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\*Chīng Lóu Jí+ (1364)

### A Party Incident (CLJ 3)

*The \*Chīng-lóu Jí+ or Tales of the Blue Towers contains anecdotes about the denizens, operatic and other, of the “Blue Tower” demimonde. This particular bit of banter from an early Ywán party turns on the conventions regarding the use of personal names. The non-Chinese Syēn’yw Shū (1257-1302) held important offices early in his life, and in later years retired to cultivate his passion for calligraphy. His style (the characters opposite are his personal name Bwó-jī) shows a lyrical blend of structure and line that puts him, as he hoped, and as critics recognized, at the level of the monumentally famous Wáng Syì-jī (p122). Within the informal circle of his party guests, his personal name was proper usage, but the little minx of a singing-girl here presumes to use it also. Her comeback when challenged on this liberty (repeating it; underlining it by using an intimate pronoun for “you;” at once flattering and caricaturing his ambition) may have inspired a later heroine, the Syè Tyēn-syāng of Gwān Hàn-chīng (p422).*

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**Tsáu Ngv-syòu.** A famous singing-girl of the capital; clever, quick, and with a gift for repartee: outstanding in both beauty and skill. One day Syēn’yw Bwó-jī gave a party. The guests were all prominent officials. Syēn’yw went to the inner rooms on some errand, and told Tsáu to see that everyone was served wine. When he returned, a guest said “Bwó-jī hasn’t drunk.” Tsáu also chimed in “Bwó-jī hasn’t drunk.” A guest laughed “You call him Bwó-jī, so you must be on the most intimate terms with him.” Syēn’yw, pretending to be angry, said “You little demon; you dare to be so impertinent!” Tsáu said “All right, if I can’t say Bwó-jī, I suppose I’ll have to call you Wáng Syì-jī.” All the company laughed uproariously.

Gwān Hàn-chīng (c1220-c1330)

\*Four Bits of Jade+

Separation

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*Gwān Hàn-chīng, who had held office under the Jīn, was the great master of early opera; not as poetic as Bái Pǔ, but vigorous, funny, enormously prolific, and high-minded enough when the occasion called for it.*

*This piece keeps close to its basic formula of 3's and 7's. Since 7-syllable lines end in 3-syllable segments, the whole design is thus based on recurring 3's. The listener expects the rhythm to broaden at the end (as at the beginning: the 33 followed by 77). Instead, it stays at 3. In that context of expectation, the final 3's have an air of constraint; of not quite reaching a goal, as in Dzŭng Rweì (p413).*

*To this already expressive prosodic form, the words add detail: the tear stain on the sleeve, which gives the fabric a richer color (p340), the nudging of willow fronds (the usual accompaniment of partings, p201). As she takes her hand from her eyes, the graceful sleeve of her robe inadvertently scatters the flowers on the breeze; all ends with the distant landscape into which her lover has vanished.*

Since I saw you go,  
 My heart is full of woe;  
 When this little splot of love  
   will fade, I do not know -  
 By the rail, my sleeve brings down  
   willow-blossom snow.  
 River's winding flow,  
 Mountains in a row,  
 No trace of you they show.



Gwān Hàn-chīng (c1230-c1320)

An Operatic Incident (Syè Tyēn-syāng, Scene 2)

<sup>3</sup>46445<sup>3</sup>372<sup>1</sup>8 4<sup>3</sup>5<sup>3</sup>65<sup>3</sup>3728

Now we are in the theater; people packed around us. On stage, the courtesan Syè Tyēn-syāng, the heroine, has parted from her lover Lyǒu Yǔng. He has written her a farewell verse, to the A Minor tune \*Stilling Windblown Waves+ (p363). The Governor (like Yèn Shū, p362) thinks that Lyǒu Yǔng should forget the girl and work on his career. The servant Jāng Chyēn has spied on the parting, and given the Governor a copy of Yǔng's farewell verse. The Governor, seeing the name taboo trap (p419) that awaits her in Yǔng's verse, craftily summons her.

Governor Ti: Jāng Chyēn, bring in wine; I'll have a cup. And let's have Syè Tyēn-syāng sing us a song.

Girl (it is of course for him to choose the mood): What key?

Governor Ti: A Minor.

Girl (professionally proud of her wide repertoire): What tune?

Governor Ti: \*Stilling Windblown Waves+.

Girl (she knows a score of them, but of course, as the Governor expects, Yǔng's is special to her, and fresh in mind. She begins):

**Since the spring has come / I sorrow at greens and sigh for reds,  
My fragrant heart feels everything . . .**

(The hearers hold their breath; she is about to fall into the trap. Jāng, a low fellow and thus on her side, gives her a warning cough. Seeing her peril, she improvises a different ending to the line):

**. . . has lost its hue**

(Everyone breathes in relief. She has dodged it!).

Governor Ti (aside, impressed in spite of himself; he recites a throwaway couplet as the cheers die down): Percipient and resolute, that we call "genius." Upright and steady, that we call "talent." (Quiet is restored; the audience can hear him. He recapitulates): This old man had her sing "Since the spring has come / I sorrow at greens and sigh for reds, My fragrant heart finds everything is vanity." Had she sung the "ty" of "vanity," she would have violated the taboo on pronouncing this official's personal name Ti; I could have sentenced her to forty strokes. But she heard Jāng Chyēn cough, and changed "vanity" into "lost its hue." (He sees another way): Aha! "-ty" is in the -i rhyme; "hue" is in the -u rhyme. (He addresses her): All right, Syè Tyēn-syāng; I have a copy of the verse right here in front of me. If you miss a rhyme, or fault a tone, or scant a note, I'll sentence you to forty strokes. Go right ahead, sing it in the -u rhyme, and if you make a single mistake – Ha! Jāng Chyēn, prepare the heavy cudgel!

*(The audience gasp. They know Yǔng's verse by heart; they know how intricately words and music combine in these verseforms. To improvise a prosodically perfect counterpart – in a different rhyme – impossible! The vulgar forget their bites of lunch, curious to see them stage-manage the fatal beating; the literary, for whom she symbolizes talent wasted in captivity, in short, themselves, listen intensely as the doomed heroine goes back to the beginning of Yǔng's verse):*

**Since the spring has come / I sorrow at greens and sigh for reds,  
My fragrant heart feels everything has lost its hue:**

*(The task she had set herself, by her original substitution).*

**Past flowering boughs, the sun climbs high,  
In trailing willows, orioles chirp,  
'Neath brodered quilt I sleep the morning through.**

*(She might think of some -u word, but she doesn't just replace the word, she reshapes the whole line. In so doing, she makes Yǔng's verse her own, and avows her hope, and that of every frustrated person – everyone – in the audience. Doomed, but plucky. Applause).*

**The ointment dried away / the cloud-locks pushed askew:  
Too weary, all the endless day, to wash and comb anew;  
What to do? -  
I hate / how once the fickle one has gone, letters long are overdue**

*(Halfway through: is it possible she is going to make it? Utter silence).*

**Had I known what would ensue,  
I would then have kept / the figured saddle hidden far from view:**

*(Parting sorrow is socially acceptable, but now she will defy the Governor, Yèn Shū, the Mongols, with a vision of perfect literary happiness):*

**By the study window  
I'd set in place the patterned paper, the ivory brush;  
I'd make you learn the lesson to construe.**

*(Tremendous excitement: it is beautiful, and it is coming out):*

**Always near at hand / never a thought untrue:  
My needlework I'd put aside, and watch you, just us two;**

*(A chastely sweet version of the line that had scandalized Yèn Shū)*

**I'd be with you –**

*(Zowie!! Never mind waiting for the last line; she has done it!! She faces the audience, and spontaneous applause begins to well up) –*

**And we'd not lose the years of youth  
That fade away, so far and few.**

*(Up roar!!! Young love!!! Dreams of office!!! The crowd goes wild!!! Let's get out of here, before the police come in and break it up).*