Tune: "Sand of Silk-Washing Brook"

Late Spring

A small courtyard, an idle window: The mellow tints of spring.
Double blinds unfurled:
A room deep in shadow.

Upstairs, silently,
Someone plucking a jade zither.

Clouds emerging from far-off peaks

Hasten the fall of dusk.
A soft breeze blowing rain
Dallies with light shade.

Pear blossoms already past their bloom –
I’m afraid one can’t keep them from fading.
Last night there was intermittent rain, a gusty wind.
Deep sleep did not relieve me of
The last effect of wine.
I ask the maid rolling up the blinds,
But she replies: "The crab-apple is lovely as before."
  "Don't you know?"
  "Oh, don't you know?"
"The green should be plump and the red lean?" (2)

1. A short poem noted for its swift turns of thought expressed with the utmost economy of words.
2. A famous line in the Chinese text which almost baffles translators with its rich imagery.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Complaint Against A Prince" (1)

Admiring Lotuses

Wind on the lake sends the waves
Drifting far and wide.
Autumn deepens. A few lotus blossoms remain
With a lingering fragrance.
Beautiful beyond words are these verdant hills and sparkling streams
That endear themselves to me so warmly.

Lotus pods ripen into seed
Lotus leaves grow sere;
Duckweed and rushes fringe the bank
Fresh-washed by crystal dew.
Dozing egrets and gulls on the sand
Do not so much as turn their heads,
As if they, too, resent
My going away so early.

1. written probably before the poet's marriage in 1101. This poem is noted for two characteristics: it describes the scenes of autumn in a tone of cheerfulness rather than melancholy; it is entirely free from feelings of sadness or nostalgia such as we find in most of Li Qingzhao's ci-poems.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Partridge Sky" (1)

The migrant oriole on the bough-
Tears fill my eyes
As I hear its sweet trills,
Fresh tear stains mingling with old.
A whole spring—and no word from you;

A thousand g beyond the mountain pass-
I search for you in my dreams.
Wordless, facing the cup,
I resign myself to heart-rending sorrow till dusk.

No waiting for the lamp oil to run out. (2)
I shut the door tight
As rain pelts the pear blossoms.

1. The authorship of this poem has been the subject of some debate. I am in favor of the view of Professor Jin Jichang of Shanxi University that both the content and the style of the poem show it to be from the pen of Li Qingzhao rather than of Ouyang Xiu or Qin Shaoyu as some scholars believe.

2. Buddhist saying with an intriguing exotic flavor used to signify the tedium of waiting.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Little Overlapping Hills"

Spring returns to my lonely chamber, (1)
Once more spring grass is lush and green.
Some red plum blossoms are open,
Others have yet to bloom.
I grind tea bricks into fine jade powder
In a pot carved with azure clouds, (2)
Still under the spell of the morning's dream,
Till all of a sudden I am woken
By a jug of spring. (3)

Flower shadows press at the double gate,
Pale moonlight silvers the translucent curtains. A beautiful evening!
Three times in two years (4)
We've missed the spring.
Come back without further ado
And let's enjoy our fill of this spring!

1. Chang Men' (High Gate Palace) in the original poem used to be where Empress Chen of the Ban Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) lived in loneliness when she was out of favor with Emperor Yu. It is a metaphor for "lonely chamber".

2. An illusion to the Song custom of grinding tea bricks into fine powder in a carved pot which is then put over the fire to make tea.

3. delicious spring tea.

4. ‘The Beginning of Spring’ (Li chun), the first solar term in the lunar calendar, sometimes occurs twice a year.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune:

"Drunk in the Shade of Flowers"

Double Ninth Festival (1)

Fine mist, thick clouds:
A day of sadness drags on.
The incense in the gilt animal-burner is running out.
Once more the festive day of Double Ninth returns,
And my mesh-curtained bed and jewelled pillows
Are just drenched in the chill of midnight.
Beside the east hedge I drink after dusk;
A subtle fragrance fills my sleeves.
Don't say one is not pining away!
When the west wind blows the blinds aside,
I am frailer than the chrysanthemums.

1. Legend says that the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month in the lunar calendar was originally a day when people in ancient times went to the hills to escape natural calamities, each wearing a bag filled with dogwood. Later it became a festival for groups of friends or members of a family to go picnicking on the hills to enjoy the brisk air and mellow tints of autumn—a custom immortalized in one of the Tang poet Wang Wei's quatrains, in which the famous line "On festive occasions one thinks doubly of absent dear ones" is often quoted to this day.

This poem was written not long after the poet married Zhao Mingcheng, when the latter had to leave home at short notice to take up a distant official post. Its vivid images are pregnant with implicit feelings which she leaves for the reader to imagine. The concluding three lines, famous for their lyric charm, are frequently quoted. It is said that when her husband received the poem, he was overcome with admiration and took pains to compose fifty poems to the same tune to rival and surpass hers, but without success.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
No more incense smoke from the gilt lion burner;
Quilts in the bed: a riot of crimson waves.
A night of unrestful sleep,
And I am in no mood to comb my hair.
Heedless that my jewelled toilet-set is covered with dust,
And the morning sun peeping above the curtain-hooks.
A jumble of parting thoughts,
Yet I hesitate on the verge of utterance
For fear of bitterness.
Of late I've been growing thin, Not that I over-drink myself,
Nor from lament for the autumn.

Finished! Finished!
Ten thousand Songs of Farewell (1) failed to detain
The loved one—now gone far away
To Vu Ling Peach Blossom Springs. (2)
Here in this mist-locked chamber
I sit brooding the livelong day,
With only the limpid stream showing me sympathy
As it glides quietly past the terrace.
A fresh wave of regret floods my heart
Where I gaze.

1. An allusion to a poem written by Wang Wei of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) to see off a friend, which in later generations came to be widely used as a song of farewell, with its last line “West of Yang Guan you'll have no more old friends” sung as a refrain. Yang Guan was an ancient pass in present-day Gansu Province.

2. The poet compares her husband to the fisherman who sojourned in the Land of Peach Blossom Springs in Tao Yuanming's Utopian essay.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Butterflies Lingering Over Flowers"

Separation

Sunny breezes, warm drizzle
Take the chill off the air
As the thaw sets in.
Willow sprouts like a girl's eyes,
Plum blossoms rosy-cheeked:
Already one feels the heart of spring stirring.
Oh the delights of wine and poetry—
Who will now share them with me?
The gold-petalled hair-piece feels heavy,
And tears melt my rouge.

I try on my lined dress sewn with gold thread,
Recline idly on a pile of pillows,
Crushing my phoenix hairpin.
No pleasant dream comes to one
Alone in deep sorrow.
At dead of night I sit up,
Trimming the tell-tale wick
Of my bedside lamp. (1)

1. The wick of the candle burnt in to a flowery shape was thought to be a good omen, here presumably of the lover's return.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Sand of Silk-Washing Brook"

Late Spring

Spring colors, mild and rippling,
Usher in Cold Food Day. (1)
Wisps of dying incense smoke
Wreathe the jade burner.
I wake from my dream to find myself
Still wearing the gold—petalled hair—piece,
Reclined on my pillows. (2)

Swallows have not come back from the sea, (3)
People are already competing in games of grass.
Riverside plums past their bloom,
Catkins appear on the willows.
Rain drizzles as twilight deepens,
Wetting the garden swing.

1. The Day of Cold Food customarily occurred two days Qingming (Pure Bright), the fifth solar term in the lunar calendar. On this day people in ancient times abstained from cooking to lament the hermit Jie Zhitui, who let himself be burnt to death rather than obey the summons of the Duke of Jin in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.), when the latter set fire to the mountain forest where he was hiding.

2. A line capable of two interpretations. The present translation follows the one preferred by most authorities.

3. A stanza full of emotional significance. Each of the images given reflects some feeling that must be disturbing the poet’s mind.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: “Sand of Silk—Washing Brook” (1)

Late Spring

Languidly I leave my tresses uncombed,
Regretting that spring will soon be over.
Plum blossoms in the courtyard
Begin to fall in the evening breeze,
And moonbeams grow sparse
As light clouds drift to and fro.

The jade duck-censer idle
With the incense unlit.
Drooping tassels of many-colored feathers
All but conceal the small cherry—tinted bed—curtain.
My rhinoceros hairpin (2) —
Is it still proof against the cold?

1. Some critics pay tribute to this poem as being in the style of High Tang lyricism—replete with feeling through sheer imagery.

2. A kind of rhinoceros horn said to diffuse warmth was sent as tribute to the Tang court by Viet Nam. Here it means ‘a rhinoceros cushion’ or ‘a rhinoceros hairpin’, both of which are relevant to the context.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Magnolia Flowers" (A shorter version)

From the flower vendor I bought
A sprig of spring just bursting into bloom—
Sprinkled all over with teardrops
Still tinged with traces of
Roseate clouds and morning dew.

Lest my beloved should think
I'm not so fair as the flower,
I pin it slanting in my cloud hair;
And ask him to see
Which of us is the lovelier:
The flower or I.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Complaint Against A Prince"

Spring in the Boudoir

Late spring in the Imperial city,
A hall deeply secluded within double gates.
Once more the grass in front of the steps
Grows lush and green,
Had from my upstairs window
I gaze and gaze at the last wild geese
Vanishing from the evening sky.
No where to find a messenger to convey
My teeming thoughts far away.
I am in deep sorrow—
A sorrow that never abates.

The deeper your love, the more poignant
The feeling of sadness there's no resisting.
It is again Cold Food Day.
The garden swings lying idle,
The lanes deserted.
All is quiet save to bright moon
That slants do the drench the pear blossoms.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Fill no more this cup of amber,  
A feeling of intoxication comes over me  
Before I am deep drunk.  
Evening wind blows,  
Echoing the intermittent chimes of bells.

The borneols have gone out, my dream is interrupted.  
My tresses fall loose,  
The gold-bird (1) hairpin is so small.  
I wake up and brood idly  
Over the glowing candle flame.

1. An allusion to a bird which spit gold presented as tribute by Viet Nam to the King of Wei in the Period of the Three Kingdoms (220-285)

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Rouged Lips"

Loneliness

Fine rain urges the falling petals, And soon spring will be fled
Love it as I may.
A twinge in my aching heart,
And I am overwhelmed by a thousand sad thoughts,
Secluded in my lonely chamber.

Impossible to get out of this mood of depression,
Moving from one end of the balustrade to the other.
Where is he, the one dear to my heart?
The road by which he may return I cannot glimpse,
Withered grass stretching to the farthest skies.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Complaint against A Prince"

Late Spring

The clepsydra has stopped dripping;
My dream is broken.
Heavy drinking last night
Intensifies my sorrow.
A chill falls on my jewelled pillow
As the kingfisher screen
Faces a new dawn.
Who swept away the fallen petals outside my door?
Was it the wind that blew the whole night through?

Echoes of a jade flute die away,
The player gone nobody knows where. (1)
Spring, too, will soon be fled,
Yet he has the heart not to keep
His date to return.
I ask the God of Spring
Through the drifting clouds,
What I should do with this longing, this regret,
This moment of time.

1. Legend has it that the daughter of Duke Mu of the State of Qin (c. 7th century B.C.) married Xiao Shi, a gifted flute player. The couple lived happily in a jade tower, and one day riding a phoenix they flew away together to the Land of Immortals.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Usurper of the last days of spring,
Canopied by low palace curtains,
Protected by exquisite crimson railing;
Delicate, unadorned,
Nature’s very image untrammeled by art!
Let all other flowers hide sway!
To you alone the dewy breeze of morn does bring
A hundred charms after your early toilet—
Envied by the wind and laughing at the moon,
Enough to make the God of Spring fall in love with you,
Ever reluctant to depart.

Perfumed carriages jostle one and all,
Through the southern streets,
To where sunshine bathes Brookside Hall (1)
East of the city wall.
Who can succeed you when you become fragrant dust,
The banqueting once over?
Let all the golden cups be drained,
All the candles gutter out,
And yellow twilight fall unheeded in the west!
But miss not your boughs
Nestling beside the Palace of Brilliance, (2)
By the sun (3) first softly caressed.

1. Presumably a popular resort to which people of rank and wealth flocked to enjoy shows of rare flowers and plants.

2. A luxurious palace built in the reign of Emperor Yu of the Han Dynasty, reputed for its walls inlaid with pearls and its staircases and doors shining with gold, the whole palace being a blaze of light even on a dark night.

3. A pun meaning both royalty and the sun.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Sand of Silk—Washing Brook"

(a New version)

To the Cassia Flower

Your petals—twisted into ten thousand flecks of soft gold;
Your leaves—layer upon layer of carved emerald jade.
Graceful in bearing,
Noble and bright in spirit,
You me worthy to compare
With the ancient scholar Yan Fu. (1)

Beside you how vulgar the plum,
For all its profusion of petals;
How coarse the lilac,
With its innumerable knotty branches.
But your all too heady perfume,
O you heartless flower!
Wakes my sorrowful dream
Of a thousand li away.

1. The style name of Yue Guang of the Jin Dynasty (265-420), a scholar renowned for his erudition, wisdom and eloquence as well as his upright character as an official.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "On the Trail of Sweet Incense"

The Seventh Day of the Seventh Lunar Month (1)

A deep gloom broods over Heaven and Earth.
In the rank grass crickets are chirping,
And parasol—trees, startled, let fall their leaves.
Clouds for stairs, the moon for floor,
To Heaven the way is blocked by a thousand barriers,
And floating rafts (2) ply to and fro
To no avail.
On this night magpies form a star bridge to span the Milky Way,

Where Cowboy and Weaving Maid keep their yearly tryst.
Endless must be their murmurings of love and regret.
After long separation!
But whence these sudden changes
Of sun and rain and wind
In the midst of their love—making?
Can it be that they are taking leave of each other
At this sexy moment?

1. A beautiful folk-tale dating back many centuries says that the Cowboy and the Weaving Maid (the two stars Altair and Vega on opposite sides of the Milky Way) loved each other so much that they incurred the displeasure of the Emperor of Heaven for neglect of duty and were permitted to meet only once a year on the night of the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month, crossing the Milky Way by a bridge formed by magpies.

2. According to the nBook of Natural Science (bowuzhi) written by Zhang Hua of the Jin Dynasty, in ancient times the Milky Way was connected with the sea, and people setting out from the sea on a huge wooden raft, would reach Heaven after sailing ten—odd days. There they could catch sight of the Weaving Maid busy at her loom in the palace and the Cowboy herding cattle on the bank of the Heavenly River.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Bodhisattva's Gold Headdress" (1)

Nostalgia

The honks of departing wild geese die away;
Only scattered clouds are lingering in an azure sky.
Outside the back-window snow falls thick and blinding,
Smoke from the incense burner rises straight and high.
My phoenix hairpin lurid under the candle's glow;
From the hairpin pendants of figurine and flower designs (2)
Swing languidly to and fro.

Bugles hasten the break of day,
Bs dawn stars (3) fade in the Milky Way.
Futile my search for the first blooms of spring:
A wintry chill to the west wind does cling.

1. Many authorities are of opinion that this poem expresses nostalgic sentiments by the use of a series of images, and that the characters ming and qing in the first stanza are key words which imply a suggestion of melancholy. In this translation I have therefore used "lurid" and "languidly" instead of "bright" and "lightly" for these two characters respectively. However, there is one annotator who thinks that the poem is a portrayal of a young woman impatient for an outing to enjoy the sights of early spring.

2. Ornaments made of gold foil and colored silk thread to decorate the hair with.

3. dou and niu in the original text refer presumably to the stars of Ursa Major.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Butterflies Lingering Over Flowers" (1)

A Farewell Letter to My Sisters

Written at an Inn in Chang Luo

Tears stain my silk robe with rouge and powder
As the Song of Farewell is repeated
Thousands of times over.
I'm told the going's hard
Over these endless ranges of mountains
That block the view.
In my lonely lodge I listen all night
To the patter of mizzling rain.

Regrets at parting drive my mind to distraction:
I forget how full I filled your cups
As I bade you adieu.
Be sure to send word
When the wild geese pass.
After all Dong Lai is not so far off
As Peng Lai. (2)

1. Written when the poet was en route to Dong Lai, i.e. Laizhou in present-day Shandong Province, where her husband had just taken a new official post. She must then be around 38 years of age.

2. According to legend, Peng Lai was an island in the Eastern Sea, where the Immortals dwelled.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: “Fisherman’s Pride” (1)

A Dream

Billowing clouds surging across the heavens
Merge into dawn’s hazy mist.
Sails in their thousands toss and dance
As the Milky Way recedes.
In a vision I find myself before the Heavenly Ruler,
Who asks solicitously
Where I wish to be off to.

"My journey is a long one," I reply.
"The sun is setting all too soon.
And my brilliant poetic attempts, alas!
Have come to no purpose."
Presently a whirlwind rises, and lo!
The Mighty Roc (2) is winging to the Empyrean
On a flight of ninety-thousand Li.
Blow, O Whirlwind! Blow on without cease.
Blow my tiny craft to the three far—off isles (3)
Where the Immortals dwell.

1. Among all Li Qingzhao's ci—poems this is one unique in style and content. Written probably after the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty when she found herself an exile in South China with all her hopes and aspirations frustrated, it was a work of pure romance, conceived in a trance, worthy of the greatest masters of the romantic style ci—poetry. It shows the versatility of her genius capable of producing a masterpiece in a style other than the elegant restrained style of & of which she was generally recognized as the foremost exponent. Among its most enthusiastic admirers was Liang Qichao, a great essayist and critic in the last years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

2. A fabulous bird first described in the works of Zhuang Zi in the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.). When migrating to the South Seas it is said to strike the waters for 3000 before soaring to a height of 9000 li on a whirlwind. Hence the popular saying 'Roc’s Journey' frequently used by the Chinese to this day to congratulate someone embarking on a career of lofty aspirations.

3. i.e. the three legendary isles "Penglai, Fangzhang and Yingzhou" in the Bohai Sea.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: “Bowl of Green Jade” (1)

Nostalgia

Spring’s glory—how far is it advanced?
Two-thirds already gone.
Lush foliage deep in verdure,
Red blossoms all smiles:
Are barely passable.
A courtyard shadowy under weeping willows,
A room with curtains brushed by warm breeze:
Here’s someone withering away!

A riot of flowers on sale for my choosing
As I ride through the streets of Changan, (2) vine my freight—
What are these beside the peach and plum of my native hills?
Blame not the east wind bringing tears to a wanderer’s eyes!
Nostalgic feelings are hard to express;
Cherished dreams—a mere illusion.
What can I do but return to my home town?

1. In view of i-t's similarity in content and style to quite a few other been written by Li after the removal of the Song capital to Jian Kang south of the Yangtze, though it is attributed to Ouyang Xiu or an anonymous writer by some annotators.

2. “Changan” is here used as a synonym for “the capital”.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)
Tune: "Bodhisattva's Gold Headdress"

Nostalgia

A mild sun, a soft breeze,
The touch of a lined coat just put on:
Early springtime finds me
In a somewhat cheerful mood.
There's a bit of chill, though, on getting up,
And the plum blossom in my hair
Has wilted.

My old home-where may it be?
There's no forgetting about that
Unless I am drunk.
No scent left of the sandalwood incense
Lit overnight,
But the effect of vine
Is with me still.

Translated by Jiaosheng Wang (From Sino-Platonic Papers, 13 (October, 1989)