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A Feminist Comparison of Li Qingzhao's Poetry in Song Dynasty China and Christine de Pizan's The Book of the City of Ladies in Medieval France

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Abstract:

Intellectual women in pre-modern societies often ran up against tough barriers. Patriarchal norms and political unrest stifled their agency, making it hard to speak out. This study steps into that space by comparing Li Qingzhao's ci poetry from Song Dynasty China with Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* from medieval France. We look closely at how these works capture women's quiet acts of resistance, filling a real gap in cross-cultural feminist literary analysis. Our approach centers on comparative textual analysis. Feminist theories steer the way—think Judith Butler's ideas on performativity or Kimberlé Crenshaw's take on intersectionality. Primary texts come straight from digital archives. We round it out with 10 to 15 secondary sources for solid historical grounding. The results paint a clear picture. Li Qingzhao turned to veiled metaphors. She critiqued war and exile while navigating Confucian constraints. This subtle style let her carve out an intellectual identity and a form of resistance that felt personal yet powerful. Pizan flipped the script entirely. She dreamed up an allegorical utopia. It stood as a bold stand against feudal misogyny, pushing forward a fierce feminist agenda. These contrasting moves reveal something deeper about early feminism. Eastern subtlety clashed with Western explicitness, each shaped by its cultural soil. The study shows how women bent literature to their will. In the end, literature emerged as a key force for female empowerment. This comparison offers fresh angles on gender today and enriches comparative literature studies.

Keywords: Comparative textual analysis; intellectual agency; feminist resistance; pre-modern literature.

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1. Introduction

Back in pre-modern days, smart women had to deal with heavy-handed patriarchal systems and the mess of political instability, which boxed them in tight. Here, I'm comparing Li Qingzhao—a standout poet from China's Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE)—and her use of ci poetry (that lyrical style with uneven lines, set rhymes, tones, and tied to old tunes for singing) to voice her defiance during the Jurchen attacks [1], alongside Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), written in the thick of France's Hundred Years' War. Both came from times ripped apart by conflict—China's empire crumbling, France's lords at each other's throats—and yet they grabbed the pen to question the rules pinning women down [2, 3]. Scholars have long admired Li's graceful verses but skimmed over her sly digs at the powers that be [4]. For Pizan, folks rave about her ahead-of-its-time feminism but gloss past how she tangled with royal intrigue [5]. That oversight means we're missing the bigger picture: how these women wielded words as weapons to shake things up, no matter the ocean between them.

At its core, this paper asks how Li Qingzhao's poems and Pizan's book let intellectual women fight back against the chains of history and politics, and what that says about feminism's roots. I zeroed in on key pieces like Li's Like a Dream and Slow Dancing from the Chinese Text Project, plus Pizan's full allegory via Project MUSE [4, 6]. For context, I stuck to 10-15 fresh articles (mostly from the past few years, keeping Chinese ones to under a third) to keep things current and balanced. It's all doable in a five-week sprint without drowning in sources. My approach mixes side-by-side text breakdowns to spot patterns in power and rebellion, laced with feminist lenses to unpack the patriarchy-busting angles, and a nod to the eras to tie it all together [7, 8]. Spotting the contrasts could uncover fresh takes on how feminism tweaked itself to local vibes. Academically, this links up Chinese and European old-school lit under a gender spotlight, plugging that gap I mentioned. On a bigger scale, it spotlights real stories of women's brainpower holding strong, which hits home for ongoing chats about equality today.

2. Contrasting Intellectual Identities: Veiled Introspection in Li Qingzhao versus Explicit Allegory in Christine de Pizan

Li Qingzhao put her intelligence in poems focused on her own look within, pushing at Confucian limits for women but not in a showy way, while Christine de Pizan laid everything out in a straightforward tale with the princess speaking plainly against widespread doubts about women's smarts in a world moving toward a religious skepticism [1, 5]. It's a pretty clear division that illustrates how the world around them shaped how women could think and speak out: Li playing hide and seek with her intellect within her isolated life, Pizan calling in the big guns with a sort of witness protection program.

In Song China, Li Qingzhao (1084–1151) put her bookishness into ci, poems less about showy learning than feeling [4]. Most women had no chance of getting an education, coming from a literary family Qingzhao subverted the grain of history, where old records depict a dreary picture of women trapped at home, far from anything that counted [2]. How about Like a Dream (Ru Meng Ling)? It's all mood and musing on beauty that's slipping away and the pain of things that are gone, standing in for a woman's hidden world of thoughts trapped by social force [4]. The speaker watches seasons change, using them as stand-ins for inner storms. Shows a smart mind that sees beyond the surface and gets out of the day-to-day rut. Then there's Slow Dancing (Sheng Sheng Man) packed with nods to old books that guys usually kept to themselves, flexing her knowledge of the canon [1]. One Cut of Plum (Yi Jian Mei) goes further, turning her personal sorrow into a hushed cry over the fall of the empire—"Red-capped bees and yellow butterflies, too deep in flowers, who picks them now?"—mixing her pain with the country's, without ever casting blame [4]. On the Phoenix Terrace, Recalling the Flute (Fenghuang Tai Shang Yi Chui Xiao) depicts fall's emptiness as a sly jab at being uprooted and how nothing lasts, using old stories to show off without causing a stir [2]. This roundabout, soul-searching approach let her make her move without a fight, working in the push by neo-Confucianists that kept women quiet but okayed it at home [1]. One big step was teaming up with her husband, Zhao Mingcheng, on Record of Metal and Stone (Jin Shi Lu) she slipped her notes into his drafts as they fled south from the invaders, turning it into a back-and-forth between he and she that shook up the boys' circle of stone-rubbing studies and mixed up learning by gender [2]. Folks reading it with a feminist eye call it "polite uprising," where she plays her own inner gaze off as a quiet call about how stories wipe out the brains of women under male rule [1].

Switch to medieval France, and Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) flips the script with *The Book of the City of Ladies*, using straight-up symbols to put women front and center as thinkers in a guy-run brain trust [9]. Widowed early and scraping by as a scribe, she leaned on her schooling to hit back at sexist stuff like Jean de Meun's jabs, calling in Reason, Rectitude, and Justice to stack a "city" of good

women [6]. She rounds up tales of lady scholars, fighters, and holy folks to smash doubts from Aristotle and the Church about women's logic [5]. She spotlights names like Sappho and Proba to say smarts aren't rare for women—they're built-in [10]. Penned in the Hundred Years' War mess, it's a gutsy step into the spotlight, thanks to the French court's perks that let some women dip into ideas [3].

Side by side, Li's low-key, twisty self-portrait—hiding in symbols and team projects like those mixed-up pages—comes from China's love for smooth edges, where speaking out could get you sidelined (Chang, 1999). Pizan's in-your-face symbol play grows from Europe's big arguments over women, querelle des femmes, where throwing words was fair game [9]. Still, both grabbed books to take back thinking ground, spotting shared tricks in how early women grabbed hold. Li keeps it inside with sad songs, building tough skin through side-door jabs; Pizan blasts it out with group cheers, sparking team strength via head-on clashes. It drives home that smart-women vibes weren't one-size-fits-all—they twisted to fit the squeeze, giving feminist clues on how gender locks down knowledge [8].

3. Contrasting Political Engagements: Subtle Critiques by Li Qingzhao versus Overt Challenges by Christine de Pizan

These authors wade into the rough waters of politics via their pages, but Li Qingzhao sneaks in her gripes about battles and uprooting in verse [1], whereas Christine de Pizan swings hard at the sexism propping up lords and priests [10]. The gap shows how women back then threaded the needle of commentary in man-led worlds—hushed in China to dodge the censors, loud in France to sway the crowd [2, 3].

Li's brush with the big issues shows up in her take on Song chaos, especially the Jurchen raids (1125–1127) that chased her from the north [1]. In Slow Dancing (Sheng Sheng Man), she grieves the war's wreck through raw senses: "Searching, seeking. Seeking, searching: What comes of it but coldness and desolation, a world of dreariness and misery and stabbing pain!" [4]. It's a soft punch at the leaders' flops, tying her man's passing and wrecked nest to the whole shaky setup. In a Confucian world where politics was boys-only, she hid her fire in pictures to slip past backlash [2]. Her pre-war stuff gushes over bookish bliss, but after? It's all shattered dreams, underlining how fights wrecked heady lives [4]. Through a woman's rights angle, it's sneaky clout—her words echo the overlooked takes of sidelined gals on the nation's slide, poking holes in the split between public men and hidden women [1].

Pizan jumps in both feet in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, ripping into the woman-hate that's helping foment France's lordly games in the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) as she exposes how keeping women down starts with crooked guy-writings, then she crams in stories like of Queen Semiramis to show that ladies could cut the chops [6]. Her book is jumping into the querelle des femmes dust-up with kings in the middle, pleading for women to steer bosses through the war's roller-coaster [5]. The symbol setup is bombarding the church-bailed pecking orders with implications linking holy woman-bashing to wobbly rule, like how she's supporting ladies' brainpower for stable lands [9].

The key difference in their political jabs boils down to how tightly politics and culture intertwined in their worlds' belief systems. Li's subtle nudges mirror Song China's rigid imperial oversight and Confucian push for harmony [1]. That setup kept women to indirect hints, away from outright clashes. Pizan's bolder calls, though, tapped into medieval France's fluid courtly intellect [3]. It cracked open space for heated rhetorical battles. Still, both women wove their sharp minds into broader state affairs. Li did it through the raw emotional sting of war [4]. Pizan channeled hers into calls for systemic overhaul [10]. These moves laid bare feminist tactics for shaping conversations—without ever holding real institutional sway. In the end, politics became their arena for resistance. They bent to local customs, sure. But they also exposed gender's quiet grip on pre-modern power games [8].

4. Contrasting Resistance Strategies: Veiled Subversion in Li Qingzhao versus Utopian Reconstruction in Christine de Pizan

Li Qingzhao and Christine de Pizan each found their way to challenge patriarchy. They did it through smart, unique literary moves. Li slipped in veiled critiques. She hid them in poetic images. This helped her dodge the tight grip of Neo-Confucian rules. Pizan dreamed bigger. She sketched a utopian haven of women's virtue. Allegory became her tool to reshape who held real power.

These tactics show proto-feminism's real bend. Women turned writing into a weapon. They twisted norms to fit their tough times. That flexibility let them push back where it counted [7]. Li's resistance unfolds as a subtle defiance of gender enclosures, leveraging poetry to claim autonomy within a society that sequestered women to the domestic sphere. In Like a Dream (Ru Meng Ling), she enacts this through a female narrator's pursuit of solace in

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nature, a metaphor for intellectual liberation from patriarchal dominion: "The wind last night was strong and the rain sparse;/Deep sleep did not dispel the lingering wine" [4]. This layered imagery indicts the erosion of agency in the aftermath of war, when women's voices were systematically muted [1]. As both a poet and antiquarian scholar, Li further contested Song conventions by cataloging her collections and exposing forgeries—acts that countered the appropriation of female intellectual labor by male intermediaries [2]. At its core, her feminist tactic constitutes an "elegant rebellion" [1], intertwining emotional resonance with incisive critique to erode Confucian hierarchies surreptitiously, without provoking outright censure.

Pizan's counter-strategy entails erecting a symbolic "city" of women, an allegorical utopia that resists medieval misogyny by reframing history through a gynocentric lens. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she repudiates misogynist authorities by summoning virtues as architects of a bastion populated by exemplary women, declaring: "I found that women have been strong in all fields" [6]. This reconfiguration of power directly confronts the feudal and ecclesiastical barriers to female intellect [10]. As part of her expansive feminist oeuvre, the text deploys historical exemplar to embolden readers, contesting women's exclusion from governance amid the instabilities of wartime [9]. When we set them side by side, Li's veiled style fits right into Song China's love for indirect talk. Political storms made that essential. It fostered her personal brand of defiance. Pizan's Utopian allegory flips the script. She draws on France's rich rhetorical roots. That lets her rally for group-wide change.Both paths highlight women's real grit. Li's quiet rebellion holds onto her voice amid pressure. Pizan's daring rebuild sparks real shifts. At heart, they reveal literature's power. It became a tool for early fights against the odds. Today, it hands modern feminism key tips on adapting across cultures [8].

5. Divergent Feminist Articulations: Subtle Appeals for Equality in Li Qingzhao versus Explicit Demands for Rights in Christine de Pizan

Li Qingzhao and Christine de Pizan voice their ideas on women's rights and marriage in sharply contrasting manners. Li tucks subtle calls for independence into the soft layers of romantic grief and private pain [1]. Pizan, on the other hand, presses for broad systemic changes and personal freedom via a daring allegorical debate [5]. This split echoes their own lives. It also casts light on pre-modern feminism as a "shadow discourse." Li's hidden bargains stir up a layered strength born from limits. Pizan's direct design hints at future pushes for fairness. All this stems from the stormy mix of politics and cultural forces in their times. Li Qingzhao's feminist ideas in Song Dynasty China stress a fine balance in gender roles. She highlights heart and mind equality in marriage. At the same time, she nudges for women's entry into learning and free speech [2]. Society grew stricter then, locking women into home life. Her poems often cast marriage as a true meeting of equals. Intellectual bonds rise above male-led orders there. Early pieces praise the joint bookish joys with her husband, Zhao Mingcheng. Take her lines in "To the Tune of Calm Sea Reflection" (Yong Yu Le): "The green window and the small study/Where we used to read and write together" [4]. Marriage shows up not as chains, but as a shared space for thought. It quietly claims women's stake in schooling and joint creation under Confucian rules that favored men [1]. This warm view takes a soft jab at rising limits like foot-binding and forced widow purity. Those cut women's movement and second chances at love. True balance, it hints, comes from shared feelings, not strict laws.

After losing her husband, her pleas turn sharper. They affirm women's inner strength. In "One Cut of Plum" (Yi Jian Mei), the line "Who will pluck the flowers when they are in full bloom?" [4] grieves more than one loss. It signals the hush on women's public words too. Grief shifts into a smart lament for hidden skills. That "burden of female genius" leaves standout women alone [1]. Li skips loud protests. Her path marks an "elegant rebellion" [1]. Side-step images shield her freedom from censors. Notes in "Record of Metal and Stone" (Jin Shi Lu), shared with Zhao, lock in her lasting mark. She breaks men's grip on stone lore by blending her views [2]. Marriage reappears as a hub for fair knowledge sharing. It foreshadows today's bond-focused feminism. Close ties build small stands against big forces. Women's claims blend into home calm, not yanked out by force.

Song China's past and power scene molded Li's careful words. Culture bloomed, but Jurchen raids (1125-1127) broke the realm. Neo-Confucian pullback sped up. Gender lines hardened to hold society steady amid land grabs [1, 2]. Raids pushed elites like Li south. Widow risks grew—women couldn't seek divorce, and assets hung loose. Yet small law steps, like heir guards, cracked doors for quiet claims [2]. In that shaky throne and stiff-think world, Li's masked feminism meant staying alive. Private pleas dodged eyes. Critiques of lopsided marriage hid as heart drift. This matched the court's "south turn" from Tang's open ways to Song's inward hold [4]. Boom met danger there. Trade booms spread women's reading. Raids called for tight bonds. A hint-based feminism rose from that. Fairness spoke through gaps. Crises sparked secret power.

It nods to modern views on "subaltern speech" among the shut-out [8, 11].

Christine de Pizan's views in medieval France demand clear gender balance and full women's claims. Marriage looks like a risk zone. It needs sharp fixes for agreed bonds and free minds. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she shapes a bold fair world. Women's past feats list out to smash hate myths: "If it were customary...for women to study letters as men do, they would learn from that same source all that men know" [6]. This hits Aristotle's low view of women square. All learning stands as a core right. On marriage, she blasts it as a man-led deal full of harm. Women should aim for even matches or strong solo widow life. Queen Esther's praise shows it—her tie sway won justice. The setup redeems only through women's drive and fair give-back [5, 6]. Pizan's fresh take lies in early deal-thinking. Marriage must mean yes and team, not push. It grows her call for women's rule share. Claims stretch from home fire to power rooms. Readers gain tools to raise walls against lies [5, 9]. Her straight talk turns feminism from dirge to bold call. Self-worth ties to world remake. Balance proves real, not wished. A "city" of models spreads good past church gates [10].

From a political and social vantage, the tumult of medieval France during the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) forged Pizan's uncompromising demands: a protracted Anglo-French conflict that destabilized feudal hierarchies, elevating women's indirect influence through regencies and patronage even as it exposed marital vulnerabilities amid wartime disorder [3]. Figures such as Joan of Arc and Yolande d'Anjou exemplified martial and diplomatic agency, yet the war's horrors—rape, displacement—intensified misogynistic scapegoating of women as agents of chaos, fueling the querelle des femmes debates in which Pizan intervened as a courtly intellectual [3]. Amid ecclesiastical scandals and the clash between chivalric ideals and harsh realities, her calls for marital reform addressed the perils of widowhood she herself endured, along with inheritance disputes, by harnessing the era's rhetorical humanism—nurtured by Italian influences at the Valois court—to amplify voices in public arenas inaccessible to Song women [3, 10]. This confluence of martial exigency and intellectual effervescence positioned feminism as a wartime tactic: Pizan's explicitness exploited the conflict's fissures to demand rights as societal stabilizers, in contrast to Li's introspection, and revealed how existential threats can paradoxically unleash discourse—a resonance that echoes in contemporary conflict feminism, where upheaval engenders radical claims for equity.

Their voices spark a deep cross-cultural exchange. Li's gentle, connection-based feminism takes root in Song China's calm conservatism. It values emotional balance in marriage as small steps toward rights. This clever setup models "affective equality." It keeps women's agency alive through steady endurance. Pizan's firm calls for change spring from France's divided openness. She sees rights as strong defenses. Her approach pioneers "defensive feminism." It turns examples into weapons for group freedom. The Jurchen invasions turned China inward. They crushed bold challenges. Feminism flowed into private poems instead. Those works hint at layered care ethics. They mix gender and class in close scholarly ties [8]. France's Hundred Years' War pushed outward turmoil, though. It boosted heated arguments. That let Pizan link gender to politics in early free-thinking pleas [5]. This gap offers a smart view of early feminism. Call it "contextual mimicry." Li echoes harmony to quietly upend it. Pizan borrows chivalry to tear it down. The idea gives new eyes for worldwide gender work. It bolsters today's talks on mixed paths to fairness in split societies.

6. Summary

In conclusion, the study shows how Li Qingzhao's poetry and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* present intellectual women as dynamic forces against historical and political barriers. Each draws on feminist strategies finely tuned to her cultural landscape. Li's understated metaphors deliver a hidden strike at Confucian patriarchy and war's harsh scars. Pizan's allegorical design, in turn, levels a clear challenge against feudal misogyny. These paths, side by side, uncover rich patterns in gender and power across distant worlds.

At its core, the analysis spotlights literature's quiet strength. It empowered pre-modern women to rise above entrenched oppression. That said, clear limits emerge. The tight focus on two elite figures risks sidelining tales from everyday or overlooked women. Dependence on translations may also blur fine linguistic and cultural details. Future research holds promise here. It could weave in non-elite perspectives. Or expand the lens to fresh cultural realms. In doing so, global feminist literary studies would gain real momentum.

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