

# Prejudice and Protestations: Rereading Yu Xuanji's Poetry

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## Introduction

1. Aged only fifteen, Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (ca. 844–869), a native of Chang'an 長安, began her adult life as a lesser wife of a learned man. After losing her husband's favours, she joined the Daoist priesthood and remained single for the rest of her days. Graced with both uncommon beauty and a flair for composition, Yu lived only for twenty-five years but she managed to leave behind a valuable collection of poems, forty-nine of which are preserved in *Quan Tangshi* (The Completed Tang Poems).<sup>[1]</sup> For centuries, many of her poems have been criticised as decadent and depraved by traditional critics such as Huang-fu Mei 皇甫枚 (ca. 880–901), Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (ca. 900–968) and Hu Zhenheng 胡震亨 (1569–1645), who attacks her fiercely, claiming that 'Yu is the most lascivious; her poetry is decadent too' (魚最淫蕩 詩體亦靡弱).<sup>[2]</sup> Such criticism has influenced Chinese literati of later periods so profoundly that even today it remains the wont of many to label Yu as a dissolute woman. Recently, however, her reputation has been partially salvaged by some scholars. For example, the two articles written by Suzanne Cahill<sup>[3]</sup> and a book-length study by the Chinese scholar Li Suping 李素平 have challenged the orthodox view about Yu and offered new perspectives on her work.<sup>[4]</sup>
2. Though pioneering and inspiring, neither of these authors examines the roots of Yu's notoriety. In one article, focused on the female voices in poetry of the Tang dynasty, Cahill discusses the verses of four female priests together with no touch of literati's commentary of their works; in another, she examines Yu's work from the standpoint of material culture and Daoist religion. Suping's book fleshes out the place of women in Daoism as part of its broader coverage of Daoism as a philosophy and literary phenomenon, but it makes only passing references to the works of female Daoists. Thus, many questions about Yu abound. For example, why did classical critics consider Yu a prostitute? What is Yu's outlook on love? How did Yu define herself?
3. Maureen Robertson argues, 'Curiosity and a desire for insight into women's lives may lead one to read a text as a transparent and unproblematic revelation of a historical woman's thoughts and feelings and to overlook the multiply-mediated nature of feminine voices in literary texts.'<sup>[5]</sup> Yet, since few pre-modern historians care to write about women, especially women like Yu, in their chronicles, for modern readers, the only access to Yu is through either statements of traditional critics or Yu's own poetry, both literary sources.
4. I agree with Cahill, 'As we have used Tang men's poetry as a historical source, so we should use Tang women's poetry.'<sup>[6]</sup> This study attempts to re-examine Yu's love poems and the remarks others have made about her work and life. In particular, by studying her most targeted poems, I will not only explore the source of Yu's notorious reputation but also show that, though living in the ninth century, Yu had a surprisingly enlightened view of love and relationship, which illustrates her strong desire for the equality between men and women.

## Yu's love poems

5. A sentimental and talented woman, Yu wrote a great deal about her thoughts and emotions regarding love. Among her forty-nine poems, I found ten verses, in which feelings of love are explicit, and five of them were for Li Yi 李億 (fl. 858) Yu's ex-husband.<sup>[7]</sup> According to *Tang Caizi Zhuan* 唐才子傳 (Biographies of gifted scholars in the Tang Dynasty),<sup>[8]</sup> Yu Xuanji married Li Yi 李億, whose style name was Zi'an 子安, as his secondary wife.<sup>[9]</sup> Owing to the jealousy of Li's principal wife, Yu was forced to separate from her husband shortly after their marriage. All the five verses that Yu wrote to her husband were composed during this time. Since these verses express nearly identical feelings of yearning, sorrow and resentment I selected two of them because they encapsulate best the sentiment of the other poems.

**Sending My Spring Emotions to Zi'an**

The mountain road slants and the stone steps are steep,  
 I don't mind the hardship of travelling 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,<sup>[10]</sup>  
 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.  
 Parting from you, what I can use for a gift?  
 Falling tears in the bright sunshine and a single poem.

春情寄子安  
 山路欹斜石磴危，  
 不愁行苦苦相思。  
 冰銷遠澗憐清韻，  
 雪遠寒峰想玉姿。  
 莫聽凡歌春病酒？  
 休招閒客夜貪棋。  
 如松匪石盟長在？  
 比翼連襟會肯遲。  
 雖恨獨行冬盡日？  
 終期相見月圓時。  
 別君何物堪持贈？  
 淚落晴光一首詩。

6. Although she likens negotiating difficult and dangerous mountain road to lovesickness, Yu states that the hardships of travel do not bother her. Rather, she has to endure suffering over longing for her spouse. The snow and ice in the distance remind her of her husband's graceful manner and jade-like appearance. With thoughts of her beloved filling her head, Yu behaves like any ordinary wife, repeatedly urging her spouse not to invite in layabouts, not to play chess all night long, not to drink too much, and not to visit singing girls.
7. After listing these many restrictions, Yu then expresses her affection for and commitment to her husband with a series of metaphors. She asserts that her love is not like a rolling stone that is constantly in motion and changing but 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 robe fastened together. In concluding her poem, Yu offers both her tears and the poem itself, as a special gift for her spouse.
8. Despite her separation from Li, the tone of this poem indicates that Yu was evidently happy with their relationship. Regarding her marriage as an intimate alliance with her spouse, Yu demonstrates a positive attitude towards love and expresses a great tenderness and commitment. With a serious concern about her lover's health and regular daily life, Yu presents herself as a lifelong wife, rather than a woman who is interested only in sexual pleasure.<sup>[11]</sup>
9. Like many other female poets in pre-modern China, Yu 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 words 'worry' (*chou* 愁) and 'resentment' (*hen* 恨) and found that 'the word "worry" appeared sixteen times ... and "resentment" appeared ten times.'<sup>[12]</sup> The repeated use of these words suggests that many of Yu's poems evinced sorrow and melancholy about her beloved and love in general, especially in her poems for Li Zi'an.

#### Sent to Zi'an

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  
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, 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.

寄子安  
醉別千卮不澆愁，  
離腸百結解無由。  
蕙蘭銷歇歸春圃  
楊柳東西絆客舟。  
聚散已悲雲不定  
恩情須學水長流。  
有花時節知難遇  
未肯厭厭醉玉樓。

10. The opening couplet of the poem at first glance seems redolent of Cao Cao's 曹操 (155–220) 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).<sup>[13]</sup> But Yu alters Cao's meaning by saying that even a thousand cups of wine cannot wash away her melancholy. Thus she begins by emphasising that her sorrows are so deep nothing can relieve them. The second couplet is very famous because Sun Guangxian has used it as evidence of Yu's debauchery; 'Willows in the east and west hinder the traveler's boat. Yu certainly indulged in sensual pleasure, she was undoubtedly a prostitute 楊柳東西絆客舟, 自是縱懷 乃娼婦也.'<sup>[14]</sup> Therefore, this line of Yu's work has been taken as one of the roots of Yu's notorious reputation.
11. In the poem, Yu states that when '*huilan*' 蕙蘭 (which is also Yu's style name), fragrant grass or an orchid, withers, they stay home—the ground of the garden.<sup>[15]</sup> Here Yu compares herself metaphorically to the 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, believed that this line meant that Yu was a prostitute who, like a willow tree impeding travellers' boats, tried to waylay her customers. Apparently, Sun looks askance at Yu's behaviour, or so his disparaging interpretation suggests.
12. In my alternative analysis, however, Yu is actually using the line about the willow trees to refer to her husband, who in his travels happened on meeting other women. Thus, the 'willows' are more likely intended to symbolise these other women, not Yu herself. Although her husband loves her, Yu fears that he may meet other women outside. So this couplet is intended to allude to the differences between Yu, represented by 'an orchid,' and her husband, represented by 'a traveller.' The 'orchid' must remain at home, but the 'traveller' can experience life outside and may enjoy the companion of other women, represented by 'willows.' If, as Sun suggests, both the 'orchid' and the 'willows' are meant as symbols of Yu herself, then the two lines of the couplet are contradictory. It seems more logical that these two lines imply that Yu, like many other women of her time, often waits at home for her husband, who is frequently away travelling and perhaps seeing other women.
13. In the second quatrain Yu continues to emphasise about the instability in their relationship, this time likening it to the constantly changing drifting clouds. She wishes her beloved's affection could instead be as constant as a flowing river. At the end of the poem, Yu laments that she is apart from her husband, particularly when she is in the efflorescence of her youth and beauty and she hates to be dejected and pathetic, getting drunk alone in her cold, jade-like home.

14. This poem is clearly focused on Yu's yearning, sorrow and resentment while at home alone. I cannot find anything in the poem to support Sun's interpretation that the poem indicates that Yu was a prostitute.<sup>[16]</sup> In my reading Sun misinterpreted or distorted Yu's poem and his commentary on the personality of Yu is thus 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. This poem expresses regret, sadness, weeping and drinking—some typical elements of boudoir lament poetry. In addition to the effusion of her self-pity, this poem also carries a soupçon of Yu's indignation over the inequality between men and women.
15. Although some of Yu's work is dark in tone, her corpus includes poems that convey her happiness upon meeting her beloved as well. It was poems of this sort that were most frequently criticised as vulgar or wicked by earlier critics. The poem, 'Welcoming Supernumerary Li Jinren,' is a good example of this category of poems. It is difficult to find any 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 張燦 have suggested that Li Jinren is a nickname that Yu bestowed upon Li Zi'an, but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis.<sup>[17]</sup>

#### Welcoming Supernumerary Li Jinren

Today in my happiness I heard the joyful magpies,

Last night I worshipped the candlewick ash by lamplight.<sup>[18]</sup>

Burning incense, I go out of the gate to welcome Pan Yue,<sup>[19]</sup>

I don't envy the Cowherd and Weaving Girl.<sup>[20]</sup>

迎李進仁員外

今日喜時聞喜鵲

昨宵燈下拜燈花。

焚香出戶迎潘岳

不羨牽牛織女家。

16. Using only a plain lexicon, Yu applied several techniques to make her poem absorbing and distinctive. First, Yu explores both visual images (magpies, snuff) and sound effects by the repetition of two Chinese characters: (1) *xi* 喜 (happy) and *xi que* 喜鵲 (magpies); (2) *deng* 燈 (light) and *deng hua* 燈花 (flower shaped candlewick ash) to make the opening couplet read quickly and lightly. Then, she 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 his talent in poetry and handsome appearance, Yu ends the poem 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 romanticise these characters, Yu states that she does not envy them at all, implying that her own love match is superior to that of the mythological lovers.
17. In this verse Yu presents herself as a girl filled with joy and passion, waiting for her beau. Nonetheless, not only has her joyful demeanour been criticised for lacking morality, but also it has been used as more proof that Yu was neither restrained nor decorous. Not surprisingly, very few women wrote poems about the happiness of love in Yu's time, as it was considered improper for women to exult in feelings of love so freely. As Maureen Robertson explains, in her discussion of Xin Wenfang's work *Tang Caizi Zhuan*,

The terms in which Xin ... defends women writers suggest that they were customarily regarded as disruptive and immoral. In this construction, writing women could be represented as guilty of improperly displaying themselves and as expressing excessive and unseemly desires dangerous not only to themselves but to others.<sup>[21]</sup>

Thus, 'Xin characterizes the subject matter of women's poetry exclusively as their feelings of grief and sufferings at the absence or loss of husbands and lovers.'<sup>[22]</sup> Yu's disregard for this

convention places her in the pantheon of avant-garde, brave and talented poets. Even though such a delightful poem was most possibly for her own personal amusement, the act of writing itself sufficed to challenge the power of ethics and traditions.

18. Because Yu had once written an erotic verse to Li Ying, the rumour spread that Yu had an affair with Li. According to *Tang Caizi Zhuan*, Li 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). About 106 pieces of Li's poetic works are collected in *Quan tangshi* and *Quan tangshi bubian* 全唐詩補編 (A supplement to the complete collection of Tang poems).<sup>[23]</sup> As Li was such an accomplished classical poet, Yu regarded him in a particularly favourable light.

**Hearing Official Li Is Back from Fishing I Sent Him This Poem<sup>[24]</sup>**

Unlimited lotus fragrance scents your summer clothes,

Dear *Ruanlang*, I wonder where you came back from boating.<sup>[25]</sup>

I feel regret I am inferior to companions of the mandarin ducks,

They can go close to the rocks where you fish, pair by pair.

聞李端公垂釣回寄贈

無限荷香染暑衣

阮郎何處弄船歸。

自慚不及鴛鴦侶

猶得雙雙近釣磯。

19. Regardless of the short length and simple style, this poem 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 Li while he was fishing. Moreover, Yu seems to be teasing Li with a question, and thus the poem reads like a dialogue between two people who are close. In the ending couplet, Yu employs the symbol of mandarin ducks, which represent happy lovers in Chinese culture, stating that she envies the ducks because they can approach him so freely and without reproach. Whatever fancy the poem might have taken for Li, her affection was not returned. Even though we cannot see Li's response, which is not extant today, Li did not reciprocate her feelings, because we find Yu's second poem in reply to Li Ying's poem on his return from fishing on a summer's day.

**Reply to Li Ying's Poem on His Return from Fishing on a Summer Day**

Although we live in the same alley,

We haven't visited each other once a year.

Your pure lyrics urge an old girl,

A new branch has been broken from sweet-scented cinnamon.<sup>[26]</sup>

The nature of Taoism is stronger than ice and snow,

The heart of Chan laughs at silk and gauze.

Since you have ascended onto the firmament,

There is no way to follow your misty waves.

酬李郢夏日釣魚回見示

住處雖同巷

經年不一過。

清詞勸舊女

香桂折新柯。

道性欺冰雪

禪心笑綺羅。

跡登霄漢上

無路接煙波。

Surprisingly, Yu's tone in this verse is completely different to the previous poem that she sent Li. The poem opens with a summary of the relations between her and Li—although they both live in the same alley, they have barely spoken for years. She then contrasts her own inadequacy, implying that she has experienced a failed relationship, with Li's success on a prestigious royal examination. At the time of writing, Li had already passed his *jinshi* examination, so Li may have taken and passed a more advanced imperial examination. The contrast, then, highlights her debased station in society with Li's ascension.

20. In the second quatrain, Yu then moves on to religious ideas. Since Li often met monks and Daoists, seen from the extant poems he sent them, Li was also well known for his interest and knowledge in both Daoism and Buddhism. After praising Li for his religious achievements, Yu says that there is no way for her to follow his 'misty wave' since he has already ascended to the firmament. Evidently, this poem focuses on the gap between Yu and Li, emphasising the disparity in their social standing. Still, what caused Yu to realise their differences? What changed Yu's attitude from flirtation to restraint? The answer probably lies in Li's poem, which no longer exists. At the very least, we learn that Yu and Li were not in a close relationship.
21. Just as some love poems in Yu's corpus are special because of their versatility and unusually explicit expression of joy in amorous relationships, so too others coruscate not only with Yu's intelligence and deep thought, but also with her witticisms about 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 easy to seek for a priceless treasure,  
 But hard 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?

贈鄰女  
 羞日遮羅袖  
 愁春懶起妝。  
 易求無價寶  
 難得有心郎。  
 枕上潛垂淚  
 花間暗斷腸。  
 自能窺宋玉  
 何必恨王昌?

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. So well-known is the analogy that almost everyone who has read Yu can recite the couplet. At first glance this poem reads like a typical work conveying a woman's yearning and sorrows about being abandoned, but this interpretation falters in the last couplet, where Yu suddenly changes the mood of the poem by saying, 'Since I can spy on Song Yu, / why should I hate Wang Chang?' The poem, then, replaces resentment with new hope for her future.

22. Song Yu 宋玉 (320–225 B.C.) was a minister in the State of Chu (chu guo 楚國), famous for his elegant bearing 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.<sup>[27]</sup> Yu, however, has modified the original meaning of Wang Chang, emphasising that an ideal mate may ironically still be imperfect. Thus, in her poem, Wang Chang, who simply symbolises a good-looking man, is inferior to Song Yu, who is endowed with both talent and appealing looks.
23. After writing several lines bemoaning her abandonments, the abrupt shift in the poem's mood seems to suggest, Yu finds comfort in looking at her problems from a broader viewpoint. It is also possible that she composed the poem for the girl next door, who had experienced a breakup with her boyfriend. Either way, this poem reveals that Yu was little influenced by traditional norms or social restraints. Given her intelligence and indomitable character, Yu realises that because a magnificent 'Song Yu,' who represents her potential future lover, exists somewhere, there is no need to moan over a mere 'Wang Chang,' who represents her former lover. If the couplet, 'It's easier to seek priceless treasure, / but hard to find a man with a loving heart' is regarded as a summary of Yu's failed experiences with love over the past years, the closing couplet, 'Since I can spy on Song Yu, / why should I hate Wang Chang?' could be construed as the solution to her situation.

24. Of course, Yu's approach to solving her problem makes her unconventional in view of the fetters Confucian scholars placed on female thought. Her poem 'Presented to a Girl Next Door' elicited many virulent attacks on her work and characters. Huang Zhouxing 黃周星 (1611–80), a relatively famous scholar and critic in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), once wrote a condemnation of the poem,

Teacher Yu is indeed teaching a monkey to climb up a tree, inducing women to break the law. She is guilty! She is guilty!<sup>[28]</sup>

魚老師可謂教獼升木 誘人犯法。罪過 罪過!

25. By calling her 'teacher,' Huang seems to show Yu some respect, but his analogy relating to monkeys and women is derogatory. In Chinese literature, 'teaching monkeys to climb trees' usually implies helping ones to develop a wicked part in their nature—a part as natural as a monkey's inclination to climb trees. In effect, Huang accuses Yu of inciting women, who he considers easily corruptible in the first place, to flout convention. In addition to Huang, other Confucian scholars also censured Yu for her 'immoral' work and alleged dissolution. Therefore, her notoriety spread far and wide. In her discussion of Tang women's poetry, Suzanne Cahill has sharply pointed out,

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.<sup>[29]</sup>

26. Needless to say, Yu's final couplet of the poem, that reads as a rebellion against the supposed morality imposed on women of her time, represents her bold, progressive and anti-traditional outlook on love.

27. Entitled 'I Was Moved and Sent This to My Friend,' the subsequent poem also evidences Yu's iconoclastic view of love.<sup>[30]</sup> Without an addressee, Yu seemed to take the poem as a means of self-representation rather than a vehicle for social communication. She expresses her deep thoughts of love and strong desire for a man with a loving heart in this long verse.

**I Was Moved and Sent this to My Friend**

To my zither's scarlet strings I entrusted my resentment,<sup>[31]</sup>

But my passions are held back **by** rational thought.

Had I known it was a meeting of clouds and rain,<sup>[32]</sup>

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 luxuriantly green,

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 *zhiyin* (true friend) comes.<sup>[33]</sup>

感懷寄人

恨寄朱弦上

含情意不任。

早知雲雨會

未起蕙蘭心。

灼灼桃兼李

無妨國士尋。

蒼蒼松與桂

仍羨世人欽。

月色苔階淨

歌聲竹院深。

門前紅葉地

不掃待知音。

28. This twelve-line pentasyllabic poem 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 the zither, she unleashes her resentment, because she realises that her current relationship

is not long-term. Here, Yu once again alludes to Song Yu's work, 'Gaotang Fu' 高唐賦 (Rhapsody on Gaotang), in which the goddess of the Shaman Mountain depicts herself as 'clouds in the morning and rain in the evening.' Because the King of Chu had sex with the goddess, "clouds and rain" has become a common euphemism for sexual intercourse in Chinese literature. [34]

29. Contrary to the goddess being represented by 'clouds in the morning and rain in the evening,' Yu describes herself as having 'an orchid-heart' to symbolise her noble and virtuous mind. As has been previously discussed, the literal definition of '*huilan*' is a type of fragrant plant and is often used in a deliberately figurative manner in literature, symbolising a woman's beauty and grace. Moreover, for Yu, *huilan* is also her style. Therefore, in the above poem, 'an orchid-heart' has a dual meaning: it represents both Yu's name and her pure and graceful mind.
30. Due to the ambiguous grammatical structure, the second couplet leads itself multiple interpretations. Jan Walls translates the lines as 'Had I known of the sad tryst of clouds and rain, / this tender heart would never have stirred.' [35] But Kang-I Sun Chang and Huan Saussy render the lines as 'Long ago I knew that a cloud-rain meeting, / Would not give rise to an orchid heart.' [36] Walls' translation would mean that she had given her heart to someone, without realising 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 was used, it would demonstrate Yu's maturity 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.
31. 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 Chinese scholars, such as Peng Zhixian and Zhang Yi, believe that Yu is using the phrase 'blossoms of peaches and plums' to refer to herself. [37] 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. [38] 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 men with noble character. Yu tactfully says that even scholars whose noble characters are like pine and cassia trees still experience the emotions of ordinary people. This emphasises that distinguished scholars are fundamentally no different from common people in that they are fond of beautiful women as well.
32. The final quatrain focuses on Yu's own situation and state of mind. In describing the 'mossy steps' to her house, she implies that few people have visited her because moss does not grow on a frequently used path. 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. Despite her loneliness and gloom, 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 *zhiyin* [a true friend] comes.'
33. In alluding to an 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, 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 not simply for 'a meeting of clouds and rain.'

34. One beautiful image after another is evoked in the verse: 'bright 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 is pursuing a love as enduring as the universe. Alas, this beautiful, profound and well-organised poem receives little attention in the classical literary world.
35. Why has this voice been ignored or even silenced in the literary world dominated by male literati? So unpalatable has been Yu's implied criticism of male scholars' hypocrisy in lusting for pretty women that many of critics—some from her epoch, others more from later periods—have persistently censured her. As Beata Grant says, '... 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.'<sup>[39]</sup>

## Conclusion

36. Yu was 'a woman in a man's world, and though she resented it, she was helplessly dependent upon men.'<sup>[40]</sup> In regard to norms and virtues that a traditional Chinese 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 chase ... is quite in conformity with what is required of a woman in the *Nüjie*,' which was recognised by Confucian literati as one of the classics for educating women, focusing on rules and regulations that a woman should observe.'<sup>[41]</sup> Yu's strong desire for equality between men and women and her rejection of a Zeitgeist that demanded in women coyness, humility, passivity and tolerance accounts for the fury and disgust unleashed upon her—fury and disgust so caustic and enduring that, at times, the name of Yu Xuanji seemed synonymous with dissolute prostitution.
37. Every story has two sides and, for centuries, we have heard a lot about Yu from critics' commentaries, but few have had an opportunity to hear Yu's voice—how she identified herself. In fairness to Yu and for the sake of the study of women in pre-modern China, then, a re-evaluation of Yu is warranted. Given that some male scholars in the pre-modern period criticised Yu, as an historical person, based on their interpretation of her poetic works, why should we not re-examine and re-evaluate Yu's works according to a less rigid moral rubric, or from a modern feminist perspective? Admittedly, the person Yu presents in her poems perhaps belies the true complexity of personality. However, based on my textual studies of Yu's verses, I find little evidence of the obscenity described by earlier critics. Instead, I consider that Yu's love poetry not only releases feelings of sorrow, regret and resentment, common motifs shared by many pre-modern Chinese women in boudoir poetry, but also balances her indignation over the inequality between sexes with her optimistic spirit seen most strongly in the philosophical wit of her verses. Ultimately, the delicate balance she maintains signals the triumph of her rationality.

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## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> *Quan Tangshi* 全唐詩, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, vol. 23 (1960): 9047–56.

- [2] Huang-fu Mei 皇甫枚 (ca. 880–901), *Sanshui xiaodu* 三水小牘, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, vol. 1260 (1995): 46; Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (ca. 900–968), *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言, in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, vol. 271, (2003): 2134; Hu Zhenheng 胡震亨 (1569–1645), *Tang yin guiqian* 唐音癸籤 8. See also *Wenjingge siku quanshu* 文津閣四庫全書, *jibu* 集部, Shanghai: shangwu yinshu guan, vol. 496 (2005): 195.
- [3] Suzanne Cahill, 'Resenting the silk robes that hide their poems: Female voices in the poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns,' in *Tang-Song Nüxing Yü Shehui* 唐宋女性與社會, edited by Deng Xiaonan, Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2003, 519–66; 'Material culture and the Dao: Textiles, boats, and zithers in the poetry of Yu Xuanji (844–868),' in *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage, and Ritual*, edited by Livia Kohn and Hal Roth, 102–26, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.
- [4] 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.
- [5] Maureen Robertson, 'Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-inscription in Authors' Prefaces and "Shi" Poetry,' in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, edited by Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang, 171–220, California: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 174.
- [6] Cahill, 'Resenting the silk robes that hide their poems: Female voices in the poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns,' 521.
- [7] Based on the themes of Yu's work, I have classified Yu's forty-nine verses into five categories: love poems (10); Daoist poems (6), social poems (18); poems about herself (8); and poems on history, travel and sports (7). I will keep this paper focused on Yu's love verses, the most controversial aspect of her corpus.
- [8] Xin Wenfang 辛文房, *Tang caizi zhuan* 唐才子傳, Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1965, 136.
- [9] According to *Dengke Ji Kao* 登科記考 (A study of passing lists of Government examinations), Li Yi passed the *jinshi* examination and won fame as the Principal Graduate (*zhuangyuan* 狀元) in the twelfth year of the Dazhong 大中 era (858). *Dengke ji kao* 登科記考 in *Xüxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, vol. 829 (1995): 359.
- [10] Yu alludes the verse of 'Bai Zhou' 柏舟 in *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' 我心匪石,不可轉也。我心匪席 不可卷也. *Shijing* Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1926, 32.
- [11] Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 criticises Yu 'As a woman who indulged in sensual pleasures and she was undoubtedly a prostitute 自是縱懷,乃娼婦也,' Sun Guangxian 孫光憲, *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言 in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, vol. 271, 2134.
- [12] Lin Xueling 林雪鈴, *Tangshi zhong de nüguan* 唐詩中的女冠, Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2002, 168.
- [13] According to Chinese legend, Du Kang 杜康 is the first person who brewed wine. In Cao Cao's 曹操 poem, *Du Kang* refers to wine in a general sense. See Cao Cao's *Ballads of Short Songs* 短歌行 in *Hanwei liuchao shixuan* 漢魏六朝詩選, Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1961, 105.
- [14] Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (ca. 900–968), *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言 in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, vol. 271 (2003): 2134.
- [15] Yu styles her name as 'huilan' 蕙蘭. The characters mean fragrant herbaceous plants, *ocimum basilicum* and *eupatorium japonicum* respectively. Both plants are often used as symbols of purity, beauty and fragrance in Chinese literature. Yu's pseudonym, then, carries with it an implied rejection of debauchery and meretricious love. As Western scholars usually translate 'huilan' as 'orchid', I follow the tradition, instead of using the longer formal plant names. For translations of 'huilan,' see the translation of Yu Xuanji's works in *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, edited by Kang-I Sun Chang and Huan Saussy, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999, 66–75, p. 70; Jan Walls, 'The poetry of Yü Hsüan-chi: A translation, annotation, commentary, and critique,' PhD diss. Indiana University, 1972, 269.
- [16] Sun's commentary goes, 'Here are some lines of her [Yu's] 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.' Yu certainly indulged in sensual pleasures, she was undoubtedly a prostitute.' 詩曰。宜求無价寶。難得有心郎。又曰。惠蘭銷歌歸春圃。楊柳東西絆客舟。自是縱懷。乃娼婦也。 Sun Guangxian 孫光憲, *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言 in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, vol. 271, 2134.

[17] Peng Zhixian 彭志憲 and Zhang Yi 張燦, *Yu Xuanji shi biannian yizhu* 魚玄機詩編年譯註, Wulumuqi 烏魯木齊: Xinjiang daxue chubanshe 新疆大學出版社, 2006, 4.

[18] *Denghua* 燈花 refers to flower-shaped candlewick ash, which, as part of Chinese culture, was believed to bring good fortune.

[19] Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300) was a famous man of letters in the period of the Western Jin 西晉 (263–317), known for his handsome appearance.

[20] In Chinese legend, Cowherd and Weaving Girl (*niulang zhinü* 牛郎織女) are known as a loving couple.

[21] Robertson, 'Changing the subject,' 180.

[22] Robertson, 'Changing the subject,' 182.

[23] See *Quan Tangshi*, vol. 18, 6846–956; and *Quan Tangshi Bubian*, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, vol. 1 (1992): 426–33.

[24] In the poem, Yu called Li 'Duangongg' 端公, which is an alternative name for Censor in Attendance (*shiyushi* 侍御史) in the Tang dynasty.

[25] In the fifth year of the era of Yongping 永平 (57–75), East Han dynasty (25–220), Liu Chen 刘晨 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. *Ruan lang* 阮郎, originated by the fairies, later becomes a term of endearment of boyfriend. See *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, vol. 41 (1960): 194–95.

[26] In the Tang dynasty, the term 'breaking a branch of cinnamon' was a metaphor for passing a royal examination.

27 See Xiao Yan's 萧衍 (464–549) poem 'Water in the River Flows East' 河中之水向东流, 'What does she expect for wealth in her life? / She regrets for not having married earlier to Wang living to her east' 人生富贵何所望 恨不早嫁东家王, *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, vol. 4 (1979): 1204.

[28] Huang Zhouxing 黃周星, *Tangshi kuai* 唐詩快. See *Tang nü shiren ji sanzong* 唐女詩人集三種, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984, 97.

[29] Cahill, 'Resenting the silk robes that hide their poems: Female voices in the poetry of Tang Dynasty Daoist Nuns,' 522.

[30] Due to the limited historical records, it is hard to provide dates of Yu Xuanji's work and we are unable to know which of the poems were written at each major point in her life.

[31] In ancient China, a *qin's* (a musical instrument like zither) strings were made from *shusi* 熟絲, a special kind of silk, which was red.

[32] The phrase 'meeting of clouds and rain' is from Song Yu's work 'Rhapsody on Gaotang' (*Gaotang Fu* 高唐賦), in which Song Yu tells of an ancient King of Chu who had a dream of a beautiful woman in the 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, an euphemism for intercourse; the King gave his favour. When she left she said, 'I am 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.' *Song Yu Cifu* 宋玉辭賦, Hefei 合肥: Anhui daxue chubanshe 安徽大学出版社, 2006, 168.

[33] In the Warring States period (403–221 B.C.) a musician called Bo Ya 伯牙 was very skilled at playing the 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 *zhiyin* (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.

[34] Stephen Owen (ed. and trans), *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1996, 189.

[35] Jan Walls, 'The poetry of Yü Hsüan-chi: A translation, annotation, commentary, and critique,' 213.

[36] See the translation of Yu Xuanji's works in Kang-I Sun Chang and Huan Saussy (eds), *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, 66–75, p. 69.

[37] Peng Zhixian 彭志憲 and Zhang Yi 張燚, *Yu Xuanji shi biannian yizhu*, 97.

[38] Bai Juyi 白居易 (772 –846) wrote in his poem *Envoy* 贈言, '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 *Quan Tangshi*, vol. 13, 4766.

[39] Beata Grant, 'Women gender and religion in premodern China: A brief introduction,' in *Nan Nü* vol. 10 (2008): 2–21.

[40] Jan Walls, 'The Poetry of Yü Hsüan-chi,' 29.

[41] Josephine Chiu-Duke, Reviews *Nan Nü* vol. 9 (2007): 375.

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