

## An Exploration of Liu Zhaohui's Poetics

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### Abstract:

Liu Zhaohui's poetry anthology *Whispering to the Wind* (听风私语) offers an introspective exploration of memory, existential reflection, and the human condition, blending classical Chinese poetry's emotional intensity with modern free verse's introspective depth. Her style is marked by fluidity, sensory focus, and minimalist language, using precise words to evoke vivid imagery and emotions, shaped by her "spiritual exile" experiences. Key themes include memory's impermanence, the tension between idealism and reality, and life's transience. Her work stands out for its individuality, rooted in personal experiences, with first-person narration fostering intimacy and a strong sense of place. Four poems listed in the article exemplify these themes, exploring mourning, identity, impermanence, and unfulfilled desires, respectively, through evocative imagery and emotional depth.

**Keywords:** Liu Zhaohui; *Whispering to the Wind*; poetics; theme; individuality

Liu Zhaohui<sup>1</sup>'s poetry, as encapsulated in her anthology *Whispering to the Wind* (听风私语), offers a deeply introspective journey through themes of memory, existential reflection, and the human condition. Her work is characterized by a distinctive style that merges the emotive intensity of classical Chinese poetry with the introspective depth of modern free verse.

### I. Writing Style and Poetics

Liu's style is marked by a fluidity that allows her to traverse a wide range of emotions and ideas seamlessly. Her poems often display a keen awareness of the sensory world, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Liu Zhaohui (刘朝晖) is a poet and professor of English at Shenzhen Vocational and Technical University. He has published poems collection such as *Whispers to the Wind*.

particular focus on sound and silence, as seen in her poem “The Sound of Silence” (寂静之声), where she explores the paradox of silence being both a presence and an absence .

Liu employs a minimalist approach to language, carefully selecting words that evoke powerful images and emotions without unnecessary embellishment. This is evident in her poem “Color” (色), where the interplay of words like “gentle look” (温和的眼色) and “shivering and astringent” (瑟瑟涩) conveys a nuanced emotional landscape in just a few lines .

Her poetics are also deeply influenced by her personal experiences, which she refers to as a “spiritual exile” in her self-reflection on poetry. Liu views her poetry as a means to navigate her inner world, expressing both joy and pain in a way that is intensely personal yet universally resonant.

## II. Themes

A central theme in Liu's work is the exploration of memory and its impermanence. In poems like “Nostalgia” (怀旧), she delves into the beauty and melancholy of recalling past experiences, likening it to a "beautiful melody" that persists despite the passage of time .

Another recurrent theme is the tension between idealism and reality. In “Ideal and Reality” (理想与现实), Liu juxtaposes the lofty aspirations of the human spirit with the harsh realities of life, illustrating the often painful disconnect between the two . This theme extends to her exploration of human emotions and relationships, where she frequently meditates on the fleeting nature of happiness and the inevitability of loss.

Liu also reflects on the human condition in a broader sense, contemplating the existential questions that arise from life's transience. Her poem “Autumn Dream” (秋之梦) is a vivid

example of this, where she uses the imagery of autumn's vibrant colors to symbolize the cyclical nature of life and death .

### **III. Individuality**

What sets Liu Zhaohui apart as a poet is her ability to infuse her work with a profound sense of individuality. Her poems are not just reflections on universal themes but are deeply rooted in her personal experiences and emotions. This individuality is particularly evident in her use of the first person, which creates an intimate connection between the poet and the reader.

Liu's poetry is also characterized by a strong sense of place, whether it is the physical landscapes she describes or the emotional terrain she navigates. Her poem "Heart in the Swamp" (心在沼泽), for example, uses the metaphor of a swamp to convey the complexity of human emotions, blending the physical and emotional into a single, evocative image .

In conclusion, Liu Zhaohui's poetics is a rich tapestry of introspection, emotional depth, and linguistic precision. Her work stands out for its ability to convey complex emotions and ideas with a simplicity that is both accessible and profound. Through her poetry, Liu invites readers to explore not just the external world but also the vast landscapes of the human spirit.

Here are the four poems by Liu Zhaohui:

#### **1. Lantern Festival**

Low and somber is the sky,  
Drizzle begins to fall.  
The stream in front of my hometown,  
Must be swelling with joy.  
Azaleas spread across the mountains,  
White pear blossoms and pink peach flowers,

Are blooming regardless, in their own splendor.

I can't help but chase the path back,  
To the times we walked together.  
Images flicker, clear and blurred,  
And I struggle to let go,  
To relinquish the essence of life,  
Too heavy to carry to the end.

In dreams, I use red-hot coals,  
Trying to warm your blue-clad form.  
Anger and insult burn within me,  
I roar to the world,  
How could they treat my father this way,  
Leaving him alone in the cold,  
Yet you awaken, speaking words I don't understand.

How many times have we parted,  
I was calm, knowing there'd be a next time,  
But you always stayed behind,  
Watching me go, as if abandoned.  
This time, reunion on a festival day,  
How ironic these words seem.  
Among the crowds, I pretend not to care,  
Laughing at my solitude,  
Abandoned by you.

Original Chinese Poem:

元宵节

低矮阴沉的天  
毛毛细雨飘起来了  
家乡房前的溪流  
想必已开始欢腾  
那漫山遍野的映山红  
洁白的梨花粉红的桃花  
自顾自地依然要绚烂

总禁不住追寻来时的路  
和你一起走过的时光  
影像频频地在模糊中清晰  
又在清晰中模糊  
只能挣扎着放弃  
放弃—— 生之真谛  
太过沉重无法背负至终点

梦中 我用红红的炭火  
试图烤热一袭青衣的你  
愤怒侮辱燃烧了我  
对着全世界我怒吼  
你们怎么这样对待我的父亲  
冰天雪地中让他着单衣独卧  
你醒了 却说着我听不懂的语言

多少次 你送我我送你  
我淡然 只因还有下次  
而你却总在原地目送我

久久地 仿佛被我遗弃  
这一次 佳节 团圆  
多么讽刺的词语  
众目中我毫不在乎 假装

在如潮的人群里  
在隐约的烟花中  
不断地戴上面具  
笑着祝福着  
笑我的孤独  
被你遗弃 (Liu, 2018)

In “Lantern Festival” (元宵节), Liu Zhaohui reflects on the complexities of memory and mourning during a festival typically associated with joy and reunion. The poem contrasts the vibrant imagery of nature—azaleas, pear blossoms, peach blossoms—with the narrator's internal turmoil. The vivid descriptions of nature's persistence in blooming despite the somber mood underscore the tension between external celebration and internal grief. Liu's use of the festival as a backdrop to explore themes of loss and unresolved emotions adds a layer of irony to the poem, highlighting the disconnect between societal expectations of happiness and personal sorrow. The poem culminates in a poignant image of the narrator pretending to be joyful while feeling abandoned, a powerful commentary on the performative nature of social rituals.

## 2. Whispers and Madness

I

I despised my soul seven times, the wind  
Carried the voice of Gibran. Why

Seven times? I've never  
Loved myself so deeply, body and soul,  
Loved so much that I only see my kind, loved so much  
That I alienate myself, like  
Narcissus by the water, destroying  
Water's reputation as the source of life.

## II

On Monday, I wore  
Sunday's mask, passersby saw  
And laughed at my untimeliness. I was indifferent.  
Tomorrow I'll wear today's mask, the day after  
Tomorrow's, and so on.  
Maybe one day, I'll simply tear off  
All the masks, revealing the sun-starved  
Bare face. Passersby will flee in terror,  
Shouting, "She's truly mad!"  
But it's not my madness they fear, it's  
The reflection of themselves in my eyes. I won't forget  
To comfort them: Don't be afraid, I only see the masks.

## III

A window isn't a view, without a window  
There's no view.  
Sunlight streams through the window,  
Wind and rain enter through the window.  
A room without windows is a dark house,  
A train without windows is a sealed carriage,  
A body without windows is blind,  
A soul without windows is dull.

Better to endure wind and rain, than to stand by a window,  
Better to shut the door, but open a window.

Though I often wonder,  
When God closes the door, will He open a window?

#### IV

As a child, I secretly sowed seeds  
Of all kinds in the bamboo grove by the old house.  
In my dreams, they sprouted, bloomed, and bore fruit,  
But in reality, they never grew,  
All rotted in the soil beneath the bamboo leaves.  
Last night, I returned to that grove,  
Dug through the layers of bamboo roots,  
My brother began to urinate for fertilizer,  
And grandma's smiling face appeared in the soil.  
He said: Plant grandma's face in spring,  
And maybe we'll harvest her kindness in autumn.  
I said: Why not plant grandpa's mouth,  
So by autumn, we'll have endless stories.  
In the dream, my face bloomed like a gardenia, content.

#### V

Mountains or the sea? someone asked,  
The sea, I answered without hesitation.

After seeing the restless sea,  
I began to long for the quiet mountains.  
The joy of the wise is like flowing water,  
The joy of the benevolent is like lofty mountains.  
My happiness, if it exists,

Is like the joy of shrubs in the mountains,  
With tall trees above and weeds below,  
I'm trapped in a limited space.

The ideal happiness is the joy of birds in the mountains,  
Flying freely, when tired  
Resting on a big tree, when hungry  
Sampling the mountain's wild delights, when awake  
Singing freely, breaking the silence of the wilderness.

## VI

Cough, cough, cough, day and night,  
My lungs and guts have been shaken apart.  
Did you cough anything up? the doctor asks,  
Nothing. Maybe something is growing in my lungs,  
And the only way to remove it is to take out my lungs.  
Just like how some attachments grow in the heart,  
And can't be removed, unless you take out the heart too.  
Take out my lungs and heart, doctor,  
Happiness is being heartless and lungless.

## VII

Language is existence,  
Existence is not language.  
Language is the house of being,  
A house is not the existence of language.  
Language expresses what can be spoken,  
What cannot be spoken returns to silence.  
What cannot be spoken is not unspeakable,  
Language is too limited, it must be silent.

Do not try to say what cannot be said,  
Nor force others to say what cannot be said,  
Unless you're good at embracing lies.

Original Chinese Poem:

风言·疯语

一

我有七次鄙视自己的灵魂，风中  
飘过纪伯伦的声音。为何  
是七次？我却一次也没有  
如此深爱自己，身体和灵魂  
爱到只看得见同类，爱得  
把自我异化为他者，如同  
水边的纳西索斯，毁掉了  
水为生命之源的声名

二

星期一，我戴上了  
星期天的面具，路人看见  
笑我不合时宜。我无动于衷  
明天戴今天的面具，后天  
戴明天的，如此以往  
也许有那么一天，我索性揭去  
所有的面具，露出久不见阳光的  
裸脸。路人定会在惊恐中  
奔走相告：“她真疯了！”

他们恐惧的不是我的疯，而是  
我眼中他们的镜像。我不会忘记  
安慰他们：别怕，我看到的只是面具

三

窗不是风景，没有窗  
没有风景  
阳光从窗口洒进来  
风和雨也从窗口飘入  
没有窗的房间是黑屋子  
没有窗的火车是闷罐车  
没有窗的躯体盲目  
没有窗的心灵愚钝  
宁愿忍受风雨，也要伫立窗口  
宁愿关上门，也要打开窗  
尽管总是怀疑  
上帝关上了门，就会打开窗

四

小时候总偷偷在老屋边的竹林里播种  
各种各样的种子  
孩提的梦里它们破土而出，开花结果  
实际上它们从未发芽  
全都烂在了竹叶下的土壤里  
昨夜又回到那片竹林  
掘开一层层爬满竹根的土  
弟弟开始尿尿施肥

地里惊现奶奶的笑脸  
弟弟说：春天播下奶奶的脸  
秋天兴许能收获她的慈祥  
我说：不如还种下外公的口  
这样到秋天我们就有听不完的故事  
梦里满足地把脸笑成了梔子花

五

喜欢高山还是大海？曾有人问  
大海，不假思索的回答

看遍了躁动的大海  
开始怀念静默的高山  
智者之乐，如同流水  
仁者之乐，如同高山  
我的快乐呢，如果有  
也只是山间灌木之乐  
上有大树下有杂草  
我被困在有限的空间

理想的快乐是山中小鸟之乐  
自由地飞翔，困了  
可栖息在大树上，饿了  
可尝遍山间野味，醒了  
可随意歌唱打破山野的寂静

六

咳，咳，咳，夜以继日  
五脏六腑都震翻了  
吐出什么没有？医生问  
什么也没有。有些东西或许  
长在了肺里面，要除去只有拿掉肺  
正如有些牵挂长在了心底里  
怎么也去不掉，除非把心一同拿走  
拿掉我的肺和心吧，医生  
幸福就是做个没心没肺的人

七

语言是存在  
存在不是语言  
语言是存在之家  
家不是语言的存在  
语言表达能够言说的  
不能言说的归于沉默  
无法言说的并非无法启齿  
语言太有限，必须沉默  
不要试图去说无法言说的  
更不要逼人去说无法言说的  
除非你善于悦纳谎言 (Liu, 2018)

“Whispers and Madness” (风言·疯语) is a multi-faceted poem that delves into the interplay between identity, societal expectations, and self-perception. The seven parts of the poem each address different aspects of these themes, using various metaphors and symbols. The first part, with its reference to Khalil Gibran and the myth of Narcissus, explores the dangers of self-obsession and the loss of connection with the world. The subsequent sections

continue this exploration, with Liu's critique of the “masks” people wear in society, the need for windows (metaphorical and literal) as a means of connecting with the outside world, and the futility of clinging to illusions or past regrets. The poem's concluding lines on language and silence emphasize the limitations of communication and the inevitability of misinterpretation, reflecting Liu's broader themes of isolation and existential contemplation.

### **3. Morning Farewell by a Light Boat**

Scoop a handful of clear water into your palm,  
See your face in the water,  
It quickly fades away with the flow.  
Don't try to watch the water,  
Not even your own reflection.

Better to take a boat,  
Sailing on a river between the cries of monkeys on both banks,  
The boat's shadow in the water,  
When the waves are calm,  
That shadow quietly follows you on your journey.

Or board a light boat,  
Winding through the waterways of the south,  
The picturesque scenery all around,  
Silently drifting by,  
Knowing that in this life, you may never meet again.

Then sing as you bid farewell to the morning,  
Head for the sea to see the waves crashing against the shore.  
But fear not,

Facing the sea brings infinite shame,  
For the vigor has faded, leaving only a weary body.

Original Chinese Poem:

### 轻舟晨别

掬一汪清水在手心  
看水中自己的脸  
随同水快速消逝隐退  
不要试图去流水中观看  
哪怕是自己的影像

不如乘一艘船  
游走在两岸猿啼的江面上  
水中是船的倒影  
波澜不惊的时候  
那个影像也安静地随你远行

或是搭一叶轻舟  
穿行在江南的水道  
四周如画的景色  
都静默地缓缓流过  
知道此生也许不再邂逅

然后踏歌作别清晨  
奔向大海去看那惊涛拍岸  
可是就怕啊  
面对大海会无限惭愧

只因风华不再却空有一身疲惫 (Liu, 2018)

“Morning Farewell by a Light Boat” (轻舟晨别) is a contemplative meditation on impermanence and the passage of time. The imagery of water, often a symbol of change and the flow of life, is central to the poem. Liu uses the metaphor of a boat journey to explore the idea of moving through life, with the reflection in the water representing the transient nature of self-perception and identity. The calm, almost resigned tone of the poem suggests an acceptance of life’s fleeting moments and the inevitability of aging. The final lines, which express a fear of confronting the vastness of the sea and the realization of one’s own weariness, encapsulate the poem’s themes of vulnerability and the fear of insignificance.

#### 4. Pretending

You are in water, he is in fire,  
You see his pain, he sees your struggle.  
In different worlds,  
You both long for the same destination.  
How you wish to stir the water,  
To retrieve him from the fire.  
How he wishes an ember would fall,  
To ignite you in the water.  
But the water cannot stir,  
And the fire cannot drop embers.  
You both pretend to let things be,  
Yet always hope to meet again.  
Watching as the fire spreads,  
You sink into the water, silently grieving.  
The water blocks your tears,  
You pretend not to care at all.

Original Chinese Poem:

## 假装

你在水里他在火中  
你看到他的痛苦，他看到你的挣扎  
在不一样的世界里  
你们期盼同样的归途  
多想你的水中掀起狂澜  
夺回火中的他  
多想他的火里掉下余烬  
点燃水中的你  
水掀不起狂澜  
火掉不下余烬  
你们假装顺其自然  
却总是期盼再度谋面  
    眼睁睁地看着火四处移动  
你沉入水中暗自神伤  
水堵塞了你的泪腺  
你顺势假装毫不在乎 (Liu, 2018)

In “Pretending” (假装), Liu Zhaohui addresses the theme of unfulfilled desires and the gap between appearance and reality. The poem's imagery of water and fire represents the opposing forces in the lives of two individuals who are struggling in their separate worlds. The desire for connection, for one to reach the other, is thwarted by the inherent nature of their environments—water cannot easily affect fire, and fire cannot alter water. The poem poignantly captures the pain of pretending that everything is fine while harboring deep, unspoken longings. The closing lines, where the narrator pretends to be unaffected, resonate with the themes of resignation and the emotional cost of maintaining façades in the face of insurmountable barriers.

These four poems provide a deeper insight into Liu Zhaohui's exploration of human emotions, particularly the tension between societal expectations and personal realities, the passage of time, and the complexities of identity and memory. Each poem exemplifies her ability to convey profound reflections with simplicity and precision, enhancing the overall thematic coherence of her anthology.

### References

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