished the authentic from the spurious, and erased or handed out praise and blame: this suffices, above, to match the Way of the Sages, and below, to emend the failures of historians.² And [he] wrote a record of each—one could say this is a lot! Ah! Yet Wang Ya and Yuan Cai both met catastrophe: it made no difference [that one hoarded] books and paintings and [the other hoarded] peppercorns.³ Changyu and Yuankai were both sick: what difference did it make that one was obsessed with money and the other was obsessed with transmitting [knowledge]? The name [of the sickness; OR the reputation of the men] is not the same, but the delusion is the same.

Discussion: *Is Li praising Zhao for his collection and his hard work commenting on each inscription?*

2. I first “returned home to” (married into) the Zhao family in the *xinsi* year of the Jianzhong period (1101). At the time, my late father was serving as a Vice Director of a bureau in the Ministry of Rites, and the eventual Prime Minister (Li’s father-in-law) was Vice Minister of Personnel. My husband was then twenty-one years old (somewhere between nineteen to twenty-one in our count), a student at the National University. The Li and Zhao families _____ (Fill in the blank with one of the options below.)

- a. in those days were not well-to-do and were always frugal. (Owen)
- b. are undistinguished families that have always been poor. (Egan)
- c. were families of modest origins, poor and frugal people. (Idema and Grant)

On the first and fifteenth of each month, [my husband] had a short leave from the University, and [] would “pawn some clothes”⁴ to raise half a thousand copper cash. [] would walk into the Xiangguo Temple and buy rubbings of inscriptions and some fruit and return home. [We] would sit together and spread them out before us: examining, munching, savoring them. [] thought []self/selves in paradise.⁵

Discussion: *Who is raising money? Who is walking, who is buying and carrying home? Who is in paradise?*

3. When, after two years, [he] left the capital to take up a post, [] “lived on rice and vegetables and dressed in common cloth” and/in order that [] could search out the most remote spots and out-of-the-way places, setting the heart on the ancient writings and unusual words of the whole world. As the days and months passed, the collection grew. While the Prime Minister remained in office in the capital, various relatives and old friends worked in the Imperial Library, so [] had access to lost odes and

little-known histories of great rarity.⁶ [] worked hard copying such things, and having tasted the flavor could not stop [] self/selves. Later, if [] happened to see a painting or piece of calligraphy by some person of ancient or modern times, or a special vessel from the Three Dynasties, [] would even pawn clothing to buy it. [I] recall that once in the Chongning period (1102–1106), a person came with a painting of peonies by Xu Xi, asking 200,000 copper cash for it. At that time, could even the sons and younger brothers of noble households have raised 200,000 copper cash easily? We kept it overnight on credit, but could not figure out any way to pay, and returned it. Husband and wife looked at each other in deep dejection for several days.

Discussion: *Who is living on rice and vegetables, and saving money on clothes? Who is searching out remote spots, and who desires all the strange and ancient writings of the world? Who did the copying? Who would go to any lengths to raise the cash for a special painting or ancient ritual vessel? What is their relationship like at this point?*

4. Later, [we] lived retired, behind gates, in [his] native village for ten years.⁷ [] managed carefully, so we had food and clothing and some extra. Then [my husband] served successively as Prefect in two places, and [] devoted his salary to buying books and writing materials. Whenever [] acquired a new book, the two of us together would collate it [with other editions] and make corrections, repair it, and label it with the correct title. Whenever [] got hold of a piece of calligraphy, a painting, or a bronze ritual vessel, [] would also go over it at leisure, pointing out faults and flaws. The limit was one candle's length of time per night. Thus the collection came to surpass all others in the quality of the paper and the perfection of the written words. I (余) happen to have an excellent memory, and whenever [we] finished dinner, we would sit in what we called the "Homeward Bound" Hall and brew some tea. Pointing to the heaped-up books and histories, [] would say that a certain event appeared in which book in which chapter on which page and on which line. In this contest, getting it right or wrong would determine whether [] got to drink tea first or afterward. Whenever [] got it right, [] would raise the cup high and laugh a lot, until the tea splattered the front of the clothing, so in the end one would get up without having taken a sip after all. [] would have grown old in this place with a happy heart. Even with the anxiety and poverty, what the heart was set on was not bent out of shape.

Discussion: *How do the couple amuse themselves? Are they both playing the history geek game? How would you describe their relationship at this time? What does the last sentence mean?*

5. When the book collection was complete, [] built a library with large cabinets in "Homeward Bound" Hall, and put the books there in numbered order. If [] wanted to read, [] would ask for the key and record the number in a register and only then take out the particular book. If [] made the slightest mark or smudge, it was their responsibility to repair or clean it. [It?] was not as easygoing as before. This quest for amusement had turned into a source of anxiety. I (余) couldn't stand it and began to plan how to eat less meat and wear less fancy clothes. [My] head wore no ornaments of bright pearl or kingfisher feather; [my?] rooms had no gilded or embroidered accoutrements.⁸ Whenever [] came upon a history or a common work, as long as it had no problems in the printing and no errors in the edition [] would buy it on the spot to have as a backup copy that need not be catalogued since it had no value. The family that [] came from home 自來家 had always specialized in the *Book of Changes* and the *Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals*, so the writings in these two areas were most complete.⁹ Books were ranged on tables and desks, scattered over pillows and bedding. Ideas came together and mind(s) considered; eyes traveled where the spirits [of past authors?] could transmit. [] joy was higher than that derived from singing and having sex, or racing dogs and horses.

Discussion: *Who formalized the collection? What or who was less easygoing? Who bought the backup copies, and who enjoyed them, and why?*

In 1126, the Jin invasion ended Li and Zhao's time of peace and intimacy, and the intriguing ambiguity of pronouns in the text ends, too. The teacher can choose among translations for the rest of the autobiographical postface to finish the exciting story. Li's husband, galloping off to an official post, shouts instructions about what to hold onto longest; he falls ill and dies without providing for her; she joins the many refugees on the roads and seeks protection from her brother; she fears an accusation of treason; her collection is sold, lost in a river, and stolen; and she marries a second, abusive husband and lands in jail in attempting to divorce him. Teachers may choose a translation of the second part, and each of the translators also provides different information and perspectives on Li's life, character, oeuvre, and reputation, as well as additional translated texts by and about her.¹⁰

What Students Learned

I did the pronoun exercise during the discussion and I think it is fun. There were differences between my work and my partner's work, but they all work well for me. No matter who is the subject, all the activities in the article are understandable . . . they [Li and her husband] had a good time with each other. (Chenxin T.)

Students responded enthusiastically to the in-class exercise, and TAs, including one who knew no Chinese and nothing about Asia before the quarter started, thought it successful. On the final exam for the course, about a third of the students (about forty-five) chose to answer the extra credit question "What did you learn from the pronoun exercise about Li Qingzhao and her husband?" I had been most interested in the changing relationship between Li and her husband as they aged, but the students raised a whole range of points.

Most basically, they recognized "how difficult works in translation can be to work with" (Terry J.). "It made me more aware of the translations not always being the exact words of the original text," wrote Andrew R. But after trying to do it themselves, they did not blame the translators. "I learned that historians and translators of texts have a very tough job!" wrote Louise J. Rather, both native English speakers and native Mandarin speakers (who comprised about one-third of the class) commented on the problem of translation:

I learned the difficulty of reading ancient Chinese text, as the subjects were really hard to determine just by context. Li Qingzhao and her husband can be referred together or maybe it was just Li Qingzhao herself that was relevant or rather then action can be done by her husband alone. (YiAn S.)

Jake V. wrote:

I learned that it is very difficult to translate an ancient piece, and to do it incorrectly can change the whole meaning of the piece. For my group, it was very difficult to choose which pronoun went where . . . And reading it over again made it seem as though the story is completely different. I learned that one simple change can make a large difference in a historical text.

Students focused on the process of choice:

It is extremely difficult to tell who the author is talking about and arguments could be made for different possibilities. (Chris Z.)

What kind of arguments? Some students saw the choice as confirming existing biases:

The translation really depends on one's perspective and biases. If you go in with a certain opinion on what life was like for Li Qingzhao, a woman, there are specific tasks that you are more likely to ascribe to her as opposed to jobs that sound more suited for her husband. If you believe that they were a happy, cooperative couple, everything sounds like things that they could have done together. It really depends on how you look at it. (Melody J.)

Brandon H. extended the bias problem to the scholarly world:

The pronoun exercise, as confusing as it was at some points, showed me how we as scholars may wrongly associate one action or emotion with a male or a female.

Bias bothered one student:

In the exercise with pronouns, I learned that much of what we "know" from history is interpretation. Depending on how each one of us felt like the story of Li Qingzhao should go, we picked pronouns that we felt would fit. In this way, our bias from an etic perspective changed "facts" from history. In many cases, group members could have chosen a completely different pronoun and given the text a whole new meaning. In this way our bias in interpretation became really clear. (Aaron C.)

But others saw in this a useful lesson, not a cause for despair:

In doing the exercise, I realized that each person's personality and bias determined how they read the story. This is why it is important to have many perspectives when analyzing history. In this way we can discover truth. (Aidan B.)

More specifically, when the students talked about bias, they meant gender bias:

I learned about husband–wife relations—how they saw each other, acted around each other, etc.), and about gender roles. When my partner and I try to identify which pronoun to use for which blank, there were several occasions where we chose a “stereotypical” answer that would fit best. However, there were instances in which either feminine or masculine pronouns could work. (Erica W.)

Josh M. went a step further:

I learned that gender bias may be unconscious. I came to this conclusion after finding that I filled in a majority of the blanks regarding money/work to Li's husband.

Another pointed out that one's pronoun choices might boil down to whether one “believed in” Confucianism or Daoism, the latter permitting more of a partnership.

But some students pointed to the utility of historical context in making informed choices:

From the pronoun exercise, I learned that studying history is about aggregating knowledge and making conclusions when they are best supported by evidence. Despite urges to make assumptions about pronouns in the exercise, I realized that any conclusion was fairly unsubstantiated and I would better conclude by learning about Song cultural context and norms to better take a guess. (Marshall W.)

Jonah L. made this point explicitly with respect to gender:

It was somewhat hard to differentiate which pronoun to use. However, an understanding could be gained by looking at all the roles discussed. Many times a statement about managing clothes and food would be made. Since [these] were the responsibility of the women, you could determine it was her part. On the other hand, if they discussed going to work or purchasing items, it would be the male pronoun.

Beginning from the missing pronouns and their recognition of the bias problem, the students articulated the circular process whereby historians interpret texts on the basis of what is already known and add to that (secondary) knowledge by reading the texts. As Kuo L. put it:

In the pronoun exercise, some blanks may have many possibilities, so there was no 100 percent accurate answer for it. I think what [I] learned was that as a historian, I could make a guess and find related materials to support my idea. I also might learn more information of Song people in that process.

Students indeed used the piece productively to question their existing knowledge about Song gender norms. One student came “to understand that Li Qingzhao and her husband were a team in their relationship.”

It was difficult to decide on the correct pronouns at times, and it made me realize how much respect and equality they seemed to have for each other. The way it was written did not leave me thinking that he had incredible power over her, and noting the differences in opinion that others had in discussion about the proper pronouns really made me see how interchangeable they really were. (Kristen B.)

This is good up to a point—for instance, one student learned that:

Both men and women enjoyed autonomy when it comes to creating literature and that both were influential in creating works that would be studied for generations after they were written. (Ryann-Kai C.)

And another student was surprised that:

Both husband and wife learned reading and respected each other. (Wanlin Y.)

But the apparent husband–wife equality in parts of the text led students to questionable generalizations about Song gender equality, so the teacher needs to discuss Song women's legal rights, economic status, and so on, and point out Li's helplessness, especially as a widow.¹¹

Beyond language, students experienced and recognized the historian's dilemma of interpretation. “History is very much like a puzzle,” wrote Sang Hoon K., and Jessica C. explained:

I saw the pronoun exercise as a demonstration of what it meant to be a historian. I realized that although there is much information that we can gather from artifacts and

textual documents, some aspects remain vague and uncertain. Because of this, historians must use context and maybe also employ outside knowledge to attain the best understanding of the people and the piece as possible, based on whatever is already known. Their tolerance for scholarly uncertainty increased: “I learned that a lot of historical knowledge is based off educated guess, more so than textbooks imply,” wrote Bartholomew T. And Karen M. went further: “I learned that a historian must also take risks because there are various forms of analysis.”

Bringing it all together, a freshman in the class, Shogo N., concluded:

I learned from the pronoun exercise about Li Qingzhao that ambiguity is an issue that historians face when dealing with historical documents. Due to the nature of the language, historians would have to interpret at their discretions whom the pronouns are referring to. Using information about social values and the culture of the society from which the document comes, historians can try to make guesses on the meaning. This issue also highlights the importance of collaboration with other historians, since as we were doing the pronoun exercise, other people reached different conclusions for different reasons.

Shogo touches on the ambiguity of primary sources; the historian’s need to interpret; and the role of historical context in that interpretation. He touches on the need for collaboration and discussion, and on the way that diversity enhances truth. That is a handsome payoff for one fifty-minute class exercise. ■

NOTES

1. Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 192–199; Wilt L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 204–243; Stephen Owen, “The Snares of Memory,” in *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). The original Chinese text is available at <https://tinyurl.com/ztxc5z>.
2. Owen and Egan disagree on whether Li says that Zhao did do this correction, etc., or whether one could do it based on the inscriptions.
3. Egan explains that both men were grand councilors of the Tang Dynasty. When Wang came to a disastrous end, his painting collection, which he had hoarded in secure vaults, was scattered in the street; and when the emperor ordered Yuan to kill himself, an enormous amount of valuable pepper was found stored in his house.
4. Owen says this just means they took their allowance from the family, not that they literally had to pawn their clothes. Probably Zhao’s mother would give them their pocket money. Similarly, their vegetarian diet and cotton clothing below are clichés not to be taken literally.
5. Literally, “We thought ourselves subjects of [legendary ruler] Ge Tian.”
6. Li says metaphorically that what they found are writings not seen even amongst the pre-Qin texts hidden in the walls of Confucius’s house in Lu and discovered when the Han Prince Gong of Lu tried to demolish it to expand his palace, and as rare as the lost *Documents of Zhou* recovered from the Ji tomb.
7. Egan explains that Zhao’s father fell from power and died shortly after in 1107. The place was Qingzhou in Shangdong.
8. Only women in Song wore such head ornaments; for Li, then, to speak only of her own room(s) would be parallel, but she might mean the whole household.
9. Both Owen and Egan interpret this as meaning his family, the family she married into. To me, it looks more like Li means her own family, the family she came from.
10. See references listed in endnote 1.
11. See Egan’s explication of Li Qingzhao’s second marriage, divorce, and imprisonment in *The Burden of Female Talent*, 145–158.

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