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An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the feminine'

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The 17th Century Tale of Lady Liu and Lady Remington and a 20th Century Postscript

Maira Roth & Hung Liu

Preface

This tale was inspired by a conversation on July 29 1996 between Hung Liu and myself over dinner at her house in Oakland (where she was recovering from surgery). She told me that she had just received a phone call requesting the name of a 'at-least-seventy-five-year-old-dead' Chinese woman artist for some project in New York, and could not provide one. We talked idly of research and invention.

I went home and, taken by fancy, began to write rather feverishly.

Faxes went back and forth between the two of us and within three days our tale was finished on July 31st 1996.

Maira Roth, Berkeley.

Excerpt from a letter recently given to the British Museum, London, published for the first time in "Lady Liu, A 17th Century Chinese Woman Artist," by Maira Roth, *Feminist Studies* (Summer, 1996).

Note: I have changed certain archaic spellings and phrasing to make for better comprehension of the modern reader. Ed.

From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 24,1620

Lord Remington and I have just returned from paying our respects to the Peking imperial court, and I have so much to tell you, my dear sister. We stood in the vast courtyard, flanked by the Emperor's Life Guards, and twelve white horses, and made our way slowly across it. The flagstones are marked for where one must, yet again, make an obeisance.



Although we spent our time bowing nine times (it is called the kowtow) to the Emperor Wan-Li, and did not permit ourselves more than a mere glance, his regal bearings, the brilliance of his yellow robes and the huge pearl in his Imperial Hat dazzled us. But, dear sister, it was not only his presence but also--for the merest moment--we glimpsed Lady Liu who is said to be that rare creature, a female painter. We had, of course, heard rumors of her existence, but now we saw her standing in the background of the group of courtiers. I am determined, Julie, before we leave China to try to find a painting by her to bring back to England. You must wish me luck in this impossible dream.

From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 25, 1920

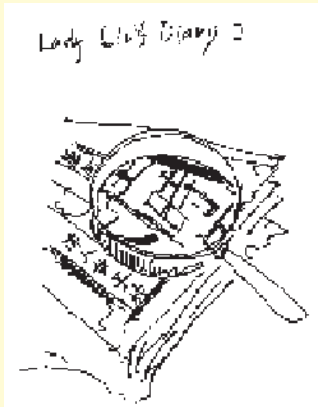
My dearest Julie,

This day has been an extraordinary one. We rose to drink jasmine tea, as is the custom here, and a servant informed us that we had a visitor in the waiting room. It is, of course, always Lord Remington who is asked for but this time the visitor was announced as having come to see me. I thought surely it must be a mistake, but I asked to have the visitor ushered into my reception room. It was Lady *Liu* (Although I have now heard from her own lips that I should spell it LI and not Liu.)

I could not believe my eyes. She told me through her translator-servant that she had heard that I was interested in meeting her, and so she had come in her carriage as soon as she could. It is, as you can imagine, an unheard honor for a European to be visited in such a way.

Lady Li is unusually tall for a Chinese woman and her eyes are very bright. Her clothing was simple but rich material, and around her neck she wore, what I have been told, is her famous *signature*--an opal necklace. She smiled and laughed a lot as we exchanged greetings. I felt surprisingly that I did not have to stand on ceremony. She wants to know what England is like and I, of course, want to know what China is like. And, Julie, she wants to do my portrait as she has never had the opportunity to paint a European woman before. I am told that she paints for the Emperor Wan-Li. Imagine that she may paint me. We are to talk more tomorrow. She is worried that the Emperor may hear of her rash offer, but she is determined to do it anyway.

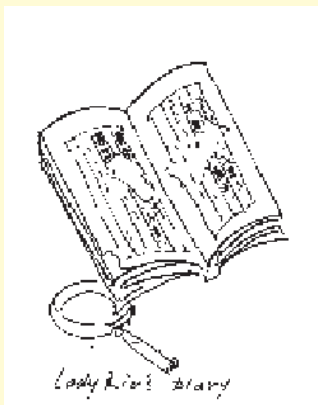




From the Diary of Lady Li, July 25, 1620

Editor's Note: this fascinating document was badly damaged in the Great Flood in Peking of 1793, and there are many missing sections.

I risked the Imperial anger and left the palace today to seek out Lady Remington. There is something about her that I must know. She reminds me of . . . [missing section] .When I first saw her in her house, I thought that she [missing section]. She spoke to me as a friend. I have no friends at court. Everyone is jealous of me and if it were not that I am known to be in the Emperor's good grace, I dread what might be my fate. Lady Remington said . . . [missing section] and I replied that I could not but agree. We laughed together. I left feeling that I must paint her.



From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 26,1620

I have talked to my new friend today as she has begun my portrait. She asks me many questions about you, dear sister, as it appears that she, too has a sister, a little younger than she-just like us--and she wants to meet you. She tells me, through her stiff and anxious and embarrassed translator- servant, that as children they were inseparable, but now her sister lives two thousand miles away. Lady Liu dreams of her each night, and in her dreams sees herself splashing water on her young sister's hair. They lived near a lake and would go each day to wash their hair and catch pale green fish and run after large blue butterflies that flew near the shore.

Do you remember when we would run away from our nurses and go to the stream to wash our hair?

This afternoon I rested, and fell asleep and I dreamed that I was surrounded by clouds of huge blue butterflies. Nearby, a child laughed and dapped her hands. Was it you, or Lady Liu or her sister? I don't know, but I do know that I woke smiling.

**A Poem by the sister of Lady Liu
July 26, 1620**

Blue Butterflies
My sister's long hair
Dreams
I see two sisters
Across Time



Letter from Lord Remington in Peking to his friend, Sir John Reynolds in London, July 26,1620

My dearest love,

We wait impatiently to leave this God-forsaken country. The Chinese heathens are despicable and the Ming Court foolish in its pretensions. There is no one to talk to, and nothing happens here that gives pleasure. I long for England and its Christian ways. Only five more days and we leave for the treacherous journey back to London but the risk is worth it to see and embrace my family and friends and, most of all, you.

Mary joins me in sending you love. Curiously it is the first time today that she has not complained about China. If I did not know her so well, I would suspect that she has some secret that she has not confided in me. A foolish thought, of course. She still does not know of our passion for each other.

Excerpt from the Fragments of an Unfinished Novel based on the Life of Lady Liu by her erstwhile lover, S.

... Lady Liu returned to the Palace, her head filled with stories of English crumpets and strawberry jam, of fishing and hunting excursions in aristocratic country homes and of children plaintively singing Lady Greensleeves around a huge log fire.

Lady Pamela was equally enchanted with Lady Su's descriptions of the shoes she and her siblings had worn-- embroidered brilliant dark green-and-purple dragons on the boys' shoes and pale mauve-and-pink pigeons on the girls'. Of stories of bowls of noodles and duck's feet, and of long summer nights sitting in the dark listening to their grandfather tell stories from his childhood in Manchuria before he came to China.

Each woman wanted to live in the other's memories.....



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From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 27,1620

We have but a few days left before we leave Peking for our long arduous journey home to England. Much as I am longing to see you and our dear Mother, I am suddenly loath to leave. John, on the other hand, is counting the days impatiently. He seems in a slightly odd, almost secretive mood. When I woke up this morning--to the sounds of the peacocks in our garden-- I wondered briefly why but find that I cannot heed his moods because my thoughts and heart are elsewhere.

Lady Liu and I are meeting again today. I have asked her to tea so that we may continue to talk--she will be arriving at 4 pm, and has promised to bring me the sketch she made for my portrait. But even more important than art is life. I feel I have suddenly found a second sister. And she feels the same.

We are fearful of anyone finding out she is coming to see me, so she plans to come disguised as a beggar. That means she will make the last part of her journey to my house by foot. She will be able to walk on foot unlike other high-born women because her parents refused to have her feet bound. (She must be the only woman at the court with unbound feet.)

From Lady Liu's sister * to Lady Liu July 27,1620

Editors Note: As of this time, we have not been able to identify the name of this sister. Again, as with Lady Liu's Diary, the letter's text has been badly damaged.

.... I write anxiously, dearest sister, to hear your news from the Court of Emperor Wan-Li. As I sit in our small village, living with our old parents, I think of the miracle that transplanted you to Peking. Do you remember the day [missing section]. We still speak of it in the village.

Last night I had a dream of you. You were sitting intensely talking to a foreign woman, strangely white and oddly dressed. Was she a ghost?

[The letter ends at this point as there is a missing section]

Fax from Lady Jane Remington to her sister, Lydia Remington, July 30,1996

I have so much to tell you but I must be brief for I am exhausted with having worked all day in the house. So many discoveries. So many explanations of our Remington family history. What seemed myths and legends are actual facts. Amazing.

We arrived yesterday at the village and were greeted by women in the Liu family. It is a tiny village and *The Liu-Remington House* is far larger than any other structure there. As you know, the village is part of the small section in China where there is--literally--a woman's language passed down from generation to generation as well as "women's art' traditions. Right in the center of this is the history of our 17th century relative, Lady Mary Remington and *her* Lady Liu.

The Liu sisters--who are just our age, my dearest Lydia--greeted me like family. And, of course, we are. After they had settled me in my room, they took me to the Room of Memories and there I discovered to my astonishment both letters and diaries by

[Editors Note: transmission was interrupted at this point and there is no further fax.]

Editor's Postscript, July 30,1996. Moira Roth

To piece together the story of the encounter between Lady Remington and Lady Liu in 1620 has been a fascinating mixture of amateur detective work and fortuitous events. In the spring of 1994 Hung Liu, an artist originally from Beijing but now living in Oakland, and myself, a historian and critic of contemporary art, read about a region in China where there was a tradition of a secret women's language; we decided to seek out the last living survivors. Travelling by train, railway, bus and car we finally arrived at a small village where we met Gee Ling Oy. She was at that time age ninety-five - a lucid, animated woman who talked to us hour after hour with a sense of urgency- who taught Hung Liu as much of the language as she could in the month that we stayed in the village. We tape recorded Gee Lin Oy's account of the history of this extraordinary centuries-old phenomenon. Central to her accounts of its origins were references to an anonymous Chinese 17th century woman painter, who was said to have fled suddenly from the Imperial Court (upon hearing of the Emperor's ban on her painting) with a newly-found friend, an English woman, who had decided to stay in China rather than return to England with her husband. (Gee Lin Oy told us that legend had it that this decision was caused by the English woman opening a letter by mistake--a few days before their planned departure--which disclosed her husband's infidelity.) The two women came to live with the artist's sister, and it was in the sister's village that this "woman's language" first originated. But search as Hung Liu and I did, we could find no concrete evidence to support this story. Now with the discovery of the texts that I have published here- together with investigations we hear are currently being undertaken by descendants of Lady Remington--we are able to begin to lay out fragments of this 17th century Chinese woman artist's life. Is it too much to hope that in time we will also discover actual works by Lady Liu?

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