



# Elegant Rebellion—An Analysis of Feminism in Li Qingzhao's Works

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**How to cite this paper:** Liang, F. (2025) Elegant Rebellion—An Analysis of Feminism in Li Qingzhao's Works. *Open Access Library Journal*, 12: e13175.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1113175>

**Received:** February 28, 2025

**Accepted:** March 30, 2025

**Published:** April 2, 2025

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## Abstract

Li Qingzhao is one of the outstanding representative figures of the graceful and restrained school of poetess in Song Dynasty in China. Wang Zhuo said that she was “talented and close to her predecessors, and there were not many scholar-officials like her. Over the women of this dynasty, her writing can be the top.” Zhu Xi also praised that “only Li Yi’an and Mrs. Wei can write in this dynasty”. However, when it comes to graceful and restrained schools, there is always a stereotype that Li Qingzhao is the Northern Song Dynasty version of Lin Daiyu who is “thinner than yellow flowers”. In fact, this impression can be said to be a big misunderstanding of Li Qingzhao or at least one-sided. Born in an official family, she was influenced by the scholar style since childhood, and had considerable political opinions, patriotic feelings and worries about the country and the people, all of which were no different from the male of her contemporaries. In fact, from Li Qingzhao's works, we can deeply feel that her poetry has unique personal charm in both ideological content and aesthetic consciousness, and it is also full of her own unique female consciousness. Under the social situation at that time, she carried out her unique “elegant rebellion”.

## Subject Areas

Culture

## Keywords

Li Qingzhao, Feminist, Poem

## 1. Introduction

The core of feminism is to demand that women enjoy the complete right to be human beings and advocate equality between men and women. Since the feminist

thought was introduced into China in 1990s, it has brought great influence to the society, which makes more women begin to pursue their own values, pay attention to their self-awareness and strive for their own rights. In ancient China, the thinking pattern of patriarchal society is rooted, and men have always been in a positively dominant position. On the other hand, women have always been negatively dominated. Unequal gender relations put all women in a cage. They accepted the ethical education of “a woman without talent is virtue” and “the wife should be held to the standard by her husband’s behavior”. Women have become accessories of men. However, Li Qingzhao, as a woman in the society at that time, was able to export some progressive thoughts from the female point of view under the pressure of the patriarchal society.

The female consciousness in Li Qingzhao’s works is closely related to her life experience and ups and downs. From a young girl to a glue with her husband, then to a permanent separation from her husband. Finally, the country is broken and the family dies, the life is from comfort and calm to wandering and turbulence. She has experienced vicissitudes of life and society with a keen and delicate female heart, and integrated the feelings of boudoir, the thoughts of home and country, and the generosity of life into her creation. However, her poems are not simply “boudoir grievances”, but she blends her free and independent consciousness into her works to safeguard women’s independent personality and dignity, and makes women shout loudly in the patriarchal society.

## **2. Awakening of Independent Consciousness and Publicizing Free Personality**

Most of the women in ancient times were trapped in their own boudoir. Knitting work and taking good care of husbands and kids were all they had in their whole life Li Qingzhao, who lived in another style, drunk alcohol and played in a boat. After getting drunk, she wrote everything into words like a dream order. From the words, we can see that Li Qingzhao in her girlhood was not locked up in the boudoir compound [1], but went out to go boating and played freely. She hadn’t the dullness of ancient ladies. She grew up freely, which created her personality. This is a poem written by Li Qingzhao in her youth. It can be seen that there were some “masculine colors” at that time. It was the awakening of her independent consciousness that women could do whatever they wanted like the men usually do [2].

In ancient China, women’s status was low. Everything should be respected by men, and men’s preferences should be given priority to. Men’s aesthetic concepts should be regarded as their own guidelines. Although the male authority culture set a good wife and mother as a model for women in morality, virtuous women suppressed by this kind of ethical codes and regulations, men think they are boring in perceptual level. Most of the time, women are self-denying and lose themselves. From this perspective, Li Qingzhao wrote in her poem “Why it should light blue or deep red, it just be the first class among flowers”. It seems to describe

sweet-scented osmanthus, but in fact, the sentimental poets compare themselves to sweet-scented osmanthus to express their noble personality, highlighting the inner beauty of sweet-scented osmanthus, and thus reflecting their own feelings of emphasizing inner beauty, quality beauty and advocating elegance and nobility [3]. Li Qingzhao has his own appreciation of things, and he can be confident in himself. She doesn't care about secular views and only follows her own heart. This kind of self-recognition is a kind of protection for oneself and a kind of resistance to the unequal social relations in the patriarchal society.

Being in a society of political darkness, war and turbulence, Li Qingzhao showed extraordinary women's foresight and sagacity as well as expressed her attitude towards life boldly with strong patriotism and firm national integrity [4]. Li Qingzhao, who was de-feminized, lived a different way for other women at that time. She pursues independent values which are beneficial to the country and society, and never regards herself as a vassal of men, nor is it confined to the love-sickness of the boudoir. She closely links her personal destiny with society [5]. The poem *Wujiang River* is very popular. "In life, one should be a hero among men; in death, being a spirit among the ghost. To this day, we remember Xiang Yu, who refuses to cross the river." This poem contains grief, indignation and sarcasm [6]. For the civil and military officials of the Manchu Dynasty in the Southern Song Dynasty, it is like a thorn in the back. The awe-inspiring righteousness between the lines makes Li Qingzhao's patriotism come to light. His loyalty to country is admirable. Li Qingzhao expressed her ambition with this poem "To live in high spirits, to be outstanding, to die heroically, to be generous and epic." Li Qingzhao has a progressive female consciousness [7]. She observed the world from a female perspective and dared to express her true feelings. In the patriarchal society of the "three cardinal guides and five permanent members" at that time, she highlighted the dignity and value of women.

### 3. The Pursuit of Love and Marriage

In ancient times, women were marginalized in society, which inevitably led to the loss of all rights, including the pursuit of love. They had no love, only marriage, and even in marriage, they were absolutely passive, with decisions being made by parents and matchmakers. However, Li Qingzhao, who grew up in a relatively relaxed environment, broke through the shackles of the "three cardinal guides and five permanent members" with her extraordinary personality, integrating her pursuit of love and her experiences in love into her poetry, reflecting a strong sense of feminism [8].

Originally, Li Qingzhao wrote more erotic contents from the perspective of women's self-morality, which is quite different from men's boudoir poems *Huanxisha*, for example, boldly expressed the girl's care "Embroidered hibiscus smiles and flies obliquely. Treasure duck is lined with fragrant gills. Eyes are guessed." By the opening of hibiscus, it sets off a girl's smile and implies a girl's seed of love. The fragrant treasure duck sets off a girl's fragrant snow gills and

thoughtful manner. The girl's eyes flow shows uneasy and excited mood at the same time [9]. The contradiction that is afraid of being seen through and can't control her joy is displayed to the fullest "One side of the amorous feelings has deep rhyme, half a note, charming hate, sending a secluded moon, moving flowers and shadows, and coming back." The melancholy of love but not seeing needs to be told through letters, but what I write down is only the expectation of meeting next time [10]. The heroine's emotional changes in the poem reflect the complicated psychology of young girls when their hearts first move. Under the background of feudal patriarchal marriage, the heroine's pursuit is bold and beautiful. Li Qingzhao expressed her approval of women's bold pursuit of love by describing this girl who boldly pursued free love, and also strongly resisted the repression of women in the patriarchal society.

Li Qingzhao married Zhao Mingcheng at the age of 18. It was an honest life for Li Qingzhao. He found the right husband. For Zhao Mingcheng, he got a talented wife when he was young. They were harmonious and had the same interests. This marriage was a good story at first. A sentence in *Mulan*, "I want to teach Lang Bi and watch", describes that girls' psychological activities achieve the harmony and unity of frankness and implicature, and at the same time show the interest of young couples. Li Qingzhao wrote her love into her works without exaggeration, and boldly poured out her true inner feelings, which was a collision with feudal ethics to a certain extent [11].

In the Song Dynasty, due to the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng and Zhu, it strongly advocated "preserving heaven and destroying people's desires", and extremely despised women's rights and interests in the marriage and family system, and even put forward that "starving to death is a small matter and losing integrity is a big matter". However, after the death of her husband Zhao Mingcheng, Li Qingzhao did not follow the secular constraints and remained widowed all her life. She insisted on pursuing happiness again [12]. But Li Qingzhao thought that when she met a like-minded person, she never wanted Zhang Ruzhou to tear off her disguised face. She was an extremely hypocritical person. After recognizing Zhang Ruzhou's hypocritical face, Li Qingzhao resolutely decided to divorce and reported him for cheating in the imperial examination. But according to the law of Song Dynasty, a wife who told her husband whether he won or lost, right or wrong, would be sentenced to two years in prison. Li Qingzhao would rather suffer from flesh and blood than be enslaved by spirit. At that time, Li Qingzhao violated feudal norms and ran counter to feudal ethics [13]. But she bravely abandoned the feudal etiquette and persistently pursued the common spiritual concept of love and marriage, which showed her unique love and marriage consciousness [14].

#### 4. Conclusion

"Through a hundred generations, the great river rushes with waves, washing away ten thousand heroes. In the garden of poetry for a thousand years, a myriad of

flowers compete in beauty, and one daughter blooms supreme” [15]. Li Qingzhao, an eternal female hero, has made unprecedented contributions to poetry of Song dynasty from practice to theory. Her sharp thinking and the value of her works are not inferior to those of many male. Li Qingzhao is cheerful and free to pursue freedom without losing the beauty of women; she is bold and brave in the pursuit of pure love [16]. She hates the secular world, but realizes her value with her patriotic feelings. She walked out of the boudoir, crossed the shackles of feudalism, opened up a way for women to play their own values [17]. She stands out in the male society by virtue of her outstanding artistic achievements and becomes a “wonderful flower” in the history of Chinese literature.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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