Remembrances

The Experience of the Past
in Classical Chinese Literature

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The Snares of Memory

Through remembrance we repay our debt to the dead, a payment of present time offered to time past, and in that act of remembrance may secretly lodge our own hopes to be remembered. But remembrance can also become a trap for the living. Too many memories may crowd the present. This occurs in interior and involuntary remembrance, when a magnitude of things past rise up before us wherever we turn. That same danger may also be found in a strange, exterior formalization of remembrance; this is the antiquarian passion, in which the value of the past is embodied in the value of some ancient thing and in which acts of conservation are imperceptibly transformed into acts of acquisition.

Suppose these snares of memory, both the interior and the exterior, came together in the history of a collection, laboriously gathered and painfully lost, bit by bit. Suppose further that the historian of the collection is not the primary collector but the collector's wife and companion, herself a connoisseur who shares in the collecting but who has enough distance to recognize the human cost. Then place such a complex act of remembrance in a present that refuses to be crowded out, the dissolution of a dynasty, framing and contributing to the dissolution of the collection. This is the situation in which we find Li Ch'ing-chao, writing in 1132 an afterword to the remaining portions of her dead husband's monumental study of epigraphy, *Ch'in-shih lu, Records on Metal and Stone*.

Writings on metal and stone are inscriptions on stone monuments, bronze ceremonial vessels, and the like; the phrase was also a commonplace for permanence in commemorative inscriptions. Li Ch'ing-chao's husband, Chao Te-fu, made copies of such permanent inscriptions on mere paper and wrote colophons for them, in recognition of the fact that records on metal and stone do indeed wear away; a laborious and learned effort of conservation was demanded before the inscriptions disappeared altogether. But the ceremonial vessels and the man who recorded their inscriptions were lost as the Northern Sung disintegrated in the invasion of the Chin Tartars. All this Li Ch'ing-chao records in her afterword, itself a devotional act of commemoration that inscribes its doubts about the value and permanence of such acts, a testament of love mixed with great bitterness.

What are the preceding chapters of *Records on Metal and Stone*?—the work of the governor, Chao Te-fu. In it he took inscriptions on bells, tripods, steamers, kettles, washbasins, ladles, goblets, and bowls from the Three Dynasties of high antiquity all the way down to the Five Dynasties (immediately preceding our Sung); here also he took the surviving traces of acts by eminent men and obscure scholars inscribed on large steles and stone diks. In all there were two thousand sections of what appeared on metal and stone. Through all these inscriptions, one might be able to correct historical errors, make historical judgements, and mete out praise and blame. It contains things which, on the highest level, correspond to the Way of the Sages, and on a lower level, supplement the omissions of historians. It is a great amount indeed. Yet catastrophe fell on Wang Ya and Yuan Ts'ai alike; what did it matter that the one hoarded books and paintings while the other merely hoarded pepper? Ch'ang-yu and Yuan-k'ai both had a disease—it made no difference that the disease of one was a passion for money, and of the other, a passion for transmission of knowledge and commentary. Although their reputations differed, they were the same in being deluded.

It begins less like a preface or an afterword than like the colophon to a book, a colophon written on a collection of colophons. It begins with the question "What is this book?" The reader, who has probably glanced at the book before coming to the afterword, has formed some notion of what he was looking over. The afterword surprises him, follows the expected words of praise for erudition with an admonition against the ugly folly of passionate erudition. Then, as he reads on in the afterword, the reader discovers that these entries are not simply themselves but a complex history of gathering, preservation, and loss. He discovers that these "surviving traces of acts by eminent men and obscure scholars" are also the surviving traces of acts by another eminent man, Chao Te-fu, and another obscure scholar, Li Ch'ing-chao.
Judgements on the histories of dynasties are embedded not only in the records themselves but also in the story of their composition and their tenuous survival. Blame and praise are meted out, not only in the inscriptions but also in the narrative of their recording. All this noble, laborious effort is folly and waste: these writings are mere things like other things; the passionate concern for them is no more enlightened than any other passion. She recognizes this truth and tells us that she recognizes it, but she still clings passionately to what survives, and publishes it, with an afterword, for posterity.

In 1801, in the first year of the Ch'ien-ch'ang Reign, I came as a bride to the Chao household. At that time my father was a division head in the Ministry of Rites, and my father-in-law, later Grand Councilor, was an executive in the Ministry of Personnel. My husband was then twenty-one and a student in the Imperial Academy. In those days both families, the Chao and the Li, were not well-to-do and were always frugal. On the first and fifteen day of every month, my husband would get a short vacation from the Academy; he would "pawn some clothes" for five hundred cash and go to the market at Hsiang-kuo Temple, where he would buy fruit and rubbings of inscriptions. When he brought home these, we would sit facing one another, rolling them out before us, examining and munching. And we thought ourselves persons of the age of Ko-tien.

The first part of her story is pure idyll—her marriage, Chao Te-fu's student days, the simple pleasures shared by the young bride and her husband. The language of frugality figures prominently throughout her story, from the conventional "pawning cloth" (an allowance) to purchase rubbings, to her remarks about lacking the accustomed luxuries of official households, to her apparently straitened circumstances after Chao Te-fu's death. Yet many details she mentions—the extent of their collection, ownership of at least two households, fine bindings for books, a high reward offered to redeem works stolen from her—all these indicate substantial wealth, if not common luxury.

This recurrent theme of frugality grows from a fear of fortune's cycles, that wealth portends loss, that accumulation anticipates scattering. She draws over herself and her husband a thin disguise of the poor scholar, a vain defense against the impoverishment that inevitably follows riches. Instead of fine food, fine clothes, and fine ornaments for the body, the couple gathers fine books, fine paintings, and antiques. But when the time of scattering comes, she discovers that the books, paintings, and antiques are lost just as easily and as painfully as the more common trappings of wealth. She repeals the old disguise of poverty here, but she has already told us that she knows better, knows that this passion is "no different from a passion for money."

Yet Li Ch'ing-chao remembers those books, paintings, and antique vessels less as objects in themselves than as the center of an experience she shared with Chao Te-fu. That is the significance of the fruit. We are struck less by the fact that Chao Te-fu brought home rubbings from the Hsiang-kuo Temple than by the reollection that he brought home rubbings and fruit. Reading this tells us less about Chao Te-fu—after all, it is hardly surprising that he brought home fruit—than about how Li Ch'ing-chao remembers. Possession of the rubbings was less significant in her memory than the shared pleasure of going over them with Chao Te-fu, an event in which "munching" on the fruit played an essential part.

This word "munching," chih-chiueh, means not only literally chewing fruit, but also figuratively "chewing," "mulling over" passages in writing. It is a word in which the slow savoring of sweet fruit and the slow savoring of the significance of an inscription can become one and the same. Collecting, eating, learning—all are pleasures of slow absorption and acquisition, joined in the word chih-chiueh. Later in the afterword, the pleasure of "chewing over" books becomes a substitute for eating too well, and perhaps also a defense against the dangers that eating too well may bring upon them; yet this substitution provides no real defense against the end of pleasure. "And we thought ourselves persons of the age of Ko-tien." "We thought ourselves," tzu-tzu, marks their illusion, youth's innocent blindness now recognized for what it was.

I would like to "chew over," chih-chiueh, this final passage. To speak of "persons of the age of Ko-tien" unmistakably recalls the end of Tao Ch'ien's famous "Biography of Master Five Willows." The memory of this text carries more force for Li Ch'ing-chao than a mere evocation of a primordial and mythic past, the age of Ko-tien, when everyone lived in simplicity and contentment. Like this section of the afterword where she recalls it, the "Biography of Master Five Willows" speaks of the pleasures of reading, of the difference between grim study and innocent delight in a text. We read here also how the joy of reading may take the place of eating; it has something to say
about contentment with simple things, and it contains a wife's admonition to her husband. Coming to Li Ch'ing-chao's mind as she describes her early married life with Chao Te-fu, the "Biography of Master Five Willows" is the subtext of her history, her silent admonition to her dead husband, a compendium of values he once shared with her but lost.

T'ao Ch'ien, Biography of Master Five Willows

We don't know what age the master lived in, and we aren't certain about his real name. Beside his cottage were five willow trees, so he took his name from them. He lived in perfect peace, a man of few words, with no desire for glory or gain. He liked to read but didn't try too hard to understand. Yet whenever there was something that caught his fancy, he would be so happy he would forget to eat. He had a wine-loving nature, but his household was so poor he couldn't always obtain wine. His friends, knowing how he was, would invite him to drink. And whenever he drank, he finished what he had right away, hoping to get very drunk. When drunk, he would withdraw, not really caring whether he went or stayed. His dwelling was a shambles, providing no protection against wind and sun. His coarse clothes were full of holes and patches; his plate and pitcher always empty; he was at peace. He forgot all about gain and loss and in this way lived out his life.

Ch'ien-lou's wife once said, "Feel no anxiety about loss or low station; don't be too eager for wealth and honor." When we reflect on her words, we suspect that Five Willows may have been such a man—swigging wine and writing poems to satisfy his inclinations. Was he a person of the age of Lord No-Cares? Was he a person of the age of Ko-tien?

The "Biography of Master Five Willows" is a secret foil for each stage of her life with Chao Te-fu. Here is the simple contentment that increasingly eludes husband and wife. In the early days of their marriage their joys seemed simple; but as they chew over the old writings, Chao Te-fu takes them too seriously, loses his former ease in the passion for collecting, and gets caught up in the quest for glory and gain, in which he loses his life and almost loses his good name. Each in their own way, husband and wife both become victims of memory.

When, two years later, he went to take up a post, we lived on rice and vegetables, dressed in common cloth; but he would search out the most remote spots and out-of-the-way places to fulfill his interest in the world's most ancient writings and unusual characters. When his father, the Grand Councillor, was in office, various friends and relations held positions in the Imperial Libraries; there one might find many ancient poems omitted from the Book of Songs, unofficial histories, and writings never before seen, works hidden in walls and recovered from tombs. He would work hard at copying such things, drawing ever more pleasure from the activity, until he was unable to stop himself. Later, if he happened to see a work of painting or calligraphy by some person of ancient or modern times, or unusual vessels of the Three Dynasties of high antiquity, he would still pawn our clothes to buy them. I recall that in the Ch'ung-nü Reign a man came with a painting of peonies by Hu Shao and asked twenty thousand cash for it. In those days twenty thousand cash was a hard sum to raise, even for children of the nobility. We kept it with us a few days, and having thought of no plan by which we could purchase it, we returned it. For several days afterward husband and wife faced one another in deep depression.

Later we lived privately at home for ten years, gathering what we could here and there to have enough for food and clothing. Afterward, my husband governed two commanderies in succession, and he used up all his salary on "lead and wooden tablets" [for scholarly work]. Whenever he got a book, we would collate it with other editions and make corrections together, repair it, and label it with the correct title. When he got hold of a piece of calligraphy, a painting, a goblet, or a tripod, we would go over it at our leisure, pointing out faults and flaws, setting for our nightly limit the time it took one candle to burn down. Thus our collection came to surpass all others in fineness of paper and the perfection of the characters.

I happen to have an excellent memory, and every evening after we finished eating, we would sit in the hall called "Return Home" and make tea. Pointing to the heaps of books and histories, we would guess on which line of which page in which chapter of which book a certain passage could be found. Success in guessing determined who got to drink his or her tea first. Whenever I got it right, I would raise the teacup, laughing so hard that the tea would spill in my lap, and I would get up, not having been able to drink anything at all. I would have been glad to grow old in such a world. Thus, even though we were living in anxiety, hardship, and poverty, our wills were not broken.
The recurring refrain of "anxiety, hardship, and poverty," punctuating an anecdote of perfect contentment, is a vain defense to ward off the coming storm: we see through the disguise of rags to a comfortable life of plenty and shared joys. It was a period of gathering, but the afterword recalls the joys and economies of gathering itself rather than of what was gathered. Strangely, the only particular item remembered is the Hsu Hsi painting they could not acquire. Had they been able to raise the money to purchase it, it would have been lost with the rest of the collection and would have passed unrecorded here. It survives in memory as the acquisition missed, while a thousand successful acquisitions pass unmentioned. Its value in the afterword is not as a work of art but as an occasion that reveals their shared passion for books, art, and antiquities, how it escaped their grasp and left "husband and wife facing one another in deep depression." What was acquired was lost, and lost to memory as well; what was lost is now preserved as memory. Such is the nature of memory, everywhere and here in the afterword, concerned with what is lost and out of reach.

Husband and wife were scholars together and connoisseurs; constantly attentive to what was flawed, fraudulent, or incorrect. They carried out repairs and made collations to preserve the past perfectly. But we note a doubleness in this activity, a union of seriousness and amusement that remains within the scope of idiolic reading described in the "Biography of Master Five Willows." Transmission is not drudgery but an occasion for delight. Strength of memory is not what saves the schoolchild from humiliation; it is a game. The competition between husband and wife was an occasion for sharing between equals, an occasion for meritment. The books and the tea were mere props for joy in the present. Here in this hall named "Return Home," after T'ao Ch'ien's famous rhapsody—in which T'ao chooses freedom and simplicity over the bondage of society—the hierarchy between husband and wife disappears, and the surrounding records of the past find a comfortable home in the present.

When the book collection was complete, we set up a library in "Return Home" hall, with huge bookcases where the books were catalogued in sequence. There we put the books. Whenever I wanted to read, I would ask for the key, make a note in the ledger, then take out the books. If one of them was a bit damaged or soiled, it would be our responsibility to repair the spot and copy it out in a neat hand. There was no longer the same ease and casualness as before. This was an attempt to gain convenience which led instead to nervousness and anxiety. I couldn't bear it. And I began to plan how to do away with more than one meal in our meals, how to do away with all finery in my dress; for my hair there were no ornaments of bright pearls or kingfisher feathers; the household had no implements for gilding or embroidery. Whenever we would come upon a history or the work of a major writer, if there was nothing wrong with the printing and no errors in the edition, we would buy it on the spot to have as a second copy. His family had always specialized in The Book of Changes and the Tao chuan, so the collection of works in those two traditions was most perfect and complete. Books lay ranged on tables and desks, scattered on top of one another on pillows and bedding. This was what took our fancy and what occupied our minds, what drew our eyes and what our spirits inclined to; and our joy was greater than the pleasure others had in dancing girls, dogs, and horses.

Classical Chinese requires a personal pronoun only when the distinction of person will not be clear from the context. Except at the moment when Li Ch'ing-chao comments on her powers of memory, her description of their early life together consistently omits personal pronouns. Yet there are many occasions of "facing"—"chewing over" fruit and rubbings, the depression at their failure to acquire the Hsu Hsi painting, or playing memory games and drinking tea. From these anecdotes we know that antiquarian learning was their joint passion. In that period of their life, the third-person singular of "he sought," "he purchased," "his collection" cannot be distinguished from the first-person plural of "we sought," "we purchased," "our collection."

However, with the building of the bookcases the problem of pronouns becomes acute, and their omission is the means to disguise as well as to record a domestic trouble. When "we set up a library," the choice of the first-person plural is still comfortable and automatic. But it becomes increasingly clear that the new rules of library use are her husband's and not her own. In the context of the ease of their earlier life together, we would like to understand ch'ing-yao as "we would get the key," but the proper force of ch'ing and the apparent nature of the situation makes us suspect that ch'ing-yao means "I would ask him for the key." We would like to believe that if either husband or wife found a damaged section in a book, they would both feel that it should be repaired. We realize that the sense of "respon-
believe her, at the same time recall what she said earlier, that no passion is better than any other passion.

Li Ch'ing-chao has not lost her love of books, but that love has changed, has become mixed with wariness. Before, the books had been nothing more than a prop in the small dramas of affection staged with her husband. Now the pleasure she finds in books differs from that of her husband, the collector; it seems to be directed to what can be read in the books. Thinking back to T'ao Ch'ien's "Biography of Master Five Willows," she claims that hers is the authentic appreciation of books. In the same way her love for Chao Te-fu has become complicated and changed; there appears a faint undertone of resentment and disapproval, still mixed with genuine pride and affection, a sense of discomfort intensified and held in check by the memory of happier times together. She seems to have withdrawn somewhat from "the Collection," and wisely so, now that the storm is coming that will scatter what has been so laboriously gathered. In her subsequent role as the unsuccessful conservator of the collection, her care for the collection is inextricable from its link to her husband and to their earlier life together.

In 1126, the first year of the Ching-k'ang Reign, my husband was governing Tse-ch'uan when we heard that the Chin Tartars were moving against the capital. He was in a daze, realizing that all those full trunks and overflowing chests, which he regarded so lovingly and mournfully, would surely soon be his possessions no longer. In the third month of spring in 1127, the first year of the Chien-yen Reign, we hurried south for the funeral of his mother. Since we could not take the overabundance of our possessions with us, we first gave up the bulky printed volumes, the albums of paintings, and the most cumbersome of the vessels. Thus we reduced the size of the collection several times, and still we had fifteen cartloads of books. When we reached Tung-hai, it took a string of boats to notify them all across the Huai, and again across the Yangtze to Chien-k'ang. In our old mansion in Ching-chou we still had more than ten rooms of books and various items locked away, and we planned to have them all brought by boat the next year. But in the twelfth month Chin forces sacked Ching-chou, and those ten or so rooms I spoke of were all reduced to ashes.

The next autumn, the ninth month of 1128, my husband
took charge of Chien-k'ang Prefecture but relinquished the position in the spring of the following year. Again we put everything in boats and went up to Wu-hu and Ku-shu, intending to take up lodging on the River Kan. That summer in the fifth month we had reached Ch'ih-yang. At that point an imperial decree arrived, ordering my husband to take charge of Hu-ch'ou, and before he assumed that office, to proceed to an audience with the Emperors. Therefore he had the household stop at Ch'ih-yang from which he would go off alone to answer the summons. On the thirteenth day of the sixth month he set off to carry out his duty. He had the boats pulled up onto the shore, and he sat there on the bank, in summer clothes with his headband set high on his forehead, his spirit like a tiger's, his eyes gleaming as though they would shoot into a person, while he gazed toward the boats and took his leave. I was in a terrible state of mind. I shouted to him, "If I hear the city is in danger, what should I do?" He answered from afar, his hands on his hips: "Follow the crowd. If you can't do otherwise, abandon the household goods first, then the clothes, then the books and scrolls, then the old bronzes—but carry the sacrificial vessels for the ancestral temple yourself; live or die with them; don't leave them up." With this he galloped off on his horse.

The northern half of the Sung Empire is crumbling before the invasions of the Chin Tartars. Another passionate collector, the Emperor Hui-tsung, has been carried off into captivity. Now everything that has been amassed, lovingly corrected, set in perfect order, repaired, protected in locked bookcases with rules for use—now all this must meet its time for scattering and destruction. Realizing this, Chao Te-fu looks about desperately, hoping to save as much as he can, ranking the items of the collection in a hierarchy of value. At some point between the time they sat discussing the flaws and merits of each new acquisition and this present ranking of their collection, a subtle transformation has taken place. From a connoisseurship of knowledge and appreciation, we have moved to an almost mercantile connoisseurship of possession, in which every object is a commodity with a relative value. This new world is altogether different from that of Master Five Willows, who read at random and found delight in whatever struck his fancy; this world also differs from one in which a husband and wife play games of guessing the location of a particular passage, indifferent to whether the passage is in a printed Academy edition or in a rare manuscript. The difference seems to center in a distinction between the work as object and "what is in the work. The transformation of books and art into objects is part of a system of possession, which in controlling, organizing, ranking, regulating, and looking things away, corrupts a genuine relation to the past just as it corrupts the relations between human beings in the present. Li Ch'ing-ch'ao learns that she too has a value and a relative position in his collection.

Fifteen carts carry the collection southward, leaving the bottom of the hierarchy of value to burn in the sack of Ch'ing-chou. The collection shows its ugly face, not as knowledge and pleasure but as a mass of objects that enslave their owners: every move means packing up the collection and seeing to its transportation. Then at Ch'ih-yang a decree comes, separating Chao Te-fu from "his" collection and leaving the full weight of its charge to Li Ch'ing-ch'ao. This parting is a memorable scene, as Li Ch'ing-ch'ao describes her husband's heroic appearance with love, admiration, and a glitter of womanly desire. But suddenly everything changes: the collection infects the scene. Again using the first-person pronoun, she says yī yì shèn qī, translated above as "I was in a terrible state of mind." This is a problematic phrase, which décorum might make us take simply as an expression of her apprehension ("I anticipated the worst"); but its history of usages hints at a tension between them: "I was in a bad mood." Realizing that she is being left a prisoner of the collection, she "shouts" her question at Chao Te-fu's departing form. Chao Te-fu answers as one who can instantly appraise the value of commodities, cataloguing the order in which she should abandon the household goods and the collection. She too has her place in the catalogue—along with the sacrificial vessels, the last to go.

How are we to weigh this speech? Much depends on how we understand t'ung-ch'i, the sacrificial vessels for the ancestral temple. These may be either the sacrificial vessels of the Chao clan or the finest bronzes in the collection. On the one hand, there is no doubt that her recording of the speech here is intended to redound to Chao Te-fu's credit, either as the passionate antiquarian or as the person charged with the preservation of the ritual vessels of family sacrifices. In either case, he prizes the vessels as much as life itself. Although he must hurry off in response to imperial command, we would like to believe that he would be willing to die with the sacrificial vessels as readily as he expects Li Ch'ing-ch'ao to sacrifice herself. But it is one thing to choose such a death for oneself and quite another to
order someone else to die for a few pieces of bronze, especially when that someone is one's wife and partner, the person left to write the record. If these are the sacrificial vessels of the family, we have an exemplum of Confucian duty. But if these are merely part of the collection, the passionate antiquarian has a terrible price for his passion, forgetting what pleasure is due, putting his books under lock and key, making them masters of the living. She does tell this incident with pride, but as in many tales told with apparent pride about the strength of character of loved ones, a bitterness haunts the subsurface.

"But carry the sacrificial vessels yourself—live or die with them."

We may remember here an ancient story, told in the Chuang-tzu:

The priest of the Ancestral Sacrifice dressed in his black robes once looked down into the pigpen and delivered an oration to a pig as follows: "Why should you hate death? For three months I will fasten you, for ten days practice abstinences, then for three days fast. Next I will strew white rushes, then on the carved sacrificial platter lay your shoulder and rump. Under those circumstances you wouldn't mind, would you? I suppose that if I were thinking as a mere pig, I would probably say that I would much rather eat chaff and stay in the pigpen. But thinking on my own case, I would certainly do it, as long as I could enjoy the honor of caps and carriages while living, and when dead, get to ride in a decorated hearse with a fine coffin. If I were thinking as a mere pig, I'd turn all that down; thinking for myself, I'd welcome it. And what then is the difference between my desires and those of the pig...?"

Like the passionate antiquarian, the passionate ceremonialist somehow loses sight of certain basic values. But Chuang-tzu presents this distortion of values in an outrageous parody of ancient oratory. Chao Te-fu has forgotten how it sounds to encourage another creature to a noble death that he himself would choose. But we may remind Li Ch'ing-chao that buried in that domineering mass of exquisite editions is a wise voice that mocks her husband's command to die gloriously and willingly with her arms full of bronzes.

As he was hurrying on his journey, he suffered sunstroke from the intense heat, and by the time he reached imperial headquarters, he had contracted a malarial fever. At the end of the seventh month I received a letter that he was lying sick. I was much alarmed, considering my husband's excitable nature and how nothing had been able to prevent the illness deteriorating into fever; his temperature might rise even higher, and in that case he would have to take chilled medicines; then the sickness would really be something to be worried about.

Thereupon I set out by boat and in one day and night traveled three hundred leagues. At the point where I arrived he was taking large doses of ch'ii-hu and yellow ch'in; he had a recurring fever with dysentery, and the illness appeared terminal. I was weeping, and in such a desperate situation I could not bring myself to ask him what was to be done after his death. On the eighteenth day of the eighth month he could no longer get up; he took his brush and wrote a poem; when he finished, he passed away, with no thought at all for the future provision of his family.

He who made such careful provision for his collection during his life made no provision for his household after his death. Here again a failure of humanity has a corrupting effect, forcing Li Ch'ing-chao to worry for herself in worrying about his illness, forcing her to conclude the narrative of his death with an indictment. Her conservation of Records on Metal and Stone, with her afterward, is a work of love, honoring Chao Te-fu's memory, yet the afterward does not always do honor to him. Up to this point Li Ch'ing-chao's criticism of her husband has been muted, the faintest undercurrent of resentment, sometimes rising to the surface, but always mixed with love and respect. Here, as Chao Te-fu leaves the world and the narrative, criticism surfaces clearly. Li Ch'ing-chao has been left alone, with no guidance or provision, in a dissolving society in which, even at its most stable, it was almost impossible for a woman to function independently. Complicating that anxiety, she has been left with her husband's charge to preserve an immense bulk of rare books, paintings, and antiquities, the sole fruit of her husband's lifelong labors and the focus of her memory of their lives together.

When the funeral was over I had nowhere to go. His Majesty had already sent the palace ladies elsewhere, and I heard that crossings of the Yangtse were to be prohibited. At the time I still had twenty thousand chiou of books, two thousand copies of inscriptions on metal and stone with colophons, table service and mats enough to entertain a hundred guests, along with other possessions equaling those already mentioned. I also grew very sick, to the point that my only vital sign was a
rasping breath. The situation was getting more serious every day. I thought of my husband’s brother-in-law, an executive in the Ministry of War on garrison duty in Hung-chou, and I dispatched two former employees of my husband to go ahead to my brother-in-law, taking the baggage. That winter in the twelfth month Chin invaders sacked Hung-chou and all was lost. Those books which, as I said, took a string of boats to ferry, across the Yangtse were scattered into clouds of smoke. What remained were a few light scrolls and calligraphy pieces, manuscript copies of the collections of Li Po, Tu Fu, Han Yu, and Liu Tsung-yuan; a copy of A New Account of Tales of the World (Shih-shao hsin-yü); a copy of Discourses on Salt and Iron (Yen-yieh fun); a few dozen rubbings of stone inscriptions from the Han and T’ang; ten or so ancient tripods and cauldrons; a few boxes of Southern T’ang manuscript editions—all of which I happened to have had removed to my chambers to pass the time during my illness—now a solitary pile of leftovers.

Since I could no longer go upriver, and since the movements of the invaders were unfathomable, I went to stay with my younger brother Li Hang, a reviser of edicts. By the time I reached Tai-chou, the governor of the place had already fled. Proceeding on to Shan through Mu-chou, we left the clothing and linen behind: Hurrying to Yellow Cliff, we hired a boat to take us toward the sea, following the fleet ing court. The court halted a while in Chang-an, then we followed the imperial barge on the sea route to Wen-chou and Yu-teh-chou. In the twelfth month of the fourth year of the Chien-yen Reign, early in 1131, all the officials of the government were released from their posts. We went to Ch’u-chou, and then in the third month of spring, now the first year of the Shao-hsing Reign (1131), we returned to Yu-teh-chou, and in 1132, back again to Hung-chou.

When my husband had been gravely ill, a certain academician, Chang Fei-ch’ing, had visited him with a jade pot—actually it wasn’t really jade but min, a stone like jade. I have no idea who started the story, but there was a false rumor that they had been discussing presenting it to the Chin as a tribute gift. I also learned that someone had made formal charges in the matter. I was terrified and dared say nothing, but I took all the bronze vessels and such things in the household and was about to turn them over to the imperial court. But by the time I reached Yu-teh-chou, the court had already gone on to Suo-ming. I didn’t dare keep these things in the household any longer, so I sent them along with the manuscript books to Shan. Later, when the imperial army was rounding up defeated enemy troops, I heard that these had all been taken into the household of General Li. That “solitary pile of leftovers” of which I spoke had now been reduced by about fifty or sixty percent. All that remained were six or so baskets of books, paintings, ink, and inkstones that I hadn’t been able to part with. I always kept these under my bed and opened them only with my own hands.

At K’uai-chi I chose lodging in a cottage belonging to a local named Chung. Suddenly one night someone made off with five of the baskets through a hole in the wall. I was terribly upset and offered a substantial reward to get them back. Two days later Chung Fu-hao next door produced eighteen of the scrolls and asked for a reward. By that I knew the thief was not far away. I tried every means I could, but I still couldn’t get hold of the rest. I have now found out that they were all purchased at a low price by the Circuit Fiscal Supervisor, Wu Yu-ch’i. Now seventy or eighty percent of that “solitary pile of leftovers” is gone. I still have a few volumes from three or so sets, none complete, and some very ordinary pieces of calligraphy, but I still treasure them as if I were protecting my own head—how foolish I am!

She had been charged by her husband to watch over the collection, and now she must watch that bulky charge dissolve before her eyes—burned in Hung-chou, plundered in Shan, stolen in K’uai-chi, until all that remains are a few odd volume of broken sets. There are rich ironies here: what survived the fires of Hung-chou survived precisely because she did not keep the collection together; they survived because she kept some books with her out of affection, rather than acting from the collector’s sense of value and order. Had her husband’s system of locked bookcases still been in force, she probably could not have kept so many with her at one time. The priceless treasures that burn in Hung-chou are as nameless as the treasures that burned in Ch’ing-chou; here in the “solitary pile of leftovers,” preserved by her personal interest, names of books appear for the first time.

The elaborate itinerary of her movements chronicles her circumstances in an immediate way, a scattering of household goods and the collection in constant flight, amid the flight seaward and the imminent
dissolution of the Sung government. The Yangte line is held against the Chin, and the frightened court cautiously returns to make its new capital in Hang-chou. It was a time of fear, suspicion, and dishonorable actions. Not only is Chao Te-fu dead, his good name is put in jeopardy. And that very connoisseurship on which his reputation (ming, "name," "good name") has been founded now threatens to destroy his reputation. To save his good name, Li Ch'ing-chiao wants to take the surviving bronze vessels and present them to the court. And here again we have the connoisseur’s fine judgment of value: we know that these vessels are worth a life ("But carry the sacrificial vessels yourself—live or die with them"); yet in the eyes of their new appraiser, Li Ch'ing-chiao, they are worth something less than a reputation; she would gladly barter them for that.

The household shrinks, and the collection shrinks to a few baskets under her bed in a rented cottage; the wall is breached, most of the baskets are stolen, and the theft is haunted in her face. But she treasures what remains—a few volumes of broken sets—and pretends to laugh at herself for valuing what has no value, at least according to the criteria of the collection as it used to be. Works were chosen for their perfection—no broken sets then. She claims that these too are worth a life ("as if I were protecting my own head"); just as the sacrificial vessels were worth a life to Chao Te-fu; but we recognize how different these two kinds of value are, both of which are so lightly set against the value of human life.

In this afterward Li Ch'ing-chiao has written for us a secret treatise and history of valuing: first, when her husband was a student, valuing old texts only as part of a complete experience shared with her husband; then in maturity, his valuing the books as "things," commodities in a connoisseur’s market; and in her growing isolation from him, her learning to value the books for what is in them, for the solitary pleasures they offer; now finally valuing what survives as a link to her past, as "old friends" who, when encountered, give occasion for remembrance.

Nowadays, when I chance to look over these books, it’s like meeting old friends. And I recall when my husband was in the hall called "Calm Governance" in Lai-chou: he had first finished binding the volumes, making title slips of rue leaves to keep out insects and tie-ribbons of pale blue silk, binding ten ch'üan into one volume. Every day in the evening when the office clerks would go home, he would do editorial collations on two ch'üan and write a colophon for one inscription.

Of those two thousand items, colophons were written on five hundred and two. It is so sad—today the ink of his writing seems still fresh, yet the trees by his grave have grown to an arm span in girth.

Looking at these tattered remains, she remembers—with a fondness mixed with irony—the care Chao Te-fu lavished on the conservation and perfection of the collection. Even though that care was part of the metamorphosis of the collection into an oppressive "thing," she remembers it not as a contributing cause but as a living scene of his scholarship: as when the young couple sat chewing fruit and examining rubbings, it is the event and not the object that she recalls. His handwriting, which seems so fresh, embodies all the complex ratios of continuity and loss. The man is dead, the collection is gone, but here in the colophons something of the man and the collection lives on. Now Li Ch'ing-chiao, in her turn, preserves what he once worked to preserve. She is no less ensnared by the past than her husband was, but her past is a living past of experience, one that has not disappeared entirely into its thinlyse traces, that weight of objects that become masters of their human masters.

Long ago when the city of Chiang-ling fell, Hsiao Yi, Emperor Yüan of the Liao, did not regret the fall of his kingdom, yet destroyed his books and printings [unwilling to see them fall into the hands of his conquerors]. When his capital Chiang- tu was sacked, Yang Kuang, Emperor Yang of the Sui, wasn’t concerned with his own death, only with recovering his books [his spirit overturning the boat in which they were being transported so that he could have his library in the land of the dead]. It must be that the passions of human nature cannot be forgotten, even standing between life and death. Or maybe it is Heaven’s will that brings as insignificant as ourselves are not fit to enjoy these superb things. Or it might be that the dead too have consciousness, and they still treasure such things, give them their devoted attention, unwilling to leave them in the world of the living. How hard they are to obtain and how easy to lose!

From the time I was eighteen [two years younger than Lu Chi when he wrote the "Poetic Exposition on Literature"] until now at the age of fifty-two [two years after the age at which Ch'ü Po-yü realized the error of his earlier life]—a span of thirty years—how much calamity, how much gain and loss I have witnessed! When there is possession, there must be lack of possession; when there is a gathering together,
there must be a dissolution—that is the constant principle of things. Someone loses a bow; someone else happens to find a bow—what’s worth noticing in that? The reason why I have so minutely recorded this story from beginning to end is to serve as a warning for scholars and collectors in later generations.

Written this second year of the Shao-hsing Reign (1132), the eighth month, first day.

Li Ch'ing-chao

Strange—this work, which claimed to be an afterword and turned into a long narrative, now is called an admonition against precisely the kind of passion that produced the work to which it is appended. Resentment flows just beneath the surface: she implicitly compares her husband's passion for collection to the bibliomania of Emperor Yutan of the Liang and Emperor Yang of the Sui, both exemplars of bad government and its dire consequences, both representatives of destructive distortions of value (and there is another, unstated example in the last Northern Sung emperor, Hui-tung, the imperial aesthete and collector whose preoccupations would bear the blame for the Sung loss of North China). The family is the microcosm of the state; how different then is valuing books above a kingdom from valuing one's collection above one's kin? It is a passion no better than other passions, dehumanizing in its disarrangement of all other values. She calls the books and the objects in the collection “superb things,” yu-xiu, a phrase heavy with associations of dangerous beauty in a woman, objects of addictive attraction, things that might indeed give more pleasure than “dancing girls, dogs, and horses.” Such things are too dangerous for mortals; Heaven should take them back. Or perhaps the dead carry their passions with them into the grave, then reach out to draw the objects of those passions in after them.

Li Ch'ing-chao has been close to the fires of such passions, and she rejects them with commonplaces on the danger of attachments, the Chinese “consolation of philosophy” in the principle of alternating gain and loss. But do we believe for a moment her stated motive in writing as she has, to give warning to future scholars and collectors? Granted, this afterward, a mirror and a warning, will make them uneasy in their passion, but the force of warning in this text will come from recognizing here the scar of her own attachment and the common compulsion of all those with fierce attachments to display what they are bound to. She too is caught in the snares of memory, tangled in recollected pleasures and wounds she cannot forget.

Repetition:
Of Small Pleasures in Idleness

Everywhere in the workings of memory we discover a secret compulsion to repetition. And when we turn to consider repetition itself, we discover that only through memory is repetition possible. The beast, driven by instinct to repeat the motions of its ancestors, lacks the capacity to say to itself weakly, “Yet again.” But for us memory utterly overwhelms instinct in all but our most mechanical repetitions. Within us these two events, memory and repetition, are two faces of a single demon.

Our repetitions are the scars of some incompleteness, of imperfection: something in our lives stutters. Something is not content simply to be and to have been, but must try to be again and again, and never successfully and finally. The event remembered may always be unique and unrepeatable—at least we say it is, even while we repeat it—but not all of the unique and unrepeatable past is the material of memory. We truly forget only what is “perfect,” finished. This proposition may violate all we would like to believe about memory, but let us suppose that every memory that survives more than a brief while is sustained by some painful imperfection. There is some maimed story that should have gone on in one direction, should have turned and ended differently, or simply ended. The sharper this thorn of imperfection, the more memory opens itself to variation. Memory becomes a hollow form, a rite of error in which new actors continually appear to play the familiar roles, in which bits and pieces of the familiar story are continually rearranged, in which new settings and circumstances are tried. But there is some core in this rite of error