



## Article

# Interactivity and Influence: A Research on the Relationship between Epitaph (*muzhi* 墓志) and Mourning Poetry for Deceased Wives in Ancient China

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**Abstract:** Epitaph and poetry are two different literary genres in ancient China. However, when they collectively address the theme of “mourning the deceased”, they demonstrate an evident phenomenon of permeation and interaction. Pan Yue, as the pioneer of mourning poetry, his personal expressions as well as the scenes and objects in his mourning poems have become fixed imageries of mourning, which have been applied to the epitaphs written by later literati for their deceased wives, enhancing the mourning attributes of these inscriptions. Some renowned poets such as Wei Yingwu 韦应物 (737–791) from the Tang 唐 Dynasty (618–907), and Li Mengyang 李梦阳 (1473–1530), from the Ming 明 Dynasty (1368–1644) would personally write tomb inscriptions while creating mourning poems for their deceased wives. Reading these two kinds of texts from the same author side by side not only deepens our understanding of both types of text, but also helps to examine the intertextual interactions between these two literary forms.

**Keywords:** Epitaph; mourning poetry; ancient China



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## 1. Introduction

In his essay “A Comparison of Sentiment between Chinese and Western Poetry” (*Zhongxi shi zai qingqu shang de bijiao* 中西诗在情趣上的比较), Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897–1986) made a famous statement: “Most Chinese love poems are written after marriage, so the best ones are often about parting and mourning”.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Western literature, which often depicts the joy of love and happiness in marriage, ancient Chinese literati often expressed their feelings for their wives through separation and longing. When a wife who had once promised to “share the same bed in life and death” (生则同衾, 死则同穴) passed away, the pain of losing a loved one was multiplied compared to ordinary parting, thus mourning for a deceased wife became the husband’s emotional outlet when they were overwhelmed with grief.

Among various literary styles, poetry is the oldest and most fundamental form of expressive literature. It was first combined with the language of mourning by literati, giving birth to elegy, an important literary product that occupies a significant place in later mourning literature. As early as in the *Book of Songs* 诗经, we have already seen the prototype of the emotional mode of later mourning literature.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the poet Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300) of the Western Jin 西晋 Dynasty (265–317) wrote three elegies for his deceased wife Lady Yang (*Yangshi* 杨氏) that the theme of mourning began to have a special and conventional meaning, namely, mourning the deceased wife or loved ones. In addition to poetry, epitaphs that record the life and merits of the deceased are also an important form for literati to express their grief. Due to the differences in literary forms, elegies, and epitaphs present different contents and achieve different literary effects. Since the Tang 唐 Dynasty (618–907), with the popularization of writing epitaphs as a part of funeral culture, it has become a common practice for men to invite literati or personally write epitaphs for their deceased wives or concubines. At the same time, the creation of mourning poetry by literati also became more and more prosperous. Therefore, it became increasingly

common for a woman to have both an elegy written by her husband and a tomb inscription. For example, Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) and Wei Yingwu 韦应物 (737–791), the poets with the most elegiac poems in the Tang Dynasty, famous literati such as Su Shi 苏轼 (1037–1101), Liu Kechuang 刘克庄 (1187–1269), Zeng Gong 曾巩 (1019–1083) in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), Li Mengyang 李梦阳 (1473–1530), the leader of the so-called *qian qizi* 前七子 of the Ming 明 dynasty (1368–1644),<sup>3</sup> and Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634–1711), a literary scholar and poetry critic of the Qing Dynasty (1616–1912), have all written mourning poems for their wives, and their wives also have surviving epitaphs. Among them, Wei Yingwu and Li Mengyang are particularly noteworthy because they not only wrote mourning poems for their wives but also personally wrote epitaphs for them. When we read the epitaphs and elegiac poems for their deceased wives in comparison, we can find that there is a certain degree of interaction and adoption between the two. In general, epitaphs for deceased wives or concubines often highlight their emotional expression by using traditional mourning allusions; at the same time, being flexible in form and narrative methods, epitaphs expand the contents and expressive ways of elegiac poetry that are limited by its poetic form. Thus, when both elegies and epitaphs are created for the same female figure as the subject of mourning, epitaphs can provide us with original backgrounds and more information for understanding elegiac poetry.

## 2. The Impact of Mourning Poems on Epitaph: Pan Yue and His Elegy in the Funerary Inscriptions

Pan Yue was not only a talent of his time but also a renowned handsome man. At the age of twenty, he married Lady Yang and enjoyed twenty-four years of happy marriage. When his beloved wife passed away in Luoyang 洛阳, Pan Yue was overwhelmed with grief and wrote a series of mourning works such as “Elegy for Eternal Departure” (Ai youshi wen 哀永逝文), “Elegy for the Deceased” (Daowang fu 悼亡赋), and “Seven Elegies for Lady Yang” (Yangshi qiai shi 杨氏七哀诗). Among them, the most touching pieces are the three “Elegies for the Deceased”, which have had an important influence on later generations. As the pioneer of elegiac poetry, Pan Yue not only had a major impact on the creation of elegiac poetry among later generations but was also frequently mentioned in later epitaphs, which transformed him into a symbol of mourning literature. As early as Yu Xin’s 庾信 (513–581) “Epitaph for Lady Bolugu, Wife of Lord Qiao Guo and Pillar of the Great Zhou” (*Da Zhou zhuguo Qiaogo gong furen Bulugu shi muzhiming* 大周柱国谯国公夫人故步六孤氏墓志铭), it was said that “the elegy of Zhou Jizhi only deepens people’s confusion about life, while Pan Yue’s mourning poem only adds to people’s sorrow about death”.<sup>4</sup> By using allusions in a complaint tone, Yu Xin pointed out that the person had already passed away, and Pan Yue’s elegiac words were not enough to dispel his inner grief but only added to his sorrow.

In epitaphs written by later generations, there are more references to Pan Yue. In order to make the epitaphic language form more orderly, writers such as Sun Chu 孙楚 (220–293), Xun Can 荀粲 (210–238), and the Daoist philosopher Zhuang Zhou 庄周 (369–286 BCE) are often presented together with Pan Yue. When these figures appear alone in literary works, respective allusions will be adopted; however, when they appear together with Pan Yue, they all symbolize mourning, which further strengthens the function of commemoration of the epitaph.

In Tang tomb inscriptions, there were more references pertaining to Pan Yue, which were similar to the writing style of Yu Xin discussed above. Sun Chu, styled Zijing 子荆, was a literary figure in the Western Jin Dynasty. According to *Jin Shu* 晋书, after Sun Chu finished his mourning period for this deceased wife, he wrote a poem for Wang Ji 王济 (?–?), who was Emperor Wen’s 晋文帝 (r.211–265) son-in-law. After reading it, Wang Ji commented, “I don’t know if literature comes from emotion or emotion comes from literature. Reading it, I feel even more sorrowful and heavy-hearted about the love between husband and wife”.<sup>5</sup> In Yu Xin’s “Funerary Inscriptions for Lady Hedouling, Wife of Lor Zhao Guo of Zhou” (周赵国公夫人纡豆陵氏墓志铭), it reads that “when Sun Chu mourns

his departed loved one; resentment arises with autumn wind. When Pan Yue mourns for the deceased; sorrow seeps into the long bamboo mat".<sup>6</sup> Yu Xin was the first to parallel Sun Chu and Pan Yue together and regarded them as the forerunners of mourning poems. In the "Epitaph of Lady Sima, Wife of the Honorable Li, Recorder of Chang'an County of Tang" (唐长安县主簿李公故夫人司马氏墓志铭), it says: "We hoped to grow old together and enjoy good fortune. How could we not mourn and sigh when one is gone? Such is life. It is more than the melancholy in Sun Chu's writings and the day and night grief and sorrow expressed by Pan Yue".<sup>7</sup> By naming Sun Chu and Pan Yue together, Yu Xin highlights his grief and lament about his wife's death.

Xun Can, also known as Fengqian 奉倩, was the youngest son of the famous minister and *xuanxue* 玄学 philosopher Xun Yu 荀彧 (163–212). Xun Can married the daughter of General Cao Hong 曹洪 (d.232), and the couple had a happy life together. According to Liu Yiqing's 刘义庆 (403–444) *New Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xin yu* 世说新语), Xun Can deeply loved his wife. When she had a high fever in the winter, he went outside, endured the cold, returned to their room, and used his body to cool her down.<sup>8</sup> When Liu Xiaobiao 刘孝标 (463–521) annotated *New Tales of the World*, he quoted the following from "The Biography of Xun Can" (Xun Can biezhuàn 荀粲别传):

妇病亡，未殓，傅赍往殓。粲不哭而神伤……曰：“佳人难再得，顾逝者不能有倾城之异，然未可易遇也。”

When Xun Can's wife died from illness but had not yet been buried, Fu Gu came to comfort Xun Can. Although Xun did not cry, he was deeply saddened... Xun Can said, "It would be difficult for him to find another woman like her. Although my wife may not have been considered exceptionally beautiful, she was a rare gem". (Liu 2007, p. 1075)

Xun Can grieved for more than a year before passing away due to excessive sorrow. Later on, because of Xun Can's excessive grief over his wife's death, the phrase "emotional injury of Xun Qian" (*Xunling shangshen* 荀令伤神) became synonymous with mourning loved ones in Chinese culture. When using Xun Can's story in tomb inscriptions or other similar contexts, people often focus on the phrase "emotional injury" (*shenshang* 神伤) to express their deep sorrow and grief. For example, "Epitaph of Lady Gao, Wife of Cui Rui of the Great Zhou" (Da Zhou Cui Rui furen Gaoshi muzhi 大周崔锐夫人高氏墓志) reads, "Pan Anren's words are full of sadness in every sentence; Xun Fengqian's mournful writing is heart-wrenching".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the "Epitaph for My Wife Lady Zheng of Xingyang" (Wangqi Xingyang Zhengshi furen muzhiming 亡妻荥阳郑氏夫人墓志铭) reads:

昔奉倩之伤神，安仁之悼亡，征其辞旨，不过闺房之爱耳。况余情义之外，荷周旋而怀德惠，攒万绪而糅中肠，以是思哀则痛百荀潘矣。

The sorrowful spirits of Anren and the mourning for the deceased by Fengqian were only expressions of love within the women's quarters. My feelings and affection go beyond that. I have always cherished her kindness, and my heart is filled with countless thoughts and emotions. My grief is deeper than that expressed by Xun and Pan. (Wu 1997, p. 206)

In addition to paralleling Xun Can and Pan Yue, Zhuangzi and Pan Yue were mentioned together in epitaphs. In this case, a comparison was made between Zhuangzi's beating drum and singing when his wife died and Pan Yue's famous sorrow for his deceased wife. As written in the "Epitaph of Lady Zheng, wife of Sun Wo" (Sun Wo furen Zhengshi mozhi 孙偓夫人郑氏墓志):

潘岳遗挂，著之悼亡；庄生鼓盆，明于幻化。虽死生有命，修短定期，奈琴瑟之调，今昔无比。

Pan Yue created a mourning poem in front of his wife's belongings; Zhuangzi understood the truth of life's transformations after his wife's death. Although life and death are predetermined, the harmonious relationship between husband and wife is invaluable. (Hu and Yang 2022, p. 479)

Zhuangzi believed that life and death are natural processes that cannot be defied, so there is no need to mourn excessively. Although the author of Lady Zheng's epitaph accepted Zhuangzi's view on life and death and understood that life had its predetermined length, when faced with the death of a beloved spouse, it was still difficult to be as unperturbed as Zhuangzi. "The Epitaph for the Wife of Magistrate Li of Longxi, Census Section at the Command of Prince Feng" (Fengwang fu hucao Longxi Li fujun gu furen muzhiming 丰王府户曹陇西李府君故夫人墓志铭) compares the husband to Pan Yue and Zhuangzi, praising his deep affection for his deceased wife: "Magistrate Li mourned deeply like Pan Yue; he was ashamed that he could not face life and death as calmly as Zhuangzi did".<sup>10</sup> The meaning of this sentence originates from Pan Yue's elegiac poem: "I feel ashamed that I cannot be like Dongmen Wu, who did not worry even after losing a loved one, or like Zhuangzi, who sang while beating a drum after his wife's death".<sup>11</sup> From these examples, we can see the influence of Pan Yue on the literature of mourning for later generations.

Apart from the references centered around Pan Yue, some epitaphs also express mourning by adopting popular imagery from his elegies. For example, "The Epitaph of Wang Lin" (Tang Wang Lin muzhi 唐王琳墓志) reads, "Unable to bear the sorrow on the long mat, I beat the drum and gong. ...Grieving, I watch the bitter moon and weep at the empty bed".<sup>12</sup> "The Epitaph of Princess Huaiyang of the Great Tang" (Da Tang gu Huaiyang gongzhu muzhiming 大唐故淮阳公主墓志铭) reads, "I smooth the long mat and vent my sorrow, my tears fall like snowflakes when facing a solitary lamp".<sup>13</sup> Similar literary images are also found in, for example, "The Epitaph for Lady Su of the Great Tang" (Da Tang gu furen Sushi muzhiming 大唐故夫人苏氏墓志铭) and "The Epitaph of Lady Li, Wife of Luo Chengxian of Tang" (Tang Luo Chengxian furen Lishi muzhi 唐罗承先夫人李氏墓志).<sup>14</sup>

"The Epitaph for the Wife of Elder Liang of Tang" (Tang Lianggong gu furen muzhi 唐梁公故夫人墓志) reads, "With high heavens and distant moon, Chang'e never returned; with an empty room and mournful wind, Anren was moved to grieve".<sup>15</sup>

In the above epitaphs, the imageries of "long mat", "cold moon", "empty bed", "sad wind", and "vacant room" are all commonly used allusions in Pan Yue's mourning poems. Take the second poem in Pan Yue's "Mourning Poem" for example,

岁寒无与同，朗月何胧胧。  
展转盼枕席，长簟竟床空。  
床空委清尘，室虚来悲风。  
The cold sky has no one to sleep with,  
and even the bright moon appears hazy.  
Turning to look at the pillow and mat,  
the long mat is empty on the bed.  
The empty bed is covered in light dust,  
and the room is filled with sorrowful wind. (Ding 1957, p. 376)

The phenomenon of seeing objects and thinking of loved ones is a common psychological experience shared by people. The place where Pan Yue once lived with his deceased wife is now empty and covered by the cold moonlight. The bamboo mat and bed that they once shared were now covered in light dust. Remembering their loving life together inevitably brings Pan Yue sadness, deepening his longing for his wife.

In general, Pan Yue and the typical imagery used in his mourning poems had already influenced the writing of tomb inscriptions, as seen in that by Yu Xin. By the Tang dynasty, such influence had become even more far-reaching in the composition of tomb inscriptions for wives and concubines. This not only enriched the emotional expression of tomb inscriptions but also highlighted their elegiac nature. Furthermore, it reveals the interactive relationship between the epitaph and the mourning poem. However, when we look at some specific cases, we find that poets personally write an epitaph for their wives in addition to writing mourning poems. A comparative reading of the two literary forms can help us deepen our understanding of the relationship between mourning poems and epitaphs.



### 3. The Intertextuality between Epitaphs for Women's and Elegiac Poem Written by Their Husbands

Wei Yingwu 韦应物 (737–791) was probably the most famous Tang poet for the writing of mourning poems.<sup>16</sup> There are nineteen poems in the collection of his work listed under the “Lamentation” (*gantān* 感叹) category, all of which are mourning poems written by Wei Yingwu. In early 2007, the tombstones of Wei Yingwu and his wife were unearthed in Xi'an. It is noteworthy that Wei wrote the epigraph for his wife Yuan Ping 元苹 (d. 776) and inscribed her tombstone by himself with deep emotions in order to express his grief for her. Ma Ji's 马骥 study of the epitaph of Yuan Ping shows that Yuan Ping married Wei Yingwu in 756 and died in the ninth month of 776 at the age of thirty-six. Wei Yingwu was forty years old when Yuan Ping passed away. The nineteen mourning poems were written between 776 and 783 (Ma 2007, vol. 6, p. 38). The middle-aged poet was deeply saddened by his wife's death and expressed his genuine emotions through his poetry. Due to the fact that only a few Tang elegies remain, Wei Yingwu was so far the only Tang poet who wrote both an elegy and a tomb inscription for his wife. Therefore, Wei Yingwu's works are particularly invaluable for the study of the intertextuality between epitaph and elegy.

In his book *Jianxi Shuoshi* 剑溪说诗, Qiao Yi 乔亿 (1702–1788) of Qing 清 Dynasty commented on Wei's elegies:

古今悼亡之作，惟韦公应物十数篇，澹缓凄楚，真切动人。不必语语沉痛，而幽忧郁堙之气，直灌输其中，诚绝调也。潘安仁气自苍浑，是汉京余烈，而此题精蕴，实自韦发之。

Among all the works of mourning in history, only Wei Yingwu's, numbered ten or so pieces, are gentle, melancholic, and sincere. His poems chant without being overly sorrowful. However, the emotion of melancholy permeates throughout his works without being explicitly stated. They are absolute masterpieces. Pan Anren's work echoes the writing style of the Han Dynasty, which is powerful and virile. However, the essence of mourning was indeed created by Wei Yingwu. (Qiao 2022, p. 1131)

Jiang Yin 蒋寅 also mentioned in his article, “Daowang shi xiezuo fanshi de yanjin” 悼亡诗写作范式的演进 (The Evolution of Elegiac Writing Paradigms), that Wei Yingwu's elegies can resonate more widely with poor scholars in the world; writers from privileged backgrounds such as Pan Yue, Shen Yue (441–513), and Jiang Yan (444–505) cannot experience such feelings at all. Furthermore, Jiang Yin argues that:

由于这缘于贫寒的特殊体验，韦应物的悼亡诗像那些唐人自撰亡妻墓志一样，增添了许多新的内容。相比潘岳之作，诗的结构已明显不同，清楚地分为伤逝、忆旧、抚今、托梦四个段落。

Due to his special experience of living in poverty, Wei Yingwu's elegies add many new contents, in line with the self-written tomb inscriptions for deceased wives by Tang Dynasty poets. Compared with Pan Yue's works, the structure of Wei Yingwu's poems is clearly different, and they can be divided into four sections: mourning the deceased, recalling the past, comforting the present, and entrusting dreams. (Jiang 2011, vol. 3, p. 6)

In fact, no matter whether it is Wei's elegies or his tomb inscription for his wife, the reason why they are more sincere and touching than those of previous writers and can open up a new paradigm for elegiac literature is because they include more details describing the lives of the couple and their family. These descriptions of their marriage and daily life can be roughly divided into three categories.

First is the record of their memories of their married life. The tomb inscription reads:

自我为匹，殆周二纪，容德斯整，燕言莫达。昧然其安，忽焉祸至，方将携手以偕老，不知中路之云诀。相视之际，奄无一言。

It has been two decades since we were married, and her look and virtue are refined, with no teasing words heard from her. We lived safely in ignorance, yet

suddenly accidents happened. We were supposed to grow old together, but we separated forever in the middle of life. We can only look at each other wordlessly. (Hu and Yang 2022, p. 244)

Moreover, Wei Yingwu's poem "Mourning the Deceased" (Shangshi 伤逝) describes their relationship in the following lines:

结发二十载，宾敬如始来。  
提携属时屯，契阔忧患灾。  
柔素亮为表，礼章夙所该。  
仕公不及私，百事委令才。  
Over the twenty years since we were married,  
We respected each other as if we had just met.  
Suddenly, disaster came upon us as we were supporting one another.  
My wife is gentle, simple, and polite.  
I concerned myself more with official affairs than family matters.  
It was my wife who settled countless chores. (Sun 2002, p. 135)

They respected each other and always shared their hardships. Yuan Ping was truly a virtuous wife, as she settled the countless family chores. In addition to managing household affairs, she was also highly literate and was a good match for Wei Yingwu both in terms of daily life and emotional support. She used to "recite poetry and study calligraphy after settling chores".<sup>17</sup> However, with the death of his wife, the brush she used was put aside for a long time and eventually cracked: "the soft brush became split" (*rouhan quan fenyi* 柔翰全分意).<sup>18</sup> Here we can see Wei Yingwu's detailed description of daily life and his true affection for his wife.

Secondly, Wei Yingwu describes how their young children reacted after his wife's death:

母尝居远，永绝遗恨，遗稚绕席，顾不得留。况长未适人，幼方索乳。又可悲者，有小女年始五岁，以其惠淑，偏所恩爱，尝手教书札，口授千文。见余哀泣，亦复涕咽。试问知有所失，益不能胜。天乎忍此，夺去如弃？

My wife used to live far away from us; now she has passed away forever. Our young children are still around me, but I cannot take care of them properly because I am too busy grieving. My eldest daughter is not married yet, and my youngest still needs milk to survive. What is even more heartbreaking is that my five-year-old daughter was particularly loved by her mother and often taught to read and write by her. When she sees me crying, she also cries. I ask myself what I have lost, but I cannot find an answer. How can heaven be so cruel as to take her away from us? (Hu and Yang 2022, p. 244)

When he sees his five-year-old daughter, the poet remembers how his wife taught her to read and write before she passed away. The contrast between then and now makes him even more sorrowful. This description corresponds with a few lines in his poem "Chu Huan" 出还 in which he writes: "The young girl knows nothing of loss, playing in the courtyard as usual".<sup>19</sup> In his poem "Song Zhong" 送终, Wei Yingwu, however, tells us that "child knows what is lost, crying and grabbing my clothes".<sup>20</sup> All of these lines use the behaviors of children to express the poet's grief, whether it is through joy or sorrow.

Finally, Wei Yingwu describes the scene and feelings he faces when he returns home at night:

余年过强仕，晚而易伤。每望昏入门，寒席无主，手泽衣腻，尚识平生，香奁粉囊，犹置故处，器用百物，不忍复视。

I am getting old and easily hurt. Every time I come home at dusk, the cold bed is empty without my wife's presence. Her clothes are still hanging there untouched, and I still recognize all her belongings, such as perfume sachets and powder

boxes, that are still in their original places. But I cannot bear to look at them anymore. (Hu and Yang 2022, p. 244)

In the empty bedroom, the old clothes worn by his wife, the used powder boxes, and all other living utensils are still placed in their place, which seems to still retain the breath of his wife.

This scene is also the focus of Wei Yingwu's mourning poems, such as "Mourning the deceased" in which he writes that "once I walk in her chamber, I see the rooms are full of dust. Knowing she has passed away, my heart breaks as I saw these objects".<sup>21</sup> In the poem "Pass by the Old House in Zhao Guoli," Wei Yingwu tells his memory of his wife in the following lines:

城室在东厢，遗器不忍观。  
柔翰全分意，芳巾尚染泽。  
残工委筐篋，余素经刀尺。

In the east chamber, I cannot bear to see her tools.

The soft brush became split while the aromatic towel still smelled her grace.

My wife's unfinished embroidery work remains in the basket

and the left fabric is tailored by rulers and knives. (Sun 2002, p. 144)

The empty bedroom where his wife lived is now covered with dust; the writing brush used by his wife has been dried and cracked, and the towel left behind still reveals the original luster. In a suitcase is unfinished sewing work, which gives the poet a feeling of pain that he cannot bear to see and a feeling of cherishment that he cannot bear to discard. What is even more heartbreaking is that his wife followed him throughout his life of hard work, but they lived in poverty for a long time. Even after her death, they could only afford to rent a temporary house for her funeral. The tomb inscription clearly states: "Moreover, because we have always been in poverty when Yuan Ping passed away we did not even have our own house, which has become a psychological burden for me".<sup>22</sup> This sense of guilt undoubtedly adds to the poet's grief.

In terms of the use of elegiac imagery and scenes and the expression of emotions, Wei Yingwu's elegies are undoubtedly similar to those of Pan Yue. In Pan Yue's mourning poems, there are lines that read,

望庐思其人，入室想所历。  
帟屏无髣髴，翰墨有余迹。  
流芳未及歇，遗挂犹在壁。

Looking at the former residence, I miss my wife.

Upon entering the room, I imagine the past.

Behind the closed curtain, I can no longer see the beauty.

but her calligraphy works still remain.

and her charm still lingers on the wall. (Ding 1957, p. 376)

Wei Yingwu not only continued Pan Yue's style in his poetry but also applied it to his composition of tomb inscriptions. Through detailed elaboration, he further enriched the emotional content of the tomb inscriptions.

#### 4. Revitalizing the Deceased: Li Mengyang's Elegies and "The Tomb Inscription of Lady Zuo"

Like Wei Yingwu, the Ming Dynasty litterateur Li Mengyang 李梦阳 (1473–1530) also composed tomb inscriptions and elegiac poems for his deceased wife. According to "The Tomb Inscription of Lady Zuo",<sup>23</sup> Li's wife Lady Zuo 左氏 was the granddaughter of Prince Gongjing 恭靖 of Zhenping 镇平 County, Henan 河南 Province, and a descendant of the Ming 明 (1368–1644) imperial family. Li's father was a tutor at the imperial palace, and he was a low-ranking official. This humble and poor background made Li's marriage difficult. He was rejected by many prominent families for marriage. When proposing to Lady Zuo,

both Lady Zuo's mother and grandmother opposed it. Thanks to his father-in-law, who recognized his talent, Li Mengyang finally married Lady Zuo. In an era where marriage required matching social status and wealth, it was not easy for Lady Zuo to marry into such a humble family. In the tomb inscription written for his wife, Li Mengyang expressed gratitude to his father-in-law, his confidence in his own talent, and most importantly, gratitude to his wife for willingly lowering her status to marry him. Li Mengyang also expressed regret for not being able to provide her with a stable and prosperous life. After marrying Li Mengyang, Lady Zuo received rewards and honors due to Li's promotion. However, her life was full of ups and downs until her death.

The funeral of Lady Zuo was personally arranged by Li Mengyang. In order to comfort the deceased, he wrote a set of poems titled "Knotted Intestine" (Jiechang pian 结肠篇) to express his grieving for his wife.

The first poem in this collection tells of a supernatural occurrence that happened while cooking animal intestines as a sacrifice offered to the poet's deceased wife. It then expresses the poet's infinite grief for her as follows:

哀者且停声，吊客坐在堂。  
听我结肠篇，曲短哀情长。  
五月廿七吾妻亡，厥明奠之罗酒浆。  
其牲伊何豢与羊，痛哉釜鬻结豢肠。  
神灵恍惚心骇伤，团圞肉毬出中汤。  
左回右盘准流黄，经纬缠纠文阴阳。  
底形并字圈两旁，翼翼仿佛双凤凰。  
有绥在下累而长，上有提襻五寸强。  
汝乎无意岂为此，呼汝欲问魂茫茫。  
十呼不应百转咽，肠乎肠乎为畴结。  
Mourners, please be quiet, guests, please sit in the hall.  
Listen to my poem of knotted intestines,  
a short melody with a long sorrow.  
On the 27th day of the fifth month, my wife passed away.  
We held a memorial service with offerings of wine and food the next day.  
The pig and sheep were cooked for the ritual,  
It was so painful to see in the pot that the pig intestines tangled into a ball.  
The soul appeared fleetingly, causing a sense of shock and sadness in our hearts.  
A meatball rolled out of the soup pot.  
left twists and right turns,  
the colour of the meatball falls between black and yellow,  
the intertwining lines of it present a balance of yin and yang.  
The shape below is surrounded by the character "bing"  
and two wings on either side,  
resembling a pair of phoenixes.  
The tassels were long and tangled at the bottom,  
with five-inch-long strings on top.  
You may think it's just a coincidence,  
but I call upon you to ask my wife's wandering soul.  
I called out ten times but received no answer;  
my intestines were twisted into knots. (Hao 2020, p. 645)

While preparing sacrificial offerings, the intestines of the sacrificial animal formed into balls, and various patterns appeared on them. The patterns were clear and distinct, resembling tassels, drooping branches and leaves, and ribbons on clothing. Li Mengyang believed that this miraculous phenomenon was the manifestation of Lady Zuo's spirit and felt even more sorrowful. The creation of this group of poems was triggered by this scene, which was also echoed in the tomb inscription he created for his deceased wife:



死之日，正德丙子五月丁未。年四十二矣。翌日，牲奠左氏。烹牲肠，肠自团织文理阴阳状，若流苏垂绥夹耳，提襻在上。李子观之，哭愈恻，曰：“呜呼！神哉！”于是赋结肠之篇。

The day of her death was the fifth month of the *Bingzi* year in the *Zhengde* reign, and she was forty-two years old. The next day, sacrificial offerings were made to honor her. When the intestines of the sacrificial animal were cooked, they spontaneously formed patterns resembling *yin* and *yang*, with tassels hanging down like ear pendants and tied at the top. Li saw this and cried even harder, saying, “Oh, how divine!” He then wrote a set of poems called “Knotted Intestines”. (Hao 2020, p. 1543)

The supernatural phenomena witnessed by Li Mengyang were no doubt a special psychological reflection of his mourning and longing for his wife. Writing about such a theme in poetry was considered unconventional during the literary trends of that time. However, as the leader of the so-called *qian qizi* 前七子 of the Ming dynasty, Li Mengyang believed that poetry should focus on genuine emotions. In his view, the Neo-Confucianism (*lixue* 理学) of the Song dynasty was to blame for the decline of poetry and literature. Therefore, his works often emphasized emotions over reason. This is also evident in the second poem of the “Knotted Intestines” series.

The second poem is unique in its expression compared to the first one. It is told through the voice of Li’s wife, who reflects on her marriage and life. Li’s wife, at the age of sixteen, married Li Mengyang and followed him as he traveled around for his official duties. As a well-bred lady from a prestigious family, she had no complaints about her life, to which Li Mengyang was very grateful. In the epitaph, Li Mengyang devotes a great deal of space to recounting the vicissitudes of his career path to showcase the hardships his wife endured. This content was also condensed into poetry. When we compare the poem and epitaph side by side, we can see that they have a close intertextual relationship in terms of their content. To facilitate the discussion, I have presented both texts in table form below:

The second poem (Hao 2020, p. 646).	The Tomb Inscription of Lady Zuo
I began serving my husband at the age of sixteen. 妾年十六初侍君	Lady Zuo married into the Li family at the age of sixteen. 左氏生十六年归李氏
My father passed away early, leaving my mother alone. 父也早逝母独存	During that time, the Ceremonial Companion and his mother had passed away, leaving only the Commandery Mistress. 是时，仪宾母、仪宾亡矣，独郡君
I gave birth to a son for you, and now we have a grandson. 为君生子今有孙	Lady Zuo gave birth to a son named Zhi. Lady Zuo’s son was married. In that year, Lady Zuo became a grandmother with the birth of her grandson. 左氏生子枝罢。 左氏儿有妇矣。 是年，左氏有孙。
In the past, I travelled from the city of Chu to the land of Yan and Qin. 昔走楚城迈燕秦	Li served as a principal official in the Board of Revenue and Population in the capital city. Lady Zuo also returned to the capital city after previously being in Tongzhou. 李子拜户部主事，居京师。左氏复从京师，已从通州。 Li was sent to supply troops in the Western Xia regime and brought Lady Zuo with him, passing through Bianliang. 李子饷军西夏，挈左氏还，过汴。

<p>In the past, I travelled from the city of Chu to the land of Yan and Qin. 昔走楚城迈燕秦</p>	<p>Li was appointed as a vice-commissioner of Jiangxi Province... and received Lady Zuo there. 李子起江西按察司副使提学.....李子迎左氏于江西。 Li became an official in charge of the prison in Shangrao, and as a result, Lady Zuo moved to Xingzi County. However, due to false rumors of bandits in Xingzi County, Zuo relocated to Xunyang. 李子以与江御史构，从理官于上饶，而徙左氏星子。会讹言贼过星子，于是左氏自徙于浔阳。 After Li's official duties were terminated again, he traveled to Xunyang with Zuo. They sailed up the river and arrived at Xiangyang, where they planned to settle down. 李子官复罢，道浔阳，就左氏泝江入汉，至于襄阳，将居焉。</p>
<p>In middle age, I am able to return to my hometown, but my body has already accumulated numerous illnesses. 中年得归计永久，命也百病攒妾身。</p>	<p>Li then took Zuo back to their hometown. Upon returning to their hometown, Zuo fell ill and passed away due to emaciation after a year. 李子悟，于是挈左氏归。归而左氏病，踰年，骨立死。</p>

Generally speaking, elegies for deceased wives often convey emotions by selecting specific images, such as the wife's belongings or the couple's old home. While Wei Yingwu's elegies and tomb inscriptions use some traditional images, there are innovations in depicting sadness through specific scenes and details of daily life. For example, Wei Yingwu's poems describe the memory of his wife teaching their young daughter how to read and write before her passing away; they also describe the scene of the daughter crying after her mother's death. In Li Mengyang's collection, both the content of tomb inscriptions and poetry have significantly increased in comparison with that of Wei Yingwu. Li Mengyang's narrative style presents an uninterrupted and complete picture rather than fragmented selections. It starts when Lady Zuo married the Li family, and Li Mengyang's troubled career as a government official is fully displayed, successively commemorating Lady Zuo's life journey of giving birth, losing loved ones, having grandchildren, and falling ill. Such a storytelling mode makes the mourned subjects in Li Mengyang's elegies more concrete and vivid compared to Wei Yingwu's vague and abstract depictions.<sup>24</sup> In this context, Li Mengyang's poetry portrays the marriage and emotions of the couple in a more realistic manner. In typical mourning poetry, poets often deliberately highlight the virtues of their wives and depict their married lives as harmonious and beautiful. However, Li Mengyang sincerely reveals the emotional distance between him and his wife due to a lack of mutual understanding: "We would argue because of disagreements. I was not without fault, and you criticized me".<sup>25</sup> In ancient society, such content was important because, in marital relationships, duty rather than love was often emphasized. Li Mengyang also recognized his wife's inner pain: "If we couldn't understand each other in life, how could we know each other after death?"<sup>26</sup> Lady Zuo had always yearned for the warmth and understanding of her husband. This poem not only expresses Li Mengyang's nostalgia and sympathy for his deceased wife but also truthfully blames his own flaws in life and marriage.

The third poem in the collection returns to the traditional mode of elegiac poetry, depicting their children's grief and the poet's loneliness after his wife's passing. In one line, Li Mengyang writes, "after my retirement from official position, I finally managed to provide you with a peaceful life. Why did you suddenly fall ill and pass away?"<sup>27</sup> This line echoes Yuan Zhen's 元稹 (779–831) poem, in which Yuan Zhen laments that "I can only repay your tumultuous and sorrowful life with my sleepless yearning for you".<sup>28</sup> While the line "where does your soul wander, with the cries of children surrounding you",<sup>29</sup> was reminiscent of Wei Yingwu's "the child seemed to know that they had lost their mother, and they cried while pulling on my clothes".<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the imagery of an empty bed, dusty silk quilt, mandarin ducks, and howling wind in Li Mengyang's mourning poems demonstrate influence from Pan Yue.<sup>31</sup>

In “The Tomb Inscription of Lady Zuo”, Li Mengyang uses the sentence, “my wife passed away, and only then did I realize my wife’s existence,” to introduce the changes in his life after his wife’s death. He continues:

往予学若官，不问家事，今事不问不举矣。留宾，酒食称宾，至今不至矣，即至弗称矣。往予不见器处用之具，今器弃掷弗收矣，然又善碎损。往酰酱盐豉弗乏也，今不继旧矣。鸡鸭羊豕时食，今食弗时，瘦矣。妻在内无嘻嘻，门予出即夜弗扃也。门今扃，内嘻嘻矣。予往不识衣垢，今不命之浣，不浣矣。缝剪描刺，妻不假手、不袭巧，咸足师。今无足师者矣，然又假手人。往予有古今之恹，难友而言之妻，今入而无与言者。故曰“妻亡而予然后知吾妻也”。

When I was an official in the past, I never had to worry about household matters, but now I have to; otherwise, nothing will be done. Previously, when entertaining guests, the wine and food prepared by my wife were always satisfactory to the guests. Nowadays, few guests come, and even if they do, it is difficult to satisfy them with food and drink. In the past, I did not pay attention to utensils and tools as my wife took care of them. Now that there is no one taking care of them, they are easily broken. Previously, we never lacked seasoning such as oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar, but now no one continues to add them. The chickens, ducks, sheep, and pigs we raised have become thin because no one feeds them properly. When my wife was alive, there were no sighs in the house, and we did not need to lock the door when going out. Now we lock the door, and there are often sighs in the house. In the past, I never saw any dirt on my clothes, but now if I do not order my servants to wash them, they will not be washed. My wife never let others do her sewing or embroidery work, but now I have to rely on others for these tasks. Previously, if there was something on my mind that I could not tell my friends about, I would tell my wife instead. Now that she’s gone, there’s no one left for me to talk to at home. Therefore, I say that it was only after my wife’s passing that I truly began to understand her. (Hao 2020, pp. 1543–44)

When his wife was alive, every aspect of their home was in good order. He became so accustomed to this happiness that he failed to truly appreciate and cherish it. It was not until his wife passed away that the pain of her absence became apparent in every aspect of his life. It was then that he realized the virtue of his wife, her skill in managing the household, and the tireless effort she put into it day and night. This reflective mourning is infused with Li Mengyang’s unique life experience, making it both heartbroken and sincere.

Comparing the poem with the tombstone inscription describing life after the death of Li Mengyang’s, we can see that while both express grief, the tombstone inscription portrays the difficulty of managing a household through its meticulous depiction of daily chores. Li Mengyang expresses deep regret for not appreciating his wife’s hard work until after her death. This emotion is more vividly conveyed in the tombstone inscription than in the poem. Clearly, Li Mengyang’s emphasis on emotions in the creative process allowed for the tomb epitaph, a type of formal document that traditionally does not express emotions, to break free from its stylistic constraints. In addition to the standard narrative of family lineage, names, virtues, lifespan, and burial dates, Li Mengyang has added more descriptions that reflect the mourning sentiment in tomb inscriptions.

In terms of content selection and artistic expression, Li Mengyang’s elegiac works differ greatly from those of his predecessors. His tomb inscriptions and poetry demonstrated a clearer connection and adoption between literary genres, that is, poetry and epitaph. The poetry no longer simply narrated the emotions of mourning in a concentrated and general manner, but rather, like tomb inscriptions, it incorporated abundant marital history. The tomb inscription also breaks through the limitations of recording the life of the deceased but is charged with emotional expressions. By combining tomb inscriptions with poetry, the subject of Li Mengyang’s elegies was more concrete and vivid in imagery, and the emotional expression went beyond the usual connotations of elegiac literature.

## 5. Conclusions

The focus on the theme of mourning in ancient China has always been a poetic tradition. When we examine it in two different literary genres, poetry and tomb inscriptions, we can see a certain degree of interaction and adoption between the two occurring since the 3rd century. Pan Yue, the founder of ancient Chinese mourning poetry, along with other figures such as Xun Qian, Sun Chu, and Zhuangzi who had experienced the loss of their wives, had become symbols of mourning poetry for deceased wives in Chinese literary history. They frequently appeared in tomb inscriptions written by later literati. The imagery and scenes commonly used in Pan Yue's mourning poetry were not only adopted by later poets but were also often seen in tomb inscriptions. Among the later literati, Wei Yingwu and Li Mengyang both wrote tomb inscriptions and mourning poems for their wives. By comparing the content between tomb inscriptions and poetry authored by Wei Yingwu and Li Mengyang, we see that they have clear intertextual relationships that enrich the development of these two different literary genres. Wei Yingwu introduced classic imagery and scenes adopted from Pan Yue into his tomb inscription for his wife, Yuan Ping. He then further expanded the emotional connotation of the inscription through commemorative family life segments and integrated it into his mourning poem. Li Mengyang's series mourning his wife and the tomb inscription for Lady Zuo have more clear connections. They both broke through the expressive mode where previous writers only captured specific scenes or images and fully portrayed his wife's life, making the subject of mourning more specific and vivid. This is another breakthrough after Pan Yue and Wei Yingwu.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 中国爱情诗大半写于婚姻之后,所以最佳者往往是惜别、悼亡。See [Zhu \(2013\)](#), p. 71).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the poem “Gesheng” 葛生 is generally believed by scholars to be composed by a woman mourning her deceased husband. It reads: “Vine grows over thorn tree; Weeds in field overspread. Thou whom I love art dead. Who'd dwell with lonely thee? Vine grows over jujube tree; Weeds over graveyard spread. Thou whom I love art dead. Who'd stay with lonely thee? How fair the pillow of horn and the embroidered bed! Thou whom I love art dead. Who'd stay with thee till morn? Long is the summer day; Cold winter night appears. After a hundred years, in the same tomb we'd stay. The winter night is cold; Long is the summer day. When I have passed away, We'll be in same household.” 葛生蒙楚, 藟蔓于野。予美亡此, 谁与独处。葛生蒙棘, 藟蔓于域。予美亡此, 谁与独息。角枕粲兮, 锦衾烂兮。予美亡此, 谁与独旦。夏之日, 冬之夜。百岁之后, 归于其居! 冬之夜, 夏之日。百岁之后, 归于其室。 See [\(Cheng 1991\)](#), pp. 328–30). The poem depicts the husband being buried in a cemetery, while the woman spends the rest of her life alone in the long days and nights, with the four seasons alternating. Only after a hundred years was she able to reunite with her husband in the grave.

<sup>3</sup> *Qian qizi* was a literary school during the periods of Hongzhi 弘治 and Zhengde 正德 (1488–1521) in the Ming Dynasty. The members included Li Mengyang 李梦阳, He Jingming 何景明 (1483–1521), Xu Zhenqing 徐祜卿 (1479–1511), Bian Gong 边贡 (1476–1532), Kang Hai 康海 (1475–1540), Wang Jiushi 王九思 (1468–1551), and Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1544). They opposed the monotonous and hypocritical literary style, proposing the slogan “essays must model after that of Qin and Han; poetry must model after that of the high Tang” (文必秦汉, 诗必盛唐).

<sup>4</sup> 周季直之留书, 更深冥漠; 潘安仁之词藻, 徒增哀怨。See [\(Ni 1980\)](#), p. 1029).

<sup>5</sup> 未知文生于情, 情生于文, 览之凄然, 增伉俪之。See [\(Fang 1974\)](#), p. 1543).

<sup>6</sup> 孙子荆之伤逝, 怨起秋风; 潘安仁之悼亡, 悲深长簾。See [\(Ni 1980\)](#), p. 1038).

<sup>7</sup> 期偕老以福善, 岂悼亡而兴叹。夫如是也, 岂直孙楚文情凄怆, 潘岳旦夕悲伤而已哉! See [\(Wu 1998\)](#), p. 407).

<sup>8</sup> 荀奉倩与妇至笃, 冬月妇病热, 乃出中庭自取冷, 还以身熨之。See [\(Liu 2007\)](#), p. 1075).

<sup>9</sup> 潘安仁之词彩, 句句衔悲; 荀奉倩之哀文, 凄凄思断。In *Quan Tang wen bu yi*, vol. 5, p. 228. Moreover, “Da Tang Binwang gu xiren Gaoshi muzhiming” 大唐邠王故细人高氏墓志铭 reads, “it is more heart-wrenching than Anren and more distressing than Fengqian” 情换动安仁之怨, 神伤起奉倩之愁。See [\(Zhou 2000\)](#), p. 2448).

<sup>10</sup> 李府君悼亡之切, 同潘岳以恻怀; 伉俪深情, 惭庄生之击磬。See [\(Wu 1999\)](#), p. 437).

<sup>11</sup> 上惭东门吴, 下愧蒙庄子。See [\(Ding 1957\)](#), p. 376).

<sup>12</sup> 不堪长簾之悲, 聊发鼓盆之响。……愁看苦月, 泣对空床。See [\(Hu and Yang 2022\)](#), p. 166).

<sup>13</sup> 拂长簾而抽怨, 向孤灯以雪泣。See [\(Zhao 2007\)](#), p. 292).



- 14 “The Epitaph for Lady Su of the Great Tang” reads, “The poem Ge Qin inspires me to create elegiac poetry. While composing my poem, the mention of the long bamboo mat brought about an overwhelming sense of sorrow within me” 思葛覃而动咏, 赋长簟而伤神. See (Wu 1995, p. 157). “The Epitaph of Lady Li, Wife of Luo Chengxian of Tang” reads, “Her light dress sways like the flicker of lightning, reminiscent of the poem Yan Xian gifted to his wife; the empty bed covered in dust added to the sorrow similar to that of Pan Yue” 轻裾电挥, 犹想彦先之赠; 空床尘委, 弥增潘岳之悲. See (Wu 1995, p. 157).
- 15 天高月远, 常娥于是不归; 室虚风悲, 安仁以之兴悼. See (Wu 1999, p. 423).
- 16 Wei Yingwu’s poems are later published in *The Collection of Wei Suzhou Collection* (Wei Suzhou ji 韦苏州集), which consists of ten volumes and covers a wide range of themes. For more reading of Wei Yingwu, see (Tao and Wang 2022).
- 17 尝修理内事之余, 则诵读诗书, 玩习华墨. See (Hu and Yang 2022, p. 243).
- 18 See “Guo Zhaoguo li gudi” 过昭国里故第. See (Sun 2002, p. 144).
- 19 幼女复何知, 时来庭下戏. See (Sun 2002, p. 138).
- 20 童稚知所失, 啼号捉我裳. See (Sun 2002, p. 139).
- 21 一旦入闺门, 四屋满尘埃. 斯人既已矣, 触物但伤摧. See (Sun 2002, p. 135).
- 22 又况生处贫约, 歿无第宅, 永以为负. See (Hu and Yang 2022, p. 244).
- 23 封宜人亡妻左氏墓志铭, See (Hao 2020, p. 1542).
- 24 During the Tang and Song dynasties, tomb inscriptions mainly focused on the virtues of female protagonists, with less emphasis on their life details. Even when some inscriptions did mention the daily life of these women, they were usually limited to specific scenes. This trend was also reflected in elegiac poems of the time, such as those written by Wei Yingwu for his wife. In contrast, tomb inscriptions from the Ming dynasty provided more comprehensive and detailed accounts concerning the life stories of female protagonists. Most inscriptions depicted the entire lives of women in a continuous and complete manner. Li Mengyang’s tomb inscription and poems written for his wife were typical examples of this.
- 25 言乖意违时反唇, 妾匪无迁君多嗔. See (Hao 2020, p. 646).
- 26 生既难明死诘知? See (Hao 2020, p. 646).
- 27 宦归家定今稍宁, 岂汝沈绵遽离绝. See (Hao 2020, p. 646).
- 28 惟将终夜长开眼, 报答平生未展眉. See (Ji 2010, p. 112).
- 29 魂乎魂乎游何方, 儿号女哭周汝旁. See (Hao 2020, p. 646).
- 30 童稚知所失, 啼号捉我裳. See (Sun 2002, p. 139).
- 31 For one example, Li Mengyang writes: “Standing there, it seemed as though I caught a glimpse of my wife’s figure, but as I approached, all I saw was an empty bed. Two swallows perched on the rafters frantically feeding their young, and the green worms they dropped dirtied my clothes. The brocade quilt was covered in dust, and the embroidered mandarin ducks on the blanket looked limp and lifeless. The curtains in front of the coffin swayed in the howling wind. Startled awake from my dream, I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness as I looked around at the dreary rain and dimly lit lamps” 伫立逶迤若有望, 迫而即之独空床。梁间二燕哺子急, 触落青虫污我裳。锦衾尘埃委鸳鸯, 總帷中夜风琅琅。魂惊梦摇中惨伤, 阴雨啾唧灯无光. See (Hao 2020, p. 646).

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