

As soon as Gao read this poem, he immediately went back [to the capital]. Later, after he had successfully passed the examinations, his wife again sent him a poem:

Chang'an is not so very far from here,
 An auspicious air, thick and dense, hovers above.
 You, my husband, have reached your goal in the prime of your youth—
 In which bordello will you sleep off your drunken high tonight?

We may assume that lady Liu was not only concerned about her husband's alcohol consumption, but also about the company he kept. And this brings us to the subject of courtesans.

Public Women

The insistence in the *Rites* and other guidelines for women on the segregation of the sexes in elite families, even if not always strictly adhered to, greatly limited the possibilities for elite men to associate with educated women outside their own families. The need for female companionship on such occasions as festive gatherings was filled instead by professional female entertainers, trained from early youth in all the skills of music and dance, repartee, and poetry. The entertainment they provided might extend to sexual services but not necessarily. The overwhelming majority of these female entertainers lived a miserable life, but for a few women, the career of courtesan provided an opportunity to pursue an independent life outside the strict confines of the family.

The Tang dynasty is not the first period in Chinese history from which we have poems that are attributed to courtesans. From the centuries of political disunion we have a number of erotic quatrains that are ascribed to women with professional names such as Ziye (Midnight) and Taoye (Peachleaf). A few examples may suffice:

When young, a man should not hesitate—
 Let time slip by, and quickly you'll be old.
 If you do not believe the words I say,
 Look at the grasses, now covered by frost.

The night is long, I cannot fall asleep—
 How brightly shines the light of the full moon!
 I imagine I hear your voice calling me,
 And to no avail at all I answer: "Yes!"

How lovely the blossoms on the spring trees!
 How mournful the warbling of the spring birds!
 And, oh, how passionate those spring breezes
 That blow open my skirt of silk.

Although attributed to named (but otherwise unknown) courtesans, these poems most likely are anonymous folksongs. Within the Chinese tradition of erotic poetry, they are remarkable for their relative sexual frankness.

The second half of the Tang dynasty provided even more favorable conditions for the rise to prominence of literate courtesans. In his *Records of the Northern Ward* (*Beilizhi*), a description of Chang'an's red-light district during its final glory years, Sun Qi (second half of the ninth century) provides us with a few brief biographies of the most prominent courtesans of the time. In these biographies, Sun occasionally also quotes one or two poems written by these women. Gao Yanxiu, another author of the second half of the ninth century, records the case of a courtesan, acquired by a certain Mr. Wei, who was not only beautiful but also an excellent musician and a perceptive textual scholar:

Her smart intelligence was really unparalleled. Once Wei had her copy out the poems of Du Fu. The text he had at his disposal was riddled with errors, but she would correct these as she plied the brush, and the literary structure [of the poems] would blaze forth with even greater brilliance! That was the reason Wei loved her so much!

This little anecdote holds out the tantalizing possibility that the transmitted text of the poetry of China's greatest poet may be as much the work of this anonymous courtesan as that of Du Fu himself!

The three best-known women poets of the Tang dynasty—Li Ye, Xue Tao, and Yu Xuanji—were both courtesans and Daoist nuns, either simultaneously or in succession. Both the nun and the courtesan lived outside the family, and both the nun and the courtesan could participate in male society by, for instance, the exchange of occasional verse. Such a free association of nuns with male patrons made the distinction between nun and courtesan at times quite hazy in the eyes of their contemporary observers.

Our knowledge of the lives of Li Ye, Xue Tao, and Yu Xuanji is very limited, since their careers did not entitle them to a biography in the dynastic histories. The information that can be culled from their poems must be combined with the scattered references to these women that we find in the

works of some of their contemporaries. We also have some occasional anecdotal information, which, because it is often of a later date, is of questionable reliability.

Poet and Traitor: Li Ye. We know very little about Li Ye (style name Jilan) apart from the fact that she was a native of Wuxing, was active in the third quarter of the eighth century, mainly in southeast China, and that in 784 her life came to a brutal end. Some later sources refer to her as a Daoist nun, but among her extant eighteen poems, there is only one poem, entitled "Love for the Way; Sent to Vice-Minister Cui," that is clearly religious in character:

Cease your useless craving for floating fame,
Be sure to restrain your desire for high office.
Life's hundred years are like a single day
And what has passed all turns to emptiness.
Your sorrowed sideburns soon turn white,
For all your study, still no ruddy cheeks!
The best thing you could do in India
Would be to join the Ancient Master.

"Ancient Master" is a Daoist designation for the Buddha, so it would appear as if our Daoist nun is urging her addressee to seek refuge with Buddha.

Li Ye's other poems evince a frank sensuality that would seem at odds with a monastic vocation. This sensuality, together with her known contacts with a number of local officials, make it more likely that our poet spent most of her active life as a courtesan rather than as a nun.

Fishes Knotted of White Silk; Presented to a Friend

A square of silk as white as snow:
I folded it tight into a pair of carp.
You want to know the secrets of my heart?
Just read the letter hidden in their belly.

On Receiving a Letter from Yan Bojun

So filled with love, before the mirror I forget to do my hair,
The evening rain desolate, the courtyard trees autumnal.
Don't be surprised to see tears running down in streams:
I am heartbroken when confronted by the traces of your brush!

A Night of Full Moon; For Someone Seeing Me Off

The one departing has no words, the moon has no voice,
But the full moon has her light, and I have my feelings.
After this goodbye I will in my longing be just like the moon:
Between the clouds, above the streams, atop the highest wall!

Eight Extremes

Most near and most far: east and west,
Most deep and most shallow: limpid streams.
Most high and most bright: sun and moon,
Most close and most distant: husband and wife.

The Willow

I love most your slender form by the side of a winding stream
When the setting sun moves your shadow across the duckweed—
The east wind once again has dyed you with your annual green,
The wanderer is pained once more by a thousand miles of spring.
Your hanging leaves can already conceal the boat at the bank,
Your highest branches surely sequester the girl on the tower.
When your dancing waist thickens, and your misty beauty ages,
Your drifting floss will scatter and flirt with the grasses below.

Love-Longing

Nothing, they say, is deeper than the ocean—
But it is not half as deep as this love of mine.
The waters of the ocean have their borders—
My love is endless and it has no bounds!
I took my zither and climbed up the tower,
To an empty room flooded by moonlight.
There I played a melody of love and longing,
Until both strings and heart snapped in two.

Sent to Zhu Fang

I climbed the hill to gaze upon the streams:
The hill was high, the lake was oh-so-wide,
Longing for each other all the time,
Waiting for each other months and years.

The trees on the hill grow thick and lush,
 The wild flowers blossom without end.
 Of my boundless feelings since our parting
 I will tell you as soon as we meet again.

Zhu Fang was a local magnate and minor official who lived toward the end of the eighth century. The poem suggests that the addressee has left the poet to take up an official position, perhaps at the capital. While the "trees on the hill" (or mountain) may refer to high officials, "wild flowers" may refer to the many courtesans of the capital who could well lure Zhu Fang away. Li Ye's poem may have been written as a response to the following poem by Zhu Fang, entitled "Saying Goodbye to Li Jilan":

On the old riverbank new blossoms open on a single branch,
 Beside the bank and below the blossoms is where we parted.
 Don't make the blossoms fall by brushing them with your sleeve,
 Because that would immediately break this traveler's heart!

In China, as in many other parts of the world, "fallen flower" was a common metaphor used to refer to courtesans and prostitutes. In some poems Li Ye seems to be advertising her availability as a courtesan, especially in those poems in which she compares herself to the goddess of Shamanka Mountain (Wushan). Shamanka Mountain is one of the peaks of the mountain ranges that mark the border between the modern provinces of Hubei and Sichuan. It is through these mountain ranges that the mighty Yangzi River winds its way through the Three Gorges. Once upon a time, according to an old legend, the goddess of Shamanka Mountain appeared in a dream to the king of Chu as he lay napping on this mountain. After they had made love, she told him that she manifested herself in the early morning as drifting clouds, and in the evening as showers of rain. Since that time "clouds and rain" has been the most common Chinese euphemism for sexual intercourse, and the goddess herself became a symbol of sensuality and desire. Li Ye's identification with the goddess of Shamanka Mountain is most explicit in the following poem, which is the longest of her extant works:

I Attended Xiao Shuzi While He Was Listening to Someone
Playing the Zither; The Poem Topic That Was Assigned to
Me Was "Song on the Flowing Springs Near the Three
Gorges"

Originally I lived among the clouds of Shamanka Mountain,
Where I would always listen to Shamanka's flowing springs.
Imitated on the zither, they sound even more distant and pure,
And are just like those I heard in my dreams of those days!

The Three Gorges are so far away, many thousands of miles,
But all of a sudden they flow into these gloomy inner quarters.
Huge boulders and collapsing cliffs are born from the fingers,
And waterfalls and racing waves rise up from the strings!

At first their roaring rage seems to be like thunder and storm,
But then it sobs and sighs like a stream that cannot flow.
Swirling eddies and whirling maelstroms expend all their might,
To be followed again by dripping and dropping on level sand.

When long ago, I recall, Master Ruan composed this tune,
He could make Zhongrong listen to it without end.
Play the tune once again as soon as it is done,
Please make these flowing springs go on forever!

Instrumental music in the Tang dynasty was programmatic in nature, and strong contrasts in tempo and volume were greatly appreciated. Master Ruan refers to Ruan Ji (210–263), the famous poet, zither player, and untrammelled drunkard, who was later included among the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. Zhongrong was his nephew Ruan Xian (234–305), who enjoyed a great reputation as a lute player.

Some Chinese scholars have read the first line of the above poem literally, and in so doing, conclude that Li Ye must have been born in western China. But this then leads them to wonder how it is she ended up in eastern China. Such a literal reading is improbable, though, since this is not the only poem in which Li Ye compares herself to the goddess of Shamanka Mountain. Elsewhere she writes: "In the form of morning clouds and evening rains I will continue to pursue you." It should come as no

surprise therefore that the earliest sources on her life present Li Ye as a courtesan. In fact, according to an anecdote preserved in a mid-tenth-century collection, she gave indication both of her poetic talent and her lack of virtue even as a very young girl:

Li Jilan was famed for her talents despite the fact that she was a woman. When she was five or six years old, her father carried her in his arms into the courtyard, where she composed a poem on roses, the last lines of which read:

If for a moment left unsupported by a trellis,
They will tend to stray wildly in all directions.

Her father said angrily: "This girl will later be blessed with literary style, but she is bound to end up as a fallen woman." And indeed it turned out to be as he had said.

In his anthology of poems from the period 756–780 titled the *Restoration Collection* (*Zhongxing jianqi ji*), Gao Zhongwu (second half of the eighth century) included six poems of Li Ye's, which he prefaced with the following introduction:

For a gentleman there are the hundred rules of deportment, but for a woman only the four virtues. But not for Jilan! Since her personality is masculine, her poetry is unrestrained. Rarely since the time of Bao Zhao has her equal been seen.²⁵

Once she was together with several gentlemen at the Reopened Beginning Monastery [Kaiyuansi] of Wucheng. One of them, Liu Changqing [709–780] from Hejian, was suffering from incontinence, and so she made fun of him, saying:

The mountain's smell is finest in the evening.

Changqing retorted:

There all the birds so happily find a haven.

Everyone present roared with laughter, and the critics praised both of them equally.

Lines of hers such as "On distant streams a fairy boat is floating, / And frozen stars send off the envoy's cart" belong to the finest of five-syllable lines. While she may not be as good as Concubine Ban from the distant past, she easily surpasses Han Lanying from more recent times.

25. For Bao Zhao we probably should read Bao Linghui.

She is not worried by her advancing age; she is really an eminent dame.

A great man is often compared to a mountain, and many Chinese poets have described how birds return to the woods for the night at the close of day. But the tree that is equally hospitable to all the birds is also an image for the courtesan who receives one guest after another. The Buddhist monk and poet Jiaoran (d. 789) has even left us a poem in which he compares our passionate poet, who had apparently paid him a visit, to a seductive heavenly nymph:

In Reply to a Poem by Jilan

A heavenly aspara put me to the test,²⁶
She wanted to dye my gown with her flowers.
But in the end my dhyana-heart was not aroused²⁷
And carrying her flowers she had to return.

Li Ye was eventually inducted into the Inner Palace, probably in the early years of the reign of Emperor Dezong. But when in 783 the general Zhu Ci rose in rebellion and even occupied the capital for a while, she wrote a poem to him so flattering that the indignant Zhao Yuanyi (second half of the eighth century), the contemporary chronicler of these events, refused to include the text in his account:

At that time there was a woman of questionable morals, Li Jilan, who presented a poem to Ci. Its words are so rebellious and treasonous, that I will leave them out and not record them. When the emperor recovered the capital, he summoned her and castigated her, saying: "Why didn't you learn from Yan's poem, which goes: 'My hands hold the ritual vases and my tears course down, / My heart thinks of the enlightened ruler but I dare not say a word?'" He then ordered her to be clubbed to death.

No further information is available on Yan Juchuan. As for Li Ye, the poetry-loving Emperor Dezong would a few years later fill her empty spot in the Inner Palace with the five talented Song sisters.

Despite her lifestyle and her ultimate disloyalty, the eighteenth-century compilers of the catalogue of the imperial library held a remarkably high

26. Asparas are flower-scattering heavenly nymphs in Buddhist mythology.

27. Dhyana is the Sanskrit word for meditation. A "dhyana-heart" is a mind fixed in meditation.

opinion of Li Ye's work. They regarded her poetry as comparable to that of her male contemporaries and as much better than that of the more famous Xue Tao: "We must not belittle her collection just because it includes such a limited number of poems."

Courtesan and collator: Xue Tao. Xue Tao (758–831) spent all her life in the city of Chengdu, where for many years she was the leading lady at the parties thrown by the successive governors of Sichuan. The earliest sources simply describe her as a "registered courtesan," but according to later stories, she was a native of Chang'an. Her father, who had been sent to Sichuan to take up a minor post, passed away while in Chengdu and left her mother a widow. Eventually his daughter drifted into the life of a courtesan, for which, like Li Ye, she apparently had shown an early predisposition:

One day, her father pointed to the *wutong*-tree in their courtyard, and recited:

In front of the courtyard steps an ancient *wutong*-tree:
Its towering trunk rises up into the clouds.

When he ordered Tao to continue the poem, she immediately responded with the following lines:

Its branches welcome birds from north and south,
Its leaves send off the winds that come and go.

This left her father filled with sadness for a long time.

As in the case of Li Ye, the reliability of such late, prophetic anecdotes has to be doubted.

A short biography of Xue Tao, appended to a 1609 edition of her collected poems, summarizes her life as follows:

Xue Tao's style name was Hongdu. Originally she was the daughter of a commoner family from Chang'an. Her father Yun died in Sichuan while residing there in an official capacity, and her mother, now a widow, raised her till she was of marriageable age. She became known outside the family not only for her poetry, but also for her expertise in the painting of brows and application of makeup. She was not of the same class as the gentry families, and so guests would flirt with her secretly.

At that time Secretariat Director Wei Gao [745–805] was the governor of Sichuan. He summoned her and ordered her to serve wine and compose poems

[at his banquets]; this led all his subordinates and gentlemen to change their opinion of her. After one year, he proposed sending a memorial requesting an appointment for her as collator, but he was told by the military protector that this was unthinkable, and so never actually did it. Tao went in and out of the governor's offices and, beginning with Wei Gao and ending with Li Deyu, she served eleven governors in all; each of them appreciated her because of her poetry. Among those who exchanged poetry with her during those years were [famous men such as] Yuan Zhen, Bai Juyi, Niu Sengru, Linghu Chu, Pei Du, Yan Shou, Zhang Ji, Du Mu, Liu Yuxi, Wu Wuling, and Zhang Gu. The others were also famous gentlemen; in total, twenty are known by name, and with all of them she exchanged poetry.

Tao lived on the banks of the Hundred Flowers Pond, and with her own hands made small letter paper of a deep red color, which she cut to size for writing the poems she presented to these eminent personalities. People call this "Xue Tao's letter paper."

During the last years of her life, she lived in the Black Rooster Ward, where she built the Poetry-Intoning Tower, in which she would take her rest. She died at the age of seventy-five sometime during the reign period Great Harmony [Dahe, 827-835], when Duan Wenchang was serving for a second time as governor in Chengdu. Wenchang wrote a grave inscription for her.

This biography probably exaggerates the extent and the intensity of the exchanges, poetic and otherwise, between Xue Tao and the leading writers and statesmen of the early decades of the ninth century. Bai Juyi, for instance, never visited Chengdu. According to another account, it was not Wei Gao but rather Wu Yuanheng who was appointed as governor of Sichuan in 807, who initiated the unprecedented step of proposing a woman (and a courtesan no less) for an official appointment as collator, a minor post in the imperial library that often was the first appointment for students who had brilliantly passed the examinations. Yet another source tells us that Xue Tao spent her final years on the banks of the Flower-Washing Brook, clad in the garb of a Daoist nun.

The biography also neglects to mention that Xue Tao at one point offended Wei Gao so much that she was banished to the border regions, from where she sent her great patron the following contrite verses:

I had heard about the sufferings of the border,
But only after coming here do I know them.

Full of shame I now sing my festive songs
For our boys who serve over here in Long.

Curiously enough, Xue Tao's collection also contains the following two poems addressed to Wu Yuanheng, who apparently had also found cause to punish her by sending her to the border garrisons:

I

The fireflies above the overgrown fields, the moon in the sky:
How could such fireflies ever hope to fly and reach the moon?
May the light of sun and moon illuminate ten thousand miles—
I gaze far into the clouds, lacking any means to send a letter.

II

Atop the mountain range I halt my horse: colder than cold!
The sharp wind and fine drizzle pierce me to the bone.
If only I was lucky enough to be allowed to go home,
I would never again want to look at a landscape painting!

In later ages, Xue Tao was not only remembered for her poetry and her red letter paper, but also for her calligraphy. The rich collection of the art-loving Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1126) of the Song dynasty contained one sample of her calligraphy, which the catalogue of the collection describes as follows:

The woman Xue Tao was a prostitute from Chengdu. In her time, she was famous for her poetry. Even though her lowly profession meant she lacked any status, she displayed the style of a recluse. And so, as soon as she produced a poem or a piece of calligraphy, people would compete to circulate it for all to enjoy. Her written characters have nothing girlish about them, and the force of her brush is strong and vigorous. The marvelousness of her running script to a large degree captures the method of Wang Xizhi.²⁸ If she would have studied his style even more, she would have been of the class of Lady Wei.²⁹ She always liked to write out the poems she had written herself.

28. We encountered the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi earlier as the father-in-law of Xie Daoyun.

29. Wang Xizhi is said to have studied calligraphy with Lady Wei. Lady Wei is said to have derived her style of calligraphy from Cai Yong after having been taught by his daughter, Cai Yan.

Their phrases are artful, and the ideas behind them are extraordinary. Model calligraphy and startling lines—that is why she became famous!

As laudatory as it is, this is the earliest reference to Xue Tao's calligraphic skills, on which all our Tang sources remain silent. Since none of the calligraphy attributed to her survives, we have no choice but to take the Song experts at their word.

Xue Tao's extant collection consists of nearly ninety poems. Most of these are occasional verses; the rest are largely poems on assigned topics such as were often produced in large quantities at literary parties. The thematically rather restricted nature of her poetry was noted by critics fairly early on:

During the reign period Primal Harmony [Yuanhe, 806–820], Xue Tao, a registered courtesan from Chengdu, was skilled in literary composition and rich in eloquence. Even though her works lack the intent of indirect criticism or moral instruction, they display her talent for singing of flowers and moonlight. She truly was an extraordinary person among the garrison courtesans of the time.

Xue Tao's poems may be technically perfect, but they are also rather conventional. In fact, in her collection only a few of her poems stand out:

From: Spring Prospects, Four Songs

I

The blossoms open—but no shared enjoyment,
The blossoms wither—but no shared distress.
You ask me when it is I long for you?
When blossoms open and when blossoms fall.

IV

Unbearable! The blossoms on the branches
Turn into longing in two places.
I face the mirror and my tears course down,
But does the spring wind care?

Willow Floss

The Second Month: the willow floss, so light and ethereal,
Tossed about by the spring breeze, tugs at your gown.

But actually it is an object bereft of feeling,
Now it drifts to the south, then to the north!

Xue Tao's most popular work by far (if indeed it is hers) is a series of ten quatrains on separation:

The Dog Separated from Its Master

The most docile in this wealthy household for several years!
Fragrant fur and cleaned paws—beloved by its master.
But ever since it, without warning, bit a cherished guest,
No longer is it allowed to sleep on the red silk carpet.

The Writing Brush Separated from the Hand

Only when made of bamboo from Yue and hairs from Xuan
Can it scatter the most exquisite flowers on red letter paper.
But because through long use it has lost its sharp point,
No longer does Wang Xizhi want to hold it in his hand.

The Horse Separated from Its Stable

Snow-white ears, reddish coat, and hooves of lightest green:
Chasing the wind as far as the east and the west of the sun.
But because it startled and threw off its rich young master,
No longer is it allowed to neigh in its precious pavilion.

The Parrot Separated from Its Cage

As a solitary and lonely exile from Longxi
It could fly freely about on the brocade carpet.

But since it spoke out in an embarrassing way,
No longer is it allowed to greet people from its cage.

Swallows Separated from Their Nest

In and out of the rich man's house they'd never been chased away
Because the master often loved to listen to their twittering sounds.
But since they soiled his brocade pillow with the loam from their beaks,
No longer are they allowed to build their nest between the beams.

The Pearl Separated from the Palm of the Hand

Brilliant and pure, round and bright, and completely transparent:
Its clear light seemed to illuminate the Dragons' Crystal Palace.
But now, just because it has been tarnished by a single tiny flaw,
No longer is it allowed to spend the night in the palm of the hand.

The Fish Separated from Its Pond

It frolicked in the lotus pond for a number of years,
Flicking its red tail, it would tease the line and hook.
But for no reason at all it broke the stem of a lotus flower—
No longer is it allowed to swim in its clear waves.

The Hawk Separated from the Gauntlet

Its talons are as sharp as awls, its eyes as round as bells:
To catch a hare on the level plain is its greatest joy.
But for no reason at all it stole away beyond the clouds—
No longer is it allowed to perch on the king's wrist.

The Bamboo Separated from the Pavilion

Thick and lush, and newly planted in four or five rows,
They withstood the autumn frost with their sturdy nodes.
But because their sprouts in spring cracked the wall,
No longer are they allowed to shade the jade hall.

The Mirror Separated from Its Stand

When, forged from gold, the mirror was first uncovered,
It was a hovering full moon of the fifteenth of the month.
But because it has been covered by dust without end,
No longer is it allowed on its jade stand in the painted hall.

Xue Tao is said to have written this series of ten poems for Yuan Zhen (779–831) in the hopes of regaining his affection after she had offended him. Yuan Zhen, who is nowadays probably best known as the author of the *Tale of Yingying* (*Yingying zhuan*), arrived in Chengdu in 809 in the capacity of inspecting censor, and soon found himself embroiled in controversy as he began to document and judge numerous cases of serious

official abuse of power. One may well wonder how he could have found the time to initiate a relationship with Xue Tao, break up with her, and then reconcile with her once again. Later generations, however, must have found it unimaginable that the author of one of the most romantic tales in Chinese literary history would not have enjoyed a liaison with the most famous courtesan of his time. A collection of anecdotes compiled in the final decades of the ninth century describes their relationship as follows:

As soon as Minister Yuan . . . heard that among the registered courtesans of Sichuan there was a certain Xue Tao who was competent in poetry and extremely eloquent, he continuously longed for her in his heart. When he was appointed an investigating commissioner, he asked to be posted to Sichuan, but as he was judging cases in his capacity as censor, it was impossible for him to go to visit her. When he was later [relieved of his duties and] transferred to the position of omissioner, the prefect Yan Shou, knowing of Yuan Zhen's desires, again and again sent Xue Tao over to him. When Yuan Zhen was about to depart, he did not dare take her with him. Once he had been appointed to the Hanlin Academy, he sent her the following poem:

The rippling waves of Brocade River and the glory of Mt. Emei
Have through the art of transformation produced Wenjun and Xue Tao,
In speech so skillful they steal the parrot's tongue,
In style so brilliant they earn the phoenix's plumes.
In droves the poets all lay down their writing brushes,
While each and every high official dreams of appointment there.
Since our separation my longing has been blocked by misty rivers:
The calamus flowers must be blooming—the clouds of dusk are high.

This account makes no mention of the ten poems on separation. It does provide the additional information that when more than ten years later, Yuan Zhen was appointed as governor of eastern Zhejiang and finally was about to send a messenger to Chengdu to fetch Xue Tao, he was suddenly smitten by the attractions of the actress Liu Caichun, and forgot about Xue Tao altogether. In fact, the account concludes with a poem Yuan Zhen wrote for Liu Caichun. A collection of anecdotes compiled in the early tenth century contains a story according to which the ten quatrains on separation were written by one of Yuan Zhen's secretaries, when Yuan was serving as governor of eastern Zhejiang. Apparently, this secretary, also surnamed Xue, had once become drunk

and wounded his master with his chopsticks for which he was duly punished. Afterwards, it is said, he wrote this series of separation poems in the hopes of getting his job back. However, when in 900 Wei Zhuang (836–910) compiled the *Mystery upon Mystery* (*Youxuan ji*), a large anthology of Tang dynasty poetry that also included a substantial number of women poets, he credited the first poem of the series to Xue Tao. To complicate matters even further, yet another source claims that Xue Tao wrote the series in order to regain the favor of Wu Yuanheng. Most likely the series of ten poems of separation were anonymous poems that circulated orally, eagerly awaiting an opportunity to be associated with a famous name.

Concubine, Daoist nun, and murderer: Yu Xuanji. We know very little about Yu Xuanji's early years other than that she was born around the year 848 to a family of modest means. We also know that she spent most of her short life in the capital of Chang'an. At the age of fifteen she became the concubine of the censor Li Yi and accompanied him on a journey to central China. The following quatrain, "Traveling on the River," very likely dates from Yu Xuanji's days as a concubine:

The Yangzi encircles Wuchang, which slopes down to its banks,
Where the houses of ten thousand families stand facing Parrot Isle.
In the painted boat our spring sleep continues past dawn:
In our dreams we are butterflies still trying out the flowers.

Soon afterwards, though, Li Yi apparently sent her away, according to one source because he had fallen out of love with her, but according to another, because his jealous wife had forced him to do so. Yu Xuanji then became a nun at the Xianyi Convent, which at that time was the largest Daoist nunnery in Chang'an. One of her poems, "Going to Visit Refining Master Zhao but Not Finding Her at Home," describes an unsuccessful visit to a fellow Daoist (most likely a nun):

Where has she gone with her fellow immortals,
Leaving her servant girl alone at home?
On her warm stove, medicines are still simmering,
And in an adjoining courtyard tea is being brewed.
The painted walls remain dark despite the lamp's glow,
The poles hung with pennants throw slanting shadows.

I leave my regards and just as I turn around:
A few blossoming branches beyond the wall.

Yu Xuanji's life at the convent was by no means a cloistered one. In fact, she maintained warm contacts with many literary gentlemen, one of whom was the famous poet Wen Tingyun (812–870; style name Feiqing), known for his suggestive lyrical descriptions of the ennui and despair of abandoned women. Wen was also a frequent visitor in the red-light districts, and his official career suffered after he lost a few teeth in a bar-room brawl. In the following poem addressed to Wen, Yu Xuanji compares him to the third-century eccentric Xi Kang:

By the stones of the stairs, the crowded crickets chirp,
On the trees in the courtyard, the misty dew is clear.
Under the light of the moon, music from nearby is heard,
As seen from my room, the distant mountains are bright.
A chilly breeze settles on the pearly mat,
The entrusted regret rises from the jade zither.
If you, my Xi Kang, are too lazy to drop me a note,
What else is there that will assuage my autumn feelings?

While Tang dynasty sources do not provide any further details on the relationship of Yu Xuanji and Wen Tingyun, Ming dynasty drama would eventually turn them into a loving couple.

The circumstances of Yu Xuanji's death are described by Huangfu Mei in his *Minor Writings from Shanshui* (*Shanshui xiaodu*). Huangfu Mei wrote this collection of anecdotes in the early years of the tenth century; they represent an elderly man's reminiscences of more than a quarter of a century earlier:

The style name of Yu Xuanji, a Daoist nun in the Xianyi Convent of the Western Capital [Chang'an], was Youwei and she was the daughter of a commoner family in Chang'an. Not only was her beauty earth-shattering, but her intellectual capacities were also extraordinary. She loved to read books and compose texts, and devoted herself in particular to the writing of poetry. By the age of sixteen, her mind was focused on "the pure and empty," and in the early years of the reign period Full Communication [Xiantong, 860–873] she donned the capeline and stole [of a Daoist nun] at the Xianyi Convent. Her fine verses of appreciation and enjoyment of breeze and moonlight often circulated among the forest of gentlemen.

However, possessed as she was of the weak nature of a fragrant orchid, she was incapable of preserving her honor. She allowed herself to accept the advances of powerful bosses, and accompanied them on their excursions and elsewhere. All the men about town vied with each other to appear at their finest in the hopes of starting an affair with her. Occasionally they would come to visit her, bringing wine with them, and she would strum the zither and recite poetry, interspersing this with risqué banter. Those with insufficient learning would feel very much out of place. Her poems included lines such as the following:

Gauze pathways: the spring outlook is distant,
Jade zither-studs: autumnal feelings in profusion.

And:

Filled with devotion, unable to speak,
Red tears course down my cheeks.

And:

Burning incense, I ascend the jade platform,
Grasping my tablet, I bow to the golden gate.

And:

Cloud emotions, thick and heavy—it could not be a dream:
Fairy face, forever fragrant—far more lovely than a flower!

These several couplets were her finest.

Her servant girl, Lüqiao, was also very clever and beautiful. One day, when Xuanji had been invited by the nuns of the adjoining courtyard [in the convent], she left Lüqiao with the following instructions: "Don't go out, and if a guest should show up, just tell him that I am at such-and-such a place." Xuanji was kept longer than expected by her girlfriends and did not return to her own courtyard until evening. Lüqiao opened the gate for her, saying: "Just a moment ago such-and-such a guest showed up. When he heard that you were not in, he went away without dismounting from his horse." Now, although this guest was an old patron of hers, Xuanji suspected Lüqiao of having an affair with him.

That night she lit a lamp and, after locking the door, ordered Lüqiao to come into her bedroom so as to question her. Lüqiao said: "During all the years that I have been your servant, I have truly behaved myself properly and have never committed a transgression of the sort that would offend you. Moreover, when

that guest arrived, I kept the door locked, and it was from behind the door that I informed him that you were not at home. He then went away without saying a word, spurring on his horse. You talk about love—but it has been years since I have harbored that kind of feeling in my heart! Mistress, please do not doubt me!” But Xuanji only grew more enraged. Stripping her servant naked, she lashed her hundreds of times with a cane. But Lūqiao continued to protest her innocence. She then collapsed to the ground, and requesting a cup of water, she poured it out on the ground saying: “You wish to pursue the Way of Longevity of the Three Purities,³⁰ but are incapable of denying yourself the pleasures of removing your skirts and sharing the couch. But because of your inveterate suspicion you falsely accuse me, who am chaste and correct! It turns out that I will be dying a cruel death under your brutal hands. If there is no Heaven, I will have nowhere to lodge my complaint. But if there is, no one will be able to thwart my stubborn soul! I swear I will not wriggle about like a worm in deepest darkness and allow you to indulge in your lasciviousness!” As soon as she had spoken these words, she passed away right there on the spot. Xuanji was filled with fear and buried her in a hole that she dug in her backyard, thinking that no one would find out. This took place in the First Month of spring in the ninth year of Full Communication [868].

Whenever someone would ask after Lūqiao, Xuanji would say: “She ran away after the spring rains cleared!” Once a guest who had been dining in Xuanji’s room went out into her backyard to urinate. On the spot where Xuanji had buried Lūqiao, he noticed quite a number of green flies, which, when he chased them away, only came back again. When he looked more carefully, he noticed not only traces of what appeared to be blood, but a rancid smell as well. After the guest had left, in confidence he told his servant what he had seen. The servant, once he got home, told it in turn to his elder brother. Now this elder brother was a patrolman. He had once asked Xuanji for money, but she had ignored him, and so he harbored a grudge against her. When he heard this story, he immediately went to the convent gate to spy on her. When he overheard people speculating as to why they hadn’t seen Lūqiao coming in and out, the patrolman called together some additional police officers, and with spades in their hands they rushed into Xuanji’s courtyard. When they dug Lūqiao up, they found that her face looked just as it had when she was alive.

The policemen arrested Xuanji, and when she was questioned by the clerks of Chang’an prefecture, she confessed. Many of the gentlemen at court tried to intervene on her behalf but the prefecture submitted her name to the emperor

30. The Three Purities are the highest divinities in the Daoist pantheon.

in a memorial and when autumn came around, she was, in fact, executed. While in prison, she also wrote poems, the most beautiful couplets of which are the following:

Easy it is to find a priceless treasure,
Difficult it is to find a steadfast lover.

And:

A full moon shines through the dark crack,
A clear breeze blows open my short jacket.

Readers sympathetic to Yu Xuanji have questioned whether she was really a murderer, although they usually accept the fact that she was condemned to death and executed. Some later versions of her life, however, simply ignore the unfortunate incident of her execution altogether. For instance, Xin Wenfang, in the short notice devoted to Yu Xuanji in his influential *Biographies of Tang Poets* (*Tang caizi zhuan*) of 1304, suggests that Yu Xuanji lived a life of utmost propriety devoted to religious pursuits, and does not say a single word about her ignominious death. Readers of the Judge Dee novels by the Dutch diplomat and sinologist Robert Hans van Gulik will find that in *Poets and Murder* (1968), the last of his many novels, Yu Xuanji served as the model for the versifying nun Yulan.

Some fifty poems by Yu Xuanji have come down to us today. She may well have been a less accomplished versifier than Xue Tao, and some of her poems are simply clumsy, but these defects are compensated for by poems such as the following that are distinguished by such things as an individual voice, a felicitous image, or an expression of urgent desire:

Feelings in the Last Month of Spring; Sent to a Friend

The chatter of orioles startles me from my dream,
And a light makeup disguises the traces of tears.
Above the dark bamboo, a thin new moon,
On the quiet river, a heavy evening mist.
With moistened beaks, the swallows carry loam,
With perfumed beards, the bees collect their honey.
Alone in love, my longing is without end—
My poem intoned, the pine branches hang low.

On the Assigned Topic of Willows by the River

Their verdant color conjoins with the grassy bank,
 Their misty forms enter into the distant towers.
 Their shadows spread out over the river's face,
 And their floss falls down upon the angler's head.
 Their old roots conceal the holes where fishes hide,
 Their low branches snare the boats of merchants.
 In desolate nights of sighing wind and rain
 They startle me from my dreams, adding to my sorrows.

Early Autumn

Tender chrysanthemums carry new colors,
 As distant mountains idle in the evening mists.
 A cool breeze startles the green trees,
 And pure rhymes enter the red strings:
 The longing wife: brocade on the loom,
 The man on campaign: sky beyond the border.
 Geese fly overhead, fish swim in the water,
 But how could they ever carry any letter?

Selling Wilted Peonies

Facing the wind they evoke a sigh as their petals continue to fall,
 Their fragrance fades and dissolves as yet another spring goes by.
 It must be because of their high price that no one shows interest,
 And because of their extreme fragrance butterflies cannot come near.
 Their red flowers are fit to be grown only inside the palace,
 How could their green leaves bear to be tainted by dew and dust?
 But when their roots will have been transplanted to the Imperial Park,
 You, my prince, will then regret that you can no longer buy them!

One may safely assume that in "Selling Wilted Peonies," Yu Xuanji is recommending herself to an undecided patron and urging him to take action before she is snatched away into the Inner Palace as had so many other literary women before her. This poem betrays a strong self-consciousness, which we also encounter in Xuanji's quatrain entitled "During a Visit to the Southern Tower of the Veneration of Truth Monastery I Saw the New Examination Graduates Writing Their Names on

the Wall.” This last poem is probably the only one from this period in which a woman so nakedly voices her dissatisfaction at the limitations imposed upon her by her gender:

Cloudy peaks fill one’s eyes under a clear spring sky:
Clearly legible “silver hooks” emerge from their fingers.³¹
Oh how I hate this gauze gown for hiding my verses!
To no avail I look up with envy at the names on the list.

It would not be surprising if Yu Xuanji often found herself consumed by a powerless rage. To men, literary talents brought status and riches when they passed the state exams. A woman who craved recognition for her literary talent was not only excluded from taking the examinations, but her active participation in literary exchange automatically turned her into a public woman.

31. “Silver hooks” refers to beautifully written Chinese characters. The simile was first used by the Tang poet Bai Juyi.