

XIN Qiji

Xīn Qìjǐ 辛棄疾

1140–1270 *Song dynasty lyric writer, poet, and military leader*

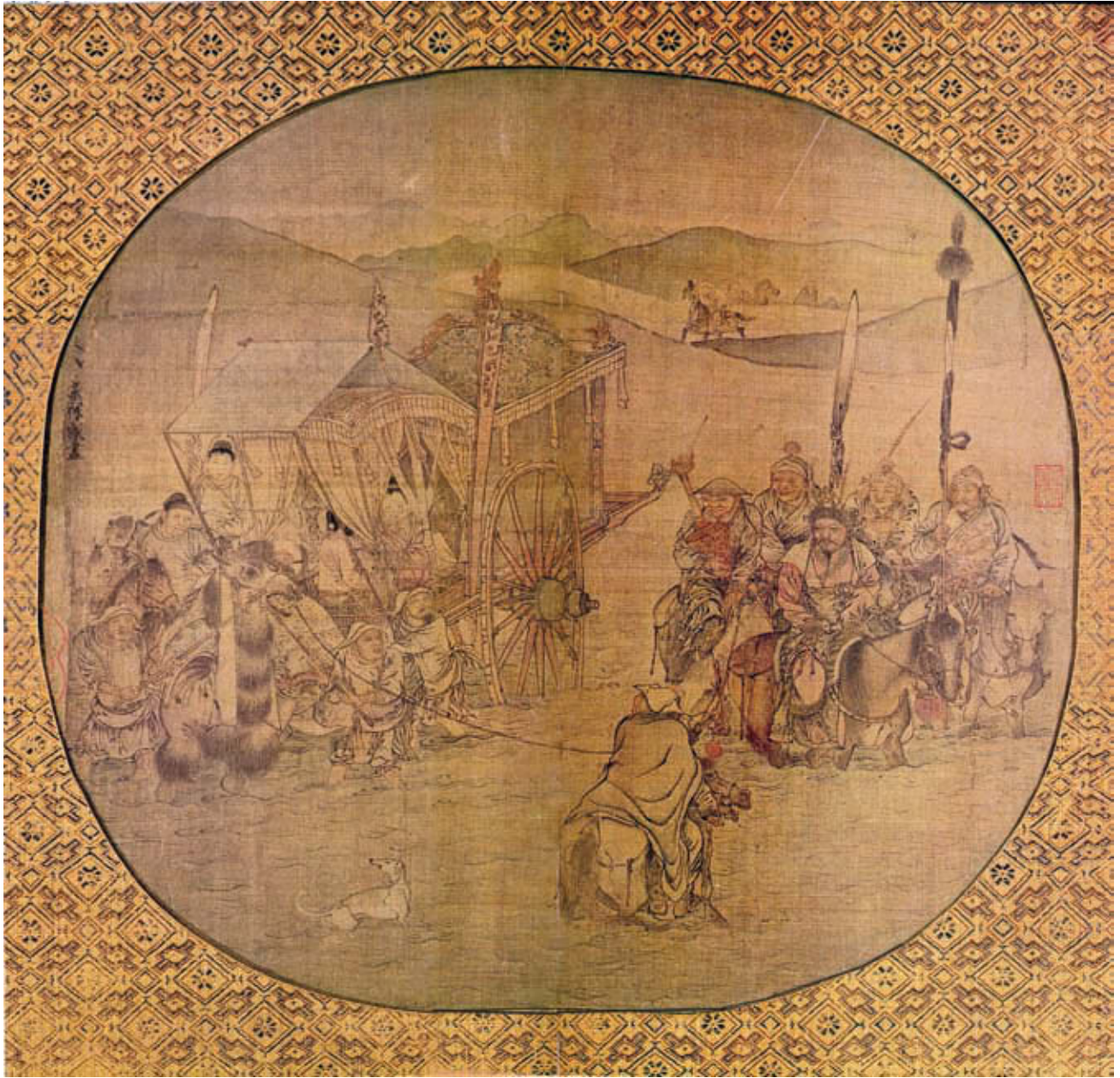
Xin Qiji, the most prolific lyric writer of the Southern Song dynasty, devoted his life to seeing that the former Northern Song territories captured by Jurchen Jin forces would be returned to Chinese rule. Ultimately Xin's heroic recovery mission failed; in his retirement he wrote unabashed lyrics that expressed the frustrations of his thwarted ambitions.

The conflict that raged within the heart of Xin Qiji, one of the most important lyric writers of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), reflects the major political dilemma of his time—the division and competition between the reconstituted Song dynasty in the South and the conquering Jurchen Jin dynasty (1125–1234) in the north. He is known for his forthright and martial personality, and his song lyrics were characterized by the term “heroic and unrestrained” (*haofang*) during his own lifetime, even though the broad stylistic range in his lyrics often belies the simplicity of this label. Over 670 of his song lyrics have been preserved, making Xin Qiji the most prolific song lyric writer of the Song dynasty.

The central concern of his entire life, fueled by patriotism and reinforced by homesickness for a homeland unoccupied by alien invaders, was his determination to recover the Song empire's lost territory. In 1126 the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) capital of Kaifeng was sacked by the Jurchen Jin dynasty army, forcing the last heir to the throne to flee south of the Huai River and reestablish the capital in Hangzhou. Xin Qiji was born in the

occupied north in the city of Licheng (modern Jinan in Shandong Province). In 1161, when Xin Qiji was twenty-one, he organized an uprising and joined forces with Geng Jing. On Geng Jing's orders Xin Qiji led his forces to join the court in the south. He met Emperor Gaozong (reigned 1131–1162) in Jiankang (modern Nanjing) on an inspection tour and was granted an audience and an official title. Despite this promising reception, Xin Qiji received no support for his plans to retake captured northern territories. When Geng was murdered by a subordinate who had gone over to the Jurchen Jin, Xin rode into the enemy camp and returned with the traitor for execution. Afterward Xin relocated to the south for good. There he tirelessly advocated a policy of retaking the occupied northern territories, submitting to the throne his “Ten Discourses of an Ignorant Rustic” sometime between 1165 and 1168 and nine essays to a newly appointed pro-war grand councilor in 1170. Although Xin Qiji served ably in a series of provincial appointments in various parts of the Yangzi (Chang) River delta, he was frustrated by repeated misinterpretations of his actions and by downright slander from his political opponents. In 1182 Xin retired to a villa of eccentric design called “Ribbon Lake” in Jiangxi Province and, after this villa burned down, to a second villa called “Calabash Spring.” It was during his twenty years of retirement that he composed over nine-tenths of his song lyrics.

Xin Qiji failed in his ambition to become the heroic leader who recovered the northern half of his country. Instead he became the greatest songwriter of the Southern Song dynasty and poured his pent-up feelings into his lyrics. The lyrics of Xin Qiji have often been compared



A Chinese Lady Under the Escort of the Mongols, ink and color on silk, unknown artist. This Song dynasty painting depicts a Han beauty crossing a northern river inside a camel-drawn carriage. She is to be given as a gift to a tribal ruler, most likely of the Khitan, Jurchen, or Mongol peoples. Xin Qiji wrote lyrics with themes that reflect the political upheaval of his time: fierce competition between dynasties of the north and south.

with those of his literary predecessor Su Shi (1037–1101). In reality they are quite different in tone and technique. The late Qing dynasty (1644–1912) critic Wang Guo-wei (1877–1927) aptly distinguished the tone of the two

writers, calling Su Shi's lyrics "expansive" (*kuang*) and Xin Qiji's "heroic" (*hao*). The one main similarity of the two poets is their interest in experimenting across genres. Like Su Shi, Xin Qiji further elevated the lyric by using it

The Poetry of Xin Qiji

SUNG TO THE TUNE “THE PARTRIDGE SKY”

In my prime, beneath my flag were ten
thousand warriors.
My horseman, in brocaded uniforms,
burst across the river.
At night the northern soldiers held fast to
their silver quivers.
At dawn our archers let fly their golden
arrows.

Thinking back on those events,
I sigh over my present circumstances.
The spring wind will not darken my
graying beard.
I've traded my ten-thousand word
treatise on military strategy
For my neighbor's book on planting trees.

Source: Ebrey, P. B. (1981). *Chinese civilization: A source-book*. New York, The Free Press, 170.

to write about his public ambitions, a topic typically associated with *shi* poetry. In technique Xin surpassed Su Shi's efforts as well—by incorporating quotations from old-style prose and by combining classical prose with colloquial phrases from the spoken language.

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Further Reading

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