

A Comparative Study of Li Qingzhao's *Ci*-lyrics and Sappho's Monodic Lyrics

Remarkable Literary Achievements

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Abstract—Li Qingzhao and Sappho are poetesses with remarkable artistic creativity and strong individuality, composing lyrics deviant from the dominant literary style of their times. Li Qingzhao prompted the recognition of *Ci* as an important genre in Chinese literature, inventing a number of “Yi An’s amazing verse expressions” and “Yi An Style”. Sappho helped monodic lyrics establish its position in Western literature, inventing the Sapphic stanza and creating exquisite poetic expressions.

Keywords—comparative study; remarkable literary achievements; Li Qingzhao’s *Ci*-lyrics; Sappho’s monodic lyrics

I. INTRODUCTION

Li Qingzhao (1084-1155AD) was acclaimed as the Chinese most distinguished poetess for her overflowing talents in composing *Ci*-lyrics. Sappho (610-580?BC) of ancient Greece won the fame of “the Tenth Muse” for her superb artistic skills in composing lyrics. Although living in the male-dominating society, both had a sense of their own identity as a woman with marked individuality. This individuality encouraged them to form their individualistic style of poetic creations in an age when the literary field was dominated by males. They accomplished greatly in lyrics creation, making great contributions to the forming and maturity of the literary genres their chief verses respectively belong to.

II. LI QINGZHAO’S REMARKABLE LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS

Tang *Shi* and Song *Ci* have been considered as the highlight in the development of Chinese poetic compositions. It can be safely said that Li Qingzhao’s verses have acted an important part in the establishing of the high position of *Ci* lyrics in the history of Chinese literature.

In theory, Li Qingzhao has made great contributions to the recognition of *Ci* as an important genre in Chinese literature. Before and even in the initial stage of *Ci*, only *Shi* was considered as the “orthodox” literary genre. *Ci* was only looked on as a “coarse trick” and “unqualified to take its place in cultural circles” by some great minds. However, Li Qingzhao’s *Essay on Ci-poetry* helped to change its fate.

This literary treatise summarizes *Ci*’s historical development, examines its distinctive characteristics and requirements of being sung to music, comments on the *Ci*-verses by some of her predecessors, makes clear its sharp differences from *Shi*-poems and finally points out that “*Ci* is a genre different from *Shi*, which few have understood [1].” Thus, the nature of *Ci* was accurately defined and the prejudices against it were removed. From then on, *Ci*-lyrics has become a school all of its own. Therefore, *Essay on Ci-poetry* has been viewed as “the Declaration of Independence” of *Ci* [2].

In practice, Li Qingzhao invented a number of “Yi An’s amazing verse expressions” which have been recited and applauded for hundreds of years. The following are some typical ones:

When the west wind blows the blinds aside,
I am frailer than the chrysanthemums [3]

Don’t you know? Oh, don’t you know?
The green should be plum and the red lean [4]?

Willow sprouts like a girl’s eyes,
Plum blossoms rosy-cheeked [5]

Our yearning is the sort
Both sides far apart endure—
A melancholy feeling there’s no resisting.
As soon as it leaves the eyebrows
It surges up in the breast [6].

Things remain, but all is lost
Now he’s no more.
Tears choke my words...
I only fear at “twin Brooks” my grasshopper of a

boat
 Wouldn't be able to bear
 Such a load of grief [7].
 and
 Searching, seeking.
 Seeing, searching:
 What comes of it but
 Coldness and desolation,
 A world of dreariness and misery
 And stabbing pain...
 To convey all the melancholy feelings
 Born of these scenes
 Can the one word "sorrow" suffice [8]?

Though some of them are composed by borrowing inspirations from the lines of other famous poets, they are added to something original and fresh to become unparalleled to those learned from. "Her effort is not directed towards expanding the boundaries of *Ci*-lyrics, but towards increasing its profundity; not towards seeking for new materials, but towards refining the traditional ones into exquisite productions [9]." Without rich life experiences and solid accumulation of literary knowledge, one could not have achieved so much.

Li Qingzhao evolves her own style called "Yi An Style" which has three main characteristics. Firstly, her poems are mainly concerned not only with pleasant moments and beautiful scenes but also sadness about partings and deaths; secondly, most of her poems create a profoundly harmonious picture of nature and life in a flow of effortless and placid verse [10]; thirdly, her lyrics are distinguished by "the application of straightforward language to convey fresh thoughts [11]." Her style has exerted a profound influence on many distinguished contemporary and later poets. For example, Xin Qiji, the foremost exponent of the bold romantic style of *Ci*-poetry, Wang Shizhen, Liu Chengwen, Liang Qichao, the noted scholars in the history of Chinese literature, are all among her enthusiastic idolaters.

Li Qingzhao expands the content of *Ci* by adding her patriotic feelings and homesickness to her reminiscence of her husband and sorrows about her own fate. Hu Yunyi observes: "besides her personal agonies, the poems in her declining years possess a deep social significance in that they express the homesickness and patriotism shared by her fellow people who are forced to come to the south [12]."

III. SAPPHO'S REMARKABLE LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS

Sappho plays an important role in the development of personal lyrics. She composed during the classical period (8th to 4th centuries B.C.) in the history of the ancient Greek poetry, when the important achievement was the solo lyrics. Just like Song *Ci* being debased as a "coarse skill," as a poetic style at its early time, monody occupied a very limited

literary space among various poetic genres around the same time. At the beginning of the Greek poetry (from 11th century B.C. to the 9th century B.C.), heroic epic, mainly represented by Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*, was the dominant literary success, which now has become a traditional literary style in Western literature. Homeric epics relate the legends of nobles of the Mycenaean, written in dactylic hexameter which sounds solemn, serious, tardo and suitable for being sung in public to express glory, pluck up courage and the sense of responsibility. Around 700 B.C., the farmer poet, Hesiod wrote his didactic poetry like *Works and Days*. Though it exhibits some concern with the humble people, it continues the Homeric epic tradition in its meter, spirit, style, diction and some other aspects to a large extent. With the awakening of ancient Greeks' individualism appeared the lyric genres of elegy, iambus and lyrics, "the three shootings of bright lights shed out from the human soul [13]". The chief representatives of elegy and iambus are Archilocus, Callinus, Theognis, Solon, Tyrtaeus, and Mimnerus. Though their poems begin to record their own experiences and emotions, they consistently reveal their debts to Homer and Hesiod in images, thoughts, diction values or something. Lyrics has two forms, one being solo song or monody, and the other choral lyric. The first "is much more an expression of personal emotion" than the second, which, "like much of early Greek poetry... is public rather than personal in outlook, expression and orientation [14]." Sappho, along with Alcaeus and Anacreon, is a most remarkable monodist. Though her poetry shows some dependence on the traditions of epics they maintain noticeable poetic independence in points of view, subject matter, meter, diction and image, contributing to the freeing of monodic lyrics from epic traditions and standing on its own as a poetic style.

Sappho moves from writing poetry from the point of view of gods and muses towards the personal and individual themes, describing love and loss as it affects her personally. While many other lyricists still concentrate on martial valour, politics and gods, she shows great interest in her individual life and emotions. Charles Segal states that Sappho "turned Homeric language to new, entirely non-epic situations [15]." Upon this shift of poetic themes, Sherod Santos remarks:

This is all the more remarkable...in Sappho's work, the historical preeminence of myth with its warring gods and godlike heroes, is quietly supplanted by a human voice, a woman's voice speaking to the concerns of her daily life, a solitary daring to posit the notion that the ordinary experience of human love is imbued with significance as worthy of attention as all the martial splendors of Homeric [16].

Few had done that before and therefore Sappho continued to affect the whole new stream of Greek lyricists long after her death.

Sappho's particular "poetic skill can be seen also in her inventing and handling of the Sapphic stanza, which seems to have been her favorites," ---a four-line stanza in which the first three lines are each 11 syllables long and the fourth is 5 syllables long [17]. Based on Sherod Santos' thinking of

“new poetic forms as the shapes of new possibilities of thought [18],” this new poetic form is a good shape for Sappho’s new way of viewing the conditions of her own life. Sapphic stanza has become one of the poetic forms best liked by the western poets. Ovid, Catullus, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats as well as Virginia Woolf, all fell under her spell.

Sappho is also capable of bold poetic expressions which have been remembered and imitated for thousands of years. Her expressions of love have become permanent in the descriptions of love in the world literature. For example, in fr. 38 she declares: “Now love...fills me with bitter-sweetness.” In her own 1998 book *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson recalls that “It was Sappho who first called eros ‘bittersweet.’ No one who has been in love disputes her [19].” In fr. 188 she calls Eros (god of love) as “tale-weaver”. According to Maximus of Tyre, Socrates describes love as “a sophist” [20]. Obviously, the desire for love arouses in the lovers’ hearts boundless imaginations about life. The image of “Love Triangle” described in fr. 2 has become typical in the western romances, in which Sappho expresses her jealousy at her rival in love and her strong desire for her lover [21]. She is also considered as the first to use the word “mantle”. In fr. 54 she said about Eros: “Who had come from heaven clad in a purple mantle [22].” Besides, the epithet “golden-sandalled” she applies to the dawn in fr. 108 has been thought of very beautiful in both vision and sound. The phrase “rosy-fingered” she uses to refer to the moonlight in her fr. 12, which used to be Homer’s description of the dawn, also creates a spectacular effect [23]. This adaptation is one of the evidences of Sappho’s conscious departure from Homeric diction.

IV. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

The literary originality and creativity of Li Qingzhao and Sappho result from their enormous creative courage and endless exploring spirit, which can only be owned by those who have great determination and individuality. However, when their creative activities are put in the literary backgrounds of their times, they seem to play different roles in the developing process of their literary history. As a matter of fact, Li Qingzhao, absorbing nutrition from the fertile soil of Chinese literature which had evolved for more than 1,500 years, displayed unsurpassable innovative and challenging spirit, while Sappho standing at the beginning period of Western civilization, showed her peerless originative and pioneering courage.

Between the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties, the classical Chinese literature had reached its peak through almost 2,000 years of miraculous continuity and unremitting enrichment. *Shi*-poetry flourished most abundantly during Tang Dynasty and *Ci*-poetry also had a history of several hundred years and in Li Qingzhao’s time it had reached “the acme of its perfection [24].” Therefore, it was on the top of the classical literary mountain that Li Qingzhao developed her poetic genius where the unexhausted wellspring of *Shi* and supplied her with prolific creative experiences, skills and materials. Many of her poems are the results of her clever borrowing and learning from the works of well-recognized

poets before and around her time. Qu Yuan, Tao Qian, Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, Chao Buzhi, Zhang Wenqian were among those she admired most. However, “to admire great work of the past is one thing, but to deny the possibility of improving on the past is the death of literature [25].” If Li Qingzhao had just followed those examples, she would not have made such a big name. Among the factors that made her poems appealing to all generations is her matchless creativity and innovation in the subject matter, music, images, rhetoric devices, expressions as well as the theory of *Ci* lyrics. According to Wang Shizhen, she was “the foremost exponent of the elegant restrained style of *Ci*-poetry [26].” Zheng Zhenduo comments on her *Ci*-poems that “in the atmosphere and style, her *Ci*-lyrics are incomparable among the ancients, and likely to be so in the generations to come...And among poets of all time, she should not rank below either Tao Qian, Li Bai and Du Fu, or Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi [27].” Indeed, in the development of the Chinese literature, especially of poetry, Li Qingzhao has acted the efficient roles of both a transmitter and creator.

In comparison, Sappho is greatly eulogized for the traditions she has established for the Western literature. The earliest written poems in Greece, Homer’s epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were produced only three centuries before that time. And personal lyrics had just sprouted in the 8th century B.C. Lu Xun said: “actually the earth had no roads to begin with, but when many men pass one way, a road is made.” Sappho was one of the few earliest poets who treaded on the untrodden road of personal lyrics. With little experience to follow and route signs to refer to, she is left a comparatively free space to discover and create something new and fresh in the stanza, language use, angles of view, figures of speech of her lyrics, laying foundations for the European personal lyrics. For example, when Homer, the all overshadowing poet, made homage to war and bravery, Sappho was attentive to the female side of life, that of love, beauty and peaceful living, so her works can be posed as complementary to Homeric poetry. “Sappho was ‘the Poetess’ as Homer was ‘the Poet’ [28].” “For a people, the culture or things he first falls in love with is just something like a person’s first love -- it is exciting, has the ‘everlasting charms’ and will obstinately remain at the bottom of his soul and consciousness [29].” Sappho, standing on the one of the two fountains of western civilization, reveals her matchless trailblazing and exploring spirits as a literary avant-courier with her rich artistic heritage for her literary offspring.

V. CONCLUSION

Both Li Qingzhao and Sappho used their poems to express their attitudes towards a valuable life. Li Qingzhao in one of her *Shi*-poems writes that “Be man of men while you’re alive; Be soul of souls e’en though you’re dead.” And Sappho in her fr. 30 says confidently: “I think men will remember us even hereafter.” In reality, they realized their wish to become outstanding and made themselves known to the coming generations by creating great poetic works. They were bold enough to challenge the established literary conventions, and creative enough to bring new vitality and charm to the old literary world.

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