Imagery of Female Daoists in Tang and Song Poetry

by

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B.A. Changchun Normal University, 1985
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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Assian Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

April, 2011

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Abstract

This dissertation involves a literary study that aims to understand the lives of female Daoists who lived from the eighth to the twelfth centuries in China. Together with an examination of the various individual qualities manifested in their poetry, this study includes related historical background, biographical information and a discussion of the aspirations and cultural life of the female clergy. Unlike some of the previous scholarship that has examined Daoist deities and mythical figures described in hagiographical texts and literary creations, or on topics such as the Divine Mother of the West and miscellaneous goddesses and fairies, this work takes the perspective of examining female Daoists as historical persons who lived in real Daoist convents. As such, this work concentrates on the assorted images of female Daoists presented in their own poetic works, including those of Yu Xuanji, Li Ye, Yuan Chun, Cao Wenyi and Sun Bu-er.

Furthermore, this thesis also examines poetic works about female Daoists written by male literati from both inside and outside the Daoist religion. I do this in order to illustrate how elite men, the group with whom female Daoists interacted most frequently, appreciated and portrayed these special women and their poetry. I believe that a study of their works on Daoist women will not only allow us a better understanding of the nature and characters of female Daoists, but will also contribute to our knowledge of intellectual life in Tang and Song society.

An investigation of their varied representation at different historical junctures illustrates the multifarious images of Tang Daoist nuns and the strong commitment that the Song Daoist priestesses made to their religious enterprise, as well as the divergent
perspectives and responses that the male intellectuals of the time had for this unique
group of women.
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<tr>
<td>BBCSJC</td>
<td><em>Baibu congshu jicheng</em> 百部叢書集成</td>
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<tr>
<td>DJDCD</td>
<td><em>Daojiao da cidian</em> 道教大辭典</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DZJY</td>
<td><em>Daozang jiyao</em> 道藏輯要</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMDJCD</td>
<td><em>Jianming Daojiao cidian</em> 簡明道教辭典</td>
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<tr>
<td>JTS</td>
<td><em>Jiu Tangshu</em> 舊唐書</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSZXTDTJHJ</td>
<td><em>Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian houji</em> 歷世真仙體道通鑑後集</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QTS</td>
<td><em>Quan Tangshi</em> 全唐詩</td>
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<tr>
<td>WID</td>
<td>Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn, <em>Women in Daoism</em></td>
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<td>YXJSBNYZ</td>
<td><em>Yu Xuanji shi biannian</em> 魚玄機詩編年</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZHDZ</td>
<td><em>Zhonghua Daozang</em> 中華道藏</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZTDZ</td>
<td><em>Zhengtong Daozang</em> 正統道藏</td>
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Acknowledgements

I owe my deepest gratitude to Professor Jerry Schmidt, my primary supervisor, for his in-depth instruction and wise guidance as well as exhaustive reading of my work, which helped me avoid many errors. I am also grateful to my other two supervisors, Professor Josephine Chiu-Duke and Professor Terence Russell, for their rewarding courses, unfailing inspiration, and valuable comments that have enlightened me and encouraged me to work hard on my project.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to my good friends Marie O’Connor and Gary Wang, who have generously helped to edit my drafts, provided with good suggestions about how to improve it. Special thanks go to Shaun Wang and Pheobe Chow, staffs of Asian Library at UBC, for their enthusiasm and direct assistance in finding references for my work. Also I thank Jasmina Miodravic and Mina Wong for their kindness and sincere assistance. I was benefited from the scholarship and grant offered by the Department of Asian Studies of UBC.

I am greatly indebted to my mother, Yang Zhi and brother, Liu Shu for their profound love and strong moral and financial support. Finally, my particular thanks go to my husband, Liu Xiaofeng, and my son, Liu Jiada, for their complete understanding, patience and loving care.
Dedication

To My Parents

Liu Kezhi and Yang Zhi
Chapter 1  Introduction

1.1. Female Daoists

More than two thousand years ago, a great sage, the philosopher Zhuangzi depicted an immortal of gentle beauty with skin as pure as snow. Living in a remote mountain, she drank dew and breathed in the wind without consuming any grain. She rode on clouds and traveled beyond the four oceans by steering a flying dragon. This depiction has generally been recognized as the earliest description of a Daoist goddess in the history of Chinese literature, and it provided a special model for later images associated with immortals and some exceptional Daoist masters.

Stemming from Zhuangzi’s portrayal of the divine woman, a handful of Daoist matriarchs appeared in the early-medieval period. Among these were “the Seven Female Masters” from the family of Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (mid-second century), who founded a Daoist lineage called “Five Pecks of Rice Sect” (wudoumi dao 五斗米道). Moreover, dozens of the teachings of the Highest Clarity (shangqing 上清) Sect were attributed to the woman, Wei Huacun 魏華存 (252–334), who is regarded as one of the initiators of the school. Yet, remarkable as these female Daoist leaders were, Daoist nuns did not become a notable social group until the Tang dynasty (618–907).

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The Tang dynasty is highly significant in the history of Daoism, for it witnessed important developments in its theories, rituals and practices. Many scholars have explored reasons for the prominence of Daoism in the Tang. One of the most cited reasons is that the imperial family shared the surname Li with Laozi. Thus, Tang emperors claimed that they were descendents of the sage as a means of enhancing their family prestige and reifying their power. At the same time, some Daoists such as Wang Yuanzhi 王遠知 (530–635) sought patronage from the new rulers and reported that the Li family held the Mandate of Heaven and would rise to power as the legitimate rulers. It is also possible that since Buddhism was of foreign origin while Daoism was an indigenous teaching, the latter won the support of the Tang emperors and thereby went through a period of immense growth.  

The Tang emperors’ ambitious promotion of Daoism undoubtedly had a profound effect on Daoism in society. As a result, a large number of prominent Daoists and prominent Daoist works appeared during this period, for example, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (fl. 650), a founder of a new school for the study of the Daodejing, which was named the Chongxuan 崇玄 school (the Double Mystery School) and Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (646–735), the head of the 12th generation of the Highest Clarity school. Although a recluse in the Tiantai Mountains, Sima’s fame spread widely and he was invited to court by Empress Wu (r.624–705), Emperor Ruizong 睿宗 (r.684–90 and 719–12) and twice by Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756). Among the many books written by

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Sima, the best known was Zuowang Lu 坐忘录 (Essays on Sitting and Forgetting), in which he discusses seven steps in meditation and how to attain the Dao. He emphasized sitting and forgetting for the purpose of personal refinement, an idea that had a strong influence on theories of transformation that shifted Daoist practice from Exterior Alchemy to Inner Alchemy.³

The Tang sovereigns’ strong patronage of Daoism is also exemplified in a decree by the emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–83), which states, “No less than three Daoist monasteries should be set up in each major prefecture, two in each middle prefecture, and one in each minor prefecture”.⁴ With the emperor’s support for Daoism, Daoist temples were constructed throughout the country. Based on the Six Codes of the Great Tang (Datang liudian 大唐六典), in the era of Kaiyuan 開元 (713–724), there were about 1,786 Daoist temples in China. Remarkably, 550 of these were assigned to Daoist priestesses.⁵

In addition to the construction of Daoist temples, the Six Codes of the Great Tang also informs us that the government granted each Daoist priest thirty mu of land, and female Daoists were granted twenty.⁶ In order to protect the prestige of Daoist priests, Xuanzong proclaimed in 737 that in cases of criminal conduct, the Daoist clergy would

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⁶ For reference see Tang liudian 唐六典 v.3 in Siku quanshu zhenben liu ji. One Chinese “mu”亩 equals 0.1647 acre.
be tried in accordance with the regulations set forth in the Daoist religion without interference from civil authorities.⁷

As more and more women entered Daoist communities, including a number of imperial princesses and concubines as well as women from noble families, Daoist women became popular in the Tang dynasty and they were recognized in official documents as “nüguan”女冠 (female Daoist priests), which became the formal appellation for the women living in Daoist communities.⁸ With regard to this terminology, “guan”冠 literally means “cap”; this is notable because according to sartorial customs in ancient China, only men wore caps. Yet it appears to have been a part of the female Daoist’s attire, hence “nüguan” became a way of referring to these women.

Daoist religion accepted women of various backgrounds, from royal and aristocratic families to commoners; Daoist convents accepted the young and the old, widows and concubines, entertainers and genteel women. Multifaceted and complex as these groups were, Daoist women took on different roles in society and likely created divergent impressions for the public. While the influence of Daoism was wide-ranging and permeated every field of Chinese culture, it is especially evident in classical literature composed by the Chinese intellectual elite, which will be the focus of this study.

Many famous poets of the Tang period were in close contact, and in some cases had intimate relationships, with Daoist priestesses. Since poetry was the most esteemed art of the literati at the time, authors often wrote of their feelings and

experiences with female Daoists. Thus, a significant corpus of poetic works on Daoist women by the Tang male literati survives. These poems convey the close attention that male intellectuals of the Tang paid to society and give a sense of their views on, or personal interactions with, the special group of women.

Under the influence of a few critics from medieval times, female Daoists of the Tang dynasty are often considered as equivalent to prostitutes. The most notable examples in this regard are views of some male writers held toward Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (fl. 844–868) and Li Ye 李冶 (?–784). Since most critics refer to lines from Yu and Li’s poems to support their assumptions, I intend to reexamine these women’s writings and to reconsider the way earlier critics censured them.

Thus, my study begins with an investigation of how Daoist women in the Tang period present themselves in their works and why they were often described as loose women by some critics. For purposes of comparison, I also explore men’s writings on female Daoists and point out differences in the male and female perspectives. Through close inspection of original works by both male and female intellectuals, I seek to provide a more sophisticated understanding of female Daoists in the Tang dynasty.

Daoism also enjoyed extensive support in the Song dynasty (960–1279). While several Song emperors patronized Daoism, the peak of Daoist worship in the Song dynasty occurred during the reign of Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1100–1125), who received Daoist ordination and referred to himself as Emperor, Patriarch and Sovereign of Dao (Jiaozhu daojun huangdi 教主道君皇帝). As self-proclaimed patriarch of Daoism,
Huizong participated regularly in Daoist ceremonies, and Daoism became the state religion. Despite a declining economy, Huizong not only had Daoist temples constructed and re-constructed on a wide scale but also called in eminent Daosits to the capital and granted them official positions in the bureaucracy.

With regard to Daoist theories, by far the most significant innovation during this period was the development of “Internal Alchemy” (*neidan* 内丹), which means inner cinnabar, in contrast to “External Alchemy” (*waidan* 外丹), outer cinnabar. Isabelle Robinet explains, “the fundamental difference is that interior alchemy does not seek to produce a particular physical substance and is above all a technique of enlightenment including a method of controlling both the world and oneself and a means of fashioning (*zaohua* 造化) and hence understanding in the sense of an existential and intellectual integration.”

Though the notion of internal alchemy originated in the late Tang period, it developed vigorously in the Song dynasty, as many Daoists realized the impossibility of external alchemy and began to explore internal alchemy.

One important Daoist figure in this movement was Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (?–1082), who contributed a great deal to the establishment of the new approach and was regarded as a founder of its theory. His works became classic texts on internal alchemy and were often cited and commented on by later Daoists, in particular *Wuzhen Pian* 悟真篇 (*On Realizing Perfection*), in which he describes the entire procedure of cultivation. Since Zhang’s famous book consists of sixteen regulated poems and sixty quatrains as

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well as other commentaries, quite a number of later works on internal alchemical practice were written in a poetic form as well.

Of all the new Daoist sects that appeared in the Song dynasty, the Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) was the most influential among women in the Song period. A founder of the sect, Wang Zhe 王喆 (1112–1170), also known as Wang Chongyang 王重陽, composed assorted theoretical books and poetry collections about Daoist cultivation, which were taken as guides to living a Daoist life. Wang’s best-known works are found in *Chongyang Lijiao Shiwu Lun* 重陽立教十五論 (*Fifteen Discourses on Establishing Teachings by Chongyang*), in which he taught strict religious discipline, such as refraining from wine, sexual intercourse, and the love of wealth. He accepted Zhang Boduan’s idea that one had to cultivate nature (xing 性) as well as destiny (ming 命), which Wang referred to as the “dual cultivation”.

Since Daoist religion experienced radical changes and specific innovations in the Song dynasty, Song Daoist women’s views about themselves and their roles in society were very different from those of the Tang dynasty. A handful of female Daoists of the Song dynasty stand out in particular. They initiated a new style of poetic writing referred to as “Women’s Alchemical Poetry” (*nüdan shi* 女丹詩). Therefore, my study of female Daoists covers not only works in the Tang dynasty but also includes a look at those from the Song period, as well as the Five Dynasties (907–960), a period of transition between them. I therefore take a wide-angle approach and examine Daoist women of different periods. Through an examination of their poetic works, I attempt not
only to illustrate the aspirations and cultural life of female clerics in the Song dynasty but also to make a comparison between Daoist women of the Tang and Song dynasties.

1.2. Previous Studies

Some excellent scholarly works have appeared in recent years that contribute greatly to our knowledge of women and Daoism from the perspective of religion and philosophy. Suzanne Cahill’s Transcendence & Divine Passion and Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn’s Women in Daoism are among the notable for surveying the field of women and Daoism. Both books are devoted to looking at representations and functions of female Daoist deities and immortals, and the values and positions of women in the family, society, and Daoist religion. By exploring a variety of source materials, they present different angles on these topics.

Despeux and Kohn’s book is a comprehensive history, starting from the earliest known records to the present sources. Their heroines include not only the Queen Mother of the West but also the Mother of the Dao, the Dipper Mother, and many other immortals reported in Daoist hagiography, as well as some prominent female Daoists. Viewing Daoist women from religious and academic perspectives, Despeux and Kohn explore both religious and historical texts, rather than popular literature, and discuss how Daoist theories and practices affected women. Moreover, they address many theoretical discussions on the development of Daoism and its influence on women over time. Thus, what Despeux and Kohn provide is a religious study of women in Daoism rather than a literary investigation.
Cahill’s book focuses on the Tang period, concentrating on the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wangmu 西王母) and some of her maidens. Cahill makes significant use of both Tang poetry and hagiographic texts, especially the book Yongcheng Jixian Lu 雍城集仙錄 (Records of Assembled Transcendent of the Fortified Walled City) written by Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933). Focusing on depictions and functions of the Queen Mother of the West as represented in Daoist books, Cahill examines in this work the ideological religious portrayals of the goddess and compares these to the beliefs and fantasies that Tang poets held about the immortals as well as Daoist priestesses. Through her translation and analysis of the works, Cahill provides two perspectives on the Daoist priestesses from both religious texts and the works of elite men, with a special interest in analyzing the differences between the perspectives of the clergy and literati laymen. Hence, Cahill’s book does not touch on the writings of the female Daoists themselves; the texts she examines are all by male writers.

Cahill shifts her focus to writings by Daoist women in two later essays from 2002 and 2003, looking particularly at Yu Xuanji’s poems. These pioneering studies challenge traditional views on Yu Xuanji and were a great inspiration to my interest in researching Daoist women. Nevertheless, instead of examining Yu’s personality and the insights expressed in her writings, Cahill examines her work, in the former article, from the standpoint of material culture and the Dao. Moreover, in another article her investigation is limited to only seven poems out of forty-nine written by Yu Xuanji, six poems out of sixteen by Li Ye and a couple of works by two other Tang Daoist priestesses. Thus, Cahill’s two essays, while important, are not comprehensive with regard to the material
available to be examined.

An earlier study of Yu Xuanji, a 1972 Ph. D. dissertation by Jan Walls, deals with the full corpus of Yu’s works and is therefore the most comprehensive and detailed work on Yu’s poetry to date. Yet while Walls makes an invaluable contribution by exploring Yu’s biography and providing important information about the literary context in which she worked, I find that he fixes his subject in a traditional framework. In my view, Walls’s arguments are premised on certain historical biases and assumptions, especially with regard to Yu’s personal experiences, and therefore at times echoes earlier prejudices against Yu.

In addition to the studies just mentioned, translations of works by female Daoists have also been made available in English. These include Thomas Cleary’s Immortal Sisters, which focuses on the poems and secret texts written by female Daoists in the Song dynasty, as well as David Young’s work The Clouds Float North: The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (fl. 844-868). Although these two books present works written by female Daoists themselves, for the most part they do not provide in-depth interpretations of the writings or any critical analysis of the characters of the women and their cultural lives.

Chinese scholars have also taken an interest in women and Daoism and a number of articles on Yu Xuanji, Li Ye, and others from the Tang period have appeared recently. The most comprehensive work is a book-length study published in 2004, Goddesses, Female Cinnabar and Female Daoists (Nüshen nüdan nüguan 女神女丹女冠), provided
by Li Suping 李素平. This book begins by emphasizing Laozi’s pro-feminine philosophical view, which is defined by Li as a “female philosophy” (nüxing zhexue 女性哲学). As the book covers such a big range, from matriarchal society to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), touching on Daoist thought, theory and practice as well as Daoist literature and culture, Li’s book provides only a general overview of women in Daoism through history, without any detailed explanation or analysis of the works it cites by female Daoists. In other words, Li contributes from the standpoint of history and developments in religion rather than of literature.

Given the broad scope of the subject of women in Daoism, scholarship in this field ranges in the period of study, sources examined, investigative approaches taken, and the subjects scrutinized. Although a number of scholarly works exploring this field have been carried out, there are still many questions to be explored about Daoist women. Why, for example, did some critics in the Tang period connect Daoist nuns with decadence and prostitution? What was the general attitude held by Tang elite men toward Daoist priestesses? What do the voices of female Daoists, as presented in their poems, say about their perspectives and experiences? Notorious for her “dissolute” life and “immoral” works, how did Yu Xuanji represent herself in her writings? How have critics read, and perhaps misread, Yu’s work? Is there a significant difference to be found in Daoist women’s poetry between the Tang and Song periods? And how did learned men of the Song portray Daoist women in their work? I set out to explore these questions in my study. Through an approach of close readings, I examine poetic works by both female Daoists and literati men, ranging from the tenth to twelfth centuries. I attempt to
strengthen our appreciation of classical Chinese poetry about Daoist women, as well as to establish a more balanced portrait of female Daoists through a comparison of their representation at different historical junctures.

1.3. Sources and Materials

As this study focuses on the portrayal of female Daoists in poetic literature of the Tang through Song dynasties, most of the materials I examine are selected from *A Comprehensive Collection of Tang Poetry* (*Quan Tangshi 全唐詩*), *A Collection From Among Flowers* (*Huajian ji 花間集*), *A Comprehensive Collection of Song Poetry* (*Quan Songshi 全宋詩*), *A Record of Song Poetry* (*Songshi jishi 宋詩記事*), *A Comprehensive Collection of Song Ci Poetry* (*Quan Songci 全宋詞*) and some Daoist hagiographical texts.

Since scholarship on Daoist women from the perspective of religion and women’s studies are already available, I do not discuss critical theories about Daoist religion or women’s studies, although my study is closely related to both fields. Rather, I concentrate on providing concrete examples of the lives, feelings, and personalities of this special group of women as depicted in poetic literature from the eighth to the twelfth centuries.

I look at these Daoist women as historical persons, rather than Daoist deities and mythical figures in hagiographies, folk legends and literary creations. Therefore, in this work I will not deal with topics such as the Divine Mother of the West, the Lady of
Purple Rose (Ziwei furen 紫微夫人), the Lady of Highest Prime (Shangyuan furen 上元夫人), or assorted goddesses and immortal ladies described as dwelling on Shaman Mountain (Wushan 巫山) or by the Xian River or in other holy places. A Comprehensive Collection of Tang Poetry (Quan Tangshi) preserves a handful of poems ascribed to some fairies and immortal ladies whose names are only found in Daoist books or mythological stories, such as Lan Caihe 藍采和, Wu Cailuan 吳彩鸞 and Madam Fan 樊夫人.\textsuperscript{10} However, since all of them are said to be descendents of immortals and their lives in the human world occupy only a brief aspect of their experiences, I leave these poems out, including the work credited to the five women whose names are all connected with “zhēn” 真 (perfect), preserved in the Quan Tangshi and entitled “Huizhen shi” 會真詩 (Poems on meeting perfected women).\textsuperscript{11}

Some scholarship on talented poetes discusses Daoist women in the same breath with prostitutes and singing girls, like Xue Tao 薛濤 (770–832) and Liu Caichun 劉彩春 (ninth century). Because of their exceptional skills at composing poetry, women like Xue and Liu are often grouped together with Daoist nuns like Yu Xuanji and Li Ye. As all of these women exhibited outstanding poetic talent, some scholars have ignored their different backgrounds and studied them as a single category. In this dissertation, I define female Daoists as those who lived in Daoist convents, and distinguish them from lay followers, who may have had an interest in Daoism but did not live in Daoist convents.

\textsuperscript{10} Lan Caihe’s poem can be found in Quan Tangshi (hereafter abbreviated QTS) v. 861; Wu Cai luan’s poem in v. 863 and Madam Fan’s verse in v. 860.

convents. I thus leave aside the works of authors like Xue Tao, who is said to have worn a Daoist hat and dress in her later years, but appears never to have lived in a Daoist convent.

Given their inferior status in a patriarchal society, few women are described in detail in historical documents and few works by women have been preserved. Thus, aside from the poetic works by men and women from the tenth to twelfth centuries, I also examine other sources from this period, including critical commentaries, anecdotes and Daoist hagiographies. I also make use of a selection of official documents, which provide information on state policies about Daoist religion and female Daoists, though they lack information about individual women.

1.4. Approaches and Structures

For each female Daoist whose poems I examine, I first provide a brief biographical sketch, then interpret her poems and make an analysis of the presented works. I pay attention to both form and meaning in my translations, though this often proves difficult considering the differences between the English and Chinese languages. Therefore, in many cases, my translations are more reflective of meaning and do not convey the poetic use of language in the original Chinese. In other words, my preference has been to retain accuracy in meaning over style in the English when necessary. Due to the common practice of omitting subjects in writing poetry, there can be a lot of ambiguity in classical Chinese poetry. In such cases, I give some previous interpretations along with my own understandings. When a poem makes use of allusions, I generally
adhere to the literal words and explain the allusion in notes or main text.

The greatest challenge I have encountered has been interpreting the many specialized terms drawn from Daoist interior alchemical theory, which are found in the works of Daoist women and Daoist adepts of the Song period. Although such work describes Daoist concepts and practice, I do not intend to carry on any detailed discussion of how Daoist theory was formed and what specific steps were required in Daoist practice. Instead, I have limited my work to translation of the poems for the purpose of showing the zeal of Daoist women in practicing their religious enterprise. As I am not an expert on Daoist studies, I have rendered these Daoist poems based on Daoist dictionaries and some primary Daoist texts.

For every Chinese term, name and official title, I provide Romanization in pinyin followed by Chinese characters. However, I have retained the Wade-Giles Romanization system where it appears in texts that I quote. With regard to translations of Chinese official titles, my reference has been Hucker’s dictionary.¹² My discussion on the artistic value of selected poems generally emphasizes grammatical structure, lexicon and technique in rhetoric and writing. While it is a fundamental aspect of poetry, I seldom deal with issues of rhyme in detail because my study is intended for a readership that may not have specialized knowledge of Chinese phonology.

As Yu Xuanji is the most controversial figure among Daoist women of the Tang, I begin my study with an examination of her work. I then move on to look at the poetry of Li Ye. Chapters are ordered chronologically, with Chapter One and Two covering the

Tang, Chapter Three covering the Five Dynasties (907–960), and Chapters Four and Five studying the Song. Each chapter is organized thematically. Furthermore, because Yu Xuanji and Li Ye are such famous poets and comparatively large corpuses of poems by each are extant today, a significant portion of my study is devoted to discussing their works.

In Chapter Two, I examine imagery related to female Daoists within the poetry of Tang male literati. Since the male intellectuals of Tang society were the group with whom female Daoists interacted most frequently, many male Tang poets composed poetry expressing their interest, curiosity, experiences and passion with regard to this unique group of women. Thus, numerous poems on female Daoists have been preserved and still exist today. Confronted with such a large number of poems on Daoist women, I have selected works that convey a range of opinions, as well as works by the most prominent poets including Li Bai, Wang Wei, Han Yu and Bai Juyi. I believe that a study of the works of the Tang intellectuals who were inspired by the female Daoists will not only help to establish a more accurate picture of the female Daoists but will also contribute to our further understanding of Tang intellectual life.

Chapter three investigates poetry on female Daoists from a well-known poetic anthology *Collection From Among Flowers* (*Huajian ji*) that appeared in the Shu region (modern Sichuan) during the Five Dynasties. Since Shu is one of the areas where the Daoist religion originated, Daoism continued to have a strong influence in the region. As seen in dozens of poems on Daoist women in the Shu anthology, I believe that Daoist women were very popular in the area at the time. To continue the study of Daoist
women, I explore the works by Shu poets attempting to demonstrate how the Shu elite of the period portrayed female Daoists.

Due to some important reform and innovation of the Daoist religion in the Song period, remarkable changes took place in the female Daoist community. To trace this, Chapter Four examines poems by eminent Daoist priestesses like Cao Xiyun 曹希蕴 (1040–1115), Sun Bu-er 孫不二 (1119–1182), Zhou Xuanjing 周玄靜 (fl.1189) and Tang Guangzhen 唐廣真 (fl. 1180). Although Cao was well known for her prolific output in poetry and her monographs, many of her books were either destroyed or lost. In the past decade, however, a handful of her verses and scattered lines have been discovered in the Daoist canon, *A Comprehensive Collection of Song Poetry* (*Quan Songshi* 全宋詩) and *A Record Events of Song Poetry* (*Songshi jishi* 宋詩紀事). In addition to exploring this new material attributed to Cao, I examine her famous “*A Song to Spirit Source and Supreme Dao*” – a 128-line poem on inner alchemical practice – that has thus far received little attention in Western scholarship. While Su Bu-er’s seventeen extant poems on internal alchemical practice are famous, I leave them out of my current study not only because they have already been interpreted by Western scholars, but also because my objective is not to inspect Daoist theory but to explore the various images of Daoist women in literary works. I therefore focus on Sun’s poems on everyday life instead.

Chapter Five explores works on Daoist women written by Song literati men, including poetry by some Daoist adepts, which have thus far been little noticed by Western scholarship. Through the examination and comparison of their verse, I attempt to exhibit particular features of the Song literati that are distinct from Tang intellectuals, and
the differences in perspective between the Song elite laymen and the elite clergy.

I conclude my study with a summary of major findings about female Daoists as presented in their poetic works and provide answers to the questions I have raised above. Through a close examination and discussion of the original poetic works written by both male and female literati, I hope my work will provide a more complete understanding of female Daoists as well as enhance our appreciation of classical Chinese poetry, particularly literary works by Daoist women, which have been misread or neglected in the past.
2.1. Yu Xuanji

2.1.1. Biographical Information

The earliest text recounting Yu Xuanji’s 生 (fl. 844–868) life is found in Sanshui xiaodu 三水小贒 (Small Notes from Sanshui) written by Huang-fu Mei 皇甫枚 (fl. 880 – 901), who was from Sanshui District 三水縣 in Anding Commandery 安定郡, (in modern Ningxia). Huang-fu is recognized as a contemporary of Yu Xuanji, and thus his opinions about Yu Xuanji had a great influence on later critics. It is no exaggeration in saying that most of the later assessments about Yu Xuanji were primarily based on Huang-fu’s account in Sanshui xiaodu.

Huang-fu’s book, originally had three volumes and was finished in 901, but unfortunately, one volume of the book has been lost. In 1883, the ninth year of Guangxu’s 光緒 reign in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), Miu Quansun 繆荃孫 (1844–1919) tried to collect scattered chapters found in Taiping guangji 太平廣記, Xu tan zhu 績誼, and other classical books. With the other two extant volumes, Miu compiled and edited a new edition of Sanshui xiaodu and listed it in his collectanea named Yunzi zaikan congshu 雲自在龜叢書, which was published in 1901 in Jiangyin 江陰, (in modern Jiangsu 江蘇). 13 This edition of Sanshui xiaodu is now available in some collectanea,

13 Miu Quansun 繆荃孫 got his jinshi degree in 1876.
such as the Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書, 14 Tang wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan 唐五代筆記小說大觀, 15 and Zhongguo wenyan xiaoshuo baibu jingdian 中國文言小說百部經典16.

I find three inconsistencies between the editions of Sanshui xiaodu in Taiping guangji 太平廣記 and the Xuxiu siku quanshu, which is a photocopy of Miu’s block-printed edition. One major difference is that Miu said that Yu was “a girl from a pleasure house” (chang jia nü 倡家女), but the Taiping guangji says Yu was “a girl from a household in an alley” (li jia nü 里家女)18. Although these accounts differ by only a single word, the meanings change significantly and suggest two very different family backgrounds and social upbringings.

It is possible that “li jia nü” reminded Miu of “Bei li zhī” 北里志 (Records of the North Alley), a book that describes life of singing girls and prostitutes, who lived in the north alley (bei li) in Chang’an during the Tang dynasty. Through close study of a map of Chang’an, I found that the city had a total of 110 alleys or lanes (li), and the North Alley was very famous because it was an entertainment district. I do not see that “a girl from a household in an alley” would necessarily mean “a girl from the North Alley”. Moreover, recent scholars, from both China and the West, have different opinions about Yu’s origin. For instance, Suzanne Cahill states that Yu was “born to a commoner

14 Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書, (Shanghai: guji chubanshe, 1995).
15 Tang wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan 唐五代筆記小說大觀, (Shanghai: guji chubanshe, 2000).
16 Zhongguo wenyan xiaoshuo baibu jingdian 中國文言小說百部經典, (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000).
17 Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書, 1260.45.
family”. While some Chinese scholars, such as Li Suping李素平, Peng Zhixian彭志憲 and Zhang Yi張穎believe that Yu was from an ordinary family, Lin Xueling林雪鈴, from Taiwan says that, “Yu Xuanji was born and grew up in a pleasure house” 魚玄機生長於娼家.  

The two other inconsistencies between the two editions are that Miu uses “wan”玩 to replace “wan”巋 in the edition of Taiping guangji and “que”缺 to replace an archaic form of the character that is not available in modern Chinese typography. Apparently the edition of Sanshui xiaodu in Taiping guangji is older than that of Miu’s edition, and thus it is much closer to the original work of Huang-fu. I therefore chose to use the edition of Sanshui xiaodu in Taiping guangji for my study instead of the edition in the Xuxiu siku quanshu.

Returning to the study of Yu Xuanji’s background, I would like to present a part of Huang-fu’s account in his book Sanshui xiaodu found in Taiping guangji.

Yu Xuanji, who styled herself as Youwei, was a female Daoist at the Convent of Xianyi in the Western capital (Chang’an) in the Tang dynasty. She was a girl from an ordinary household in Chang’an and looked so beautiful that the very thought of her was fascinating. She was fond of reading and writing, and especially liked chanting poems. When she was sixteen she had great admiration for Daoist purity and emptiness. Then early in the Xiantong

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20 Li Suping李素平, Nüshen Nüdan Nüdao女神女丹女道 (Beijing: zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2004), 417.
period (860-874), she put on a Daoist hat and gown and became a Daoist nun at the Convent of Xianyi. However, her verses on romance and entertainment were frequently circulated among the literati. Since Huilan was too weak to restrain her vivacity, she was often teased by gallant men and became the object of their flirtations. Thereafter Yu followed them and associated with them. As a result, some licentious men competed in adorning themselves to win her favor. When people visited her with wine she would certainly play a zither and compose poems, making jokes and flirt. Beside her, even some scholars looked dull and lackluster.

Huang-fu clearly considered Yu to be a gifted and beautiful woman but one who lived a dissolute life. Although it is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of Huang-fu’s views about Yu’s life, by comparing his version to other extant classic and contemporary sources we discover some inconsistencies. For example, Huang-fu’s information does not accord with other classic sources, which say that Yu married Li Yi 李億 (828? – 888?) prior to becoming a nun, as seen in Sun Guangxian’s book, and also the biography of Yu

23 “Huilan” is Yu Xuanji’s style.
24 Translation of the whole story can be found in the appendix of this study.
Xuanji in *Quan Tangshi*. In addition, most scholars of today who study Yu Xuanji believe that Yu had become a concubine before she entered the convent.

Jeanne Larsen states, “In her [Yu] mid-teens, she became the concubine of an official who took her south and eventually dropped her.” Jan Walls writes, “I am inclined to believe that Yu turned fifteen and became the concubine of Li Yi in the year 858.” According to *Dengke ji kao (A Study of Passing Lists of Government Examinations)*, Li Yi passed the *jinshi* examination and won fame as the Principal Graduate (*zhuangyuan*) in the twelfth year of the Dazhong era (858). Thus, Walls believes that after this triumph Li Yi returned home from the capital bringing Yu Xuanji with him. Based upon other scholarship and Yu’s own literary output, I believe it is more reasonable to conclude that before conversion to the Daoist religion Yu had been in a marital relationship with Li Yi.

Another missing point in Huang-fu’s statements is the chronology of Yu’s life. Jeanne Kelly translates Huang-fu’s sentence as, “At the age of sixteen, she decided to dedicate herself to the Taoist teachings.” While Suzanne Cahill renders the same phrase, “At the age of sixteen, she devoted herself to the clear void. So at the beginning of the Xiantong reign period, she accordingly put on the cap and gown at the Universal Propriety (convent).” Suzanne Cahill’s translation is a more accurate reflection of Huang-fu’s original work, but Jeanne Kelly’s interpretation implies the possible understanding...

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26 QTS, 23.9045.
28 Jan Walls “The Poetry of Yu Xuanji: A Translation, Annotation, Commentary and Critique” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1972) 60.
29 *Dengke ji kao* vol. 22 in *Xüxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書, 829.359.
that Yu reached the age of sixteen around the beginning of the Xiantong era (860-874). In other words, there is some uncertainty over whether or not – “her age of sixteen” and “the beginning of the Xiantong era” – overlapped. This question is very important because if Yu was sixteen at the beginning of the Xiantong, we can speculate that the date of her birth should be around 844, and that Yu was possibly twenty-five when she died in 868. This proposed chronology of Yu’s life has thus been accepted by many scholars. Hence, although the exact dates of Yu’s life remain unknown, scholars at least have some approximate dates with which to work.

Even though Sanshui xiaodu is a collection of contemporary legends and gossip that were circulating at the time and its factual authenticity might be questionable, it is the first book providing a detailed description of Yu Xuanji, including such information as her hometown, her parents, her Daoist identity, lines from her poetry, and especially how she died. Based on some genuine information about Yu, Huang-fu created dramatic dialogues and a well-knit plot to make his story more interesting. It is not hard to see how Huang-fu won a large number of readers not only during his time, but also in later centuries, contributing greatly to the spread of Yu Xuanji’s fame and notoriety.

Compared to Huang-fu Mei, Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (fl. 900–968), a famous poet of the Five Dynasties period (907–960), expressed his disapproval of Yu Xuanji more openly and directly in his book Beimeng Suoyan 北夢瑣言 (Trivial Stories in Dreams of the North). His text reads as follows:

Yu Xuanji, a Daoist nun, styled herself Huilan. She was very talented and brilliant
In the middle of the Xiantong era, she married Censor Li Yi. Later she lost his favor and was abandoned. Then she became a Daoist nun at the Convent of Xianyi. Here are some lines of her poems: “It is easy to seek a priceless treasure, / But harder to have a man with a loving heart.” And “Having withered an orchid returns to spring garden, / Willows in the east and west hinder a traveler’s boat”. By nature, she indulged in sensual pleasure and lived like a prostitute. Eventually, she was executed by the Capital Magistrate Wen Zhang for the murder of her servant maid. She has a collection of poems extant.

Sun Guangxian, from Sichuan Province, wrote this book during his travels in Jiangling (modern Hubei). Like Huang-fu Mei’s jottings from Sanshui, Sun recorded stories he heard on his trip and named his book *Trivial Stories from Dreams in the North*, which hints that all his anecdotes and biographical sketches were not standard authorized history. According to his brief account of Yu Xuanji, Yu was once married to Li Yi, but not as a principal wife. Only after she lost favor with her husband did she join a Daoist convent and become a nun. After giving a short introduction to Yu’s background, Sun quoted four lines of Yu’s verses and then made some highly critical remarks, including the following: “By nature, she indulged in sensual pleasure and lived like a prostitute”. I see this as Sun’s personal opinion about Yu Xuanji; the question here is – on what basis did Sun Guangxian come to make these comments? Considering the context

31 Sun Guangxian 孫光憲, *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言 (Trivial Stories in Dreams of the North), in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, 271.2134.
of his statement, he seems to be using Yu’s poems as evidence for his judgments. In my view, however, he may have misread those writings.

Xin Wenfang 辛文房 (fl. 1340), dating to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), gives a slightly more detailed description of Yu Xuanji in *Tang caizi zhuan* 唐才子傳 (*Biographies of Gifted Scholars in the Tang Dynasty*). It reads,

Xuanji, from Chang’an, was a Daoist nun. She was very bright and intelligent, and fond of reading. She was especially adept at composing verses and very sensitive and emotional. In the middle of the Xiantong era, when she turned fifteen, she became the concubine of Censor Li Yi (李德). However, Li’s wife was so jealous that she could not bear the fact that Li had a concubine. Li, therefore, had to send away his concubine to wear Daoist cap and gown at the Convent of Xianyi. Xuanji expressed her grievance in her poem “It is easy to seek a priceless treasure, But it is hard to have a man with true love.” Xuanji used to live on the same lane as Court Censor Li Ying (李勣). As they lived very close they wrote poems to each other. In addition, Xuanji had frequent contact with Wen Tingyun (溫庭筠) and exchanged poems with him that are extant. Once she ascended the Chongzhen Temple and composed a poem on seeing the inscribed names of the newly successful examination candidates: “Clouds and peaks meet my eyes on every side on a sunny spring day, elegant handwriting was created under his fingers. I resent my gauze robe concealing my verses, raising my head I envy in vain the names on the list.” From her lines we could see she was so ambitious that if she were a man she would have certainly made use of her talent. This author had both appreciation and sympathy for her. During that period of time, Daoist nuns in various temples in the capital were all beautiful and graceful wearing pretty clothes and shining hairpins. The only entertainment amongst themselves was the chanting of poems.

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32 The literal translation of “ji ji” 及笄 is “she reached the age of doing hairpin”. In ancient China a woman rolled up their hair with a hairpin at the age of 15, indicating that she became an adult and was ready for marriage.
Xuanji is outstanding among them; many of her poems were composed for her friends.

There is one volume of her poems extant today.

This slightly longer account of Yu Xuanji contains additional information. Firstly, Xin’s text states that Yu Xuanji and her spouse Li Yi separated because Li Yi’s wife was jealous. Secondly, the text mentions that Yu was in contact with Li Ying 李郢 (fl. 817–880) and Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (812?–870) since Yu exchanged poems with them. In addition to biographical information, Yu’s poems are quoted in Xin’s text. His appraisal of Yu Xuanji is not only positive, but also highly reverential, which contrasts dramatically with the criticisms of Huang-fu Mei and Sun Guangxian. Xin concludes that at the time Daoist nuns in the capital’s various temples were all graceful and beautiful. They passed the time by entertaining themselves with singing and chanting poems, and among them Yu, was outstanding. Xin’s account indicates that there were many Daoist nuns in the capital in the late Tang, many of them led leisurely lives and were educated and well versed in poetry.

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33Xin Wenfang 辛文房 Tang Caizi Zhuan 唐才子傳 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1965),136.
There are certainly other accounts about Yu Xuanji, but they are mostly extracted from the three texts I cited above, and little new information is found in them. It is possible to draw some basic information from the three biographies cited above. Yu Xuanji was from Chang’an, and had a short life of about 25 years. She was once married to Li Yi, but not as a principal wife. Because Li Yi’s legal wife became jealous, Li deserted Yu not long after their union. Yu then entered the Convent of Xianyi in the capital, Chang’an, and became well known for her beauty and poetic talents. She was later held accountable for the murder of her handmaid, and was executed for this in the year 869.

As Yu’s poems were widely circulated, and she was frequently in contact with literati of her time, many commentaries were written about her and her work, both hostile and appreciative. But what kind of person was Yu? Why did classical critics consider her a prostitute? Does this account of Yu’s life seem well-founded? Did Yu write any obscene works? How does Yu present a different perspective of herself in her verse? Why did she become a Daoist nun? Was she a devout Daoist nun? I believe the best answers to these questions lie in Yu’s own literary output, rather than the remarks of former critics. Thus, I now turn to an examination of her poems.

2.1.2. Yu Xuanji’s Poetic Works

How many of Yu Xuanji’s poems are still extant? There are different answers – some say 50, some say 48, but 49 poems are collected in Quan Tangshi that are under the name of Yu Xuanji, including miscellaneous scattered lines. Based on their themes I
have classified these poems into five categories: love poems (10); social poems (18); poems about herself (8); Daoist poems (6), and poems on history, travel and sports (7). A sentimental and talented woman, Yu wrote a great deal about her thoughts regarding love and emotions – among her 49 extant poems, more than 17 are related to her various passions and views on love. These sentiments are found even in poems dealing with travel and friendship. In addition, love poetry is the most controversial part of her oeuvre. Therefore, I shall start my discussion of her poetry with her love poems.

2.1.2.1. Yu Xuanji’s Love Poetry

A close study of Yu Xuanji’s love poetry reveals that Yu Xuanji’s feelings and thoughts on love changed with time. For the sake of the study, I have chosen to classify her love poems into four categories based on the mood and ideas expressed: (1) belief in love; (2) sorrow and resentment; (3) joy and delight; and (4) wit and rationality. These categories, with the exception of the third, seem to reflect the stages of the development in Yu’s attitude towards love; however, this study is not intended to chronologically analyze Yu’s changing her views on love, but instead to consider her outlook on love and how she presents different aspects of herself in the individual poems.

1) Belief in Love

According to Tang caizi zhuan 唐才子傳 (Biographies of Gifted Scholars in the Tang Dynasty) written by Xing Wenfang 辛文房, Yu Xuanji married Li Yi, when she was fifteen. Some Western scholars use the word “concubine” for the Chinese “qie”妾 to
describe Yu’s relationship with Li Yi. Yet, unlike the English term “concubine”, “qie” in classical Chinese may denote a marital bond, albeit an inferior form. As Yao Ping explains, “In the T’ang Code, the term for having a concubine is ch’ü (to marry a woman), and the term for becoming a concubine is chia (to marry a man), the same terms used for taking a wife and becoming a wife.” 34 Given the dimension of marriage of the Chinese word “qie” and for the sake of emphasizing that Yu was one of Li’s legitimate spouses, I follow Suzanne Cahill in referring to Yu’s status as Li Yi’s “secondary wife”. 35

Due to the jealousy of Li Yi’s principal wife, Yu had to be separated from her husband after her marriage. In spite of this separation, Yu maintained a strong faith in love and longed for the time when she and her husband would live together forever again. Here is a poem Yu wrote to her lover during this time.

_Sending My Spring Emotions to Zian_

The mountain road slants and the stone steps are steep,
I don’t mind the hardship of traveling but suffer from longing.
Ice melts in distant ravines, I adore your pure manner,
The far away snow and cold mountains remind me of your jade-like appearance.
Don’t listen to vulgar songs and get drunk on wine in Spring,
Don’t call idle guests to play chess overnight.
Unlike stone but rather as pine our oath shall last forever, 36
The union of two birds in flight, or the joining of our robes may come late.
Although I abhor travelling alone till the end of winter,
I anticipate our meeting when the moon is full.

春情寄于安

山路欹斜石磴危，
不愁行苦苦相思。
冰銷遠潤憶清顰，
雪遠寒峰想玉姿。

莫聼凡歌春病酒，
休招閒客夜貪棋。
如松匪石盟長在，
比翼連糧會遙遲。

雖恨獨行冬盡日，
終期相見月圓時。

36 In “Bai Zhou” 相逢 of _Shijing_ 詩經 (the Book of Songs) “My heart is not a stone that can be rolled around. My heart is not a mat that can be rolled up. I am not a rock that can be rolled around. My heart is not a mat that can be rolled up.” See _Shijing_, (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan 1926), 32.
Parting from you, what I can use for a gift?  
Falling tears in the bright sunshine and a single poem.

There is a consensus among scholars of Yu Xuanji’s poetry that this poem was written to her husband Li Yi, whose style was Zi’an 子安. Although the date of composition is unknown, the title and content indicate that it was composed in spring, a time when all plants are flourishing, just like Yu’s passion. Simply by reading the title, one can already feel Yu’s affection, as in classical Chinese poetry, the phrase “spring emotions (chun qing 春情)” indicates stirrings of love.

In the opening couplet, Yu contrasts traveling a difficult and dangerous mountain road with lovesickness. She states that the hardships of travel do not bother her, but she has to endure suffering over longing for her lover – the snow and ice in the distance remind her of her lover’s graceful manner and jade-like appearance. With thoughts of her lover filling her head, Yu behaves like any ordinary wife, urging her spouse not to invite layabouts, not to play chess all night long, not to drink too much, and not to visit singing girls. After listing these many restrictions, she expresses her affection for and commitment to her lover with a series of metaphors. She asserts that her love is not like a rolling stone that is constantly in motion and changing, but is like the everlasting “pine trees”. She has faith that sooner or later she and her beloved will be like two birds flying wing to wing or the two front sides of a rope fastened together. In concluding her poem, Yu offers up both her tears and the poem itself, as a special gift for her lover.

Yu’s self-presentation is not only found in the content of the verse but also in the elaborate design of the poem. Her well-organized heptasyllabic regular verse consists of...
six antithetical couplets, which can be divided into three quatrains. The first quatrain speaks of her longing for her lover; in the second quatrain she reels off a list of dos and don’ts and indicates her commitment to him; and the third quatrain expresses her hopeful expectations for a reunion and sends her tears of yearning and her exquisite verse to her lover as a gift. As a result, her skillfully constructed work is regarded as the best example of heptasyllabic pailü by the critic Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1511 – 1602) in his book Shi sou 詩藳 (Collection of Poems), where he states,

I studied heptasyllabic pailü in Song poetry but did not find any good examples.

In the Tang Dynasty, only two poems, both written by a woman named Yu Xuanji, are acceptable. All the rest are inferior to hers.

Yu Xuanji wrote two poems in the form of heptasyllabic pailü, both of which were regarded as excellent pieces by Hu Yinglin and Sending My Spring Emotions to Zi’an is one of them. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether Hu’s comment is accurate or not, his words indicate that this form of poetry is very hard to compose, but that Yu did it very successfully. Not only did she follow a strict rhyming scheme, but also her parallel constructions in terms of both syntax and semantics are very good. For example, in her second antithetical couplets, she matches “ice” to “snow”; “pure manner” to “jade-like appearance”; and the verbs “admire” to “think”. In the third couplet she has more such pairs in phrases like “don’t listen” and “don’t call on”, “vulgar songs” and “idle guests”, “get drunk in spring” and “play chess over night”.

37 pailü: a standard form of heptasyllabic or pentasyllabic regulated verse with at least more than ten lines, so it is a longer form than a quatrain (four lines) or an ordinary regulated verse (eight lines).
38 Hu Yinglin 胡應麟, Shi sou 詩藳 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 1979), 301.
Due to the level of skill required to compose heptasyllabic *pailü*, many poets prefer to write eight lines with seven syllables in each line, which is termed heptasyllabic regulated poetry (*qiyan lūshi* 七言律詩). Thus, it is astounding that Yu Xuanji, a teenage girl at the time, could compose a heptasyllabic *pailü* perfectly representing her exceptional command of form as well as her genuine feelings. As Jan Walls writes, “Her success in this aspect is her claim to fame as a poet.”

The tone of this poem indicates that Yu was evidently happy with her relationship with Li Yi, even though she was currently separated from him. As we recall, Yu had a secondary marital bond to Li Yi, so she regarded her marriage as an intimate alliance with her spouse and committed herself to her partner. Accordingly, she demonstrates a positive attitude towards love expressing a great tenderness and promise. With her serious concern about her lover’s health and regular daily life, Yu presents herself in this poem as a lifelong wife, rather than a woman who is interested only in sexual pleasure. However, throughout her total oeuvre, this is the only verse in which Yu expresses her great confidence in love and her relationship.

2) Sorrow and Resentment

It is true that Yu Xuanji, like many other female poets, wrote a great deal about her sadness, worries and resentment, often complaining of being abandoned. Lin Xueling 林雪鈴 counted the number of times that Yu used the word “worry (chou 憂)” and “resentment (hen 憤)” and found that among her 50 extant poems “worry” appeared 16 times...
times … and “resentment” appeared 10 times. This reveals that many of Yu Xuanji’s poems expressed feelings of sorrow and melancholy about lovers and love in general. For example,

*Sent to Zi’an*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sent to Zi’an</th>
<th>寄子安</th>
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<tr>
<td>When parting I had drunk a thousand cups of wine yet my sadness cannot be washed away, My alienated heart has a hundred knots that are impossible to untie.</td>
<td>醉別千卮不流愁，離腸百結解無由。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having withered an orchid returns to its spring garden, Willows in the east and west hinder the traveler’s boat. Reunion and separation are both sad and clouds drift and change. Our affection should be like the ever-flowing river. It is hard to meet in the blooming season, I don’t want to get drunk declining in a jade building.</td>
<td>蓼蘭縱歇歸春圃，楊柳東西繚客舟。聚散已悲雲不定，恩情須學水長流。有花時節知難遇，未肯貯貯醉玉樓。</td>
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This heptasyllabic verse is in the standard form of regulated poetry, in terms of meaning, it is usually divisible into two quatrains. The opening couplet may remind one Cao Cao’s verse, “How can I relieve my worries? The only way is to drink Du Kang’s wine.” (何以解憂，唯有杜康). But Yu alters Cao’s meaning by saying that even a thousand cups of wine cannot wash away her melancholy. Thus she begins by emphasizing that her sorrows are so deep that nothing can relieve them.

The second couplet is very famous because Sun Guangxian has used it as evidence of Yu Xuanji’s debauchery. Probably, it is one of the roots of Yu’s notorious reputation. As we know from her biographical account, “Huiyan” is Yu Xuanji’s

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41 According to Chinese legend, Du Kang 杜康 is the first person who brewed wine. In Cao Cao’s poem, *Du Kang* refers to wine in general sense. See Cao Cao’s *Ballads of Short Songs* 短歌行 and Hanwei liuchao shixuan 漢魏六朝詩選 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1961), 105.
style. The characters in her style are both fragrant herbaceous plants, Ocimum basilicum and Eupatorium japonicum respectively. These plants are often used as symbols of purity, beauty or fragrance. Since Western scholars usually translate “huilan” as “orchid”, I will follow the tradition, instead of using the longer formal plant names. Still, the Chinese “huilan” does not look like North American orchid, but the symbolic meaning is similar.

In the poem, Yu states that when fragrant grass withers, it stays home, the ground of the spring garden. On a metaphorical level, Yu is comparing herself to fragrant plant, which remains relatively static throughout its life. In the next line of this couplet, she states, “Willows in the east and west tangle travelers’ boats.” The question is to whom the willows refer. Some critics, like Sun Guangxian, believed that this line meant that Yu Xuanji was a prostitute who, like a willow tree impeding travelers’ boats, tried to waylay her customers. Based on this interpretation, Sun was highly critical of Yu Xuanji’s behavior.

In my opinion, however, Yu is actually using the line about the willow trees to refer to her husband, who was always traveling, and thus meeting other women. It is likely that the “willows” are intended to symbolize women, but not Yu Xuanji herself. Yu is afraid that, although her husband loves her, he may meet other women outside. So this couplet is intended to allude to the differences between Yu, as represented by “an orchid,” and her husband, represented by “a traveler”. The “orchid” must remain at home, while the “traveler” can experience life outside and may enjoy other women’s company. If, as Sun Guangxian interprets, both the “orchid” and the “willow” are intended as

symbols of Yu Xuanji herself, then the two lines of the couplet would be contradictory. It seems more logical that these two lines imply that Yu, like many women of her time, often waits at home for her husband who is frequently away traveling and perhaps seeing other women.

In the second quatrain of this poem, Yu continues to grumble about the unstable relationship between herself and her husband, with a comparison of their relationship to the constantly changing drifting clouds. Yu wishes her lover’s affection could instead be as constant as a flowing river. In conclusion, Yu laments that she is separated from her husband just as she is at the height of her youth and beauty. She hates to be dejected and pathetic, getting drunk alone in her cold, jade-like home.

This poem clearly expresses yearning, and it is unique in conveying female sorrow and resentment. I cannot find anything in the poem to support Sun Guangxian’s interpretation that the poem indicates that Yu was a prostitute.\(^{43}\) In my view, there is no question that Sun misinterpreted or distorted Yu Xuanji’s poem and thus, his commentary on the personality of Yu Xuanji is unreliable. In fact, Yu presents herself as a lonely woman who longs for her husband wasting time in her room and feeling sad about her beauty going unappreciated. On the one hand, this poem expresses regret, sadness, weeping and drinking; some typical elements of boudoir lament poetry. On the other hand, this poem embodies Yu’s indignation over the inequality of men and women.

\(^{43}\) Sun Guangxian’s 孫光憲, *Trivial Stories in Dreams of the North* in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, 271.2134.
Returning to Yu Xuanji’s corpus of poems, I have found a number of other poems in which Yu presents herself as a woman prone to complaint and resentment. A typical example of her at times intense grief can be found in the following famous poem:

*Anxiously from Jiangling, Sent to Zi’an* 江陵愁望寄子安

Maple leaves fill hundreds and thousands of branches, 楓葉千枝復萬枝，
The river bridge hides the sunset glow as a boat returns late. 江橋掩映暮帆遲。
Longing for you, my heart is just like the water in the West River, 憶君心似西江水，
Day and night it flows eastward never stopping to rest. 日夜東流無歇時。

Following the strict tonal pattern and rhyme schemes of the quatrain (jueju 絕句) form of heptasyllabic regulated poetry, Yu employs a very plain lexicon and simple structure, helping this heptasyllabic quatrain to read very smoothly. The rhythms of her easy-going verse resemble flowing water, and this is also reflected in the content of the poem in which she compares her yearning for her lover to endlessly flowing river water. Her symbolic device reminds one of the well-known lines from Li Yu’s 李煜 (937–978), poem entitled “Following the Tune of Yu Meiren.”

May I ask you how many worries do you have? 間君能有幾多愁，
They are as numerous as east-flowing water in a spring river. 恰似一江春水向东流。

It is possible that Yu Xuanji’s lines were the inspiration for Li Yu’s much better known couplet, since the two sentences are very much alike. My point is that while many

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44 *Juejū* 絕句 is a form of classical poetry, with four lines and seven or five characters in each line, required strict patterns in rhymes and tones.

45 See Li Yu's 李煜 “Following the Tune of Yu Meiren”虞美人 in *Tang Song cixuan* 唐宋詞選 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe 1981), 70.
Chinese people chant Li Yu’s lines with great appreciation, very few know that Yu Xuanji composed similar lines a hundred years earlier.

3) Joy and Delight

Yu Xuanji’s love poems encompass a variety of emotions and experiences, all of which represent her intelligence, independence and unyielding mind. Some scholars have claimed that Yu’s poetry always possesses an oppressive tone. In my view, however, this does not seem a well-founded assessment. Although some of Yu’s work is dark in tone, her corpus also includes poems that convey her happiness upon meeting her lover. It was poems of this sort that were most frequently criticized as vulgar or wicked by earlier critics. The poem “Welcoming Supernumerary Li Jinren” is an example of this category of poem. Unfortunately we have no information about the man this poem was written for because his name does not appear in any of the known biographical records from the Tang Dynasty. The Chinese scholars Peng Zhixian 彭志憲 and Zhang Yi 張燚 have suggested that Li Jinren is a nickname that Yu bestowed upon Li Zi’an, but I have not found any evidence to support this hypothesis.

### Welcoming Supernumerary Li Jinren

今日喜時聞喜鵲，
昨宵燈下拜燈花。
焚香出戶迎潘岳，

今日喜時聞喜鵲，
昨宵燈下拜燈花。
焚香出戶迎潘岳，

46 Lin Xueling 林雪鈴, *Tangshi zhong de nüguan* 唐詩中的女冠, 165.
47 YXJSBNYZ, 4.
48 “Denghua” refers to flower-shaped snuff of a charred lampwick or candlewick. As part of Chinese culture, a flower-shaped snuff was believed to bring good fortune.
Although the language of this poem is plain, consisting of only four lines, several different techniques are applied. First of all, to make the opening couplet read more lightly, Yu explores both visual images (magpies, snuff) and sound effects by the repetition of two Chinese characters: (1) *xi* 喜(happy) and *xi que* 喜鹊(magpies); (2) *deng* 燈(light) and *deng hua* 燈花(snuff). She then employs three successive verb phrases – “burn incense”, “go out”, and “welcome” – within one line to accelerate the poem’s progression. Having first flattered her boyfriend by comparing him to Pan Yue

潘岳 (247 – 300), who was famous for both of his talents in poetry and handsome appearance, Yu closes the poem with a bit of a twist by alluding to two legendary figures, Cowherd and Weaving Girl, who are said to live on opposite sides of the Milky Way and meet only once a year on the seventh of the seventh month. In contrast to the traditional tendency to romanticize these characters, Yu states that she doesn’t envy them at all, with an implication that her own love match is superior to that of the mythological lovers.

In this verse Yu presents herself as a girl filled with joy and passion, waiting for her lover. Nonetheless, her joyful demeanor has been criticized for lacking morality, and this was used as more proof that Yu was not acting in a restrained or proper manner. The fact is that very few women wrote poems about the happiness of love at the time Yu Xuanji wrote her poems, as it was considered improper for a woman to openly express the joyful feelings of love. With regard to norms and virtues that a traditional Chinese

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49 Pan Yue 潘岳 (247 – 300) was a famous man of letters in the period of the Western Jin 西晋(263-317), known for his handsome appearance.
50 In Chinese legend, Cowherd and Weaving Girl (*niulang zhinü* 牛郎織女) are known as a loving couple.
woman had to observe, Josephine Chiu-Duke points out, “the general aim of a daughter’s education – that they learn to be gentle, submissive, and chaste… is quite in conformity with what is required of a woman in the Nüjie.”[51] Nüjie 女誡 (Lessons for women), written by Ban Zhao 班昭 (45 – 117), was recognized by Confucians as one of the classics for educating women, focusing on rules and regulations that a woman should observe. Following the virtues of tolerance and passivity, most women’s writings related to passion and love were about sorrow, regret or longing for lovers. Yu was a brave and gifted poet who disregarded convention and composed poems for all occasions. Even though such delightful poems were likely for her own personal amusement, she challenged the power of ethics and traditions.

A brief look through Yu Xuanji’s corpus yields other examples of her versatility. The following poem, for example, illustrates how Yu documents a time when she felt extremely happy with her love.

*Following the Rhymes of My New Neighbor in the West and Begging Wine from Him*

One poem makes me chant it a hundred times,
Every word gives me new feelings and sounds like gold.[52]
Looking west I have a mind to climb a fence,[53]
Gazing far away I wonder if I can transform to a stone.[54]

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[52] When Sun Chuo 孫绰 (314 – 371) finished his famous “Poetic Exposition on the Excursion of Tiantai Mountain” 游天台山賦, he showed it to his friend, saying “If you throw it on the ground you can hear a sound of gold 詩來百道吟，新詩又聲金。” Later “throwing on the ground and hearing a sound of gold” is used as a phrase to describe an excellent literary work. See Jinshu, Sun Chao Zhuan 晋书・孙绰传 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1973), 1544.
[53] In his work “Rhapsody on Dentuzi’s fondness of women” (dengtuzi haose fu 登徒子好色賦), Song Yu 宋玉 (320-225 B.C.) tells of a very beautiful girl in his neighboring household in the east, who once climbed on the garden wall, an act that seemed to the poet to signal her desire for him. See Cao Wenxin 曹文心 Song Yu Cifu 宋玉辭賦, (Hefei 合肥: Anhui daxue chubanshe 安徽大学出版社 2006), 155.
[54] On the top mountain in the northern part of Wuchang County 武昌縣, Hubei 湖北, there is a stone shaped like a person standing erect, the local people call it Wang Fu Shi 望夫石. It is said in folk legend
The Milky Way is too vast, so they gaze into the distance in vain.\(^{55}\) My dreams of Xiaoxiang are broken off so I stop tuning my lute.\(^{56}\) Moreover it is Cold Food Festival and I get more homesick.\(^{57}\) Please don’t drink Shuye’s delicious wine alone.\(^{58}\)

This poem is more difficult to understand than any of the works discussed so far. Perhaps Yu was trying to make this poem seem very scholarly by showing off her knowledge of poetry. She fills nearly every line with allusions to both classical works and legendary stories. While these allusions make her poem hard to comprehend upon a first reading, it is certain that Yu did this on purpose. It seems that her new neighbor, the person this poem is written for, must have been a member of the literati, since he had written her a poem and Yu wrote this poem in response, following his rhyme scheme. In composing a poem for such an important recipient, Yu carefully structured it as a heptasyllabic regulated verse, matching the couplets in terms of rhetoric and speech. All of her efforts paid off, giving the verse a brilliant literary grace.

In the opening couplet, she pays her new neighbor’s poem an enormous compliment, saying that even though she has read his poem a hundred times, it still gives her fresh feelings upon each reading. She then alludes to Sun Chuo’s 孫綽 (314 – 371) words, “Throw it (his poetic work) on the ground and you can hear a sound of gold 卿試擲地，當作金石声也”, praising every word of the poem for its literary taste. Then, through two

\(^{55}\) The Milky Way separates the two stars, the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl from each other, so they can only gaze into the distance in vain.
\(^{56}\) “Xiaoxiang” 潇湘 is a joint name of Xiao River and Xiang River, which flow together into Lake Dongting 洞庭湖. “Xiaoxiang” is often used as a symbol of Hunan.
\(^{57}\) Cold Food Festival is in the third month in lunar calendar, one day before Qingming 清明 (the Grave-sweeping Festival).
\(^{58}\) Shuye 叔夜 is the style of Ji Kang 晷康 (223-263), a poet, musician and Daoist philosopher, who was known for being fond of drinking.
more allusions in the next couplet, she talks about her own thoughts and feelings. Song Yu’s 宋玉 (320-225 B.C.) work, “Rhapsody on Dentuzi’s Fondness for Women” (Dentuzi haose fu 登徒子好色賦), has been alluded to in many literary pieces, but Yu Xuanji deals with the story from an unusual point of view, that is not from the view of Song Yu, the male character, but instead from the view of Song Yu’s neighbor, an extremely beautiful girl.

This alteration of the story is layered in meanings. By taking this point of view, Yu is comparing herself to the extremely beautiful woman in Song Yu’s work. Yu must have been very confident of herself, since this poem is not the only instance in which she compares herself to acknowledged beauties. Yet, while Yu compares herself to the beautiful woman, she also flatters her new neighbor by comparing him to Song Yu, a very famous, talented, and good-looking poet. The most significant part of her exploration of Song Yu’s work is that she uses it to convey her admiration and affection for her new neighbor.

Following her exploration of Song Yu, the next line of the poem invokes another legendary story about a woman who was transformed into a stone after waiting each day and night on the top of a mountain for her husband’s return. This allusion hints even more explicitly at Yu’s passion and loyalty in love. In the next couplet, Yu relates her personal loneliness and regrets through an allusion to the two stars, the Cowherd and the Weaver, who are separated from each other by the Milky Way. She grieves for the two lovers who, instead of being together, can only gaze at one another from far away.

After alluding to the legends, Yu moves on to her own situation: the end of her relationship with Li Yi. Some of Yu’s poems indicate that she once travelled to areas
around Hunan 湖南 and Hubei 湖北, while waiting for a reunion with him. It seems that it was during these travels that she finally realized that she had no hope of being with Li. This is supported in this poem when Yu states that her dream in Xiaoxiang 瀟湘, a region in Hunan, is broken and that, consequently, she put aside her qin 琴 (a kind of zither). By giving up her qin, Yu implies that no one in the world could understand her and she lived a life of depression and loneliness before leaving Xiaoxiang.

The closing couplet returns to the present as Yu states that it is now the Cold Food Festival and that she is homesick. After describing herself in such a pitiful state, she begs for some wine from her new neighbor. It is possible that what she wants is not just wine, but rather an affectionate companion. The poem closes with yet another flattering allusion for her new neighbor, when Yu compares him to another famous poet Ji Kang 稽康 (223-263), who was also known for being fond of drinking.

Due to a lack of historical records, practically nothing is known about when and where Yu wrote this poem but it is certain that she had already stopped expecting reunion with Li Yi by the time she wrote this poem. More to the point, she seems to have stepped out of the shadow of her broken relationship and begun looking for new hope in her life. In this work, Yu presents herself in a light and joyful mood, which can be clearly felt in the opening and closing couplets. Again, Yu displays her optimism, unyielding mind and determination to persist in her quest to find love and happiness.

4) Wit and Rationality

The love poems in Yu Xuanji’s corpus are unique and special not only because of the
versatility and unusually explicit expression of joy in amorous relationships, but also
because some of them reflect Yu Xuanji’s intelligence and deep thought, radiating a kind
of philosophical wit regarding love. For example,

_Presented to a Girl Next Door_  

Feeling shy under the sun I cover myself with gauze sleeves,  
Sad about spring I am too lazy to do make-up.  
It is easier to seek for a priceless treasure,  
But harder to find a man with a loving heart.  
My pillow floods with falling tears,  
Amid the flowers my heart is secretly broken.  
Since I can spy on Song Yu,  
Why should I hate Wang Chang?

Yu draws a famous analogy in this poem between the search for a priceless treasure and
the hunt for a man with a loving heart. This analogy is so well known that almost
everyone who has read Yu Xuanji can recite the couplet. At first glance, this
pentasyllabic-regulated poem seems like a typical work conveying a woman’s yearning
and sorrows about being abandoned, but this interpretation is turned on its head in the last
couplet. After composing six lines about her depression and resentment over her
relationship, Yu suddenly changes the mood of the poem by saying, “Since I can spy on
Song Yu, Why should I hate Wang Chang?” Thus, the poem concludes without any
resentment but a new hope for her future.

Again, Yu alludes to Song Yu, who was a minister in the State of Chu (*chu guo* 楚
國) and also famous for his talents and brilliant literary works. By comparison, “Wang
Chang” is a fictional figure, who appears in some classical works as a symbol of a
woman’s ideal man.\textsuperscript{59} Yu, however, has modified the original meaning of “Wang Chang”, emphasizing that an ideal mate may ironically still be imperfect. Thus, in her poem, “Wang Chang” simply symbolizes a good-looking man, while “Song Yu” represents a famous man endowed with both talent and looks.

The abrupt shift in mood comes first of all from Yu’s comfort in looking at her problems from a broader viewpoint after writing several lines bemoaning her abandonment. Secondly, it is also possible that she was composing the poem for her neighbor, to encourage her to pursue a new life. Finally and perhaps most importantly, given her intelligence and indomitable character, Yu was little influenced by the traditional norms or social restraints. She was shrewd enough to know that one way to reduce her sorrow is to make another choice: since a magnificent “Song Yu”, who represents her potential future lover, exists somewhere out there, why bother mooning over a mere “Wang Chang”, who represents her former lover.

From the title of this poem, “Presented to a Girl Next Door”, Yu seems to try to give the girl some advice based on her own experience of having been abandoned by her former lovers. Yu’s view of love at the time she composed this poem is clearly quite different from the time when she wrote poems for Li Zi’an. If the couplet, “It’s easier to seek priceless treasure, but it’s harder to have a man with a loving heart” is regarded as a summary of her failed experiences with love over the past years, then the closing couplet, “Since I can spy on Song Yu, why should I hate Wang Chang” is the solution to her situation. Once again, Yu presents her persistent character and determination to seek for

true love. By repeatedly alluding to Song Yu’s work and comparing herself to Song’s beautiful female neighbor, Yu also illustrates her self-admiration, and supreme confidence in herself.

Without a doubt, Yu Xuanji’s approach to pursuing love distinguishes her as unconventional with respect to expectation for women in traditional China. Her poem *Presented to a Girl Next Door* evoked a great number of vicious comments, casting aspersions on her character for centuries. Huang Zhouxing 黄周星 (1611-1680), a relatively famous scholar and critic in the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), once wrote a condemnation of the poem,

Teacher Yu is teaching a monkey to climb up a tree, inducing people to break the law. It’s a sin! It’s a sin!

鱼師可謂教猱升木，誘人犯法。罪過！罪過！\(^6\)

Huang seems to show Yu respect by addressing her as “teacher”. In fact, Huang’s analogy, relating monkeys and women, is derogatory. In Chinese, “teaching monkeys to climb trees” usually implies teach something bad to someone who has the potential for evil, just like monkeys have a natural inclination to climb trees. In effect, Huang accuses Yu of inciting women, who he considers easily corruptible in the first place, to defy conventional morals and norms. This leads us to ask what, in Huang’s mind, were the laws and moral standards of proper behavior? Should Yu remain sad and single forever after being abandoned by her husband or lover?

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It is interesting to note that the closing couplet of Yu’s poem, which can be read as a rebellion against the morality imposed on women of the time, has never become as widely known as the middle couplet of the same verse, “It is easy to seek for priceless treasure, But hard to find a man with a loving heart.” Suzanne Cahill has sharply observed, “I think that for many centuries we have been reading Tang women’s poems through stereotypes created by Tang and earlier poets, considering these works hopelessly corrupted by false consciousness and borrowed language. We have been reading them incorrectly. I am embarrassed to admit that the Tang women writers were freer of such constraints than we have been.” 61 Indeed, Yu’s final couplet represents a progressive and anti-traditional outlook on love.

Another example of Yu Xuanji’s distinctive point of view on love can be found in the following poem. Although it is entitled I Was Moved and Sent This to My Friend, the content of the poem does not give any indication of who this friend may have been. Because the poet begins the title with the words “I was moved,” I consider this poem an example of her self-expression or introspection, rather than a poem for social communication. Her long verse goes:

I Was Moved and Sent This to My Friend

To my zither’s scarlet strings I entrusted my resentment, 62
But my passions are held back by my rational thought.
Had I known it was a meeting of clouds and rain, 63

62 In ancient China qin’s (a musical instrument like zither) string was made from shusi 熟丝, a special kind of silk, which was red.
63 The phrase of “meeting of clouds and rain” is from SongYu’s work “Rhapsody on Gaotang” (“Gaotang Fu” 高唐赋), in which Song Yu tells of an ancient King of Chu who had a dream of a beautiful woman in daytime. The charming woman introduced herself as a visitor from Shaman Mount (wushan 巫山) that is located at the north side of Yangzi River in modern Hubei Province. She offered herself to be the King’s pillow and mat, a euphemism for intercourse; the King gave his favor. When she left she said, “I am
I would never have stirred my orchid heart.
As peaches and plums are in full bloom,
Outstanding scholars may seek them as well.
Although pines and cassias are verdant,
They still enjoy the admiration of common folk.
In the moonlight the mossy steps look clean,
A voice in song rings deep in the courtyard bamboo.
Red leaves cover the ground in front of my gate,
I won’t sweep them till my true friend (zhiyin) comes.  

This twelve-line pentasyllabic pai lü verse is, in my opinion, one of Yu’s best poems in terms of skill and content. It is composed of three quatrains, each focusing on one sub-topic. The opening quatrain discusses Yu’s feeling, her perceptions and her self-awareness. By playing her qin, she gives vent to her resentment. Although she feels passionate about her male friend, she realizes that the relationship is not a long-term one. Here, Yu once again employs an allusion to Song Yu’s work. In “Rhapsody on Gaotang” (“Gaotang Fu” 高唐赋), the goddess of the Shaman Mountain (Wushan 巫山) describes herself as “clouds in the morning and rain in the evening.” Since the King of Chu had sex with the goddess, “clouds and rain” has become a common euphemism for intercourse.

Contrary to the goddess, represented by “clouds in the morning and rain in the evening”, Yu, again, describes herself as “an orchid-heart” to symbolize her noble and living on the south side of the Shaman Mount, at the steep place of the high hill. At dawn I look like rosy clouds, but I transform to running rain in the evening. Dawn by dawn, evening by evening, I stay under this terrace.” Later the phrase of “meeting of clouds and rain” implies a casual relationship or a relationship only for sex. See Cao Wenxin 曹文心 Song Yü Cifu, 168. 

64 In the Warring States (403 – 221 BC) a musician called Bo Ya 伯牙 was very skilled at playing zither, his close friend Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期 could fully understand what Bo Ya tried to express in his music. “Later when Ziqi died Bo Ya broke the strings (of his qin), as he believed there was no one who could understand his music. 子期死,伯牙絕弦,以無知音者.” (Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋, Shanghai: Guji chubanshe 1989),102.

virtuous mind. As has been previously discussed, the literal definition of “huilan 菡蘭” is a type of fragrant plant. In Chinese literature, huilan is often used in a deliberately figurative manner, symbolizing a woman’s beauty and grace. Moreover “Huilan” is the style of Yu Xuanji herself. Therefore, in the above poem, “an orchid-heart” has a dual meaning: it represents both Yu’s name, as well as her pure and graceful mind.

Parenthetically, the second couplet is ambiguous in terms of grammatical structure, which affects how it is and has been interpreted. Jan Walls interprets the lines as “Had I known of the sad tryst of clouds and rain, / this tender heart would never have stirred”. But Kang-I Sun Chang and Huan Saussy translate the lines as “Long ago I knew that a cloud-rain meeting, / Would not give rise to an orchid heart”. Jan Walls’ translation would mean that she had given her heart to someone, without realizing his intentions. Having been abandoned she perhaps regretted her naïveté and felt deceived. While Chang and Huan’s interpretation would mean that she avoided the relationship because she was aware of the man’s ill intentions, and thus her heart was never stirred in the first place. If this second interpretation were used, it would demonstrate Yu’s maturity and clear head when entering into relationships. However, I believe the first translation is more accurate because the opening couplet of the poem mentions Yu’s feelings of resentment.

Yu moves on to talk about her male partner in the second quatrain, saying, “There are brilliant plums and peaches, outstanding scholars may look for them as well”. Some scholars, such as Peng Zhixian and Zhang Yi, believe that Yu is using the phrase

“blossoms of peaches of plums” to refer to herself. 68 But I argue that Yu is actually using “blossoms of peaches and plums” to metaphorically represent women in general. In classical Chinese literature, “peaches and plums” are often used figuratively to describe women’s beautiful facial features. 69 Given this interpretation, the couplet can instead be read as meaning “there are brilliant beautiful women, outstanding scholars may look for them as well, or eminent scholars may chase after beautiful women who look like blossoms of peach and plum.” Yu then follows with two more figures of speech, “pines and cassias”; these are types of trees that are usually used to refer to a noble character. Yu tactfully says that even scholars whose noble characters are like pine and cassia trees still experience the emotions of ordinary people, which emphasizes that distinguished scholars are fundamentally no different from other people.

In the final quatrain, Yu turns back to her own situation and state of mind. In describing the “mossy steps” to her house, she implies that few people have visited her, since moss will not grow on a frequently used path. In the evening, the mossy steps look clean in the moonlight. Although she sings, her bamboo-filled courtyard is deep in the dark, and her voice does not carry far, so few people can hear her songs. After describing her gloomy mind and lonely situation, Yu concludes her poem with a strong and determined statement, “I won’t sweep away the red leaves on the ground in front of my gate till a true friend comes”. By employing an allusion to a historical story, Yu expresses her wish for a “zhiyin” 知音, someone who can appreciate her talent and fully understand her. Usually a “zhiyin” does not have any connotation of gender, but in this context,

68 YXJSBNYZ, 97.
69 Bai Juyi 白居易 (772 – 846) wrote in his poem Envoy 賦詩, “She has grown up at twenty, but starts getting old after thirty. Her face looks like blossoms of peach and plums in a mirror but cannot last as long as ten years.” 二十方長成，三十向衰老。鏡中桃李色，不得十年好. See QTS,13.4766.
because Yu has used most of the previous lines to discuss her opinions on love, I am inclined to think that her “zhiyin” is a male friend to whom she hopes to give her heart. In other words she wishes for a genuine lover. It is clear from the first quatrain that she is looking for more than “a meeting of clouds and rain”.

In terms of technique, this poem is an excellent example of variant parallel structures. For instance, the second couplet is actually one compound sentence, the previous line works as a conditional clause of its following line, as shown in the diagram,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditional clause (if…)</th>
<th>Had I known it was a meeting of clouds and rain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main clause</td>
<td>I would never have stirred my orchid heart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Structure of Yu's Poem "I was Moved and Sent This to My Friend"

In classical Chinese poetry, this kind of structure is called a “liushui dui 流水对 (flowing water couplet), meaning the two lines are consistent in content like a flowing stream. Even though the two sentences are parallel in structure and in grammatical meaning, the order of the two sentences cannot be switched. Therefore, this kind of antithesis is hard to compose because it requires not only matching the parts of speech but also relating the semantic meaning. Yu Xuanji takes on the challenge of this difficult technique and creates a perfect example of it. The third and fourth couplets employ special kinds of antithesis as well. Parallelism is found in every other line, which is known as gejü dui 隔句对. For example, the duplicate adjectives “zhuozhuo”灼灼 (shining) match the duplicative adjectives “cangcang”蒼蒼 (green), and the noun phrase “tao jian li”桃兼李
(peaches and plums) matches the noun phrase “song yu gui” 松與桂 (pines and cassias).

One beautiful image after another is evoked in the verse, such as “bright shining blossoms of peaches and plums”, “green and luxuriant pine and cassia”, “the green mossy steps” and “red leaves cover the ground”. Yet, Yu still manages to poignantly convey her feelings of sadness, exclaiming that she is not superficial and flighty. Instead, she expresses that she is pursuing a love as enduring as the universe. After all, what Yu seeks is a man who can marry her and remain faithful to her, rather than a man who just plays with her. Why has this voice been ignored or even silenced in the classical literary world dominated by male literati? As Beata Grant has observed, “…what is written about women and gender in texts, whether religious, literary or historical, necessarily reflects actual social practice, especially given the fact that the overwhelming majority of these texts were written, edited and compiled by men, and thus, whether or not consciously, usually androcentric in perspective.”

“Yu was a woman in a man’s world, and though she resented it, she was helplessly dependent upon men.” Her tragedy is, in my opinion, not only that she was abandoned time and again in her life, but also that she was persistently censured by a number of male critics both during and after her time. Given her unyielding mind and refusal to follow conventional morality, which emphasizes coyness, humility, tolerance and passivity, Yu could not be accepted by some Confucian-minded male critics. Their criticism of Yu Xuanji was so long-standing that, at times, the name of Yu Xuanji was almost considered equivalent to a dissolute prostitute.

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Fortunately there are 49 of Yu’s poems still extant, which enable us to reevaluate her work and rethink her personal character according to a less rigid moral rubric. While only seven love poems are examined here, they are among those that have been most frequently criticized by various critics. It might be argued that as a historical person Yu Xuanji’s personality is more complicated and ambivalent than what she presents in her poems. However, I agree with Suzanne Cahill that, “If we want to know something about Yu Xuanji, her thought, and her accomplishments, we cannot do better than to study her actual writings in the context of her time.” I believe that it would be fair to ground the studies of Yu Xuanji in her own poetry rather than the stereotypes the former critics have imposed on it.

2.1.2.2. Yu Xuanji’s Social Poetry

Female Daoists were socially active and, because Daoist convents were public social areas, they were well known for having large circles of friends. In addition, Daoist nuns were free from restrictions such as parents, husbands and children, allowing them to be relatively independent. This seems to have been Yu Xuanji’s living situation after she had been forsaken. According to Yu’s poetry she had many friends, male and female, inside and outside religious circles. Nevertheless, the friends to whom Yu wrote most frequently were literary men, some of whom were officials of high rank. Of the 49 poems preserved in Quan Tangshi, more than 24 are addressed to her friends. Many of these were composed for exchanging verses. Unfortunately, none of the verses written by Yu’s

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friends is extant; thus, this study must rely only upon those written by Yu herself. Among her circle of friends, two were of particular importance, Wen Tingyun and Li Ying. These were the only people for whom Yu wrote more than one poem. Therefore, my discussion of her social poetry begins with these two people.

Wen Tingyun is a very famous poet in classical Chinese literature, but because his biography is incomplete, even his birthdate is uncertain and there are at least three possible dates: 798, 801, and 812. It is certain that Wen styled himself Feiqing and, although he failed the government examinations for jinshi several times, his amazing poetic talents won great fame in his time. It is interesting to note that only two people are addressed by their familiar sobriquet names in Yu’s poetry. One is Li Yi whose style is Zi’an, and who was Yu’s husband and the other is Wen Tingyun whose style is Feiqing. As evidenced in the two poems in which Yu addresses Wen as Feiqing, one can ascertain that Yu Xuanji and Wen Tingyun were close friends.

**Sent to Wen Feiqing on a Winter’s Night**

I think hard to find poems to chant under the lamp,  
During a long sleepless night I fear my cold quilt.  
The courtyard is covered with tree leaves and I worry about the blowing wind,  
Through translucent gauze window curtains I regret the moon descending.  
By endless alienation and separation he finally fulfills his wish,  
Through ups and downs his true desires are just exposed.  
I cannot stay around parasol trees for a reclusive life,  
At the dusk a sparrow chirps and flies around the forests in vain.

As is Yu Xuanji’s custom, her sentiments are clear simply from the title of the...
poem, “Sent to Wen Feiqing on a Winter’s Night”. Winter is a season of white, coldness and hardship; life in winter is more difficult than that of other seasons. Moreover, a winter’s night is even worse than a winter’s day; thus, Yu Xuanji emphasizes her depressed mood from the very beginning of her work. In the first quatraine of the poem, Yu briefly but vividly depicts her circumstances: she is inside her room pondering her poems in the lamplight, chanting them because she cannot sleep and fears returning to her cold quilt. Seeing the leaves covering her courtyard outside, she is worried by the blowing wind and she regrets the moon setting.

In the next couplet, the poet turns to her inner mind. In the sentence, “through endless alienation and separation he finally fulfills his wish,” Yu addresses her relationship with Li Yi. She states that Li succeeded in abandoning her by continuously avoiding her. The following line is ambiguous because the Chinese word “見” is polysemous; it could mean, (1) “see” (jian) or (2) “appear, be exposed” (xian). If we take the first meaning of “jian” 见, the line should be translated as, “Through these ups and downs I see his true desires but in vain.” If we take the second meaning of “xian” 见, the translation would go like “Through these ups and downs, he has exposed his true desires.” The difference in the two translations depends upon who is the subject of the sentence, Yu or Li. Given that Li is the subject of the previous line, I prefer the second translation, which emphasizes that Li is the subject of the action. The line can then be interpreted to mean that by constantly changing from affection to indifference towards Yu, Li Yi makes his true desires known.

Another point of debate in this poem is the meaning of the adverb kong 空. Its
meaning is unclear because it could mean “in vain” or “just”. If Yu was using the “in vain” meaning, she might have been implying that although Li Yi’s intentions have been revealed, she is helpless to change anything. However, I feel that it is more likely that the meaning of kong is “just.” This is because kong appears twice in the poem; using the same character twice is often avoided by poets in this form of poetry, with the exception of words with polysemic meanings. As will be discussed below, the second kong in the poem obviously means “in vain”; thus, the first kong must mean “just”.

Regarding the closing couplet, scholars have different interpretations, too. Kang-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy interpret it as, “I haven’t settled upon a spot on the wutong (parasol trees) for my hidden resting place”. 73 But in my opinion Yu emphasizes that she cannot settle down around “parasol trees”, which represents “a decent place”. According to Chinese legend, the parasol tree is the king of all trees, and only the phoenix, the king of birds, can dwell in it. 74 By using this allusion, Yu implies that she is not “a phoenix” and thus cannot live a prosperous life. This is the only time in her poetry that Yu demeans herself; in all other poems, she always feels self-assured of her beauty and talents. However, her broken relationship with Li Yi seems to have dealt her confidence a damaging blow. Hence, in the last line Yu Xuanji compares herself to a sparrow anxiously but so far unsuccessfully looking for a resting place in a forest at dusk. The scholars Peng Zhixian and Zhangyi have interpreted “sparrows” as symbols of those who chased after Yu Xuanji, but in my opinion, this explanation dose not fit the context of the

74 Shaw Bo 邵博, Shaoshi wenjian houlu 邵氏聞見後錄 v.29, “The old saying has been confirmed that hundreds of birds don’t dare to stop or dwell in parasol trees because they want to stay away from phoenix.” 梧桐百鸟不敢栖止，避凤凰也。古语云桐，嫁之果然。(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 229.
poem. It is in this final line of the poem that Yu uses the word “kong” a second time, but this time its meaning is clearly “in vain”. Yu presents herself as the sparrow searching endlessly for nighttime home, but the search is in vain. With mingled resentment and helplessness, Yu draws a miserable picture of her life in this poem.

It seems that Yu was considering what to do with her life. Although Yu had a number of options, such as moving into an entertainment district or remarrying, settling in a Daoist temple seems to have been her chosen way to make a living. Therefore, I am doubtful about the validity of Huang-fu’s remarks, “When she (Yu Xuanji) was sixteen she had great admiration for Daoist purity and emptiness and then early in the Xiantong period she put on a Daoist hat and gown and became a Daoist nun at the Convent of Xianyi.” I believe that Yu chose to be ordained as Daoist nun largely because it would give her a secure position in life, just like she described in the verse that “a sparrow tries hard to find a place to stay over night.”

Although there is no hard evidence to support it, there has been speculation that Wen Tingyun and Yu Xuanji had an affair. A close examination of the above poem demonstrates that such gossip is unreliable. Judging from the tone used in Yu’s poem, as well as the content of the poem, Yu might see Wen as an old friend or as a teacher; she shares her innermost feelings with sincerity and trust. Wen was likely also acquainted with Yu’s husband, Li Yi, because when Wen, at nearly fifty years of age, finally got his jinshi degree, it was in the same year (858) as Li Yi did. In addition, Wen wrote a poem for Li Yi, “Sending off Li Yi Returning East” 送李億東歸. Yu Xuanji’s motivation in

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75 Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書, 1260.45.
76 QTS, 17.6716.
writing a poem to Wen was to communicate with her acquaintance and discuss where she should go for patronage. By comparing the above poem to those Yu sent to Zi’an, it is clear that Yu does not express any romantic affection towards Wen.

**Sent to Feiqing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scattered crickets chirp on steps in my yard,</td>
<td>隔砌亂蛩鳴，</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misty dew on the branches in my yard is crystal clear.</td>
<td>庭柯煙霧清。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under the moonlight the music from my neighborhood echoes,</td>
<td>月中鄰樂響。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look out from the upstairs, and the distant mountains are bright.</td>
<td>樓上遠山明。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My precious bamboo mattress is cooled by the breeze,</td>
<td>珍簟涼風著。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By playing my zither I express the bitterness of my life.</td>
<td>瑤琴寄恨生。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mister Ji is too lazy to write letters,</td>
<td>業君懶書札。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With what can I comfort my emotions in the autumn?</td>
<td>底物慰秋情。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike the first poem to Wen, which reveals Yu Xuanji’s complicated feelings, this verse reads like a letter of greeting or a request to keep in touch. As usual, the poet uses the first quatrain to describe the external setting. In the following couplet Yu turns to her internal feelings, stating that she suffers from the cold and loneliness, so she plays her zither to express her bitterness and in so doing, she remembers her old friend. Since Wen Tingyun was an admirer of Ji Kang 稹康 (223 – 263), and often compared himself to Ji Yu flatters him and addresses him as Mister Ji, but she complains that he hasn’t written to her often enough. Yu concludes her poem with a question: in the absence of a letter, what should I use to comfort myself this autumn? Again, Yu defines her passions with reference to a season; as autumn is a time of decline and coolness, Yu’s feeling must be gloomy and depressing.

In addition to Wen Tingyun, Li Ying 李郢 (fl. 817 – 880) was another poet who received two poems from Yu Xuanji. According to the biographical sketch of poets in
Quan Tangshi, Li Ying was from Chang’an, and succeeded in the jinshi examination in the tenth year of the Dazhong era 大中 (856). His highest official position was Censor in Attendance (shi yushi 侍御史). A famous Tang poet, Li Shanyin 李商隐 (fl. 813 – 858) once described Li Ying “as a noble man who takes pain in composition (rengao shiku 人高詩苦)”. About 106 pieces of Li Ying’s poetic works are collected in Quan Tangshi and Quan Tangshi Bubian. Since Li Ying was a person of great accomplishment in classical poetry, Yu Xuanji regards him in a particularly favorable light.

Hearing Official Li Is Back from Fishing I Sent Him This Poem

Unlimited lotus fragrance scents your summer clothes,
Dear Ruanlang, I wonder where you came back from boating.
I feel regret I am inferior to companions of the mandarin ducks,
Who can go close to the rocks where you fish, pair by pair.

Although this poem is short, it contains an explicit flirtation with the addressee. By alluding to “Ruanlang” 阮郎, a sobriquet form often used by young ladies to address their boyfriends, Yu indicates that she would like to get together with the man. Moreover, by using a question, Yu seems to be teasing Li, and the poem reads like a dialogue between two close people. In the last couplet Yu employs the metaphor of mandarin ducks, which represent happy lovers, stating that she envies the ducks because both of

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77 Li Shangyin 李商隱 “Seeing Li Ying off For Suzhou by River Bian”汴上送李郢之許都. See QTS, 16.6205.
78 See QTS, 18.6846 – 6856; and Quan Tangshi Bubian (Zhonghua shuju,1992), 1.426 – 433.
79 Duangong 端公 is an alternative name for Censor in Attendance (shi yushi 侍御史) in the Tang dynasty.
80 In the fifth year of the era of Yongping 永平(57–75), East Han dynasty (25–220), Liu Chen 劉晨 and Ruan Zhao 阮肇 went together to gather medicinal herbs in TianTai Mountain 天台山. On their way they met two beautiful goddesses. They were invited to the goddesses’ home and lived together with the fairies for a half year. “Ruanlang” 阮郎, originated by the fairies, later becomes a term of endearment of boyfriend. See Taiping Yulan 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960 facsimile), 41.194–95.
them can get close to him. What a bold and undisguised erotic verse! While the poet might have taken a fancy to Li, her affection was not reciprocated by Li. Although Li’s response is not extant, he must have given her a negative reply, because Yu wrote him a second poem in reply.

In contrast to the first poem sent to Li Ying, Yu’s tone is completely different. In the opening couplet Yu summarizes the relations between her and Li Ying. Although they both live in the same alley, they have barely spoken for years. She then contrasts her situation to that of Li Ying: while she is damaged goods, implying that she has been with another man, he has just passed a new royal examination. At the time that Yu wrote this poem, Li Ying had already passed his jinshi examination, so Li Ying may have taken and passed a more advanced imperial examination. Thus, Yu emphasizes that her position in society is worsening, while Li Ying’s can only raise even higher.

Following this comparison, Yu talks about religious ideas, since Li Ying was well known for his interest in both Daoism and Buddhism. He had frequent contacts with

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81 In the Tang dynasty, the term of “breaking a branch of osmanthus” (zhe gui 折桂) was a metaphor for passing a royal examination.
monks and Daoists, as can be seen from the extant poems he sent them. After paying Li Ying an enormous compliment on his religious accomplishments Yu says that there is no way for her to follow his “misty wave” since he has already ascended to the firmament. It is apparent that in this poem Yu is emphasizing the gap between her and Li Ying, indicating that they are not in the same social stratum. The mystery remains: what caused her to focus on their differences? What changed her mood from flirtation to respectful distance? The answer probably lies in Li Ying’s poem, which is no longer extant. At the very least, we learn that Yu Xuanji has lost hope that she can ever depend on a male patron.

Many of Yu Xuanji’s poems to friends shed light on her sincerity, friendship and passion for poetry. It is fair to say that poetry was a key part of her friendships and love affairs and was a major part of her life. The following poem is addressed to a friend whose name and background remain unknown and appears to have been written in response to a poem Yu received while traveling.

*Replying to a Friend With the Same Rhyme*  
和友人次韻

What can I use to erase my sorrows of staying at an inn?  
何事能銷旅館愁，

Opening the red envelope I see beautiful handwriting.  
紅箋開處見銀鈎。

A thousand peaks look small when it rains on Peng Mountains,  
蓬山雨霽千峰小，

Ten thousand leaves grow yellow when wind blows through Xie valley.  
嶪谷風吹萬葉秋。

In the morning I read word by word, uninterested in green jade jewelry,  
字字朝看輕碧玉，

At night I read in my bed poem after poem.  
篇篇夜在衾堆。

I have a desire to store it in my scented box,  
欲將香匣收藏卻，

[82] The literal translation of “yinggou” 銀鈎 is “silver hook”, which refers to calligraphy. Here it means the names of new graduates written with a beautiful style of handwriting.
This poem demonstrates how Yu Xuanji was cheered up and inspired by her friend’s beautiful lyrics. Yu begins her poem with a question she immediately answers, indicating how much she needed something to distract her from her stay at an inn. Upon reading her friend’s poem she feels as though her mind has been so expanded, that even a thousand mountain peaks seem small in the rain. She then compares the impact of this poem to the power of the wind blowing through a valley and turning tens of thousands of leaves yellow. Such grand and magnificent descriptions are often seen in the work of male poets, but seldom appear in women’s poetry. Yu Xuanji’s at times masculine aspirations and writing style set her apart from other women authors of the era.

The following quatrain sees Yu turning back to the details of daily life: reading the friend’s poem in the morning, she values it more than her green jade jewelry and in the evening she reads it while lying wrapped in her quilt. She concludes her poem by describing her ambivalence about how to store the precious letter, putting it into her scented box or keeping it at hand so that she can re-read it from time to time. Some scholars believe that Yu’s extreme fondness for this poem was not because the friend’s poem was a masterpiece, but instead because they believe the author must have been one of Yu’s lovers.83 Since this assumption is not based on any solid proof, I still tend to interpret this as a poem written to a friend, not a lover. At the very least this poem demonstrates Yu’s passion for good poetry and her appreciation of friendship.

Yu Xuanji is reputed to have had a large circle of friends, nearly all of whom were literati; many of these friends were very good at composing poetry. Through close study of Yu Xuanji’s poetry I have found that, other than exchanging poems with her friends, Yu also wrote verses dedicated to a particular person or for special occasions. The following poem was written for Liu Tong 刘潼(eighth century), the highest official addressed in any of her poems. According to Fu Xuancong’s 傅璇琮 study in Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian 唐才子傳校箋 (Proofreading of the Biography of the Talented People in the Tang Dynasty), Yu’s husband Li Yi at one time served in Liu Tong’s office after he received the jinshi degree.

“Yi once served for Liu Tong, who was the Military Commissioner of Hedong district.
He went to Taiyuan together with Yu Xuanji.”

億曾於咸通四，五年入河東節度使劉潼幕，與玄機同往太原。84

Since she had just married Li Yi, Yu accompanied her husband to his new job, so it is possible that she came to know Liu Tong during this time. There is disagreement, however, about when Yu Xuanji actually composed this poem and what her intentions were. The Chinese scholar Liu Dongling 劉冬玲 believes that Yu wrote the work when she was already ordained into the priesthood, long after her marriage collapsed, and that she had a romantic relationship with Liu Tong.85 I disagree with this assumption, because the last line of the poem hints that she or her husband is Liu’s employee, indicating that she must have written it while still married to Li Yi.

84 Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, Tang Caizi Zhuan Jiaojian 唐才子傳校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju,1990),3. 449.
Sent to Minister Liu

As a commander you guard the country with a
powerful army,
Along the roads, renewed songs of praise are heard.
As it rains in Fen River in the third month, 86
Hundreds of flowers bloom in spring by the Jin River. 87
Empty jails have been locked up for a long time,
Weapons get covered with dust over time.
Scholars and monks watch Ziye performance, 88
Travelers are drunk and lie on the red carpets.
When you travel you carry brush and inkstone with you,
When you sit you are surrounded by poetry books.
Given our limited talents we have been well cared for,
And we have become favored ones who get to dine on fish. 89

This poem obviously serves primarily as a eulogy of Liu’s virtues and achievements; in
terms of the extended regular verse form, as well as the powerful and vigorous content, it
is hard to believe that it came from a woman’s hand. This pentasyllabic regulated verse is
designed in three parts. The first quatrain focuses on the flourishing scenery in the region
Liu Tong governs. The second quatrain gives four examples to illustrate the peacefulness
of life under his rule. Ziye is a punning metaphor, it could literally refer to songs sung by
a girl named Ziye, but it can also be interpreted in a more literary fashion to mean songs
sung at midnight. Some scholars believe that Ziye is used as a general term for
performances by female entertainers, including singing and dancing. In any case, this
couplet demonstrates the peaceful lives and prosperity of people living at the time, who
can enjoy singing girls and late nights.

86 Fenchuan 汾川 is a river running through Shanxi region at present day.
87 Jin River has its source in Taiyuan and flows into Fen River.
88 “Ziye” here refers to “Ziye Ge”子夜歌,a song that originated from a girl named Ziye in the Jin dynasty
(AD 265 – 420). Later poets, following its style, create more lyrics for singing girls to perform.
89 In Zhanguo ce 戰國策, v.11, Feng Xuan 馮讜 had a hanger-on named Meng Changjun 孟晳君, who
complained that he was not be treated well because he had no fish for his meals. Since after “being offered
with fish for meal” is an expression referring to someone who is a favorable subordinate. See Zhanguo ce
戰國策 (Shanghai guji chubanshe,1987), 1.395.
In the third quatrain Yu continues to praise the minister for one further couplet, admiring him not only as a man well versed in martial arts, but also as a scholar and master of letters. At the end of so many lines of excessive glorification, Yu finally verbalizes her intentions for herself and her husband. She states that, given their limited talents, they are grateful to be so well-treated, and become the minister’s most favored subordinates in his bureau.

There has been much debate among modern Chinese scholars about to whom xiaocai 小材 (“the limited talent”) refers. Peng Zhixian 彭志憲 and Zhangyi 張鎧 believe Yu was referring to herself and that the poem was written after her conversion to Daoism.\(^90\) While Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮 has a different opinion:

> At present, *The Three Anthologies of Female Poets in the Tang Dynasty* state that xiaocai refers to Yu Xuanji herself, but this is wrong. Yu Xuanji was a woman, so how could she serve as an advisor? This is illogical. The *xiaocai* in the poem must be interpreted as referring to her husband, Li Yi, who had gained some favor from Liu Tong and had a job as a consultant in Hedong [where Liu served as Military Commissioner].

> 今《唐女詩人集三種》以此詩“小材”二句為“玄機自稱”，誤。玄機一介女子，何能為人客僚幕賓？於情理殊不合。“小材”二句必指其夫李億，謂億受劉潼之顧盼，得入幕於河東。\(^91\)

I am inclined to agree with Fu Xuancong and believe that this poem was written during the early stages of Yu’s marriage; the motivation of this poem is clear, Yu was flattering Liu and expressing their gratitude for a favor from the minister, something which is

\(^{90}\) YXJSBNYZ, 78.

\(^{91}\) Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, *Tang caizi zhuan jiaojian* 唐才子傳校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 3.449.
reasonable only for Liu’s subordinates. If, as Liu Dongling assumes, Yu had already converted to Daoism at the time she composed this poem for the minister, Yu could not possibly have had the need to give Liu Tong such elaborate praise.

It should be noted that none of Li Yi’s poems is extant today, in spite of the fact that he won fame as Principal Graduate (zhuang yuan 状元) in the jinshi examination of 858 as well as having been an employee in Liu Tong’s office. However, the poems of his wife Yu Xuanji are still known and celebrated to this day. While Yu certainly wrote for personal pleasure at times, she also used her talents to further her husband’s career; it is likely that one reason for her success was her husband’s high status. Indeed, for a woman of that time, the best use of talent was to assist her husband achieve success in an official career. Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn have observed, “…the satisfaction of women was understood as occurring exclusively in connection with family and society, through the flourishing of her clan, the success of her husband, and the growth of her children.”

Yu’s poem to Liu Tong illustrates that Yu might be such a woman, who linked her self-worth to her husband’s status, something which is in sharp contrast to her traditional reputation as a loose woman.

By skimming through Yu’s poetic works one can find that Yu also wrote verses for the public, which included elegies for people or for a newly built temple. Yu was apparently socially active and probably won some fame as a talented poet and thus, on certain occasions she would use her talent to show her support. At the time, inscriptions by well-known poets were highly appreciated. The following poem was written for a

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temple, most likely a Buddhist temple. Yu was invited to the opening ceremony and
wrote a poem to commemorate it.

_Inscribed on Zifu Temple Founded by Ren Layman_

The recluse creates such a marvelous place,
Those travelers stop their journey and take a look.
On the painted wall they vainly write poetry,
For the palace of lotus is not that famous.
When a pond is dug, springs flow,
When a path is made, grass grows up again.
Golden Wheel Pavilion is a hundred feet high,
And it shines brightly before the eyes in this valley.

It is difficult if not impossible to determine the location of the temple and the identity of
Layman Ren. Nonetheless, the poem is well-composed in terms of semantic antithesis
and grammatical parallel structures. For instance, in the first couplet, the noun “recluse”
is parallel to the noun “traveller”; the verb “create” is parallel to the verb “stop”; and the
objects of each verb match as well. Yu’s perfect antithesis can be shown in the form
broken down as follows:

_Table 2. Structure of Yu’s Poem “Inscribed on Zifu Temple Founded by Layman Ren”_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couplet</th>
<th>Syntactic Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>noun phrase + verb + object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>noun phrase + adverb + verb + object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>(when) + noun + verb, noun + adverb + verb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The grammatical structure in the third couplet is more complicated, because it contains
complex clauses of time. The literal translation is, “When a pond is dug, springs flow”,
and “When a path is made, grass grows up again”. However the concluding couplet
emphasizes the visual effect of the golden temple, which shines upon the river and brightens eyes. Considering that even for such small occasion, Yu made full use of her skill at composing excellent antithesis in terms of both syntax and rhetoric, it is no wonder that her poetry is so celebrated.

With regard to Yu Xuanji’s social poetry, I should mention Yu Xuanji’s friends within the Daoist religion, who seem to have played some role in her spiritual life. Yu composed at least two poems addressed to Daoist masters (lianshi 煉師), but one of them is incomplete, so I will examine the other:

Visiting Daoist Master Zhao, Who Was Not Home

Where have you gone with immortal companions?  何處同仙侶，
Only your maid stays at home.  青衣獨在家。
Your stove is still warm with herbs simmering,  暖爐留煮菜，
In the yard nextdoor, tea leaves are being boiled.  鄰院為煎茶。
By muralled walls, the lamp is dim,  畫壁燈光暗，
The shadow of a flagpole slants with sunlight.  響竿日影斜。
From time to time I look back at your yard，  殷勤重回首，
Several blooming branches extend outside the wall.  牆外數枝花。

Unlike many of Yu’s more emotional poems, this verse is calm with an easy and mild tone, demonstrating her admiration and respect for the hermit. With the exception of the first line, the entire poem is descriptive. This fits her general tendency to begin poems with a question. Although the gender of the Daoist Master is not specified, I am inclined to believe that the master is female as she had a maid staying with her. By asking the Daoist master where she has gone with her immortal companions, Yu is flattering her as being almost equal to an immortal. Through the poem’s depiction of daily life, Yu

93“lianshi” 煉師 is a respectful title for prominent Daoists.
provides some information about the lives of female Daoists in the Tang Dynasty. First, some Daoist nuns had maidservants to care for them and do the housework. Second, Daoists were great consumers of herbs and tea, as shown by the items being boiled on the stove, even when the master is not at home. Third, the aesthetics of life as a female Daoist are shown through the wall painted with artwork, and the flowers planted around her house. The most novel information supplied in this poem is that a flagpole can be seen in the distance in front of her house. The life of a Daoist grand master seems simple but it is filled with interest and it must be attractive to Yu. Thus, she gives a detailed description.

2.1.2.3. Yu Xuanji’s Poetry on Self-portrait

Unlike many other poets who only wrote poems on special events or for the exchange of poems with friends, Yu Xuanji also wrote impromptu poems for her own entertainment or to console herself. According to Yu’s poems, Yu seems to take reading and writing poetry as her favorite pastime. The poems she composed for herself express her passions, thoughts, and meditations about her life. It is my view that these descriptions of her situation and self-reflection have the potential to contribute a great deal to a re-evaluation of her personality.

Selling Withered Peonies

Facing the wind she sighs over how often the flowers fall,
Their fragrance fades and vanishes as another spring is over.
Because the price is high, no one dares ask it,
And because her fragrance is intense, butterflies

賣殘牡丹
臨風興嘆落花頻，
芳意隨消又一春。
應為價高人不問，
卻緣香甚蝶難親。
cannot approach.
A Red flower deserves to be born only in a palace,
Green leaves cannot bear being stained with street dust.
But if she were transplanted to Shanglin Park,
Noble men would regret they had no way to buy her.

Peonies have always been much-favored flowers in China, particularly so during the Tang period. Many famous Tang poets, such as Wang Wei, Han Yu, Li He, Li Shangyin, Wen Tingyun and Bai Juyi, composed poems on the peony. Bai Juyi alone wrote twelve poems on the topic. Searching through Quan Tangshi I found approximately 117 poems on peonies, demonstrating the flower was a popular topic for Tang poets. In the above poem, Yu Xuanji follows the tradition of writing about the flower but, using her own unique point of view, she writes about wilted peonies. I agree with the many scholars who believe that the peonies in Yu’s poem are used in a deliberately figurative manner. Yu uses the wilted peony as symbolic of herself, for in spite of the fact that it is a beautiful and valuable flower; the peony is beginning to wither. By personifying the peony, Yu relates the tragedy of a wilted flower to her own difficult situation.

Facing the wind, Yu sighs at how often flowers fall and worries that she grows older with the passing of yet another spring. She complains that few noble men appreciate her intense fragrance and elegance, attributing her homelessness to charging an extra-high price. Her predicament is likened to a flower exposed to the open air and stained by street dust. Yu fantasizes that, one day, she will move to a noble garden and all high-class men will regret having rejected her. In this context, “a noble garden” refers to a man with high official rank, to whom Yu can entrust her life.
This poem indicates that Yu is an ordinary and traditional woman, anxious to marry into a well-off family. It is true that in a male-dominated society the most a young woman could ever expect is to marry a man who could give her wealth, fame and a permanent home. As a young woman, perhaps Yu was overconfident in believing that her talent and beauty were enough to attract an outstanding man. In writing this poem it seems that Yu has realized that reality has not lived up to her expectations. She is coming down to the earth and being forced to cast away her unrealistic hopes.

If “Selling Withered Peonies” contains some feelings of resentment and arrogance, then the poem of “Improvisation on Late Spring” is simply an expression of a kind of loneliness and helplessness.

*Improvisation on Late Spring*

Living in a poor house at the end of a deep alley, I have few friends I can see dear Mr. Ruan only in dreams. From whose feast does the fragrance of gauze and damask waft? From whose house sends out songs on the wind? Close to the street, a drum-beat interrupts my morning sleep, My yard is calm, but the chatter of magpies disrupts my spring sorrow. How can I pursue matters in the human world? My body is like an unmoored boat floating ten thousand miles away.

The first quatrain in the poem contains a sharp contrast. Complaining that she has few friends and a lover who remains only in her dreams, Yu then describes the worldly pleasures, such as singing and banquets, found in the houses of others. Such pleasures may once have been familiar to her, but are now long past. Then Yu continues describing
her miserable situation: because she lives close to the street, she cannot sleep well since
the watch drum beating at dawn awakens her and she is even upset by the calls of
magpies in the daytime, which may increase her more romantic concerns.

As I have discussed, seasons play a crucial role in Yu’s poetry. A sixth of Yu’s poems use the various seasons to express her feelings. This poem, for example, is written at the end of spring - a time when all plants have flourished, and so has her emotion, a time that reminds her of the passing of her youth, especially when she is living all by
herself without a permanent home.

Facing this difficult situation, the depressed poet composed her well-known verse, lines that are still recited by many people today: “How can I pursue matters in the human world? My body is like an unmoored boat floating ten thousand miles away”. Obviously the feelings and attitudes expressed in this poem differ significantly from those found in
“Selling Withered Peonies”, in which she chides noble men for not recognizing her value and feel certain that they will regret not marrying her. The poem of “Improvisation on Late Spring” indicates that Yu has reached to a different stage in life, thinking seriously about her patronage. Her eventual solution is conversion to Daoism.

Men were regarded as more able than women in Tang China and, as a result, the imperial jinshi examination, a prerequisite for starting an official career, was available only for men. Yu, a talented and learned woman, was not easily convinced of any “natural” female inferiority. Upon seeing a list of new graduates’ names inscribed on the wall, Yu composed the following famous lines.
This short poem can be regarded as one of the earliest examples of a Chinese woman arguing for the same rights as men. In the first couplet, Yu describes the scene: in the distance she sees clouds and peaks on a sunny spring day, but closer by, she sees the elegant calligraphy listing all the new jinshi examination graduates. Such near and distant pleasant scenes, however, give Yu no pleasure, since she believes that her intelligence and poetic talent are good enough to pass the examination. She realizes that her exclusion from the examination is just because of her gender, thus she blames her silk gown—a woman’s dress—for preventing her from achieving potential success. Yu concludes her poem with a sense of helplessness, as all she can do is look on in envy. The significance of this poem lies not only in her bold wish for equality, but also in the techniques applied in the poem. By speaking in a straightforward manner with simple grammar structure and commonplace words, the poet makes her verse sound like daily conversation. It is perhaps this easy tone that, more than a thousand years later, has led this poem still be recited by many people today.

The three poems I have just discussed show how Yu portrayed herself alternately as “a wilted peony”, “an untied boat floating in the ocean”, and “a potential graduate of the jinshi examination”. Some scholars have also argued that Yu has described herself as
a “willow trees with low branches mooring travelers’ boats”.\textsuperscript{94} I would like to discuss this imagery, which is from her poem \textit{Composing a Poem on Willows by the River}, in detail, because it has become a very controversial piece.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{Composing a Poem on Willows by the River} & 賦得江邊柳 \\
Green color stretches along the wild banks, & 翠色遼荒岸，
Misty figures enter the distant houses. & 煙姿入遠樓。
Reflections extend on the surface of autumn river, & 影鋪秋水面，
Flowers fall on the heads of fishers. & 花落釣人頭。
If roots are old they have crevices for fish, & 根老藏魚窟，
If branches are low they can be used to tie up & 枝低系客舟。
travelers’ boats & 伏江釣魚舟
don the bleak night of wind and rain, & 萧蕭風雨夜，
Dreams are startled and worries are getting more. & 驚夢復添愁。
\end{tabular}
\caption{Translation of \textit{Composing a Poem on Willows by the River}}
\end{table}

Technically, this poem is regarded as one of Yu’s best poetic works, because although it is on the subject of willows, the word “willow” is absent except in the title. The first quatrain depicts various scenes and objects associated with willows: green color, misty figures, reflections and flowers. It is the second quatrain of the poem that scholars have read as standing metaphorically for Yu herself. Some have explained the imagery of “old roots with crevices for fish” as emblematic of Yu, having been abandoned by Li Yi after a love affair. In this interpretation, the line “low branches mooring traveler’s boat” suggests that Yu believes that she is a charming woman who can seduce men.\textsuperscript{95}

In my opinion, this interpretation is lacking in evidence, and is not in keeping with the overall sense of the verse. A close look through the \textit{Quan tangshi} reveals that poems on the topic of willows were very popular in the Tang dynasty. Both Wen Tingyun and Li Ying tried their hand at composing such poems. Among all the poems on willows,

\textsuperscript{94}YXJSBN, 48.
\textsuperscript{95} YXJSBN, 48.
one composed by Yong Yuzhi 雍裕之 is particularly relevant, because his poem is very similar to Yu’s verse. Although we do not know exactly when Yong Yuzhi lived and died, he was certainly alive around the year 813. He has thirty-one poems preserved in Quan tangshi. Owning to the similarities between the two poems of Yong and Yu, I present Yong’s poem “On River Willows” 江邊柳 for comparison.

Waving in the wind by the old dyke,
It looks like a tree of green mist.
If branches are not broken,
They may be used to tie up my boyfriend’s boat.

Obviously, Yu seems to have drawn a lot of inspiration from Yong’s poem; some of her imagery comes from Yong’s poem, as shown in the table below:

Table 3. Comparison between the Poems of Yu and Yong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yong’s poem</th>
<th>Yu’s poem</th>
<th>by the old dyke</th>
<th>green</th>
<th>misty</th>
<th>to tie up a boat</th>
<th>boyfriend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“On River Willows”</td>
<td>“Along wild bank”</td>
<td></td>
<td>green</td>
<td>misty</td>
<td>to tie up boats</td>
<td>travelers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After comparing these two poems, I arrive at several conclusions. First, Yu borrowed the idea of “tying up a boat” from Yong’s poem, changing the word of “boyfriend” to “travelers”. I do not see anything that specifically indicates she is using this image as symbolic of herself. Secondly, if one interprets the willows in the poem as symbolic of Yu, how do we explain the contradictory imagery in the first quatrain? If the first quatrain is not a description of herself, why would only two lines of the second quatrain be taken
as her self-description? Thirdly, given that Yu tended to think quite highly of herself, comparing herself to an old root seems unlikely. Such imagery is inconsistent with her usual self-descriptions. Based on these three observations, I am inclined to believe that this poem is simply an example of Yu’s attempts to compose a poem on the subject of willows.

In terms of technique, this poem is a perfect example of pentasyllabic regulated verse. Although the poet borrows some ideas from Yong’s poem, she is very creative in developing her own work. Instead of writing a quatrain Yu makes her poem a regulated verse, consisting of eight lines. Her remarkable parallel structure, in particular, is very impressive and is illustrated in the table below:

Table 4. Structure of Yu's Poem "Composing a Poem on Willows by the River"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couplet</th>
<th>Syntactic Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>adjective + noun + verb + adjective + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>noun + verb + noun phrase + noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>noun + adjective + verb + noun phrase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Usually only the two middle couplets are required to be parallel, however, Yu makes the first couplet parallel as well. Compared to Yong’s poem, which has only one parallel couplet, Yu’s poem offers more detailed and vivid images.

2.1.2.4. Yu Xuanji’s Daoist Poetry

An emotionally scarred woman, Yu Xuanji converted to the Daoist religion and comforted herself with Daoist books. Thus, one can find in Yu Xuanji’s poetic output works focusing on her ideas about the Daoist religion. Within the corpus of Yu’s
poetry I found quite a number of poems in which she addresses her religious ideas, and views of the secular world. She also includes descriptions of her daily life after becoming a Daoist nun. In contrast to her more passionate poems, these later poems seem to have been composed by a carefree mind, in a calm and peaceful mood. The poems are often quite pleasant, as can be seen in the following example.

*Written on the Mist Hidden Pavilion*

| Spring flowers and autumn moon enter my verses,       | 春花秋月入詩篇,       |
| In daytime and quiet night I am like a free immortal. | 白日清霄是散仙。 |
| For nothing I roll up my bead curtain without ever lowering it, | 空卷珠簾不曾下, |
| Frequently I move my bed and sleep facing mountains. | 長移一榻對山眠。 |

Unlike some of Yu’s other poems, which are filled with melancholy and resentment, this heptasyllabic quatrain is full of life. What Yu writes about in this short verse is not yearning, complaining, sorrows and worries but instead natural beauty, spring flowers and the autumn moon. Thinking herself as carefree as an immortal, she has no need to even roll down her curtain, since she prefers to fall asleep looking at the mountains. Because Daoist religion considers living in the mountains and having close contact with nature as essential to its practice, many famous Daoist adepts lived in the wildness and spent their lives focusing on assimilating the essence of nature. At least in her verse, Yu followed their example and felt happy to care for nothing but enjoy the harmony of nature.

Within Yu’s corpus, there are other poems that reveal similar ideas. The following long verse provides more detailed information about her everyday life and living
environment. The remarkable feature of this poem is that the poet does not directly express her thoughts and feelings, but focuses instead on presenting a great deal of concrete imagery.

Life in Mountains in Summer

I move here to the residence of immortals,
Everywhere there are flowers in clusters but nobody ever planted them.
In the front courtyard small trees are used as clothes stands,
Sitting by a fresh spring I let my wine glass float,
A corridor with railings extends secretly to the deep track in the bamboo forests,
Silk and gauze are all around with heaps of disordered books.
Idly riding in the painted boat I chant poems to the shining moon,
Letting the light wind blow me back home.

夏日山居
移得仙居此地來，
花叢自邇不曾栽。
庭前亞樹張衣桁，
坐上新泉泛酒杯。
軒檻暗傳深竹徑，
綺羅長擁亂書堆。
開乘畫舫吟明月，
信任輕風吹卻回。

Unfortunately, we have no way to find out when Yu lived on a mountain nor where the mountain is located. A love for flowers is a common trait in women, and Yu was no exception. Upon seeing beautiful flowers everywhere, and realizing that humans have not planted them, Yu believes it must be a place of the immortals. She then depicts two other objects she found in the mountains. It is clear that she is as enchanted by these two objects as she was by the flowers. The first is a small tree that can be used as a clothing stand; the second is a fresh spring where she can float her wine glass. Here Yu is alluding to a custom among the Tang literati. In the Tang dynasty, when literary men gathered to drink and recite poetry they usually placed cups filled with wine in a stream. The glasses were held by lotus leaves and floated in the water until reaching the beach. Whoever owned the glass that first stopped would compose a poem and drink the wine. Yu refers to the tradition implying that she could still enjoy drinking and writing all by herself in
her reclusive life.

In the next quatrain, she continues illustrating the extraordinary aspects of her life in the mountains. “A corridor with rails extends to the deep track in the bamboo forests; inside the room her silk clothes surround piles of disordered books. In her spare time she rides idly in a painted boat chanting poems to the shining moon. Instead of paddling her boat she just lets the wind blow her back”. What a leisurely and carefree life!

Through the depiction of scenery and her daily activities, Yu passes some information on to us. Firstly, she seems to have no financial worries; her life situation seems to be one of privilege with the pleasures of wine, silk dresses and a painted boat. Secondly, her everyday activities seem to consist only of reading, writing, drinking and sometimes riding a boat. Yu’s life was evidently very peaceful. Finally, and the most importantly, Yu’s mood at this point in her life is calm and easy. Although she seems idle she does not complain about loneliness, on the contrary, she enjoys her reclusive life very much.

As we know from the poems discussed above, Yu endured some difficult times when she lacked financial resources following her break-up with Li Yi, her husband. Thus, converting to the Daoist religion provided the solution to her economic problems. My question is, other than financial motivations, had Yu ever accepted any influence of Daoist teaching? After careful study of her poems we can conclude that she had, indeed. The following poem reveals her views on secular life.

\[ A \ Fable \]

Red peaches bloom, everywhere with spring colors,
Every household surrounded by green willows is

\[ 寓言 \]

红桃处处春色，
碧柳家家月明。
This poem is pregnant with meaning. The title of the poem tells us that the poet is not just telling a story; she is exposing a moral principle. In the first couplet, Yu describes the beautiful scenery: red peaches blooming in spring and green willows under the bright moon. Then in the following couplet she switches to the voice of a girl full of affection, waiting to spend the night with her lover. After this quick look at the girl, Yu leaves her and moves to describing the spectacle of fish darting under lotus leaves and sparrows chirping as a rainbow forms in the sky after a rain storm.

In this poem all the pictures Yu depicts are infused with an air of romance, especially the phrase “in the moonlight fish are playing” which is usually taken as a euphemistic expression of an amorous affair between a man and woman. In spite of all the happy imagery in the poem, the poet concludes her verse with a question: “Everything, including joys and sorrows, in the human world is like a dream, how could I become an immortal?” Only at the end of poem does one realize that Yu’s interest is not in the life of the secular world, but in reaching for something beyond our short human lives. In other words, Yu is searching for ways of attaining immortality in the Daoist faith.

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96 “Shuangcheng” 雙成 is a name of a female immortal who is a handmaid to the Divine Mother of the West. See Yongcheng jixian lu 優城集仙錄 v.1 in Zhonghua Daozang (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 華夏出版社, 2004), 45.197.
This poem is remarkably constructed in terms of its technique. Yu uses an unusual structure – hexasyllabic verse (liuyan shi 六言詩), lending a mysterious feel to the poem. Compared with the popular pentasyllabic (wuyan 五言) and heptasyllabic (qiyan 七言) verse forms, hexasyllabic form was rarely practiced by the Tang poets, although examples by Wang Wei and Wen Tingyun are notable exceptions. It is easy to see that this poem reads smoothly with three groups of two characters. Yu not only observed all the strict requirements for rhythm, patterns but she also created flawless grammatical parallel structures with semantic antithesis, as shown in the diagram.

Table 5. Structure of Yu’s Poem “A Fable”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the 1st couplet</th>
<th>adjective + noun</th>
<th>reduplication of noun</th>
<th>noun phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>line 1</td>
<td>red peach</td>
<td>everywhere (chuchu)</td>
<td>spring scenery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 2</td>
<td>green willow</td>
<td>Every household (jiajia)</td>
<td>moon light</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the 2nd couplet</th>
<th>adverb phrase</th>
<th>verb phrase</th>
<th>verb + noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>line 3</td>
<td>up stairs</td>
<td>newly made up</td>
<td>wait for night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 4</td>
<td>in the chamber</td>
<td>sit alone</td>
<td>have feeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the 3rd couplet</th>
<th>noun phrase</th>
<th>adverb phrase</th>
<th>noun + verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>line 1</td>
<td>lotus</td>
<td>under the moon</td>
<td>fish dart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 2</td>
<td>rainbow</td>
<td>beyond the sky</td>
<td>sparrows chirp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The unique features of Chinese grammar can be clearly seen in the diagrams above. In the second couplet, Yu eliminates the subjects, and the third couplet has two adverbial phrases, but Yu suppresses the prepositions for the first noun phrases. Usually in a Chinese regulated verse only the second and third couplets require parallel structure,
while it is optional in the first and last couplets. Yu makes three perfect matching
couplets, which contribute significantly to the beauty of her poem.

Yu realized how difficult it is to find a perfect lover and that even if her desire for
love was fulfilled, it would only be for a short period of satisfaction. Yu enhanced her
awareness of a long lasting enjoyment of life, more appealing than any mortal happiness.
It is quite possible that by this time Yu had started to become more involved with
religious concerns, shifting the theme of her work from her own sorrows to the study of
Daoist principles. The following poem contains additional evidence for the changes in
Yu’s attitude.

_A Gloomy Thought_  

Leaves fall in profusion, but the evening rain is gentle,
All by myself, I touch the zither strings and sing a pure song.
I let my feelings go and don’t hate the one who has no loving heart,
Cultivating my character I discard the bitter sea of
suffering completely.
The senior’s carriage is heard outside my gate,
My pillows are surrounded by heaps of Daoist books.
Even a commoner can eventually visit heaven,
And can pass green rivers and mountains from time to time.

Seeing leaves falling one after another in the rain of the late autumn, Yu expresses no
worries or resentment; instead, she feels the evening rain is gentle. It is interesting to
compare this poem with lines from Yu’s _Composing a Poem on Willows by the River_,

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97 Another name for this poem is “A Thought in Autumn” (qiushi 秋思) Since I don’t find any melancholy
in this poem I prefer the name of “A Thought in Autumn”. See QTS, 23. 9050.
98 Contrary to the noble class who wore silk gowns, the common people wore cloth gowns (buyi 布衣), so
“buyi” is a general term for the common people, who are not in government or of noble class. “Yunxiao ke”
雲霄客 (a visitor of heaven) is a respectful form of address for a prominent Daoist.
“On the bleak night of wind and rain, dreams are startled and worries are getting more.” It is clear that Yu’s viewpoint and emotions have completely changed. Although she is still alone, playing a zither and singing songs all by herself, she is calm. She even intends to set herself free from her painful romantic entanglements, and to cease resenting her uncaring lover. Through cultivation she seems to have been able to let go of all her emotional suffering. What allowed her to make such a big change?

It is quite possible that Daoist masters visited her to preach and discuss with her the Daoist faith, as is evidenced by the poem’s statement that she often heard their carriages outside her gate. In the following quatrain, Yu then discusses her new interests. Her current focus is reading Daoist books, as evidenced by the piles of them around her pillows. Due to the specific features of Chinese grammar, the subject is often omitted, and some ambiguity is present in the concluding couplet. Karashima Takeshi translated the lines as “Once a cotton-clad civilian, at last you’re a celebrity; drop by sometime while the waters and hills are green.” But David Young interpreted the same line as “Raggedly dressed people eventually go to heaven, green water and blue hills already here and gone.” While the Chinese scholars Peng Zhixian 彭志憲 and Zhangyi 張燚 believe Yu is referring to herself having become a Daoist nun.

The question under debate is to whom “buyi” refers. If it is a general term for common people, then the sentence should be interpreted as “Common people who wear cloth gowns can finally become visitors of heaven, and can pass green rivers and mountains from time to time.” However, if we take Yu, who came from a commoner’s

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family, as the subject the sentence could mean “I, once an ordinary layperson wearing cloth gowns now become a visitor of the heaven (a Daoist nun) and I can pass green waters and mountains from time to time.” In my opinion, this sentence is Yu Xuanji’s reverie, as “Yunxiao ke” 雲霄客 (a visitor of the heaven) is a respectful form of address for a prominent Daoist. As a recently converted Daoist nun, Yu is unable to visit heaven or pass by waters and mountains from time to time, but she hopes in the future to visit the heaven illustrated in Daoist books, and to pass rivers and mountains from time to time as described in the Daoist canon.

The last poem examined in this section is a long pentasyllabic regulated verse Yu composed for herself, describing in even greater detail her life after conversion and her sophisticated mind.

Expression of my Feelings

Free and at leisure I have no cares, 我懒散無事,
I travel alone and visit scenery by myself. 風光獨自遊。
The moonlight passes through broken clouds and 斷雲江上月,
shines on the river, 解織海中舟。
A moored boat is unfastened at the sea. 琴弄瀟寥寺。
I play a zither by Xiao Liang Temple, 101 我吟庾亮樓。
I chant poems at Yu Liang Tower, 102 叢篁堪作伴。
Bamboo forests can be my companions, 片石好為 pute。
A piece of stone makes a good partner. 燕雀徒為貴。
Swallow and sparrow shaped hairpins are a vain expense, 103 營杯春酒綠。
Gold and silver are not my pursuit. 對月夜窗幽。
The spring wine filling in a goblet is green, 織砌澄清沼。
I face the moon at night, the window is dark. 抽簪映細流。
Going around stone steps, I clean up debris in the pond, 104 還憶海中舟。
Plucking out my hairpin, it shines in a small creek.

101 Xiao Liang 蕭梁 refers to the emperor of the Liang dynasty, whose name is Xiao Yan 營衍 (464 – 549), in the Southern dynasty 南朝. Being a devoted Buddhist he built many temples and named them Xiao Si 蕭寺. But in this poem Yu probably means a Buddhist temple in general.
102 Yu Liang 庾亮 (289 – 340) once served as a director of Wuchang 武昌, Hubei 湖北. A pavilion tower was built in his honor in Jiujiang 九江, Jiangxi 江西.
103 Yanque 燕雀 refers to jewelry, particularly hairpins in the shapes of sparrows and swallows.
I lie in my bed surrounded with books and volumes,
Half drunk, I get up to comb my hair.

The sixteen lines of this extended regulated verse are divisible into four parts. In the opening quatrain Yu describes her current situation and relaxed mind: she is free and at leisure, and has no cares, so she travels and visits the scenery by herself. The moonlight passes through broken clouds shining over the river. Having unfastened her boat she lets it drift at sea. All these pleasant depictions reveal that the poet enjoys her freedom and reclusive life.

In the following quatrain the poet alludes to two famous buildings, one is Xiao Liang temple 蕭梁寺, the other is Yu Liang tower 庚亮樓. I agree with some scholars who argue that the fact that Yu mentions the two famous buildings does not mean she plays the zither and chants poems in those specific places. Since Yu was very fastidious about matching in composing her poems, I think she may have used the two names for the purpose of parallel structure. Therefore, I prefer to interpret the temple and the tower in a general sense. After painting some pictures of her isolated life, she claims that her only friend is a stone and the bamboo forest.

Living in such a solitary place, Yu does not express any regret or sorrow, instead she loudly declares that all jewelry is meaninglessly expensive, including hairpins in the shapes of swallows and sparrows, which were cherished by many women in her time. Gold and silver are not of her interest either. These two lines expose that Yu’s aspirations and concerns are distinct from those of secular women.

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104 YXJSBN, 63.
Strangely enough, no ancient critics ever mentioned the two lines expressing this distinction. On the contrary, their commentaries repeatedly criticize Yu’s allegedly “dissolute” life and “immoral” works. For example, Hu Zhenheng 胡震亨(1569 – 1645), a critic in the Ming dynasty, stated in *Tang yin guiqian* 唐音癸箋, “Yu (Xuanji) is the most licentious, her poetic style is decadent too.” 105 I wonder on what basis he judged Yu so harshly. It is my view that every reader has his/her own intelligence and judgement; what a scholarly research should do is to provide a full picture of the poet, rather than to impose personal opinions on readers, which may in turn mislead them.

Celebrating her seclusion in the above poem, Yu focuses on imagery of her life and activities, many of them traditional, such as playing the zither, singing songs, reading, drinking and riding a boat. However, the images in the last quatrain are fresh and innovative. Going around stone steps she cleans up debris in the pond and in front of the clear waters; she plucks out her hairpin that then reflects in the small creek. In spite of all her loneliness and idleness Yu amuses herself through her close communication with nature. Inside her room she lies in bed surrounded by scattered books. In conclusion, she offers us the striking image: feeling half drunk she arises from bed to comb her hair.

Even though Yu has been greatly enlightened by the Daoist teachings she is still a woman, a woman once proud of her attractiveness, and very sensitive to beauty and nature. This reminds me of Xin Wenfang’s commentary on female Daoists during the late Tang period, which I quoted in the section of Biographical Information of Yu Xuanji.

105Hu Zhenheng 胡震亨 *Tang yin guiqian* 唐音癸箋 v. 8. (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe 古典文學出版社, 1957), 70.
According to Xin, beauty, sentimentality and tenderness were similarities shared by many Daoist nuns in the Tang dynasty. Even though they might have to study Daoist texts, their womanly natures still played a large role in their lives. Yu Xuanji, for example, accepted Daoist doctrines but she still enjoyed life as a member of literati in the secular world, drinking, playing music, visiting famous places, composing and chanting poems, as evidenced in her own verse.

It seems that for many of the Tang Daoist nuns, conversion to the Daoist religion was very much related to their need to live in the secular world. For example, it helped women make a living, because a registered female Daoist could have twenty “mu” land from the government; Daoist teaching could heal their spiritual wounds. In addition, they could gain a relatively independent social status, and have a great deal of leisure time. While such women admired and practiced Daoist doctrines and ceremonies, they were also fond of poetry and music, enjoying a large circles of friends.

2.2. Li Ye

2.2.1. Biographical Information

Li Ye 李冶(? – 784) was also a controversial figure and well known for her poetic works. Because of the inferior status of women in society their lives were rarely recorded in the official historical biographies. Thus studies of Li Ye, Yu Xuanji and other female Daoists encounter the same difficulty – a lack of historical records about their lives. Owing to the shortage of historical information about Li Ye, little is known about her life. Apart from the

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106 For reference see note 6 in the Introduction.
fact that Li Ye was a Daoist nun and that she styled herself as Jilan 季蘭, we have no other reliable information about her. One can find various conjectures and anecdotes about her birthdate, hometown and life experiences in several different works, among which, Xin Wenfang’s 辛文房 account is the longest and most detailed. Xin collected assorted scattered sentences on Li Ye’s life and stories in his book Tang caizi zhuan 唐才子傳 (Biographies of Eminent Tang People).

(1) Jilan, whose given name is Li Ye, often used her style and was born in Xiazhong 107. She was a female Daoist. She was very beautiful with a careless mind, devoting herself to literary writing. She was good at playing the zither and especially skilled at regulated poetry. The literati of her time highly praised her delicacy and elegance without rich attire and heavy make-up.

(2) At the age of six she wrote a poem on roses saying, “Since the trellis has not been set up for a while, her mind is confused and upset.” 108 Hearing her words, her father said, “This girl is very bright and smart, I am afraid that she may be an unchaste woman.”

(3) Because of her unrestrained conversation she was able to socialize with literary men, which causes some rumors about her. While male scholars can practice a hundred professions, women have only four virtues to follow. However, Jilan was different, her tone and expression were masculine, the flavor of her poems were riotous. After Bao Zhao, few were her equal. From time to time she traveled in Shanzhong 109 and had close contact with a hermit, Lu Yu and a Buddhist monk, Jiaoran. They appreciated one another. One of Jiaoran’s poems reads, ‘A goddess came to test me,/ She wanted to dye my clothes with flowers./ To my surprise my meditative heart did not arise,/ Nonetheless I carried the old flowers returning.’ Thus they flirted and made jokes with one other.

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107 Xiazhong 峯中 is in Wushan District 巫山縣, modern Sichuan Province 四川省.
108 Because jia 架 (trellis) is homophonic with the word jia 嫁 (marry), her lines can also be interpreted as “Having not been married for a while her mind is confused and upset”.
109 Shanzhong 峯中 is located in today’s Sheng xian 峯縣 in Zhejiang Province.
In addition, she often met with various literary men in the Kaiyuan temple in Wucheng. Realizing that Liu Changqing from Hejian had a hernia problem, she teased him, saying, “The mountain air improves at dusk.” In responding to her, Liu says, “All birds are happy to have a home.” Everyone present burst into laughter, as both sides, the attacking and defending, are equally good.  

In the era of Tianbao (724 – 756) Xuanzong heard of her talent as a poet and summoned her to the royal palace, where she stayed for a month or so and then was dismissed, returning home with an abundance of valuable gifts. A critic says she is inferior to Banji but much better than Han Ying. Considering her old age she is a graceful old lady. She has an anthology still extant today.

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110 In Chinese “shanqi 疝气(hernia)” is homophonic with the phrase “shanqi 山气( the air in mountain)”, “rixi 日夕”can be interpreted either “at dusk” or “day and night”. Thus, Li actually asked Liu “Is your hernia problem getting better day and night?” In Liu’s answer, “zhong 重(many)” is homophonic with “zhong 重(heavy)”, “niao 鸟”is polysemous, which can refer to a bird or male genital.

111 Banji 班姬 is refered to Ban Jieshu 班婕妤(48 BC–2 AD), who was a poem writer in Xi Han dynasty (206 BC – 6 AD).
In order to make my discussion of Xin Wenfang’s account easier to follow, I have separated the text into paragraphs and numbered them. In the first paragraph Xin gives some background information, including Li Ye’s name, hometown, her beauty and her skills. However, there is disagreement among scholars as to the identity of her hometown. Some believe that Li Ye came from Wuxing, rather than Xiazhong, and they cite Quan tangshi as evidence,

“Li Ye styled herself as Jilan. She is a Daoist nun, born in Wuxing. She has sixteen poems extant. 李冶。字季闇。女冠也。呉興人。存詩十六首。”

A close investigation of her works reveals that several addressees of her poetic works once lived in the area of Zhejiang province, for instance, Zhu Fang 朱放 (eighth century), recipient of Li’s poem, was a hermit living in Shanxi 剩溪; Cui Huan 崔渓 (?–769), recipient of Li’s poem, once served as a governor of Hangzhou 杭州; Lu Yu 陸羽 (733–804), recipient of Li’s poem, once lived a reclusive life in Wuxing area during 760s, as well as Li’s close friend, Jiaoran 駹然 (720–805) was from Wuxing, too. In contrast, none of Li’s works is related to the names of persons or places in the area of Xiazhong, except the poem “Going with Xiao Shuzi and Listening to Zither Music I Composed a Song on Flowing Streams in the Three Gorges”(從蕭叔子聽箏琴，賦得三峽流泉歌), in which she uses a figure of speech to compose her poem. Therefore, I agree with the Quan Tangshi, and believe that Li Ye’s hometown was Wuxing.

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112 Wuxing 吳興 is located in contemporary Huzhou City 湖州市, modern Zhejiang 浙江.
113 QTS, 23.9057.
114 Shanxi 剉溪 is located in today’s Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang 浙江.
Xin Wenfang’s second paragraph provides an anecdote about Li Ye’s precociousness, which is impossible to prove, but other critics have repeated the story in their work. Due to the homophony between “jia 架 (trellis)” and “jia 嫁(marry)”, Li Ye’s verse on Multiflora roses could be interpreted as “Having not been married, her mind is confused and upset.” Based on this interpretation, Li Ye was considered a woman lacking in virtue. It is said that because of this verse that she composed at age six, her parents sent her to a Daoist convent when she was eleven, but I have not found any definite sources in support of this idea. Thus, the time and place where Li Ye converted to Daoism remains a mystery.

In the third and forth paragraphs Xin gives some examples demonstrating Li Ye’s character. These stories were also widely known, but they do seem to have a genuine basis in fact: the poet’s own work. However Xin still colours these accounts with his personal views. As an outspoken person Li Ye was, on the one hand, criticized for “her frivolous mouth,” but, on the other hand, she was appreciated for her quick wit and interesting personality.

Because of her excellent poetic works, in the last paragraph, Xin speaks of the emperor summoning her to the capital, which is supported by her own poem After the Arrival of the Emperor’s Decree, I Write a Farewell Poem to My Friends in Guangling 恩命追入，留別廣陵故人. Nevertheless, scholars continue to argue about the date when Li Ye went to the capital, Chang’an. The Chinese scholar Chen Wenhau claims that it was during Jianzhong 建中 (780 – 783) period, not in the era of Tianbao as Xin claims in his work.115 Other scholars

115 Chen Wenhua, Tang nü shiren ji sanzhong, 3.
believe that Li Ye traveled to the capital twice, the second trip occurring in 784, in the Jianzhong era.\(^{116}\)

Regarding the date of her death, I think it is necessary to present an account from *Fengtian Lu* 奉天錄 (Records of Fengtian),\(^{117}\) written by Zhao Yuanyi 趙元一, whose dates of birth and death are unknown, but who was likely a contemporary of Li Ye. His account is as follows:

At that time a coquettish woman, Li Jilan, composed a poem for Ci\(^{118}\). Because her words were so disloyal and seditious, I will refrain from quoting the lines here. When the emperor’s forces recaptured the capital, he summoned and blamed Jilan. “Why didn’t you follow Yan Juchuan’s example? Yan wrote a poem saying, ‘Holding the ritual vases my tears fall down helplessly; although I miss the wise emperor I do not dare to speak’. Then the emperor had Li Ye clubbed to death.”

This account indicates that Li Ye was once involved in a rebellion, and that she wrote a poem in admiration of the leader of the revolt. It is unknown to whom Yan Jüchuan refers, but it seems that Yan was a Daoist too, as evidenced by the line “holding ritual vases”. Some

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\(^{116}\)See Li Suping’s 李素平 work, Nüdan nüshen, nüdao 女丹女神女道, 449.

\(^{117}\) *Fengtian Lu* 奉天錄 v.1 in Baibu congshu jicheng (hereafter abbreviated BBCSJC), Taipei: Yiwen yinshu guan 1965, 11. Fengtian is in today’s Ganzhong 乾縣 (Gan County), Shanxi 陝西, where the emperor Dezong fled during the rebellion.

\(^{118}\) Zhu Ci 朱泚 (742 – 784) the leader of the rebellion, who drove the emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 742 – 805) out of the capital and established a new dynasty, which lasted only six months.
scholars suspect that Li Ye wrote the treasonous poem under coercion. In any case, based on the above statement, Li died of a brutal beating at the order of the Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 742 – 805) in the year 784.

Facing a shortage of concrete evidence in support of dates and other records about Li Ye, we can only create a composite biography based upon data extracted from early scattered records. Li Ye, whose birth date is unknown, styled herself Jilan, and came from Wuxing. She was famous for her extreme beauty and her outstanding talent at poetic composition. A female Daoist, she was free from restrictions of family, which facilitated her active socialization with local literati in the region of the lower Yangzi River, including such famous figures as Liu Changqing 劉長卿 (709? – 780?), a well known poet; Cui Huan , once a governor of Hangzhou; Lu Yu, author of the first Tea Classics 茶經 and Jiaoran who had prolific poetic works.

Because of her renowned poetic talents she was once summoned by the emperor and returned home laden with gifts. There are two possible dates for her death. One source reports that because she wrote a poem paying respects to a general who led the rebellion in 784, she was executed for treason. Another account says she got lost on the way to the capital and disappeared in the turmoil of the An Lushan Rebellion in 756. If the second source is accurate her death should be recorded as 756. But I am inclined to believe that she went to the capital during the reign of Emperor Dezong 德宗 and stayed there, as Zhao Yuanyi 趙元一 chronicles in his account of the rebellion. Although we are

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120 Suzanne Cahill, “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems: Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns” in Tang Song nuxing yu shehui, 523.
unsure when and how she converted to Daoism, we know that she did not marry despite her intimate relations with two or three literary men.

Even if Li Ye did not leave us a great number of poetic works - *Quan tangshi* preserves only nineteen poems under her name - she enjoyed a remarkable reputation for her talent among the literati of her time, Liu Changqing called her a “poet giant” (*shihao* 詩壎). In contrast, one cannot find any examples of Yu Xuanji’s contemporaries appreciating her works, in spite of the fact that Yu was a friend of such prominent poets as Wen Tingyun and Li Ying, whose oeuvre do not contain any poems addressed to, or even referring to Yu Xuanji.

Regarding the nineteen poems associated with Li Ye, collected in *Quan tangshi*, some scholars suspect that two of them, one on the topic of Willows, and the other on Multiflora Roses, are mistaken attributions. This is because the poetic form and style of both poems are significantly different from her other work.\(^\text{121}\) For the ease of illustration, I classify her works into two categories: her social verses and her poems of self-expression.

2.2.2. Li Ye’s Social Poetry

Among the nineteen poems extant today, eleven were written to Li Ye’s friends. Of the eleven, eight were composed on the occasion of parting or sending off a friend or receiving letters. The following poem is addressed to Yan 26, whose full name was Yan Bojun 閻伯釗(eighth century). It was customary in old China to name children of the

same generation in a clan in the order of their birth date, Yan 26 is an informal name used by close friends.

**Sending Yan 26 to Shanxian**

Outside my home gate the river flows,
There is a lonely boat when the sun sets again in the west.
My parting feelings cover the fragrant grass,
That is luxuriant everywhere.
My dream is to go by Wu Park,
You are going to Shan Creek.
Please meet me again when you come back,
On your return, don’t get lost like Ruanlang.

This is quite an ordinary poem about parting; the opening couplet tells where and when the two part and the following couplet uses a metaphor to express the poet’s sadness at parting. She states that she follows him in her dreams and then, in the next quatrain, urges him to visit her when he returns.

Although it is difficult to know anything about the recipient, it is clear that Li Ye is in love with him because she alludes to the story of “Ruanlang” 阮郎 in the concluding line. The legend is as follows: a man named Ruan Zhao 阮肇, loses his way in a mountain while gathering medical herbs. He meets a beautiful goddess, who invites him to her home where they live together for six months. The fairy gives him the pet name Ruanlang. When Ruan returns home six months later, more than one hundred years have passed in the human world.

By alluding to the story of Ruanlang, Li Ye’s poem is given different layers of meaning. One meaning is that she is asking the recipient not to behave like Ruanlang, who, by staying with the fairy, never returned home. She is also begging Yan not to fall in love with other women. Through this pentasyllabic verse Li Ye illustrates her profound emotions for Yan. But it

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122 Shanxian 剃縣 (Shan District) is in modern Zhejiang 浙江。
seems her affection was for nothing, as is demonstrated in a poem composed after receiving Yan’s letter.

*Receiving a letter from Yan Bojun*

Deep in love I am too lazy to comb my hair in front of the mirror,
It rains desolately in the evening and the trees in the courtyard look as they do in autumn.
Don’t feel surprised if my tears run down the railing,
It is just my melancholy at seeing your sterling script.\(^\text{123}\)

This poem contains additional information about Li Ye’s relationship with Yan Bojun.

Addressing him by his full name, instead of the nickname used in the earlier poem, the poet distances herself from the recipient. The heptasyllabic quatrain opens with a twist on a traditional image – the young woman combing her hair in front of a mirror. Li Ye emphasizes her misery by stating she is unwilling to comb her hair, infusing her verse with a sorrowful mood from the very first line of the poem. The second line sets the season in autumn. Facing falling leaves and the evening rain, her tears run down the rails. The closing line reveals the reason for her sadness: Yan’s letter has made her unhappy and disappointed. This verse demonstrates that her affection for Yan who has not returned.

The next poem is also a parting verse, but we do not know for whom it was written, nor the time and place of composition, because it focuses only on description.

*Seeing Someone Off on a Night with a Bright Moon*

We part from each other without a word and the moon is silent,
The bright moon has light and we have emotions.
After separation our yearning for each other will be like the moonlight,
That cuts through clouds shining over the waters and the layered walls.

\(^{123}\) As explained in the former note, the literary meaning of “*yingou*” 銀鈎 is “silver hook”, which often refers to calligraphy, but by extension, here it refers to the letter.
Unlike the two poems just discussed, in which various scenes and images were painted for readers, this heptasyllabic quatrain is centered upon an analogy between the moon and a parting couple. As the moon is soundless the people separating are speechless; but just as the moon is bright, so do the two people have a burning passion. After they separate, their yearning will be like the bright moonlight cutting through the clouds, shining over the waters and the layered walls. The author’s heart will follow her lover wherever he goes, just as moonlight can shine anywhere.

Viewed in technical terms, the poetic form of this verse employs one of the techniques of didactic verses (shuo li shi 說理詩): explaining an idea by the description of an object (zhuang wu yu li 狀物喻理). By comparing her invisible feelings to the observable moon, the poet makes her yearning for her friend or lover perceptible and understandable. Since we have no idea who the recipient was, or what kind of relationship they were in, this poem can be interpreted as either a love poem or a poem of friendship. In fact, although most of Li Ye’s poems on parting are filled with a feeling of attachment, with the exception of the poem “Sending Yan 26 to Shanxian”, none of them explicitly indicated the intimate relationship is sexual. “Sending Yan 26 to Shanxian” is different because Li Ye calls herself qie 妻, a humble term used by a wife to refer to herself, and she calls the recipient Ruanlang, a pet name used by a girl for her lover. All of her other parting poems can be read in two ways, composed for either a friend or a lover.

The following poem is also on the topic of parting, written for Han Kui 韓揆, whose dates and biography are unknown today. It is important to note that in Cai diao ji 才調集
(Anthology of Talents) this verse is not addressed to Han Kui, but instead to Yan Bojun.¹²⁴

Sending Han Kui to Jiangxi
(or Sending Yan Bojun to Jiangzhou)

We look at each other and point at the willows,
The grief at our departure turns into clinging to one other.
The river in Jiangxi flows ten thousand miles,¹²⁵
Where does the lonely boat return?
The tide cannot reach Pengcheng,¹²⁶
Letters from Xiakou will be rare.¹²⁷
Only geese come from Hengyang,
Flying back and forth year after year.

In the opening line of this pentasyllabic regulated verse Li Ye alludes to the old custom of breaking a willow twig and presenting it to the parting person, as Chinese word “willow” (liu 柳) is a homophone of “stay” (liu 留). By using this traditional symbol, Li Ye expresses her emotional attachment for the addressee and regret at parting. Then, with great consternation she asks Han where in the ten thousand-mile long river does the lonely boat return?

In the next couplet the poet mentions the names of the two places that seem very far apart, Pengcheng 滇城 and Xiakou 夏口, indicating that after separation they will be far away from each other and it will be difficult to correspond. Although she can see geese, which are said to be letter carriers, flying between the cities, she knows she will not have any news from her faraway friend. This is a poem infused with pathos, depression and helplessness.

However, is this a love poem? Based only upon the emotions expressed in this poem, can we claim that Li had an affair with Han?

¹²⁴ Cai diao ji 早調集 v. 10, in Siku quanshu congmu congshu 四庫全書存目叢書 Ji bu 集部 Zongji lei 總集類(Jinan: Qilu shushe 齊魯書社, 1997)288.733.
¹²⁵ In Tang nü shiren ji sanzhong 唐女詩人集三種, 6, this line is written as “萬裡江西水”, Chen Wenhua argues that Yangzi river is Xijiang as it flows from the West.
¹²⁶ Pengcheng 滇城 is today’s Jiujiang 江西, Jiangxi 江西.
¹²⁷ Xiakou 夏口 is today’s Hankou 漢口.
I am inclined to believe that Han was Li Ye’s close friend because there is another poem in her corpus addressed to him. In this second poem Li once again shows her sentimental attachment. It is unclear if the Han in the second poem refers to the same Han as referred to in the verse “Sending Han Kui to Jiangxi”, but some scholars believe that the recipient of both poems are the same man. The second poem is as follows:

*Sent to Editing Clerk, the Seventh Brother*
(or *Sent to Editing Clerk Han*)

I have nothing to do in Wucheng District,
Time drifts by slowly.
I was wondering about you, the government clerk of a library,
How solitary do you feel?
Your transcendent oars move in the distant waters,
And your carriage was accompanied by cold stars.
Since you passed by the Great Thunder Shore,
Don’t forget to write an eight-line letter.

It seems that the poet was in a calm and relaxed mood when she wrote this poem, because she seldom began her pentasyllabic verses with such a carefree feeling. In addition, her poem reads like someone casually speaking, asking Han how he feels about being solitary. Although the poet is aware that her friend may feel lonely, she comforts him with a joke, saying that he travels far away with transcendent oars and has only the cold stars for companionship. The poet, thus, displays her brilliant literary elegance in her poem.

In the concluding couplet Li Ye alludes to the famous poet Bao Zhao 鲍照 (414 – 466) and his younger sister, Bao Linghui 鲍令晖, who was also well-known for her poetic

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129 Wucheng is today’s Wuxing 吳興, (located in modern Huzhou City 湖州市, Zhejiang), where the poet lived.
130 It was a custom to write eight columns on a piece of old-fashioned paper, thus, “eight-column of writing” is a general term for a letter.
talents. When Bao Zhao traveled to the Great Thunder Shore, he once wrote a famous letter to his sister. Li Ye here flatters Han by comparing him to Bao Zhao, and comparing herself to Bao’s sister, who was close to her brother and happy to receive a letter from him. This poem clearly indicates that Li Ye sees Han as a brother or, at least, that she is not being flirtatious or frivolous. Therefore, I think it is improper to consider Li Ye a promiscuous woman based solely upon the number of social poems she wrote.

The next poem is sent to Zhu Fang, who had served in government but resigned and later lived as a hermit in the area of Shanxi (Shan creek), Zhejiang province. Zhu was a prolific correspondent, exchanging many poems with famous contemporary poets, such as Liu Changqing, Huang-fu Ran (717 – 770), Lu Yu and Jiao Ran. Quan tangshi has collected 27 poems written by Zhu Fang. Li Ye and Zhu Fang shared similar backgrounds, one being a Daoist nun and the other a hermit. In addition, both lived very close to one another, and thus they had a very good relationship, as demonstrated in the following poem.

**Sending to Zhu Fang**

I try to climb up the hill for a good view of the water,
The hill is high and the lake is broad.
My longing remains the same day and night,
For years we have gazed at one other.
Green and luxuriant are the trees on the mountains,
Continuously do the wild flowers bloom.
Since we parted we have boundless passion for each other,
That will be poured out when we meet again.

Instead of description, this pentasyllabic verse focuses again on making analogies between her yearning and the natural scenery. In the opening couplet the poet, in seeking a good view of the water, climbs a hill. Upon seeing the vast lake from the high hill she associates the
immense water with her endless yearning, stating “my longing remains the same, day and night, for years we have gazed at one another.” In the next quatrain Li speaks of the luxuriant trees and the blooming wild flowers, suggesting that her yearning is as lavish as the plants. At the end of the poem she fantasizes that someday, when they reunite, they will finally realize all their passions.

A Qing critic, Ye Xie 葉燮 (1627–1703) once made a penetrating comment on the requirements of a good poet, saying, “Those who are good at poetry must first engage in an examination of things (gewu 格物), and then they can expand their talent along with their knowledge.” (善學詩者,必先從事於「格物」而以識充其才.) Li Ye is such an accurate and keen observer of natural scenery that she tends to connect her subject with the concrete imagery that surrounds her. While didactic verse was often seen in poetry written by men, particularly in the Song period, few women were adept at this technique. As a result, poems written by women tended to be in descriptive rather than didactic style. Li Ye, however, is a notable exception.

Li Ye’s preference for writing didactic poetry is best exemplified in the following poem, written to Cui Huan 崔渓 (fl.769). According to Jiu Tangshu 舊唐書, Cui once served as a governor of Hangzhou in 757. While in Hangzhou he might become acquainted with Li Ye. Using her knowledge as a Daoist nun, Li Ye delivers a lecture on Daoist principles, reflecting her convictions about the Daoist religion.
Don’t love empty fame too much,
And have less desires when pursuing official promotion.
A hundred years equals a single day,
What was full or empty in the past is all gone.
Grey hairs on your temples grow because of worries,
Since you haven’t learnt how to have a rosy complexion.
Don’t go to the state of Tianzhu,\textsuperscript{133}
Please depend on our Old Master.\textsuperscript{134}

This poem is filled with Daoist thought and doctrine. From the opening couplet, Li goes straight into a Daoist sermon, “Don’t love empty fame too much, and have fewer desires when pursuing official promotion,” because whatever has been accomplished will be over very soon, just like a single day. The poet then alludes to the Daoist belief in immortality, by contrasting “white hair” to “rosy complexions”. It was believed that although the hair of prominent Daoist adepts turned white, they would still have the rosy complexion of a child. In this poem Li implies that Cui already has grey hair because he has too many worries about his official career, and he has not learnt Daoist teachings to cultivate his vital energy. Finally Li persuades Cui to convert to Daoism, since while Buddhism was introduced from the State of Tianzhu 天竺国, located in India, where he has no need to go, Daoism is the national religion.

Unlike all other poems discussed above, in which Li Ye displays her profound emotions, begging for letters, and hoping for reunions, here Li speaks like a missionary, instructing the recipient. Even though the recipient was certainly older than Li and of high official position, she still endeavors to educate him. Based upon the tone of the poem, it is

\textsuperscript{133} The state of Tianzhu 天竺国 is India, the birthplace of Buddhism.
\textsuperscript{134} Old Master (gu xiansheng 古先生) refers to Laozi.
difficult to tell that this verse comes from the pen of a woman. No wonder some critics regard Li Ye as a poetic giant among women (nǚzhòng shihao 女中詩豪).\textsuperscript{135}

The following poem is on the topic of parting, too, but in this case, Li Ye is the one leaving. After Li Ye was summoned by the emperor to the capital, she wrote the following poem to her old friends.

\textit{After the Emperor's Decree Arrives I Write a Farewell Poem to My Friends in Guangling}\textsuperscript{136}

\begin{quote}
Feeling old and untalented I am sick with several diseases, 
Unexpectedly my underserved reputation reaches His Excellency, 
Looking up in shame I tap my hat then place it on my grey hair,\textsuperscript{137} Much abashed I wipe my mirror clean and paint make-up on my aging face.
My heart flees to the Palace in the north and follows the fragrant grass,\textsuperscript{138} Looking over the mountains in the south I gaze at the ancient peaks.
Cinnamon trees cannot delay a guest from the wild, 
Flying out the mouth of the river, the gulls will not meet each other.
\end{quote}

It is assumed that at the time of writing Li Ye was over forty years of age, and was afflicted by infirmity. Some scholars believe that Li Ye “reluctantly left home for the northern capital city”, since she had to obey the emperor’s command.\textsuperscript{139} With a feeling of reverence and awe, the poet describes her condition in the first quatrain of the poem. She is aging and suffering from several diseases. She has to make-up her aging face and put a hat over her grey hairs. In the second quatrain she expresses the yearning she already feels for home. Although her body

\textsuperscript{135} Ji Yougong 許有功 Tangshi jishi 唐詩記事 v. 78 in Tangshi jishi jiaojian 唐詩紀事校箋 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe 巴蜀書社, 1989), 2017.
\textsuperscript{136} Guangling 廣陵 is in today’s Yangzhou 揚州, Jiangsu 江蘇.
\textsuperscript{137} Originally tapping a hat refers to cleaning off the dust of a hat before entering the palace. Later it has the meaning of preparing for official position.
\textsuperscript{138} Fragrant grass (fang cao 芳草) in this context refers to the virtue of gentlemen (junzi 君子).
\textsuperscript{139} Suzanne Cahill, “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems:Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns” in Tang Song nuxing yu shēhui, 527
is in the northern royal palace following virtuous gentlemen, her mind will always be filled with thoughts of home.

The symbolic meaning of the cinnamon trees in the concluding is unclear, making the conclusion rather ambiguous. Chen Wenhua explains that cinnamon trees represent mountains and “yeke” (野客) refers to hermits. Based on this interpretation, the meaning of the sentence is “Hermits cannot stay in the mountains” which seems contradictory, given the fact that hermits were traditionally portrayed as living in mountains. Suzanne Cahill interprets this line as “jaded residents consider her (Li Ye) a barbarian, a wild stranger,” so they cannot keep her. Even though I have not found any other example of cinnamon trees referring to the royal palace, I think Cahill’s interpretation seems logical and correct. The last line reveals Li Ye realizes that, after leaving home, she will be unable to see her friends again.

This verse illustrates Li Ye’s ambivalent attitude to the emperor’s decree. Given her age and health situation, she would like to stay home with her old friends, however, it is a great honor to be summoned by the emperor and, without question, she has to submit to the command of her ruler. Judging from her poetic works Li Ye appears to have been a person uninterested in fame and reputation. The question, then, is why did she write a respectful poem about Zhu Ci, the rebel leader? Kang-i Sun Chang and Huan Saucy speculate that she might have been forced to write the poem. Like Yu Xuanji’s death, the end of Li Ye’s life remains mysterious because there are no other known records about this incident.

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140 Suzanne Cahill, “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems: Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns” in Tang Song muxing yu shehui, 528.
The last poem presented in this section has been highly praised by many scholars and critics, and is taken as the masterpiece of Li Ye’s oeuvre. The poet uses the name of a piece of musical composition as the topic of her poem. Upon hearing zither music, she composed the following.

*Going with Xiao Shuzi and Listening to Zither Music I Composed a Song on Flowing Streams in the Three Gorges*

My home used to be in the clouds in Shaman Mountain,  
I often heard the flowing streams in Shaman Mountain.  
The music produced by the jade-zither and heard from a distance,  
Is like what I heard in my dreams in those days.

The Three Gorges extend several thousand miles,  
All at once they flowed into my quiet chamber.  
His fingers produce the sound of huge rocks tumbling off the cliffs,  
Waterfalls and racing waves come out of the strings.

Initially it sounds like an angry outburst of thunder and gale,  
Then it is like sobbing, as if the current cannot pass through.  
The strength of the swift current and the winding waters is almost finished,  
Sometimes like drops of water falling on flat sand.

I recall when Master Ruan composed this song long ago,  
Zhong Rong was so fascinated that he kept listening to it  
When the song was finished it was played again and again,  
I wish I could be the flowing stream going on forever.

Due to the lack of biographical information, it is not possible to determine who Xiao Shuzi is. It is known, however, that the song *Flowing Streams in the Three Gorges* was very popular in the Tang dynasty, because there is another verse on this music preserved in *Quan Tangshi*. The Three Gorges are located in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River (長江), between Sichuan (四川) and Hubei (湖北) provinces. For the convenience of discussion I break this long heptasyllabic verse into four quatrains.

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In the opening quatrains, the poet links herself to the goddess in Shaman Mountain, who was first celebrated by Song Yu 宋玉 (320-255 B.C.) in his “Rhapsody on Gaotang” (Gaotang Fu 高唐賦) and “Rhapsody on the Divine Woman” (Shennü Fu 神女賦). In the first rhapsody, Song Yu tells of an ancient King of the state of Chu, who once dreamed of a beautiful woman in the daytime. The charming woman introduced herself as a visitor from Shaman Mountain and offered herself to be the King’s pillow and mat – an euphemism for sexual intercourse. The King, therefore, gave her his favor. She left him with these words, “I am living on the south side of Shaman Mountain, at the steep place on the high hill. At dawn I look like rosy clouds, but I transform to running rain in the evening. Dawn by dawn, evening by evening, I stay under this terrace.”

By exploring Song Yu’s story Li Ye emphasizes the authentic effect of the music, which sounds like real streams running in the Three Gorges. Some scholars censured Li Ye for not speaking of Daoist ideas in her work, and instead comparing herself to the goddess in Shaman Mountain. It is my point of view that this criticism might be improper as Li Ye does not use the allusion in a sexual manner, but instead uses it to highlight the beauty of the music. The content of the poem in its entirety serves as good evidence of Li Ye’s motivation: to appreciate the music, which rivals the sounds of a flowing stream heard by the goddess in a dream.

In the next two quatrains Li Ye depicts the music in detail. Sometimes the music is as powerful as thunder and gale, depicting the racing and violent stream and the collapse

143 The terrace is the place where the King of Chu encountered the goddess. (Cao,Wenxin 曹文心 Song Yu Cifu 宋玉辭賦) 167.
144 Lin Xueling 林雪玲 Tangshi zhong de nüguan 唐詩中的女冠,145.
of huge rocks from cliffs. However, at other times the music sounds like water, as if the current cannot pass through. Finally, the music slows down, like a twisting stream that has lost its energy and become water dripping on flat sand. As has been discussed, Li Ye is very good at explaining ideas through the descriptions of objects. This poem illustrates that Li Ye is also skilled at the description of sound (*zhuang sheng*)，another reason that some critics consider this verse Li Ye’s masterpiece.

Nonetheless, the translation of the last quatrain is controversial. Who is the composer, Master Ruan (Ruan Gong 阮公)? Kang-I Sun Chang and Huan Saussy explain that Master Ruan is Ruan Xian 阮咸 (234 - 305), whose style name is Zhong Rong 仲榮. By this explanation, they translate the couplet as “I recall how long ago Ruan Xian composed this tune – this could make even him ever hear his fill.” However, according to Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, Master Ruan is Ruan Ji 阮籍(210 – 263), who was Ruan Xian’s father, and they interpreted the lines as “When long ago, I recall, Master Ruan composed this tune, he could make Zhong Rong listen to it without an end.”

The former translation sounds awkward because the composer and listener are the same person. The *Collection of Classical Songs* (*yuefu shiji*) in the section of *Qin ji* 琴集 (A Collection of Zither’s Music) says that the *Song of Flowing Streams in the Three Gorges* was composed by Ruan Xian. In my opinion, Idema’s translation sounds more reasonable. It seems that either the *Qin ji* is mistaken or Li Ye wrote an awkward

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147 It says in *Qin Ji* 琴集, “*Flowing Streams in the Three Gorges* was composed by Ruan Xian in Jin Dynasty.” “《三峽流泉》，晉阮咸所作也.” *Yuefu shiji* 業府詩集, 876.
sentence. However, because little information is available for our research, this still remains mysterious.

2.2.3. Li Ye’s Poetry on Self-expression

In addition to writing poems for friends, Li Ye composed some verses for herself that expressed various emotions and thoughts. For instance, the following poem is written about being lovesick.

*Emotions and Thoughts*

Dawn clouds and evening rain keep each other company all the time, People or geese, coming or going, they all have dates of return. The jade pillow knows only frequently falling tears, The bright candles illuminate in vain during my sleepless nights. I look up at the bright moon turning with meaning, Looking downward with a fluid glance I am thinking of sending off a poem. Then I remember the first time I heard the song from the building of phoenix, And it makes me feel lonely with yearning.

This heptasyllabic verse can be divided into two parts in terms of its structure and meaning. In the first quatrain the poet first depicts some real objects, such as, morning clouds and evening rain; people and geese coming or going; pillows of jade and bright candles, which all serve as the subjects of the sentences. However, in the next quatrain there are no explicit subjects, as the poet is talking about herself. Looking up, she feels the moon rolling with meaning, so she

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148 Building of phoenix (fenglou 嵐樓) is a mansion built by Qin Mugong 秦穆公 for his daughter Nongyu 弄玉, who married to Xiao Shi 蕭史, who was good at playing flute. The couple practiced flute, which sounds like phoenix singing. See “Xiao Shi” 蕭史 in *Biographies of Various Immortals* 列仙傳 in *Zhonghua Daozang* (hereafter abbreviated ZHDZ) Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2004, 45.7.
lowers her head and thinks of sending a poem. Recalling the first time she heard the song she is aware of her loneliness and yearning.

As is her custom, the poet is very skillful at selecting concrete imagery that echoes her feelings and makes her implicit emotions evident and perceptible. Similar feelings of melancholy and resentment also can be seen in the following poem,

Resenting Lovesickness

It is said that the ocean is deep,
But it doesn’t equal half of my lovesickness.
The ocean has its boundaries,
But my yearning is vast and without limit.
I climb up a tall mansion with my zither,
The building is empty but filled with brilliant moonlight.
I play a lovesick song,
For a while the strings and my heart are both broken.

This poem reads like a combination of didactic poetry and narrative poetry. The poem opens with a statement, or discussion, comparing the vast ocean with endless yearning. But in the last quatrain the poet stops commenting and instead narrates how, when playing her zither, the strings broke along with her heart. While the plain structure and simple lexicon make the verse easy to understand, the original and precise comparison between the huge ocean and limitless yearning, as well as the strings of the zither and the human heart are very impressive; the analogy serves to broaden the appeal of the poem.

The meanings of the above two poems are clear and direct, expressing the poet’s grief and resentment of longing. However, some of Li’s poems contain complex emotions and ambivalence. As an example I will look at the following poem, an impromptu verse composed

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149 The literal translation of this line is “For a while the strings and intestines are both broken.”
when Li Ye’s friend Lu Yu visited her. It is said that Lu Yu, who styled himself Hongjian, was adopted by a monk and remained a hermit all his life. He was also adept at classical poetry, however, he was best known for his expertise in tea and composed the first book about tea, Cha Jing (The Tea Classics), in the world.150

When I Was Lying Sick in Bed by the Lake I Was Happy to See Lu Hongjian Come

In the past you left in the month of heavy frost, 昔去繁霜月，
Today you return at a time of miserable mist. 今來苦霧時。
I am still sick in bed when we reunite, 相逢仍臥病，
Before our words, tears star to flow. 欲語淚先垂。
You urge me to drink the wine of the Tao family, 強勸陶家酒，
In return I chant the poems of Xie Ke. 還吟謝客詩。
It happened that I was drunk for a while, 偶然成一醉，
What more can I expect other than this? 此外更何之。

The poem starts with a perfect antithesis couplet: it was in a month of heavy frost when he left and now he returns during a time of bitter mist, suggesting that one year has passed. Li then moves on to describing her own situation: lying in bed she is still sick and upon seeing her friend, tears emerge before her words. Li Ye seems not to have been in good health, as she mentions her sickness several times in her verses. In the following quatrain she describes their reunion: her friend urges her to drink more, and in return she chants poems of Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433) Thus far, the poem reads like a happy one, but the concluding couplet is rather confusing due to its rich and subtle meanings. Is Li Ye satisfied with getting drunk? If yes, then the poet emphasizes that she does not have any expectation other than getting drunk.

150 For reference of Lu Yu, see Chen Xiang 陳香 Cha dian 茶典 (Taipei: guojia chuban she 國家出版社, 1970), 70.
151 Tao family refers to Tao Qian 陶潜 (365 – 427), a famous poet, who was also addicted to alcohol.
152 Xie Ke refers to Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385 – 433), a famous poet in the Eastern Jin 東晉 (317 – 420) and the Six Dynasties 六代 (420 – 589).
If no, the poet implies that she expects more than getting drunk, but there is nothing more. The ambiguity of her attitude make the poem more appealing.

In Li Ye’s corpus, there is another very short poem that is similarly unclear and contradictory at first glance, but brimming with philosophical ideas beyond its superficial meaning.

*Living Together*  
偶居

My heart goes as far as the floating clouds and never returns,  
心遠浮雲知不還，

My heart and clouds are both existence and non-existence.  
心雲並在有無間。

For what reason fierce winds shake each other,  
狂風何事相搖撼，

They blow to the southern mountains and back to the northern mountains.  
吹向南山復北山。

Though this heptasyllabic quatrain is short it is mysterious and ambiguous. First of all, it is entitled “Living Together”, but throughout the poem the poet does not mention with whom she lives together except the clouds and winds. A Ming critic Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574-1624) wrote a commentary on this verse, saying “The beauty of the poem lies in its separation of the content from the title.” (妙在全不似題.) But in my opinion, Li Ye implies that her heart and clouds stay together. Thus she doesn’t digress from the subject, her implication is just not so obvious at first sight. Secondly, the line “My heart and clouds are both being existence and non-existence” is arbitrary, because from the view of linguistics, existence and non-existence are absolute, not relative, antonyms. Relative antonyms, for example, “young and old,” “hot and cold,” or “big and small,” allow for things in between the two antonyms. Thus, it is acceptable to say “not old, nor young”, meaning middle aged; “not cold, nor hot” meaning lukewarm. But “existence and non-existence” are absolute antonyms, and do not allow

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153 *You 有, existence; wu 無, non-existence, the literary translation of this line is “ My heart and clouds are both in between you and wu.”*

154 *Chen Wenhua, Tang nü shiren ji sanzhong, 17.*
anything in between, just like “alive and dead”. The assertion of one is the negation of the other. It is not reasonable to say “not alive, nor dead”.

However, in view of Laozi’s philosophy, “ten thousands of things in the world are born of being (you), yet being is born of non-being (wu).” (天下万物生于有,有生于無.) Influenced by Laozi’s idea, Li considers you and wu complementary to one other, you results from wu; wu and you coexist. It appears that Li Ye is very knowledgeable about Lao Zi’s philosophy and tends to observe the world in philosophical views. Finally, Li Ye talks about how the winds from the north and the south keep changing all the time. On the whole, this short poem embodies philosophic ideas, which proves again that Li Ye had a strong interest in Daoist philosophy.

One more good example of Li Ye’s didactic poetry can be found in the following brief verse.

Eight Extremes

The shortest and the furthest is east and west,
The deepest and the shallowest is a clear creek.
The brightest and the darkest are the sun and moon,
The closest and the most distant are husband and wife.

This quatrain contains several unusual elements worth examining. First, it is composed in the hexasyllabic form, the only example of a hexasyllabic verse in Li Ye’s corpus. Through a careful examination of the poem’s content, one begins to understand why Li Ye applies this form for her verse. Li lists four bi-syllabic noun phrases, each modified by two antonyms, except in the third line. Thus, each line has six syllables in total. In addition, it observes a strict traditional poetic rhyme scheme.

\[155 \text{ Daode Jing 40.}\]
Second, while the language used in this verse is plain and direct, and the structure is simple, this work contains some profound philosophical ideas. At first glance, it seems awkward to put two words with opposite meanings alongside one other, but reading in depth, one realizes that philosophically it represents two sides of one issue. The concluding line is the most vital part of the poem, which may be referred to as “the eyes of the verse” (shi yan 詩眼). In this line, Li Ye articulates her opinion about the relationship between a husband and a wife. Given Li Ye’s devotion to the Daoist religion, it is surprising that given her Daoist identity Li could observe mundane affairs with sharp eyes and through the impressive metaphors she expresses her deep thought without any embellishment.

In finishing the discussion of Li Ye’s poetic works I recall a Chinese scholar who regarded Li Ye a disguised female Daoist (bianxiang nüguan 變相女冠), 156

“Given her Daoist identity, Li Ye does not write any religious ideas in her writings. Instead, she claims herself to be the goddess of Shaman Mountain. This is a typical illustration that a disguised female Daoist in the Tang dynasty possessed a combined identity of being both a prostitute and Daoist nun.

李冶名屬女冠，然而在她的詩作中，卻絲毫見不到宗教的成分，反而以巫山女神自況，這便是唐代變相女冠在身份上娼妓與女冠複合的典型呈現.”

There are several points worth addressing in this evaluation. First of all, Li Ye did indeed write poems based on Daoist religion, for example, Sending “My Daoist Ideas to Assistant Minister Cui”, in which she writes like a missionary encouraging Cui to convert to Daoist religious practice. Second, as has already been discussed, Li Ye’s motivation for linking

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156Lin Xueling 林雪玲, Tangshi zhong de nüguan 唐詩中的女冠, 145.
herself to the goddess in the poem “Going with Xiao Shuzi and Listening to Zither Music I Composed a Song on Flowing Streams in the Three Gorges”, was for the purpose of showing her appreciation for the music from the standpoint of a local person.

Although the goddess is an emblem of sexuality and desire, in Li Ye’s poem one cannot find any evidence that she was drawing on this symbolism. Just like one cannot believe that the real home place of Li Ye is in Xiazhong, the goddess’ hometown, I do not see any indication that Li Ye has a desire for sex even though she compares herself to the goddess in the poem. Therefore, I cannot agree with Lin Xueling’s comment on Li Ye’s identity, stating that she is a disguised female Daoist, a combination of a prostitute and a Daoist.

“There are two characteristics in Li Ye’s poetry, one is that she wrote many more social poems, another is that she reveals a great deal of emotion in her poetry. These two features are probably connected to her identity as a disguised female Daoist with prostitute flavor.

李冶的詩作在內容上主要呈現了兩大特色，一個是贈答的詩特別多，一個其中流露的情感特別豐富。這兩點，和李冶帶有娼妓色彩的變相女冠身份，恐怕脫不了關係。”

In my opinion, Li Ye was a devoted female Daoist, which can be seen in her poem, Sending My Daoist Ideas to Assistant Minister Cui, and other poems with philosophical ideas, such as Living Together and Eight Extremes. All of these poems demonstrate religious ideas and philosophical views that a lay woman would not possess. It is true that Li Ye did write a number of poems expressing emotions such as longing, regret, distress over separation, but

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157 Lin Xueling 林雪玲, Tangshi zhong de nüguan 唐詩中的女冠,304.
her feelings toward the recipients of these poems is obscure. With the exception of two poems written to Yan Bojun, one cannot determine whether such poems were composed for a lover or a friend. This is demonstrated in the table below, in which I list all the social poems in Li Ye’s corpus.

Table 6. Li Ye's Social Poems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title of the Poem</th>
<th>Recipient</th>
<th>Information about the recipient</th>
<th>Li Ye’s attitude to the recipient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sending Yan 26 to Shanxian</td>
<td>Yan Bojun</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>regarded as a lover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Receiving a letter from Yang Bojun</td>
<td>Yan Bojun</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>same as the above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I was Happy Seeing Lu Hongjian Coming While being Sick in Bed by the Lack</td>
<td>Lu Hongjian</td>
<td>hermit</td>
<td>obscure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sending to Zhu Fang</td>
<td>Zhu Fang</td>
<td>hermit</td>
<td>obscure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sending to Editing Clerk, the Seventh Elder Brother (or Sending to Editing Clerk Han)</td>
<td>unknown (Han Kui?)</td>
<td>clerk</td>
<td>regarded as a brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sending Han Kui to Jiangxi</td>
<td>Han Kui</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>obscure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sending My Daoist Idea to the Assistant Minister Cui</td>
<td>Cui Huan</td>
<td>once served as a governor of Hangzhou</td>
<td>regarded as a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Knitting Fish with White Silk for My Friend</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>obscure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among her eight social poems, only the first two poems clearly indicate that the recipient was Li Ye’s lover. Li’s poems to Zhu Fang, Lu Hongjian and Han Kui cannot
conclusively be categorized as love poetry; they can be interpreted as poems between either friends or lovers. For instance, in her poem about Lu Hongjian’s visit, Li Ye, expresses intimate feelings for Lu, but she also seems to indicate their relationship was limited, when she says, “what more can I expect than this (having a drink)?” In this case, I do not think it is appropriate to draw the conclusion that Lu Hongjian was a sexual partner.

Li Ye’s distinct personality probably drove her to focus her relationships on expressions of sincere feelings, but not on expressions of commitment or love. As demonstrated in her poem, “Eight Extremes”, Li Ye had the wisdom to realize that even a husband and wife may be strangers. A talented and sentimental woman, Li Ye had a right to love and her poems indicate that she may have suffered a great deal longing for affection. But is it reasonable to take such poems as evidence that she behaved like a prostitute?

For over one thousand years critics have repeated that some female Daoists of the Tang Dynasty were simply prostitutes in disguise. Li Ye and Yu Xuanji are prime examples of this tendency. After a close study of Li Ye’s poetic works I could find no evidence to support this evaluation. Therefore, I doubt the veracity of this stereotyped concept; on what basis did these critics reach their conclusions? The only sources they had were the extant poems by both women, and generations of misinterpretation. Without any solid proof of Li Ye’s being a prostitute, I refuse to repeat their commentary and I believe that Li Ye was a female Daoist not only in theory but also in real life. The fact that she wrote a number of poems on her emotions is not evidence enough of prostitution or a dissolute lifestyle.
2.3. Yuan Chun

It is difficult to find any biographical or even anecdotal information about Yuan Chun 元淳 (fl.756), apart from a very short description of her in Quan tangshi, which reads, “Yuan Chun, a female Daoist, from Luozhong, having two poems extant.” 158 Hence, we know only that she was a Daoist nun and that her hometown was in Luozhong (present-day Luoyang). Since no further references are available, studies of Yuan Chun have had to focus on her two extant poems preserved in Quan tangshi. The first poem is addressed to her sisters in Luozhong, but it is unclear to whom “sisters” refers, whether they are her family members or religious colleagues. I agree with Cahill’s interpretation that this poem was written to the “women of her former monastic community.” 159

Meanwhile the titles of her extant verses, including some scattered lines that will be discussed later, indicate that Yuan Chun was very active in exchanging poems with religious women.

*Sending to My Elder-sisters in Luozhong* 160

*寄洛中諸姊*

It has been years since I left my hometown,  
Through frontier passes and rivers my mind  
goes over a thousand miles.  
Writing poems I depend on geese to deliver them,  
Looking at the moon I think of my sisters’ eyebrows.  
I have grown grey hairs because of my worries,  
My thought of returning home was understood  
only in my dreams.  
Who can endure living in a war-torn place,  
Turning to the southern branches I sweep away my tears.161

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159 Suzanne Cahill, “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems: Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns” in Tang Song nüxin g yu shehui, 2. 538.
160 Luo zhong 洛中 refers to “luoyang 洛陽”, see Tangshi zici da cidian 唐詩字詞大詞典(Beijing: Hualing chubanshe, 華齡出版社 1993)411.
161 Chinese term “nanzhi”南枝 refers to a native place. eg.: “Since the group of Wang Bao and Yu Xing stayed in Guanzhong (in modern Shangxi), they should have been homesick.”王褒，庾信之徒既異旅鬭

117
This is a very typical nostalgic pentasyllabic poem, in which the poet expresses her longing for her old sisters and her native place. From the opening couplet, Yuan directly talks about her yearning for home a thousand miles away, across frontier passes and rivers. She has been away for a long time, but the exact length is ambiguous due to the Chinese phrase jing nian, which could mean either “over a year” or “over several years”. Suzanne Cahill translates the phrase as “years”, but Jeanne Larsen interprets it as “a year”. Following the opening couplet Yuan exhibits her homesickness with two examples: when writing a poem she wishes wild geese could carry it to her hometown; and the crescent moon reminds her of her sisters’ beautiful eyebrows.

In the next quatrain the poet focuses on her miserable situation: she dreams of going home with such frequency that her hair has grown grey with sorrow. The final couplet is more intriguing than it first appears. The Chinese phrase li luan usually refers to chaos caused by war; thus, the translation of the line could be “who can endure living in a war-torn place”. However, both Suzanne Cahill and Jeanne Larsen treat li and luan separately, not as a fixed phrase. Thus, Cahill’s translation is “Who can bear separation in such a chaotic place.” Larsen translates it as “Who could bear it – cut off from a land in chaos.” Their translations, I think, are acceptable since the poem talks about

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162 Suzanne Cahill, “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems: Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns”, 538.
163 Jeanne Larsen, Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon: Women’ Poems from Tang China, 111.
164 Suzanne Cahill, “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems: Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns”, 538.
165 Jeanne Larsen, Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon: Women’ Poems from Tang China, 111.
separation from home. However, I am inclined to deal with *liluan* as a fixed phrase with a traditional concept and to interpret it as meaning “a war-torn place”.

In this light Yuan Chun provides us some information about her life; in the year of the An Lushan Rebellion (756) she would be in her early forties, the average age when grey hairs start to show. To conclude the poem Yuan uses the metaphor *nanzhi* 南枝 (the south branches). This metaphor is an allusion to the lines “horses from the north stand against the northern wind; birds from the south build their nests on the southern branches” (胡馬依北風, 越鳥巢南枝) from the “Nineteen Ancient Poems”. The original poem suggests that people resemble the animals who miss their homes. Thus, Yuan emphasizes her homesickness through this analogy.

The overall mood of this poem is simple, shot through with pathos. It provides two other pieces of information about Yuan Chun’s time. The concluding couplet suggests that Yuan probably lived around the era of Xuan Zong 玄宗 (r.712 – 756), as her poem implies that she could not go home during the war time. The poem also indicates that, unlike most ordinary women who often stayed home all their lives, Yuan left home and traveled far away. It is likely that she went to Chang’an, because her other extant poem describes Chang’an’s splendid springtime scenery.

This second poem, preserved in *Quan tangshi*, reads as though it was composed by a man. It was common for the Chinese literati to sing about their environment from a political and religious viewpoint, but it was very rare to see such a poem mixed with a missionary zeal in the verse of a woman poet.

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166 “Horses from Hu” refers to horses from the north. Yue means the south in general. See *Gushi shijiu shou jishi*, 古詩十九首集釋 (Hongkong: zhonghua shuju, 1958), 1.


There is a nice view of spring from a building of phoenix,  
The imperial palaces were arranged in multiple rows.  
In the royal garden, the trees are washed in a shower of rain  
The peaks of Zhongnan Mountains look clear after the rain.  
Flowers fall everywhere on the tracks,  
Auspicious air are growing more and more significant  
in the evening.  
I am happy to live in the reign of a sagacious emperor,  
Ladies wearing rosy dresses follow the Daoist tracks.  

Unlike the first poem, which narrates Yuan’s yearning, this poem focuses on describing beautiful scenery and the favorable circumstances of an age of peace and prosperity. The poem was obviously written in the capital city, Chang’an, because the poet describes the beauty of the magnificent royal buildings and gardens.

Zhongnan Mountain, located fifteen kilometers to the south of Chang’an, is one of the birthplaces of the Daoist religion. It is said that Laozi preached his Daode jing (道德经) in this mountain. Thus, in the second couplet Yuan connects the imperial gardens with this Daoist sacred place, suggesting a close relationship between the emperor’s regime and the Daoist religion. The Tang emperors’ policies promoted a great deal of development in the Daoist religion, and in return Yuan believes that Daoism protects the security and prosperity of the Tang dynasty. Though Yuan lavishly praises the beautiful scenery she frames it using Daoist ideas, especially in the concluding line, which says that even ladies from imperial families would like to follow Daoism.

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167 “Qin” refers to Qin Mountain Range (qin ling 秦岭). Zhongnan Mountain is located in the middle part of it.
168 “Rosy dresses” could refer to either fairies or ladies from Royal families. Based on the context of the poem, I think the latter interpretation is more reasonable.
Therefore, on the superficial level this poem is an appreciation of the spectacular views; however, Yuan’s descriptions accomplish far more. Yuan shows her admiration of the Tang emperors, who favor and support Daoism on a large scale. With this knowledge, it is not jarring to read the concluding line, which is not a description of the scenic views. Instead, Yuan directly states that even ladies from the royal families wish to abandon their affluent lives for the purpose of following Daoism. This poem is a good example of Yuan Chun’s enthusiasm for Daoism and, in my opinion, is much more a missionary poem rather than a meditation on nature. Few Tang women could write a landscape poem like Yuan Chun, and this is probably due to her identity as a Daoist nun.

Unfortunately Yuan Chun left behind only two complete poems. There are, however, some fragments of poems under the name of Yuan Chun. For example,

(1) 《A Fable》

In the royal palace, three thousand maids expose their delicate eyebrows,
With a smile they melt gold ore, the sun and the moon are delayed.

(2) 《Junior Sister Apprentice Huo Visiting Mountain Tiantai》

Nobody has ever been to the cliffs of Chicheng, Cranes visit the places of cinnabar furnace and field of magic fungus.

(3) 《Sent to a Female Daoist Yang》

It is heard the scenery in Maolin is beautiful, Green water flows down the streams and there is the Peach Spring.

169 “Chicheng” is a mountain located in the south of the Tiantai mountains in Zhejiang Province.
170 The Peach Spring is a shortened form of the Peach Blossom Spring, referring to an ideal place for hermits to withdraw from society and live in a solitude. See Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (fl. 365 – 427) “A
The titles of these incomplete poems tell us that Yuan had frequent literary exchanges with religious women. The scattered lines are full of Daoist terms, such as, melting gold ore, cinnabar furnace, field of magic fungus and cranes, which are regarded as the favorite animal in Daoist religion. Thus, we see that these female Daoists had a strong interest in Daoist practice and indulged in sightseeing trips.

Jan Walls observes, “One theme which is conspicuous by its rarity in Chinese women’s verse is the eulogizing of nature and the virtue of the rustic life. There are obvious reasons for this. Climbing into the mountains and hiking through the wildness was not considered a ladylike pastime to begin with, and even if it were it is unlikely that a respectable father or husband would allow a woman to engage in it.”171 With the comparison of the ordinary traditional Chinese women, who had to stay home taking care of housework, female Daoists were much freer from the restrictions of family. This freedom facilitated their social activities and allowed them to enjoy a grand landscape, which certainly broadened their vision. Hence, it is not surprising to find some significant intellectual and spiritual factors in the poetry of Daoist nuns.

It is also interesting to note that both of Yuan Chun’s full poems are in the pentasyllabic form, but all the scattered lines are in the heptasyllabic form. In terms of technique, Yuan observed strict rhythm patterns and made some perfect antitheses in her poems. For example, in the poem “Sending to My Elder-sisters in Luozhong”, her excellent parallelism is shown in the following diagram.

Record of the Peach Blossom Spring¹⁷¹桃花源記. See Tao Yuanming ji jiaojian 陶淵明集校箋 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1996), 430.
Table 7. Structure of Yuan Chun's Poem "Sending to My Elder-sisters in Luozhong"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the 2nd couplet</th>
<th>verb phrase</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>noun phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>line 3</td>
<td>writing poems</td>
<td>depend on wings of geese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 4</td>
<td>looking at the moon</td>
<td>think of delicate eyebrows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although only two complete poems and a few scattered lines are available for study, one can still notice that the language used in Yuan’s verses is plain and direct. Moreover, Yuan does not make much use of allusion, with only three being found in her poems. Therefore, while her topics relate to religion and politics, and are pregnant with significant meaning, Yuan tried to make her poems easy to understand.

Having discussed her poetry, three points about Yuan Chun are worthy of mention here. First, Yuan Chun was a zealous Daoist nun interested in both politics and religion, as evidenced in her poem “Gazing in Spring at the Central Qin”, and in some scattered lines. Secondly, Yuan is seen as a sentimental woman too; her tenderness, melancholy and nostalgia are revealed in her poem “Sending to My Elder-sisters in Luozhong”. As a woman, particularly a literary woman, it was her nature to possess an abundance of emotion and a variety of passions. I do not think it is appropriate to say that a woman who expresses a lot of emotion is not a pious Daoist in the Tang period. Finally, although Xin Wenfang states that the only entertainment for Tang Dynasty female Daoists is chanting poems, Yuan Chun depicts a variety of other activities enjoyed by them.¹⁷² Yuan’s poetry provides more details about the life of Tang Dynasty Daoist nuns. It is reasonable to conclude that Yuan Chun was a sentimental woman, a devout Daoist nun, and a talented poet.

¹⁷² Xin Wenfang 辛文房 Tang Caizi Zhuan 唐才子傳, 136.
2.4. Lu Meiniang and Zhuo Yingying

Stories about Lu Meiniang 留眉娘(fl. 805) read like myths. She was known as shengu 神姑 (supernatural maid), and was famous for her embroidery skills. Her stories and biographical information are available in many literary works, but the earliest account is found in Duyang zabian 杜陽雜編 (Miscellaneous Compilation in Duyang) written by Su E 蘇鄠, passed the jinshi examination in 886. In his book, Su wrote the following description of Lu Meinian, which was copied from time to time by later literary men.

In the reign of Yongzhen 永貞 (805), the magistrate of Nanhai area presented an ingenious woman, Lu Meiniang, who was fourteen years old. Because she was born with long eyebrows that look like threads, she was named as Meiniang, “Eyebrow Girl”. She claimed that she was originally a descendant of the teachers of Beizu (the Northern Ancestor), but wandered destitute in Lingbiao in the middle period of the reign of Dazu 大足 (701). In the Latter Han 後漢 (25-220) Lu Jingzuo 盧景祚 and his three brothers, Jingyu 景裕, Jingxuan 景宣 and Jingrong 景融 all served as teachers of the emperor, and thus they were Dishi (the emperor’s teachers).

永貞元年，南海貢奇女留眉娘，年十四，眉娘生而眉如線細長也。稱本北祖帝師之裔。自大足中流落於嶺表，後漢盧景祚、景裕、景宣、景融兄弟四人皆為帝師，因號為帝師也。

From her childhood Meiniang was bright and deft, few could equal her in manual dexterity. She could embroider seven volumes of Fahua jing 法華經 (The Lotus Scripture) on one foot of silk. The size of each character was not bigger than a millet, the strokes were clearly visible and as thin as a hair. All chapters and sentences as well as notes and commentaries are included in it. She was even more skilled in making

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173 Lingbiao 嶺表 is located in modern Guangdong and Guangxi.
174 Fahua jing 法華經 (The Lotus Scripture) is Buddhist scriptures.
feixian gai (an umbrella-like canopy). Splitting a single strand of silk into three lines, she dyed them five different colors and knotted them in her hands making a canopy of five tiers. On the canopy were images of ten continents, three islands, immortals, goddesses, palaces, balconies, qilin (Chinese unicorn) and phoenixes, besides, there were also over a thousand children carrying banners and signs. The canopy was about one zhang (3 meters) wide, but it weighed no more than three liang.\(^\text{175}\) Moreover, she applied fragrant ointment made by herself on the canopy, so that it became much stronger and could not be broken. Admiring her craftsmanship and believing that she had the assistance of goddesses, the emperor put Meiniang in the imperial palaces. Everyday Meiniang only ate two or three he of cooked huma.\(^\text{176}\) By the middle of the Yuanhe (806-820) the Emperor Xianzong bestowed on Meiniang a golden bracelet carved with phoenixes to encircle her wrist, commending her intelligence and exquisite work. Realizing that Meiniang did not like to live in the palaces, the emperor ordained her as a Daoist priestess, styling her “Xiaoyao (free and unfettered)” and then sent her back to Nanhai area.

幼而慧悟，工巧无比。能於一尺絹上織《法華經》七卷，字之大小不逾粟粒，而點畫分明，細於毛髮。其品題章句，無有遺闕。更善作飛仙蓋，以絲一縷分為三縷，染成五彩，於掌中結為傘蓋五重，其中有十洲三島、天人玉女，臺殿麟鳳之象而外，執幡捧節之童，亦不啻千數。其蓋闕一丈，秤之無三數兩。自煎靈香膏傅之，則 avril 不斷。上歎其工，謂之神助，因令止於宮中，每日但食胡麻飯二三合。至元和中，憲宗皇帝嘉其聰慧而奇巧，遂賜金鳳環以束其腕，知眉娘不願住禁中，遂度以黃冠，放歸南海，仍賜號曰逍遙。

When she was transformed into an immortal, her room was filled with fragrance. Her disciples were going to have a funeral. But when they raised the coffin, they felt it was light. Then they opened the cover and found only her shoes in it. Later, she was often seen by sailors traveling on purple clouds across the oceans. A hermit in Mount Luofu, Li Xiangxian, wrote Biography of Lu Xiaoyao, but Xiangxian was not a well-known person, therefore, his works did not survive.

\(^{175}\) “Liang”兩 is Chinese metric unit of weight, 10 liang = 0.5 kg.

\(^{176}\) “He”合 is Chinese metric unit of grain, 10 he = 1 deciliter. “Huma”胡麻 is said to be a kind of sesame growing in the north or west of ancient China.
In this account Lu Meiniang is said to come from Nanhai, an area in modern Guangdong province, and was born to a well-known literati family. She was once sent to the capital and stayed in the imperial harem because of her particular talent and unique skill. In Daoist books Meiniang is presented as a successful example of transformation from human to divine being. Since all the information about Lu Meiniang is found in legends or anecdotes, many of which were copies of Su E’s account, it is difficult to judge the credibility of these reports. Therefore, like other poets examined above, studies of Lu Meiniang can only focus upon the poems written by Meiniang herself.

Quan tangshi preserves two poems under the name Lu Meiniang, both listed as replies to the poems of Zhuo Yingying 卓英英 (the ninth century), who was known as “a girl from Chengdu 成都女郎”. The Chinese scholar Li Suping states that during the reigns of Shunzong 順宗 (r. 805) and Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805 – 820) Zhuo was called into the imperial harem for her excellent ability at composing poetry. She too was ordained a Daoist nun by the emperor. In order to fully comprehend Lu Meiniang’s poems I will also present Zhuo’s poems for a comparison between the two women’s work.

Zhuo Yingying:

_Gazing from Jincheng in Spring_

A gentle breeze decorates the brocade city as spring comes, and風裝點錦城春，

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177 Duyang zabian 杜陽雜編 in BBCSJ, (juan zhong 卷中, 2b).
178 Li Suping 李素平 Nüshen Nüdan Nüdao 女神女丹女道, 513.
Fine rain falls like thread pressing the jade-like dust.
A will, I take my poetic passion to visit spectacular scenery,
Beautiful flowers and strong wine are for idle people.

Lu Meiniang:

Replying to Zhuo Yingying’s Poem “Gazing from Jincheng in Spring”

The silkworm market is just open and spring is everywhere,
The nine streets and roads look bright and colourful
with fragrant dust stirred up.
There are always vanity things in the world,
Competing with the immortal mountains, people
detached from the worldly affairs

From different perspectives the two women express their divergent feelings upon facing the beautiful view of the city in spring. While Zhuo Yingying starts her verse with “gentle breeze and fine rains”, the symbols of spring, Lu Meiniang focuses on a more concrete scene, the silkworm market. As a talented embroiderer, it is logical that she would be very interested in the silk and cloth market. Contrary to Zhuo’s line “pressing jade dust”, Lu uses the image of “fragrant rising dust” kicked up by women swarming forward to the market. An even bigger difference is seen in the concluding couplet. With her poetic passion Zhuo appreciates the wonderful scenery, but she admits that because she is such an idle person with a mind of leisure she can enjoy beautiful flowers and strong wine. Meiniang, however, has a different reaction when facing the picturesque view. Realizing that all the vain affairs of the mortal world are temporary, Lu’s ideal is the immortal world. Thus, unlike Zhuo, who enjoys the pleasures of the mortal world, Lu tries to detach herself from such pleasures. The sharp contrast illustrates the fundamentally different views of the two poets toward human life. While Zhuo is well-
known as a gifted woman and a Daoist nun, what she expresses in her poem is the view of a secular woman, enjoying the human world. In contrast, Lu illustrates her determination to cut herself off from the human world, no matter how beautiful the scenery she faces.

Such contrasts can be seen in their other poems, as shown in the following.

Zhuo Yingying:

*Playing a Reed Pipe*

Leaning against a silver screen I have frequently played the reed pipe.
My spring emotions arise with the exquisite tune.
Thinking about what happened in the past, I become melancholy,
I don’t hear any reply from Goushan at all 179

Lu Meiniang:

*Replying to Zhuo Yingying’s Poem “Playing a Reed Pipe”*

Keep on playing the reed pipe in the chamber;
Immortal Taibai has affections of his own.
Someday you will ride a white phoenix carriage through the cinnabar sky,
There will be no need to worry that Zijin will not hear you playing.

Both poems allude to a legend about Wang Ziqiao, who liked to play the reed pipe and imitate the cry of the phoenix. It was said that he was led to a mountain to do Daoist practice and thirty years later transformed into an immortal of Goushan mountain.180 In her poem Zhuo Yingying expresses her doubt about the truth of the legend. She complains that she has played the reed pipe so often, but there is no response from any

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179 *Goushan* 終山 refers to *Goushi shan* 終氏山, where Wang Ziqiao 王子喬 did Daoist practice and transformed into an immortal. Detailed explanation is provided in the text.

immortals. Lu Meiniang persuades Zhuo, in her reply, to keep on practicing. Lu believes that immortals have sincere feelings, implying the existence of an immortal world. When there are splendid multihued clouds, Zijin, a representative of immortals, will appear after hearing Zhuo continuously playing the reed pipe.

Again these two poems demonstrate the sharp contrast between Lu Meiniang, who is a deeply pious adherent of Daoism, and Zhuo Yingying, who half-believes and half-doubts the Daoist faith. This is probably the reason why Lu Meiniang is said to have been transformed into a divine being, but not Zhuo Yingying. In terms of technique, both poets composed very good poems. Lu’s poems are more difficult because she has to follow the form and rhymes of Zhuo’s verses, and at the same time present a divergent opinion. However, Lu’s poems read like preaching, rather than the usual exchange of poems that express personal emotions.

Quan tangshi also preserves some poems under the names of Fairies of Luochuan 洛川仙女; Five Fairies from the Mount of Yuntai 雲臺峰仙女; A Group of Fairies in Shu Palace 蜀宮羣仙 and fairy poems by the Wife of Wu Qing 吳清妻. Since the purpose of this study is to investigate female Daoist poems, rather than those of any fairies or goddesses, I will not discuss these poems, as the authors of the works have not been remembered as Daoist nuns but as fairies, even though they talk about Daoist teachings, stories and their feelings about being immortals.

Through a careful study of the extant works of the Tang female Daoists, I have found that some ancient Chinese critics held prejudiced public views about Daoist nuns
in the Tang period. It is not fair, nor accurate to define female Daoists in the Tang period as equal to prostitutes. The poetry of the Tang Daoist priestesses indicates that although they were different in personality, family background and life experience, they all shared some common features, such as, strong personal characters, spiritual independence, they possessed startling insight and high self-esteem. Moreover, some were sentimental and active in communities. Given their various motivations in Daoist priesthood, women in Daoism were on the border of secular life and religious cloisters. While some pious Daoist priestesses aspired to the immortal world, some still regarded their life with a worldly outlook. Thus, they formed a new model for women and combined all the special qualities of being women, literati and Daoists all in one body.
Chapter 3  Imagery of Female Daoists in the Poetry of Tang Male Literati

The Tang dynasty witnessed a high point in the development of Daoist religion in Chinese history. With strong patronage from Tang emperors, the Daoist religion developed rapidly and was highly respected throughout the Tang period. Several Tang emperors, especially Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649-683) and Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756), had strong, wide-ranging interests in Daoism – from Daoist texts, rituals, and music, to theories of obtaining immortality, including those involving longevity and the golden elixir. In fact, Daoist religion became the family cult of the imperial household.

The close relationship that the Tang imperial family had with Daoist religion is demonstrated through the following recorded incident: During the reign of Gaozong, the Tibetans demanded a marriage alliance with Princess Taiping 太平. In order to avoid such a marriage, the princess was instead made a Daoist nun and was provided with a Taiping Guan 太平觀, a monastery where she was installed as abbess. The excuse was given that Princess Taiping was unsuitable for marriage because she had been ordained as a Daoist nun. By the year 681, when this matter was over, Princess Taiping resumed a secular life and married a Chinese man. It seems that Princess Taiping became a model
figure, whose example was followed by more than sixteen princesses in the Tang dynasty over the next two centuries.\textsuperscript{181}

Meanwhile, the number of court women who received Daoist initiation also grew during the Tang period. Some of them were sent to serve princesses after they entered the religious life, while others, including rejected concubines, former courtesans, old singing and dancing girls, as well as maid servants of the imperial palaces, were sent to Daoist convents to live out the rest of their lives. Thus, with the mixture of ordained Daoist women in local areas and the converted court women, the Tang dynasty experienced a rapid increase in the number of female Daoists, further driving the popularity of women making the choice to enter the Daoist priesthood in the Tang dynasty.

Given their keen awareness and literary talents, the Tang male literati responded enthusiastically to this particular social phenomenon and composed a large number of poems on the topic of women in Daoism. In contrast to the very few extant works of Tang dynasty female Daoists, there are numerous examples of poetic works about Daoist nuns written by the male Tang elite. While these poets expressed their personal ideas, emotions or even experiences with Daoist priestesses, they created and developed new themes in classical Chinese poetry, such as “Sending the Court Women to the Daoist Convent” and topics related to “the Convent of Yuzhen”, “the Convent of Kaiyuan”, and other cloisters where female Daoists lived.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{181} For the details of Tang Princesses’ entering the Daoist priesthood, please see Lin Xueling 林雪鈴《唐詩中的女冠》唐詩中的女冠, 42–44.
\textsuperscript{182} Princess Jinxian 金仙 lived in the Kaiyuan Convent from the tenth year of the Kaiyuan 開元 era (713-741).
This chapter will investigate the works written by learned Tang men about Daoist nuns, focusing on their descriptions of the appearance, daily life and living environment of such women, as well as the personal experiences the Tang elite had with those “divine women.” Various questions will be explored, including, what kind of feelings or attitudes did learned Tang men hold towards Daoist nuns? How did the Tang poets present female clerics in their literary writings? In the eyes of the Tang literati, were Daoist women treated in the same way as women of the secular world? What drove male Tang poets to create such a large number of works on female clergies?

For the sake of this discussion, I have classified all the related materials under the following headings: I Admiration; II Mysterious Feeling; III Criticism; IV Passion and Lust. The final section of the chapter, Section V, will concentrate on the traditional topic of “Sending Court Women to a Daoist Convent”.

3.1. Admiration

When Princesses Jinxian 金仙 (689–732) and Yuzhen 玉真 (692–762), the two daughters of Emperor Ruizong 睿宗 (r.684-690 and 710-712), took monastic vows and entered the Daoist priesthood in 711, Ruizong built palatial sanctuaries in mountains in addition to two lavish temples in the northwest section of Chang’an 長安, near the imperial harem. One source in the Daoist canon includes an epigraph about the abbey of Yuzhen written by Xue Shaopeng 薛紹彭, a calligrapher in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127):
The Tang Princess Yuzhen styled herself Chiying. She was the ninth daughter of Ruizong. Originally she was enfeoffed at Chongchang. She entered the Daoist priesthood together with her older sister Jinxian in the first year of Jingyuan, receiving the title Shangqing Xuandu Dadong Sanjing. Today the memorial shrine for Princess Yuzhen still stands at the foot of the Southern Mountain, which is considered the relic of her villa, and is usually called Langgong. It is hard to study its history because all the stelae and geographical materials are missing, except the stela written by Daixuan in the middle of the Kaiyuan era, saying, ‘The Princess Yuzhen did cultivation here’. Moreover, both Wang Wei and Chu Guangyi wrote poems on the mountain villa of Yuzhen. Therefore, this shrine should be her villa. So I collected all the poems on Yuzhen’s shrine that were composed by the Tang poets and inscribed them on the wall of the shrine.\footnote{See Gu louguan ziyun yangqing ji 古樓觀紫雲衍慶集 in ZHDZ, 48.624.}

Xue’s inscription not only provides some information about the princess Yuzhen and her temple but also shows that quite a number of learned Tang men composed poems on Yuzhen’s temple. Among them, Wang Wei’s work is the longest and most outstanding, reading like a commemoration of his visit to the abode of Yuzhen. Wang’s twenty-line poem is as follows:
Ten-rhyme Inscription on Stone Wall Following the Emperor’s Theme
“While Visiting Princess Yuzhen’s Mountain Villa” 184

The sky goes beyond wind and mist,
The road to the Terrace of Yao is long.
Why does it need to connect with the imperial garden?
It is an immortal’s residence by itself.
Around this place simurghs carriages go,
Along the valley plants become fresh green.
The sun and moon can be seen from her cave, 185
Rosy clouds move around her windows.
In her courtyard she keeps a crane that can fly to the sky,
On the stream she has a raft from the heaven.
After planting white jade grows,
In the clay furnace golden elixir transforms.
In the quiet valley a spring sounds even louder,
In deep mountains the sun’s light slants more.
The royal soup is mixed with stalactites,
Delicious meal is provided with sesame.
The supreme Dao does not exist outside,
And longevity has no limit.
Looking up to the sky with reverence
Carriages on five-colored clouds come and go.

The title of the poem indicates that this pentasyllabic poetic work was written on a topic assigned by the emperor. Through his description of the princess’ residence, Wang Wei shows his unequivocal admiration for the princess. Using his fertile imagination, Wang employs Daoist symbols in the descriptions of ordinary and simple objects. For instance, the Terrace of Yao refers to the abode of the Queen Mother of the West, the supreme female deity of the Daoist religion. As such, his description of “The road to the Terrace of Yao” suggests a road towards the pursuit of Daoism. “Ground stalactites” were believed to have medicinal value in ancient China, and were often used as food and medicine by ancient people. “Huma” 胡麻 is usually interpreted as sesame, but according to Daoist canon, it is specified that Huma is a form of millet that can only be

184 All poems discussed in this chapter are chosen from QTS.
185 Wang may compare the Princess’ residence to the Daoist underground paradise (dong tian 洞天) with its own sun and moon.
found in the meals of immortals. Moreover, in Daoist texts, cranes and simurghs are often described as animals that were ridden by the immortals. Thus, together with other terms such as the golden elixir and the carriages of the immortals on five-colored clouds, that visibly mark the poem with Daoist labels, Wang has infused his writing with supreme and reverent Daoist elements. In Wang’s poem, the princess’ villa is likened to the villa of an immortal.

In recognition and perhaps slight competition with Wang’s masterpiece, the great poet Li Bai also composed a seminal poem dedicated to Yuzhen. Li fully exhibits his romantic talents and rhetorical skill in the poem below:

*A Poem to Immortal Sister Yuzhen*  
The Divine woman, Yuzhen  
Often goes to the peaks of Taihua Mountain  
At dawn she strikes a celestial drum,  
Then soars on a wild wind behind a pair of dragons  
Playing with lightning her hands do not stop,  
Traveling on the clouds she does not leave any traces,  
When she enters the divine shrine on Shaoshi Mountain, 

The Divine Mother of the West will certainly

Go out to welcome her.

Instead of describing her living place, Li Bai focuses on the description of the person and embellishes the image of the princess as a divine being, creating vivid imagery such as “striking a celestial drum,” “rides two dragons,” “playing with lightning,” and “traveling on clouds without a trace.” These extraordinary descriptions of the princess even state that the Queen Mother of the West will emerge to meet with the princess. Compared to Wang Wei’s line “the road to the Terrace of Yao is long”, Li Bai’s concept is more

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186 Shaoshi Mountain is among Songshan Range 嵩山山脈, located in modern Henan. There were famous shrines first built around 118-123 in Han Dynasty, and named Shaoshi Temple (shaoshi que 少室闕).
flattering, as Li promotes the princess to the level of reverence right up with that of the Queen Mother.

Indeed, both Li Bai and Wang Wei exaggerate the divine qualities of their subject. Yet two points can be drawn from their poetic work. One is that Li and Wang, as well as many other Tang poets, had a high regard for female Daoists, and very often associated female Daoists with the Queen Mother of the West, one of the most honored deities in the Daoist religion. Another point that can be noted is that the daily activities and environment of a female priestess are often associated with supernatural elements: holy mountains, rosy clouds, winds or even lightening, and feats that laymen could never perform, such as riding on dragons or cranes, attaining longevity and making elixirs.

Li Bai’s fervor for Daoism is better illustrated in two poems he sent to his wife who was going to look for a Daoist master, Li Tengkong 李騰空, who was the daughter of Li Linfu 李林甫 (683–752), the prime minister during the reign of Xuanzong 玄宗. Based on the Daoist canon, Li Tengkong did not have any pastimes except for being fond of Daoism in spite of growing up in a wealthy family. Her parents could not stop her when she was determined to leave home and head for Mount Lu 廬 in the middle of the Zhenyuan 貞元(785–805) era. The content of Li Bai’s poem indicates that Li Tengkong may have inspired some Tang women from high-ranking official families to leave home and seek the religious life.

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Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1300) *Lishi zhenxian tidao tonjian houji* 歷世真仙體道通鑑後集 (hereafter abbreviated LSZXTDTJHJ) v.5, in *Zhengtong daozang* 正統道藏 (Hereafter abbreviated ZTDZ)Taipei: Yiwen yinshu guan 1962, 150.
I.
If you are going to find master Tengkong,
You should go to her house in the green mountains.
Water pounds hard mica,
The wind blows heather flowers.
If you love a solitary life,
You may be invited to play with the rosy clouds.

II.
There are many gentle women from senior official families,
Who prefer to study Daoism and love immortality.
With delicate hands they scoop up evening haze.
Their silk dresses drag a long trail of purple mist.
They head for the peak of Pingfengdie.\(^{188}\)
Riding a phoenix, they hold a jade whip.

It was said that Li Bai wrote this poem for his third wife, Madame Zong 宗, who was the granddaughter of Zong Chuke 宗楚客(710), the prime minister in the reign of Empress Wu (690-704). Madame Zong received a good education from childhood and married Li Bai because of her appreciation of Li’s poetic talents. But in her later years she became more interested in Daoism and finally disappeared into the mountains until her death. Since both Li Tengkong and Zongshi came from families of prime ministers in the Tang court, Li Bai begins his second poem with an emotional statement, sighing about how many gentlewomen from high-ranking official families prefer Daoist practice. Li’s verse provides us with evidence of the popularity among Tang women to enter the Daoist priesthood.

Given that the addressees of the above poems all came from prominent families, one might suspect that Li Bai’s reverence of them is the result of their notable family background, and not simply their Daoist identities. Therefore, I will present one more of

\(^{188}\) Pingfengdie 屏風嶺 (Folded Screen) is one of the peaks of Mount Lu.
Raw text:

Li Bai’s poems below, a work in which he pays a compliment to an ordinary Daoist priestess, named Zhu Sanqing.

Seeing the Female Daoist Chu Sanqing Off for Nanyue by the River 江上送女道士褚三清游南岳

A female Daoist from Wujiang River, 吳江女道士，
She wears a lotus-shaped cap. 頭戴蓮華巾。
Her Daoist robe does not get wet in the rain, 霧衣不濕雨，
She is different from the clouds over the terrace. 特異陽台雲。
She wears hiking sandals for long journey, 足下遠游履，
Walking gracefully, dust rises under her feet. 凌波生素塵。
As she travels to the south mountains looking for immortals, 尋仙向南岳，
She will be able to see Madam Wei. 應見魏夫人。

I have found no information about Chu Sanqing in Daoist hagiographies, including anecdotal stories. Thus, as common as she might be, Li Bai is still unstinting in his praise, depicting a pure and pretty female Daoist of Wujiang (in modern Jiangsu 江蘇). On the one hand, Li emphasizes the beauty of the priestess by describing her Daoist robe and her hat designed in a lotus shape, as well as her graceful walking that looks like a fairy moving over rippled water. On the other hand, he makes it clear that this Daoist woman is different from the goddess in the Wushan Mountain, who presented herself as the clouds over the terrace of the mountain and enjoyed a sexual life with the king of Chu. Thus, Li Bai excludes any of the erotic associations that may be connected to the female Daoist. In the concluding lines, instead of the Queen Mother of the West, Li refers to Madam Wei, whose full name is Wei Huacun 魏華存(251–334), another Daoist deity. Li Bai clearly shows his respect and appreciation for the Daoist priestess in this poem.

189 For the reference of the goddess in Wushan mountain, see my note in Yu Xuanji’s poems “I Was Moved and Sent This to My Friend” in Chapter One.
Through a careful study of Tang literati poetic works that praise female Daoists, one can find that a Daoist nun called as Master Jiao 焦錬師, received several poems from the Tang poets. Unfortunately, nothing is known about this female Daoist adept apart from the fact that she was famous at the time. Among a handful poems that dedicated to Jiao, I chose to present a pentasyllabic regulated poem written by Wang Changling 王昌龄(?-756?), that illustrates the high opinion that some Tang poets held of this famous Daoist priestess.\(^1\)

*Calling on Master Jiao*

| 中峰青苔壁，   | 萬仏萬佛，   |
| 一點雲生時。 | 一點雲生時。 |
| 岂意石堂里，   | 岂意石堂里， |
| 得逢焦錬師。 | 得逢焦錬師。 |
| 鐵香浮琴案， | 鐵香浮琴案， |
| 松影閑硯岡。 | 松影閑硯岡。 |
| 拜受長年藥， | 拜受長年藥， |
| 翱翻西海期。 | 翱翻西海期。 |

Unlike the exaggerated descriptions given by Li Bai and Wang Wei in their eulogies, Wang Changling wrote his poem like a report, recounting his honorable meeting with the great Daoist master. Wang uses the first quatrain explaining the where and the when of his contact with the Daoist priestess. He then provides a picture inside her room – “Incense was burning and zither’s table was dustless” and her courtyard, where few people came as the steps looked idle. The concluding sentence speaks of the author’s reward for the visit and his wish to attain immortality. Wang’s admiration is expressed in

\(^1\) Wang Changling 王昌齡 got his jinshi degree in 727, the fifteenth year of the era of Kaiyuan 開元 (713–742).
his choice of words, for example, starting from the title, he applies “ye” 謹, (to pay a
tormal visit) emphasizing his respect for the Daoist master, then he says, “I was pleased
to enter her stone room” in the third line and “I was honored to receive medicine for
longevity” in the second last line. Finally, he summarizes his visit by describing his hopes
for the world of immortality.

Since Wang focuses his work on recounting how he met the Daoist priestess, he
uses only two lines depicting the Daoist nun’s residence. Therefore I wish to present a
poem written by Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫(772–842), who concentrates his poem on the portrayal
of the female Daoist.191

*To Master Zhang in the East Mountains*

Master Zhang is a Perfected in the east mountains,
Her noble emotions and a quiet charm rarely rarely found
in the human world.
She is able to write books for women,
Living in green mountains she has now served the Primordial
Lord for a long time.192
With golden threads she weaves brocade characters,
On the altar of Yuqing she puts on a Daoist robe.
She doesn’t need accompaniment playing flute,
on the path to the clouds
She just wants to ride the phoenix alone.

According to Liu, the Daoist priestess Zhang has lived in mountains alone for a long time.
Because she has noble emotions and quiet charm that are rarely found in the human
world, as well as a good command of writing, she is capable of penning books on
behavior norms for all women. In addition to her literary work, she also performs

191 Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 won jinshi degree in the ninth year of the era of Zhenyuan 貞元(785-805).
192 The Primordial Lord is the god of Yuqing 玉清 division.
religion rituals wearing a Daoist robe. The altar of *Yuqing* 玉清 refers to a division of the Daoist texts. Robinet Isabelle explains, “Three supreme gods, each reigning over a separate heaven, sent out in turn three teachings”. "Yuqing” is one of the three teachings and its corresponding god is named Primordial Lord 元君, whom the Daoist priestess worships in her room in the mountain. Finally Liu points out a unique feature shared by many Daoist practitioners: she has an inclination to be alone, which might arouse, in the Tang male literati, more interest in her mysterious life. Liu’s reverence for the female Daoist master is clearly revealed in his the depiction of Master Zhang.

### 3.2. Mysterious Feeling

One can find a great variety of complicated feelings and attitudes towards female Daoists in the many diverse poetic works created by the Tang male elite. Some works express elements of curiosity and feelings of mystery regarding the Daoist nuns. The following poem was written by Zhang Ji 張籍 (fl. 767 – 830), who describes a female Daoist who lived in the mountains for years and practiced the Daoist “bigu” 辟穢 (diet). Julian F Pas explains, “In the Taoist religion, diet is one of the basic disciplines of the adept. It has two aspects: Positively, a proper diet strengthens one’s health and nourishes one’s *ch’i*; negatively, abstention from certain foods prevents evil influence from affecting one’s physical and spiritual well-being.” According to Zhang, the Daoist nun apparently took on such a positive practice with regard to her diet:

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193 Isabelle Robinet *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, 197.
194 Zhang Ji 張籍 (fl. 767–830) got *jinshi* degree in the fifteenth year of the era of Zhenyuan 貞元 (785–805).
The Lady Who Eats Nothing
(or Sent to the Daoist Priestess in the Mountains)

She has lived in the mountain for several years,
Green hairs grow over her body.
She rarely speaks to save her breath,
Keeping her mind in body she meets with immortals.
The turtle she keeps doesn’t eat either;
Untouched, her medicines gather dust.
We must ask the Divine Mother,
For her ranking among immortals.

不食姑
(作赠山中女道士)

幾年山里住，
已作綠毛身。
護氣常稀語，
存思自見神。
養龜同不食，
留藥任生塵。
要問西王母，
仙中第幾人。

Zhang portrays a Daoist nun who has lived in the mountains for several years and has green hairs covering her body. To conserve her breath (qi), she seldom speaks. Although she has medicine for longevity, she does not touch it. The last couplet, however, seems confusing due to the missing subject. It may be interpreted as “we’ll have to ask the Queen Mother of the West, for her rank among immortals”, or “she will ask the Queen Mother of the West, for her rank among immortals”. I prefer the first interpretation because it reflects Zhang’s curiosity more clearly.

Zhang’s imagery of the Daoist priestess in the poem appears strange, unconvincing or even preposterous, but his interest and curiosity about the fasting Daoist nun seem very strong; he created another poem on a Daoist nun, whose name is Shangfang, who also practiced fasting. In the following poem his subject seems more realistic.

The Immortal Lady Shanfang Who Eats Nothing

Quiet and lonely among flowering branches,
There’s only a plain zither in her straw hut.
She changes her outlooks because of mountains,
She doesn’t speak out to visitors.

不食仙姑山房

寂寂花枝裏，
草堂唯素琴。
因山曾改眼，
見客不言心。
When the moon rises, the path to the creek is quiet,
Cranes cry in the deep sky-high forests.
If we can learn how to produce elixir,
I would like to live in the darkest forest.

In spite of the title, which says that the poem is on a fasting immortal lady, Zhang does not say anything about her diet in the poem. Instead, he explores her surroundings: lonely flowers, a plain zither in a hall of grass, a quiet path to the creek and a crane crying in the deep forest. The second couplet passes on the same information as in the prior poem “The Lady Who Eats Nothing” – this Daoist nun does not talk much either. While Zhang expresses reverence for the priestess, he has doubts about her Daoist practice as he says in the final couplet, “If we can learn how to produce elixir, I would like to live in the darkest forest”. Thus, he expresses an ambivalent attitude towards the Daoist priestess in the poem.

Zhang’s contradictory attitude about female Daoists’ practice was shared by other Tang literati as illustrated in the following poem written by Ma Dai 馬戴 (775–?). Ma expresses a mix of respect, curiosity and even a bit of lust in his poem.

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**Inscription on the Residence of a Female Daoist**

*(She did not take herbs for forty years)*

The fasting nun lives in Yunxi creek,
She does not make elixir, nor plant herbs.
Apricot flowers produce seeds in vain,
She lets stalactites become mud.
When she sweeps the floor, black bulls come to crouch down,
When she plant pine trees white cranes rest in them.
Everybody knows the fairy is beautiful,
Isn’t she wife of Ruanlang?

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196 Ma Dai 馬戴 won jinshi degree in the fourth year of the era of Huichang 會昌 (841–847).
197 This poem is also ascribed to Qin Xi 秦希 (724–?), see QTS 8.2895.
While in the subtitle of this poem, the term “buer”不餌 appears like a verb phrase, in sense of “not eating”, and taking an object of “zhishu”芝術 (a kind of herb), it is used as a person’s name in the opening line. Thus I think “Buer” might also be the name of the nun. The first quatrains of Ma’s poem is clearly focused on the Daoist nun’s diet. She does not eat herbs, elixir, flower seeds, or stalactites, which were commonly consumed by Daoists. Ma seems to highlights the accomplishments that the Daoist priestess has achieved, as she has lived on qi (breath) for forty years.

In the third couplet Ma continues his amazing description of the Daoist nun, adding more awe-inspiring characteristics. The final couplet, however, provides a surprising ending with an unexpected questioning of whether the nun is married. It is possible that the poet considered the Daoist nun as beautiful as the goddess and that her beauty simply reminded him of the story of “Ruanlang”. Thus, while the poet compliments the Daoist nun on her religious ascetic practice, he also emphasizes her pretty appearance and wonders if she is available to marry a man in the secular world.

Among the masterpieces on Daoist women composed by famous Tang poets, Jia Dao’s 賈島 (779-843) work is unique. Since little is known about the process of female Daoist ordination, Jia’s work “Ordination of a female Daoist on the First Day” seems particularly valuable and distinctive. In the poem, the ordination ceremony occurs at midnight, which makes it especially mysterious.

*Ordination of a Female Daoist on the First Day*

On the renewal night of the first day,
She took a bath and put on clean clothes.
A number of stars appeared in the shape of the Big Dipper,
Across the vast sky scattered clouds were flowing.
Amid frost, the sound of a chime beaten,
With the moon high in the sky the shadow of the altar looked small.
She stood and listened to her master’s speech to the end,
Then she returns, a talisman tied to her left elbow.

Similar to an on-the-spot record, this poem starts with an indication of the time: the ritual took place at a time of transition from old to new. Though the poem does not speak explicitly at what time of the year, it says the ritual is on “the first day”. According to Jia, the nun has to take a bath and puts on clean clothes for the ritual. Then, in the following two couplets, Jia depicts the scene around her. In ancient China, the stone chime, “qing” 磬, an instrument beaten like a bell and shaped like a ruler, was often played in Buddhist or Daoist rituals. As the “qing” was usually hung high on a rock, Jia says that amidst the frost can be heard the sounds of a “qing”.

In the concluding couplet, Jia switches to depicting the priestess, offering more details of the ritual. When her master finishes a speech, the priestess receives a talisman tied around her left elbow. Unfortunately we do not know what the talisman looked like, but it seems to have represented her ordination. Although Jia writes his poem in a plain style using simple language, the incident he describes seems original and mysterious.

3.3. Criticism

Han Yu occupies an important place in the history of Chinese literature because of his masterpieces in both prose and poetry, and writing based on Zhou and Han models. A famous example of his verse is his “Xie Ziran”, which became well known not only
due to his innovative style of writing, but also because of its fierce critique of Daoist beliefs and people’s obsession in immortality.

According to Daoist hagiography, Xie Ziran 謝自然 (?–794) was born in Sichuan and demonstrated a natural talent for reading Daoist texts from childhood. She was proficient in zither playing, calligraphy and composition. She started travelling at the age of forty, visiting famous mountains, temples and relics. Later she returned to Jinquan 金泉 mountain in Sichuan and continued her Daoist cultivation. In 794, she was said to have transformed into an immortal in the daytime.198 When Xie’s story spread to the Tang court, emperor Dezong 德宗 (r.779–805) issued two decrees to local officials declaring that this was an auspicious omen. Later Xie was given the title as “The Perfected in the Extreme East” (Dongji Zhenren 東極真人).

It seems that this story of Xie’s transformation inspired a large number of Daoist zealots, because many learned Tang men responded favorably and composed poems on Xie Ziran, especially after the imperial edict, examples of which are, Shi Jianwu’s 施肩悟 (780–861) “The Transformation of Xie Ziran” 謝自然昇仙199 and Xia Fangqing’s 夏方慶 “The Perfected Xie, Her Immortal-self, Returning to Her Old Mountain” 謝真人仙駕還旧山.200 In contrast to all this complimentary work, Han Yu’s poem is entirely negative and remarkably long, consisting of sixty-eight lines. In order to show the

198 See LSZXTDTJHJ v.5 in ZHDZ, 47.651.
199 Shi Jianwu got jinshi degree in 807. His poem on Xie Ziran can be found in QTS v.494(Zhonghua shuju, 1960) 15.5605.
200 Though Xia Fangqing’s dates of birth and death are unknown, he got jinshi degree in the ninth year of the Zhenyuan 貞元 era (785–805). His poem can be found in QTS v.347(Zhonghua shuju, 1960)11.3887.
different views that Han held regarding Xie Ziran, a Daoist divine woman, I present the lengthy poem below.

_Xie Ziran_  

In Guozhou, Nanchong District,  
There is a girl, named Xie Ziran, born in a commoner’s family.  
She was childish, idiotic and had no knowledge,
But she heard that immortals exist.
So she cared more for their techniques than for her own life,
She then settled in Jinquan mountains.
She broke with prosperity, glory and admiration,
And threw away her parents’ love.
Even the ghosts were touched by her infatuation,
Her mind was so bewildered that it is hard to describe.
One day she sat in an empty room,
Clouds rose from inside her room.
It was as if reed-pipe playing was heard,
The music sounded like it came from a celestial world.
The daylight dimmed and everything became invisible,
The wind soughed and the scenery became desolate.
The light flashed on and off over the beams,
Five-colored light at the same time.
All the people watching it felt shocked and scared,
In a second, she rose up lightly,
Floating in the air she looked like mist in the wind.

The world is vast and boundless,  
It is hard to tell the reasons for things.
The village head reported the story,
The governor was surprised and sighed.
He drove to the village with other officials,
Ruffians and the vulgar competed to move to the front.
Having entered the door they saw nothing,
Her hat and shoes looked like a cicada’s slough.
Everyone said it was related to immortality,
It was so “obvious” and it passed around.

I heard in ancient times after the Xia dynasty,
Pictures of all things were drawn so gods and ghosts were distinguished.
Then people could enter the forest in the mountains,
And they did not come across demons and monsters.
But things declined and did not revive,
The later generation willfully cheat and abuse.  
Darkness and brightness were mixed up in disorder,  
Humans and ghosts were killed by each other.  
The first emperor of the Qin dynasty had his fondness, The emperor Wu of Han dynasty expanded its origin.  
Ever since the two emperors’ reigns,  
Disasters like this kept happening.  
Trees and stones grew or changed to eccentric types,  
Foxes exerted theurgic power.  
No one could enjoy a full life,  
How can he prolong his life?  
Human life is among ten thousands of things,  
Knowledge has the highest priority,  
Why do you have no confidence?  
And you are motivated by material.  
Those past cannot regret,  
The lonely souls make a deep complaint.  
People of the future can learn a lesson,  
My words won’t be idle talk.  
Certain principles exist in human life,  
Man and woman have their own proper morals.  
Winter clothes and food for the empty stomach,  
Both come from spinning and farming.  
The inferior use this to protect his children and grandchildren,  
The superior to serve emperors and parents.  
If one behaves differently,  
It is the same as giving up the body.  
Oh, that poor girl,  
Took permanent refuge among spirits.  
I signed about this and wrote this poem,  
People ignorant should remember my words.

This poem can be divided into three parts. The first part (line 1–22) recounts the story of Xie Ziran in a tone of matter-of-fact. However, Han’s vision conflicts with what we learn from other sources. For example, according to the Daoist canon and the Taiping guangji 太平廣記, Xie’s father was an official in the local government and her mother came from a big wealthy clan in the area. In addition, Xie is said to have received a good education from childhood, visited many famous scenic spots and historical places after

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201 In this and next lines, Han Yu is referring to the fondness of superstition the emperors’ of Qin and Han had.  
she reached the age of forty. Therefore, I doubt the accuracy of Han’s account of Xie, which states that she was “childish”, “idiotic” and “had no knowledge”.

Han begins the second part (line 23 – 32) with an allusion to Huainanzi 淮南子, “Beyond the nine zhou 州 (regions), there are the eight yin 燮 (remote areas), and beyond the eight yin there are eight hong 累 (expanses).” (九州之外有八冥，八冥之外有八累). 203 Charles Hucker explains, nine regions is a reference to the nine administrative areas in remote antiquity of China, which were “used throughout history as an analogy for the concept of China in its entirety.” 204 By using allusion, Han emphasizes that anything odd might happen in the vast and boundless world. Then, he depicts vividly how the incident was reported and how the officials went to confirm it. However Han’s choice of words reveals his stance, as he specifies, “ruffians and the vulgar competed to move to the front”, indicating that people who are interested in it are not well educated.

Having introduced the whole fiction of Xie Ziran, in the third part (line 33 – 64) of the poem Han switches his role from that of an observer or narrator, to that of a trenchant critic speaking on behalf of Confucian scholars. He starts his criticism with an allusion to a historical story from 606 BC. It was said that the sage emperor Yu 禹 (fl. 2300 BC) collected bronze in China to cast an ancient cooking vessel and had pictures of all sorts of objects drawn on the vessel, so that the common people could recognize many peculiar things, including strange trees, stones, and mountains. Henceforth, people could identify all kinds of objects, including gods and ghosts, and therefore were not confronted

203 Huainanzi zhuzi suoyin 淮南子逐字索引 (A Concordance to the Huainanzi) (Taiwan: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1992), 33–34.
204 Charles Hucker Dictionary of official titles in imperial China, 176.
by any monsters or demons when they went across rivers or entered the forests in mountains.\textsuperscript{205} This old story, in my opinion, celebrated the virtues of Yu and the importance of education, rather than negating the possible existence of gods.

Following this allusion, Han denounces the first emperor of the Qin dynasty and the Emperor Wu 武帝 of the Han dynasty for their misconduct in governing. A close reading of Han’s poem reveals that Han does not completely deny the existence of ghosts, as indicated when he says, “Humans and ghosts were killed by each other.” and “Foxes exerted theurgic power.” However, his ardent passion for Confucianism does not allow any other spiritual support to exist in China except for Confucian values and morality.

In fact, the entire third part of the poem is a good example of the propagation of Confucianism. For instance, “Certain principles exist in human life, man and woman have their own morals.” (人生有常理, 男女各有倫) and “Human life is among ten thousands of things, knowledge having the highest priority.” (人生處萬類, 知識最為賢) and “To the inferior, one should protect his children and grand children; to the superior, one should serve the Emperor and parents.” (下以保子孫, 上以奉君親). Finally, Han finishes his moral lecture with an admonishment. Based on Chinese dictionary, the Chinese term “\textit{shu shen}” 書紳 originally referred to writing on a belt, but later came to

\textsuperscript{205} The original story goes, “In ancient time the place of Xia was full of virtue. They painted objects in the distance. With nine pieces of tribute bronze they made nine tripods, on which hundreds of objects were drawn. So people could recognize gods and ghosts. Therefore when people went to waters and mountains they didn’t come across anything that could hurt them, neither demons nor ghosts.” 昔夏之方有德也。远方圖物，貢金九枚，鑄鼎象物，百物而為為之僃，使民知神僃；故民入川澤山林，不逢不若，魑魅魍魎，莫能逢之.” See \textit{Chunqiu zuozhuan zhuzi suoyin}, 春秋左傳逐子索引, (\textit{A Concordance to the Chunqiu zuozhuan}) Hongkong: Shanwu yinshu guan 1977, 159.
mean “unforgotten”. Thus Han attempts to persuade ignorant people to bear his words in mind.

This poem prominently displays Han’s great zeal for Confucianism. According to Han, Confucianism should be the sole and supreme standard for behavior in China, and thus he rejects all other teachings, including those of Buddhism and Daoism. Ostensibly, this poem blames the rise of Daoism on the beliefs of the so-called illiterate or inadequately educated people; however, it also embodies Han’s attacks on the pro-Daoist works of some high-ranking officials or even the emperor Dezong’s interest in Daoism.

In contrast to Han’s disapproval and criticism that were released directly and forcefully in the poem “Xie Ziran”, Han subtly mocks Daoists religion through the use of a humourous tone in another poem about a Daoist nun from the Hua Mountain. Although her exact name is unspecified, Han makes it clearly that she is from a family believing in Daoism.

A Woman from Hua Mount

On the street east and west street, monks discuss Buddhist sutras,
Hitting bells and blowing shell trumpets they make a loud noise in the Palace.
They seduce and convince people by holding out guilt and good fortunes,
The audience is packed so tightly, the people look like lines of duckweed.
In yellow robes the Daoist is also preaching,
Like a scattered stars, few people listen in the seats.
In Hua Mountain there is a lady whose family believes in Daoism,
She wants to expel the heterodoxy and return to

華山女

街東街西講佛經，
撞鐘吹簫鬧宮庭。
廣張福資誘脅，
聽眾狎恰排浮萍。
黃衣道士亦講說，
座下寥落如明星。
華山女兒家奉道，
欲驅異教歸仙靈。

immortals and goddesses.  
After washing and doing her make-up she puts on her robe and cap,  
Her neck is white, cheeks are red, and eyebrows are drawn long and dark.  
Then she climbs up to her seat and delivers Daoist teachings,  
The gate of temple is not allowed to open.  
Nobody knows who secretly discloses information,  
They make a stir just like a thunderclap.  
It sweeps across all other Buddhist temples and people are all gone,  
Fine horses jam the road and curtains of carriages are connected in one line.  
The Daoist temple is so full that some must sit outside,  
Latecomers can not find place, so they cannot listen.  
They take off hairpins, bracelets and jade attachments,  
Jade and gold are piled up, shining like pure light.  
A eunuch from Royal Palace passes the decree from Emperor,  
People in the six palaces are willing to know the face and figure of the master.  
The jade emperor nods his head allowing her to return,  
Riding a dragon and a crane she travels across the sky.  
How can young people from wealthy families know about Daoism,  
They circumambulate a hundred times without rest.  
Things with her are blurry as her window is covered with clouds and her room is shrouded in mist,  
There are layers of green curtains and golden screens extending a long way.  
The ladder to immortality is hard to climb because of their strong connection with the world,  
Fruitlessly they let blue birds pass on messages.

This poem focuses completely on a popular narrative, employing a humorous tone. Han starts with a graphic account of how Buddhist and Daoist monks contend to win audiences away from one another. Thus he paves the way for the appearance of the Daoist woman. Without question, Han’s portrayal of the Daoist priestess is fresh and attractive, and it has often been used as evidence of the Daoist woman being like a prostitute, because she wears heavy make-up. Some Chinese scholars believe that Han
expresses his irony and disapproval through his depiction of the Daoist nun.\textsuperscript{207}

Based on Han’s narration, the female Daoist not only appears beautiful but also has some psychological understanding. Her success at winning the popularity and trust of the local people illustrates her competence and extraordinary abilities at performance. The Chinese scholar Chen Hanxing argues that Han criticizes the female Daoist for using her good looks to seduce her audience.\textsuperscript{208} But I wonder if it was simply her beautiful looks, or possibly a combination of this and the audiences’ beliefs in Daoism that enticed the audience to not only come to listen to her speeches, but also to make contributions, in the form of jewelry, to the cause of Daoism.

The last quatrain also contains elements that have been subject to some controversy. Some Chinese critics consider Han’s lines “everything about her is mysterious” and “there are layers of green curtains and golden screens that extend a long way” as an indication of sexual liaisons that took place between the Daoist nun and young men from wealthy families.\textsuperscript{209} However, the last couplet suggests that the young people were unable to get close to the Daoist priestess because they still had strong connections in the secular world. As such, it implies that they had to entrust blue birds to pass on messages to her. In spite of all the debates, Han’s ridicule and satire are clearly stated in his poem, rendering it more of an amusing story than a serious political attack.

Compared to his writing style in the poem “Xie Ziran,” Han employed a different technique in this poem. His censure of the Daoist nun from Hua Mount is not as pointed

\textsuperscript{207} Chen Hanxing 陳寒星 “Hanyu shige de xiexue fengge”韓愈詩歌的諺詼風格 in Hanyu yanjiu lunwen ji 韓愈研究論文集(Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1988) 265.
\textsuperscript{208} Chen Hanxing 陳寒星 “Hanyu shige de xiexue fengge”,265.
\textsuperscript{209} Chen Hanxing 陳寒星 “Hanyu shige de xiexue fengge”,265.
and direct as it was of Xie Ziran. Therefore, Han allows readers to have a greater freedom of imagination by providing them with an assortment of possible interpretations according to their own preferences and understanding. Some may find political information embodied within the poem, while others may see an implication of sarcasm. It is my view that Han’s detailed and vivid depiction of the Daoist priestess gives us a wider perspective regarding female Daoists during the Tang dynasty. His poem provides concrete images of her appearance, performance techniques, as well as her general popularity as a woman Daoist, not only within local circles but also among the royal families. I regard this poem as an observation of female Daoist involvement in community service and cultural activities, as well as this woman’s religious dedication during the mid-Tang period. In contrast to other views that see a dialectical tension of ethical and political significance, I put my focus on her cultural contributions and on the ways in which the poem contributes to our understanding of the social dynamics of the period.

3.4. Passions and Lust

The portrayal of the Daoist women varies as seen in the works of the Tang male elites. Apart from admiration, criticism and mysterious feelings, the Tang poets also expressed their passions or even sensual desires for Daoist priestesses. Therefore, the attraction or erotic element of these women becomes increasingly explicit and their religious or so-called supernatural elements are deemphasized. For example, Bai Juyi 白居易(772-846), who had frequent contact with Daoist masters and wrote several poems
for his Daoist friends (including Daoist priestess), expressed his various emotions and states of mind towards Daoist priestesses in a poem written for a Master Wei.

**To Master Wei**

Moving from Xunyang she is now a stay at home priestess, 　　赠韋鍊師
Her body is like a floating cloud and her heart is like ashes. 　　漸陽遷客為居士，
If immortal ladies in heaven have no carnal desires, 　　身似浮雲心似灰。
Why do we stare at each other, feeling reluctant to leave? 　　上界女仙無嗜欲，
We both wonder what happened in our previous life, 　　何因相顧兩裴回。
In whose household did we become man and wife? 　　共疑過去人問世，

Though this poem consists of only three couplets, it embodies layers of meaning related to the author and the priestess. In the opening couplet Bai introduces the background of the priestess - she is not a professional Daoist nun since she stays home, but her heart seems dead and her body is insecure. Then Bai moves to his personal feelings asking, “if immortal ladies in heaven have no carnal desires, why do we stare at each other feeling reluctant to leave?” Apparently, Bai’s rhetorical question is a doubt or negation of her Daoist identity. Regardless of his description of her ashen heart in the previous line, Bai feels a lot of desire between him and the priestess. Thus, in the final couplet, he makes a bold request in the form of another rhetorical question, wondering if they were married in a previous life.

It is possible that Bai’s burning emotions for Master Wei had nothing to do with her Daoist identity, although her Daoist background may have enhanced the sense of mystery about her. In other poems that Bai composed for Daoist priestesses, he expresses only feelings of sympathy or curiosity. For example, in the following poem sent to
another Daoist nun, whom Bai addressed as Master Su, we read:

_To Master Su_

Grey hairs grow at her temples and her mind is broad
By the window in the deep pine forest and in front
of a stove for boiling herbs
Together with some Daoists she talks all night long,
When they forget about flowers they sleep the whole day.
Due to her laziness her shining mirror remains in the box all the time,
When she tries to play her plain zither, half the strings are missing.
As she dislikes superfluous statements by Zhuangzi,
She only reads six or seven sections of Free and Easy Wandering Chapter.

Through Bai’s depiction, one may form a picture of an aged Daoist nun, who once played
the zither, but not anymore. Her current interests are boiling herbs and chattering with
Daoist friends. She seems so idle that when she doesn’t tend her flowers, she often sleeps
the whole day. As her hair grows grey, she no longer cares about her appearance and her
mirror remains in its box. She does read some Daoist classics, but only a few paragraphs
from Zhuangzi’s essays. The portrayal of the Daoist nun that Bai draws in his poem
seems real and objective. Contrary to the passion expressed in the poem for Master Wei,
Bai’s mind is calm and reasonable in the poem for Master Su.

For comparison, this study will present a poem composed by Shi Jianwu 施肩吾,
who seemed to possess a special interest in Daoist women and who wrote several poems
for Daoist priestesses.²¹⁰

_Two Poems Presented to the Daoist Priestess Zheng Yuhua_ 贈女道士鄭玉華二首

I
On your black hair the new hairpin looks like green lotus,
玄發新簪碧藕花，

²¹⁰ Shi Jianwu got his degree in 820, the fifteenth year of the era of Yuanhe 元和 (806–821).
For a finer complexion you take cinnabar.
The scenery of the human world is not worthy of love,
You often laugh at Liu’s terrible homesickness.

II
You don’t pick lotus flowers in the mirror-like lake,
But following the old lady you learn how to be an immortal.
A red string fell in a black bag by mistake,
What string should it be for the harp you pluck.

Though nothing can be found about the addressee of this poem either in anecdotes or in Daoist texts, the priestess seems to have been well known during her age, as several learned Tang men composed poems for her. The Tang poet, Li Kangcheng 李康成 even wrote a poem of thirty-two lines, in which he expressed his strong emotions for her. As Shi Jianwu was famous for his proficiency at writing quatrains, he sent two quatrains to the female Daoist. He starts his first quatrain with a description of her beautiful appearance: her new hairpin looks like a green lotus clipped on her black hair, and her complexion is fine because she takes elixirs. Then the poet makes an allusion to a legendary love story: on his way to collect herbs in the mountains Liu Chen 劉晨 encountered a beautiful immortal girl, with whom he lived for half a year. However, they separated because Liu suffered severely from homesickness. By applying the allusion, Shi expresses his favorable impression of the Daoist woman joking about Liu’s silly homesickness.

In the second verse Shi reveals his curiosity about the addressee: why doesn’t she pick lotuses from a lake, like an ordinary girl? Why does she follow an old lady to study

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211 Unfortunately the exact birth and death dates of Li Kangcheng are unknown, but he is said to have been a contemporary of Li Bai and Du Fu. Li’s poem for Zheng Yuhua can be found in QTS v.203 (Zhonghua shuju, 1960),6.2129.

212 Xiaoyao xujing 逍遙墟經 v. 1 in ZHDZ, 45.497.
Daoism and pursue immortality? The final couplet expresses the poet’s sadness for the priestess. Shi compares the Daoist woman to a red string, which has fallen in a black bag by mistake. In ancient China, Daoists often carried books or utilities in a black bag, thus Shi implies that the beautiful woman has made a mistake by studying Daoism, otherwise, she would be one of the strings of an elegant musical instrument – the harp.\textsuperscript{213} I am uncertain about the symbolic meaning of the harp strings. Are they the symbol of a singing girl? Or of a girl who plays in the court? At the very least, Shi feels that the priestess is wasting her beauty by practicing Daoism.

An examination of Shi’s poem reflects that Shi seems to care more about her looks rather than her mind and her spirit. In order to give a more rounded picture of the priestess, Zheng Yuhua, I chose a short poem composed by Zhang Hu 張祜 (fl.785–849), who explores a different part of her life.

\textit{A Farewell to Immortal Lady Yuhua}

\begin{align*}
\text{The mist and rosy clouds around her house are her neighbors in four directions,} \\
\text{Everyday she is close to the cold spring and white rocks.} \\
\text{It is not a place for a secular person to live,} \\
\text{Please take good care of yourself in the mountains.}
\end{align*}

Based on Zhang’s poem, the priestess lives in a mountain without any neighbors. Her company is the cold spring and the white rocks. The poet admires the nun’s devotion to Daoist practice, believing that one with strong secular desires could not live in a place like this. In general, Zhang expresses his high regard and deep concern toward the priestess.

\textsuperscript{213} Konghong 慶箏 (harp) came from western area, it is an ancient plucked stringed instrument, its size varies. The biggest harp has twenty-five strings.
As seen through Zhang’s poem, the priestess, Zheng Yuhua, is a committed Daoist cleric, which seems contradictory to the portrait given in Shi’s poem. It is my view that we should exercise caution when using poems by the Tang male elite to understand Daoist women as, in the composition of these poems, Tang poets expressed their personal ideas and feelings, which might not be a reflection of the subject but instead a reflection of the author’s own mind.

Although Li Shangyin 李商隱 (fl. 812–858) was well known for his close relationship with the two Daoist sisters, he left few poems that express his passions explicitly for the Daoist nuns. It was said that Li once went to study Daoism in Yuyang (玉陽) mountain, where he met with Song Huayang(宋華陽), a servant girl. Song entered the Daoist priesthood with her master, who was said to be a princess. A close inspection of Li’s poems that were said created for the Daoist woman reveals that all the poems were written obliquely and they could be interpreted variously. Furthermore, without an indication of recipient, it is hard to define if the poem is written for a Daoist woman. Thus I chose a short poem from Li’s corpus, which is clearly intended for the Song Huayang sisters.

_Sent to Song Huayang Sisters Again in a Moon Night_ 月夜重寄宋華陽姊妹

We have to choose between stealing peaches and medicine, 偷桃竊藥事難兼，
The colored toad is locked inside the twelve-storied tower. 十二城中鎖彩蟾。
Three of us should enjoy the night scene together, 應共三英同夜賞，
The jade building looks still like a crystal curtain. 玉樓仍是水晶簾。
Though the poem consists of only four lines, four allusions are employed in it. In the opening line, Li talks about the two legendary figures, Dongfangsu 東方朔, who stole longevity peaches from the Divine Mother of the West, and Heng-e 嫦娥, who stole longevity pills from her husband and ascended to the moon. The surface meaning of the line is that they cannot steal peaches and pills at the same time, which may imply that they cannot keep their secret from being discovered.

In the second line Li compares Song sisters to a toad, the creature that Heng-e turned into when she went up to the moon. By emphasizing “colored toads” Li implies that although the two sisters are beautiful they are locked in the twelve-level building, where the Divine Mother of the West is said to live. Then Li says that the three of them should enjoy the night scene together, however, the “jade building”, where the Song sisters live, looks like a crystal curtain, a symbol of the Divine Mother’s residence, which is inaccessible for Li. This poem seems to have embodied Li’s ambivalent feelings and complicated thoughts and it discloses the intimate relationship between Li and the two women in Daoism.

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215 Dongfangsu’s story can be found in Bowu zhi 博物志 v.8. See Bowu zhi jiaozhen 博物志校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980)97.

216 Heng’e’s story can be found in Huainan zi, 淮南子 “Lanming pian” 覽冥篇 (Taiwan: Shangwu yinshu guan,1966)43.


218 Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗 Daojiao yu nüxing 道教與女性 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1990)24.

219 For the reference of “a crystal curtain” 水精簾 see Wenjingge siku quanshu 文淵閣四庫全書, shibu/zhengshulei/yizhi zhishu/wanshou shengdian chuji 史部 / 政書類 / 儀制之屬 / 萬壽盛典初集, v.74(Shanghai: shangwu yinshu guan 1934-5)217.679.
The following poem is written by Li Dong 李洞, who wrote a poem for a Daoist nun, addressed as Master Pang, in which a completely different view and description of a Daoist woman is provided.²²⁰

*To Master Pang*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem in English</th>
<th>Poem in Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living by the Fu River she speaks softly,</td>
<td>家住湔江漢詠嬌,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her loud song is accompanied by a flute playing</td>
<td>一聲歌戛玉樓簾。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the jade building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She sleeps on a warm spring day in her soft golden-thread dress.</td>
<td>睡融春日柔金繭,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her makeup and cloud-like hair style shake with her</td>
<td>敷發秋霞戰翠緌。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jadeite hairpins.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even red plums would envy her rosy cheeks,</td>
<td>兩脣酒醺紅杏妒,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half of her breast cleavage looks tender, like thick white clouds.</td>
<td>半胸酥嫩白雲饒。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to take her hands and follow her orders,</td>
<td>若能携手隨仙令,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And I’ll cross the magpie bridge over the white Milky Way.</td>
<td>皎皎銀河渡鵲橋。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Without the title, one might not believe that this poem is written for a Daoist woman. The author applies six couplets in the depiction of his subject’s voice, dress and looks. She speaks softly, sings loudly; she wears a golden thread dress and fine makeup; she also drinks and has rosy cheeks; the description of her breasts is original and sensual. These imageries are often seen in the poems for a singing girl or women in the entertainment district, but are rarely found in the description of female Daoist clerics, except in works that appeared during the Five Dynasties period. The last couplet, however, implies the identity of the subject, as the author expresses his wish to be transformed and to follow the immortal to heaven.

Among the Tang poetic works on Daoist women, poems written in such an erotic way are few in number. Many Tang poets express their admiration, criticism, and

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²²⁰ The exact dates of birth and death about Li Dong are unknown, but he was alive during the reign of Zhao Zong 昭宗 (r. 889–904). He once took the imperial examination for jinshi degree but did not pass. *Quan Tanshi* preserves 168 poems written by Li Dong.
curiosity toward Daoist priestesses through depictions of their residence, practice, performance or daily activities. Some record their personal experiences with the religious women. Some are interested in Daoist rituals and events. There are some poets who focus on the appearance of the priestesses and some even reveal their wish to marry Daoist women either for the purpose of transformation or for the satisfaction of their sensual desires, or for both.

Tang poets’ strong interest and great concern for women in Daoism are illustrated even more clearly through the common theme called “Sending the Court Women to a Convent”. So many Tang poets, especially in the mid to late Tang periods, composed poems exhibiting their opinion and concerns about this topic, that it will be impossible to present all the poems on the theme in the space of this study. I have thus selected examples of the most famous or those that provide concrete and fresh images.

3.5. Sending the Court Women to a Daoist Convent

A unique phenomenon that occurred in the Tang period was the practice of sending court women to a Daoist convent, a practice that contributed a great deal to increasing numbers of Daoist priestesses. According to Wenzong ji 文宗紀 (Record of Wenzong) in the Jiu Tangshu, “In the sixth month of the third year of Kaicheng era (836–841), four hundred and eighty women from the imperial palaces were sent out and settled in the temples and convents along the two streets”. (開成三年六月，出宮人四百八十人，送兩街寺觀安置). This was not the only time that the Tang court released

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221“Wenzong ji” (文宗紀)in JTS v.17, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju)1.574.
women from the palaces and sent them to temples and abbesses. Indeed, many of the Tang poets who composed poems on this topic lived before the Kaicheng era.

Although it is difficult to determine when this theme first appeared, Dai Shulun’s poem should be considered among the earliest works on the theme, not only because his life span is earlier than that of many poets who wrote on it, but also because he entitled his poem “A Woman from the Han Palace Went to a Daoist Convent”. Unlike other poems on the theme that stress how the court lady was ordered off to a convent, Dai’s title implies that the court woman went to a convent by her own volition.

_A Woman from the Han Palace Went to a Daoist Convent_  

With desolate grey hair she walked out of the Palace gate,  
In feather-like clothes and a star-like hat she has intentions toward Daoism.  
She bids farewell to the palace to enter the nine layers of the sky,  
Where will she find the Peach Blossom Spring in the mountains of clouds?  
Exhausted from her immortal dream, she will get drunk under the moon at Yao Pool,  
She rode a jade carriage ran in spring without the emperor’s favor.  
Turning back she played a flute, the sky her companion,  
With whom will she talk about the fallen flowers in Shangyang Palace?

Originally “Han palace” refers to a palace in the Han dynasty, but later its meaning extended to include any imperial palace. Dai’s poem begins with a description of the released woman, who was already old. Daoists are often described as dressed in feathered clothes, and the second line emphasizes that the court woman has put on Daoist clothes and hat. The Peach Blossom Spring refers to the immortal land described in Tao Qian’s

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222 _Shangyang_ Palace is the name of a palace located in Luoyang, constructed during the reign of Tang Gaozong (r.649–683).
work, which has been discussed in the previous chapter. “Yao Pool” is said to be the abode of the Divine Mother. Since the court lady has lost her favor with the royal palace, she can only entrust her life to the pursuit of Daoism and immortality. The poem concludes with a touching melancholy coda reflecting the author’s deep sympathy with the released court woman.

As has been discussed in the previous section, Zhang Ji had a considerable interest in observing Daoist women, so it is not surprising to find a poem on the topic written by Zhang as well.

Sending the Court Women to a Daoist Convent

She used to be a favorite in the Zhaoyang Palace,
Among the people pursuing immortality her case is rare.
As she was just released from the imperial palace,
She hasn’t got her immortal dress.
She bid farewell to singing and dancing in glory,
And now she’d like to ride cranes and the phoenix all the time.
Eunuchs saw her entering the cave
Then only an empty jade carriage returns.

The opening line indicates that the court woman is an expelled concubine, who used to live in the Zhaoyang 昭陽 Palace, which originally referred to the palace in the Han dynasty, but later was used for the palace of the emperors’ wife and concubines. Meanwhile, Zhang says, “Among the people pursuing immortality, her case is rare”, which means that by the time she went to the Daoist convent there were not many court women like her entering the Daoist priesthood. Since she had just been released from the palace she did not yet have an “immortal dress”, a term for a Daoist robe. Since cranes and phoenixes are often described as animals ridden by immortals, Zhang writes
symbolically that the woman will follow Daoists in pursuing immortality. In the last couplet Zhang says that eunuchs sent the woman to a cave, a name addressing Daoist priestesses’ residence. Based on Zhang’s poem, it is possible that at an early time, Daoist women were sent to a mountain instead of temples in the city. Overall, Zhang applies a calm and polite tone in the description of her identity, the place she settled in and the eunuchs who sent her off.

The following poem is written by Yu Hu 鈐鴻 (fl.780), who was a contemporary of Zhang Ji. Yu deals with the topic in more detail, and he specifies that the woman was sent to a mountain to enter the Daoist priesthood.

*Sending a Court Woman to a Daoist Convent on a Mountain*

At ten she entered the imperial palace playing the flute,
She took care of water palaces and planted lotus.
She was sad about her grey hair and left her golden hall,
She was permitted to wear a yellow Daoist robe and head for the Jade Peaks.
The old ape who can understand people opens the window in the morning,
Baby cranes learning to fly rest on the pine trees.
She knew after separation from her friends in the palace,
They would listen to the sound of the bell in Gou Mountain at midnight.

Though applying a plain lexicon and straightforward style, Yu recounts a sad story. Due to the woman’s talent for playing the flute she was taken to the imperial palace at the age of ten. But her job was not limited to play, and she had to do various chores in the palace. After growing old, she had to leave the royal palace and get permission to live in the mountains. In the second quatrain Yu focuses on her current life: her company is composed of old apes and baby cranes. She misses her friends in the palace and believes
that they think about her as well. As they do not have any means of communication, they can only count on the sound of the bell from Gou Mountain, which is said to be a place where successful Daoists can be transformed. Compared to the poem of Zhang Ji, Yu tells a story chronologically, with a feeling of sympathy for the woman.

A particularly stunning example of writing on the theme of “Sending Court woman to a Convent” is by Wei Yingwu 韦应物 (737–792?). Wei originally served as a bodyguard (sanwei lang 三卫郎) for the emperor Xuanzong. During the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763), he lost his position and started to focus on study. He was said to be a jinshi degree holder, and received official positions as the prefect (cishi 刺史) of Chuzhou 滁州, Jiangzhou 江州 and Suzhou 蘇州. It is possible that Wei composed the following poem when he worked in the imperial palace. Because Wei had free access to the imperial palaces, he might have had opportunities to watch closely when court women were dismissed. Thus, he explored the topic from a different point of view, focusing on describing how the women were sent away.

*Sending a Court Woman to a Daoist Convent*

She foresook her favor to pursue immortality because she worried about getting old

Without make-up she bade farewell, standing on the steps of the imperial palace

She believes gold elixir can keep her young for a thousand years,

She trimmed her eyebrows symmetrically in front of her treasured mirror.

After handing her jewels and emeralds back to the princess,

The emperor came to watch her putting on a Daoist hat.

Usually all court ladies were jealous of each other,

But when they talk of the Yao Terrace, tears fall from their eyes.
Some inconsistent description appears in the poem. On the one hand, Wei starts his poem by saying that it is the court woman who forsakes her favor in the palace for the purpose of studying immortality because she worries about getting old. On the other hand, the concluding line suggests that all court ladies are reluctant to go to Daoist convents, as they all have tears in eyes whenever they talk about Yao Terrace. In addition, to enhance the effect of the ending line, Wei emphasizes, in the second last line, that their common anxiety about their future can dissolve all the envy that has grown up between them. Moreover, based on Wei’s poem, the court women do not wear make-up on the day when they leave the palace, and in the fourth line he describes that the woman trimmed her eyebrows symmetrically, like the Chinese character for “eight” (ba 八). The third couplet provides some important and original information. First, the court women had to hand over their jewelry and leave the palace without anything valuable. Second, it is a princess, not a eunuch, who comes to collect the treasure. Third, the emperor seems to enjoy watching the woman or women putting on Daoist caps. Given Wei’s position, he was able to get very close to the emperor, and thus, his depiction about the event might be truthful.

The next poem was composed by Wang Jian 王建 (fl. 767–831), who obtained the jinshi degree during the era of Dali 大歷 (766–780). Wang’s poem on the theme also provides some fresh imagery of the dismissal process.

_Sending Court Women to a Daoist Convent_  
She washed off her make-up and didn’t comb,  
Wearing a lotus in her hair she left Weiyang Palace.  
Her disciples copied down her songs and placed them in a folder.

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223 Weiyang 未央 is the name of a royal palace in the Tang dynasty.
The court lady distributed her dancing dresses.
Having asked her master she began to know how to read scriptures,
When she did meditation the incense from the imperial palaces kept burning.
She vowed to go to Penglai to meet the Queen Mother,
But she returned to the human world performing the magic of a goddess.

Wang’s poem is composed of two parts. In the first quatrain he tells us that the court ladies sent to a convent did not comb or wear make-up, which is identical to what Wei Yingwu writes. As Daoist caps were made in the shape of a lotus, the second line indicates she wore a Daoist cap and went out of the imperial palace. The second couplet recounts that the retired woman let her apprentice copy all songs she had performed before, and that she distributed her dancing dresses among the court ladies.

The second quatrain moves on to the depiction of her religious life: she began to learn how to read Daoist texts and she did meditation too. The concluding couplet, however, conveys a vague message due to the ambiguous word “fang”方. Based on the context of the poem, “fang” may have two possible meanings, either “power” or “prescription”. Wang says that though the court lady wished to meet with the Divine Mother who lived in Penglai, she would return to the human world to exhibit her magic power or to illustrate immortal prescriptions. In any case, Wang’s subject seems not to have any melancholy or depressed feelings.

All of the poems examined thus far were composed before large numbers of court woman were dismissed, beginning in 839, as described at the beginning of this section. The following poem presented below was composed by Xiang Si 項斯 (fl. 825-846), who obtained the jinshi degree in 844, the fourth year of the era of Huichang 會昌 (841–847).
It is possible that Xiang wrote his poem using this traditional theme after hearing about the large-scale demobilization of the court women.

_Sending A Palace Lady to a Daoist Convent_  送宫人入道

She wants to follow the Immortal Lady Dong Shuangcheng, 風隨仙女董雙成，
And walk in front of the Divine Mother’s entourage. 王母前頭作伴行。
Wearing a jade crown for the first time she made mistakes 初戴玉冠多誤拜，
in greeting gods and deities,
She would leave the golden palace and give up her old titles. 欲辭金殿別稱名。
She is going to beat the chime for fasting hung high up in the sky, 將敲碧落新齋磬，
Though she was presented her old zither from Zhaoyang palace. 卻進昭陽舊賜箏。
Every morning and evening she burns incense and walks around 旦暮焚香繞壇上，
the terrace,
She regards the Buxu lyrics as songs she sang before.²²⁴ 步虛猶作按歌聲。

Obviously, Xiang’s poem does not have any detailed description of how the court women left the imperial palaces; instead, it is filled with the author’s own suppositions and fantasies. The first quatrain recounts Xiang’s imagination of the immortal world. Dong Shuangcheng 董雙成 was the name of the Divine Mother’s attendant. Xiang assumes that the court lady would like to follow the immortal girl, Dong, and serve the Divine Mother. Then in the following line, he conceives that she has made silly mistakes during the initial period in nunnery, as she cannot recognize the many Daoist deities.

In the second quatrain the poet keeps on joking about the woman. He writes that she confused the Daoist beaten instrument “qing”磬 with the musical instrument “zheng”筝, a Chinese zither, awarded by the emperor when she was in the palace. In addition, she confuses Daoist “buxu” lyrics with the songs she used to sing in the imperial palace. By

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²²⁴ _Buxu_ 步虛 (pacing the void) refers to the lyrics that Daoists read or sing during the religious rituals.
comparison with Wei Yingwu’s poem discussed above, Xiang applies a humorous and relaxed tone in a poem created by his fantastic imagination.

It should be noted that all the poems presented in this study are just a few among the original and well-known work on this theme. A large number of poems on the topic are available in the Complete Collection of Tang Poems. In fact, the theme of sending court women to a Daoist convent became so popular that poets of the Song or even the Qing dynasties would try their hands at the topic, for example, the famous Qing scholar Wang Wan’s 汪琬 (1624–1691) work “On the Theme of Sending Palace Ladies to a Daoist Convent” 賦得宮人入道. 225 Thus the event of sending court women to a Daoist convent not only stimulated the flourishing of Tang poetry but also provided a sub-genre for later poets.

Based on the Tang poets’ works discussed above, we see that the Tang intellectuals held mixed feelings and attitudes towards the Daoist nuns, including emotions that encompassed respect, curiosity, disapproval, and amorous feelings. Although some Tang poets expressed their interest in the beautiful appearance of the Daoist nuns, and treated them as women in the secular world, the erotic poems are not relatively great in numbers. Since the Daoist women were independent, and many of them seemed educated and cultured and, because they had relinquished family connections and were members of a public religious institution, the male Tang intellectuals were able more easily to connect with them both at an intellectual and social level.

225 For Wang Wan’s 汪琬 poem, see Qingshi biecai ji 清詩別裁集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975)1.70.
The male Tang elite created many poetic portrayals of court ladies who, as young women were invited to live in palaces, but as they aged, were sent to convents. These intellectuals articulated a deep concern and sympathy for these women. Their descriptions of female Daoists and their explorations of the events of the time, clearly shed light on our knowledge about the lives, experiences, inspirations and states of mind of women in the Tang period, as well as the palace ladies’ adventures in the transitional period from court life to religious life. These traditional topics attest to the complex fabric and elements in the lives of female Daoists and assist us in gaining a fuller picture of Daoist women and the development of Daoism in the Tang dynasty.
Chapter 4 Imagery of Female Daoists in the Poetry of  

*Huajian Ji*

4.1. Introduction to the Anthology

In the Five Dynasties period (907–960) there appeared a distinguished and significant poetic anthology of ten *juan*. It was compiled by Zhao Chongzuo 趙崇祚 (fl.940), who collected five hundred lyrical poems (*ci*) written by eighteen poets from 800 to 940. Ou-yang Jiong 歐陽炯 (895–971), who was Grand Councilor (*zaixiang* 宰相) of the Later Shu 後蜀 (934–965) court, wrote a preface for the anthology, which he named *Huajian ji* 花間集 (*Collection From Among Flowers*), indicating that the essential features of this collection are its flowery lexicon, exquisite structure and amorous themes. Since many poets included in the anthology came from Shu (Sichuan), or had a close relationship with Shu, their poetic works are often regarded as a reflection of the cultural life in that region around the tenth century.

Surrounded by mountains and rivers in remote southwestern China, Shu received little impact from the wars during and after the An Lushan rebellion (755). As Anna M. Shields explains, “Due in part to its geographical isolation, and in part to its preexisting wealth, the region of Shu enjoyed almost unparalleled independence and prosperity,
which strongly influenced the social and political environment of the Shu courts.” Living in peace and prosperity, the literati in Shu developed a culture of songwriting to meet the ever-growing demands for entertainment at court banquets or taverns. Given that all songs were performed by singing girls, the tone of the songs is generally light and soft. The content of the lyrics are mainly depictions of feminine beauty and scenes of nature, often dwelling on the longings and romantic feelings of women and including erotic descriptions. Thus, a novel and distinctive style of poetry, typified by Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (fl.812－870), was formed in the tenth century – often referred to as *Huajian pai* 花間派 (School Among Flowers), the style can be characterized by its lyrical format, sensual themes and sentimental expressions.

Ever since Wen Tingyun composed lyrical poems on female Daoists, quite a number of Shu poets followed his example. Indeed, Shu was an important region in the earlier history of religious Daoism. With this significant Daoist influence, female Daoists were likely popular in this region at the time and quite a number of poetic works about them can be found in the Shu anthology. Among eighteen poets in the Shu anthology, nine poets wrote nineteen pieces to the tune of *Nüguan zi* 女冠子 (female Daoist priests). A Song scholar Shen Duanjie 沈端節 explains, “An examination of *Collection From Among Flowers* reveals that themes of the poems are usually related to the musical tune that the poem was sung to. For example, poems about female Daoists were written to the tune of *Nüguan zi* [Female Daoist Priests].”

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227 Though Wen Tingyun was a native of Bingzhou 並州 (modern Shanxi 山西), he was regarded as the head of the School Among the Flowers, he has sixty-six lyric poems preserved in the Shu anthology.
Hence, this chapter investigates the lyric poetry on female Daoists in the Shu anthology. I attempt to explore how elites in the Shu area represented Daoist nuns in their work, focusing on three major aspects: their physical appearance, their yearnings for love and their Daoist inspirations and lives.

4.2. Their Physical Appearance

Recognized as the founding father of the school, Wen Tingyun was given prominence in the Shu anthology. In addition, based on extant poetic works, Wen is the first person that wrote lyrics to the tune of Nüguan zi in its short form (duan ling 短令), which contains forty-one characters and is generally divided into two stanzas. All other poets in the Shu anthology followed Wen’s format and fixed rhyme patterns; they also adhered to the same number of characters per stanza – for example, 4/6/3/5/5 in the first and 5/5/5/3 in the second and so on. The following is one of Wen’s poems:

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

I
With her charm and smile,
Last night’s kohl and remanants of red make-up make her
look pretty and graceful,
The hair on her temples is combed like a cicada’s thin wings.
Her cool jade hairpin fastened dew drops like the autumn water,
Her light gauze robe rolled up like greenish mist.

Her snow-like bosom was reflected in the mirror painted with simurghs,
A slender beauty stands in front of the building of phoenix.
She sent messages to her pretty fellows,

女冠子

其一
含嬌含笑，
宿翠殤紅窈窕，
髻如蟬。
寒玉簪秋水，
輕紗捲碧烟。

雪胸鸞鏡裏，
琪樹鳳樓前。
寄語青娥伴，

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228 Hua Zhongyan 華鍾彥 Huangjian ji zhu 花間集注 (Zhengzhou 鄭州: Zhongzhou shuhuashe 中州書畫社, 1983).229 All the poems discussed in this chapter are chosen from Huajian ji ci Quanji 花間集詞全集 (Beijing: Dangdai shijie chubanshe, 2002). 230 Qishu 琪樹 usually refers to jade trees in legendary stories, but in this poem, it is used as a symbol of a slender beauty.
Let’s go to the immortal land as soon as possible.

In this poem, seven lines out of eleven describe the Daoist priestess’s appearance. She is charming and graceful with hints of make-up remaining on her face, and her hair is combed in a fashionable style. The fifth and sixth lines, however, are ambiguous due to the implicit relationship between the words “zan” (hairpin) and “qiushui” (autumn water). The word “zan” is usually a noun, but based on the parallel structure of the couplet, “zan” should be used as a verb to match the verb “juan” (roll up) in the sixth line. However, in terms of semantics, the verb “zan” cannot take “autumn water” as its object. Therefore, scholars interpret this line in various ways. Edward Schafer interprets it as: “Cold jade stabs as autumn water”. Anna Shields renders the line: “Cold jade hairpins above the autumn waters (of her eyes)”. Shields takes the phrase, “autumn water,” for its symbolic meaning and takes it to be reference to the woman’s eyes. Although the analogy between eyes and autumn waters is common in literature, I prefer to take the denotative meaning of “autumn water” rather than its symbolic meaning because of the structure of the poem.

A close study of the metric structure of the lyrics to Nüguan zi indicates that the fourth and fifth lines are usually in parallel structure. Thus, in Wen’s poem, “autumn water” should match “green mist” (bi yan). Some Chinese scholars have noted how a jade hairpin is like autumn water in appearance, with its light cool colour and translucence. The translation is semantically viable, but it does not take “zan” as a

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232 Anna M. Shields Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji (Collection from Among the Flowers), 325.
233 Huajian ji ci quanjii, 25.
verb, and it does not match the verb in the next line. In my view, it is possible that autumn dew fell on her hair, making her cold jade hairpin appear as though gliding on the autumn water. This interpretation matches the next line in terms of both semantic and grammatical standards.

Interpretation of the sixth line is arguable as well, due to the vague meaning of “light gauze.” While Hua Zhongyan 華鍾彥 explains that light gauze refers to curtains, Zhu Hengfu 朱恆夫 takes it as the clothes of the Daoist nun. Given the context of the poem, I am inclined to take it as her light gauze dress rather than curtains, because this way the line still focuses on the description of the priestess.

In the second stanza, Wen’s portrait of the priestess moves on from her face, hair and dress to her body – her snow-white bosom. According to his description, the woman is almost naked. Wen’s sensual description of the female Daoist reminds me of the line written by Li Dong (discussed in Chapter two): “Half of her breast cleavage looks tender, like thick white clouds” (半胸酥嫩白雲飄). Both Wen and Li are more interested in her feminine beauty rather than her identity as a Daoist priestess. Based on Wen’s depiction, the subject of the poem is no different from a concubine or singing girl. Without the last line, few people would think that it is a poem on a Daoist nun.

Wen’s manner of depicting female Daoists can also be seen in his second poem following the tone of Nüguan zi, where he dwells on feminine mannerisms:

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234 Hua Zhongyan 華鍾彥 Huajian ji zhu 花間集注, 32.
235 Zhu Hengfu 朱恆夫 Xinyi Huajian ji 新譯花問集(Taibei: Sanmin shujü, 1998),84.
Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

II
Her colorful shawl and cloud-like hair,
In the figured mirror her fairy face is as white as snow,
Painting her worried brows.
She waved her fan softly and covered her mouth,
Bashfully she lowers down her embroidered curtain.

They looked at each other from the jade chamber for a long time,
And regretted that they came to the flowery cave too late.
Sooner or later they will go riding simurghs,
And won’t abandon each other.

As in Wen’s first poem on Nüguan zi, this one focuses on the appearance and behavior of the priestess, emphasizing her delicate beauty and enchanting movements. The second stanza, however, switches from description to narration. As the subjects of the lines are not directly referred to, they have been interpreted differently by a number of scholars. Hua Zhongyang’s reading is that the Daoist nun in the flowery cave was waiting to meet her female companions from the jade chamber but is disappointed that they came late.\(^{236}\)

Shields interprets the stanza as follows:

In the jade tower, they gaze at each other long;
in her flowery bedchamber, she regrets his coming late.
Soon, he must ride off on his simurghs—
‘Don’t leave me behind!’\(^{237}\)

Based on Shields’ translation, the priestess was going to meet her lover, and she is displeased by his late arrival. In addition, Shields believes that it is the priestess’ lover who is going to ride off on simurghs. In my view, the subject of line six, seven and eight

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\(^{236}\) Hua Zhongyan 華鍾彦 Huajian ji zhu 花間集注, 33.
\(^{237}\) Anna M. Shields Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji (Collection from Among the Flowers), 326.
are the same – the Daoist priestesses. Jade chamber refers to their secular residence, and flowery cave is their residence after entering a Daoist lineage. Since many Daoists have a preference for living in mountains, their dwelling places are usually referred to as “caves”, even though this may not literally be the case. The Daoist nuns saying that they have regrets upon arriving late at the cave means that they wish they had converted to the religion earlier. This is because they believe that sooner or later, they will become transcendents riding off on simurghs to the immortal world.

As illustrated in the poems cited above, Wen’s representations of the female Daoist focus on her charming face, slept-in make-up, fashionable hairstyle, snow-white bosom and bashful feminine demeanor. By giving one or two Daoist references, such as, “simurghs”, “caves” or “seeking immortals”, he reveals the identity of his subject.

This style of writing and the way of presenting Daoist nuns were copied by several other poets in the Shu area. For example, Niu Qiao 牛峯, who attained the rank of jinshi in 878, wrote a set of four lyric poems to the tune of “Nüguan zi,” which I now turn to:

*Following the Tune of Nüguan zi*

I
Like green clouds her hair combed into a high coil,
Marked with kohl and evenly spread rouge, her make-up is in the fashion,
Her eyebrows look like crescent moons.
With a little smile appeared dimples on her cheeks,
In a gentle voice she sings short verses.

I am afraid she’ll become an immortal in a moment,
My soul is fascinated as I drift away following her.
Her jade-like feet walk elegantly,
Let’s make a date.

女冠子

其一
緣雲高髻，
點翠勻紅時世，
月如眉。
淺笑含雙靥，
低聲唱小詞。

眼看雖恐化，
魂蕩欲相隨。
玉趾回姽步，
約佳期。
Throughout this poem one cannot find any Daoist references besides the word “immortal”, literally, “transform” (hua 化) to immortality, in line six. The poem seems to depict a singing girl as she performs short verses in a gentle voice. Having set a tone of sensuality, Niu turns away from evoking his subject to express his own desire for the religious woman, wishing to make a date with her. Among all the lyric poems to the tune of Nüguan zi in the Shu anthology, this is the only instance where a poet directly conveys his passion for the priestess.

Unlike his first poem, Niu’s second piece of the work contains none of his personal expression but focuses on the depiction of the Daoist woman.

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

II
The Jin River is covered with mist,
Ms. Zhuo makes nice and strong wine,
Sandalwood incense burns and forms a colored mist.
She has embroidered belt and lotus designed bed curtains,
She wears golden hairpins and peony flowers.
Turmeric-colored cream goes into her smooth hair,
Through transparent red silk her armband is visible.
In the shade of willow trees where warblers sing,
She recognizes her lover’s home.

女冠子

其二
錦江煙水,
卓女燒春濃美,
小檀霞。
繡帶芙蓉帳,
金釵芍藥花。
額黃侵膩髮,
臂釵透紅紗。
柳暗鶯啼處,
認郎家。

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238 Ms. Zhuo refers to Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, who was a well-known beautiful and talented widow in the Western Han dynasty (206 BC – 24 AD).
239 “Shaochun” 廚春 is a name of wine. See Li Zhao 李肇 Tang guoshi bu 唐國史補 v. 3 “For wine there are Fushui in Yingzhou… and Shaochun in Jiannan,” 酒則有郢州之富水…… 劍南之燒春。See BBCSJJC,14.
In the first stanza, Niu conjures images of the Daoist nun’s surroundings. Instead of using Daoist terms, Niu alludes to Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, a widow of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC – 24 AD) famed for her beauty and talent and who once sold wine to make a living. It is possible that by alluding to Zhuo Wenjun, Niu implies that his subject is a widow too. The second stanza moves on to the description of the woman’s silky hair and translucent dress, which are unusual for depictions of female Daoists. Particularly unusual is that the poem ends with an indication that the Daoist nun will meet with her lover.

In Niu’s third poem following the tune of Nüguan zi, however, Niu makes some Daoist reference in his description about the priestess, though his interest clearly still centers on her sensual appearance and romantic emotions:

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

III

In starry hat and rosy cloud colored cape,
She lives in the immortal’s Ruizhu Palace; 240
She wears pieces of jade ornaments that tinkle,
Her bright green hairpins wave beside her cicada wing-like temple hairs,
Her slender jade-like hands straighten up her last night’s make up.

On the Daoist altar the spring grass is green,
In the herbal garden the apricot flowers are fragrant.
Green birds carry my message,
Sending it to my lover.

240 Zhu piling 朱丕麟, “The morning sun is just beginning to rise in the east of green ocean./In Peng Isles, Ruizhu Palace is filled with spring.” (旭日初昇碧海東 / 蓬萊春滿蕊珠宮). Ruizhu Palace 蕊珠宮 refers to an immortal palace. See Wenjingge siku quanshu 文淵閣四庫全書 shibuzhengshulei/yizhi zhishu/wanshou shengdian chuji 史部 / 政書類 / 儀制之屬 / 萬壽盛典初集, v.111(Shanghai: shangwu yinshu guan 1934-5) 217.816.
From the opening line, Niu compliments the priestess’s vivid hat and cape, both of which are associated with Daoists. He then alludes to the Ruizhu Palace, which according to the Daoist canon is a dwelling place for immortals. Niu thus insinuates a likeness between the clergywoman and immortal. However, while Niu frames the priestess in a Daoist setting, making references to a Daoist alter and herbal garden, he concludes his poem with an allusion to a Mr. Liu, or Liu Lang, a symbol of a goddess’s lover or spouse, revealing his interest in her romantic emotions rather than her religious practice and inner resources.

In his last piece of Niu’s lyric poems on female Daoists, the poet expresses explicitly of his romantic longings from the start of the poem:

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

IV
Flying in pairs and dancing in pairs,
Orioles sing in her back yard on a spring day,
She rolls up silk curtains.
Her letter written on brocade has been sealed,
Over the Milky Way geese are late passing by.

On her treasured bed curtains are embroidered rows of mandarin ducks,
Twined cardamom branches are embroidered together.
Without a word her tears come down like even pearls,
It is the time when flowers fall off.

In this poem, Niu depicts paired animals and intertwining branches throughout, thus implying that the female Daoist desires her romantic companion. On seeing the paired birds and intertwined branches, she sheds tears of loneliness and longing. By conveying the Daoist priestess’s emotions, Niu presents her as a mortal woman yearning for love.

While Wen and Niu emphasize the feminine sensuality and romantic feelings of
female Daoists’ over their religious identity, Mao Xizhen 毛熙震 expresses an ambivalent attitude toward female priests in his poems that are also set to the tune of Nüguan zi:\textsuperscript{241}

\textit{Following the Tune of Nüguan zi} \textsuperscript{242}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
I & 女冠子\textsuperscript{242} \\
Jade peach leaves and red apricot flower, & 碧桃紅杏，
The setting sun is beautiful but conceals its light, & 遲日媚籬光影，
The colors of rosy clouds are deep. & 彩霞深。
The warm incense burns perfuming orioles that chatter, & 香暖燻葫語，
The pure wind draws cranes singing. & 風清引鶴音。
Her black hair bun is covered with jade leaves, & 翠鬟冠玉葉，
With colorful sleeves she holds her zither. & 霞袂捧瑤琴。
She should have a companion playing flute, & 應共吹簫侶，
She looks for him secretly. & 暗相尋。
\end{tabular}

Mao frames his subject in a Daoist setting of rosy clouds, incense and cranes, which are all associated with the transcendent. Moreover, in the second stanza, Mao describes his subject’s hair as styled in a “black bun covered with jade leaves,” clearly indicating her Daoist identity. However, the female Daoist holds a zither and she longs for someone to accompany her on a flute. Here, Mao alludes to the Daoist figure, Xiao Shi 簋史.

According to Biographies of Various Immortals (Lie xian zhuan 列仙傳), Duke Mu of Qin (Qin Mugong 秦穆公 r. 625–621 BC), allowed his daughter Nongyu 弐玉 to marry Xiao Shi, who excelled at playing the flute. The couple practiced playing music together every day and it is said that they later became transcendents and ascended to heaven.\textsuperscript{242}

\textsuperscript{241} Though we know nothing about his dates of birth and death, Mao Xizhen 毛熙震 worked as a secretary in the Later Shu court.

\textsuperscript{242} Liexian Zhuan 列仙傳 is considered the first biography of immortals, it is often attributed to Liu Xiang 劉向 (fl. 24). See ZHDZ, 45.7.
Mao’s allusion to this Daoist story can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the poet might be implying that the Daoist nun is seeking a man whom she can marry, which appears to be a mundane desire. On the other hand, the music accompanist that she longs for may represent her wish to transform into an immortal, which seems to be a desire evoked by her strong religious aspirations. Some Chinese scholars believe that this poem is about a woman’s longing for love, but I argue that the verse can be read either way. In any case, this poem provides vivid and detailed images of female Daoists.

Just like the vague meanings conveyed by his first poem set to Nüguan zi, Mao’s second poem is also ambiguous, his detailed description of the woman being similar to the erotic depiction of Wen Tingyun:

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

Ⅱ
She has long eyebrows and powdered face,
Speechless she has a dot with sandal paste on her forehead,
Her hair is combed into a high coil style.
Her temple hair looks like cicada’s wing, low and dark,
Her silk clothes are in light yellow.

Feeling bored she walks into the deep court yard,
Idly she strolls beside the fallen flowers.
With her slender hands she softly arranges things,
Incense in a jade burner.

This poem is like a montage of detailed descriptions of the Daoist woman’s appearance and mannerisms. The first stanza focuses on her make-up and Daoist dress; she has long eyebrows, powder, red lips and a fashionable hairstyle and gauze dresses. The second

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243 Li Baomin 李保民, Huajian ji (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 425.
stanza moves on to a description of her state of mind and movement. As the Chinese character “men” is polysemous, two possible meanings might be at work in the context of this poem. Anna Shields interprets it as “depressed,” which emphasizes the girl’s unhappiness. In my view, “men” in the poem means boredom as this would correspond with the verb in the following line, “xian” (idle). Although the Chinese word “men” can mean both “depressed” and “bored”, the semantic ranges of the two words in English are distinct.

The subtle difference of the translation creates very different understandings of the poem and the priestess depicted in it – “bored” suggests calm idleness while “depressed” suggests misery and a state of unrest. It is my understanding that this poem does not express sadness and depression and is therefore not a representation of “familiar close-ups of the abandoned woman”, as Shields interprets it in her work. The concluding line of the poem conveys images of incense, which plays a crucial role in religious rituals. Overall, Mao’s poetry uses delicate and refined descriptions that provide colorful pictures and novel representations of Daoist women.

4.3. Their Yearning for Love

Some poets in the Shu anthology describe Daoist women in ways that are indistinguishable from descriptions of the boudoir women who pine for lovers or express their longings for love. The only notable difference is that worldly dwelling quarters are

\[\text{244}\] Anna M. Shields Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji (Collection from Among the Flowers), 325.
\[\text{245}\] Anna M. Shields Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji (Collection from Among the Flowers), 325.
changed to Daoist settings. An example is the following poem written by Zhang Bi 張泌，who depicts a female Daoist as a lonely woman thinking about her former lover.246

*Following the Tune of Nüguan zi*

Dew falls on flowers, mist covers grass,
It is lonely in the Five Clouds and Three islands,247
Spring is at its height.
Her appearance declines as jade wears out imperceptibly,
The remaining fragrance still stains her lapels.

Bamboos are sparse and the railing around her house is quiet,
Pine trees are dense and the Daoist altar is in shade.
Why did Liulang, my lover, go?
There is no news about him.

While Zhang locates his subject in a Daoist environment of “five clouds and three islands,” he follows the tradition of boudoir lamentations, such as, Zhang sets the time in spring and focuses on the subject’s loneliness and worries about her beauty fading without appreciation. In the second stanza, Zhang introduces a Daoist alter but does not give any further description about the Daoist woman’s religious practice. Instead, he concludes his poem with her yearning for her former lover.

It has been observed that poems on the theme of longing expressed by a Daoist nun sometimes used fixed conventional expressions, an example of which is the following poem written by Lu Qianyi 鹿虔扆.248

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246 Zhang Bi 張泌, whose dates of birth and death are unknown, but he once served in Nan Tang 南唐(937–975) as Royal Secretary (*Neishi sheren 内史舍人*).
247 Five clouds and three islands refer to the dwelling places of immortals, they are Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈 and Yingzhou 永州.
248 Though Lu Qianyi’s 鹿虔扆 dates of birth and death are unknown, but we know that he received his *jinshi* degree in the period of the Later Shu. The Shu anthology preserves six of his poems.
Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

I
A slender beauty stood by the building of phoenix,
She feels melancholy since Liulang has gone,
Spring is at its height.
She had vainly worried in the cave,
Don’t look for trust in the human world.

Bamboos are sparse and the dining hall is deep,
Pine trees are dense and the Daoist altar is in shade.
Leaning on clouds she lowers her head watching,
Her mind is perceptible.

Comparing Lu’s poem with the work of Wen Tingyun and Zhang Bi, one finds that at least four lines of Lu’s poem echo lines found in Wen and Zhang’s works. For example, in the opening line, Lu repeats Wen’s line “A slender beauty stood in front of the building of phoenix” 琪樹鳳樓前; and the third line of his poem “Spring is at its height” is exactly like the one of Zhang Bi. In the second stanza, Lu alters Zhang’s sixth line by changing “rails around her house” with “dining hall”, which seems more reasonable for a woman living in a Daoist setting. Finally, Lu’s seventh line “Pine trees are dense and the Daoist altar is in shade” repeats a line in Zhang Bi’s work.

The similarities between lyrics set to the tune of Nüguan zi suggests that some poets composed works about female Daoists by convention and it is possible that their motivation for writing might simply be literary practice on the theme rather than an expression of their personal views about the female Daoists they depicted. Thus, while poets pursued beautiful imagery and sought to perfect parallel structures, they depicted a mixture of views toward Daoist women. An example can be found in Li Xun’s 李洵 corpus of writings, which contain similar imageries of Daoist woman in a familiar
expressions and lexicon.

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

II

In spring the mountains are green and the night is quiet,
Sadly she hears occasional beating of chimes in the Cavern Heavens,
The jade hall is empty.
Her pearl pendant dangles in the thin fog,
Light mist drags her green skirt.

Facing flowers she is full of tender affection,
Watching the moon, she walks slowly.
Where are Liu and Ruan now?
No news from them.

Although this poem focuses on the descriptions of the scene and the figure, many of the images described in the verse are not original. Following convention, the opening line sets the time and place as spring amidst the mountains. The heroine feels melancholy just like other women yearning for love. The expression “thin fog”, “light mist”, “pearl attachment” and “green skirt” are also common in poetry on women. The second stanza, however, contains a parallel couplet that conveys the priestess as full of affection and longing for her lover. Finally, the poem concludes with a clichéd allusion to Liu and Ruan.

4.4. Their Inspiration and Daoist Life

It has been noticed that the number of poems does not seem to indicate the order in which the poems were written, so each poem may be taken as a single body of work. These numbers might be added by editors when compiling the anthology. Hence, even

\(^{249}\) Li Xun 李殉 (855–930), he once served in Former Shu (907–925) court as a Cultivated Talent (xiucai 秀才). After Shu perished he gave up his official career. He has 37 poems preserved in the Shu anthology.
though Li Xun treated the Daoist nun as a secular woman longing for love in his second poem, he describes a Daoist ritual that took place at night and a devoted priestess in his first poem following the tune of *Nüguan zi*:

_Following the Tune of Nüguan zi_  

_女冠子_  

I  

Stars are high and the moon stays in the sky’s centre,  
In the deep forest of red osmanthus and green pines,  
The Daoist ritual is taking place on the altar.  
The gilt chime is beaten as the pure dew covers its surface,  
The beaded pennants stand on the green moss.  

The sound of Pacing in the Void songs is dimly discernible,  
In imagination her thought wavers.  
At dawn she sets out to return,  
Heading for Penglai.

This poem is notably different from the poems discussed above, as it depicts a Daoist ceremony. According to the opening line, the ritual takes place at midnight as the moon is in the center of the sky. As we recall, Li’s description coincides with that given by Jia Dao, who described a Daoist ritual – the renewal night of the first day” (元日更新夜) – in his poem, “A Female Daoist Receives Her Ordination on the First Day” (元日女道士受録). It was therefore likely a tradition for certain Daoist rituals to be held at midnight in medieval China.

The second line tells that the ceremony was held in deep forests of osmanthus and pine trees. As we have seen in Chapter Two, chimes made of stone or metal were often used for rituals or various activities in both Buddhism and Daoism. While providing vivid images of the Daoist ritual, the poet also explores the aural aspects of the ceremony in the
second stanza. As Daoist hymns, “Pacing the Void” (*buxu* 步虚) were often chanted at rituals.

The seventh line, however, is somewhat ambiguous due to the implicit subject. Shields explains that, “Li Xun intimates a meeting between mortal and divine being in a sacred space”\(^\text{250}\), so she translates, “As he visualizes her image, his thoughts stray back and forth”.\(^\text{251}\) But I have a different interpretation. I believe the subject of this line is the priestess for two reasons. Firstly, since the first stanza focuses on the depiction of the Daoist ritual, the poet should give a description of his subject in the second stanza, not his own feelings or reflection. Moreover, given the structure of the concluding lines, in which the subject is clearly the priestess, I take the Daoist nun to be the subject of the seventh line to correspond to the last sentence of the poem. Thus, the poem ends on a note about the Daoist woman’s commitment to attaining immortality.

Lu Qianyi also expresses mixed ideas about Daoist women. In Lu’s first poem set to the tune of *nüguan zi*, he depicts a Daoist woman yearning for love in the secular world. In his second poem, he portrays a Daoist ritual as well as a religiously dedicated Daoist woman:

*Following the Tune of Nüguan zi*

II
On the altar of Pacing the Void,
Scarlet pennants and rainbow banners face each other,\(^\text{252}\)
As a guide for true immortals.

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\(^{250}\) Anna M. Shields *Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji*, 336.

\(^{251}\) Anna M. Shields *Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji*, 335.

\(^{252}\) *jiangjie* 繒節 may refer to a voucher usually written in red on a piece of bamboo or jade. But the Tang poet Luo Binwang 歌賓王 once wrote a line “Scarlet pennants and red banners share the sunlight.” (*jiangjie zhuqi fen riyu* 繒節朱旗分日羽) in his poem “A Difficult Trip Marching in the Army” (*congjun zhong xinglu nan* 从軍中行路難), in which *jiangjie* seems as tall as banners. Therefore, it is possible that *jiangjie* may be taken as pennants. See QTS 3.832.
Jade pendants shake the shadow of the moon’s toad,  
From the golden burner the smoke of burning musk curls up.  

Dew grows heavy and bamboo tablets get wet,  
Wind blows so hard that her Daoist robe goes aside.  
Although she wants to stay, she has to go,  
She returns to the immortal land.

The first stanza of this poem describes a Daoist ritual that takes place on an altar where Daoist songs of Pacing the Void are chanted. On the platform stand red pennants and colorful banners that are used as a guide for immortals. The poet then describes the movement of priestesses indirectly by depicting their jade ornaments. Literally, “chan”蟾 means toad in the moon, as a fabled toad resides on the moon, but here it simply refers to the moon. Thus, though Lu does not indicate the time of the ritual explicitly, it is clearly held at night. Shields interprets this and the next line as a sexual encounter. She writes, “The last two lines of the first stanza hint at a sexual encounter in terms familiar from romantic lyrics – the movement of the jade pendants in response to bodily movements and the rising smoke from musk incense that masks the scene are easily understood.”

According to Shields, “the movement of jade pendants” is “in response to bodily movements.” Yet, bodily movements do not necessarily indicate a sexual encounter. It may simply refer to walking or other activities.

It is my understanding that because the shining jade pendants reflect the bright moonlight, the poet says “Jade pendants shake the shadow of the moon’s toad”.

Furthermore, Shields’ statement of “the rising smoke from musk incense (that) masks the scene” might be far-fetched, because in describing the smoke, Lu applies the word “niao”袅, which indicates very thin smoke curling up into the air. As usual, the expensive

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253 Anna M. Shields Crafting a Collection: The Cultural Context and Poetic Practice of the Huajian ji, 333.
incense of musk is used for fragrance rather than a mask. Therefore, I do not see any
sexual connotations suggested in the two lines. Instead, I find a sacred religious scene
described in the poem.

Among the Shu poets who composed works following the tune of Nüguan zi, Xue
Zhaoyun 薛昭蘊 is different as he focuses on clergywomen’s Daoist aspirations and the
details of their Daoist lives, rather than romantic feelings.²⁵⁴

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

I
She left to look for immortals,
She abandoned all jade hairpins and golden combs,
She settles in peaks and mountains.
Fogs roll up her yellow silk shawl,
Clouds carve her white jade crown,
With field mist the cave by the stream is still cold,
With the moon over the forest and the stone bridge is icy,
At the quiet night wind blows pine trees;
She pays obeisance at the heavenly altar.

Unlike many poets in the Shu anthology who are interested in the description of the
jewels worn by Daoist women, Xue depicts his subject abandoning all her finery for
Daoist practice. The “yellow silk shawl” and “white jade crown” are described as her
Daoist garments. Xue’s artful work is epitomized by the perfect parallel structure in the
fourth and fifth lines. The second stanza provides a glimpse of her Daoist life in the
mountain. She lives in a cave close to a stream and her companions are the moon, forest
and stone bridge. Though her life is difficult, she pays obeisance to the heavenly altar in

²⁵⁴ Xue Zhaoyun 薛昭蘊 (fl. tenth century) once served in the Former Shu court as Attendant Gentleman
(Shilang 待郎). He has nineteen poems preserved in the Shu anthology.
the quiet night when wind blows pine trees. The last sentence illustrates that the priestess dedicates herself to Daoism.

The second of Xue’s poems might be taken as a continuation of the first, conveying his subject’s success in her Daoist practice. Although some traditional Daoist expressions are seen in his work, they are infused with new meanings:

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

II
Wearing cloudy silk and misty rippled gauze,
She recently received ordination with Daoist precepts,
A certificate from the religious authorities.
Her black hair was combed into a coil;
Her Daoist crown is fastened with a green jade hairpin.

She travels back and forth across the five clouds,
She goes and lives in three islands.
When she meets with the envoy from Liu Lang,
She opens the jade letter.  

The first stanza of this poem reveals that the priestess has received full ordination, which means that she has become a transcendent and has entered the immortal world. Therefore, in the second stanza, the poet describes that she lives in an immortal palace and travels back and forth across the immortal land. The Daoist term “five clouds” originally means five colored clouds, where immortals live, but was later simply a conventional way of referring to immortals’ dwelling places, which is also true of term “three islands”. In order to highlight her identity as an immortal, Xue alludes to Liu Lang at the end of the poem. However, Xue explores the romantic legendary figures of Liu and Ruan from the

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255 "Jade letter" (yao ji 瑤璽) is a polite name for letter.
perspective of divinity, emphasizing that the role of his subject is the same as the immortal lady who once had an encounter with a mortal man.

The last poet I will discuss is Sun Guangxian 孫光憲. As mentioned earlier, Sun once criticized Yu Xuanji strongly in his famous book *Trivial Stories from Dreams in the North*. Sun has thirteen lyric poems preserved in the Shu anthology. His works to the tune of *Nüguan zi* illustrate his idea about the Daoist women in the tenth century. One poem reads:

*Following the Tune of Nüguan zi*

I
Wind blows fragrant orchid, dew falls on irises,
A little fragrance remains around the Altar’s edge,
In the Ruizhu Palace.
Mossy dots are distinguished as green circles,
The red of the peach blossoms is trampled.

Her character gets known beyond Wu Valley,
Her name is registered within Ziwei Palace.
True immortals meet in Yongcheng, २५६
Her dream soul gets through.

Sun’s poem is very different from all other poets’ work as he does not describe his subject explicitly. Instead, he depicts the surroundings of the immortal palace in the first stanza of his poem. To refer to the priestess, he uses a parallel structure in line six and seven. Based on Schafer’s interpretation, “Ziwei Palace” (the Palace of Purple Subtlety) refers to “the supreme mansion of the spirits who reside in the pole star and the

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२५६ Ever since Du Guangting wrote *Yongcheng jixian Lu*, Yongcheng is considered a concentrated area where immortals live. Du’s book can be found in ZHDZ, 45.193.
circumpolar asterism – Draco and others.”

Obviously Sun is trying to elevate her status by declaring that she is registered in Ziwei.

Furthermore, Sun makes reference to another sacred Daoist site – Yongcheng, where the Divine Mother of the West dwells, emphasizing that his subject is a divine being and can thus access Yongcheng for a meeting with other immortals. The last line, however, is ambiguous. Schafer renders it, “Her cloud-soul, dreaming, finds passage to them”, which is confusing as it is not clear who Schafer means by “them”. In my opinion, two interpretations of the line are possible. One is that her dream (of becoming an immortal) and her soul are finally connected, which implies that she has succeeded in cultivation. Another is that her spirit adheres to her dreams, stressing that she does Daoist practice consistently even in her dreams. Since Sun regards her as a goddess, I prefer the first translation.

In the second part of his work, Sun shifts from his subject’s reputation and dwelling place to her divine look and dress, providing more concrete images of the Daoist priestess:

Following the Tune of Nüguan zi

II
Plain flowers and thin jade,
She dresses like an immortal,
Wearing jade with inscription.
Propitious dew drops stay for the whole night,
Delicate incense burns for the whole day.

女冠子

其二
淡花瘦玉，
依約神仙妝束。
佩瓊文。
瑞露通宵貯，
幽香盡日焚。

259 Qiongwen 瓊文 may either refer to wines inside jade, or Daoist texts inscribed on a piece of jade. See Pi Rixiu’s 皮日休 (fl.864) poem “Dedicated to the Residence of Master Ye Hanxiang at the Peak of Yuxiao”(寄題玉霄峰葉涵象尊師所居) “At dawn, on the desk the Daoist texts inscribed on jade lights up the cave, / In the evening, the fragrance in the altar stirs pine trees.”(曉案瓊文光洞壑 / 夜壇香氣惹杉松) in QTS v. 614.
Her green gauze covers her scarlet insignia,
A yellow lotus crowns her thick cloud-like hairs.
Don’t take her as a companion playing the flageolet,
She is different from the others.

What does a goddess look like? Sun conjures up an image of her. She is thin and appears to wear no makeup, as Sun compares her to plain flowers and thin jade. Wearing jade incised with Daoist text, she has a yellow lotus-shaped crown on her hair, typical of female Daoists. Her dress, however, is green instead of yellow, as described in Mao Xizhen’s line, “her silk robe is in light yellow,” and Xue Shaoyun’s line, “fog rolls up her yellow silk shawl”. As stated in a note on Lu Qianyi’s second poem, the Daoist term “jiangjie” may refer to a voucher usually written in red on a piece of bamboo or jade. Thus, in Sun’s poem it could be rendered as a scarlet insignia that might be held in her hand. Finally Sun distinguishes her from the one who plays flute as a companion since she is incomparable. Like Xue Shaoyun, Sun frames his subject as an ethereal lady, expressing his high regard for this Daoist priestess.

In the Collection From Among the Flowers, there are some other tune settings that deal with the theme of female Daoists, such as “Tianxian zi” 天仙子 and “Lingjiang xian” 臨江仙. However, they are similar in style and content to Nüguan zi. A close study of the tune setting of Nüguang zi in the Shu anthology reveals clearly that some of the works are romantic readings, representing female Daoists in similar ways to how concubines or singing girls are depicted in contemporary or earlier poetry. A few poems are Daoist readings and regard Daoist priestesses as divine women living in sacred
precincts. Some poems appear with a mixture of both romance and Daoist divinity,
exploring the legend of a goddess’ encounter with a secular man, revealing some Shu
poets’ desire for romance combined with transcendence.
Chapter 5  Self-Presentations of Song Daoist Nuns

5.1. Cao Xiyun

5.1.1. Biographical Information

Cao Xiyun 曹希蕴 (1040–1115) also known as Cao Wenyi 曹文逸, often referred to as the “Immortal Lady Cao” (Cao Xiangu 曹仙姑), was a prominent Daoist nun in the Song dynasty (960 – 1279). She was highly respected – Emperor Huizong 徽宗(r. 1101 – 1119) thrice awarded her honorific titles, and ordered the construction of temples in her honor. Indeed, Cao is the only female Daoist in China who received titles from an emperor and whose works are extant today.

Famous as a prominent Daoist nun in the Northern Song dynasty, Cao Xiyun’s biographical information and anecdotes can be found in histories of monasteries, sacred mountains and general Daoist canons, such as Luofu shanzhi 罗浮山志 (The Annals of Mount Luofu), Bianjing yiji zhi 汴京遺迹志 (A Record of Historical Remains in Bianjing) and Zhengtong Daozang 正統道贊 (The Zhengtong Orthodox Daoist Canon). Among all the accounts of Cao Xiyun, the most detailed description is found in Xiyuan guan Miaoxiansheng Citang ji 希元觀妙先生祠堂記 (Stories of the Memorial Hall of the Very First Master Observing Marvels), written by Zheng’ang 鄭昂 (fl. 1100), who once served as Acting Vice Director of the Palace Library (shi mishu shao jian 試秘書少監) in
the Northern Song Dynasty. Zheng’s account, which was collected in *Bianjing jiuyi ji* 汴京九異記 (*A Record of All Extraordinary in Bianjing*), compiled by Li Lian 李濂 (1488 – 1566), who got his *jinshi* degree in the era of Zhengde 正德 (1506 – 1522) in the Ming dynasty, indicates that Cao’s original name was Xiyun, she styled herself Chongzhi 衝之, and was later granted the name Daochong 道衝 by Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1101 – 1119). Zheng states that Cao was addressed as master or teacher (*xiansheng* 先生), but Li Lian modified the address to “Immortal Cao” (Cao Xianguang 崑光). Cao was the granddaughter of Cao Liyong 曹利用, a man originally from Ningjin 宁晋 (in modern Hebei), who served as Palace Secretary (*Shu mi shi* 架密史) during the reign of Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 998 – 1022). While acting as an envoy to the Qidan (Khitan), Cao Liyong negotiated an important peace treaty. As a result, Emperor Zhenzong bestowed upon him the title “Duke of Wei” (*Wei guogong* 魏國公), and granted him a residence in Puhui Street 普慧坊 in the capital, where Cao Xiyun was eventually born. Thus, unlike many of the other Daoist nuns, Cao came from an aristocratic family.

As with so many traditional biographies of Daoist prominent figures, Zheng’s account claims that Cao Xiyun displayed literary precocity from an early age, and behaved quite differently from the ordinary. According to Zheng,

*[It seemed that] as soon as Immortal Cao began to speak she knew how to read. She began to compose poems and essays at age five, and by the time she was fifteen she had finished reading all the classics as well as contemporary books. After reading something once she would remember it all her life. Her parents did not allow her to touch the brush and ink, so she climbed up to the roof, where she composed and read poetry. Once she said that living at home, in the mortal world*
was just like living in a cage. Since she did not want to get married, at age twenty-one she fled home and lived a reclusive life at Yuhua Peak in the Shaoshi Mountains. She engaged in the cultivation of her spirit and breath for over ten years. As she hated to be burdened by anything, she did not bring any food or clothing with her. But she was still able to get all the supplies she needed, as if the gods had assisted her. At that time her parents were alive and she had siblings, but she did not take care of them. When her family tracked her down she would try to avoid them.

A man from Qi (modern Shandong Province) named Zhang Jianyi knew she was extraordinary and ordained her into the priesthood. Wishing to become a student of Zhang Jizhen of the Yuanyou Temple and to receive the Registers of Initiation, she planned to travel all the way to Qingzhou, but she had no funds. Therefore, she traveled all over the place on foot, surviving by selling her writings in the marketplaces. It was her hope in this way to find a so-called Daoist adept. As it turned out, she received the Registers at Mount Gezao. After that, people everywhere came to know of Immortal Cao. However, she had a careless nature and unrestrained character. Aloof from the worldly things, she did not like to follow the rules, thus she enjoyed a reputation that was as much negative as it was positive. As for the Immortal Lady herself, she felt neither joy nor anger. Sometimes she found things funny or absurd and composed poems to express those impressions.

She went to the capital in her later years, living in seclusion at Xianning Street of Lü He Gate. She had just enough clothing to cover her body and her food was barely sufficient for her stomach. Her shelter was so small that it could only accommodate one person. When poor people went to her she would write them a poem, so they could sell it for money. Many people in the capital visited her with donations, but she declined most of them. She would give away any of the donations she could not reject.

Emperor Huizong wanted to build a convent for the Immortal Lady. Although she tried to decline, the Emperor insisted, and so she accepted only a home with a few rooms for worshipping The Three Purities. The Emperor granted her a formal title “Literary Master of Purity and Emptiness”; she was also given the style “True Daoist Master of Benevolence and Tranquility.” In addition, the Emperor ordered a Palace named Protecting and Blessing the Earth (Baoqing Taining) to be built beside her convent. When the construction was almost complete, the Immortal Lady was released.
from her mortal form (shi jie), and [her remains] was buried in Xinli Town, Kaifeng County. She was granted the title The Very First Master Observing Exquisiteness. The Immortal Lady was well versed in books, paintings, lunar calendars and craftsmanship. She was especially good at writing poetry and prose. After her death, the Emperor had all her writings moved to the Palace of Yuqing heyang and stored with the Buddhist treasures. Naturally, there were a few pieces scattered among the people. It is impossible to recount all the amazing things that happened in her life.

As outlined in this account Cao was a prodigy who demonstrated precocious talents in literary writing and who showed a natural interest in Daoism. Due to her dislike

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260 Li Lian 李濂 Bianjing jiuyi ji 汴京九異記 2.13 in BBCSJ.
of normal human life and her desire to avoid marriage, Cao left home at twenty-one to lead a reclusive life in the mountains. Having been ordained by a male Daoist monastic, she embarked on a long journey to find an inspiring Daoist master for instruction, disregarding the views of her parents and siblings. Thus, like many other Daoist women, Cao had to face the conflict between fulfilling expectations of filial piety and pursuing Daoism.

Instead of forever living reclusively in the mountains like other famous Daoist adepts, Cao returned to the capital later in her life, and stayed until her death. Not only did she live in the heart of the Song empire, but also showed her concern for regular people and their lives. In spite of her own austere lifestyle, she still supported poor people by writing verses for them to sell. As Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn have observed, “Unlike medieval renunciants who tended to be social outsiders and set themselves apart to pursue their salvation, these new leaders (including Cao) are highly respected members of established society who remain inside the hierarchies of traditional China while pursuing their goal of enhancing the understanding of the divine, establishing perfection, and building lineages.” 261

When her fame reached the ear of Emperor Huizong, Cao was elevated to the status of a deity. Emperor Huizong thrice awarded her honorific titles, and ordered that temples be constructed in her honor. Due to the three titles “Literary Master of Purity and Emptiness (Qingxu wenyi dashi 清虛文逸大師)” ; “True Daoist Master of Benevolence and Tranquility (Daozhen renjing xiansheng 道真仁靖先生)” and “The Very First Master

261 Despeux, Catherine and Kohn, Livia Women In Daoism, 149.
Observing Exquisiteness (*Xiyuan guanmiao xiansheng* 希元觀妙先生”), Cao was also known as Cao Wenyi 曹文逸, Cao Daozhen 曹道真 and Xiyuan Guanmiao xiansheng 希元觀妙先生. Cao was probably the first female Daoist in China to receive titles from an emperor and to have had temples constructed especially for her worship.

### 5.1.2. Cao’s Poetic Works

Given that Cao’s proficiency in literature and painting was recognized during her lifetime, she could sell her poetry to make a living for herself and for other poor people. Unfortunately most of her literary works are no longer extant; Emperor Huizong collected her works and stored them in the imperial palace. But during the Jürchen invasion they were either destroyed or lost. However, a handful of verses and scattered lines have been discovered in the modern *Quan Songshi* 全宋詩, *Quan Songci* 全宋詞, and *Recorded Events of Song Poetry (Songshi jishi) 宋詩紀事*, compiled by Li E 厲鄂 (1692–1752). For instance, the following poem is found in *juan* thirty of *Songshi jishi*.

**New Moon**

The first beat of the curfew drum is heard,  
At first glance the new moon has moved above the trees.  
Whose mirror has been newly polished?  
The box is small and cannot close due to the uneven surface.

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262 Li E 厲鄂 ed. *Songshi jishi* 宋詩紀事 v.30 (Guoxue jiben congshu 國學基本叢書 Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1937) 2126.
263 In the ancient China, the night was divided into five 2-hour periods or five watches (*geng* 更), and the first watch started from 19:00 – 21:00. A watchman would beat a drum to tell the change of each watch.
Attached to this poem there is a note,

“A woman named Cao Xiyun sold her poetry in the capital. Someone came and asked her to compose a poem on the rising moon following the rhyme of ‘qiao’, ‘shao’ and ‘jiao’, thus, Cao composed this poem.”

“女郎曹希蕴，赁诗都下。有人以敲梢交韵，索赋《新月》诗，曹赋云云。”

This note explains why and under what circumstance that Cao Xiyun composed this quatrain. It is also evidence that Cao often sold her poetry to make a living or to help other needy people. Cao apparently improvised the quatrain at the request of a customer. Although the verse does not seem to have much greater significance, it offers both audio and visual images in the opening couplet. Meanwhile, the perfect rhyme words “qiao”, “shao”, “jiao”, all share level tones, broadening the appeal of this short verse.

The next poem, also collected in Songshi jishi, may have been composed on Cao’s visit to the nunnery of a senior Daoist nun. Unlike the preceding poem, which was made to meet a customer’s request on a certain occasion, Cao wrote this poem to express her own thoughts and admiration by focusing on a description of a female Daoist adept’s daily life. Thus, through reading this poem one can obtain some idea of the lifestyle, concerns and likes of a Daoist nun in the Song dynasty.

Inscribed on White Clouds Nunnery Where Master Xie Lives

As the fisherman from Wuling who came to the cave of Peach Blossom Spring,
She has broken from the human world for twenty springs.
She is happy just with deep and amusing white clouds,
She does not know that recently she has been looked upon with approval.
The gold elixir has already formed and lies in a furnace of Kun,

264 Li E 厲鄂 Songshi jishi v.30 (Guoxue jiben congshu) 2126.
265 Li E 厲鄂 ed. Songshi jishi (juan 30) (Guoxue jiben congsh) 2176.
The jade mercury should be first refined in a cauldron of Kan.
Other than playing the zither she has another piece of work:
Stepping up to the three foot high green altar, she worships the stars.

Due to a lack of information we are unable to determine the identity of the nunnery or the addressee. However, I assume that Master Xie is likely a female Daoist because the word “kun 坤” in the fifth line refers to women in particular. As explained by Elena Valussi,

“At a cosmological level, male is represented by Qian 乾, … and female by Kun 坤, …. This concept is not new, in fact we find it already in the Yijing, from which nüdan 女丹 (female alchemy) and neidan 内丹 (inner alchemy) borrows heavily.”

In terms of the meaning and structure, this heptasyllabic poem can be divided into twoquatrain. In the first quatrain, Cao compares the senior Daoist nun to the “fisherman from Wuling,” a figure created by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (fl. 365 – 427) in his work “The Record of Peach Blossom Spring” 桃花源記, which says,

“In the middle of the reign of Taiyuan 太元 (376–379) of Jin 晋 dynasty (265–420), a man from Wuling took fishing for profession. He walked along the stream and lost his way. Suddenly he saw a forest of peach trees,… he went further, trying to seek the end of the forest. At the end of the forest he saw a spring and a mountain. In the mountain there is a small mouth of a cave, where there seems a light. He then left his boat and entered the cave”

266 Valussi, Elena “ Men and Women in He Longxiang’s Nüdan hebian” (Nan Nü 10, 2008), 261.
267 See Tao Yuanming ji jiaojian 陶淵明集校箋 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1996), 430.
By alluding to Tao’s story, Cao implies that the female Daoist has reached the entrance of the paradise because she has already cut off all affairs related to the human world. After twenty years’ cultivation in a deep mountain surrounded by white clouds, Master Xie has won appreciation and recognition. Here Cao alludes to another famous poet, Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210 – 263), who was a famous poet in the Three Kingdoms period (220 – 265). It is said that Ruan could show black eyes and white eyes; when he saw someone he liked, he would look directly at them (show the pupils of his eyes), but when he saw someone he did not like he would show only the whites of his eyes (he would not look at them directly). Later the phrase “black eyes (qing yan 青眼)” became a fixed term referring to approval or respect; and the opposite phrase “white eyes (bai yan 白眼)” indicating ignorance or disdain. Thus, through the allusion to the old story, Cao expresses her enthusiastic support and admiration for her Daoist sister.

In the second quatrain, Cao moves on to a description of Daoist practice, employing a number of terms particular to interior alchemy, such as, gold elixir (dansha 丹砂), a furnace of Kun (kun lu 坤爐), jade mercury (yu gong 玉汞), and a cauldron of Kan (kanding 坎鼎). Inner alchemical theory held that gold elixir could be produced in the human body, and thus, Daoists considered the body a furnace. The term “kun lu” therefore refers to a female body being used as a furnace. Another word for female body structure, in her poem, is kan 坎, which is opposite in meaning to li 離; both terms are closely related to yin and yang. Inner alchemy theory applied the word “mercury” to denote one of the components used in the process of creating the elixir. Robinet Isabelle

268 “Ruan Ji zhuan” 阮籍傳(Biography of Ruan Ji) in Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648) Jin shu 晉書 v.46, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972)5.1361.
explains, “The first task of the alchemist consists in finding the ‘true Lead’ and the ‘true Mercury,’ which are the Yin in the Yang, and, conversely, the kernel inside the fruit.”

Since “yu 玉” (jade) in Chinese may be taken as a term of respect, it possibly modifies “mercury” in the verse, thus, the third couplet illustrates perfect parallelism in structure.

Even though the implication of each special term is hard to comprehend, the overall sense of this poem is clear: Master Xie was a devotee of Daoism, who withdrew from the human world twenty years ago. She made great progress in cultivating her interior alchemy. Apart from travel to sacred mountains and engaging in Daoist practice, the concluding couplet describes other activities Daoist nuns enjoyed, such as playing the zither and worshiping the stars, particularly the Northern Dipper. Speaking from the perspective of a Daoist nun, Cao rendered this poem with much holiness and mysteries of Daoist theories, and, in the meantime, she also provides us an additional description of the life and mind of female Daoists in the Song dynasty.

A third Cao Xiyun poem is preserved in *Songshi jishi* and was written in memory of a prominent Daoist of the Han dynasty, a Master Xie. Although Cao did not mention the full name of the Daoist adept, I find good reason to assume that Master Xie refers to Mei Fu 梅福, who was famous for his moral character and Daoist practice in Feihong Mount 飛鴻山 (located in the western suburbs of modern Nanchang), where an Altar of Immortal Mei 梅仙壇 still remains today. One can find several texts describing Mei Fu in Daoist canon. In order to offer some basic information about Mei, I chose a short account of him from *Xiaoyao Xujing* 逍遙墟經 and present it below:

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269 Isabelle Robinet *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, 237.
Mei Fu, who styled himself Zizhen, was a native of Shouchun. He once served as Commandant in Nanchang in the Han dynasty. Having witnessed Wang Mang’s dictatorship in the government, he sighed, ‘Life is cruel for me; my form is humiliating to me. Knowledge is poison for me; my body is like shackles’. Then he left home in pursuit of immortals. He traveled in the Mountain of Yandang and all mountains in Nanmin. When he reached the Mountain of Xianxia, he met the Immortal Kongtong, who taught him both internal and external alchemy. The immortal said to Mei Fu, ‘Your predestination is in the Mountain of Feihong.’ Fu, then, went to the mountain and built a temple in the mountain to do practice. When he succeeded in producing the elixir, he went back to his hometown, Shouchun. One day, as purple mist floated in the sky, the Golden Boy and the Jade Maiden descended riding phoenixes with decrees in hand. Having bowed to the decree, Fu bade farewell to his family and took off riding the phoenixes. He was seen during the Yuanfeng era in the Song dynasty, and was entitled the Perfected of Shouchun.

The last sentence in the above statement indicates that Mei Fu was probably very popular in the Song dynasty. Although he lived during the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–8 AD), he got his honorary title in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126). The Feihong Mount, where Mei produced the elixir, has been renamed “Mei Ridge”, (Mei Ling 梅岭) in memory of Mei. It seems that quite a number of Song famous intellectuals visited the place and left their writings that are extant today, such as Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修.
1072), Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), Huang Tingjian 黄庭坚 (1045–1105). Cao visited Mei’s relics and composed the following poem to pay homage to the Perfected.

_Inscribed on the Altar of Mei_  

In the Han dynasty, Master Mei used to produce elixir here,  
The old altar is mottled with green and speckled with flowers.  
Looking endlessly at a small winding mountain track, and the vast blue sky,  
He moved his couch to the shade of pine trees and stayed idle during the day.  
The mist separates buildings that identify the secular world,  
The wind blows at bell and chime that fall in the human realm.  
I wonder after he received the decree and became an immortal,  
How many times did he return to the old mountain on a phoenix?

Unlike the preceding informative poem “Inscribed on White Clouds Nunnery Where Master Xie Lives”, in this heptasyllabic verse Cao does not give any detailed description of the master or his life. Instead, she indulges in boundless reverie at the sight of the relic of the famous altar. She sees the signs of passing time on the altar, and falls into fantasy, wondering how the Daoist master spent his life in the high mountains. She even visualizes the master moving his couch into the shade to enjoy his idle time.

The third couplet of this verse is ambiguous because there is no explicit subject for the verbs. In terms of the structure, Cao makes this couplet a perfect antithesis by matching words in the same part of speech. Therefore, examining both lines can help us understand the meaning of this couplet.
The subjects of the second verbs “fen” 分 (identify or distinguish) in line 5, and “luo” 落 (fall) in line 6, are unclear. Apparently both lines have two verbs, which make them complex sentences. The question is what kind of substitute clause it carries. If the clause is taken as an attributive one, line 5 should be interpreted as “the mist separates buildings that identify the secular world”. And with the parallel structure, the meaning of line 6 would be, “the wind blows at the bells that fall in the human world”. Another possible interpretation is to regard it as an adverbial clause. Thus, the translation would be, “as the mist separates buildings, (he) distinguishes the secular world” and “as the wind blows at bells, (he) falls in the human world”. I chose to use the first translation because I am not certain about the subjects of the verbs.

In the concluding couplet Cao seems still immersed in her imagination. On the one hand, by employing a special term “chongsheng” 衝升, which refers to the successful transformation to an immortal, Cao reinforces the Daoist beliefs about immortality. On the other hand, by posing a question at the end of the verse, she also shows some uncertainty about what happens after one becomes an immortal. Judging from the tone of the poet, Cao is paying tribute to the Daoist master, but she has written the poem with a
humorous and relaxed tone.

The following poem was written in the form of a lyric poetry (ci), which was originally created for singing girls to perform in accordance with music. Usually a lyric composer must follow a fixed tonal pattern and write in a fixed number of characters and lines. Since lyric poetry developed significantly in the Song dynasty, many Song lyric composers used the style not only for performance, but also as an expression of their personal views and feelings. As a result, lyrics became a branch of poetry, parallel with shi poetry, and enjoyed popularity among the Song literati. Given Cao’s literary talents, and the fact that she lived during a golden age of lyric poetry, it is reasonable to expect that she would have written some works using the ci style. As one might expect, Quan Song Ci preserved two poems written by Cao Xiyun, both on the topic of lamp-wicks, particularly the flower-shaped wick after burning.

Following the Tone of Xijiangyue, Lamp-wick

It withers without being beaten by the spring rain,
It blows out without help of the east wind.
There is a natural red spot on the screen window.
No matter how hard you try it cannot be planted.
Gorgeous as it is, it’s hard to find fine powder,
Without fragrance it does not attract flying bees.
In the stillness of the night and a painted chamber,
It accompanies the beauty in her dream of spring.

零落不因春雨，
吹嘘何假東風。
紗窗一點自然紅。
費盡工夫怎種。
有艷難尋賦粉
無香不感游蜂。
更闌人靜畫堂中。
相伴玉人春夢。

Frequently, the title of a lyric poem consists of two parts; the first part stands for the tonal pattern, and the second part indicating the subject of the verse. Cao seems deserving of

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271 Quan Song ci (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1965), 2.700
being called a devout Daoist nun, as her views and interests seem quite distinct from an ordinary woman. Instead of writing about real flowers, she writes about a flower-shaped charred lamp-wick, which cannot be planted and does not rely on the spring rain or east wind to grow or to wither. Although it looks as pretty as a real flower, it does not attract bees; instead, it accompanies a beautiful girl sleeping in the night.

Cao’s affection for burnt lamp-wicks seems profound, with one short verse unable to fully express her fondness. She composed a second poem on the topic. While the previous poem describes the appearance of a lamp-wick, the following poem focuses on its virtue and magic power.

Following the Tone of Tashaxing, Lampwick

It diverts people from worries,
It gives an omen of happiness.
It has influence over good events.
At the far end of a painted hall it accompanies the enchanting.
Inside red lanterns cinnabar is red.
Although it is beautiful, it cannot last for long.
How can it be found without root?
For several times I cannot bear to part from it quietly.
The beauty once whispered by my ear,
Flower has good faith.
Man has no integrity.

As part of Chinese culture, a flower shaped lamp-wick was believed to bring good fortune. An erudite and prominent Daoist nun, Cao Xiyun enhances the myth of the charred lamp-wick in this verse. More than a lucky symbol, Cao specifies how a burnt lamp-wick works for human beings, consoling people, giving fortunes and exerting a

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272 Quan Song ci, 2.701
273 “Flower” here refers to a flower shpaed lamp-wick.
favorable influence over human affairs. However, line 4 is a little bit ambiguous for the oblique reference of “yaorao” (the enchanting), which may have two implications: (1) a beautiful girl in the hall; (2) the beautiful scene in the painted hall. I am inclined to choose the first interpretation because in the previous lines Cao talks about why snuff is auspicious for human beings.

The concluding sentence might be confusing too. Cao keeps talking about lampwick in the poem, but at the end, she mentions a beauty (yuren) whispering in her ear. Who is the beauty? In my opinion, Cao is using a figurative speech in this line, linking snuff to beauty through personification. By means of the figure in her work Cao speaks out frankly her views about man. Hence, at the end of the poem, the keynote of this verse is revealed: Cao criticizes the character of man, which, she believes, is less valuable than that of flower-shaped lamp-wick.

All the poems discussed above are related to Cao Xiyun’s feelings about the secular world. However, Cao Xiyun is most famous for her 128-line long poem titled, “A Song of Supreme Dao” (dadao ge), which has been highly valued both in the past and present. According to Chen Yingning 陳櫻 宁 (1880–1969), one of the foremost interpreters of Daoist classics in modern time, Cao is likely the first Daoist priestess who wrote down her personal experiences while doing her devotional and meditative Daoist practices.

Unfortunately the poem is a little difficult to understand, because Cao uses some alchemical terminology, metaphors and allusive language. However, since nüdan shi 女
The poetry (women’s alchemical poetry) represents a new trend in the Daoist movement in the Song dynasty, a preliminary investigation at this kind of poetry will help us to gain some ideas about the aspirations and spiritual life of the Song Daoist nuns.

In light of this, I have attempted to translate Cao Xiyun’s famous work, “A Song of Supreme Dao”, which has received little attention among Western scholars so far. Indeed, it is a big challenge to render inner alchemical poems into English, due to various obscure metaphors and Daoist terminology employed in the poems. In general I will be faithful to the original work and offer literal translations, which may sometimes cause confusion or seem obscure. Instead of footnoting this poem (if I use footnotes, I would be writing notes to almost every line), I try to offer my interpretation and to give explanations to allusions employed in the poem following the complete translation.

A Song of Supreme Dao by Immortal Lady Cao Wenyi

1. Let me explain the whole story for you,
   The base of life relies on the true breath,
   Consciousness lasts long, it is empty but exists,
   Souls embrace heaven and contain everything.

2. Extreme Polarity Tai miraculously arranges the world so excellently and a human gets his “one,”
   Gaining “the one” we should be careful so not lose it,
   When chambers are empty the master of vitality will be stable,
   When the house of spirit suffers, blood will dry up.

3. Alternating between sorry, joy and anxiety,
   Or indulgence and exertion,, his body will be gnawed away,
   There is damage in the morning and harm in the evening but he knows it not,
   The Spirit is lost in turmoil and there is no help in sight.

4. Consumed little by little and declining slowly,
   When vigor is used up, the Spirit is gone,
   It says one can meditate while sitting and walking,
   But only the sage can do this, not the ordinary people.

5. When the bud is fragile it should be preserved,

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Qunxian yaoyu zhuanshi in ZTDZ, 999.
The roots of the senses change easily when they get confused,
Wasting time you don’t know to get rid of weeds,
Growing good plants in wild fields is unheard of.

6. In nine years work is complete and accomplishment full,
If we respond to things casually our spirit will transform fast,
A mind without thought is a true mind,
To be desireless we have to forget everything in motion and stillness.

7. Spirit is nature and breath is life,
If the spirit remains inside, the breath will be stable,
Originally spirit and breath are the most related,
What to count on if they are lost?

8. Having combined them into one we should also forget the One,
Then we can appear and disappear with Creation,
It’s easy to pull through gold and stone,
While sitting and standing the spirit can leave my body in a minute.

9. This principle is easy to know but hard to practice,
Only when we do it instinctively can we get the Dao,
Don’t think just holding our breath is the real task,
Count the breaths and following the charts is not the way.

10. Though you have given up physical work in the world,
What’s the difference if you still have a worried heart?
Look at the baby while still a fetus,
Does it have a secretly calculating mind?

11. If we concentrate on softly breathing, the spirit will linger,
The true breath will be able to come and go freely,
Continuously, twisting and turning, it returns to the origin of life,
Without drawing on the spirit spring, it flows on its own.

12. Thirty-six thousand is a great attainment,
Yin, Yang and the seasonal junctures will all be included,
By steaming and melding, the joints, bones and tendons transform,
Then all apertures are bright and open.

13. The three Pengs leave their shady abodes,
All nations come to the palace of the Vermilion Emperor,
May I ask where the Perfected come from?
From the beginning they have been at the Terrace of Spirits.

14. In the past it was heavily covered up by clouds and mists,
Today as we meet, our eyes of Dao are open,
It doesn’t happen in one morning and one night,
It’s the true self of me, not magic arts.

15. She is as hard as gold and stone in the coldest days,
When the demon is defeated wisdom and power increase,
Emptiness and light lead to proficiency and sophistication,
Then it will be a peaceful and quiet nation of Huaxu.

16. At the initial stage what should be taken as the foundation?
When we accomplish wuwei we are capable of doing everything,
All ideas in the mind should be removed,
We have to adhere to the spirit even in dreams.

根識昏迷易變遷，
砝砣不解去箄箄，
未聞實稼出荒田。

九年功滿火候足，
應物無心化運遠，
無心心即是真心，
動靜兩忘為離欲。

神是性分氣是命，
神不外騖氣自定，
本來兩物更譏親，
失卻將何為本柄。

混合為一復忘一，
可與元化同出沒，
透金買石不為難，
坐脱立亡猶忽忽。

此道易知不易行，
行忘所行道乃畢，
莫將閉息為真務，
散息按圖俱未是。

比來放下外塵勞，
內有無心兩何異，
但看嬰兒處胎時，
豈解有心算算計。

專氣致柔神久留，
往來真息自悠悠，
綿延流歸元命，
不汲靈泉常自流。

三萬六千為大功，
陰陽節候在其中，
蒸融間脈變筋骨，
處處光明無不通。

三彭走出陰屍宅，
萬國來朝赤帝宮，
借問真人何處來，
從前元只在靈台。

昔年雲霧深遮蔽，
今日相逢道眼開，
此非一朝與一夕，
是我本真不是術。

歲寒堅頑如金石，
戰退陰魔加慧力，
皆由虛淡復精專，
便是華胥清靜國。

初將何事立根基，
到無為處無為，
念中境象須除拋，
夢裡精神罕執持。
17. It is a fundamental principle to remain neither in motion nor still, 
   It is the supreme Dao to be neither square nor round, 
   We will succeed if we exercise original breath inside body, 
   A focus on breathing externally cannot help at all.
18. If vigor doesn’t stay inside the body, the spirit will feel uneasy, 
   An insect-bitten tree has withered branches and leaves, and no roots, 
   Don’t talk about tears, saliva, semen and blood, 
   Tracing the roots they all come from the same source.
19. This substance doesn’t have a fixed place, 
   It keeps changing with our moods, 
   When the body feels hot it starts to perspire, 
   When we feel sad have tears in eyes.
20. Desire produces semen from the kidneys, 
   When one catches cold it becomes mucus in the nose, 
   Up and down it flows about moistening the whole body, 
   In the end it all comes from mystical liquid.
21. It’s hard to define mystical liquid and few can recognize it, 
   True breath created this liquid that nourishes the human’s body, 
   Know only that you must be indifferent and avoid anxiety, 
   Also you have to fast, pacify your mind and have few words.
22. Having the pure cream and sweet dew, 
   Your hunger and thirst will be relieved, and your true nature appears, 
   Later, when the work is accomplished you will feel carefree, 
   It really required diligent practice at the beginning.
23. But we cannot do industrious work by force, 
   At ease we should look after the original spirit, 
   How to make a human’s heart rest, 
   At this stage it’s all up to you to seize or release.
24. In the past I had a hard life, 
   Feeding on tree barks, wearing straw clothes, I felt lonely and desolate. 
   I knew the great Dao but I could not practice, 
   Because of fame, responsibility and the material needs of life.
25. For instance, when we have time to do practice, 
   We should calmly practice deep meditation, 
   Although it’s difficult to have both body and spirit perfect, 
   It’s better to have spirit perfected before body.
26. Don’t chase after fame and profit, 
   Cut off human affairs and you will be free from interruption, 
   With our firm determination there will be no barriers in the way, 
   As for me nobody can dominate me.
27. What’s the use of having great fame? 
   It’s not worth having a literary gift, 
   When he has a luxurious life he has no intention [to practice Dao], 
   It’s useless to have piles of jade and gold [at the time of death].
28. If one is good at writing poetry and articles, 
   His versatile skills will impede his way of Daoist practice, 
   Just like thin fog and light mist,
Making companions at the falling flowers and willow catkins.

29. Flying leisurely across the illusory world,
   In the end it doesn’t turn into rain and dew,
   Who is closer to me fame or body?
   We live most of our life in the traditional way.

30. It turns out that practice depends on the spirit and breath,
   If the spirit and breath are not at ease our efforts will be in vain,
   It’s a pity that on such a good foundation,
   No hosts live in the golden hall and jade chambers.

31. Please convince the owner to live inside the hall for a long time,
   And let she stay in an empty closed place doing nothing of use.
   Exquisite being is produced from non-being, but it’s hard to hold it,
   A mother knows how to raise a baby best.

32. Don’t make argumentation and abandon intelligence,
   Store up your spirit and live like a fool,
   Head for the future with a firm determination and persistence,
   The supreme Dao will not let you down.

This long poetic work consists of thirty-two quatrains and for the convenience of discussion I have numbered each stanza. In terms of structure and meaning, I see every four stanzas or quatrains as a section sharing one sub-topic. Therefore, there are eight sub-topics discussed in this long verse. Even though the precise implication of some terminology is not known for certain, the main idea of this work is perceptible. With the help of Chen Yingning’s explanation, I would like to share my understanding of this masterpiece.275

Cao begins her alchemical poem with a discussion of the source of life and the relationship between life and spirit, or nature. She explains that if you do not cultivate your nature amid sorrows, worries, and even joys, your energy will decline, and finally your spirit cannot remain when your vigor is used up. On the contrary, if your mind is empty and you remain idle, your spirit will live in your body at leisure and carefree. The

275 Chen Yingning 陈撄宁 Ling yuan da dao ge bai hua zhu jie 靈源大道歌白話註解 Taibei: Zhen shan mei chu ban she 真善美出版社, 1969.
fourth couplet employs figurative speech, using “palace and chambers” as metaphors for the human “body and mind”, as can be seen again in quatrains thirteen and thirty. Another figurative usage is found in “the house of spirits” (ling fu 靈府), which, according to Chen Yingning’s note, means the place where consciousness and thought originate. In couplet eight, the last couplet of section one, Cao exposes the lie of being able to do meditation while walking and sitting, urging an ordinary Daoist to practice cultivation honestly.

In the next section, starting from the fifth quatrain, Cao goes on to make a comparison: the beginning of human life is just like the fragile bud of a plant that needs to be looked after carefully. Chen Yingning explains that “nine” years, in this poem, does not mean the actual number, but many, since “nine” is the maximum unit digit number. Defining spirit as nature and breath as life, Cao emphasizes that both spirit and breath are closely related, if one does not bother his spirit when dealing with people, his breath can be stable inside his body. The key formulas, Chen Yingning says, lie in quatrain eight, “to combine spirit and breath into one and then forget the one, or forget the combination”. For a normal person his spirit is confined within his body, but for a successful Daoist practitioner, his spirit can separate from his body, thus, his spirit can go out of his body to control other subjects. That is why Cao says it is not hard to pierce gold and stone.

It is easy to expose principles and make them known to everybody, but it is difficult to put them into practice; therefore, in the next section Cao gives some details on how to do breathing exercise and cultivate spirit. First, she criticizes the idea that the less
breathing you do, the closer to successful transformation you will be, warning people not
to focus on counting breaths or imitating gestures mechanically from drawings, because
those kinds of exercises overtax their minds. Instead of holding your breath, you should
devote your effort to breathing and softness.

Then Cao alludes to Laozi’s sentence in the tenth chapter of the *Daode Jing*,
“concentrate the breath and become as gentle as a baby.” 堪氣致柔能如嬰兒乎”. The
number of thirty-six thousand, in quatrain twelve, refers to a period of time,
approximately equal to one year according to Zhang Boduan’s 張伯端 (983–1082)
preface of “Four Hundred Words on the Gold Elixir” (*Jindan sibai zi* 金丹四百字). I
think Cao is explaining the theory of Daoist transformation by making an analogy to the
ten month pregnancy of a human being, so by speaking of the number, she means the due
date, not the real length of the time.

In the following section, from stanza thirteen to sixteen, Cao describes what
happens when you successfully cultivate a divine pearl (cinnabar) inside your body.
Based on *Taiqing zhonghuang zhenjing* 太清中黃真經, the “three Pengs” refers to the
“three carcasses”(*san shi* 三屍), also called “the three worms” (*san chong* 三蟲). The
first one, named Peng Jü 彭倨, lives in the human head, making people dull and
unintelligent; the second one, Peng Zhi 彭質, lives in the human breast, disturbing people
and giving them troubles and worries; the third is called Peng Jiao 彭矯, and lives in the
human belly, causing greed for food and sex. Successful cultivation can invigorate vital

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276 Zhang Boduan 張伯端 “Jindan sibai zi” 金丹四百字 in ZHDZ, 19.487.
energy and drive the three worms out of the body. As Livia Kohn elucidates, “This causes a feeling of inner openness and a vision of the body as consisting not so much of flesh and bones but of palaces and chambers where universal spirit and the various gods come to reside.”

In the next couplet Cao compares man’s heart to “the red palace of the king” and other human internal organs, namely liver, spleen, lungs and kidney, to “all nations”. Chen Yingning says, “the Perfected” refers to a substance that can last forever; it is also named “true me” (zhen wo 真我). Covered by “the clouds and mist”, which refers to human’s emotions and desires, “the Perfected” never appeared before. In quatrain fifteen, Cao applies an allusion to the Liezi’s, in which “the State of Huaxu” (huaxu guo 華胥國) is regarded as an ideal, joyful, and peaceful place.

Right after the above allusion Cao makes one more reference to Laozi’s famous sentences, “If one pursues knowledge he will gain something and expand everyday; / If one practices the Dao he will lose something and diminish everyday. / Diminution and again diminution, / As a result he attains wuwei. / Once he attains wuwei, he is capable of doing everything.” 為學日益, 為道日損, 損之又損, 以至於無為. 無為而無不為.

The last sentence of Laozi’s paragraph seems rather confusing due to the implicitness of the subjects. D.C. Lau interprets this sentence as “when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone”. While Moss Roberts renders the same sentence, “No end

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pursued, no end ungained.” 282 Edmund Ryden translates, “When not acting then there is nothing not done.” 283 Since many scholars consider *Daodejing* as a rulership text, they translate the text from the point of view of a king or administrator. However, Cao’s allusion to “wuwei” in her alchemical poem provides concrete evidence to suggest that *Daodejing* served as more than a ruler ship text for her and other Daoists.

In my opinion, *wuwei* should be taken as a fixed term with special meaning. Direct literal translation may confuse its meaning, as it does not mean, “to do nothing” or “to remain idle”, instead, *wuwei* is goal-oriented action, contrary to inaction, representing a kind of cultivation through which one tries to restrain one’s own individual desires. Given the special implication of *wuwei*, I agree with the scholars who treat it as a borrowed phrase and transliterated the sound of *wuwei* instead of converting its meaning, so that we are able to have this special term not only in Chinese but also in other languages in the world. Cao’s allusion to Laozi’s statement elucidates her comprehension of the ambiguous sentence.

Considering the context of Cao’s quotation, she seems to be using Laozi’s sentence as the answer for her question “At the initial stage what should be taken as the foundation?” Cao says, “When we accomplish *wuwei* we are capable of doing everything.” Hence, Cao considers *wuwei* an approach leading her to the law of nature, and to attain the Dao that is universal and omnipotent.

In section five, starting from quatrain seventeen, Cao exposes how spirit and breath work together. If vigor is unstable in the human body, the spirit will be uneasy.

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Although different names are given to the mystical liquid flowing in human body, it is always produced by the vitality of the human body. This liquid plays a significant role in Daoist pursuit of longevity. To produce more liquid inside the body and to avoid losing any serves as a primary goal for many Daoist practitioners. How, then, does one obtain more of this mystical liquid?

At the beginning of section six, from stanza twenty-one to twenty-four, Cao answers the question explicitly, saying that the mystical liquid comes from breath, or the vitality of the human body. If we can abstain from meat and wine, speak little and rest our mind, as well as restrain ourselves from seeking fame and wealth, we could have liquid as pure as cream, or as sweet as dew to nourish our vigor and body, and the true nature would then appear. While it demands hardship and diligent work, a practitioner has to avoid haste and reluctance. In what follows Cao recalls the suffering she experienced in the past, taking tree bark, wearing straw clothing and enduring loneliness and silence. In addition, she enumerates the three biggest barriers that prevent her from practicing supreme Dao: the burdens of empty fame, responsibilities, and daily needs, namely clothing, food, shelter and transportation.

In section seven, from stanza twenty-five to twenty-eight Cao emphasizes that the most efficient way of practice is to do “deep meditation” (da ding 大定), which refers to meditation focused on forgetting both spirit and breath (shen xi liang wang 神息兩忘). According to Chen Yingning, some practitioners tried unorthodox methods when they were idle and free, but Cao insists that they should do fundamental work – meditation. Given the difficulty of being perfect in both spirit and form, one should cultivate the
spirit first. The best way to concentrate on practice is to cut off all relations to the secular world. Again Cao urges Daoist followers not to seek fame and wealth, asking what the use of having piles of gold and jade is when you die. Then Cao alludes to a story recorded in *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, in which it says,

“When Huan Xuanwu made a northern expedition, Yuan Hu followed him. Yuan was blamed and removed from his position. But at that time Xuanwu needed a military punitive declaration, so he called Yuan and ordered him to write it leaning against a horse. Yuan kept writing without stop, and finished seven pages in a moment. It is unbelievable.”

桓宣武北征，袁虎時从，被責免官。會須露布文，喚袁倚馬前作。手不輟筆，俄得七紙，殊可觀。

Later the phrase of “倚馬” (leaning against a horse) is regarded as the symbol of great literary talent. However, Cao believes that it is not worth having such a literary talent, and writing essays or poetry is regarded a barrier on the way to Daoist practice, because it is a distraction from concentrating on the supreme Dao.

Finally, in the conclusion of her poem, Cao quotes lines from *Daode jing* (Chapter 44), asking, “of fame and body or health which is more important?” Even though the answer is obvious, many people live most of their lives in a traditional way. In what follows Cao explains her ideas in metaphorical language, with “a golden hall and jade chambers”, referring to the human body; and “a host or owner” meaning the spirit. She tries to emphasize that one should concentrate one’s efforts on keeping the spirit

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284 Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語. See *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1993)273.
inside the body, otherwise, if the spirit lingers around outside the body, worrying about many things, the body would get dirty and even be damaged, just like a magnificent house that needs to be maintained from time to time.

As we recall, Cao is much influenced by Laozi’s work, as shown by her multiple allusions to *Daode Jing* in her poetry. Her ideas about being and non-being are also an echo of Laozi; for example, in *Daode Jing* 40 we read, “Ten thousands of things in the world are born of being (*you*), yet being is born of non-being (*wu*)” 天下萬物生于有, 有生于無. Cao’s explanation of the idea of original spirit (元神) is just like the concept of being and non-being; it exists, but when one is not aware of it, it might be non-being to one. Since it is hard to hold and possess it, one has to nourish it like a mother raises her baby. The closing quatrain, again, echoes Laozi’s words, “Learn to be un-learned” 學不學, from *Daode Jing* 64, persuading Daoist practitioners to abandon intelligence, storing up spirit inside body and living like a fool. Then, she promises that so long as one is determined to head for the Dao, the supreme Dao will never fail one.

Overall, this lengthy poem, in my opinion, focuses on three points: (1) spirit and breath are closely related and mutually dependent on one another. While the spirit is a master of breath, it must rely on breath for nourishment. Because spirit is defined as a person’s nature and breath as a human’s life, Cao emphasizes that one has to get his/her spirit or nature perfect before making his/her body or life perfect. (2) The key point of cultivation is to take care of the original spirit (元神), which has to be kept idle and calm. Thus, eight times in the poem, Cao urges Daoist practitioners to get rid of worries or avoid seeking fame and wealth. Even working on poetry and essays impedes the way
to the Dao. (3) For Daoist practitioners, Cao suggests to exercise breath inside the body gently and continuously, rather than copying gestures mechanically or simply counting the timing of breathing. The purpose of Daoist cultivation is to combine spirit and breath into one, and then forget both, for complete immersion in the Dao.

Technically, several features can be observed in Cao’s lengthy poem. First of all, this verse exemplifies didactic poetry, which “used discussions (of ideas) to write poetry” (yi yilun wei shi 以議論為詩). As Jerry Schmidt explains, didactic poetry “experienced its first golden age during the Song dynasty, … most poets stayed close to the traditional philosophical concepts of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.” From the first line of her work, Cao focuses on ideas, explaining Daoist terms, arguing the correct way of practice, and encouraging disciples to work diligently toward the great Dao. Her approach of giving a lecture in a poetic format influenced later female alchemical followers to such a degree that many later works on female inner alchemical theories were also in the form of poetry. Thus, following Cao’s great work a new genre of poetry, women’s alchemical poetry (nüdan shi 女丹詩), appeared.

Second, while Cao employs a simple lexicon and grammatical structures, she applies allusions in her poem, such as “nation of Hua Xu” from Leizi 列子; “The three Pengs leave their shady abodes”, from Taiqing zhonghuang zhenjing 太清中黃真經, and “when one accomplishes wuwei, he is capable of doing everything,” from Daode jing. However, these allusions do not seem to make her poem very difficult to comprehend because they are quite familiar to Daoist practitioners.

Last but not the least, Cao makes extensive use of similes and metaphors (something which is not only seen in Cao’s poem but which is also used heavily in later female alchemical poems by other poets). For instance, Cao compares organs in the human body to “all nations”; the human heart to “the red palace of the king” and the human body to “golden hall and jade chamber”. She also uses appropriate metaphors in her poem, such as, the human body without original breath and spirit is just like “an insect-bitten tree with no roots and withered branches and leaves.” And, “Growing good plants in wild fields is unheard of,” a metaphor for those uncultivated human minds where “golden cinnabar” cannot be developed.

A study of Cao’s poetic works reveals that Cao was a devotee of Daoism and was considerably influenced by Laozi. Even though her lengthy poem “A Song to the Supreme Dao” is regarded as the first masterpiece of women’s inner alchemical work, the content is not limited to women’s practice or skill; indeed, both men and women can take it as guide for their practice. Therefore, a Daoist nun’s work on religious practice, for the first time, earned widespread recognition and was granted a supreme position in the field of inner alchemy. Livia Kohn sums up the contribution that Cao made to the Daoism, especially women in Daoism, “An inspiration to women, she (Cao) appears a great guide to alchemical transformation, describing the ideal states in glorious language and providing both warnings and admonition. …she (Cao) represents: the erudite, independent master and successful adept of the Dao, who acts as a guiding light to women throughout the ages.” 286

286 WID, 140.
In addition, Cao emphasized the cultivation of both nature and destiny, especially the need to perfect nature before destiny. This is very similar to the doctrines of the monastic school of the Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真), which come into being about one hundred years later and became the dominant Daoist organization in northern China for centuries. Her marvelous poetry not only provides us her insight into the Daoist religion but also made important contribution to the development of later works on women’s inner alchemical practice. Following Cao, a number of other prominent Daoist nuns appeared, including Sun Bu-er 孫不二, Zhou Xuanjing 周玄靜, and Tang Guangzhen 唐廣真, all of whom left us their poetic works on female alchemy, and thus, set out a new trend of female alchemical poetry in the Daoist religion.

5.2. Sun Buer

Sun Buer 孫不二 (1119–1182) was unique in the Daoist canon because her attainment of spiritual immortality is attributed to diligent practice rather than predestination. She was a founder and matriarch of the sect of Qingjing 清靜 (Clarity and Tranquility) in the monastic school of Complete Perfection. Before her, transcended women – such as Xie Ziran 謝自然, He Xiangu 何仙姑 and Wu Cailuan 吳彩鸞, among others – were all thought to have inherent characteristics of a sage by nature. Claims about their ascendance to heaven confirmed their difference from ordinary women in the human world.

With regard to the transcendence of Sun Buer, however, it is her assiduous and devoted practice in inner alchemy that is emphasized as factors in her attainment of
the Dao and transformation into an immortal. Sun’s achievement thus provided an example for ordinary women in the pursuit of Daoism and immortality through practice. Thus, unlike the Daoist women before her, numerous accounts and stories about Sun Buer are accessible in a more diverse range of sources.

Yet some of these narratives about her contain discrepancies; in one source, for example, it is said that Sun had three children, while another source reports that Sun had no children. Faced with these numerous and conflicting accounts, I have chosen to use the earliest hagiographic record extant today as the basis for my study, namely *Jinlian Zhengzong ji* 金蓮正宗記 (*The Orthodox Record of Golden Lotus*).

*The Orthodox Record of Golden Lotus* was written by Qin Zhian 秦志安 (1188 – 1244), whose literary name was “Linjian Yuke Chuli Daoren” 林間羽客樗櫞道人. Qin was a chief-editor of the *Orthodox Daoist Canon* (*Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏), which was compiled upon imperial order in 1237. Since Qin Zhian was a committed Daoist himself, his book conveys views from within his Daoist sect and is often regarded as one of the most important works on the monastic school of Complete Perfection. Despite some overstatements and inflated language in the description of Daoist religious accomplishments, Qin’s account of Sun Buer provides some basic information regarding Sun’s biography and her life both before and after her ordination to the Daoist religion. The account reads:

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287 *Jinlian Zhengzong ji* 金蓮正宗記 in ZHDZ, 47. 40.
288 *Qizhen Yinguo Zhuan* 七真因果傳 in Quanzhen qizi quanshu 全真七子全書 (Shenyang 濱陽: chunfeng wenyi chubanshe 春風文藝出版社, 1989), 27.
The Immortal Lady was the youngest daughter of Sun Zhongling 蘇忠翎 who lived in Ninghai 宁海 in Shandong. At the beginning, her mother dreamed of seven cranes spreading wings and dancing in the yard. After a while six cranes flew away, but one of the cranes came into her bosom and then she felt she was pregnant. She gave birth to a girl, who was exceptionally intelligent by nature and learnt to behave according to all rules of the boudoir. She was very good at calligraphy and especially proficient in poetry. After reaching the age of sixteen she married a man surnamed Ma and gave birth to three sons. All her children were well educated.

In the winter of the year of Dinghai 丁亥, 1167 during Dading 大定 era (1161–1189), Master Chongyang 重陽 came from Zhongnan and Ma Yifu 马宣甫 showed great respect for him, but the Immortal Lady was not inclined to believe him. So she locked him up in a hermitage without providing food. A hundred days later, she opened the door and found that Chongyang appeared even more energized than before, so she started to accept him, for his yang spirit 陽神 could get out of his body and enter someone’s dream, making various transformations. In his lecture Sun and Ma were intimidated by hell, and tempted by heaven. For ten times Chongyang split pears for them and six times he sent them potatoes. Then Yifu followed the master, taking holy orders, and entered the Daoist priesthood. The Immortal Lady, however, still loved her family and hesitated. After one year, she finally abandoned her three children and put on a bamboo hat and a cloth robe. She, then, called to pay respects to Chongyang for conversion in the Golden Lotus Hall in the local district.

The master sent her a poem: “Two years ago I taught you and split pears for you ten times,/ Heaven and good time are of nature. /Why didn’t you leave home at that time?/ Just because you wanted to become one of the Golden Lotuses.” Then the master gave her a religious name: Buer 不二, her Daoist title was Qingjing Sanren 清靜散人. He also instructed her in the secrets of heaven’s decree as well as sacred Daoist texts and spells. After then Chongyang returned to Bianliang 汴梁, modern Kaifeng in the south and passed away.

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289 Since Wang Chongyang and his seven disciples often gathered in the hall named Golden Lotus, the Seven Perfected are also known as Seven Golden Lotuses.
there. Qiu, Liu, Tan and Ma carried his body to Zhongnan Mount and buried him there. On hearing the news, the Immortal Lady set foot on the winding road, lying in the snow and frost and enduring various difficulties of the arduous journey. She did not feel hardship even though her appearance was ruined. In early spring of the year Renchen (壬辰 1173), she arrived at Zhao Penglai’s residence in the capital and met with Danyang. They communicated the subtle principles with each other and discussed the mystery of Daoist teachings.

Danyang wrote her a poem with the title, On Making an Elixir, which says, “To persuade the lady from Fuchun./ Don’t follow me./ We are not married any more./ Let’s finish cultivation individually./ So that we can keep away from the three paths./ Don’t breathe heavily when doing exercise./ It should go with ease from the top to the bottom./ Quietly it goes on as if it does not exist./ Bring soul boys into action./ Then you can go to the immortal land.”

The Immortal Lady accepted it with appreciation and then they departed for different places. Living separately they did cultivation in small closed areas. Seven years later, she could refine qi through her three cinnabar fields and all her orifices became clear. Afterwards, she set out for the east, travelling to Luoyang. She accepted and preached to disciples, converting a lot of people. One day she composed a ci poem entitled, Following the tune of “Busuanzi”, which goes, “Closing my hands tightly I waited with a coat over my shoulders./ Water and fire interacted frequently./ A myriad of radiant energy generated from the bottom of the ocean./ With one hit the three passes became open./ Celestial music was heard consequently./ Very often I had finest wine./ Suddenly all the magic medicine was gone./ The elixir was ready after nine rounds.”

After writing the poem, she told her disciples, “The master arranged for each of us to go to the immortal land; now the celestial date is due.” Then she took a bath and put on clean clothes, asking the people around her, “What is the time now?” “It is mid-noon.” they all replied. She sat up straight with crossed legs and let nature take its course. Her appearance looked as if she was alive, and the room was filled with fragrance. Auspicious air went around covering the field at low height, and it did not go away until the next day. This
occurred on the day of the 29th of the 12th month of 1182.\textsuperscript{290} At the moment, Danyang, who lived in a closed area in Ninghai, looked up and saw the Immortal Lady up in the sky, riding five-color clouds. She looked down and saw Danyang, saying with a mile, “I am going to Penlang ahead of you.” On hearing this Dangyang held up his robe and started dancing. He also composed a lyric poem to the tune of “Zuixian Ling” to celebrate by himself.\textsuperscript{291}

仙姑者，孫忠翊之幼女也，家世寧海。初，母夢七鶴鼓舞於庭中，良久六鶴飛去，獨一鶴入於懷中，覺而有娠，乃生是女。性甚聰慧，在閨房中禮法嚴謹，素善翰墨，尤工吟詠。既笄，適馬氏生三子，皆教之以義方。

適大定丁亥冬，重陽先生來自終南，馬宜甫待之甚厚，仙姑未之純信，乃鎖先生於庵中百有餘日，不與飲食，開關視之，顏采勝常，方始信奉。仍出神入夢，種種變現，懼之以地獄，誘之以天堂，十度分梨，六番賜芋，宜甫遂從師入道，仙姑尚且愛心未盡，猶豫不決，更待一年，始拋三子，竹冠布袍，詣本州金蓮堂禮重陽而求度。

先生贈之詩曰：分梨十化是前年，天與佳期本自然。為甚當時不出離，元來只待結金蓮。仍賜之法名曰不二，道號曰清靜散人，授以天符雲篆秘訣而已。重陽乃南歸汴梁而委蜕焉，丘、劉、譚、馬負其仙骨，歸葬終南，仙姑聞之，迤邐西邁，穿雲度月，臥雪眠霜，毁容終而不以為苦。逮壬辰之春首，亦抵京兆趙蓬萊宅中，與丹陽相見，命同妙旨，轉涉埋竈。

丹陽乃賜之以《煉丹砂》曰：奉報富春姑，休要隨予，而今非婦亦非夫。各自修完真面目，脫除三塗。煉氣莫教蠹，上下寬舒，綿綿似有卻如無。箇裡靈童調引動，得赴仙都。

仙姑謝而受之，相別東西，各處一方，鍊心環堵。七年之後，三田返復，百巖周流，遂起而東行，遊歷洛陽，勳化接引，度人甚多。一旦書《卜算子》云：握固披

\textsuperscript{290} This is a lunar date, the corresponding Western dates is usually an additional thirty-five days.
\textsuperscript{291} Qin Zhian 秦志安(1188–1244) Jinlian Zhengzong Ji 金蓮正宗記 in ZHDZ, 47.52.
According to this record, “Buer” (Non-dual) was Sun’s religious name, which conveys her full commitment to the Dao. Qin Zhian does not mention Sun’s original name, but in *Qizhen yinguo zhuan* 七真因果傳 (*The Cause and Result of the Lives of the Seven Perfected*) written by Huang Yongliang 黃永亮 in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Sun’s given name is indicated as Yuanzhen 深貞 (*Profound Virtues*). Her Daoist title was *Qingjing Sanren* 清靜散人 (*a Quiet and Free Person*). As with many other transformed women, Sun was often referred to by the title Immortal Lady, or Immortal Lady Sun (Sun xiangu 孫仙姑).

Sun is said to have been born into an elite literatus family in Shandong in 1119, under the reign of the Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1125). It is believed that she received a decent education from childhood and developed a strong command of calligraphy and poetry. At sixteen, she married Ma Yifu 馬宜甫 (1123–1183), also known as Ma Yu 馬鈺. According to *Qizhen nianpu* 七真年譜 (*Chronology of the Seven

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[^292]: Huang Yongliang 黃永亮 *Qizhen Yinguo Zhuan* 七真因果傳 in *Quanzhen qizi quanshu* 全真七子全書, 45.
Perfected), written by Li Daoqian 李道謙 (fl. 1250), Ma Yifu was born in 1123, the fifth year of the Xuanhe era 宣和 (1119–1125), making Ma four years younger than Sun Buer. If Sun married at sixteen, then Ma would have been little over twelve years old. I therefore doubt the accuracy of Qin’s account with regard to when Sun married.

When Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112—1170), the founder and leader of the Complete Perfection sect, visited Ma and Sun with the intention of converting them in 1167, the couple already had three children and lived a wealthy life in Shandong. As Qin wrote, Wang made various efforts to enlighten the couple; one famous example was his “splitting of pears and presentation of potatoes.” As in Chinese, ‘separation’ (fen li 分離) and ‘splitting pears’ (fen li 分梨) are homophonic words; and the pronunciation of ‘potatoes’ (yu 章) is identical to that of ‘stupid’ (yu 愚), Wang split pears in front of Ma and Sun ten times to imply that the couple should separate and give up secular life in wholehearted devotion to the Dao. When the couple did not understand what he meant, Wang sent them potatoes to represent their foolishness.

Another well-known account tells how Wang convinced Sun of his full attainment of the Dao by exhibiting his magical powers. According to Qin, Sun had locked Wang in a small hermitage for one hundred days without providing food and drink.293 When she opened the gate, however, she was surprised to find Wang appearing even more energized than before. Sun’s doubts about Wang were finally overcome when Wang appeared simultaneously in two different places – in front of Sun as she meditated alone in her bedroom and in the hermitage preaching to Ma Yifu and other disciples. As Ma

293 Another source says that Wang had one meal every five days during the project. See LSZXTDTJHJ, v.6 in ZHDZ, 47.662.
explained to his wife, Master Wang’s “yang shen” 陽神 (radiant spirit) left his physical body and could therefore be seen concurrently in two different places for the purpose of enlightening Sun Buer.  

Persuaded by Wang, Ma Yifu abandoned his family and property and made vows to receive his Daoist title, Danyangzi 丹陽子. Sun Buer, however, did not make up her mind to renounce the mundane world and follow the Daoist path until a year later. According to Livia Kohn’s analysis of Sun, “her reluctance to follow the call of the Dao, however predestined, was strong and not easily overcome. It was not only the severance of all family connection and security that made her so hesitant but also the change in financial and social status.”

At the age of fifty-one, Sun finally put on the Daoist bamboo hat and cloth robe and became one of Wang Chongyang’s key disciples in 1169. Identified by her Daoist title, “Qinjing sanren” 清靜散人 (The Free and Serenely Idle One), Sun became a member of the Seven Perfected Ones (Qi zhenren 七真人). In addition, it was said that Sun was the first one among the group to receive celestial appointment and ascend to Penglang 蓬鬱, the immortal land.

It should be noted that five years after receiving Daoist initiation in 1169, Sun traveled a long distance, about two hundred and fifteen kilometers, from Luoyang to the

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294 It is believed in Inner Alchemy that Yangshen 陽神 has shape and form, just like the so called immortal, which can be attained at the final stage of Daoist practice. See Zhongguo fangshu da cidian 中國方術大辭典 (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1991), 494.

295 WID, 143.

296 The Seven Perfected Ones (Qi Zhenren 七真人) are also known as the Seven Golden Lotuses, because Wang and his seven disciples often gathered in the Golden Lotus Hall located in Ninghai 寧海, Shandong.
capital Kaifeng to meet her former husband Ma Yifu, upon hearing about the death of Wang Chongyang. A careful examination of the poem that Ma wrote to Sun to commemorate their reunion indicates that Sun had wanted to follow Ma, but her wish was rejected. I present the poem here for the sake of further discussion below:

**On Making an Elixir**

Tell the lady from Fuchun,  
Do not follow me,  
We are not married any more.  
Let’s finish our cultivation individually,  
So that we can keep away from the three paths.  
Don’t breathe heavily when doing exercise,  
It should go easily from the top to the bottom.  
Quietly it goes on as if it does not exist.  
Bring spirit boys into action,  
Then you can go to the immortal land.

In terms of the meaning, this poem can be read in two stanzas, each consisting of five lines. The first stanza conveys Ma’s attitude toward Sun Buer. He starts his poem by addressing Sun as Fuchun Lady (Fuchun gu富春姑), which has confused scholars who have taken an interest in studying Su Buer. Some Chinese scholars explain that “Fuchun” was Sun’s given name or pet name; others think Fuchun is a name of the clan or place that Sun came from. After close examination of a district map of the Shandong area, I found a village called Fuchun 富春 in Juancheng 鄄城 District; thus, it is possible that Sun’s hometown was in the area of Fuchun and when she got married she moved to Ma’s

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297 The literal translation of “ling tong 靈童” is “spirit boys”. In some Daoist texts “spirit boys” refer to immortal boys. See Zhang Zhizhe 張志哲 ed. Daojiao wenhua cidian 道教文化辭典(Jiangsu: guji chubanshe, 1994)108.

298 Li Suping 李素平, Nüshen nüdan nüdao 女神女丹女道, 355.
home in Ninghai 宁海. Since there are no other clues about what Fuchun may refer to, I am inclined to take it as a place name because, in my view, Ma would not call Sun by her pet name in a poem which was meant to distance himself from Sun Buer. Ma asserts that he and Sun are no longer husband and wife and he insists that Sun refrain from following him; he asks Sun to pursue the Dao on her own so that she could evade “the three paths” (san tu 三途), a term borrowed from Buddhism, referring to the paths of animals, hell and the hungry ghosts.

In the second stanza of the poem, Ma writes about the techniques of Daoist practice. He emphasizes breathing exercises, or “tiao xi 調息”, which was regarded as a secret method that Ma has passed on to Sun. Finally, Ma concludes his poem with his grand prospect of heading for the immortal land to inspire Sun to persevere in her own cultivation and inner alchemical practice.

Based on the tone that Ma uses in his poem, one senses that while Ma distances himself from Sun, he nonetheless expresses concern for her, albeit solely as a fellow Daoist practitioner and friend. Rather than affection, Ma’s poem conveys a mixture of admonishment and encouragement before the couple parts ways for good. This poem appears to have played a seminal role for Sun in her pursuit of the Daoist path, since after her final meeting with Ma, she let go of her wish to reunite with her husband. From this point on, she devoted herself to her practice and eventually established her own sect, the Qingjing School.299

299 For the reference of Qingjing school, see WID, 157.
Another well known anecdotal story tells about Sun Buer’s departure from the human world, which is described in some detail in Qin Zhian’s account. According to Qin, Sun wrote a poem just before she transformed into an immortal. The following is the poem as quoted by Qin:

*To the Tune of Busuanzi*

Closing my hands tightly I waited with a coat over my shoulders,
Water and fire interacted frequently.
A myriad of sun rays generated from the bottom of the ocean.
With one blow the three passes became open.
Celestial music was heard consequently,
Very often I had finest wine.
Suddenly all the magic medicine was gone, ³⁰⁰
The elixir was ready after nine transformations.

In this poem, Sun summarizes her practice of inner alchemy. She begins the work by describing her physical stance when engaged in practice, focusing on her hand gestures, referred to as “*wogu*” 握固, where thumbs are bent in towards the palms and covered by the other four fingers.³⁰¹ As stated in Laozi’s *Daode jing* (55), “Although (his) bones are tender and sinews soft, he closes his hands tightly [*wogu]*.” 骨弱筋柔而握固. Later “*wogu*” became a typical hand gesture in Daoist practice and in more commonly used methods for preserving health.

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³⁰⁰ In *Jinlian zhengzong xianyuan xiangzhuan* 金蓮正宗仙源像傳 (*The Orthodox Biography of Golden Lotus with Illustration of the Origions of Immortals*), this line was written as, “Suddenly all the magic medicine comes,” (妙藥都來頃刻間), which sounds more reasonable in the context. See ZHDZ, 47.68.

³⁰¹ For more information about “*wogu*”, see *Jianming Daojiao Cidian* 簡明道教詞典 (hereafter abbreviated JMDJCD), Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe,1991, 170.
Next in her poem, Sun describes her internal exercises and feelings in doing inner alchemical practice. “Interaction between water and fire” (shuihuo jiaogou 水火交媾) is a term used in inner alchemy, wherein water represents the kidneys and fire the heart.  

The inner alchemists believed that an elixir of immortality can be produced when the original yang breath (yuan yang zhenqi 元陽真氣) and innate essences (xiantian zhi jing 先天之精) of the kidneys combine with the original spirit (xiantian yuanshen 先天元神) that resides in the heart.

They also maintain that after reaching a certain level of achievement through diligent efforts, the practitioner can become aware of rays of energy spewing forth from the so-called “ocean of breath” (qihai 氣海), located below the navel. These concepts are all described by Sun in her poem as “myriad rays of energy generated from the bottom of the ocean.” Moreover, Sun writes that after the three passes in her body are opened, she experienced sensations that were akin to the effects of drinking fine wine and she claims to have heard music being played in the celestial land.

“The elixir of nine transformations” (jiuzhuan jindan 九轉金丹), which appears in Sun’s poem, is a term used by Daoist alchemists. The term “zhuan” (transformation) refers to recurrent transformation, the more times an elixer converts, the better it is.

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302 See Daojiao da cidian 道教大詞典 (hereafter abbreviated DJDCD), Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1994, 331.

303 According to Julian F Pas, “At birth, each person is endowed with original spirit (yuanshen 元神), which is dissipated in life by thinking, worries, etc. Through inner cultivation, this process can be revered to the point where all one’s vitalies are transformed into spirit. Then longevity, even mortality, follows.” See Pas, Julian F Historical Dictionary of Taoism (Lanham, Md., & London, 1998), 364. For more information regarding yuanshen see JMDJCD, 184.

304 There are different explanations about three passes. One source said that the three passes refer to the acupuncture point on the back of human body, “weili”尾閭, “zhouhou”肘後, and “dazhui”大椎. See DJDCD, 81.
According to Ge Hong 葛洪, taking an elixir of one transformation, the practitioner could become an immortal in three years; and that taking an elixir of two transformations, immortality can be attained in two years. An elixir of nine rounds was considered the most potent, able to transform a mortal into an immortal in three days.\(^{305}\) Sun concludes her poem with this terminology to declare her success in Daoist practice as she has completed all the work required for the nine transformations and has attained the most powerful elixir.

This poem reveals Sun’s religious zeal and aspirations during her later years, affirming that she was a prominent Daoist of great achievements in her alchemical endeavors. It appears that all of Sun’s extant poems were composed after her ordination as all of them focus on her alchemical practice and make use of obscure Daoist terms and figures of speech. Examples include her most famous works, a set of seven heptasyllabic regulated quatrains often referred to as *Sun Buer Yuanjun fayu* 孫不二元君法語 (*The Alchemical Poems of Immortal Sun Buer*), and fourteen poems on practical techniques of alchemy for women.\(^{306}\)

Since these poems have already been examined in Western scholarship, I will not translate theses in my study.\(^{307}\) Instead, I will examine her other series of lyrical poems, which consist of thirteen works, entitled “Following the Tune of Xiubomei” 繽薄眉.

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\(^{305}\) See JMDJCD, 183. A detailed expiation of “jiuzhuan jindan” 九轉金丹 can be also found in Shiwen diangu cidian 詩文典故辭典 (Taipei: Muduo chubanshe 木鐸出版社 1987)31.

\(^{306}\) All Sun Buer’s alchemical poems can be found in Daozang jiyao 道藏輯要 (hereafter abbreviated DJZY), weiji 胸集, v.7. Chengdu: Bashu shushe 巴蜀書社, 1987.

These verses are preserved in the sixth volume of *Minghe yuyin* 鳴鶴余音 (*The Echoes of Calling Cranes*), edited by Peng Zhizhong 彭致中, a Daoist of the late Yuan Dynasty.³⁰⁸

It has been noted that some of the poems to the tune of Xiu bomei are categorized under the label of Wumingshi 無名氏 (anonymous) in the *Quan Jinyuan ci* 全金元詞 (*Complete Collection of Lyric Poems in the Jin and Yuan Dynasties*), edited by Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋 (1901–1990). A question presents itself when approaching Tang’s volume with regard to the ‘Wumingshi’ section. There are more than one hundred and fifteen poems under this label; I therefore doubt that these poems were written by a single person who used “Wumingshi” as a moniker. In my view, having studied the poems closely, “Wumingshi” does not refer to an individual but is simply a term used to categorize a group of verses by various individuals. This is supported by the disparate types of works included with respect to styles and themes. Moreover, sometimes poems listed as anonymous in one collection are ascribed to named authors in another volume. Because Professor Tang does not include *The Echoes of Calling Cranes* in his reference, I assume that his collection of Sun’s poem comes from other sources.

Since Sun Buer is the only person among the Seven Perfected Ones who does not have her own complete printed collection of poetry, it seems possible that her works were circulated in manuscript only and then included in the anthology of *The Echoes of Calling Cranes*, therefore, I follow it and take the set of poems to be of those of Sun and examine them below.

Following the Tone of Xiu bomei

To enlighten people for a complete understanding,
Daoism helps them escape suffering hardships on the three paths.
It is obvious that we should flee from home.
Tan, Ma, Qiu, Liu,
Sun, Wang, Hao Taigu, 309
Ship of compassionate in the sea of Daoist teaching,
To deliver all beings in the world from torment.

Two

To edify the ignorant,
To abandon household, husband and children.
With the sword of wisdom, you can cut off the three evil paths.
The mountain of selfishness collapsed,
The ocean of right and wrong dried up.
The old sins have been eliminated,
Don’t do anything wrong again.

Three

At the invitation of immortals,
Mercury, lead; black, white; and the path of xiyi. 310
After all I committed myself to do exercise.
So I don’t sleep day and night,
And I am satisfied with my sackcloth and simple food.
Begging on the street,
People in all directions could be my parents.

Four

I have no worries,
Like an isolated cloud and wild crane I am free and easy.
Inside my thatched cottage I read alchemical books.
Outside my window stand forest and spring.
Around the bend of a mountain recess I am beside a stream and bamboo,
The bright moon and a cool breeze,
They are fit companions for me.

309 “Tan, Ma, Qiu, Liu, Sun, Wang, Hao Taigu” refer to the Seven Perfected Ones, whose full names are Tan Chuduan 謝處端(1123–1185), Ma Danyang 馬丹陽(1123–1183), Qiu Chuji 丘處機(1148–1227), Liu Chuxuan 劉處玄(1147-1203), Sun Buer 孫不二, Wang Chuyi 王處一(1142–1217) and Hao Datong 郝大通(1140-1212).

310 In Daoist internal alchemy, lead represents original essence (yuan jing 元精) and original breath (yuan qi 元氣), mercury represents original spirit(yuan shen 元神). See JMDJCD,184.
“Black and white” are used in symbolic meanings of yin and yang. See DJDCD,912.
“Xiyi” is an allusion to Laozi’s work. I discuss this term in detail in the text.
Sun Buer was said to be very active in delivering sermons and converted many people to the Complete Perfection sect. The poems presented above might very well be some of her lectures for this purpose. In the first stanza, Sun expresses that it is Daoism that can help people evade suffering and hardships on the three paths. As discussed above, “san tu 三塗 (the three paths) was used in Ma Danyang’s poem to refer to the paths of animals, hell and starvation.

While this series of poems attests Sun’s command of the poems, Sun uses many terms and phrases that appear in Ma and Wang Chongyang’s works, such as, “to cut of the three evil paths” (zhanduan santu 斬斷三塗), “mountain of selfishness” (ren wo shan 人我山), “ocean of right and wrong” (shifei hai 是非海), (but in Wang’s poem it is written as “river of right and wrong”). Moreover, some modern Chinese scholars, such as Liang Shufang 梁淑芳, have noticed that Wang Chongyang has a preference to write names in his poetry. Wang included his own name in his poems fifty-seven times and the names of others in a total of twenty-five poems. Thus, it is not surprising to see that Sun follows Wang and lists the names of the Seven Perfected Ones in her poem.

In the concluding lines of the first verse, Sun says that the Seven Perfected Ones are like the Buddha rescuing people from what amounts to hell on earth. It is notable that Sun also uses many Buddhist terms in her poems to express herself and this testifies that the doctrines of the Complete Perfection are a combination of Daoism and Buddhism.

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The second stanza continues to persuade people to abandon their families and homes. Speaking from personal experience, Sun emphasizes that leaving home and cutting off the bonds of familial affection are initial steps to dedicating oneself to a religious life. By repetition of Buddhist idea, such as “san tu”三塗 and “ye”業 (sin) Sun promotes conversion to Daoism.

The following stanza begins with Sun’s alchemical practice and her daily work as a Daoist practitioner. In inner alchemy, mercury, lead, black and white are all used in symbolic meanings, referring to original essence (yuanjin 元精), original breath (yuanqi 元氣), original spirit (yuanshen 元神) and yin and yang. Sun also alludes to Laozi’s words, “xi” 希 and “yi”夷. When the Daode jing (14) describes Dao as something imperceptible, it states: “Look at it but it cannot be seen; such is called invisible (yi); / Listen to it but it cannot be heard; such is called inaudible (xi).” ( 視之不見, 名曰夷; 听之不闻,名曰希).

Using Daoist alchemical terms together with words from the Daode jin, Sun conveys her daily efforts in pursuit of the Dao. In addition to alchemical practice, Sun talks about the immense challenge she faced upon forsaking her worldly possessions – she resorted to begging on streets. One source states that initially, Wang Chongyang brought Sun with him and taught her how to beg.312 Abandoning her comfortable status from a wealthy literatu’s family, Sun accepted a position among the lowest echelons of society.

312 See LSZXTDTJHJ, 47.662.
In the fourth poem, however, Sun describes the natural beauty and elegance of her solitary life. As her mind is devoid of desires, she feels relaxed and as free as an isolated cloud or a wild crane. In a thatched hut, she reads alchemical texts amongst bamboo forests, clear springs and nearby mountains. Her only companions in the night are the bright moon and cool breeze. Corresponding to her Daoist title – free, idle and serene (qingjing sanren) – Sun’s reclusive life seems at times to be quiet, easy and enjoyable in its closeness to nature.

Unfortunately, these are the only two verses that describe Sun’s daily life in her poetry; all other poems are filled with alchemical terms and figurative speech, recounting details of her alchemical practice. Since these verses are couched in oblique terms pertaining to inner alchemical theories, I bypass them in my present study and highlight only the last two in which Sun describes the immortal world as an inspiration to her disciples:

Twelve

When one succeeds in Daoist practice,
He will go to the three islands in Penglai for a get-together of immortals.
At Yaochi, he will meet countless Sages and men of virtue.
They are all Daoist practitioners,
By studying Daoism he is able to associate with immortals.
To looking after the great sage,
Who is the Divine Mother of the West.

Thirteen

Enjoy food cooked by the celestial kitchen,
You feel body is light in the immortal’s clothes.
Riding phoenix, you admire the scenery of the immortal palaces.
Splendid halls and jade buildings,
With the red gates covered by gold pegs.
Springs last forever with no nights.
There is no coming and going.  

Depicting the immortal world as noble and dignified in the twelfth poem, Sun implies that if one is successful in Daoist practice, s/he would find a place among the sages and have the potential to attend to the Divine Mother of the West. In the last poem, Sun conjures up material splendors – heavenly food, immortal dress, jade buildings with red gates covered in gold pegs. Such descriptions are somewhat puzzling, considering Sun’s promotion of detachment from worldly pleasures for the sake of entering the land of immortals. On the other hand, Daoist sermons often assert that the purpose of giving up one’s life in the mundane world is to seek a life of pleasure in the immortal world.

In terms of techniques, these poems are very unique because throughout the history of lyrical poetry from the Song to Qing dynasties, only Sun Buer wrote poems following the tune of Xiu bomei. It is possible that the tune was created by Sun herself. Even though the language applied in this series is simple, Sun alludes to the Daode jing and Buddhist works and also employs special terms from inner alchemical books, which make the poems difficult to comprehend. As is the case with most alchemical poetry, this series of verses is mainly in the didactic style as Sun is concerned with preaching and instruction of Daoist techniques. However, the forth and thirteenth are exceptional, for these describe Sun’s worldly environment as well as the immortal land.

As the only woman among the Seven Perfected Ones, who were leaders of the Complete Perfection monastic school, Sun Buer made important contributions to the monastic school by establishing her own Qingjing (Clarity and Tranquility) sect. More
significantly, she provided a model for women to pursue a spiritual life on the path of Daoist cultivation. In addition, her works on inner alchemy provided women with practical guidance by combining theory with practice, which was often specific to women’s physiology. Following Sun’s remarkable example, the participation of women in inner alchemical practice increased rapidly. According to Livia Kohn, “Women made up about one third of the Complete Perfection clergy, and one of the seven major schools is associated with a woman founder. The Qingjing pai (Clarity and Tranquility Lineage) of Sun Buer is its most prominent women’s school.”

The extant poetic works by Sun indicate that she was a successful Daoist practitioner and a leading female sectarian matriarch as well as a member of the literati, who created her own forms and themes in writing poetic works. Under the influence of Sun Buer the new trend for women’s alchemical poetry (nüdan shi, 女丹詩) started flourishing. In the following section, I continue to examine women’s alchemical poetry, as written by Zhou Xuanjing and Tang Guangzhen.

5.3. Zhou Xuanjing

Unlike Cao Xiyun and Sun Buer, who were recognized as leaders or matriarchs of Daoist organizations, Zhou Xuanjing 周玄靜 (fl. 1189) was known only as the mother of Wang Chuyi 王處一 (1142–1217), who was founder of the Yushan 俞山 lineage and among the Seven Perfected Ones. There are no accounts about Zhou Xuanjing herself.

313 WID, 157.
even in Daoist hagiographies on female deities and immortals such as *Lishi zhenxian tidao tonjian houji* 历世真仙體道通鑑後集 (The Latter Volume of Complete Collection of Immortals’ Daoist Practice in Previous Dynasties). As such, the only account about Zhou is part of an account of her son, and found in *Sanbao xindeng* 三寶心鑾, compiled by Hui Chunzi 回春子 (dates unknown, but whose work should be dated to before 1774).\(^{314}\)

The family name of Xuanjing 玄靜 (Profundity and Tranquility) Sanren 散人 (Serene) is Zhou. She was the mother of Wang Chuyi 王處一, from Dongmu, Ninghai District. Chuyi was born in the second year of the Huangtong 皇統 era [1141-1149] during the reign of Emperor Xizong 熙宗 [r.1135–1149] in the Jin dynasty [1115-1234]. In her pregnancy, Chuyi’s mother [Zhou Xuanjing] dreamed of rosy clouds surrounding her one night. Awaking with a start, she gave a birth to Chuyi, who was very bright from childhood. While on his visit to a mountain one day, Chuyi met an old man sitting on a boulder, who said to him, “You will become a great master of Daoist religion and become famous throughout the imperial palaces.” After patting his head, the old man went away. Chuyi wrote a poem, pondering,

> Why does one have to fight for fame and compete for profit?  
> It’s better to begin cultivating one’s mind early.  
> I will do this for my own future.  
> If I do not, I will be the same as ordinary people.

After meeting the master Chongyang in the hermitage of Complete Perfection in the eighth year of the Dading era, Chuyi asked to be Wang Chongyang’s disciple and brought his mother with him to practice Daoist cultivation. Then they were taught the supreme Dao separately. Although they were physically weak and lived in poverty, they persevered in their practice and cultivation of the Dao.

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\(^{314}\) According to Hui Chunzi, *Sanbao xindeng* had already existed for a long time before he wrote preface for it in 1774, the year of *jiawu* 甲午 during the reign of *Qianlong* 乾隆 (r. 1736–1795).
Later, Chuyi was summoned to and spoke at the imperial palace, where he stated: “Even a bright mirror can have a clear reflection of things, let alone the mirror of heaven and earth; all dark places can be lighted by candles. Nothing can hide from the mirror. The so-called mirror of heaven and earth is the mysteriousness of one’s own soul and conscience.” On hearing his words, Emperor Zhangzong (r. 1189-1208) was most satisfied and said, “You are an upright and erudite person. Your aspiration is like that of a deity.” Then Chuyi made a request: “My mother is going to be ninety years old next year. I wish to take care of her.”

One day his mother told Chuyi that she was going to die. She said, “I do not indulge in life nor am I afraid of death,” and then she died. After the funeral, Chuyi said to his followers: “I have an appointment with the group of perfected ones so I am now going”. Having burnt incense and taken a bath, he ascended to heaven.315

玄靜散人，姓周氏，寧海東牟王處一之母也。處一生於金熙宗皇統（1141—1149）二年。孕時，夜夢紅霞繞身，驚寐而生。幼多穎悟。一日遊山中，遇老人坐大石，謂之曰："子異日揚名帝闕，為道教宗主。"遂摩頂而去。嘗作頌自歌曰："争甚名？奪甚利？不如閑早修心地，自家修證自前程，自家不作為群類。"大定八年，遇重陽祖師于全真庵，請為弟子，奉母同修，各受大道。家貧力薄，苦志修持。

後處一應名赴闕，奏對有云："鏡明猶能鑑物，況天地之鏡，無幽不燭，何物可逃？所謂天地之鏡，即自己靈明之妙也。"于是大稱旨，章宗嘆曰："清明在躬，志氣如神，先生之謂也。" “明年母壽九秩，表乞侍養”。

一日母謂處曰："我歸期已至，因示 "不貪生，不懼死"之語而化。葬畢，語門人曰："寡真相約，吾去矣。"焚香沐浴而昇。

315 See DZJY, biji 壁集, 4. 67.b.
Contrary to many hagiographies on famous Daoist adepts, this account highlights that Zhou’s son, Wang Chuyi, was predestined to become an outstanding Daoist master. Based on the *Chronology of the Seven Perfected Ones*, when Chuyi followed Wang Chongyang and became an ordained Daoist monastic, Chuyi was only twenty-seven. Although the exact dates of Zhou’s dates remain unknown, she certainly lived around 1189, because when Chuyi was summoned by Emperor Zhazong 章宗, Chuyi told the emperor that his mother was ninety in the next year.

Influenced by her son, Zhou Xuanjing also devoted herself to the Daoist religion, persisting in inner alchemical practice. Despite the hardships they encountered, Zhou had a long life and lived into her nineties, which was very rare for her time. Her longevity was therefore taken as evidence of the high level of her Daoist cultivation. Zhou, however, was not identified as an immortal but depicted as an ordinary Daoist practitioner. Yet her sentence “I do not indulge in life, neither am I afraid of death” indicates her noble qualities.

Though little is known about Zhou, she has left behind five quatrains on alchemical practice for women that provide some sense of her insights and spiritual life. Zhou’s poems do not have titles and read like personal notes on her daily practice.{$^{316}$}

I

The secret of feminine elixir can only be found in stillness, 坤訣須從靜裡求，
Within stillness there is a possibility of action, 靜中卻有動機留。
If you sit in vain with idle thought in your mind, 若教空坐存枯想，
How can you have the elixir when tiger runs and dragon flies? 虎走龍飛丹怎授。

II

A small terrace of soul remains as stable as a huge rock, 一點靈臺磐石安，
Whatever success or failure in a thousand ways, 任他榮落態千般。

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$^{316}$ Zhou’s poem is found in *DZJY, biji* 壁集, 4.67.b
The light of yang is like the Treasure free from dust,
One can keep inside and get reward when the elixir forms.

III
My mind is like the autumn in Cao stream,\(^{317}\)
I should practice at the time of midnight and noon,
Although fish and dragon move violently, the waves remain still,
Only the moonlight remains in the vast sky.

IV
Light smoke and thin mist cover the void,
That makes the brightness of soul get no place to live,
Hatred, love, glory and disgrace are all sharp knives,
Giving them to you equals to hurting you, how can you look for them?

V
Nature and life require the participation of the brain,
Don’t be late to catch a dragon and bind tigers.
If yang leaks during its production,
How can a millet be preserved?

Like many alchemical poems, this set of verses make use of specialized terms and figurative speech. The first quatrain explains that stillness is the foundation of inner alchemical practice. Here, Zhou emphasizes that the stillness to which she refers is clarity of the mind rather than physical immobility. According to Chen Yingning, the inner alchemical terms “tiger” and “dragon” stand for breath (\(qi\) 氣) and spirit (\(shen\) 神).\(^{318}\) The Complete Perfection school believes that only when one focuses one’s spirit on one’s breath (“catching the dragon and taming the tiger” (\(qin long fu hu\) 擒龍縛虎)) can one start producing the golden elixir within oneself.

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\(^{317}\) Cao stream is located in Qüjiang 曲江 District, Guangdong.

\(^{318}\) There are alternative explanations for “tiger” and “dragon”. One source says “tiger” represents “man’s nature” (\(xing\) 性) and “dragon” represents “man’s emotion” (\(qing\) 情). See Zhongguo fangshu da cidian 中國方術大辭典, 494. Other source says “dragon” refers to original spirit (\(yuan shen\) 元神) and “tiger” to original essence (\(yuan jing\) 元精). See JMDJCD, 174.
Of course, it is not enough just to clear the mind; one also has to maintain a stable thought and pure mind (xin ding yi qing 心定意清). Hence, the second quatrain focuses on the soul or spirit. In inner alchemy, “the terrace of the soul” (lingtai 靈臺) refers to “heart,” “soul” or “spirit.” Zhou states that her spirit remains as stable as a rock regardless of prosperity or privation. The “light of yang” 陽光 refers to a charge of energy between the eyebrows that takes place at an advanced stage of alchemical practice. Thomas Cleary explains that the yang light is “the power of the ‘restorative elixir’ that rejuvenates and renewes the original consciousness”. The inner alchemists claim that when the “light of yang” appears three times, it indicates that an elixir that has been brewing inside a person’s body is ripe. It seems that Zhou reached the level of having the “light of yang” and she cherished it to nourish her elixir.

The next two quatrains continue to appeal for a shedding of emotion and desire in one’s mind in cultivating the Dao. It is said that Master Wang Chongyang was very careful about when he practiced, and Zhou, Wang’s follower, also indicates that the time of “zi” 子 (from 11pm to 1am) and “wu”午 (from 11am to 1pm) is the right time to do inner alchemical exercise. In the fourth quatrain, Zhou echoes Wang Chongyang’s words that honor and disgrace, love and hatred are sharp knifes that she would not concern herself with as she was devoted to Daoist exercises.

The last quatrain is ambiguous and difficult to comprehend as Zhou uses some vague terms. In the first line, she says the cultivation of nature and life require the participation of “yueku” 月窟, which refers to a point at the top of the head, called “shang

"dantian" 上丹田 (upper dantian). As Douglas Wile observes, “over the centuries, various authorities have provided very different definitions. There are those who identify the upper tan-t’ien  as the yin-t’ang 印堂, or hsüan-kuan 玄闕 (between the eyebrows), the tsu-ch’iao 祖竅 (between the eyes), the ni-wan 泥丸 (center of the brain).”320

In spite of these uncertainties, Zhou may just be stressing the importance of the point. As has been discussed above, “to catch the dragon and tame the tiger” means to train one’s breath by focusing one’s spirit on breathing. Finally, Zhou applies another inner alchemical term, “shumi”衰来 (millet). Based on Zhang Sanfeng’s 張三豐 (1247–1458) work, “shumi” was used figuratively to represent the original essence, breath and spirit.321 Or “shumi” may refer to the seed of an elixir. Whatever the case, the line suggests that if the “yang” leaks, the production of the elixir will be compromised.

This is clearly a typical alchemical poem, filled with specialized terms and figurative expressions. Although Zhou composed her works as heptasyllabic poems and made most of her lines rhyme, she seemed focusing on conveying meanings and ideas about Daoist practice. Hence, the purpose of her writing poetry does not seem to create a piece of art work, but rather to enhance her comprehension of Daoism and to exchange her experience in doing Daoist practice. From her poems, one gains a sense of Zhou as a devoted Daoist nun, discarding all worldly desires and striving for the attainment of immortality.

321 Zhang Sanfeng 張三豐 was a founder of the monastic school of Wudang sect 武當派. It was said that he have lived up to 212 year’s old. Reference for his work “yili shumi shuo”一粒衰米說 (The Theory of a Millet) see Zhang Sanfeng quanji 張三豐全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 1990), 15.
5.4. Tang Guangzhen

Like Zhou Xuanjing, little is known about Tang Guangzhen 唐廣真 (fl. 1180) except for a legendary account found in Sanbao xindeng. The following is the only anecdotal account about her and provides a glimpse about her background and how others saw her:

Tang Guangzhen was from Yanzhou (in modern Laibin 來賓 Guangxi), she was filial to her mother. After her marriage, she suffered from a blood disease. Since she was fond of Daoism by nature and made offerings to He Xiangu (Immortal Lady He) so earnestly, He appeared and taught her the secret formulas and celestial talismans. In the middle of the Chunxi 涇熙 [1174-1189] era, she was led to the beach by three immortals, riding on a big frog. Following the immortals, she visited prominent mountains. The immortals asked her, “Do you want to be a sage, or remain living in the secular world in your current form? Do you want to discard your bones and transform into an immortal?” Tang replied, “My mother is alive and I want to take care of her all her life.” Then the immortals gave her an elixir pill. After taking the elixir, she never ate any grain. Later, she was called to Deshou Palace 德壽宮 [Palace of Virtue and Longevity] and received the title Jijing Ningshen Zhenren 寂靜凝神真人 (A Concentrated Serene Perfected Lady).


³²² DZJY, biji 壁集, 4. 67.a
As outlined in this hagiography, Tang was a woman who was not only fond of Daoism; but was also filial. Her moral excellence and religious zeal won the favor of Daoist immortals who led her on travels over famous mountains and oceans so that she could enjoy the experience of being an immortal. Moreover, they awarded her the golden elixir upon hearing her wish to take care of her mother. Although her encounter with the immortals belongs to the realm of legend, her summon to the imperial palace is plausible. When Gaozong 高宗(r.1127-1162) resigned and became a super-sovereign (taishanghuan 太上皇), he lived in the Palace of Deshou 德寿宮(Palace of Virtue and Longevity). Since he was very fond of Daoism, he may have called on Tang Guangzhen and granted her an honorable title.

It is worth noting that Tang was treated as a representative figure by Daoist hagiographers to promote the principles or discipline of the monastic school of Complete Perfection. In spite of the elixir that Tang had already received from the immortals, she seems to have continued with Daoist cultivation, as suggested in her poetic works on alchemical practice. Like Zhou’s verses, Tang’s poems have no titles. As such, they may also be taken as personal notes on her individual practice:

I

Although the arcane truth are right in front of you你不要认识求甚深
you don’t recognize it and try hard to look for it。
When you start thinking of it you began to know the depth of it。
It’s difficult to express the study of nature in words
Having cut off the connections with this mortal world，
the true mind will be revealed。

玄機觀面費尋求，
著眼方知至理深。
性學難將文字指，
業緣了當見真心。

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323 DZJY, biji 壁集, 4. 67.a.
II
Really human’s nature is the most easily visible,  
But it changes with the evening clouds over the peak of mountains,  
If it can live in east and west, south and north,  
Then you can sail across the ocean for the Isle of Immortals.

III
If you don’t recognize nature, or life,  
You separate “qian” and “kun” into two parts,  
On the day of joining the two parts together it is the time  
forming elixir,  
And you will fall drunk to the jug without anyone for support.

IV
When I feel no anger nor joy my breath is harmonious,  
Acting according to the situations just as the wind follows clouds,  
Having tamed the tiger and dragon, the mind is naturally still,  
With the bright moon in the blue sky it is all white.

Compared to Zhou’s work, Tang’s poem is more readable; moreover, while Zhou’s poem focuses on the process or key issues about Daoist practice, Tang’s poem focuses more on her personal visions and reflections while doing alchemical practices. In the first quatrain, she expresses her impressions about the depth and mysterious truth of Daoism, saying that although people try hard to seek the secret formula, they are not able to recognize it even when it appears right before them. Only when she starts to think about it does she come to realize the profundity of the theories. She writes that it is hard to study human nature, so she has cut off all her connections with the secular world so that her true mind can become close to the Dao.

In the following two quatrains, Tang continues to speak about nature. She believes that human nature is easy to perceive, but it changes frequently like the evening clouds over the mountains. If one keeps one’s nature stable, one will be on the path to the
land of immortals. Daoist thought regards “qian” 乾 and “kun” 坤 as binary terms, just like “yin” and “yang”; “kan” 坎 and “li”, whose meanings may vary depending on the context in which they are used. Tang states that if one does not recognize one’s nature (xing 性) or one’s life (ming 命), one separates “qian” and “kun” and this is not the right way in Daoist practice as Daoist theory advocates the combination and harmony of the two.

In the last line of the third quatrain Tang alludes to a popular expression, “getting drunk in a jug,” which is often used by famous Daoist masters to depict of the experience at an advanced stage of practice. Here “jug” is used figuratively, representing a person’s body. Just like Sun Buer’s line, “very often I had fine wine,” both Tang and Sun try to express the amazing feelings they have when they are successful in their practice.

The concluding line of the last quatrain is also an expression of Tang’s special experience rather than the surface meaning of the words. It is said that a successful Daoist practitioner will have a vision of brightness inside his body, which is defined as the “light of yang”. Tang’s description of her experience of a bright vision implies her success in inner alchemical cultivation. In fact, Tang’s poetic work echoes some ideas or even words and expressions that appear in some Daoist master’s works, for example, “to tame the tiger and dragon”; “to cur off connections with the secular world”, “still mind”, “qian” and “kun”, etc..

The works by Sun Buer, Zhou Xuanjing and Tang Guangzhen provides a sense of women’s alchemical poetry. In my view, there are at least four features that are apparent.

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324 For the meaning of “hu” (jug), see DJDCD, 800.
325 For reference, see DJDCD, 504.
First, the themes of the poetry are consistent; all of them are on the process, methods and visions in practicing alchemy. Second, the content of the poems do not vary significantly and very often make allusions to some authorities’ writings, or express their command of master works. Third, unlike many Tang and Song poets who were not a part of religious sects and who wrote poetry as art or to communicate with friends, these Daoist women created poetry to discuss or exchange their knowledge about inner alchemical theories. Therefore, their purpose for writing poems led them to be more concerned about conveying ideas rather than being too concerned with artistic forms and techniques. Finally, since many of the alchemical poems by women speak about their personal experience or feelings about their own alchemical practice, their works are usually full of special terms and figurative expressions, which make their work inaccessible to many readers. However, once one is familiar with the alchemical vocabulary and ideas, the women’s alchemical poetry is not difficult to comprehend as the basic lexicon they used was not unique.

Furthermore, the poetry written by Daoist priestesses from the Song period varies a great deal from those written by Daoist nuns from the Tang period in terms of what they convey. In the Song poems, most aspects of worldly life are not touched on at all and they focus entirely on Daoist cultivation and the pursuit of immortality. In the Tang poems, connections to the mundane world – emotions and social relations – are touched on in addition to the pursuit of a religious Daoist life. As a result, the images illustrated in the Song Daoist nuns’ poems are significantly different from those of Tang’s either.
Chapter 6 Imagery of Female Daoists in the Poetry of Song Male Literati

The Song dynasty (960-1279) featured dramatic political, social and economic change. While it suffered from military weakness, its economy and culture, as well as education were all surging forward. As discussed in the introduction, the Song dynasty also marked a period of significant Daoist development and innovation. Daoism changed in form, and its institutions were distinct from those of the Tang period. This difference can be seen in the literary works of each era as well. For instance, while learned men of the Tang period composed a large number of poems for Daoist women, Song elite laymen seemed to write less poetic works for women in Daoism. It appears that only a few poets wrote poems on female Daoists, and these poets were motivated by their personal experience with the subjects.

This phenomenon may not necessarily mean that the Song literati had little interest in Daoism. On the contrary, Song intellectuals composed numerous works on Daoist theories and practices, as well as on their personal interactions with Daoist adepts, revealing that the Daoist religion must have had a profound influence over the Song elite. As a result, the number of Song learned men who converted to Daosim was actually much greater than conversions in the Tang. Nevertheless, I find that far fewer poems about Daoists have titles containing an indication of gender, such as, female Daoist X or
Daoist nun X. Instead, many poems are addressed to “Master X” or “Immortal X”.

Starting from the Song period, some elite men began calling certain prominent female Daoists “master” (xiānshēng 先生) in their writings to show their admiration for the priestesses. For instance, in Zheng Ang’s Zheng (fl.1100) account about Cao Wenyi, a famous Daoist who has been studied in Chapter Four, Zheng addressed the priestess “xiānshēng” (teacher or master). However, when Li Lian 李濂 (1488–1566) recalled Zhen’s narration he intentionally changed the title from “xiānshēng” to “xiāngu” (immortal lady). Another fine example is found in “Recent Events in Nantang (937–975)” (nantang jinshi 南唐進事) written by Zheng Wenbao 鄭文寳 (fl. twelfth century), in which Zheng reports, “A female Daoist, Master Geng, whose fingers looked like bird talons with features like jade, was an expert in Daoist practice” (女冠耿先生，鳥爪玉貌，甚有道術). With an appreciation of her slender fingers and beautiful face, Zheng highly praises the female clergy’s Daoist skill.

Thus it is possible that among the poems addressed to “xiānshēng” there are some works that are directed to female Daoists. However, without a clear gender indication in the title of the poetic works, it is difficult for me to select poems for this study, as I have little data available to confirm which addressees are Daoist nuns. The use of this different term of address, which expresses the general respect Song elite men had towards female Daoist clergies, informs us that the position and imagery of Song female Daoists was quite distinct from that of Tang Daoist nuns.

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326 Li Lian 李濂 Bianjing jiuyi ji 汴京九異記 v. 2.13 in BBCSJ C.
Another notable feature revealed in the Song literature is that while fewer poems created by lay elite men are recognized as works dedicated to Daoist priestesses, a large number of poems were composed by male Daoist adepts for female Daoists, or for women interested in Daoism. Therefore, this chapter not only examines the works of Song elite men who were outside the Daoist religion, but also explores the writings of some famous Daoist patriarchs. Hence, our comparison is not limited to the works of male and female but, rather, goes beyond contrasting the various visions of Song male intellectuals who are in or outside the Daoist religion, as well as the different writing styles in poetic creation.

6.1. Works on Daoist Women by Non-religious Learned Men

6.1.1. Qin Guan

Qin Guan 秦觀 (1049–1100), styled Shaoyou 少游, won his jinshi degree in 1085, and served as proofreader in the Palace Library (Mishusheng zhengzi 秘書省正字) in the Song court. According to Tongjiang shihua 桐江詩話 (The Tongjiang Poetry Talks), Qin once had a passion for a Daoist nun, whose family name was Chang.328 Because he could not win the favor of the woman he wrote the following poem, expressing his feelings for her.

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328 In his work Shilin guangji 詩林廣記, Cai Zhensun 蔡正孫, a Song poet, quoted from Tongjiang shihua 桐江詩話, which appeared in the Southern Song period and was composed by an anonymous person. The original story goes, “At the time there was a Daoist nun, named Chang, who looked so beautiful that she was often compared to an immortal girl. Shaoyou liked her but could not get her. Thus he wrote this poem to express his feeling for her”. (時有女冠崔姬，姿色妍麗，神仙中人也。少游挑之不得，乃作詩雲). See Shilin guangji 詩林廣記(Taibei: Guangwen shuju 廣文書局 1973)673. Qin’s poem is also from this source.
To Daoist Nun, Master Chang

Her liquid eyes look as if trimmed by scissors and her slender waist seems girdled.

Her body looks like cold jade and is enveloped in black silk. She is as graceful as the goddess in the Gushe Mountain,\(^{329}\)

Looking back, all the pretty girls seem coarse and vulgar.\(^{330}\)

Don’t look at her mist-shrouded boudoir and cloud-covered windows;

Just let carriages and horses go east and west in front of her gate.

The spring day is quiet after she pays obeisance in the morning at the Daoist altar.

The ground is covered with fallen flowers and baby crows caw.

Starting with the depiction of her appearance and dress, the poet portrays his subject as an elegant immortal girl. Though she has “liquid eyes” and a “slender figure,” she dresses in “black silk,” which informs us that in addition to the yellow colored dresses described in Tang poems as a Daoist garment, some Song Daoist nuns also wore black. In the second couplet, the poet alludes to Zhuangzi’s 莊子 chapter, Xiaoyao You 逍遙游, in which he says, “In remote Gushe mountain lives a goddess, whose fairy skin looks like ice and snow, and her gentle beauty is similar to that of a virgin.” (藐姑射之山,有神人居焉，肌膚若冰雪，淖約若處子).\(^{331}\) Likening his subject to the goddess in Gushe Mountain, Qin elevated the Daoist woman to the status of a divine being.

In the following quatrain, Qin’s depiction moves from her alluring appearance to her mystical residence. Borrowing a line from Han Yu’s poem “A Woman from Huashan Mount,” in which Han says, “Things with her are blurry as her windows are covered with clouds and her boudoir is shrouded in mist” (雲窗霧閣事恍惚), Qin emphasizes that the

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\(^{329}\) Gushe Mountain 莫射山 is located in Linfen 臨汾, modern Shanxi 山西.

\(^{330}\) The literal meaning of fendai (粉黛) is “white powder” and “kohl”, cosmetics used by women. Later, it refers to beautiful women.

\(^{331}\) Zhuangzi 莊子 “Xiaoyao You” 逍遙遊 See Wang Xianqian 王先謙 comm. Zhuangzi jijie 莊子集解, 5.
Daoist woman is not accessible and that her place of residence is wrapped in mystery. Then Qin alters Bai Juyi’s line “Her front gate became quiet as there were fewer carriages and horses” (門前冷落鞍馬稀), implying that the Daoist Lady Chang might have many visitors, but that she is unconcerned with them. The last couplet hints that the woman might be a devoted priestess, performing Daoist rituals every day and remaining silent after her Daoist practice. Finally, the poem concludes with a depressing image: the ground is covered with red flowers and baby crows caw.

In this heptasyllabic regulated verse Qin expresses his complicated feelings for the Daoist woman. Through several allusions, Qin links his subject to both the goddess in Gushe Mountain, emphasizing her distinct, elegant beauty, and the female Daoist in Huashan Mountain, highlighting her mysterious features; Qin also connects his subject to the aged prostitute in Bai Juyi’s poem, indicating that the Daoist Lady Chang was popular at the time. However, facing the female clergy’s calm mind and commitment to Daoism, the poet realizes that he has no alternative but to abandon his erotic emotions for her. In respect, Qin vividly describes a graceful, beautiful and pious Daoist priestess in the poem.

6.1.2. Lu You

One of the greatest poets of the Song dynasty, Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210), a native of Shanyin 山陰 (in modern Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang) has nine thousand poems

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332 Han Yu’s poem has been discussed in Chapter Two of this work.
333 Bai Juyi’s line is in his poem “Ballads of Lute” (琵琶引), which can be found in QTS v.435. See QTS (Zhonghua shuju, 1960) 13.4821.
extant today. Although he wrote nearly one hundred poems related to Daoism, only two quatrains were clearly specifically composed for a Daoist woman, whose family name is Xie. Because Lu addresses the woman as “Siming Xie jun” (四明 謝君), I assume that she might be from Siming 四明 mountain, located in the east of Zhejiang. In addition, the title of the poem refers to her as “Zixiao Daoist nun” (紫霄 女道士), thus I conjecture that the priestess might have lived in a temple named Zixiao.

Sending off Ms. Xie from Siming, a Female Daoist in Zixiao (Temple)

One

It has been fourteen years since I left Nanchong, Time and again I had a good dream of Gold Spring. The autumn wind blows early over the roads at Shanyin, However, I came across the immortal girl little Ziran.

Two

Her demeanor of transcendent being distinguished herself from others, In the clear autumn she picks up herbs and goes to the village by the river. She claims she is from the south or north of the clouds, Who knows what generation she is that left in the mundane world?

Similar to Qin Guan’s poem, in which the poet talks about his personal feelings and experiences with the priestess, Lu seems to have a good relationship with the Daoist woman, as the title indicates that he sent off her and composed the poem for her. In the

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334 According to the Chinese scholar Yang Jianbo 楊建波, Lu You wrote about one hundred poems related to Daoism. See Yang Jianbo 楊建波 Daojiao wenxueshi lungao 道教文學史論稿 (Wuhan 武漢: Wuhan chubanshe,2001) 260.
336 Nanchong county is in modern Sichuan.
337 Gold Spring (Jinquan 金泉) is a name of a mountain, located in Sichuan.
338 Shanyin is Lu You’s hometown.
339 Ziran refers to the famous Daoist priestess Xie Ziran, who was said to become transcendent in Jinquan.
opening couplet the poet recalls Nanchong, the place where he parted with the Daoist woman fourteen years previously. It happens that Nanchong is the Daoist nun Xie Ziran’s native place and Jinquan is the mountain where Xie Ziran transformed. By referring to the two places, Lu pays his subject a compliment by connecting her to the well-known Daoist nun Xie. In the following couplet, Lu switches to the present, in Lu’s hometown, where Lu unexpectedly rejoins the little goddess-like Daoist priestess with happiness.

The second quatrain begins with direct accolades for the priestess’ distinguished features, which Lu attributes to her Daoist nature and cultivation. Moreover, for emphasizing her natural Daoist possessions, Lu puts a rhetorical question in the concluding line. He implies that the Daoist celestial might be a descendant of an immortal family, as she claims that she is from the south or north of clouds. By and large, this poem expresses Lu’s friendship with the Daoist nun and his feelings of admiration towards female Daoist clerics, without any frivolous or sexual descriptions of his subject.

6.1.3. Wang Chou

With regard to the different opinions that many Song learned men held towards Daoist women, Wang Chou 王翛 (the twelfth century) is someone who must be mentioned because of a short verse he once composed, the only surviving poem of his still extant today. In this verse he criticizes Han Yu’s lengthy poem on Xie Ziran. The popular topic and plain language applied in his short verse caused Wang’s poem to spread far and wide, and Wang is remembered for the following four lines.
Starting from the opening line, this short verse challenges Han Yu’s long poem on Xie Ziran, berating him for doubting the transcendence of Xie Ziran. Wang then highlights that the place has become a place of good fortune. Although Wang does not define the place he refers to, I assume that it is likely to be either Xie’s hometown, Nanchong, or Jinquan mountain, where Xie was said to have become transcendent. In the concluding line, Wang makes a declaration about the existence of immortals from ancient times to the present.

Instead of description, Wang uses the whole poem to discuss an idea. Although it appears short and the lexicon employed is simple, it contains two perfect parallel structures. In the first couplet, he uses adverbs “even” to match “rather” and verbs “doubt about” to “blame”. In addition, both verbs have pronouns as their objects. The second couplet is also in perfect parallel structure. Given its didactic style, plain lexicon and short length, Wang’s quatrain might be considered of little literary value, in spite of his parallel structures. However, it is Wang’s straightforward and blunt condemnation of Han Yu that is directly responsible for the fame of the poem. Today, people still remember Wang Chou even though he has only one poem extant.
6.1.4. Wang Yuanliang

Wang Yuanliang 汪元量 (1241 - 1317), a native of Hangzhou, styled Dayou 大有, and once served as a zither performer in the Song court. Wang purportedly wore a Daoist hat and dress in his later years but because he was not fully-ordained, I regard him as a lay follower of the Daoist religion. Wang has more than four hundred poems extant today. In this oeuvre one can find a poem of mourning composed on the death of a female Daoist.

*A Poem on the Passing of the Female Daoist Wang Zhaoyi* 340 女道士王昭儀仙逝詞

In the state of Wu her life is just like a dream,341 吳國生如夢，
In Youzhou her body is not cold after death. 342 幽州死未寒。
Her poem volumes are still kept in her golden boudoir, 金閣詩卷在，
Her Daoist books remain idle on the jade desk. 玉案道書間。
Miserable mist covers the red pennants, 苦霧蒙丹旐，
Chilly wind blows on the plain coffin. 風風射素棺。
Though there is no burial place in the human world, 人間無葬地，
There is an immortal mountain for her in the ocean. 海上有仙山。

From the two places mentioned in the opening couplet, Wang informs the reader that the Daoist woman was born in the region of Wu and died in Youzhou. Unlike some Tang poets who were interested in the dress and jewelry of Daoist nuns, Wang is interested in the Daoist priestess’ poetic volumes and religious books that still sit on her table and in her boudoir. Such details imply that the Daoist celestial was fond of poetry and committed to Daoism during her life. In the following quatrain, the poet expresses his grief for the Daoist woman, who is covered with “miserable mist” and surrounded by a

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340 This poem is found in Wang Yuanliang’s 汪元量 Hushan lei gao 湖山類稿 v.3, 1765.
341 The State of Wu 吳國 (222–280) founded by Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252), was located in lower reaches of Yangzi River.
342 Youzhou 幽州 was the transport complex and commercial centre in the Sui and Tang dynasties, located in the north of modern Hebei.
“chilly wind”. Wang concludes by addressing the immortal land for comfort, wishing that she has a place in the immortal world. Although this is an ordinary mourning poem, it reflects the poet’s respect for the Daoist priestess.

6.1.5. Sun Weixin

Different from the above poets who expressed admiration or approval of female Daoist priestesses, Sun Weixin 孫惟信 (1179–1243) composed a poem on a Daoist nun who quit the priesthood and returned to live in the mundane world. In his poem Sun depicts female Daoists from a different perspective and offers some distinct details about her preparation for a new secular life.

_On a Female Daoist’s Return to Secular Life_  

After folding up colorful gauze she returned her ritual dress,  
Her maid girl’s hair was combed into two buns like green willow branches hanging down  
She repainted her eyebrows as they were light,  
She tried on her bow-shaped shoes again as she walked slowly on them.  
In the Purple Residence orioles wake up misty flowers,  
In the immortal chamber the crane knows cloud and rain.  
Low curtain, red apricot and warm spring wind,  
In her fond dream she should have seen her previous master.

Sun’s poem is very informative. First, the colorful silk costume that female Daoists had for rituals or libations seems to have been different from their normal dress, which is usually described as yellow, or sometimes black, and made from plain cloth. Meanwhile, the second line of the poems reminds us of the law issued by the Tang court, permitting

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343 Purple Residence usually refers to a place where immortals live.  
344 The phrase “clouds and rain” is a euphemistic expression for intercourse.
Daoist nuns to have a maidservant. In this poem the maidservant also seems to be following the woman leaving monastic life. The freshest image that the poet offers in his work is of the Daoist nun’s bound feet, which are no longer used to her bow shaped shoes. Unfortunately, there are no clues about what kind of shoes a normal Daoist priestess wore in a Daoist convent.

Contrary to the detailed description in the first quatrain, the poet passes on some implicit, obscure message in the next quatrain due to the figurative usage of “yanhua” 煙花 and “yunyu” 雲雨. Literally, “yanhua” means flowers covered in mist, or a beautiful scene with flowers, as seen in Li Bai’s line “In the third month when flowers are covered in the mist (you) go to Yangzhou”. (煙花三月下揚州). However, in this poem, “yanhua” is modified by “zifu”(purple residence), which indicates that “yanhua” is used in its figurative meaning: romantic love or prostitution. Given its parallel structure with line six, in which “yunyu” has similar connotations, the third couplet implies that the Daoist nun has had an affair with some man. Thus, the reason the Daoist woman quit her religious career might be due to finding a man to live with in secular life.

It might be common practice in the Song dynasty that while quite a number of women converted to the Daoist priesthood, some female Daoists gave up their monastic lives and returned the secular world. The above poem written by Sun Weixin attests to the conjecture that some women, especially widows or women who had reached marriageable age but were not yet married, chose Daoist convents as a back-up, and when they found a man to marry they would leave the convent for a married life. Livia Kohn

345 Li Bai’s line is in his poem “At the Yellow Crane Tower Sending off Meng Haoran to Guangling” 黃鶴樓送孟浩然之廣陵, in QTS v.174. See (Zhonghua shuju, 1960) 5.1785.
points out, “As Daoist convents could serve as convenient locations to hold women otherwise unfit for society, nuns were associated with courtesans, singing girls, divorcees, widows, impoverished aristocrats, and other female misfits.”

Therefore, questions could be raised: Did Daoist teachings have any effect on the women staying in the convent? What were the motivations for Daoist women to enter the Daoist priesthood? The last line of Sun’s poem reflects such speculation, when Sun asks the priestess if she ever met the Daoist master in her sweet dreams. On the whole, Sun’s poem concentrates on detailed descriptions and provides some valuable information about Song female Daoists. However, his attitude towards Daoist women seems vague; although he depicts his subject as a woman indulging in sexual activities, the title of his poem suggests that she is not inside the religion.

As seen in the poems discussed above, one finds little eroticism, nor any sexual desire for the Daoist women expressed by the male intellectuals in the Song period in their poetic works. This is quite different from the works of some Tang literati, especially those of the Five Dynasties. Due to the shortage of the poetic works on female Daoists by Song learned men who were not professional Daoist clergy, in the next section I discuss poetry written by Daoist adepts for women who had an interest in Daoism.

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346 WID, 123.
6.2. Works of Daoist Adepts for Women

6.2.1. Wang Chongyang

Born in a wealthy family in Xianyang 咸陽 (in modern Shanxi), Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112－1170) received a decent education from childhood and passed the imperial examination for military officers in 1138. However he resigned from his office and abandoned his family, professing that he had had an encounter with inspiring Daoist masters. In addition to changing his name to Zhe 善 (wisdom) and adopting a Daoist title, Chongyang zi 重陽子, Wang engaged in serious Daoist practice from the age of forty-seven. He dug a hole in Zhongnan 終南 Mountain and called it the “Tomb of a Living Dead” (huo siren mu 活死人墓), where he stayed for three years. After he established the Complete Perfection Sect (Quanzhen 全真教), Wang traveled around starting to propagate his teachings. In the meantime he received seven key disciples who were known as the Quanzhen Seven Perfected Ones.

The Complete Perfection School proclaimed a syncretism uniting three teachings: Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. It centered on interior alchemical practice, and a religious linage developed rapidly. Isabella Robinet observes, “The synthesizing character of the school attracted the educated, and thus the little sect that had found its original membership largely among villagers spread to all classes of society, even to the highest levels of the government. Its popularity peaked in the second half of the thirteenth century…” 347

347 Robinet, Isabelle Taoism: Growth of a Religion, 223.
The Complete Perfection Sect is also well known for their specific efforts at attracting women to Daoism. The founder of the sect, Wang Chongyang successfully converted Sun Buer, who finally abandoned her three sons and property for dedication to the Daoist enterprise. One of the most effective means that Wang used in his preaching was to present poems to Sun Buer. His work, named “A Collection of Chongyang Who Divided Pears Ten Times for Persuasion” (Chongyang fenli shihua ji 重陽分梨十化集) narrates the whole process of how Wang enlightened the couple of Ma Yu and Sun Buer. The two short verses presented below are chosen from the collection.

_To Madam Sun_

Erpo still loves her residence and property,
But home and property would consume money.
If he lives at home like before,
Mr. Ma would never have the fate of becoming an immortal.

_A Quatrain_

Erpo only knows about living in human world,
She doesn’t know there are jade kettles in Pengying.
If she is willing to turn back and cultivate her mind,
She will be addressed as an immortal lady forever.

Although the first quatrain is written in simple structure and plain lexicon, its second couplet conveys an ambiguous meaning due to the implicitness of the subject. Livia Kohn regards Sun as the subject of the sentence and translates it as “But if you persist in staying home,/ The honorable Ma will not become immortal.”

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348 Since Ma Yifu, Sun’s husband, was the second son of his parents, he was usually addressed as “ergong” (number two man), and thus his wife was “erpo” (number two man’s wife).
349 Pengying is an abbreviation for Penglai and Yingzhou, where immortals live.
350 WID, 145.
interpretation Wang implies that Sun prevents her husband from transcendence because she insists on domestic life. This raises the question: Is Sun’s motivation for entering the Daoist priesthood completely out of admiration for Daoism? Given the fact that Wang Chongyang’s own wife remained home while Wang traveled and propagated his Daoist visions, Sun’s behavior would not affect Ma’s accomplishment because Ma had already cut off all ties to the secular world. Therefore, I doubt that Wang would convert Sun by making the use of her feelings for Ma and their secular husband-and-wife relationship.

It is possible, in my opinion, that the subject of the line is Ma Yifu, in which case the sentence could be rendered as “If (he) lived at home like before, Ma would never become an immortal.” This translation emphasizes that Wang used Ma as an example showing Sun that her husband is fated to become an immortal because he abandoned home. In the second quatrain, Wang’s persuasion turns to a request for immortality. Based on Ge Hong’s work, someone who has fully attained the Dao would abandon Shenzhou 神州 (China) and live in Peng and Ying 蓬瀛. The term “yu hu” 玉壶 designates female immortals. By speaking of the two isles where immortals lived, Wang shows the possibility that Sun could be an immortal lady if she became disillusioned with the world and starts Daoist practice.

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6.2.2. Tan Chuduan

Following the model of Wang Chongyang, all the Seven Perfected had an inclination to write poetic works in sermon form. Thus, dozens of volumes of poetic works composed by the patriarchs of Complete Perfection are extant today in the Daoist Canon. For example, Tan Chuduan 譚處端 (1123–1185), a native of Shandong, has a poetry collection called *Shuiyun ji* 水雲集 (*Collection of Water and Clouds*), in which several poems written for women can be found. Among them I chose a very interesting one that Tan wrote for a woman who became a Daoist novice at the age of eighty.\(^\text{352}\)

To Madam Yang

| A Daoist nun Yang committed to Daoism at eighty, | 赠楊姑
投玄八十道姑楊, |
| A precious flower sends forth fragrance in late autumn. | 一朵瓊花秋後芳。 |
| A jade jar is filled with pure and still water, | 玉燭滿添清靜水, |
| A bronze burner should burn *huiling* incense. | 金爐須爇慧靈香。 |
| Now she has good fortune for the future, | 如今已獲將來福。 |
| From now on you don’t suspect sins committed in the past. | 從此何疑過去殃。 |
| Solitary and serene in the empty hall you have nothing to worry about. | 寂湛虛堂無掛碍, |
| Naturally you’ll see rosy light appear in your body. | 自然寶鼎現霞光。 |

Acclaiming the old woman’s initiation into Daoism, Tan compares her with a precious flower sending forth fragrance in late autumn. As seen in the previous poem, inner alchemical theory often used the “jade jar” as a symbol for the human female body. Thus, Tan compares the old woman to a jade jar filled with pure and still water. “*Huiling*” (慧靈) incense in the forth line designates one of the best kinds of incense. After these compliments, Tan asserts that the old woman has already got the fortune of the future and does not need to worry about her sins of the past. In the closing couplet Tan uses more

\(^{352}\) *Shuiyun ji* can be found in ZHDZ, 26.522.
terms from internal alchemy such as, “empty hall” (xutang 虛堂) for empty mind, and “treasured cauldron” (bao ding 寶鼎) for the human body. According to the theory of internal alchemy, when one accomplishes his Daoist practice, a rosy light radiates on top of the body.\footnote{353} This poem illustrates that the Complete Perfect Sect concentrated on initiating women into Daoism so much that they even welcomed a woman who was eighty years old.

6.2.3. Wang Chuyi

One of the Seven Perfected, Wang Chuyi 王處一 (1142–1217), the son of Zhou Xuanjin, who was discussed in Chapter Four, left us a collection of poetry named “Yunguang ji” 雲光集 (Collection of Clouds and Light). Given his renowned filial piety I chose a poem from Wang’s collection that was written for his mother.\footnote{354}

\begin{quote}
Sent to My Mother

Entering a Daoist lineage, mother and son practise Daoism together,
We take it as our career communicating with nature and following the Dao.
Begging food we get help from heaven everywhere,
Urging people to be good we get more happiness and longevity.
Not counting our family ties and loving kindness,
Virtues of Daoism never diminish.
Since our spirit has been elevated we are committed to our real inclination,
Once we succeed we will win accolade from Peng island.
\end{quote}

寄呈母親

子母修真同出家，
體天法道作生涯。
化緣處處神明助，
勸善重重福壽加。
俗眷恩情都不論，
玄門道德永無差。
內靈昇化投真趣，
異日功成蓬島夸。

\footnote{353}{See DJDCD, 504.}
\footnote{354}{Yunguang ji can be found in ZHDZ, 26.644.}
While Wang employs simple language and avoids allusions, making his poem easily understood, he creates a well-formed septasyllabic regulated verse, meeting all the rhyme and structural requirements. Regarding the content of the poem, Wang surprises readers in that, although many people consider him obedient to his mother, he highlights that he and his mother do not count on family affection, but instead are bound by the Daoist precepts. Their “real inclination” in the closing couplet, in my understanding, refers to their religious convictions. Striving to attain immortality, both Wang and his mother opted for a begging life and took Daoist practice as their career. Finally, as in many other Daoist poems, Wang evokes the image of Peng Islands to inspire his mother to dedicate herself to Daoism.

Contrary to the straightforward expression in the poem sent to his mother, the next poem, also selected from Wang’s corpus, is full of allusions and special Daoist and Buddhist terms. The poem is written for a woman who entered the Daoist priesthood and cut off her nose to show her determination to adhere to Daoism.

*To Little Lady Gong in Xufudian, Who Disfigured Her Face by Cutting Off Her Nose Committing herself to Daoism*

Her strong will is shown by disfiguring her face and cutting off her nose,
She gives up secular life for the sake of pursuing Daoism.
Just by one action she surpassed her peers,
Her two pledges went to the blue sky.
The three lights shine intensely opening her wisdom,
The Four Greats surge together in harmony, gradually spreading the Dao.
With five kinds of knowledge shining it never gets dark,

徐福店小宮姑，毁容截鼻，處志慕道，贈之。
毁容截鼻志弥堅，
為脫塵緣結道緣。
一着根源超等羣，
兩通盟誓透青天。
三光密照開靈慧，
四大沖和道漸傳。
光綻五明常不夜，

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355 “Three lights” in the fifth line designates sunlight, moonlight and starlight.
356 “The Four Great” comes from “Laozi”, referring to Dao, heaven, earth and people.
The Six Paramitas spit forth golden lotus blooms.\textsuperscript{358}
Having forsaken the seven emotions your enlightenment is complete,\textsuperscript{359}
Immortals from Eight Caves announce a warrant at the same time.\textsuperscript{360}
The bright Pearls of the Nine Bends would go over your head,\textsuperscript{361}
The world in ten directions is there for you to travel around at will.

Obviously Wang Chuyi was impressed by the woman’s extreme behavior and composed this poem to support her commitment to Daoism. Except for the first couplet, which expresses his approval of her devoted attitude towards the Dao, this poem is carefully designed with each line beginning with a number, from one to ten. Thus, the poem has less coherent meaning because the sentences are connected by the numbers. By enumerating Buddhist and Daoist terms, Wang encourages the woman to keep on her Daoist practice and promises that she will enjoy immortal life after she finishes her study of Buddhist knowledge and Daoist cultivation. Again, from this poem we see more evidence of the syncretism of Buddhism and Daoism as promoted by the Complete Perfection Sect.

\textsuperscript{357} The phrase “five kinds of knowledge” (\textit{wu ming} 五明) comes from Buddhism, including interpretation of words (\textit{sheng ming} 声明), craftmanship and calendar (\textit{gongqiao ming} 工巧明), medication (\textit{yifang ming} 医方明), discrimination of good and evil (\textit{yin ming} 因明), exploration of cause and result (\textit{nei ming} 内明).
\textsuperscript{358} “Six Paramita” (\textit{Liu Boluomi 六波羅蜜}) is a Buddhism term, “ParamiTa” is normally translated as “Perfection”, and the six perfection refers to “alms giving” (\textit{bu shi} 佈施), “abiding by the religious taboo” (\textit{chi jie} 持戒), “enduring contempt (\textit{ren ru} 忍辱), “making progress” (\textit{jingjin} 精進), “deep meditation” (\textit{chan ding} 禪定), and “wisdom” (\textit{zihui} 智慧).
\textsuperscript{359} Seven emotions address to happiness, anger, worry, reflection, sadness, fright, surprise (\textit{xi 喜, nu 怒, you 悼, si 思, bei 悲, kong 息, jing 驚}.
\textsuperscript{360} “Immortals from eight caves” equals to “Eight Immortals” (\textit{ba xian} 八仙) in Daoist texts, including Lü Dongbin 吕洞宾, Han Zhongli 汉钟離, He Xiangqu 何仙姑, Cao Guojue 曹國舅, Li Tieguai 李鐵拐, Lan Caife 藍采和, Han Xiangzi 漢湘子和 Zhang Guolao 張國老.
\textsuperscript{361} “Pearls of Nine Bends”(\textit{jiuqu zhu} 九曲珠) refers to a kind of precious pearls with holes that are hard to go through. See \textit{Da cidian} 大詞典 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1985)3.4253.
6.2.4. Ma Danyang

Since Ma Danyang 馬丹陽 (1123–1183) was Sun Buer’s husband before the couple entered the Daoist lineage, some of his information has been introduced in the section of Sun Buer in Chapter Four. After the death of Wang Chongyang, Ma succeeded Wang as the head of the Complete Perfection Sect and worked diligently to attract women to Daoism, which can be illustrated in his numerous poems written for women both in and outside the religion. Among the Seven Perfected, Ma is the one who composed the greatest number of poems for women. From his works *A Collection of Profound Theory of Gold and Jade (Dongxuan jinyu ji 洞玄金玉集)*, I have chosen three poems for discussion.\(^{362}\)

\begin{quote}
*To Madam Chai*

It is the greatest cultivation to practice *wuwei*,
When your thoughts are calm and the mind is pure the lamp of wisdom will be on.
It shines over the nine passes and lets you through,
Then you will ascend over the Kunlun Mount.

贈柴姑

無為無作大修行，
意靜心清放慧燈。
照透九關通出入，
崑崙山上得升騰。
\end{quote}

As mentioned in the discussion of Cao Xiyun’s work, “A Song of Supreme Dao” in Chapter Four, the term *wuwei* should not be regarded as only directed to the cultivation of rulers or administrators. Ma’s short verse shows that ordinary Daoist practitioners are required to take *wuwei* as their greatest practice. For Daoist clergy, successful cultivation would lead to the stage that all “the nine passes” (*jiu guan* 九關) are through. According to *The Grand Dictionary on Daoism (Daojiao da cidian 道教大詞典)*, “nine passes” is a

\(^{362}\) Ma Danyang’s anthology can be found in ZHDZ, 26.411.
term of internal alchemy which refers to nine layers in one’s head.\(^{363}\) As a cliché of an usual Daoist poem, in the last line Ma alludes to the immortal land, Kunlun Mount, where the Divine Mother of the West is said to reside.

Ma’s second poem is written in *ci* form following the tune of *Manting Fang* (滿庭芳). The subject of this poem is a Daoist nun, who asked Ma for advice in doing interior alchemical practice.

| Following the Tune of Mantingfang                                                                 | 滿庭芳
| ---                                                                                             | 贈小胡村李姑
| To Madam Li in Xiaohu Village                                                                  | 姑姑修煉，
| Madam, when you do your practice,                                                               | 聽予重告，
| Please listen to my earnest advice.                                                              | 先要斷除煩惱。
| First you need to cut off worries.                                                               | 擒捉心猿意馬，
| And stop being indecisive or restless,                                                           | 休使返倒。
| Don’t let it reverse.                                                                             | 如同男兒決烈，
| Just like a man’s determination,                                                                 | 莫躇躇，
| Don’t hesitate,                                                                                   | 更休草草。
| Nor should you rush.                                                                              | 速下手，
| Take an action right now,                                                                         | 仗十分苦志，
| With your diligent work,                                                                          | 免參閻老。 
| You will not go to see King Yama.                                                                 | 

|                                                                                                 | 萬種塵緣一削，
| Once you cut off all kinds of secular connections,                                               | 得真歡真樂，
| You will enjoy the true essence of happiness,                                                    | 漸通玄奧。
| Gradually you will comprehend the mystery.                                                       | 密護無為清靜，
| You should fully protect *wuwei* and tranquility,                                                 | 自然之道。 
| Which is the law of nature.                                                                      | 應物真常幽閒，
| Going with true nature you will be reclusive and idle.                                           | 氣神相結、成丹寶。
| When *qi* and spirit combine the precious elixir will be formed.                                | 功行滿，
| When you complete your practice,                                                                  | 跨祥雲，
| You will ride auspicious clouds,                                                                  | 歸云三島。
| And return to the three clouds covered isles.                                                     | 

Compared to Wang’s first quatrain, this poem is remarkably long but it conveys similar ideas. He repeats that it is only when one discards all connections related to the secular world and works diligently in Daoist practice can one avoid meeting King Yama, a

\(^{363}\) DJDCD, 52.
Buddhist term, meaning the King of the Hell. Ma emphasizes that having practiced wuwei, the Daoist nun should remain calm and tranquil, and thus she will be on the path of nature and be able to comprehend the mysterious Dao. Though the phrase “yingwu” has alternative meanings, in this context it refers to following nature. As an encouragement, Ma’s poem again cites the islands of immortals to inspire the Daoist woman in her religious enterprise.

The third poem that I have chosen from Ma’s collected verses was composed for numerous women, who might be just initiated or lay followers. Similar to the poem for Madam Li in Xiaohu village, this poem is in the ci form following the same tune.

*Following the Tune of Mantingfang*
*To Numerous Daoist Nuns*

If you are afraid of the blowing wind and sunshine,
And care about your appearance and manner,
It is better for you to stay in the deep painted hall.
Facing the mirror as you do your make-up,
And arrange your gold-thread gauze clothes.
Since you hear of the immortals and cicada sloughs,
You admire Daoist perfect cultivation,
And resolutely break with your life.
After abandoning finery,
You look shaggy-haired with dirty faces,
Wearing plain-colored cotton clothes you convert.

Since in the past the root of your souls got sick,
You know now it’s time to start
Treating your illness on your own.
By moving the sun and moon in your body,
You connect yourself to the world.
Naturally wood and gold turn to treasure,
A divine pearl then appears,
It is so bright and pure.
Then you realize
These are
Uncanny mysteries.
This poem informs us that the imagery of Song Daoist nuns is quite different from those described in the Tang dynasty. Ma starts his poem with the difference between lay women and Daoist priestesses, especially the nuns of Complete Perfection lineage. In Ma’s vision, a woman who dedicates herself to Daoism should discard all gaudy dresses and ignore her appearance or even be shaggy-haired with a dirty face, a look that is in stark contrast to the imagery of Daoist nuns found in *Collection From Among Flowers*. However, after entering Daoist cloisters and through the inner alchemical practice, such women will comprehend the mysterious Dao.

With the application of the interior alchemical terms and expressions, the latter part of Ma’s poem seems a little bit difficult to understand for laymen, including such terms as, “the sun and moon in human body”, which represents the heart and the kidney, or the “wood and gold” standing for the liver and the lung. Finally, as a reward for diligent exercise, Ma uses “divine pearl”, a symbol for elixir, to replace the immortal islands indicating a successful practitioner would obtain longevity in the practice of internal alchemy.

Some Chinese scholars argue that Daoist poetry should not be regarded as “real” poetry, but rather simply as works in the format of poetry spreading Daoist teaching. Indeed, as seen in the above poems written by Daoist patriarchs, their poems are completely different from earlier Tang poetry written by the Tang literati poets, who were interested in concrete descriptions or the expression of emotions rather than the

\[364 \text{DJDCD}, 282.\]
\[365 \text{DJDCD}, 198.\]
\[366 \text{Liu Zhongyu 劉仲宇 Zhongguo daojiao wenhua toushi 中國道教文化透視 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1990) 287.}\]
discussion of ideas. A famous Chinese critic Yan Yu 嚴羽 (the thirteenth century) once criticized the tendency of writing didactic poetry in the Song dynasty, saying, “Poetry requires special talent, it is not related to knowledge; poetry requires special taste, it is not related to ideas.” (夫詩有別材，非闡書也；詩有別趣，非闡理也.) 367

Regardless of the debate about whether didactic poetry belongs to the category of poetry, more and more Song literati composed didactic poetry, as Song intellectuals preferred to explore reason or logical principles in the human world and in everyday life. As such, in Song poetry one can find not only beautiful portraits but also philosophical ideas. A better-known example is found in Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1037–1101) poem, “Inscribed on the Wall of West Forest Monastery” 368

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\text{Inscribed on the Wall of West Forest Monastery} \\
\text{Seen horizontally it forms a ridge of mountains} \\
\text{Seen vertically it forms a peak,} \\
\text{Far, close, high, low, each is different.} \\
\text{I don’t know the true face of Lu Mountain,} \\
\text{Only because I myself am inside of the mountain.}
\]

This short poem is considered to be typical of Su Shi’s writing in didactic style. Though it is only a quatrain, it blends images and ideas in conveying rich meanings. Literarily, it is a description of Su Shi’s impressions from when he visited Lu Mountain. However, beneath the surface of the poem, he seeks to transmit a universal truth, which might be ignored by many people. The first couplet of the poem conveys different views of Lu Mountain when one looks at it from different angles. The different perspectives of the

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368 Wang Wengao 王文詠 Su Shi shiji 蘇軾詩集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1982) 4.1219.
same object imply different ideas that people may have toward any given thing depending on their different points of view. In the following couplet, Su Shi continues to explore his philosophical thinking by saying that the reason people usually do not have a rounded picture of the mountain is that they are inside the mountain, which suggests that what obstructs our view of this world is our own involvement in this world.

Hence, among the literati poets who promoted didactic poetry, “liqu” 理趣 (taste ideas) and “liyu”理語 (discursive language) are two other bones of contention. Jerry Schmidt explains, “For didactic poetry one of the highest realms is denoted by the critical term liqu, literally ‘gusto or interest of ideas’. This term seems to be of Buddhist origin, but as befitted the golden age of didactic verse, it became common in the critical literature of the Song dynasty.”

As many Chinese critics appreciated didactic poetry that deliver ideas through the description of concrete images, Su Shi’s poem “Inscribed on the Wall of West Forest Monastery” was considered an illustration of “liqu”, in which, ideas come from the depiction of Lu Mountain. However, if a poem deals only with ideas, talking from idea to idea, it is regarded as a poem comprising discursive language, which is often considered by some literary critics as lacking in flavour and dull.

According to the standards of some critics, some of the poems written by Daoist patriarchs, as we have discussed above, might not be included in the category of “real” poetry. However, the fact is that a significant corpus of Daoist poetic writings are extant, even though some of them are full of Daoist language and read like Daoist sermons, they reflect part of the history and society, revealing a trend of writing. A study of them would

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certainly help us to understand Chinese intellectuals and the development of classical Chinese poetry. Most importantly for our study, this kind of poetry exerted a profound influence over Daoist women and their works. It is not difficult to determine that the genre of women’s alchemical poetry is indebted to the writings of the Daoist adepts.

An exploration of Daoist poems reveals that the Complete Perfection School produced the greatest number of poems amid all Daoist lineages in Daoist history, they elucidates how Daoist masters converted women in the Song dynasty and why one third of the Complete Perfection clergy were women.\(^{370}\) Through the study of the poetry written by Daoist masters we can see that in contrast to the Tang and some Song laymen literati, Daoist adepts neglected women’s appearances and at times, for the purposes of protection from sexual harassment and focus on the Daoist practice, they even supported disfigurement. Concentrating on women’s inner cultivation, the Daoist masters instructed female followers to discard all secular attachments, including family and love, which are considered the central topics in poetry about women written by lay male literati. Providing a glimpse into differing views on Daoist women, Song male intellectuals expressed their considerable concern for women in Daoism in their poetic works.

\(^{370}\) WID, 157.
Conclusion

An unfortunate truth of any study of poetry from the Tang and Song dynasties is that the work of significant numbers of famous Daoists is no longer extant; this fact invariably means that my study cannot be as complete as I would have wished. Indeed, the number of extant poetic works authored by Daoist women is quite limited. In spite of this, we can still catch glimpses of the insights, aspirations and cultural lives of Daoist women from the Tang and Song dynasties. As Suzanne Cahill rightly suggests, “we have used Tang men’s poetry as a historical source, so we should use Tang women’s poetry.”

Close study of Yu Xuanji’s poetry reveals that Yu was outstanding not only for her exceptional poetic talents, but also for her frank descriptions of passion, and her insight into love and human life. Her poetry indicates that, while she may have had relationships of some kind with a number of learned men, she never married. Such experiences may have led her to finally compose her famous line, “It’s easy to find valuable treasure, but it’s hard to find a loving heart”. Based on her work, it is clear that Yu was trying to find someone to whom she could entrust her life. In other word, she was pursuing aspirations of marriage. It is my view that “marriage” is key to understanding Yu’s life and work. In spite of the clarity of Yu’s voice in her poetry, few critics were

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willing to listen. Thus, to this day, Yu has a bad reputation among people who have not carefully read her work.

Yu’s verse covered a range of themes, including love, social interactions and Daoist thought. However, earlier Chinese critics seldom discussed Yu’s Daoist poems in which she expresses her careless mind and reclusive life. It is possible that, for Yu, Daoism was simply a practical choice, providing her with a place to live and with the tools to repair her damaged feelings. Nonetheless, several of Yu’s poems illustrate that she was influenced by Daoism and that she practiced Daoist cultivation during difficult periods of her life. Therefore, the tendency of earlier Chinese critics to censure Yu simply on the basis of a few poems should not be considered proper evaluations of her personality. At the very least, a full consideration of her assorted works is necessary before depicting her as any particular kind of woman.

As we recall, female Daoists are a complex group, consisting of many different kinds of women: from abandoned concubines and former court ladies, to aged singing girls and prostitutes. The one commonality between them is that they were bound not to their families, but to the Daoist religion, which seemed to have little control over them in the Tang dynasty. It is possible that for some women Daoist convents were not just temporary settlements but also places where they could change their identities. For example, Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 (719–756), who was once Xuanzong’s daughter in-law,
became a Daoist nun and was bestowed the Daoist title of Taizhen 太真 before becoming Xuanzong’s concubine.\footnote{For reference, see “Yang Guifei zhuan” 楊貴妃傳 (Biography of Imperial Consort Yang) in Xin Tangshu 新唐書 v. 76. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1975)1.3493.}

The purpose of such women’s conversions was not for “admiring Daoism” (*mudao* 慕道), as Huang-fu Mei states in his work; such women strongly and urgently desired life in the mundane world, that is to say, they still wished to marry and resume secular life. Thus, one should not feel shocked when reading the following narration from the *Record from the Imperial Library* (*Dongguan zouji* 東觀奏記), an account of Xuanzong’s 宣宗 (r. 846–859) life and activities.

The Emperor visited the Temple of Virtue incognito. There were some female Daoists with heavy makeup and in splendid attire. The emperor was very angry and returned to the Palace. He immediately summoned the Commissioner of Merit and Virtue, Song Shukang and ordered him to expel all Daoist nuns and select another fourteen Daoists to operate the temple to make it more religiously pure.\footnote{"Dongguan zouji" 東觀奏記 Taipei: Yiwen yinshu guan 1965, 9.}

This record confirms the complex composition of female Daoists; some of them were not pious, even though they lived in temples.

Daoist temples, which were open to the public, could be social places where female Daoists could frequently be in contact with pilgrims coming from all directions.
with various purposes. Thus, stories of love affairs and romance between Daoist nuns and
laymen became widespread, with some being recorded by various Tang elite men.
Therefore, it is widely accepted, even in today’s Chinese scholarship, that female Daoists
were similar to prostitutes, enjoying varied social lives, interacting and dining with
learned men and spending much time flirting, playing as well as exchanging poems.374

It is my view that, instead of focusing on the similarities shared by female
Daoists and prostitutes, we should instead look at the distinctions between them. Based
on my studies, the biggest difference was that female Daoists enjoyed much more
independence and freedom than prostitutes did. Unlike the singing girls and prostitutes in
the North Alley (Bei li 北里), who were controlled by bawds, or those owned by
prominent officials (jia ji 家妓), or those who were controlled by local government (guan
ji 官妓), Daoist women enjoyed full independence, and their interactions with men were
motivated by their own desire or interest, not by profit, nor command.375

The female Daoists examined in this study are multifaceted; one can find
descriptions of various female Daoists such as, Princess Yuzhen and Li Tengkong, who
were from royal families; or Master Jiao in Wang Changling’s work and Master Zhang in
Liu Yuxi’s work, who were female Daoist adepts; there are the Daoist nuns in Zhang Ji’s
work who did not consume any grain; and let’s not forget the aged court ladies with grey
hairs in the work of Dai Shulun and Yu Hu. In addition to these depictions, we have also
seen the more standard images of pious female Daoist clergy in the poetry of the Tang

374 Gao Shiyu 高世瑜 Tangdai funü 唐代婦女 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe 三秦出版社, 1988) 93.
intellectuals, for example, Master Su in Bai Juyi’s work. As can be seen by these examples, by and large, the view that Daoist women are similar to prostitutes is not accurate and cannot reflect the actual conditions and real life of this special group of women in the Tang dynasty.

Tracing the Tang elites’ work about Daoist women, one finds that the Tang intellectuals exhibit a variety of feelings and attitudes towards female Daoists, including respect and appreciation. In fact, a careful search of elite men’s poetry on Daoist priestesses reveals that the number of the works with erotic or sexual depictions is not large, only about two out of ten. However, in spite of their small numbers, these few poems have spread the furthest and among the widest audiences.

With regard to the Shu anthology, *A Collection of From Among Flowers*, the presentations of female Daoists are different. Following Wen Tingyun’s model, most of Shu poets focus on Daoist nuns’ feminine behavior, gaudy dresses, hairstyles and make-up. In other words, Shu poets seemed more interested in physical appearance rather than in insights and religious cultivation. Through the poets’ description of Daoist nuns and expression of their own feelings or passion for clergies, most of the Shu poets treated female Daoists similar to singing girls.

Among the *Shu* poets, Sun Guangxian is one of the only two poets who concentrated on describing Daoist women’s religious characters and inspirations. It is possible that Sun’s appreciation of female Daoists’ dedication to Daoist practice and cultivation is what motivated him to criticize Yu Xuanji’s works so strongly. Sun may have felt that Yu’s passionate poems ran counter to the major Daoist teachings about
purifying the mind and diminishing desire. However, I wonder whether Sun ever read the full corpus of Yu’s poetry, in which he would have found her works on Daoist ideas. Indeed, Yu’s Daoist poetry was not well known because so few critics had any interest in it.

The radical reform of Daoist religion in the Song dynasty exerted enormous influence over women in Daoism. A study of the poetic works written by Song Daoist nuns reveals that Song Daoist women present themselves as completely discarding secular emotions and desires, including love for beauty, family and property. Dressed in rags they intentionally made themselves dirty and ugly, and some even mutilated themselves, including Sun Buer who splashed boiling oil on her face, and the Little Lady Gong from Xufudian who cut off her nose to show her dedication to Daoism. Living in austerity, Song Daoist priestesses endeavored to achieve Daoist cultivation, especially interior alchemical practice. As a result, they initiated a fresh style of poetic writing, female alchemical poetry, in which they expressed their perspectives and experiences of doing Daoist practice. Nevertheless, this new poetry does not seem to have ever been regarded as artistic creation, but instead as a means of communicating guidelines for religious practice.

The pious imagery in Song dynasty poems may explain why the topic of women in Daoism seems to have been of less importance to Song intellectuals than to Tang intellectuals. In the handful of extant work written by Song learned men on the subject, their visions of female Daoists seem focused on respect and admiration rather than flirtation. In contrast to the small output by the non-religious elite, certain Daoist

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376 An account of Sun Buer’s self-mutilation can be found in Quanzhen qizi quanshu 全真七子全書, 59. The poem on the Little Lady Gong in Xufudian has been discussed in Chapter Five.
patriarchs composed large amounts of poetry to encourage and direct women in Daoist practice. Through their earnest instruction in the poetry, Song Daoist adepts paid close attention to women’s inner resources instead of their physical appearances.

In spite of the limited materials available for this study, the extant poetic literature on female Daoists written by both male and female intellectuals still serves as a mirror through which we can obtain some a real picture of female Daoists, their lives and insights, as well as the social and literary milieu from the tenth to the twelfth centuries.
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Zheng Wenbao 鄭文寶 *Nantang jinshi* 南唐進事 in *Baibu congshu jicheng* 百部叢書集
Appendix

Lü Qiao

Yu Xuanji, who styled herself as Youwei, was a female Daoist at the Convent of Xianyi in the Western capital (Chang’an) in the Tang dynasty. She was a girl from an ordinary household in Chang’an and looked so beautiful that the very thought of her was fascinating. She was fond of reading and writing, and especially liked chanting poems. When she was sixteen she had great admiration for Daoist purity and emptiness. Then early in the Xiantong period (860-874), she put on a Daoist hat and gown and became a Daoist nun at the Convent of Xianyi. However, her verses on romance and entertainment were frequently circulated among the literati. Since Huilan was too weak to restrain her vivacity, she was often teased by gallant men and became the object of their flirtations. Thereafter Yu followed them and associated with them. As a result, some licentious men competed in adorning themselves to win her favor. When people visited her with wine she would certainly play a zither and compose poems, making jokes and flirting. Beside her, even some scholars looked dull and lackluster.

Here are some of her verses: “Around crisscrossed paths a view of spring looks far and in distance, my jade-decorated zither expresses the emotions of autumn.” and “Although I am eagerly attentive, I have no words in reply and my scarlet tears fall down in pairs.” and “Burning incense I

377 Lü Qiao 绿翫 is the title of the section in which Huang-fu tells a story of Yu Xuanji. As the first paragraph has been discussed in the major text of this study, I render the whole story and present it here. The version comes from Taiping Guangji 太平广记, v.130 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 3.922. I punctuate the text based on the version of Tang wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan 唐五代笔记小说大观, (Shanghai: guji chuban she, 2000). I also break it into several paragraphs to make it easy to follow.

378 The original meaning of “yao hui 瑤徽” was “a badge which was made from jade”. They were often used to mark frets of a zither. Later yao hui 瑤徽 referred to a beautifully decorated zither.
mount on the jade altar, holding the bamboo tablet I bowed to the Emperor of Daoist religion.”

and “Clouds of my passion are melancholy competing for the same dream, that my immortal face is eternally fair, even surpassing the beauty of flowers.” These couplets were considered extremely excellent among her verses.

Yu had a maidservant named Lü Qiao, who was extremely clever and pretty too. One day a next-door neighbor invited Ji over, and before Ji left she told Qiao not to go out: “If a guest comes by just tell him I was at a neighbor’s house.” Yu did not return home until evening time, as her friend asked her to say longer. When she returned home, Qiao greeted her at the gate, saying “Just now a guest came by, but when he was told that you were not home he left without getting off his horse.” This guest had been an intimate friend of Yu and she suspected that Qiao had had an affair with him.

As night approached, when the gate was closed and the light was on, Yu asked Lü Qiao to her bedroom and interrogated her. Qiao said: “Since I started serving you for several years I have been careful about my behavior, in order to avoid such mistakes. But I failed to follow your command. When the guest arrived and knocked at the door I told him through the door that Your Reverence was not in, then the guest whipped his horse and ran away without saying a word. As for sexual affection I have stopped thinking about it for many years. I hope Your Reverence will not suspect me.”

Ji got more furious and stripped the girl beating her with a stick for a hundred times. Yet Qiao made no confession. When she was dying she asked for a cup of water and poured it on the floor, saying: “Your Reverence desires to seek the way of the Three Purities that leads to longevity, yet you can not forget the pleasure of taking off your jade pendent and offering your pillow. On the contrary, you doubt me, who is chaste and upright. Now I will die by your cruel hands. If there is no heaven then I won’t be able to accuse you, but if heaven were to exist, who can stop my soul from taking actions of revenge in the dark underworld. I swear I will not let you behave in a promiscuous way. Having finished these words Qiao died on the floor.

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379 “jique 金闕”is a name of a Daoist emperor, “jian 简”(bamboo tablet) denotes Daoist religious text. This sentence describes the Daoist ceremony.

380 The expression of “taking off jade pendent and offering a pillow” connotes sexual life.
Ji was scared so she buried the body in her back yard, speaking to herself that nobody would ever know it. This was happened in the first month of the year of Wuzi in Xiantong era. When someone asked about Lü Qiao, Yu would answer, “She ran away when the spring rain was over.”

Once, Ji invited guests for dinner at her home and a guest went to urinate in her back yard. When he got to the burial place he saw dozens of bluebottle flies gathering on the ground. The flies came back again after being driven off. Taking a close look at the place he found bloodstains, and moreover there was a rancid smell. After the guests left Yu’s home he told his servant about it, who passed this on to his elder brother. His brother happened to be a prefectural gendarme, who had asked for some money from Yu before and was rejected, so he resented Yu very much.

Having heard the story, the brother went to the monastery gate to take a look. He saw people talking to each other about their surprise about not having seen Lü Qiao recently. Then the gendarme called some of his colleagues and burst into Yu’s yard with shovels. They dug out the body and Lü Qiao’s face looked as fresh as when she was alive.

Then they took her to the office of the capital prefecture and she admitted to the murder after an interrogation by an officer. While many court officials spoke on her behalf, the prefecture had submitted the accusation to the central government. In the end, she was executed in the autumn. In prison, she also wrote poems, saying, “It’s easy to seek priceless treasure but harder to have a man with a loving heart.” and “The bright moon lights up dark cracks, a cool breeze blows open my short gown.” These are beautiful lines among her verses.

唐西京咸宜觀女道士魚玄機。字幼微。長安里家女也。色既傾國。思乃入神。喜讀書屬文。尤致意於一吟一詠。破瓜之歲。志慕清虛。咸通初。遂從冠帔於咸宜。而風月賞遊之佳句。往往播於士林。然蕙蘭弱質。不能自持。復為豪俠所調。乃從遊處焉。於是風流之士。爭修飾以求狎。或載酒詣之者。必鳴琴賦詩。間以讌遊。僧學輩自視缺然。

其詩有“綺陌春望遠，瑤鬱秋興多”。又“殷勤不得語，紅淚一雙流”。又“焚香登玉壇，端簡禮金闕”。又“雲情自鬱爭同夢，仙貌長芳又勝花”。此數聯為絕矣。
一女卓曰緑翺，亦特明慧有色。忽一日，機為鄰院所邀，將行，戒翺曰：‘無出。若有熟客。但云在某處。’機為女伴所留，追暮方歸院。緑翺迎門曰：‘適某客來，知錦師不在，不舍蕩而去矣。’客乃機素相暱者，意翺與之狎。

及夜，張燈閉戶，乃命翺入臥內，訊之。翺曰：‘自執巾織數年，審自檢御，不令有似是之過。致作尊意。且某客至，款席，翺隔闌報云‘錦師不在’。客無言，策馬而去。若云情愛，不蓄於臂襟有年矣，幸錦師無疑。’

機愈怒，裸而笞百數，但言無之。既委頓，請杯水酌地曰：‘錦師欲求三清長生之道，而未能忘解佩舊枕之歡，反以沈猜，厚詆貞正，翺今必死於毒手矣。無天則無所訴，若有，誰能抑我疆魂，誓不蠢蠢於冥冥之中，縱爾淫佚’。言訖，絕於地。

機恐，乃坎後庭瘗之，自謂人無知者。時咸通戊子春正月也。有問翺者，則曰：‘春雨霑，逃矣。’

客有宴於機室者，因溲於後庭，當座上，見青蠅數十集地，驅去復來。詳視之，如有血痕，且腥。

客既出，竊語其僕。僕歸，復語其兄。其兄為府衙卒，嘗求金於機，機不顧，卒深嫉之。

聞此，遂至觀門謁伺，見其語者，乃訝不覩緑翺之出入。衙卒復呼數卒，擒應共突入玄機院發之，而緑翺貌如生。

卒遂令玄機京兆府，吏詰之，辭伏，而朝士多為言者。府乃表列上，至秋，竟讞之。在獄中亦有詩曰：‘宜求無价寶，難得有心郎’。‘明月照幽際，清風聞短襟’。此其美者也。