The Case of the Mistaken “Jeweled Staircase”*

*Presented at the ACLA conference, March 21, 2014, New York University, in the panel on “Comparative World Literatures”, chaired by Galin Tihanov and David Damrosch.

One of the most famous translations in the 1915 edition of Ezra Pound’s Cathay, was the following:

\[ \text{Jewel Stairs’ Grievance} \]

\[ \text{Li Bai} \]

The jeweled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

\[ \text{玉阶怨} \]

\[ \text{李白} \]

玉阶生白露，
夜久侵罗袜。
却下水晶帘，
玲珑望秋月。

中文摘要：对于唐代诗人李白的名作《玉阶怨》，读者一般将其解读为：宫女独立在玉阶等情人，夜露浸湿罗袜，于是宫女进屋，放下窗帘，玲珑望冷月。但是这一解读却产生如下问题：其一，谁进门会放下窗帘望外面之夜景？其二，李白写的“水精帘”常作“水晶帘”，水晶帘一般用来分隔屋子，谁在窗户上装设“水晶帘”？其三，水晶帘已经垂下，就不能再下水晶帘；其四，从屋里面不能夜久“看到”秋月；其五，按照这个解释，宫女并没那么凄惨，最后两句，假如真的在屋里面等，则不够浪漫和诗意。而笔者的解读是：其一，诗没说宫女进屋里去；其二，“水精”（不是“水晶”）就是“白露”；其三，“水精帘”是比喻，“帘”不是具体的帘；其四，“水精”很容易让人联想到“水晶帘”的意义，李白想到“水晶”，也想到“玲珑”；其五，第四句的“玲珑”是第三句比喻的延续，实则描写宫女或“秋月”；最后，宫女在玉阶等得“夜久”实在可怜，此表示无尽的忠心、凄凉以及无尽的怨。
There are several interesting cross-cultural problems with this translation. The Chinese title is “玉阶怨”, which means, literally, “jade-steps-pining”, or more fluently, “pining on the jade steps”. In Chinese the primary connotation of “玉” is white jade, not, as in the West, green jade. The milky marmorean texture of white jade, with its veins, made the gem a natural metaphor for marble, on the one hand, and for a woman’s lustrous smooth skin on the other. Pound’s “Jeweled Stairs” is not a gaudily ornamented staircase, but the marble steps of a palace. The steps are outdoors, which is why dew can collect on the marble steps, and seep through the lady’s silk (not gauze) stockings. In the third line, Pound, following the original text, does not make explicit the fact that the lady moves indoors (presumably, to avoid catching a cold). There is, in the original, no reference to the lady moving in from out of doors. But such a move is implied in the reference to “the crystal curtain”, which the lady lets down. However, there’s something strange about this reading. First, who ever lets down a curtain in order to view something out of doors. Second, it is not possible to “let down a crystal curtain”: crystal curtains are customarily already suspended; there is no mechanism for raising or lowering a crystal curtain. As they are often decorative separators of interior space, one sweeps the strands of the curtains aside rather than lower them, as with other curtains. (Even if an actual curtain were involved, wouldn’t a palace lady have a servant to lower the curtains?)

The principal problem with Li Bai’s poem, read in this way, is that the devoted palace lady pines for her lover outside on the marble steps, but, when she realizes she’s getting soaked, she repairs indoors and, watches the moon from behind “crystal curtains”. Even this is hardly credible, since it is not possible to watch the moon long into the night, when the moon traces a trajectory that will rise to 65 to 75 from the horizon, when, presumably, it cannot be viewed from indoors. So, we have a poem in which a lady pines for her lover outside on the marble stairs, who then comes inside when she realizes she’s getting wet from the dew, and, from the dry comfort inside, she “lets down” a crystal curtain so she can watch the moon as it rises overhead.

Even were this scenario plausible, or possible, the effect could hardly be very poignant. A lady, waiting for her lover outside, goes indoors when she realizes that she’s getting soaked by the night’s dew. A very sensible lady, indeed, but hardly a very romantic lover. The palace lady in the poem may be praised for her common sense (not wishing to catch a cold), but the poem is not more poetic because she is so sensible.
The Chinese commentaries, almost without exception, follow this reading, despite the implausibilities and impossibilities. The key to the usual interpretation is that the palace lady, once she realizes that the dew has soaked through her stockings, goes inside to await her lover. The move inside is necessitated by the reference in the third line of the poem, which is read as coming inside and lowering a curtain, through which the lady gazes at the moon all night. Let us see if we can envision this: a foolish woman waits outside on the marble steps through the long night; when she realizes that the night’s dew has seeped into her stockings, she goes in, and, still pining for her lover, she lowers a curtain, presumably transparent, and gazes at the moon. How would this be depicted pictorially?

Here is one such attempt, along with the reading of the poem in Chinese that is rendered in English translations as “goes in the room, lowers the curtain, watching the moon through the window.” This romantic rendering of a romantic poem is architecturally preposterous: there are no walls, and there is no ceiling. There’s a vague hint of beaded curtains all around.

Why this conventional misreading? First of all, Li Bai composed the poem in a traditional genre of “palace laments” (宫怨), and the model for the poems in this genre was Xie Tiao (464-499), a poet Li Bai very much admired, who had lived three centuries earlier. Here is one example, among the more famous, of Xie Tiao’s “palace lament” poems:

**Jeweled Stairs’ Grievance**

In the evening, your highness, pearl curtain;
Fireflies come again to rest.
Long night sewn silk gown,
I think of my lord; where can he be?
Most of these poems in this genre are situated indoors in the lady’s boudoir, and the reader of this genre of poems is accustomed to setting the scene indoors. Li Bai’s poem, however, is set outdoors, made evident by the fact that the lady’s stockings are “seeped through” by the night’s dew.[3]

Most of the Chinese commentaries make a crucial textual emendation in Line Three: 水晶帘，variously translated: “But now I let the crystal curtain down” (Cooper); “She lets down crystalline blinds” (Hinton); “Behind her closed casement” (Bynner); “She lets down the crystal blind” (Yip); “She steps inside and lowers the crystal-strung curtain” (Lunde); “Retiring, she lets down her crystalline curtain” (Wong); “And I let down the crystal curtain” (Pound). Note the repeated translation of “crystal” or “crystalline.”

A typical exegetical reading of Li Bai’s poem is as follows:

玉砌的台阶已滋生了白露，
夜深伫立露水浸湿了罗袜。
我只好入室卷下水晶帘子，
独自隔帘仰望玲珑的秋月。

which may be translated as follows:

On the marble staircase the dew begins to form.
Deep into the night [I] stand for a long time, the dew seeping into [my] silk stockings.
I’d better go inside and let down the crystal curtain,
And alone, through the curtain look up at the exquisite autumn moon.

Notice this reading requires the textual emendation of 水精 as 水晶, which are phonetically equivalent in modern Chinese: shuǐ jīng.[4] But, whereas 水精 means “quintessence of moisture”, while 水晶 is idiomatic for “crystal”. Once “crystal curtains” are invoked, they must be located indoors, since no actual crystal curtain can be found outdoors. In this reading, the curtain is assumed to be real and concrete, and the 水晶 must designate the crystal beads hung on a string which separates interior spaces. But the original phrase is 水精, and could simply refer to the dew that falls in a fine mist from the night sky. To describe this as a curtain, through which the palace lady gazes up at the moon, presents no impediment to her pining on the marble steps gazing night long at the moon. While the words 晶 and
精 are homophonic, they are not synonymous.\footnote{5} In this reading the word for “curtain” 窗 is metaphoric, not actual.

This contrary reading\footnote{6} changes the persona of a palace lady mindful of her health, who comes inside when her stockings become wet with dew, to someone who pines for her love throughout a sleepless night, heedless of her own welfare and her health, and who watches the moon, not improbably from the inside and through curtains of crystal beads, but outside, through a “curtain” of nocturnal mist. Li Bai’s poem is about faithfulness and longing, a palace lady pining for her lover. Some readers quite naturally see the mist as surrogate tears that the lady is shedding. The poem is not about an ordinary woman’s idea of pining, which is more practical, that heads inside once it is too wet to wait outside. Faithful waiting has nothing to do with convenience and comfort. The words, 夜久, rendered in the exegetical version as “deep into the night”, does not specify the time frame that it would take for the night dew to seep into the lady’s silk stockings, and may just as well be all night. If, as a commentator writes, “this pining which doesn’t pine is a pining that is much more profound” (此不怨之怨所以深于怨也)\footnote{7}, how much deeper is the (recriminatory) pining if the palace lady does not come in, even though, heedless of her own health and comfort, her silk stockings are bedewed by the night mist?\footnote{8} The possibility of her catching cold and getting sick is merely another facet of her resentment against her delinquent lover, and deepens the sense of 怨 in the poem.

The first two words of the fourth and last line—玲珑望秋月—has often been cited as crucial to the poem. The phrase, 玲珑, clearly derives from an onomatopoeia, representing the tinkling of crystal curtains in the wind, which clearly influenced some readers to think that the “curtain” in the poem is real and not metaphorical. But, in addition to the onomatopoeia, 玲珑 is defined in classical Chinese as 明澈、精巧、细微、灵活, which might be rendered as “exquisite”, “ornate”, “subtle”, and “scintillating”.

The compound, 玲珑, occurs as the first word in the last line, in which the lady looks up at the moon; it does not describe the “curtain” alluded to in the previous line. But, brilliantly, there’s an onomatopoeic echo of the metaphoric curtain in the previous line. It would hardly make sense to read this compound as “tinklingly” to describe a palace lady looking up at the moon.\footnote{9} 玲珑 came to connote elegance and refinement, and the last line describes the implicit persona of a palace lady, gazing at the moon. It is also possible that 玲珑 applies both to the palace lady and to the moon.
The traditional reading of 玉阶怨 depicts an ordinary woman waiting outdoors for her man, and when she feels the damp, she comes inside, showing good common sense. The figure is totally ordinary and forgettable. However, the poem is about fidelity and persistent devotion, which knows nothing of comfort or convenience, and nothing of common sense. What Li Bai depicts is utterly selfless devotion, the same devotion displayed at the end of his famous 长干行, which Pound made memorable in English in his River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter. The letter, one recalls, ended with:

Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you.  
As far as Chô-fû-Sa.

The distance indicated in premodern times was far from negligible.\[10\]

In conclusion, my objection to the standard reading of this poem (in Chinese and in translation), is that it is improbable, if not impossible. Who lowers curtains to look outside? And, if the curtain referred to is actual and not metaphorical, who hangs a translucent beaded curtain in front of a window, since it fends off neither cold, rain, wind, or light. Translucent beaded curtains are decorative, and used to separate interior spaces. As a matter of perspective, it is not possible to watch the moon all night—夜久—since the moon would describe an arc that would put it too high in the sky to be seen from indoors.

But my main objection to the traditional reading is that it makes a remarkable poem into a rather ordinary one. Instead of describing a palace lady with almost obsessive devotion, by moving her (without textual warrant) from the outside, on the marble steps, indoors, the interpretation attributes to the persona of a palace lady a good deal of common sense, but the poem is not about common sense, but about heedless devotion, and, as such, the scene described should be memorable, and excruciatingly poignant.

As I read the text, this might be a plausible translation:

**On the Marble Steps**
Dew collects on the marble staircase,  
And seeps all night into her silk stockings;  
Yet still, as a curtain of fine mist falls,  
Exquisite, she looks up at the autumn moon.
In consulting traditional Chinese scholars, and asking for their arguments in favor of the traditional reading, it should not be surprising that the defense of the reading—(1) moving the persona of palace lady indoors after the first two lines; and (2) insisting on the curtain being an actual curtain made of hanging strings of crystal beads—is tenacious and unyielding. To the point that a hanging crystal bead curtain (if that’s indeed what it is) cannot be lowered, and is purely decorative, separating interior spaces, and never hung in front of a window because it is not a functional barrier between outside and inside, I elicit the following tautological defense: “A shuijing curtain, while beautiful, is also functional in that it tells the reader that the lady is now inside after being outside for a long time as indicated in the phrase ‘yejiu’ [夜久].” This defense confuses the image of the shuijing curtain from an actual shuijing curtain, which has no practical function at all (since it cannot fend off rain, or cold, or heat, or light). Why would one ever hang a crystal-bead curtain in front of a window? And why would one lower such a curtain (even if one could lower it), so that one can look up at the moon through it (and presumably a window behind it)? Strange behavior, to come in from the outside and immediately lower a curtain through which one can view the moon outside. And to the reminder that the phrase 夜久 indicates the woman has been outside “all night long,” one interlocutor responds: “Isn’t this ‘yejiu’ telling you that the lady has been outside for a long time?” But, the “long time” in the traditional reading only encompasses the time it takes the night mist to soak through the lady’s silk stockings, not the “all night long” that “yejiu” suggests. The interpretation is strange, because it recognizes the time it takes to soak through the lady’s silk stockings as “a long time”, but precludes “all night long” as “a long time”.

As for the poem being significantly titled, “Pining on the Marble Staircase”, (玉阶怨), another interlocutor maintains that “of course it’s impossible to take it literally that she would watch the moon (or moonlight) all night, but the implication is that she is sleepless”. Is the implication that, being sleepless, she stands outside until her stockings become wet, and then comes inside? “According to 西京杂记, a work in Han or Jin Dynasty,” the same interlocutor writes, “珠帘, made of stringed pearls, was initiated in 昭阳殿, one of the residences for the court ladies of 汉武帝. The purpose of 珠帘 is for the nice sound it creates when the wind blows on it.” The explanation is accurate as far as it goes, but it doesn’t explain why “crystal curtains” (水晶帘) should be hung in front of a window, or why a palace lady should lower it to look at the moon, or how one lowers a crystal-bead curtain, or a
"珠帘，made of stringed pearls", when it’s already hanging down. And, if the purpose of the bead curtain is "the nice sound it creates when the wind blows on it", why would a palace lady "lower" such a curtain to watch the moon?

It is clear that one’s blatantly new New Critical reading of Li Bai’s玉阶怨, following the original text rigorously, without emendation and without cultural interpolation, is at odds with the traditional Chinese interpretation of the poem. My contention is that in the New Critical reading, it is a far more remarkable poem, and leaves us with an almost heroic, self-sacrificing palace lady, devoted to her lord without any regard for her own personal welfare or comfort. The traditional reading describes a more ordinary women, waiting like generations of women, coming in out of the night air, waiting for her mate through the sleepless night. But the point is: an ordinary women would not gaze all night at the moon through beaded curtains. Neither would an extraordinary women.

Note:
[1] http://www.zjxcl.com/?p=277. I am indebted to Diana Wen-ling Liu, East Asian Librarian at the Indiana University Library, Bloomington, for locating this illustration.

[2] Incidentally, the compound in the first line of Li Bai’s poem, 白露, means, literally, “white dew”, but the English translation sounds more tautological, and over-specified, than it does in Chinese. Since there can be no other color for dew except white (or, more accurately, transparent), “white dew” might imply that the dew is not some other color, i.e., green, red, or yellow. But, as no other colors are possible with dew, the phrase “white dew” might sound sillier in English than in Chinese.

[3] 水精：水晶。赵昌平：《李白诗选评》（上海：上海古籍出版社，2002）233。

[4] The two words 晶 and 精 have, however, been closely associated since ancient times. 水晶, we find, in the Guang Ya (《广雅》, 227 - 123 B.C.): “Crystal: the soul and essence of water (水之精灵也).” I am indebted to Jessica Yeung for this reference.

[5] I confess that some of my Chinese colleagues are quite dismayed, even cross, with me for a reading which contradicts received wisdom. I am indebted to several distinguished scholars for their defense of the standard reading. Regrettably, I find their arguments unconvincing. I am also grateful to Brad Foreman and Rachel Lung, neither of whom claim to be specialists in Chinese literature, for reassuring me that my reading is not entirely preposterous. The widespread misreading of a famous poem is rare, but not unprecedented. Robert Frost’s "The Road Not Taken" has been persistently misread since its publication; cf. the discussion by poets and scholars: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.htm. I am grateful to Patricia Eoyang for bringing this to my attention.

[6] www.chinapoesy.com/TangShi1248.html.

[7] My student, Wang Zijun, points out that crystal curtains pre-existed Li Bai; he also cites an 8th century contemporary, 马待封, who, in commenting on the poem, writes: “Describing a lady gazing up at the moon, all alone, on an autumn evening, a deeply moving (poem) on loneliness
and unspoken recrimination (写秋天晚上妇女独自望月，寂寞幽怨感人至深).” Note there is no reference to a comfortable period of pining indoors.

[8] “Tinklingly, she gazes at the autumn moon” [?]. Jerome Seaton tries valiantly to retain the etymological onomatopoeia, by transposing the adverb to the previous line (and gratuitously pluralizing “moon”): “In the tinkling, gaze upon / so many autumn moons.”

[9] Something Amy Lowell did not appreciate, when she rendered the lines to undermine the wife’s selfless devotion as: “Prepare me first with a letter, bringing me the news of when you will reach home. I will not go far on the road to meet you, I will go straight until I reach the Long Wind Sands.” See Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell, Fir-Flower Tablets (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921). Sources tell us that the distance between 长干 (near present-day Nanjing) and 长风沙 (Pound’s “Cho-fu-sa”, in Anhui 安徽 province) was about 700 里, or over 200 miles. http://www.360doc.com/content/13/0425/2217147985_280954193.shtml.

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