

Swapping a Cat for a Prince: Did Poets and Painters Comment on the Birth of Song Emperor Renzong? *

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Abstract

This article explores the possibility that two undated Song dynasty paintings—*Monkey and Cats* and *Calico Cat under Peonies*—may obliquely refer to the birth story of Emperor Renzong (1010–1063). In her ambitious quest for status, Virtuous Consort Liu 劉德妃 (969–1033) appropriated a baby boy from Lady Li (Li Chenfei 李宸妃) in the palace. By the fourteenth century, a tale evolved that Lady Li had given birth to an undomesticated cat, and “Swapping a Civet Cat for a Prince” (*Limao huan taizi* 狸貓換太子) became a popular opera in the Ming and Qing dynasties. It was revived in the late twentieth century and became the story line for dozens of movies and TV dramas. It enacts a palace intrigue in which a childless imperial concubine takes a new-born boy from another palace woman and he grows up to be emperor. The story was based on actual events during the early Northern Song. Although I argue that the two above paintings might allude to events in the imperial family, they are unlikely to be official works from the court. Rather, the paintings were more likely commissioned outside the court and probably date to a time after Emperor Renzong’s death.

Keywords: Song Emperor Zhenzong, Emperor Renzong, Empress Liu, Empress Dowager Zhangyi, Lady Li, Qiang Zhi, Yi Yuanji

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In the early summer of 1010, Zhou Qi, the governor of Kaifeng, was calling on Song Emperor Zhenzong 眞宗 (968–1022) to present a memorial. The emperor excitedly asked, “Did you know that I have joyful news?” Zhou replied “No, I did not.” The emperor gleefully proclaimed, “I gave birth to a son.” His majesty thereupon went to the inner rooms of the palace and emerged with gold and silver that he bestowed on Zhou Qi.¹ The baby boy was not Emperor Zhenzong’s first son. Imperial consorts had previously presented him with five sons, one of whom was still alive. Why all the fuss over number six?

1. Zhenzong’s Consort Liu and Renzong’s Birth Mother Li

The official Song History notes that Emperor Zhenzong’s favorite consort, surnamed Liu, was born in Sichuan in 969, just a year after Zhenzong. Orphaned as an infant, she was raised by her maternal relatives. She became an entertainer skilled at hand drums. A Sichuan silversmith named Gong Mei, who had an acquaintance with Prince Xiang (later to become Zhenzong), escorted her to the capital. She must have been as attractive as she was talented, for in 983, when Gong Mei introduced her to Prince Xiang, the teenager was instantly enthralled. The prince immediately took the nubile Miss Liu into his palace. His Wet Nurse disapproved of Liu’s behavior and informed his father, Emperor Taizong, that she was having a deleterious effect on the prince’s health. Liu was evicted from the prince’s household on orders of his father. Unwilling to give up Miss Liu, the prince persuaded a friend (with a gift of cash) to temporarily house her.² Fourteen years later in 997, when his father died and he became emperor, Zhenzong brought her into the imperial palace as a minor consort. In 1004 she was promoted to Beautiful One (*meiren* 美人) and in 1006 she was

1 Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* (The Long Draft Continuation of the Comprehensive Mirror that Aids Administration), juan 73, Chinese Text Project, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=1930938>.

2 Throughout this essay I am indebted to John Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency of Empress Liu (969–1033),” *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 31 (2001): 1–25. For the friend who housed Liu, see Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 3. For the official biography of Empress Liu see Tuotuo et al., *Song shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), juan 242, 8612.

elevated to Cultivated Department (*xiuyi* 修儀). Emperor Zhenzong had long wanted to make her his empress but ministers refused, objecting to her humble origins. Further undermining his case was the rumor that she had been previously married and that the first husband was still alive. Historian and high official Sima Guang recorded a second version of her story in which Liu's husband was none other than Gong Mei but, due to poverty, he was forced to sell her.³ In 1009, Cultivated Department Liu was forty years of age and childless.

Meanwhile a Lady Li (986–1032), who came from a respectable Qiantang (Hangzhou) family, entered the palace as a maid about 998 and was assigned to Concubine Liu. Lady Li's grandfather served the Qian family and was Assistant Magistrate of Jinhua District. Her father Li Rende served in local offices. Observing that she was strong and soft-spoken, Emperor Zhenzong assigned Lady Li to manage bedchambers. The *Song History* does not tell us which bedchambers. Were they in the women's quarters? The emperor's own bedchamber? It is not clear, but the reassignment indicates that she was no longer serving Concubine Liu. Zhenzong had intimate relations with Lady Li. During her pregnancy, she accompanied the emperor to a terrace under construction. When a jade hairpin dropped to the ground, Lady Li was mortified, but the emperor saw it as a sign. He predicted that if the hairpin was not broken, the baby would be a boy. Attendants picked up the jade bauble and presented it to the emperor who was delighted to find it intact.⁴ His prediction came true. After Lady Li gave birth to a boy, she was awarded the title Lady of Chongyang District (崇陽縣君).

Occasionally an empress rose from the ranks of palace servants. Chances of that highest honor were spectacularly improved with a son. Concubine Liu was acutely aware that producing a son would secure her position. Characterized as “the most ambitious and aggressive of the Northern Song regents,”⁵ she worked hard to be

3 Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 4–5.

4 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, juan 242, 8616.

5 Priscilla Ching Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Sung, 96–1126* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 71.

worthy of the emperor's esteem: she educated herself on the classics, was alert, and well-spoken in discussions. Did she feign a pregnancy? Did her trusted friend Pure Consort Yang (Yang Shufei 楊淑妃, 984–1036) help her through several months of deception? After Lady Li gave birth to a boy, Liu claimed the new-born baby as her own. One unofficial but reliable history records that Liu announced that she had given birth to a boy, “but not long after she dared not speak about it; it was not known outside the palace.”⁶ The sequence of announcing that she was mother of a boy and then dropping the topic suggests that Liu perceived that palace staff knew that she had stolen the baby. If no one spoke of it, perhaps it was because they were intimidated by her violent temper.⁷

It is not known what the birth mother Lady Li was told when her baby disappeared. Emperor Zhenzong continued to visit her, which is known from her having produced a daughter. After the daughter was born, she was made an imperial consort (*cairen* 才人 and then *wanyi* 婉儀) but she had no more sons. When her son became emperor, she was elevated to Lady of Compliant Countenance (*shunrong* 順容) which had the high status of secondary wife of the emperor. Still, nothing was mentioned to Renzong. And Li was still kept out of sight, no doubt with satisfactory accommodations.

Liu, now officially the mother of a son, was promoted in the fifth month of 1012 to the lofty title of Virtuous Consort 德妃 and by the twelfth month of the same year, Zhenzong's ministers relented and allowed him to elevate her to empress. The little boy, Zhao Shouyi 趙受益, grew up in the palace and in 1018 he was named heir apparent. Following the death of his father in 1022, he became Emperor Renzong (r. 1022–1063) and Liu became Empress Dowager serving as regent to the twelve

6 Wang Cheng, *Dongdu shilue*, juan 13, Chinese Text Project, accessed June 15, 2025, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=292533&searchu=%E5%88%9D%E7%AB%A0%E7%8D%BB%E4%BB%A5%E4%BB%81%E5%AE%97%E7%82%BA%E5%B7%B2%E5%AD%90%E8%80%8C%E5%90%8E%E4%B8%8D%E6%95%A2%E8%A8%80>.

7 Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 6. Li Duanyuan commented on her fierce temper which was reported by Sima Guang, *Sushui jiwen* (A Record of Things Heard by Su River), edited by Deng Guangming and Zhang Xiqing (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 8, 153.

year old boy.⁸ In the role of regent, her low birth was an asset in that there were no male relatives to compete for power.⁹ Empress Liu left day-to-day childcare to her trusted friend Lady Yang, preferring to concentrate on the process and the pageantry of governance. But Liu structured his education, commissioning essays on the responsibilities and exemplary behavior of former emperors.

Although Renzong was an exemplary filial son, he had some contentious issues with the woman he believed to be his mother. Empress Dowager Liu had promised that she would step down when Renzong reached age eighteen, but in the event, she ignored the promise and continued to rule as regent. She prevented him from marrying the woman he loved and forced him to marry the granddaughter of a general. In 1033, following Empress Liu's death, Renzong deposed the general's granddaughter setting a precedent for an emperor's right to divorce.¹⁰

If the circumstance of Renzong's birth was originally a secret confined to the palace, it became public knowledge in 1033 when Empress Dowager Liu died. Emperor Renzong was astonished to learn that his birth mother was Lady Li. What's more, he was devastated when he was informed that she had died the year before at the age of forty-six. Officials who knew her role in Renzong's birth buried her at Yongding Mausoleum as Chamber Consort Li (Li Chenfei 李宸妃). At the time, Empress Dowager Liu sent officials to search for her relatives. They located her younger brother Li Yonghe (李用和, 988–1050) who was given the prestige title Attendant of the Three Ranks (*sanban fengshi* 三班奉職).¹¹

Having neglected his filial duties to his birth mother while she was alive, Renzong sank into a debilitating grief. He cried for days and did not attend court. An official pointed out that Li had died without a title befitting the mother of an emperor, which

8 Hui-shu Lee notes that Empress Dowager Liu was calculating in promoting her devotion to deceased Emperor Zhenzong, on whom her own influence depended. See Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 48–49.

9 Chaffee, "The Rise and Regency," 2.

10 Chaffee, "The Rise and Regency," 7–8.

11 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, juan 242, 8616.

gave him an opportunity to honor her. She was posthumously promoted to Empress Dowager Zhangyi (章懿太后).¹² Her tomb was opened, her coffin was upgraded, and her corpse was given crown and robe befitting her new rank. He decided to bestow further honors on his mother's family through his mother's brother. Li Yonghe became the beneficiary of Renzong's largess driven by the emperor's grief and guilt. Beyond conferring several titles, Renzong gave his favorite daughter, the Yan Guo princess, in marriage to Yonghe's son Li Wei.¹³

2. Yi Yuanji's Monkey and Cats

How might an artist respond to the kidnapping of a baby? Decades after the events of 1010, a painter conjured the masterpiece *Monkey and Cats* (Fig. 1).

The exceedingly accomplished painter Yi Yuanji (d. ca. 1066) hailed from Changsha, Hunan province, and was active in the second half of the eleventh century. A clever child, from his youth he loved to draw. He was over-awed by a work of the Sichuan painter Zhao Chang 趙昌 (ca. 960–after 1016) and vowed to learn to paint as well as that master. According to the biography by Guo Ruoxu 郭若虛 (fl. late 11th c.), he wandered for months in the Wanshou Mountains, living with mountain folk and drawing different types of apes, roebuck, and deer as well as forests and rocks. In 1064, Yi Yuanji was thrilled to receive a summons to the capital. He was asked to paint a three-panel imperial audience screen in the Yingli Hall of Ritual Fasting. Shortly thereafter he was summoned again to Kaifeng to paint a panorama of one-hundred gibbons (猿). After he had painted a dozen or so, he fell ill with a seasonal disease and died.¹⁴ Painting connoisseur Mi Fu 米芾 (1052–1107) held him in the highest regard,

12 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, juan 10, 195; Tuotuo, *Song shi*, juan 242, 8616–8617.

13 The Yan Guo princess's affection for a eunuch on her staff, the breakup of the marriage, and an interpretation of a painting by Cui Bai is the subject of my article "'Magpies and Hare': Cui Bai's Commentary on Marriage, Eunuchs, and Self-awareness," *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 49 (2020), 85–117.

14 Guo Ruoxu, *Tuhua jianwen zhi* (Experiences in painting), juan 4, in *Huashi congshu*, vol. 1 (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1974), 205.

declaring that after the tenth-century painter Xu Xi (d. before 975), there was only one painter: Yi Yuanji. Mi Fu suspected his death was not natural. He recorded that it was said that when Yi Yuanji was painting walls in the Xiaoyan Hall, people in the Painting Academy out of jealousy of his superb skill limited his commission to deer and apes and someone went so far as to poison him.¹⁵ It may have been baseless gossip, but Mi Fu did not hesitate to write it down.

The prestigious painting catalogue *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* completed in 1120 was also laudatory, praising Yi Yuanji as unsurpassed in his description of the appearance of animals and plants.¹⁶ Of the 245 paintings attributed to Yi Yuanji listed in the *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings*, there is no title that fits *Monkey and Cats*. The painting is not signed and has no seals of the artist. At the upper left corner an inscription in Huizong's slender-gold calligraphy gives the artist's name and title: "Yi Yuanji *Monkey and Cats*" (易元吉, 猴貓圖). Two seals of the Huizong court confirm that the scroll was in the imperial collection: "Seal of the paintings and calligraphies of the inner palace" (*Neifu tushu zhi yin* 內府圖書之印) and "Secret treasure of Harmony Revealed [Hall]" (*Xuanhe Zhongmi* 宣和中祕).¹⁷

The *Monkey and Cats* composition is unusual in depicting a drama of two cats confronting a much larger and stronger monkey. The monkey sits with legs crossed and clasps a distressed kitten tightly around the stomach. The kitten squirms with hind legs raised. It twists to try to free itself and reaches up perhaps to scratch the monkey's face with its right paw, claws extended (Fig. 2). The kitten's limpid eyes are flashing. Its open mouth hints that it is hissing or perhaps yowling. The teeth suggest that it would surely bite the monkey if it could. In his highly realistic style, Yi Yuanji managed to distinguish the soft fur of the kitten from the soft but slightly stiffer fur of the monkey.

15 Mi Fu, *Huashi* (Painting History) in *Songren hualun* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2000), 153.

16 Amy McNair, trans., *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings: An Annotated Translation with Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 385.

17 The "Secret treasure of Harmony Revealed [Hall]" seal appears on five extant handscrolls. Patricia Ebrey suggests that these were paintings that Emperor Huizong (r. 1100–1125) particularly liked. See Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009), 117.

The monkey is unperturbed and unapologetic. The facial expression is one of smug satisfaction. A leather strap around the monkey's neck secures it to a sturdy stake in the ground. The cat at the left of the painting is angry and defensive. As it keeps its distance from the monkey, it raises its tail, arches its back, and spits at the monkey (Fig. 3). Its fur is bristling and, like the kitten, its ears are flattened in a combination of rage, fear, and submission.

How might the painting *Monkey and Cats* relate to the story of Renzong's birth? My hypothesis is that Yi Yuanji's monkey stands for the formerly childless Empress Liu, a reading that is encouraged by the color of the animal. A "tan monkey" (*huang hou* 黃猴) is homophonous with "imperial consort" (*huang hou* 皇后). Female monkeys have a reputation for flares of temper, not unlike Empress Liu. The kitten held firmly in the arms of the monkey would then represent little Zhao Shouyi, the future Emperor Renzong, who was stolen away from his natural mother. In this interpretation, the screaming cat at the left would be the birth mother, Lady Li. If this hypothesis holds true, the same size of the cats may have resulted from the painter considering the kitten, the future emperor, more important than the mother cat. The wide distance in the painting between the monkey and the cat on the left may infer the enforced separation in the palace that kept Li out of sight. She is angry but helpless in confronting the commanding monkey. Both the kitten and the adult cat wear red ribbons around their necks that likely indicate their aristocratic status.

If it seems inappropriate for a painter to comment on the behavior of Empress Dowager Liu, it is well to remember two factors. First Yi Yuanji was visiting from Hunan and was not a fulltime painter at the court. Second, Empress Liu died an unpopular woman. Although she managed the government well, consulting with ministers and with Renzong, she was loath to relinquish the perquisites of de facto ruler. She reneged on her promise to give up the regency when Emperor Renzong came of age. Late in her life she made her birthday a holiday and enjoyed lavish celebrations. She proposed wearing an emperor's robe to sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Temple. When she died, still serving as Renzong's regent, she left a testamentary decree instructing that her trusted friend Pure Consort Yang should continue governing as

regent. The idea angered Renzong and horrified his ministers. The testamentary decree was ignored. Some officials had long noted her imperial pretensions and compared her to Wu Zetian of the Tang who founded her own dynasty. A low-level official named Cheng Lin 程琳 (988–1056) once presented Empress Liu with a painting that was titled *Empress Wu as Regent* 〈武后臨朝圖〉. Insulted at the implication of over-reaching ambition, Empress Liu reacted by flinging the painting to the ground.¹⁸ Historians, poets, and painters, nevertheless felt free to criticize Empress Dowager Liu for arrogance and love of status.

3. Civet Cats in Song Literature

What is a civet cat? Today the name is applied to over a dozen different species of small, mostly nocturnal mammals with an appearance that is a cross between a raccoon and a cat. The snout is longer and more pointed than that of a cat. Its long tail is typically two-thirds the length of its head and body. Native to Asia and Africa, the civet that roamed south China was the masked palm civet. It has a white blaze on the forehead and white marks above and below the eyes that extend to the ears. A solitary predator, the masked palm civet feeds on mice and birds as well as on fruit such as figs, mangoes, bananas, and leaves. The Chinese term for civet cat—*limao* 狸貓—is rare in Chinese literature. While there are cats (*mao* 貓) and foxes (*huli* 狐狸) in earlier poetry, the *limao* does not appear in recorded poetry until the eleventh century. The Northern Song dictionary *Guangyun* (廣韻) glosses the term as a stray cat or a wild cat (*yemao* 野貓).

The first poet to write about a *limao* was the official Qiang Zhi 強至 (1022–1076), style name Jisheng 幾聖. Note that Qiang Zhi was born in 1022, the year that Zhenzong died and Renzong ascended the throne. Like Palace Lady Li, he was from Qiantang near Hangzhou. He would have been ten or eleven years old when Lady Li died and,

18 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, juan 242, 8615. See also Alfreda Murck, “Images that Admonish,” *Orientations* 32 (2001): 52–57. For an assessment of Empress Dowager Liu’s governing challenges and successes, see Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 15–23.

one year later, Renzong went to great lengths to acknowledge the Qiantang native as his birth mother. In 1046, at the age of twenty-four, Qiang passed the prestigious Presented Scholar examination under Emperor Renzong. He served as magistrate for two districts in Zhejiang province, and a district in Hebei province. After Han Qi 韓琦 (1008–1075) was made head of the Yongxing army in 1067, he put Qiang Zhi in charge of the guidelines for official communications, a job he held for six years. Assignments followed at the Ministry of Revenue and the Ministry of Animal Husbandry but his most prestigious assignment was as director of the Bureau of Sacrifices.¹⁹ Besides his administrative skills, Qiang Zhi was an accomplished poet. His son compiled his more than 800 poems into a book titled *Collected Works of Director of Bureau of Sacrifices*.²⁰ Qiang exchanged poems with Han Qi as well as with prominent officials Zeng Gong 曾鞏 (1019–1083) in 1073 and with Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112) in 1065 and 1066.

In an undated poem Qiang Zhi wrote about two cats in competition for a mouse. One is an unspecified cat that he calls a Limao (狸貓). The other is a patterned cat (*huamao* 花貓), which is translated here as Tabby cat. It is possible that Qiang Zhi chose *limao*/civet cat, not because he wanted to infer that Lady Li resembled a raccoon-like feline, but rather because the sound of the animal's name evoked the surname Li. Therefore in the translation of the poem, I am using Li or Limao in place of civet cat. His preface to the poem reads:

My family had two cats, a Limao and a Tabby. One day the Limao caught a mouse but did not eat it; the Tabby secretly stole it and took it away. Family members did not know and thought that the Tabby cat had caught the mouse. So I was moved to write “Poem on Two Cats”.

When he wrote what here is translated as “my family,” Qiang used the character *yu* 予,

19 *Quan Song shi* (Complete Poetry of the Song Dynasty) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1991–1998), juan 587, 6898.

20 Zeng Gong wrote a preface, now lost, for Qiang Zhi's poetry collection. The database Souyun contains 835 poems attributed to him.

which can mean I/me in archaic Chinese. Qiang Zhi, however, was possibly thinking of a well-known exchange between Empress Dowager Liu and court officials after Emperor Zhenzong died. Zhenzong left a will stating that his son, now the Emperor Renzong, was still too young to govern, and that Empress Dowager Liu should take charge of military and state affairs. The Prime Minister led all of the officials in congratulating Empress Dowager Liu and then offering condolences. She immediately began conducting morning audience from behind a screen. The senior official Ding Wei (962–1033) decided that the Empress Dowager should be referred to as “Yu” 予 when issuing decrees from the Secretariat or from the Ritual Academy. But when making other decisions, she should be referred to as Wu 吾. The Empress Dowager objected to the distinction and issued an edict that she was not to be addressed as Wu.²¹ Henceforth she was only referred to as Yu.

It seems that Qiang Zhi was using the designation that Empress Dowager Liu had favored. If we read the poem with *yu* not as “I/me” but as “she, the Empress Dowager,” the poem becomes a clear allegory. This is especially true for the line on witnessing events from beginning to end, which Qiang, born in 1022, could not have done, but Empress Liu did.

狸貓得鼠活未食，戲局之地或前後。

Limaο caught a mouse, Alive but not yet eaten, The place of the drama,
sometimes in front, sometimes in back.

貓欺鼠困縱不逐，豈防厥類怠其守。

Cat was tricky, mouse was trapped, even if not chased, How to defend against
one’s own kind, relaxing its guard.

花貓狡計伺狸怠，帖耳偷銜背之走。

Tabby cat was cunning and waited for Li to be inattentive, With ears back, it
snatched it in mouth and carried it away.

家人莫究狸所得，只見花銜鼠在口。

21 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, juan 117, 2774. Perhaps Empress Liu was sensitive to homonyms, with Yu 予 sounding like imperial 御 and wu 吾 sounding like Wu Zetian 武則天.

The family did not investigate what Li had achieved, They only saw Tabby's rank with mouse in mouth.

予因竊覘見本末，卻笑家人反能否。

I secretly observed, seeing all from beginning to end, Yet laughed at the family whether they opposed or not.

主人養貓不知用，謬薄狸能服花厚。

The Master raised cats but knew not how to handle them, He mistakenly slighted Li's ability and generously favored Tabby.

花雖利鼠乃欺主，竊狸之功亦花醜。

Although Tabby benefited from the mouse, it deceived the master, Stealing Li's accomplishment was also Tabby's shame.

人間顛倒常大此，利害於貓復何有。

The world of men is upside down way more than this. What else was there but gains and losses to cats.²²

The poem begins with three figures: a civet cat, a mouse, and a tabby cat. If the civet cat (*limao*) stands for Lady Li of Qiang Zhi's hometown, the choice of tabby (patterned cat) is a fitting image for Empress Liu who loved the colorful embroidered robes of her high rank. In the first couplet, Qiang says that the drama unfolded "sometime in the front, sometimes in the back," which may imply the outer court and the inner court. As the poem proceeds we learn of a family that does not investigate the origin of the mouse. Perhaps the poet refers to Zhenzong, who may have been complicit, or officials who were willing to look the other way rather than offend the powerful parents. When the poet writes of the master who raised the cats, he presumably is thinking of emperor Zhenzong who was clearly the one who did not appreciate the ability of Lady Li who should have been his rightful empress. The last couplet is an invitation to read the poem as an allegory and to minimize the injustice to the cats.

When might Qiang Zhi have written his allegorical poem? There were moments

22 *Quan Song shi*, juan 589, 6923.

during Renzong's reign when Zhao family problems spilled into public view: in 1033 when Renzong grieved for his birth mother who died the year before; in 1060 and 1061 when Renzong had trouble managing a spoiled and strong-willed daughter;²³ and in 1063 when Renzong died and Yingzong succeeded him. The following year Yi Yuanji was called to the capital to paint a screen to be placed behind the throne in the hall for fasting, presumably before performing ancestral worship. It is reasonable to assume that, if Qiang Zhi were writing an allegory about emperor Renzong, he would wait until the emperor had passed from the scene. *Poem on Two Cats* can tentatively be dated to the mid 1060's.

While Qiang Zhi very likely used the civet cat name only as a homophone for Lady Li's surname, his poem may have given rise to the rumor of her having given birth to a cat. By the fourteenth century, popular tales evolved about inner court intrigue loosely based on Renzong's parentage. The stories became a popular theme in operas of the Ming and Qing dynasties and in late twentieth century TV dramas.²⁴

4. *Calico Cat under Peonies*

The second painting that may have been a commentary on Emperor Renzong's birth is *Calico Cat under Peonies*. The imposing painting is rendered in ink and colors on a panel of silk over a meter wide. It has no signature or date. Unlike the handscroll *Monkey and Cats*, the large hanging scroll was surely made for display (Fig. 4).

The English translation of the Chinese title 〈富貴花狸〉 is misleading. A calico cat has three colors in its coat—white, black, and orange. The cat under the peony bush is black and white and lacks the orange fur that characterizes the tri-color calicos.²⁵ An

23 Murck, “Magpies and Hare,” 88–92, 101.

24 Versions of the opera were titled “Record of Golden Ball” (*Jinwanji* 金丸記), “Chen Lin Holding Makeup Case at Gold Water Bridge” (*Jinshui qiao Chen Lin bao zhuanghe* 金水橋陳琳抱妝盒), “Holding Makeup Case” (*Baozhuang he* 抱妝盒), and, as noted, “Swapping a Civet Cat for a Prince” (*Limao huan taizi* 狸貓換太子).

25 An English dictionary definition of a calico cat is “a domestic cat with a coat that is white with mottled black, brown, and orange patches.”

alternative translation might be Civet Cat under Peonies or simply Cat under Peonies. The painting is unsigned and the earliest seal on the painting dates to the thirteenth century: a seal of Emperor Lizong (r. 1225–1264) is affixed at the lower left corner. The Siyin half seal of the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644) is at the lower right corner.

The painting can be read as an auspicious wish for wealth, status, and longevity. Peony blossoms were favored by the Tang imperial family and ever since they have symbolized aristocratic status and affluence. Cat (*mao*) is homophonous with one character in a phrase referring to venerable old age (*maodie* 耄耋). To convey these good wishes, paintings of cats and peony flowers likely pre-dated the events of Renzong's life.

Why should we suppose that the artist was trying to represent a civet cat? The feline-like creature in the painting slightly resembles the masked palm civet of south and central China. If the painter had never seen the real animal, he at least caught its main characteristics: the pointed snout (unlike a domesticated cat's nose); the distinctive white stripe up its forehead; and an unusually long fluffy tail. The artist did not attempt to render the animal's long legs. As mentioned above, we do not know what Lady Li was told about her missing infant. The official history of the Song dynasty does not mention Lady Li giving birth to an animal let alone a civet cat. The artist, whether or not he had seen a civet cat, possibly wanted to make the visual association but also wanted to paint a beautiful animal. He gave the cat a red ribbon very likely to indicate its high status. What is particularly fitting for the metaphor of this painting is that Lady Li—a woman who might have become empress—lived out her life isolated in a back courtyard of the women's quarters of the palace. We can suppose that she was provided for in comfortable rooms, but she would not have been permitted to move around or leave the palace. Like the monkey in Yi Yuanji's painting, the Limao/civet cat is restrained: a dark red cord secures the cat to a stone weight.

Connoisseur and painter Mi Fu owned a painting of a cat and peonies. *Peonies in Wind* was attributed to Xu Xi, the tenth century master whom he greatly admired. Mi Fu wrote:

Xu Xi's *Peonies in Wind* has thousands of leaves, but only three blossoms: one is front and center, one is on the right, and one is behind the profusion of leaves on branches. There is a stone with a smooth round hole; on top is a cat. I disliked the cat image; several times I wanted to cut it out. Later I exchanged it with Tang Linfu for an inkstone.

Mi Fu confesses in the entry that he disliked the look of the cat in the Xu Xi painting. Cutting out a section of a painting seems extreme, especially if Mi fu believed it to be by the hand of a revered master. One wonders if Mi Fu's painting had a cat with a pointy nose like the one in the cat under the peony bush. In the end he did not excise the cat but exchanged the painting with Tang Linfu for an inkstone. Tang Linfu was Mi Fu's close friend Tang Shang 唐垌. He was the son of Tang Xun 唐詢 (1005–1065), a collector of inkstones who had served at Renzong's court.²⁶

Who would commission or want to display a painting of a strange cat under a peony bush? A viewer could overlook the slightly odd features of the cat and revel in the good wishes implied by the motifs. Gentlemen associated with Renzong's court, such as Tang Shang, and Qiantang relatives of Lady Li may have enjoyed the splendid painting. Lady Li had a daughter and three nephews. We do not know what became of her daughter but one of her nephews was Li Wei, who became the spurned imperial husband-consort. He may have liked remembering his aunt this way. After his marriage to the Yan Guo princess was dissolved, Li Wei was compensated with the military title Commandant Escort and a gift of two-hundred taels of gold.²⁷ He became a collector of calligraphy and paintings, lived in Kaifeng mixing with some senior officials such as Huang Tingjian and Mi Fu.²⁸

26 Li-na Lin, "Entry 32, Calico Cat under Peonies," in *Grand View: Special Exhibition of Northern Sung Painting and Calligraphy*, ed. Boting Lin (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2006), 207–209.

27 Murck, "Magpies and Hare," 103.

28 Li Wei was a collector but perhaps not a great connoisseur. In an entry on dubious attributions, Mi Fu, who famously wrote an essay that no Li Cheng paintings survived, recorded that the honorable Li Wei said that he had in his collection no fewer than eight paintings by Li Cheng. Mi Fu, *Huashi*, 133.

5. Conclusion

Lady Li's story was fascinating for its drama, palace intrigue, and injustice. She gave birth to a prince; the baby was taken away and became emperor while she was quietly hidden in a back palace courtyard. How could poets and painters not experiment with facets of the topic? Qiang Zhi and Yi Yuanji seem to have used phonetics to create meaningful, veiled associations to the events: the tan monkey for "empress" and Limao for a pun on Lady Li's surname. The idea of a civet cat in Qiang Zhi's poem may have led to the invention, centuries later, that Lady Li was told that she had given birth to an animal. The masterpieces *Monkey and Cats* and *Calico Cat under Peony* stand on their own as aesthetically superb compositions. If *Monkey and Cats* is a private commentary on Lady Li's predicament, it was accomplished with humor and panache. *Calico Cat under Peony* can double as a birthday wish and a poignant reminiscence of the dilemma of a beautiful woman isolated in the palace. Establishing the historical origins of motifs can create a deeper appreciation of Song dynasty artists' creativity and the ways that paintings might have been viewed.

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狸貓換太子—— 詩人畫家是否間接評論宋仁宗的誕生^{*}

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提 要

本文探討兩幅無款的宋代繪畫——〈猴貓圖〉和〈富貴花狸〉——是否間接影射宋仁宗（1010-1063）的身世。劉德妃（969-1033）為提高自身地位，自李宸妃手中奪取一名男嬰。至十四世紀，民間已流傳李宸妃產下野貓的故事。〈狸貓換太子〉於明清時期成為廣受歡迎的戲曲作品，並於二十世紀後期再度興起，被改編成數十部電影和電視劇。該劇講述一場宮廷陰謀：一位無子的妃嬪自另一位妃嬪手中奪取男嬰，而該男嬰日後成為皇帝。北宋官員強至（1022-1076）曾作詩描寫兩貓相爭，其內容很可能指涉李宸妃的遭遇。雖然這兩幅畫作可能與皇室事件相關，但應非宮廷繪畫。相較之下，這兩幅畫作較可能由宮廷以外人士委託製作，其創作年代，亦可能晚至仁宗去世之後。

關鍵詞：宋真宗、宋仁宗、劉皇后、章懿太后、李宸妃、強至、易元吉

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Fig. 1 Yi Yuanji, *Monkey and Cats*. Courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 2 Yi Yuanji, *Monkey and Cats*, detail of the kitten with raised paw and open mouth.



Fig. 3 Yi Yuanji, *Monkey and Cats*, detail of snarling cat.



Fig. 4 Anonymous, *Calico Cat under Peonies*. Courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.



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