

Li Qingzhao (1084-1151?), one of the greatest woman poets in Chinese literature, lived during the collapse of the Song reign in northern China. Her marriage to a much older man, Zhao Mingcheng (whom she calls here Defu), was, according to her, short but intensely happy. The couple had a well-known book and art collection, which figures prominently in this postface. In her famous memoir, Li describes life with her husband in the last days of the Northern Song, as well as the events that followed.

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## Postface to a Catalog on a Collection of Bronze and Stone Inscriptions

By Li Qingzhao

I married into the Zhao family in 1101. My father-in-law was the minister of civil service, but the family did not live extravagantly. Defu (my husband) was at that time a student at the Imperial University. On the first and fifteenth of every month, he could leave college. He would pawn his clothing and with 500 cash in his pocket go to Xiangguo Temple in search of old prints and come home with some fruit. We would enjoy examining what he had bought while munching fruit together. Two years later, when he got a post in the government, he started to make as complete as possible a collection of rubbings or prints from bronze or stone inscriptions and other ancient scripts. When a print was not available, he would have a copy made and thus our collection of famous calligraphy and antiques began. Once a man tried to sell us Xu Xi's painting of "Peony" for 200,000 cash, and Defu asked permission to take it home and keep it for a few days and consider. We found no means to buy it and reluctantly returned it to the owner. Defu and I were upset about it for days. When he served as magistrate at two posts, he spent his entire salary over the care and preservation of rare editions. Every time we obtained a rare book, we would examine it critically and see about its repair and rebinding, or if it was a painting or antique vessel, we would spend the evening pawing over it and looking for imperfections. Because of this, our collection was considered the best among all the collectors in regard to mounting and care and condition of the scripts. Whenever we found in bookstalls a volume which was complete and had no bad errors, we would purchase it for the purpose of comparison with other texts.

I have a power for memory, and sometimes after supper, sitting quietly in the Homecoming Hall, we would boil a pot of tea and, pointing to the piles of books on the shelves, make a guess as to which line of which page in which volume of a book contained a certain passage and see who was right, the one making the correct guess having the privilege of drinking his cup of tea first. When a guess was correct, we would lift up the cup and break out into a loud laughter, so much so that sometimes the tea was spilled on our dress and we were not able to drink at all. We were then content to live and grow old in the world! Therefore, we held our heads high, although we were living in poverty and sorrow.... In time our collection grew bigger and bigger and the books and art objects were piled up on tables and desks and beds, and we enjoyed them with our eyes and with our minds and planned and discussed the collection, tasting a happiness above those enjoying the horse races and music and dance.

In the year 1126, Defu was magistrate at Zezhuan when the northern invaders threatened the national capital. He had a presentiment that we were not going to be able to keep the collection intact during the ensuing chaos. The following year, we came down south on the occasion of the funeral for his mother. We realized that a part of the collection had to be sacrificed. First we discarded the heavy, bulky volumes, the less important works of a painter, and vessels that bore no inscriptions. Next we threw out books of which standard editions existed, paintings of no extraordinary merit, and bronze that was too heavy for transportation. Even then, the collection filled fifteen cartloads and was carried in a fleet of boats when we came down the Huai River. We had planned on moving things kept at our old house at Jingzhou the following year, but the house, we found later, was burned down with its dozen roomfuls of objects.

In 1129, we were living at Zhiyang. Defu had to go to the temporary capital. As he stood on the bank to say good-bye, I felt sick at heart and asked, "What shall I do in case of trouble?" He replied from the bank, "Do as the others. If necessary, abandon the food supplies first, then the clothing; books next, the scrolls after that, and the bronze last of

all. But never part with the Song ware no matter what happens. And take good care of it!” Then he left on horseback.

In August, Defu died of an illness. At that time, the imperial court was fleeing to Jiangxi. I asked two employees to bring more than 20,000 volumes of books and over 2,000 prints of inscriptions to Hongzhou first. In winter of that year, the town fell and all was lost. What we had brought down the river in a fleet of boats was all gone. What was saved were a few small scrolls, the works of Li Bo, Du Fu, Han Yu, and Liu Zongyuan, the *Shishuo*, *the Debate on Iron and Salt*, several dozens of rubbings, over a dozen pieces of bronze, and several boxes of *Southern Tang History*, which happened to be with me in my personal luggage. As I could not have gone upriver, I came down south and moved from Daizhou, to Wenzhou, to Chuzhou, to Yuezhou, finally to Hangzhou, and had the collection stored at Zhengxian. In 1130, rebel troops came to the town and raided it, and all that passed into the ownership of old General Li. About 50 or 60 per cent of what had been saved was again gone. I had still six or seven baskets which I brought with me when I moved to Yuezheng. One night, a burglar came and got away with five baskets. What I have left now are only a few odd volumes of several incomplete books.

I suddenly came upon this Catalog (compiled by my husband) and the feeling was like that of meeting an old friend. I remember when we were living at Donglai at our house called “Qingzhitang,” Defu was working every day on the volumes, giving each ten volumes a protecting cloth case with silk fastenings. Usually, he checked over two volumes per day and wrote a postscript note on one volume. Among the 2,000 volumes of prints from stone and bronze, only 502 now bear his signature and notes. The ink is as fresh as the day he wrote them, but the tree over his grave has shot up to a considerable height already. I realize that this is the common fate of things: they come and go, or change ownership or are destroyed. There is nothing surprising in it. I merely write this story down, that collectors may take warning from it.

The fourth year of Shaoxing (1134)

Translated by Lin Yutang

Source: Mair, Victor, ed. *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*.  
New York: *Columbia University Press*, 1994.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Bronze and Stone Inscriptions," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.