

Lyóu Lìng-syén

Written on a Banana Leaf
And Shown to Someone
(c530)

The poet's husband, Syw Fēi, was an ambitious young man, the son of the better-known poet Syw Myěn. Fēi held responsible positions in the capital and elsewhere, to which he likely gave most of his time. These absences would have provided a real-life context for this poem, and so would his early death. His four preserved poems are of little interest, though one of them, addressed to his wife, implies that she had had a literary education. Her own eight poems show a wide range of allusion and literary acquaintance. This piece is included in the Jade Terrace anthology of c537, and so is earlier than that year.

Was it real, or was it merely a poetic exercise? Maybe the question is unreal. Is life itself, for a literate person, more than a poetic exercise?

By no means few, the tears she sheds of evenings,
Numberless, the sighs when she awakes;
But there's just her pillow in the night,
No one else the slightest notice takes.

Shǔn Mǎn-ywǎn (c540)

On a Lamp

This poetic exercise by Shǔn Ywē's granddaughter may be compared to his piece on moonlight (p151). It sets this technical problem: What can one find to say, directly or obliquely, about a lamp? And what human second subject can be illuminated in the process? The answer to the second question is almost a given: a lonely woman. The answer to the first is: minute observation of the actual burning of the lamp. To a third question, How will this be connected up? the answer is: by the passage of time, through the whole of a lonely night.

The opening couplet finds evening fading. In the second, the lamp is lighted, at first flickering, and casting shadows of the openwork design of its enclosure; then burning steady, but with sparks from the wick. It burns hopefully, if faintly, through the chilly spring night in the third couplet, as she looks from her balcony, only to be deterred by the cold. As dawn approaches but no lover appears, it (or she, the true but unmentioned subject of the poem) dreads the arrival of day, with its buzzing flies.

From silken covers fades the sun of day;
 To gauzy hangings comes no moon of night.
 Its first faint sputter casts a shape of crane,
 Its steady glow spits sparks that twinkle bright.
 By breezy railing moves the crimson flame,
 In icy downdrafts dims the darkling light –
 It does not grieve for dainty moths' demise,
 It only fears the dawning insects' flight.

A Sigh for Wáng Jāu-jywn

The poet here hones her skill on the theme of the ill-fated Wáng Jāu-jywn, the Hàn palace lady famous for being sent as wife to the ruler of a desert people. “Reds and greens” are short for the artist’s palette.

The poet’s contempt for dishonesty comes through very strongly, as it does also in her next poem (p168).

1

She trusts his mastery of reds and greens,
The artist puts more weight upon his fee:
A thousand gold would buy cicada tresses,
A million, and the brows arch daintily . . .

2

This morning it is still the land of Hàn;
Tomorrow's dawn will take her to the Hun.
Songs and pipes, in towers now far away –
To them, in dream, returns the wand’ring one.

Shǔn Mǎn-ywǎn (c540)

In Jest, to Miss Syāu

This piece has a bit of bite. Miss Syāu, like the Miss Syè who also figures in poems on this theme, symbolizes the courtesan. She is followed through her day: late sleep in a luxurious boudoir, the putting on of hair ornaments whose pendants provocatively accentuate her walk, and last the disrobed intimacies of the evening. The final sarcastic remark stigmatizes wifely faithfulness as mere selfishness.

One gets a sense of the poet as someone to whom fidelity was important.

Curtain of seed pearls bright, and feathers blue,
 Hangings brushed with gold, and stitched with green;
 In the breeze they billow now and then,
 Allowing her beauty to be briefly seen.
 She places dangle-hairpins in the morn,
 And sheds her silken garment in the e'en.
 O stylish one, to keep for just one man
 So fine a feeling as love were simply mean!

Song of a Reflecting Pool

This quatrain is a tiny landscape poem, with a close description of nature. The lady drops her pin, and thereby loosens her tresses. In a neat bit of closure, the pin, falling into the water, clears an opening in the floating weed, allowing her to use the crystal surface as a mirror in which she rearranges herself. Paintings of the period, and Mǎn-ywǎn's own summary of Wáng Jàu-jyǎn's beauty (coiffure and eyebrows, p165), show the place of these features in the aesthetics of the time. Technical skill apart, this piece implies a poet who had spent her share of time putting up her own hair.

Her tresses float like clouds of summer days,
Her brows suggest the moon of early nights;
She drops a pin into the waters clear –
The duckweed parts; she puts her hair to rights.

Yw Syin (513-581)

Rhapsody on a Mirror
(c538)

Yw Syin, the son of Yw Jyēn-wú (p162), is widely considered to be the greatest poet of the late Six dynasties. Apart from his more learned efforts, he also excelled in the detailed depiction of feminine beauty and feminine feelings. This piece, a more extended exercise than the momentary mirror of Shyn Mān-ywān, preceding, and bringing the larger scope of the long Hàn fū nearer to the preferred compass of the late Six Dynasties poem, dates from his period in the literary circle of Syāu Gāng (p160). As a rhapsody, it harks back somewhat to the encyclopedic character of the Hàn prototype, substituting for its detailed depiction of natural beauty an equally minute depiction of a boudoir. Syin's vast learning comes into play here: there is no space to comment on the incorporated mirror lore and indeed cosmetic jargon, and the present reader will have to take it all on faith.

The pearl in the lady's mouth refers to her puckered lip line. The seemingly fantastic claim that the chestnut-flower design on the back of the bronze mirror shows, on a wall, in light reflected from its front, is a verifiable fact. If a metal mirror cast with a design on its back is heated and quenched, nonuniform thermal deformation creates a pattern of residual stress, replicating the cast design throughout the mirror: the back design, as it were, soaks through to the surface, and shows up in light reflected from it.

The River of Heaven slowly fades,
The Wheel of the Sun more brightly glows;
Kings are twittered to by swallows,
Courtiers are surprised by crows;
Flowers on the mats in clusters,
Lotus round the bed in rows.
The landscape screen is put away,
The folding door again is drawn;
In her eyes, the glint of morn,
On her face, the wind of dawn –
From the clothing-frame she takes her long robe down,
By the jewel-box she puts her bracelets on.
Last night's hairdo still is curled,
Former makeup leaves no signs;
No more pearl between her lips,
Just a trace of eyebrow lines,
Upon her cheeks the stars are few,
Amid the yellow, moon declines.

The mirror stand, with silver trim,
 Is from the palace of the Ngwè:
 Laid down, it turns the moonbeams back,
 Hung up, it makes the breezes play;
 Dragon drapes the casket-lid,
 Phoenix rests in flower-array.

This mirror, indeed,

Reflects the gall, reflects the heart,
 A precious thing, a rarity;
 Incised with crouching dragons done in polychrome,
 O'ercarved with runic symbols from antiquity.
 The mountain-grouse would look, and do a solo dance,
 The ocean bird would see, and give a lonely call
 Place it by the water - the moon comes out above the pond
 Light it with the sun - chestnuts bloom upon the wall
 She sets her dressing-case to rights
 And then pulls out the mirror-tray,
 Striving for the latest style,
 Loving but the present day;
 Her too-straight hair she feathers off,
 Her natural brows she shaves away
 The patches in their petal shape
 Each the next must complement,
 Her lips with cinnabar are drawn,
 Her skin with incense redolent;
 Her fingers smooth with costly cream,
 Her tresses moist with orchid scent
 She estimates how low her side-locks ought to hang,
 Determines that the stuck-on flowers are spaced enough,
 Deftly drapes her bangles with the scratching-stick,
 Gently wipes the hairpin with the powderpuff
 Her hairdo done, she gives herself a long appraising look
 And then she brings the mirror back, from the makeup-nook
 She glances at her double sash,
 And sees that all the knots are tight,
 The long robe fits her perfectly,
 She tugs a crooked hemline right -
 A mirror there could never be more worthy of the name:
 She cannot for a moment bear to have it locked away,
 And when she strolls into the park, she takes it just the same.

Yw Syin (513-581)

Early Plum

The plum, at least in the traditional imagination, is the first tree to blossom, and it blossoms amid the snow, when the rest of the spring can only be imagined. So deep is the snow in this poem that the poet hardly expected to find blossoms, and has ventured forth in light clothing.

The poem moves toward the eight-line form that will be standard in Táng: introductory first couplet, descriptive second couplet, highly parallel third couplet, and the denouement in the final, exit couplet. The third couplet is notable for its intricacy: the descending ice in the first line is balanced by an opposite motion, the upraised hand, in the second. This sort of in-and-out couplet became a conscious point of virtuosity for Táng poets from the founding emperor (p153) on downward. The effective narrative framework of the eight-line form as a whole was another legacy of the focus on poetic technique in the late 5th century Dž-lyáng circle.

Poems are easy to write, but hard to end. The poet goes in search of plum blossoms, but doesn't really expect to find any, so early in the year. He anticipates only a short visit, and takes no thought for warm clothing. But in fact, the plum has blossomed. He lingers, but not being prepared, finds himself getting chilly. The plum has been more faithful to its promise. The faithfulness of the plum becomes not a theme, but a way of life, in Lín Bū (p354), five hundred years further on.

Every year, a little past the solstice,
 I feel the plum has blossomed and grown old;
 If you doubt that spring is far advanced,
 Come into the snowdrifts and behold:
 The tree trunk moves, the hanging ice comes down,
 The branch is high, my outstretched hand is cold;
 I was so sure that I should search in vain –
 And now I regret my clothes are single-fold!

Private Thoughts
(c560)

Yw Syàn's brilliance made him the pride of the Lyáng court, in its limited domain south of the Yángdž. To impress the uncouth Northern Ngwèi Dynasty, he was in 554 sent thither on a diplomatic mission. So well did he succeed in impressing that court that he was detained in its service, and spent the rest of his life under that dynasty (which destroyed his own Lyáng Dynasty in 556) and its successor, the Northern Jōu. In addition to a much admired epic history of Lyáng in rhapsody form, the Aī Jyāng-nán Fù, he composed over the years a set of 27 poems under this carelessly innocuous title (borrowed from Rwǎn Jì, p99).

The military theorist Wú Chǐ (according to one legend) was compelled to leave the state of Ngwèi, where his treatises had been written, for Chǔ, where he died in a palace intrigue. The real-life Hán Fēi was sent as an envoi to Chín, where he was retained and eventually died in prison.

5

Loyal I am, but also filial;
A son I am; but minister equally;
In just one morning, our affairs may end,
And all our doings come to nullity.
Wú Chí left for Chǔ, a fugitive;
Hán Fēi went to Chín, on embassy.
The stoutest character may fade away,
The boldest plan may have no currency.
Beneath the Hwà-Yīn Peak I now reside –
Where evermore a stranger I shall be.