

Lǐ Yw̄ (937-978)

*Song of Midnight+
7755 5555

*It was Lǐ Yw̄, the third and last ruler of Southern Táng, to whom Fǎng Yén-sz̄ had been Subtutor. A poet could scarcely have an apter pupil. Nor could a pupil ask for more misfortunes as subjects for sad verse. Yw̄ came to the throne in 961, and for a time there was some pleasure in it. This piece (the pattern is also called *Bodhisattva Barbarian+; see p339) is on the theme of the slightly too-early spring outing accompanied by ladies (For an almost humorous version, see p259). This one begins with an excuse for pushing the season (couplet 1), and continues with ladies of jadelike skin pouring out yellow wine (couplet 2). A certain conviviality grows (couplet 3). Then comes a resource available only to an emperor.*

Once long ago, when Táng emperor Míng-hwáng and Yáng Gwèi-fēi were viewing unopened flowers, Míng-hwáng had played a piece on the wether-drum, on which he was an expert performer; and at the end, the flowers had obediently bloomed. This allusion then gets mixed up with another famous Míng-hwáng story, in which Lǐ Bwó extemporizes a poem to celebrate another spring party (p217). On this rather rowdy occasion, the drum seems to have elicited poems, not flowers. Lǐ Yw̄'s retinue must have been composing them to keep the occasion going.

It is all no doubt harmless enough, in its day. But for readers in a later age, it is thick with unintended predictions of doom.

To seek for spring you need to be
earlier than spring,
To look at flowers, don't wait until
the bough's done blossoming:
A yellow hue the soft jade hands lift up,
The stream of wine comes clear within the cup
What matter if the party noisy grow?
To palace garden, spring's return is slow –
Tipsy all; to chatter all succumb,
And a poem concludes to the beat of the wether-drum

*Gazing Toward the South+

35775

(c976)

Yw's next loss was that of everything else he had. The Sung armies conquered Southern Táng in 975. Lǐ Ywè was taken north to a leisurely if humiliating captivity, where he eventually died. Of many poems in which he returns to his former state in a dream, this one is by far the most celebrated. In only five lines, he announces his anguish, and then expresses it by experiencing again the pleasures he has lost.

The shorter last line (the 5 following the two 7's) is an elliptical conclusion. Most of the poem is taken up with the journey to the palace park, with its carriages and horses. It is left for the last line to imply all that is beautiful about the spring. From that beauty, in turn, we may perhaps imagine the grief of the poet, at its loss.

So much agony!

Last night in dream my soul went wandering:

Once again, as long ago,

I sought the palace park,

Carriages like a flowing stream,

horses capering –

The flowers, the moon, the very height of spring

Lǐ Yǜ (937-978)

*Waves Wash the Sands+
2(54774)
(c977)

And here is the agony itself. Another dream like the one preceding has come and gone, the poet is still a captive, and we see him in the hard historical present, acknowledging his loss. This poem thus makes a fitting companion to Li Shì-mín's Táng inaugural poem (p177): loss of empire balancing gain of empire. As in the preceding piece, the poignantly shorter last line of the form is used to step back from the poem in a last summative general phrase. The conventional lonely garden is now the world. The question Yén Yǜn (p306) had asked a century earlier, and Fýng Yén-sz (p344), without giving a solution, had repeated twenty years earlier, seems at last to have been definitively answered.

Outside the screen, the rain is sad and slow,
Spring is but a faded glow.
The silken covers do not screen
 the morning winds that blow;
In my dream, I cannot tell
 that I have traveled far –
A moment's happiness I know.
To lean alone on railings, do not go,
Hills and streams in endless show:
I left them once without a pang,
 I see them now with woe.
Flowing river, fallen blossom:
 spring has gone away –
In heaven above and here below.