

Sywē Táu (768-831)

Spring Prospect
(811)

Sywē Táu, the most famous courtesan of the age, lived in southwestern Shú, where for many years she exerted an influence on the elegant side of official life. Her poetry was skillful and fluent (tales tell of improvisations at the age of nine), her conversation was witty, her calligraphy celebrated, and the special calligraphy paper which she designed was the rage of fashionable note-writers. Even the well which gave the water to make this paper was famous; it is still pointed out to tourists. Sywē had protracted and celebrated liaisons with several of the Governors and other mighty officials assigned to Shú, and cut quite a swath also through the ranks of the younger and greener.

The impact of a worldly courtesan on a sensitive younger scholar must often have been tremendous; Táng stories repeatedly depict affairs between an older woman and a younger man. Here is a real-life affair between a mature courtesan (she was then over forty) and a brilliant official, Ywǎn Jǎn, aged thirty, recently widowed, who had come to Shú with the important assignment of reporting on government abuses directly to the Emperor. With him, she had a brief affair in 809. It ended in 810, when she was indiscreet with something governmental which he, also indiscreetly, had confided to her. This 811 piece, from a set of four (the “prospect” of the title is a hopeful one, p203, not the darkly ironic one of p226), explores the possibility that he might care to resume their liaison. She reports the sadness which the coming and going of spring flowers alike awaken in her, diplomatically leaving him an opening to say if he also regrets the separation.

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Flowers open: I do not share the joy,
 Flowers fall: I do not share the woe;
 If one should ask when longing longs the most –
 It's when the flowers bloom, and when they go

Ywǎn Jǔn (779-831)

The River Flowers Fall
(811)

As of 811, he does not care to take up that thread once more: an ardent temperament is not something one turns off and on again. But tact is called for. Her invitation is intentionally ambiguous. She does not say whether she finds the opening or the falling of the flowers more poignant, and thus leaves it to him to make a beginning or an end. He responds with his own ambiguity, also leaving it uncertain which aspect of spring is the more affecting - but both of them are aspects of the falling flowers. No tasteful person, no arbiter of tasteful persons, could possibly take offense.

The “half and half” line in which he presents his answering ambiguity may or may not be the first use of this device; it is at any rate an early one. It became popular in later years; a witty way to balance the two halves of a heptameter line. Its potential was perhaps most amusingly explored by Gwān Hàn-chīng (p421).

East the Jyā-líng River flows
 in the sunset glare,
 The river wind is dappled with
 the flowers of the pear;
 Where do the river flowers make
 the saddest sight of all?
 Half adrift upon the river,
 half upon the air

Bwó Jyŵ-yì (772-846)

*Not Quite A Flower+
333377

Though warier by nature than Ywáén, Bwó also had his youthful moments of mystery. This influential piece fits metrically into a heptameter quatrain (7777), on the now familiar principle that 3 + 3 is equivalent to 7. Like many heptameter quatrains (such as Lǐ Bwó's improvisation on p217), it is really a song; one with music, one which is still sung at the present time. As often, the girl visits her lover, not the other way round.

Beneath the mystery in these recollections, there is a sense of the unreality of life. Ywáén and Bwó are briefly disoriented, but they are not lost in uncertainty. They do not regard uncertainty as some temporary aberration from normal clarity. It is clarity that is the aberration. They have begun to be at home in uncertainty.

Not quite a flower did glisten,
Not quite a mist did sway;
She came at deep of night,
She went at break of day.
Coming as a dream of spring
 that lasts a little while,
Going like a cloud of morn
 that vanishes away