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READINGS OF CHINESE POET XUE TAO

A Thesis Presented

by

LU YU

Submitted to the Graduate School of the

University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2010

Asian Languages and Literatures

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READINGS OF CHINESE POET XUE TAO

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By

LU YU

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am thankful to all the professors who lent a hand to me on my thesis. I would like to thank my committee chair, Professor David Schneider. He was so kind to help me from the topic of the thesis, the content, to every detail, the format and so on. He was so patient and thoughtful to give me suggestions both to my study and my career. Thanks are also due to the members of my committee, Professor Suet Ying Chiu and Professor Donald E. Gjertson, who were always willing to answer my questions and give me helpful comments. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Marc Cameron who helped me a lot in improving my English and polishing the language of my thesis.

ABSTRACT

READINGS OF CHINESE POET XUE TAO

SEPTEMBER 2010

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Directed by: Professor David Schneider, Elena Suet-Ying Chiu, Donald E. Gjertson

Xue Tao was one of the Tang Dynasty's best-known female poets. Her poems are beautiful and of her own style, but there have only been a few of studies on them. This study comprises nine close readings of her thirteen poems most of which can be defined as *yongwu* poems, as well as a conclusion which summarizes the main characteristics in these poems. The methodology of this research is based on the theory of New Criticism and combined with sinology. Every poem is studied as an independent entity, but its allusions and images are examined in the history of Chinese poetry. This study attempts to deepen the study of Xue Tao's poetry and readers' understanding of it.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Xue Tao 薛濤 (770-832), courtesy name Hongdu 洪度, was one of the Tang Dynasty's best-known female poets. She was the daughter of a minor government official, Xue Yun 薛鄖. Her father was sent to Chengdu when Xue Tao was a child, or perhaps before her birth. She received some literary education from him. Her father's death most likely left her and her mother very poor; as a result, Xue was registered as a courtesan and entertainer in Chengdu. Even so she still had the opportunity to learn how to make poems and then became well known for her poetic talent. Later, Wei Gao 韋臯 (745-805), the military governor of Xichuan Circuit, made her his official hostess. From that moment on, she got many opportunities to meet many famous poets of that time. The most famous among them was the poet Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831). She exchanged poems with many poets and writers. When she was old, Xue lived independently in a house outside the city.

It is said that more than four hundred and fifty poems by Xue Tao were gathered in her anthology—*Jin jiang ji* 錦江集 or *The Brocade River Collection*. However, only about ninety of her poems are preserved now. They are beautiful and in her own style, but there have only been a few studies on her and her poetry. In this thesis, I attempt to deepen the study of Xue Tao's poetry.

The main part of the research is a series of close readings of selected poems by Xue Tao, most from the *yongwu* 詠物 poems which are also called poems on objects. Most of her poems are echoing other people or being written for a certain practical purpose because

of her lower social status as a prostitute. In most cases, however, the *yongwu* poems are freestanding works of art.

My methodology in the research is based on the theory of New Criticism. M. H. Abrams points out that New Criticism theory "came to be applied to a theory and practice in American literary criticism until late in the 1960s. It opposed the prevailing interest in the biographies of authors, the social context of literature, and literary history by insisting that the proper concern of literary criticism is with a detailed consideration of the work itself as an independent entity."[1] Abrams continues on to list four points of view which are commonly shared among the New Critics. First, a poem should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient verbal object. Second, the principles of the New Criticism are basically verbal. Third, the distinctive procedure of a New Critic is explication, or close reading: the detailed analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities of the verbal and figurative components within a work. Fourth, the distinction between literary genres, although acknowledged, does not play an essential role in the New Criticism.[2] My primary method of analysis will be close reading; to reiterate the above, close reading is the investigation of the specific strength of a literary work in as many of its details as possible, as well the development of an understanding of how a text works, of how it creates its effects on even the most minute level. In accordance with these principles, I focus my readings on certain categories, such as settings, symbols, metaphors, point of view, tone, etc.

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[1] Abrams, M. H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p. 180.
[2] Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 181.

Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* is an exercise in the close readings of all Shakespeare's sonnets and serves the model of my study. Eloquently likening a body of text to the stage, Vendler is of the belief that the true "actors" in lyric are words, and the drama of any lyric is constituted by the successive entrances of new sets of words, or new stylistic arrangements—grammatical, syntactical, phonetic.[3] She provides interpretations of the sonnets that are based on clear textual evidence derived from close reading rather than through a dominant theoretical perspective. Taking Vendler's approach as precedent, I conduct my analysis of a selection of Xue Tao's works in a similar fashion.

Moreover, the methodology of New Criticism is adjusted and combined with sinology. While introducing Tang poetry, William H. Nienhauser notes that "the adoption in the late seventh century of a unified examination system that required the composition of *fu* and *shih* and considerably expanded the 'memorization corpus' to include the *Wen-hsüan* and selected pre-Ch'in classics had a major impact on Chinese poetry…it specified in detail the 'memorization corpus.'…The T'ang author thus knew exactly what he expected his audience to know of earlier literature."[4] So in Tang Dynasty, the use of allusions in poetry was already very popular. Without the knowledge of allusions, readers may misunderstand the meaning of a poem. That is to say, when I do close reading to Xue Tao's poems, I have to use sinological knowledge to translate, explain, and analyze them.

By the methodology of close reading and sinology, I attempt to establish my understanding of Xue Tao's poems. This methodology differs greatly from the former

[3] Vendler, Helen, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p3.
[4] Nienhauser, Jr., William H., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 69.

studies on Xue Tao and her poetry. There have only been a few of them. One of these studies is *The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life and Works of A Mid-Tang Woman*[5], the focus of which is the translation and explication of the ninety extant poems that may reasonably be ascribed to Xue Tao. It also gives a brief introduction to Xue Tao's life and to the main critical responses to her work. The writer of this study concludes in the end that Xue was "a self-aware, articulate member"[6] of the literary community of Mid-Tang China. *Xue Tao Shi Jian* 薛濤詩箋[7] is another significant study and a useful reference book. It contains textual research on Xue Tao's poems and provides necessary explanatory notes to almost all the poems listed. It also serves as a collection of research data related to her. My own research does not duplicate these studies, but instead tries to add to our understandings of Xue Tao's poem by providing more analysis.

[5] Larsen, Jeanne Louise, "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life And Works of A Mid-Tang Woman" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1983).
[6] "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life And Works of A Mid-Tang Woman," p. 497.
[7] Zhang, Pengzhou 張篷舟 ed., *Xue Tao Shi Jian* 薛濤詩箋 (Beijing: Ren min wen xue chu ban she, 1983).

CHAPTER II

READINGS OF SELECTED POEMS WRITTEN BY XUE TAO

Close reading 1

酬人雨後翫竹

南天春雨時，那鑒雪霜姿。衆類亦云茂，虛心寧自持。

多留晉賢醉，早伴舜妃悲。晚歲君能賞，蒼蒼勁節奇。

A. Reply to someone's "Amusing ourselves among the bamboo trees after a rain"

In the southern sky it is the time of spring rains.

Mirrored there is the appearance of snow and frost.

All the other kinds of plants are indeed flourishing.

Their empty hearts would rather support themselves.

They often caused to linger the drunken wise men of the Jin Dynasty,

And earlier were the companion of the grief of Shun's Concubines.

At the end of a year, you, sir, can appreciate

Their gray and vigorous joints.

In Xue Tao's poem "Reply to Someone's 'Amusing ourselves Among the Bamboo Trees After a Rain'", she shows the beauty of being older, that is to say when a woman is getting older, she can still be beautiful in a way that differs from young women. While this idea may not appear altogether obvious, one can determine it by close reading.

At first glance, the poem fits the *yongwu* category in the way in which it describes the beauty of a bamboo forest. The trees have just survived a cold winter. With empty hearts,

they can still support themselves. They once accompanied wise men of the past. At the end of the year, they still have vigorous joints. It seems at first that the only purpose of this poem is to praise this particular bamboo grove. However, this is a poem responding to another poem by someone else, most likely a male writer, considering that Xue Tao was a prostitute.[8] So her poem could be explained as some words she wants to say to him. Then is all what she wants to say only a praise of bamboo? The answer is most likely no. She has to say something about them, their relationship, or the people around them.

Then what does Xue Tao want to say to him in this poem? In the seventh line, she says that "you, sir, can appreciate" bamboo at the end of the year. Why is it not "we", but "you"? If the two of them were there together, enjoying the scene of a bamboo grove after a rain, then why does Xue Tao not include herself? I think that she may include herself in the scene, not as a subject who enjoys the bamboo, but as an object which is enjoyed like bamboo. Or we can say that Xue Tao compared herself with bamboo. To read the poem in this way, the readers can find more and richer meaning behind the lines.

What kind of characteristics does the bamboo have? The key to this lies in the seventh line as well. It is at the end of a year, when people can appreciate their gray and vigorous joints. There is an analogy between the end of the year for bamboo and the later years of human life. How does a woman like Xue Tao look in her later years? She may have gray hair, but still possesses strong soul much the same as bamboo. If we look back to the beginning of the poem, then we can find more clues. In the spring, a collection of water reflects bamboo's appearance of snow and frost. This is definitely not a description of

[8] As I conduct close readings of Xue Tao's works, her status as a prostitute will not be taken into consideration.

young bamboo growing in this spring. They have survived the difficulties of last winter and come to a new year with a mark of their suffering. Xue Tao herself, then, just like those bamboo trees, has experienced difficulties and survived. There are also traces of age on her face. We can see from these two couplets that bamboo and Xue Tao are indeed comparable.

In the second and third couplets, we can find more merit of bamboo, or an older woman—Xue Tao. The second couplet compares bamboo with the other plants. It is true that the other plants are young and flourishing, but bamboo trees that remain from the prior year also have their own merit. Inside they are empty, but they are able to support themselves. As an older woman, in appearance her beauty is different from those young girls; however, in her heart she is tougher and firmer. Also, she has experienced a lot, just as the description in the third couplet: she once accompanied well-known talented poets who are similar to the seven sages in the Jin Dynasty; she was a companion of some sincere friends in much the same way that bamboo accompanied Shun's concubines. Her strong will and rich experiences make her beautiful. Just as snowy and frosty bamboo trees are not the same as flourishing plants, Xue Tao's outward appearance is still attractive, but different from the young women. And her heart or spirit is much more beautiful than theirs. That is why even in her later years she can still be an object to be appreciated.

As viewed from this perspective, we can say that the theme of the poem is the beauty of an older woman—Xue Tao herself. Usually, Xue Tao does not show her gender in poems, but in this one we can find some female voice. It is because that she places herself in a position of being appreciated and enjoyed. Furthermore, she is conscious that this

appreciation comes first to her appearance. Different from male poets such as Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), she does not show any ambition except being appreciated. This is more like a female voice, worrying about being older and uncomely, not about success in the world.

Xue Tao uses a symbol—bamboo—to refer to virtues of a woman. Her use of this symbol is both traditional and original. On the one hand, the image of bamboo in the poem is traditional. Bamboo has a long history as an image in Chinese literature and had been personalized for a long time. In *Shi Jing* 詩經, or *The Book of Songs*, there are already several poems with descriptions of bamboo. For example, the poet of "Little Bay of the *Qi* 淇奥" in "Airs of Wei 衛風"[9] uses bamboo as an inspiration and a metaphor of *junzi* 君子 or gentleman. Celebrated Tang poet Bai Juyi summed up in "Growing Bamboo"[10] the merits of bamboo as resolute, honorable, modest, and chaste. Xue Tao followed her contemporary and used the image of bamboo in a similar way as Bai Juyi did. Bamboo trees in her poem are resolute because they survive the winter and are able to support itself with an empty heart.

Furthermore, she uses two literary allusions which make the traditional image of bamboo even stronger. One is the "wise men in the Jin Dynasty" in the fifth line, which refers to Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove 竹林七賢. These seven scholars were well-known as Taoist writers and musicians in the 3rd century. They are said to have gathered in a bamboo grove near Luoyang, drinking, playing music, and trying to escape from the

[9] Waley, Arthur, *The Book of Songs* (New York : Grove Press, 1996), p.46.
[10] Zhu, Jincheng 朱金城 ed., *Bai Juyi Ji Jian Jiao* 白居易集箋校 (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1988).

corrupted political life in court. For them, bamboo symbolizes the honor and integrity of their spirits. Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263) is one of the most famous poets among them, and he wrote that "The lofty bamboo secludes itself in the south of the mountain."[11] Here, bamboo is a metaphor for reclusion, and tall and beautiful bamboo trees are similar to honorable recluses, hiding on the mountain. The other allusion is "the grief of Shun's concubines". King Shun 舜 died suddenly in a trip to Cangwu 蒼梧. When his two concubines, Ehuang 娥皇 and Nüying 女英, heard of the bad news, they went immediately to the south for their husband. They were so sad that their tears dropped onto surrounding bamboo and stained them forever.[12] Bamboo in this legend symbolizes the resoluteness and integrity of their love to King Shun. From these two allusions, we can see that the image of bamboo in Xue Tao's poem had already existed in Chinese culture before she wrote the poem.

On the other hand, however, Xue Tao uses the image of bamboo in this poem in a new way. She draws an analogy between bamboo and a woman—herself, which can rarely be seen in literary tradition. In *Shi Jing*, bamboo symbolizes *junzi* which means gentleman. Even in the allusion of stained bamboo, it only refers to the resoluteness and integrity of love, not the two women themselves. But in Xue Tao's poetic world, bamboo becomes comparable to a tough and beautiful older lady. People can enjoy its graceful gesture and its admirable nature.

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[11] Hartill, Graham trans., *The Poems of Ruan Ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), p.91. The original text is '脩竹隱山陰.'

[12] *Bo Wu Zhi* 博物志 reads as follows: Yao has two daughters who are two concubines of Shun. Thay are both called Xiang Fu Ren. They cry at the death of Shun, and their tears dropped onto bamboos surrounded and stained them forever. Shi, Zhongwen 史仲文 ed., *Zhongguo Wen Yan Xiao Shuo* 中國文言小説 (Beijing: Beijing chu ban she, 2000), p.370.

Larsen ascribes Xue Tao to "the literary community of Mid-*Tang* China"[13], which is gender-free. She also concludes that "the number of poems that one would absolutely say must have been written by a woman is few."[14] But this poem can be a very good example with a female tone. As mentioned before, Xue Tao shows no ambition of being successful in the court, but cares about her appearance, young or old, beautiful or uncomely. This differentiates the poem from those written by men. Furthermore, there are other images which also contribute to the female tone in the poem. For example, there is a word "*jian* 鑒" in the second line, which means to reflect, describing a scene of bamboo trees and their reflection in a collection of water. This may remind readers of boudoir poetry in which the mirror is a very important image.[15] The poet treats bamboo trees as a woman who is looking into the mirror—a collection of water on the ground. In first couplet, Xue Tao does not describe the bamboo directly, but describes their reflection in the water. Since bamboo implies Xue Tao herself, it seems that while looking at the bamboo in the water, she is also looking into a mirror at herself. While praising the bamboo, she is also self-examining and self-evaluating. This is a special perspective, differentiating her poem from male poems.

Another example is the word "*liu* 留", or "to make linger", in the fifth line. The line describes that the beauty of bamboo makes linger the wise men in the Jin Dynasty. Why is it "to make linger" instead of "to invite"? One reasonable explanation is that Xue Tao, as a woman, especially a prostitute, cannot invite male scholars to do anything or take the

[13] Larsen, "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life And Works of A Mid-Tang Woman", p.497.
[14] Larsen, "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life And Works of A Mid-Tang Woman", p.500.
[15] Birrell points out that a palatial boudoir for a woman has 'ivory bed, silk bedcurtains, bronze lamps, and jade mirrorstand'. Birrell, Anne, *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p.17.

initiative in making acquaintances. But her beauty will make men come to her and linger with her, just as bamboo did in the Jin Dynasty. Both "*jian*" and "*liu*" are not very conspicuous in the poem, but to some degree, they can prove that Xue Tao cannot avoid her female perspective in the poem. Larsen overlooks many of these. She comments that "This, then, is the bamboo celebrated in this *yongwu* poem," and said with great uncertainty that "perhaps she also tells us what she values in herself."[16] Obviously, Xue Tao is telling us her value. She is always aware of her gender in the poem.

The feminine voice is clearer when the poem is compared to the essay "Growing Bamboo" written by Bai Juyi. Bai and Xue are contemporaries, and they knew each other[17] because of their common friends—Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831). In "Growing Bamboo," the bamboo is used as a model for *junzi* to learn from. Its firm body is similar to resoluteness of *junzi*, its straight body to honesty, its hollow stalk to modesty, and joints to integrity. A *Junzi* grows bamboo because bamboo can always remind him of these virtues and make him cultivate his moral character. At the end of the essay, Bai Juyi compares bamboos with wise men: bamboos can only be separated from other species by people, just as wise men can only be separated from average people by those—or emperors—who are able to use people in a right way. Obviously, the metaphor of bamboo here is used by men, aware of their social role, responsibility, and ideals. However, in Xue Tao's "Reply to Someone's 'Amusing ourselves among the Bamboo Trees After a Rain'", readers cannot find the same thing at all. Although bamboo still represents her strong will, rich

[16] Larsen, "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life And Works of A Mid-Tang Woman", p.178.
[17] Bai Juyi wrote a poem called 'To Xue Tao 與薛濤'. It reads as follows: 蛾眉山勢接雲霓，欲逐劉郎此路迷。若似剡中容易到，春風猶隔武陵溪. Zhang Pengzhou 張篷舟, *Xue Tao Shi Jian* 薛濤詩箋 (Beijing: Ren min wen xue chu ban she, 1983), p.51. It is hard to prove that they are friends, but according to this poem, at least Bai Juyi knew Xue Tao.

experiences and knowledge, it is not a model for *junzi* to learn from, but for them to appreciate. There is no need for bamboo to be separated from other species by people, because its appearance automatically tells itself from other flourishing plants. Xue Tao pays attention to her appearance after getting older, and cares about how others will look at her. All of these are very different from Bai Juyi, and make her poem different from those by men.

There are two lines in this poem. The visible line is the praise of bamboos, and the invisible one is the description of the poet herself. The poem not only shows Xue Tao's respect to and pride in herself, but also reveals her appreciation and admiration of the poet who wrote "Amusing Ourselves Among the Bamboo Trees After a Rain". It is in springtime when everything is flourishing, but this poet can still appreciate the appearance of bamboo with snow and frost and the gray joints. Or we can say, even though there are a great number of young, beautiful women, this poet can still appreciate Xue Tao's beautiful appearance and her beautiful inner qualities as being different from young women. How can Xue Tao not feel admiration to such a true friend? For her, this poet is a true *junzi*.

Although the poem is short and simple, the meaning in it is rich. This contrast shows that Xue Tao is a master of Chinese language. She is good at taking advantage of traditional symbols to make her own words and is aware of her gender in the poem. The poem is very rich in implication.

Close Reading 2

風

獵蕙微風遠，飄弦唳一聲。林梢明淅瀝，松徑夜淒清。

B. Wind

Passing through a field of fragrant orchids, the gentle breeze travels into the distance.

Strumming the strings, it cries once.

Under the light of the moon, the top of the woods rustle,

And at night a path among the pines is desolate and sad.

In the *yongwu* poem “Wind”, Xue Tao creates an atmosphere of seclusion. This poem describes not only the wind but also the place where she sees and feels the wind. The atmosphere is established through the description of the circumstance.

It is a peaceful place in the poem where only the breeze comes and goes. In the first line, the breeze is mentioned. It passes through fragrant orchids, goes along with the sound of the *qin*, and stops in the trees and pines. Nothing there is in a rush or ambitious. They are all natural things, which together compose several peaceful pictures.

The place the poem describes is a secluded wood. We may conclude from the second line and the fourth line that someone or the poet is there. It is this person, who strums the string and makes it sing, or the *qin* belongs to this person and it is the wind playing it. Also, this person comes here through a path among the pines. However, except these clues we cannot see anything else alive but plants, orchids, trees, and pines. At that moment, the wind plays in the wood, from the top to the bottom. It is definitely a place far away from the temporal world.

That is a quiet place. We can only hear the sound of the string and that of the leaves blown by wind. When can the sound of leaves be heard? Only when there is no other sound or voice, not even a bird or a small animal there. Also, the cry of the string makes a sharp contrast to the quietness in the wood. The same as a little light makes the dark night even darker, as one happy moment makes a life of misery more pathetic, the cry of the string can only make the quiet wood more quiet. Only a secluded place can be so quiet.

The color in this poem is dark and cold. The orchid is a green plant, whose flowers are yellowish green. The top of the trees and the pines are also green and the pines are especially dark at night. Even though there is moonlight on the top of the wood, it will not be very bright. Furthermore, the moonlight will make readers think of the dark sky at night. In an unsecluded place, people always use light at night and it will not be so dark. As a result, the dark, cold colors in the poem echo the seclusion of the circumstance.

Thus, the place described in the “Wind” is peaceful, quiet, and secluded with dark, cold color. But what was the feeling of the poet when she was writing this poem? What was her purpose to write it? The key word is ‘凄清’. If the scene is so peaceful and quite, then why is the path among the pines desolate and sad? A path does not have any feeling, so it must be the poet using her emotional response to project feelings onto the path. Her emotional tone is that of worry and desolation. This can be proved from several perspectives.

First, the description of gloom and cold colors in the scene is a good example. In literature, description of bright colors may contribute to a mood of happiness, while that

of cold colors contributing to a mood of sorrow or horror. The cold colors in the poem echoes the desolation of the path in the pines.

Second, why does the poet go out and walk in the wood on such a night? If she feels comfortable and peaceful, then she will fall asleep. Only when people feel worried or uncomfortable will they get up and take a walk. This poem reminds me a famous essay written by Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898 – 1948) in 1927, which is called 'The Lotus Pool By Moonlight 荷塘月色'. In this essay, the writer describes the beautiful scene of a lotus pool in the moonlight when he feels restless on a summer night.[18] The picture in this essay is also peaceful and a kind of secluded, just as the one described in Xue Tao's poem.

Third, the symbols in poem also reveals poet's feeling. '蕙' in the first line means a sort of fragrant orchid. It refers to good and wise men in *The Songs of The South* (*Chu Ci*, 楚辞), but is always hurt or discriminated against by wild grass which refers to small and mean men.[19] As a result, the fragrant orchid in the poem may show that the poet herself is like the fragrant orchid, good and wise, but she is suffering from mean people. This can explain why she is so unhappy. '松', which means the pine, refers to the same thing in *The Songs of The South*, and in this poem emphasizes that the circumstance of the poet is also pure and perfect, even though she is exiled to such a secluded place, just as Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340 BC – 278 BC) was. Another symbol is *qin* which often appears in poems written by a recluse. For example, Tao Qian 陶潛 (365-427), a well-known recluse and

[18] Zhu, Ziqing, *He Tang Yue Se* (Hongkong: Shanghai shu ju, 1964), p.29 .
[19] You, Guo'en 游國恩, *Chu Ci Lun Wen Ji* 楚辭論文集 (Hongkong: Wen chang shu ju, 1955), p205.

poet, wrote in his "*He Guo Zhubu er shou* 和郭主簿二首" or "Matching a Poem by Secretary Guo" that "I keep alone and idle time away by reading books and playing the zither (*qin*) all day."[20] For a recluse, *qin* symbolizes virtuousness and superiority to mundane world. Xue Tao in the secluded wood with a *qin* can be seen as a recluse, and the *qin* can to some degree prove her pure spirit.

From these three points, we can conclude that Xue Tao's emotional tone in the poem is that of worry and desolation. The way she composes the poem may remind readers some other famous poets, such as Wang Wei 王維 (701-761), Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689-740), etc. They have many poems describing the recluse's life in the wood. For example, Wang Wei wrote "*Chou Zhang Shaofu* 酬張少府" or "An Answer to Assistant Magistrate Chang" as following

晚年惟好靜，萬事不關心。自顧無長策，空知返舊林。

松風吹解帶，山月照彈琴。君問窮通理，漁歌入浦深。

In the sunset years of my life, all I desire is quietude;

The ten thousand affairs of this world no longer involve my heart.

As to my future? I have no better plan

Than to retreat to my old forest.

There the pine wind will loosen my girdle

And the mountain moon will smile on me as I pluck my lute.

Sir, do you ask the principle behind success and failure?

[20] Wang, Rongpei, 汪榕培 and Xiong Zhiqi 熊治祁 trans., *The Complete Works of Tao Yuanming* 陶淵明集 (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2003), p.19.

Listen to the fisherman's song drifting up from the deep river estuary.[21]

In the third couplet, there are wind, pines, moonlight, and *qin* or lute, most of the key symbols in the "Wind". Xue Tao follows their poetic tradition, and so the poem holds a painting within them. But the emotion in the poem is closer to Qu Yuan, who is exiled. She combines these two traditions and makes her own poem.

This is also a poem of boudoir lament. Although the picture in the poem is that of the outdoors, she is most likely in a boudoir or at the very least in a garden outside of the boudoir. There are two elements within the text which can substantiate this. First, there is a *qin* close to her. She uses "*li* 唳" or "to cry" to describe the sound of *qin*. This implies that the *qin*'s sound is loud and sharp. If it is heard from a long distance, then it will not be so abrupt. Also, a *qin* is rather large and heavy and is not feasibly carried about everywhere; therefore, it must be placed somewhere in a room. Second, all that we are given to see in the poem are located not too far away from the speaker. Raising her head, she sees the top of the woods; looking further, she sees a path gradually disappearing in the darkness, with only the wind traveling off to the distance. As it is quite late at night, Xue Tao may not be able to comfortably go further into the wild woods. As such, wandering instead in the garden appears to be more appropriate. She in actuality may not leave her boudoir at all, since she neglects the feeling of wind stirring against her body in the poem. In either of the above situations, it can be considered as a poem of boudoir lament.

[21] Chang, Yin-nan and Walmsley, Lewis C. trans., *Poems by Wang Wei* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1958), p.100.

With the characteristics of sleepless night and boudoir lament, “Wind” is quite different from love poems which have the same characteristics. Although a lament for love is one of the possible way of reading “Wind”, Xue Tao never makes it clear in the poem. Her allusions to orchid, *qin*, and pine make the theme closer to the lament of a banished scholar or a recluse.

Close Reading 3

月

魄依鉤樣小，扇逐漢機團。細影將圓質，人間幾處看。

C. Moon

The glint of moonlight is dim while the shape of the hook is small.

A fan that pursues the Han loom is round.

The slender image is going to be roundness of its nature again.

How many places on earth can such a thing be seen?

The poem can be explained and translated more than one way. The four-line-poem creates several different beautiful images for readers to enjoy, and arouses readers’ several feelings.

The poem can be describing a picture with a woman, most likely the poet herself, in it. The second line can be explained as a beautiful woman, holding a fan, being compared with the moon. The fan in her hand, from a certain aspect, is approaching the moon like pursuing it. The fan is round, and so is the moon. However, the moon now is slender

although it is going to return to the roundness of its nature. In such a picture, the woman or the poet is there enjoying the moon, playing with the moon. She also thinks about who else on earth shares this beautiful scene with her, or who else have the chance to enjoy such a beautiful scene.

This poem can also be describing a picture without any person in it. It is a cloud in the sky, which has a shape of a fan. The cloud is pursuing the round moon, covering most of it and making it slender. However, the moon's nature is roundness. As the cloud is moving, its nature is going to be revealed. Then the poet poses a question to herself or the readers: how many places on earth can such a thing be seen? It looks like that there is no person in the picture, only the lonely moon surrounded and covered by the clouds. But when it comes to the last sentence, the voice of the viewer of the scene, i.e. the author, comes out.

The second line is the key to make two different pictures, but the last line is more important to the multiple explanations of this poem. It can be a rhetorical question, emphasizing the beauty of the moon. It is so beautiful that only the poet or all the people there with the poet are very lucky to be there enjoying it. Nobody else on earth is able to watch such a scene. In this sense, this is a simple *yongwu* poem.

The second explanation is that it is a question for her lover, who is probably in a place far away from her. This explanation quite fits the picture with a woman in it and also echoes the allusion of the round fan which originates from a poem of Ban Jieyu 班婕妤 (48 – 6 BC). Ban was a concubine of Emperor Cheng in Han Dynasty. She was also well-known as a great scholar, able to recite and write poems. After Emperor Cheng took a liking to

the dancing girl Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (? - 1 BC) and her sister, Ban fell into disfavor and chose to become a lady in waiting to the Empress Dowager, instead of remaining consort to the Emperor. She once wrote the following poem.

怨詩

新裂齊紈素，鮮潔如霜雪。裁為合歡扇，團團似明月。

出入君懷袖，動搖微風發。常恐秋節至，涼飈奪炎熱。

棄捐莢笏中，恩情中道絕。

Song of Resentment

Newly cut white silk from Qi,

Glistening and pure as frost and snow:

Fashioned into a fan of "conjoined bliss,"

Round, round as the bright moon.

It goes in and out of my lord's breast and sleeve;

Waved, it stirs a gentle breeze.

But I always fear autumn's coming,

When chilling winds dispel blazing heat.

Then it will be thrown into a box,

And his love will be cut off midcourse.[22]

In this poem, Ban compares herself to an autumn fan discarded after the summer heat. According to this poem, we can know that "the Han loom" pursued by a fan in Xue's poem means the moon. Furthermore, we may infer that there is a similar emotion in the

[22] Chang, Kang-i Sun and Saussy, Haun, *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.18.

“Moon” as that in “Poem of Lament”. The woman in the “Moon”, just as Ban Jieyu, is missing her lover, so she wonders if her lover is enjoying the beautiful scene just as she does. Based on this explanation, the poem becomes similar to the poems in *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*. They share a similar theme which is a lonely woman in her room longing for her far-away lover. The woman may not be able to fall asleep, so she gets up and enjoys the moon. Such a motif of sleepless night was developed long time ago in Han *fu* 賦. For example, in “*Chang men fu* 長門賦” or “The Tall-gate Palace” by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179 – 117 B.C.), the neglected lady, in a depression, is unable to sleep and walks out, watching the moonlight and thinking of her lord. Although in Xue Tao’s poem she does not mention if the lady is sleepless or not, we may still wonder why she is there at night instead of going bed. Furthermore, the allusion of “a fan that pursues the Han loom is round” strengthens the motif of sleepless night of a neglected woman. As a result, it is most likely a poem in the style of courtly love poetry from Six Dynasties.

Also, there is other evidence contributing to this possibility. The theme of moon originated from “Yue chu 月出” or “Moon Rising” of *The Book of Songs*:

月出皎兮，佼人僚兮，舒窈糾兮，勞心悄兮。

月出皓兮，佼人懰兮，舒懮受兮，勞心慅兮。

月出照兮，佼人燎兮，舒夭紹兮，勞心慘兮。[23]

As moon rising white

Is the beauty of my lovely one.

Ah, the tenderness, the grace!

[23] Legge, James trans., *The Book of Poetry* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corporation, 1967), p.156.

Heart's pain consumes me.

A moon rising bright

Is the fairness of my lovely one.

Ah, the gentle softness!

Heart's pain wounds me.

A moon rising in splendor

Is the beauty of my lovely one.

Ah, the delicate yielding!

Heart's pain torments me.[24]

It is considered to be a poem of lovesickness. The speaker loves the beautiful girl standing in the moonlight, but he is anxious and sorrowful. The beauty of the girl is compared to that of the moon. The girl may spend some time under the moon, so the heart's pain of the viewer—the speaker of the poem—haunts him for a while, first consuming him, then wounding him, and finally tormenting him. In Xue Tao's poem, however, the speaker is the girl standing in the moonlight with a fan in her hand, with a sad mood as that of the speaker in "Moon Rising". She also stands there for a while, so that she has the time to use a fan to play with the moon. When the moonlight is on her, she may become more beautiful, just as the girl in "Moon Rising". However, the man whom she wants to appreciate her beauty is not there. She even does not know if he is looking at the moon at that moment as she is; this brings her feelings of sadness.

The third explanation is the fourth line is a real question. When the poet is enjoying the scene, she thinks about the other people in the world. Will they notice the moon now?

[24] Waley, *The Book of Songs*, p.111.

Will they have the same feeling as "I" have while enjoying the moon? The poet cares about the other part of the world she is a part of and the people she lives with on the same land. It is human nature to think in this way, and some other Chinese classical poets did the same thing. For example, Wang Jian 王建 (?) of Tang Dynasty wrote a well-known poem called "*Shi wu ye wang yue* 十五夜望月" or "Watching the Moon on a Mid-Autumn Night", which is a good example of considering others in a poem.

中庭地白樹栖鴉，冷露無聲溼桂花。今夜月明人盡望，不知秋思落誰家。[25]

The ground of the mid-courtyard is white and the crows nestle on the trees.

Chill and silent dew drops silently moisten osmanthus flowers.

Tonight the moon is bright and people everywhere are looking at it.

No one knows whose house the autumn reflections will fall onto.

While enjoying the beautiful scene of the moon, the poet is thinking of those people who are not able to unite with their families. In an atmosphere of happiness and family gathering, he cares about people who are not able to be in this atmosphere. And Xue Tao in her poem does the same thing.

The "Moon" is simple, but with close reading the reader may find that the way the poet presents the moon in the poem encourages readers to read the poem in different ways. All the scenes and feelings in the poem are beautiful. The poet inherits the poetic tradition in many aspects, and at the same time creates her own poem with multiple meanings.

Close Reading 4

[25] *Quan tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1960), P.3437.

浣花亭陪川主王播相公暨寮同賦早菊

西陸行終令，東籬始再陽。綠英初濯露，金蘂半含霜。

自有兼材用，那同衆草芳。獻酬樽俎外，寧有懼豺狼。

D. In Huanhua Pavilion Accompanying the Head of Chuan, Master Wang Bo, I Compose a Poem on Early Chrysanthemums Together With Him and His Colleagues

The West Continent is proceeding with its last order,

And the eastern hedge has now started to go back to the sunny side the second time.

Green petals are firstly bathed in dews,

And golden stamens and pistils are half contained by frost.

They themselves have multiple talents.

How can they be the same with all the other grass and flowers?

Besides as a condiment in the wine and dishes,

Would you prefer (I prefer) fear of the pack of wolves?

In the poem Xue Tao creates a special image of chrysanthemum, which differentiates from the traditional one.

The first couplet describes the open season for chrysanthemum, which is autumn. There are two allusions. The first one is "*xilu* 西陸" or "West Continent". It is one of the Twenty-eight mansions of the Chinese constellations. Chinese people usually call it "*mao* 昴" and its English name is Hairy Head or Taurus. Sima Biao 司馬彪 (? – ca. 306) explains that the autumn comes when the sun travels in the West Continent.[26] Many poets

[26] Zhang, *Xue Tao Shi Jian*, p.6. The original text is "日行西陸謂之秋."

use it to refer to autumn. For example, Luo Binwang 駱賓王 (ca. 640 – ca. 684), a famous poet in the early Tang Dynasty, once wrote

西陸蟬聲唱，南冠客思深。[27]

Cicadas sing in the West Continent.

Deep thoughts settle with southern guest.

"Land of west" here means the autumn season. But why is the West Continent proceeding with its last order in Xue Tao's poem? It is because the star *mao* is disappearing while the sky is getting light. It must be an autumn morning when Wang Bo, his colleagues, and Xue Tao gathered and composed poems on the flowers.

The second allusion in the first couplet is "*dong li* 東籬" or "the eastern hedge". It is a well-known allusion from "Drinking Wine the Fifth" written by Tao Qian, which is

采菊東籬下，悠然見南山。[28]

I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,

And gaze afar towards the southern mountains.[29]

"The eastern hedge" then became an allusion of easy, self-possessed manners, temperament, or interest. So it can be inferred that "the eastern hedge" in Xue Tao's poem refers either to the garden where chrysanthemums are growing or to chrysanthemums, the flower themselves. "*Yang* 陽" means that the flowers are blooming.

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[27] The title of the poem is "在獄詠蟬" or "The Cicada Heard In Prison". *Quan tang shi*, p.848.
[28] Wang, Shumin 王叔岷 ed., *Tao Yuanming shi jian zheng gao* 陶淵明詩箋證稿 (Taibei: yi wen yin shu guan, 1976), p.290.
[29] Acker, William trans., *T'ao The Hermit: Sixty Poems by T'ao Ch'ein (365-427)* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1952), p.66.

In Chinese philosophy, the concept of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 is used to describe how polar or seemingly contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other in turn. According to *Yi jing* 易經 or the *Book of Changes*, "When the undifferentiated universe moved, light or *Yang* was produced; when movement ceased, dark or *Yin* appeared."[30] So *yang* is the positive, active aspect of all things on earth. For flowers, it means their blossoming. And the word in the second line "*shi* 始" or "to start" echoes the word "early chrysanthemums" in the title. As a result, we can imagine such a scene: in an autumn morning, some early chrysanthemums in a garden close to Huanhua Pavilion are blooming leisurely again.

The second couplet is a direct description of chrysanthemums. Maybe there are many buds, so the poet sees green petals with dew and she guesses it is their first time to be bathed in dew. The word "*chu* 初" is also an echo to "early chrysanthemums". They are early flowers in the season and they just experienced something new in their lives. But even though they are early, the weather is already cold because the frost has come to them. The open flowers are half contained by frost. However, the coldness is not able to ruin their beauty with golden stamens and pistils.

The last two couplets talk about the characteristics of chrysanthemum. It has multiple uses: it could be the raw materials of ornament, insecticide, medicine, dye, and oil. Furthermore, in the seventh line the word "*xian chou* 獻酬" means to propose a toast and to urge to drink and the word "*zun zu* 樽俎" is wine and meat containers used in ancient ceremonies. These are two metonymies that refer to wine and food. So as the poet points

[30] Osgood, Charles E., and Richards, Meredith Martin, "From Yang and Yin to and or but," *Language*, 49.2 (1973): 380.

out, chrysanthemum can be a condiment in the wine and dishes.[31] These are its multiple talents which differentiate it from other grass and flowers. The meaning of the last line is rather complicated and significant for us to understand the whole poem. There are several possible interpretations. One is that the chrysanthemum has multiple talents, one of which is its courage to face the jackals and wolves. Those chrysanthemums grow in the field where wild animals may always pass by, but they still have an indifferent attitude to the world. They do have the courage to face all the difficulties in their lives. Based on this explanation, the poem is only a simple *yongwu* poem, praising the unique characteristics of chrysanthemum.

Another explanation is that if people drink the wine or eat dishes with chrysanthemum as a condiment, then they will not fear jackals and wolves. And there had been a long history that jackals and wolves were considered together as a symbol of evil people, especially those barbarians trying to conquer China. For example, after *An Shi* Rebellion, Li Bai 李白 (701 - 762) wrote “” to criticize An Lushan 安祿山 (? - 757) and his accomplice. The fourth couplet of the poem is

流血涂野草，豺狼盡冠纓。

Spilt blood coated the grasses of the field;

Wolves and jackals all sporting officials’ caps.[32]

Wolves and jackals here refer to those foreigners who conquered Chang’an by killing hundreds and thousands of people. But is it the right time and right place for Xue Tao to

[31] Yan, Yan 閻艷, “First Exploration of the Cultural Meaning of Chrysanthemum ‘菊’的文化意义初探,” *Journal of Hebei University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, 28.3 (2003): 130 – 132.
[32] The title of the poem is “古風” or “Ancient Air”. Varsano, Paula M., *Tracking The Banished Immortal: The Poetry of Li Bo and Its Critical Reception* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press, 2003), p.190.

imply the war? The answer is yes. She composed the poem together with the head of Chuan and his colleagues. The official title of the head of Chuan, Wang Bo, is Military Commissioner of *Jian nan xi chuan* Circuit 劍南西川道 which was very important in the southwest China. In late Tang, the conflicts and wars between China and foreigners, such as Tufan 吐蕃 and Nanzhao 南詔, were becoming more and more serious, and *Jian nan xi chuan* Circuit was at the border of Tang territory, adjacent to these foreign countries. As the head of Chuan, Wang Bo had the responsibility to fight off foreigners. So it is very smart for Xue Tao to relate chrysanthemum with these officers by pointing out that the flower can increase their courage.

The third possible explanation is that there is an analogy between chrysanthemums and Wang Bo and his colleagues. They, as chrysanthemums, will not be afraid of any jackal and wolf, or any foreign enemy. If we go back to read the whole poem again, we may find more evidence for this explanation. When will chrysanthemum blossom? It is when the West Continent is proceeding with its last order. The West Continent is *mao*, which is also called "*mao tou* 旄頭" or "flagpole finial". A Tang poet, Cen Shen 岑參 (714 - 770), once wrote

輪臺城頭夜吹角，輪臺城北旄頭落。[33]

At Luntai's citadel, the horn sounds at night.

North of Luntai's citadel, the Pleiades fall.[34]

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[33] *Quan tang shi*, p.2051. "旄頭" is translated to be "the Pleiades" here. It is a constellation which is also called "*mao* 昴".

[34] The title of the poem is "輪臺歌奉送封大夫出師西征" or "The Song of Luntai: Presented When Escorting My Lord Feng Leaving with His troops on a Western Campaign". Chan, Marie ed., *Cen Shen* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p.95.

Some other Tang poets, such as Li He 李賀(790 – 816) and Wei Xiang 衛象 (?), also use "flagpole finial" in their frontier-style poems. So *mao*, to a certain degree, can be related with the war. When *mao*, or the "flagpole finial" is going to its end, chrysanthemums start to blossom. It may imply that when the war is going to its end, Wang Bo and his people finally have some spare time to gather together and to do something fun. What will be fun for them? Enjoying the scene of chrysanthemums and composing poems about them. The allusion "the eastern hedge" implies that their nature is refined enjoyment, just as that of Tao Qian. Ultimately, both chrysanthemum and the people chrysanthemum symbolizes have two characteristics: although they are brave and skillful in battle, their nature is reclusion, naturalness, and enjoying their life freely.

Naturalness was very popular in Xue Tao's time and Tao Qian and his poetry contributed a lot to this fashion. The poem, "Drinking Wine", is a good example to explain what naturalness is.

結廬在人境，而無車馬喧。問君何能爾，心遠地自偏。

采菊東籬下，悠然見南山。山氣日夕佳，飛鳥相與還。

此种有真意，欲辨已忘言。[35]

I built my house near where others dwell,

And yet there is no clamour of carriages and horses.

You ask of me "How can this be so?"

"When the heart is far the place of itself is distant."

I pluck chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,

[35] *Tao Yuanming shi jian zheng gao*, p.289 – 293.

And gaze afar towards the southern mountains.

The mountain air is fine at evening of the day

And flying birds return together homewards.

Within these things there is a hint of Truth,

But when I start to tell it, I cannot find the words.[36]

Tao Qian was a paradigm of the truth of natural existence, a sustaining source of inspiration amidst the poet's unexorcized solitude. He cherishes naturalness and simplicity as his existential ideal. This poem is considered as "a crowning jewel even among the gems of Tao's *oeuvre*…The poet makes no dramatization of loftiness in insulation from the mundane world: he is 'in the midst of man,' firmly planted in the humanity he cherishes but free from its hustle-bustle…The poet's spirit, already wandering far in serene self-possession, is now lost in a sublime communion with the natural spectacle…the 'I' is absent…aptly signifying the subsumption of the human within the natural and the existential within the cosmological."[37] The naturalness could be explained as serene self-possession, even though it is in the mundane world. It is a significant part of personage's styles or *ming shi feng du* 名士風度. Yang Jiong 楊炯 (650 –ca. 693) wrote in his "*Ting ju fu* 庭菊賦" or "Courtyard Chrysanthemums" that "凴南軒以長嘯, 坐東籬而盈把. Leaning on the southern balcony, I make a long whistle. Sitting on the eastern hedge, I collect a full handful of chrysanthemums."[38] The poet is accompanied by chrysanthemums, making a whistle. This is the typical personage's style. Xue Tao in her poem compares Wang Bo and his colleagues, of course, were people in

[36] Acker, William trans., *T'ao The Hermit: Sixty Poems by T'ao Ch'ein (365-427)*, p.66.
[37] Kwong, Yim-tze, "Naturalness and Authenticity: The Poetry of Tao Qian," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, 11 (1989): 65.
[38] *Quan tang wen xin bian* 全唐文新編 (Changchun: Jilin wen shi chu ban she, 2000), p.2188.

the mundane world. They worked for the government and went to the battlefield. But just as chrysanthemums in the eastern hedge, their hearts were in peace and their nature was simplicity. Xue Tao praises their personage's style and personalities.

The appearance of the flowers in Xue Tao's poem is with dew and frost. It is a traditional description of chrysanthemums: they are not afraid of the cold. Du Fu 杜甫 (712 –770) describes it in one of his poems that "Cold season flowers blossomed and have all gone. Chrysanthemums alone fill their stems."[39] Chrysanthemums are always praised for resistance to cold, just as people who can fight off difficulties. Xue Tao in her poem then may imply that Wang Bo and his colleagues are not scared by the danger from the borders. The words "*di lu* 濯露" or "to be bathed in dews" and "*han shuang* 含霜" or "to be contained by frost" may be analogies of their sufferings in the battlefields. At that moment, Xue Tao found traces from the battle on their appearances, but this makes them even more charming and attractive. And their green petals and golden stamens with white frost and crystal-clear dews, all cold colors, show their pure spirit and vitality.

However, the most important characteristic of chrysanthemum, or of Wang Bo and his colleagues, is their multiple talents. It is a good ornament. In the Tang Dynasty, people liked to wear them in the hair, especially in Double Ninth Festival. Also it has medical use. It has a calming effect and can be good for stress. It is known to be a powerful antiseptic and antibiotic. It is taken internally for headaches, dizziness, hearing disorders, high blood pressure, some eye problems, as well as colds, flu, and infected sores. It is a natural source of insecticide and sometimes a source of dye and oil. Furthermore, as Xue

[39] *Quan tang shi*, p. 2492. The original text is "寒花開已盡, 菊蕊獨盈枝" from the poem called "*Yun'an jiu ri zheng shi ba xie jiu pei zhu gong yan* 云安九日鄭十八携酒陪諸公宴" or "The Ninth Day in Yun'an Zheng Shiba Brought Wine to Accompany Our Party."

Tao points out in the poem, it is a condiment in food and wine. There are a lot of poems speaking of chrysanthemum wine, such as "辟惡茱萸囊, 延年菊花酒. To fight off evil spirit it is a bag of dogwood. To prolong life it is chrysanthemum wine."[40] It is also a good condiment and material for food. What kind of other plants can have so many different uses at the same time like the chrysanthemum? On the other hand, Wang Bo was the Minister of both Ministry of Rites and Ministry of Revenue and the Salt Monopoly Commissioner by then, and he always had important duties in the Tang government. He is not only good at composing poems, but also at battle and management of national affairs. He is the one with multiple talents, especially the ability to fight off jackals and wolves, just as chrysanthemum, which makes him outstanding. The analogy between the flower and the people is reasonable.

If we read the poem in the third way, then the image of chrysanthemum is both traditional and original. As mentioned before, her chrysanthemum is a companion of Tao Qian and a symbol of naturalness, with a peaceful attitude toward life. This is very traditional. In poetic history, there had been hundreds and thousands of poems following Tao Qian's chrysanthemum. Its being fearless of cold is also a cliche. However, the emphasis on its multiple talents is not common at all. Furthermore, the flower is always considered as of mild nature so that it is rarely attached to wild animals like jackals and wolves. Xue Tao's chrysanthemum, to some degree, has heroism and masculinity. The word "*yang* 陽" in the second line can also mean "the male", and in the whole poem it is hard to find any feminine description although it is a poem about a kind of flower. How does the flower

[40] The poem is written by Guo Yuanzhen 郭元振 (615–713) and its title is "子夜四時歌" or "Ballads of Four Seasons". *Quan tang shi*, p.264.

look like? Green petals and golden stamens and pistils contained by white frost. These are all cold colors for men. "*Jin* 金" also means metals and was used for armor in ancient China. Some generals of high status would use golden to decorate their armor. So the chrysanthemum here looks like noble generals, with green tassels and golden armor which glisten in wintry light. When we read "*xian chou zun zu* 獻酬樽俎", it looks as if there is a meeting or banquet of warriors. The toast and drinking seem to reveal the bold and unconstrained character of these people. Only they can tolerate the suffering from frost and dew and only they have no fear toward ferocious wild animals. At this point, Xue Tao's chrysanthemum goes beyond its traditional image and becomes a masculine hero.

Close Reading 5

秋泉

泠色初澄一帶烟，幽聲遙瀉十絲弦。長來枕上牽情思，不使愁人半夜眠。

E. Autumn Spring

The cool color is just purified and there is a belt of mist.

The distant sound flows down far away, like the sound of a *qin* with ten silken strings.

It comes all the way to my pillow and tugs at my feelings and thoughts.

It makes a sorrowful person at midnight unable to fall asleep.

On an autumn morning when the fog disappears, the poet finds a belt of mist made by water from a spring. The spring must be on a hill or a mountain, so its water flows down quickly which sounds like music made by a *qin* with ten silken strings. The poet may

stand somewhere far away from the spring and its water and is listening to this music. She realizes that this is what she heard at night and what made her awake.

This is a poem full of sorrow. What can we see in the poem? "The cool color" is being purified. It is much likely the fog in the early morning: the fog is white and cool; it dissipates when the sun comes out. So the poet sees the fog just falls away and a belt of mist over there in the woods. All the other possible images in an autumn morning, such as the golden sunshine, green or yellow trees, birds, are not available in this poem. The poet only introduces these two things which are both white, a cold color. What can we hear in the poem? Only the sound of the spring from distance. It is naturally, freely, rising and falling, like music from a *qin*. *Qin* is a very quiet instrument and *qin* players "channel their melancholy into music… As early as in the Han dynasty (206 BC – 221 BC), Chinese intellectuals were fascinated by 'sadness' (*bei*) and by grave sentiments in music, which, intriguingly, they associated with lofty mental states and with moral purity. In later periods, the *qin* was never able to shed off entirely its image as a 'sad' instrument, and as a medium which could transform the minds of its players and listeners, and evoke a deep sense of harmony and peace."[41] Since the sound of the spring is described as similar to the *qin* music, it will most likely make a sorrowful person feel sad. The poem draws a Chinese traditional painting. It is black and white, and it is so quiet that the sound of a spring from far away travels all the way through the woods. We can feel the cold wet air and the depressed emotion of the poet when she draws it.

[41] Kouwenhoven, Frank, "Meaning and Structure: The Case of Chinese qin (zither) Music", *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 10 (2001): 40.

However, who is the "sorrowful person"? It is the poet herself, because only the "sorrowful person" herself would get up early to find out what made her awake last night. Why she did not sleep well at night and why did she get up so early? She complains that it is because of the sound of the spring water. But the sound is not loud and also it travels a long way before she can hear it, then how can it affect her so much? The most reasonable explanation for her sleepless nights is her sorrow. She is so sad that she cannot fall asleep at night, but she does not blame the person or the thing which makes her sad. Instead, she complains about the spring. She does not tell the readers where her sorrow comes from and does not explain what her "*qingsi* 情思" or feelings and thoughts are. This leaves more room for readers' imagination. It could be her longing for lover making her sleepless, if following a poetic tradition from *Yu tai xin yong* 玉臺新詠 or *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*[42]. For example, there is one poem by He Xun 何遜 (? – ca. 518) called "*Gui yuan* 閨怨" or "Bedroom Regret" which is

曉河没高棟，斜月半空庭。窗中度落葉，帘外隔飛螢。

含情下翠帳，掩涕閉金屏。昔期今未返，春草寒復清。

思君無轉易，何異北辰星。[43]

Dawn River dies on a tall ridge-pole.

The slanting moon halfway over an empty garden.

Fallen leaves cross the window sill,

Beyond the blind flitting fireflies are trapped.

[42] *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* is an anthology of love poems compiled c. 545 A.D. by the court poet Xu Ling 徐陵(507-583). It comprises 656 poems dating from the late third century B.C. to the mid-sixth century A.D.

[43] Xu, Ling ed. *Yu tai xin yong* 玉臺新詠 (Shanghai: Shi jie shu ju, 1935), p.120.

Full of love she lowers kingfisher drapes,

Tearful shuts the gold screen.

My long promised love has not come back,

Spring grass though chill is green once more.

My love for you is unswerving,

When will the north star veer?[44]

This is a same sleepless night in autumn as Xue Tao's. The difference is that the girl does not hear any sound of the spring. Instead she sees Dawn River and moon in the sky as well as fallen leaves and fireflies outside her window when she is suffering from the sleeplessness. If we only read the first two couplets, we may not be able to figure out what makes this person awake for the whole night. However, the poet then reveals the girl's sorrow, which is the longing for her lover. The tone of this poem is very close to that of "Autumn Spring", with the sleeplessness and sorrow. As a result, to certain degree, "Autumn Spring" is similar to "Wind" and "Moon" with a motif of sleepless night. The difference is that she does not get up and then go outside at night. Instead she stays in bed, listening to the melodious sound from the spring, and then gets up in the morning to take a look at it.

There is another possibility for her sorrow, which is homesickness. There is a poem called "*Quan shui* 泉水" or "Fountain Waters" in *The Book of Songs*, which is

毖彼泉水，亦流于淇。有懷于衛，靡日不思。孌彼諸姬，聊與之謀。

出宿於泲，飲餞于禰。女子有行，遠父母兄弟。問我諸姑，遂及伯姊。

[44] Birrell, *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*, p.153.

出宿於干，飲餞于言。載脂載舝，還車言邁。遄臻于衛，不瑕有害。

我思肥泉，兹之永歎。思須與漕，我心悠悠。駕言出遊，以寫我憂。

As the streamlet from its spring

Flows into the river Ch’i,

So my daily thoughts on wing

Fly, my native Wei, to thee;

For I long with cousins there

Counsel sweet and love to share.

For a night, at Tzu I stayed;

Drank the cup to Ni when come;

Parents, brothers, farewell bade;--

Such the fate on leaving home.

Parents are not now alive;

Aunts and sister still survive.

Lo! I hasten home again.

Let the rushing chariot wheel

Pause at Kan, and part at Yen,

Pebbles flashing to its steel.

Does My heart go far away,

Panting for its native Wei?

By the Fei-ch’ üan’s winding stream

Daily sighing thought will stray.

Hsü and Ts’ao in memory gleam,

Broken glints of childhood's day.

Spring, my horses! Speed, my wheels!

Gone the grief my bosom feels.[45]

The spring in the poem is an analogy. It is used to hint that a woman's wish of going back home and visiting parents is as natural as the spring water flows into the River Qi (Ch'i). Xue Tao usually lived in the city of Chengdu, but according to the environment in the "Autumn Spring" it seems that she lives in a wild place which is very quiet. Since she uses "*xie* 泻" to describe spring water rushing down swiftly, the place is likely very close to a mountain, or on a mountain. She might just be there for a few days because she is obviously not very familiar with that place and has to find out where the spring is in the morning. It is reasonable that she starts to miss her own home and the sound of spring at night make her even more homesick. Also, we may wonder why she leaves her home. Is she sick and so comes here to rest and recuperate? Or is she demoted by someone with power? Xue Tao does not mention any of these, but her sorrow is very clear in the poem.

Furthermore, autumn is a sad season. It is said that women are longing for love in spring and scholars are sad in autumn in "*Miu cheng xun* 繆稱訓" or "On Erroneous Designations" of *Huan nan zi* 淮南子[46]. Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772 – 842) also said that "From time immemorial people feel sad and lonely when the autumn is coming."[47] The season of autumn might aggravate Xue Tao's sorrow. By pointing out that it is in autumn, she makes the sorrow in the poem stronger.

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[45] Legge trans., *The Book of Poetry*, p.41.

[46] Liu, An, *Huan nan hong lie jie* 淮南鴻烈解 (Taibei: He luo tu shu chu ban she, 1976), vol.10, p.12. The original text is "春女思, 秋士悲."

[47] *Quan tang shi*, p. 4111. The original text is "自古逢秋悲寂寥", the first line of "*Qiu ci* 秋词" or "Autumn Lyrics".

The music of *qin* is an important symbol in the poem. As mentioned before, *qin* is a "sad" instrument, but at same time may evoke a deep sense of harmony and peace. Playing a *qin* in a sleepless night had been a trope for some time by Xue Tao's time. Ruan Ji once wrote a "*Yong huai shi* 詠懷詩" or "Poem of expressing heart feelings", which says

夜中不能寐，起坐彈鳴琴。

Midnight, and I can't sleep.

Sitting up, I play upon my harp. [48]

Ruan Ji was also not able to fall asleep because of his sorrow while composing this poem. He chose to get up to play his *qin*, while Xue Tao lay in her bed, listening to the sound similar to music of a *qin*. Both of them might be trying to use the music to allay their sorrow. However, for Xue Tao it turned out to be even worse. There is a contradiction in the purpose and the result.

Based on the analysis above, it can be seen that although the title of the poem is "spring", the real theme is "sorrow." Or we can say that the spring is a symbol for Xue Tao's sorrow. It flows in an endless stream just as her deep sorrow. The spring is a myth and so is her sorrow. She hears it and suffers from it; however, it is so far away that she can do nothing to change it.

Close Reading 06

西巖

[48] Hartill, *The Poems of Ruan Ji*, p.3.

憑闌却憶騎鯨客，把酒臨風手自招。細雨聲中停去馬，夕陽影裏亂鳴蜩。

F. West Cliff

Leaning upon a balustrade I just recollect the memory of the whale rider.

Holding a cup of wine in the wind, my hand beckons by itself.

In the sound of drizzle the departing horse stops;

In the shadow of the setting sun the cicadas sing flurried.

The poem is a mystery. With a brief look, it looks like a *yongwu* poem; under further reading, it is a rather rich and open poem whose theme is far from that of a *yongwu* poem.

Zhang Pengzhou considers "*xiyan* 西巖" or "west cliff" as a place connected to Li Bai in Sichuan. He cites *Quan shu yi wen zhi* 全蜀藝文志 that "There are two places where Li Bai once read there. One is Xi yan which is on Dui Mountain of Wan County."[49] Nowadays, there is a Taibai Rock on the Xi Mountain of Wan County. Taibai Rock and West Cliff could be the same place and people might change its name to commemorate Li Bai whose courtesy name is Taibai. Based on this idea, Zhang believes that Xue Tao wrote the poem in memory of Li Bai. However, there are two reasons which may cause our reading of this poem to deviate from such an explanation. First, Xue Tao and Li Bai lived in different periods. Second, the description in the second couplet of the poem does not correlate with the personality of Li Bai. It is true that the allusions in the first couplet may remind readers of Li Bai, as he was often referred to as a whale rider and was fond of drinking. But the person described in the second couplet is not outgoing and full of resolve, but is instead hesitating and depressed.

[49] Zhang, *Xue Tao shi jian*, p.13.

Then what is its theme? It is hard to answer this question only by doing research on the title "West Cliff". First, there were many places called "*Xi yan*". At least there was one in Fujian, one in Hunan, and of course one in Sichuan. It was a common name. Second, even if it refers to the place in Wan County where Li Bai went before, then it could be a popular place where many people went. In the first line of the poem, she leans upon a balustrade from where she probably can see the West Cliff; or the balustrade is on the West Cliff, from which she can enjoy the scene below. It may be that people at that time chose that place to build up houses for travelers to rest and enjoy the scene. This, to some degree, can prove its popularity. Xue Tao might have once traveled there with someone, so she later wrote the poem for this person.

The key word to understand the theme is "the whale rider". The allusion of "riding a whale" originally appears in "*Yu lie fu* 羽獵賦" or "Plume Hunt Rhapsody" by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BC – 18). It describes a scene when he followed Emperor Xiaocheng 孝成帝 (51 BC – 7 BC) of Han Dynasty to hunt. Since the Tang Dynasty, especially after the death of Li Bai, the meaning of "riding a whale" gradually became to mean "to be a recluse" or "to be a traveling immortal", sometimes also a euphemism for death. For example, Li He in his "*Shen xian qu* 神仙曲" or "Ballad of the Immortals" describes their way of traveling as "they strive to ride enormous waves, on the backs of whales."[50] And Chao Buzhi 晁補之 (1053 – 1110) of Song Dynasty uses "riding a whale" to express his

[50] Frodsham, J. D. trans., *The Poems of Li Ho* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p.273. The original text is "乘巨浪騎鯨魚".

willingness to become a recluse and to become an immortal.[51] Its meaning as death was also commonly used. For example, in order to commemorate a friend, Zhao Fan 趙蕃 (1143 – 1229) of the Song Dynasty once wrote

此日騎鯨去，它年化鶴還。

On this day you left by riding a whale.

One year in the future you will come back as a crane.[52]

These two lines later became a very popular elegiac couplet. Based on all these three possible meaning of "riding a whale", it can be inferred that Xue Tao, in her poem, is commemorating someone who had passed away or disappeared from the mundane world at that moment. This person might also be considered as having become an immortal, which is the possible result of those two situations. Furthermore, this person is very likely a man in that a whale rider is mostly used to refer to a male immortal. He is described as a whale rider, which means that in Xue Tao's eyes he is respectable and wise.

Another problem is the difference between the second line and the second couplet. Even if it is not talking about Li Bai, the emotions in them are obviously different, one unconstrained and passionate while the other one gloomy and confused. A possible explanation is that those lines are describing two people, one of which is Xue Tao herself. So now there are two ways to read the poem.

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[51] Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋 ed. *Quan song ci* 全宋詞 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1965), p. 561. The original text is "它日騎鯨, 尚憐迷路, 與問眾仙真" from "*Shao nian you* 少年遊" or "To the Tune of Wandering Youth".

[52] *Quan song shi* 全宋詩 (Beijing: Beijing da xue chu ban she, 1998), p.30658. The title of the poem is "Wan Zhou Deyou 挽周德友" or "An elegy for Zhou Deyou".

First, the second line describes the person whom Xue Tao misses. In her memory, he once drank wine in West Cliff. In the breeze he was a little drunk and his hand lifted and started to beckon something, maybe immortals in the heaven. However, the third and fourth lines are talking about Xue Tao herself. What makes her so upset? It is not the drizzle or cicadas; it is her admiration and longing for this person. She may have come here many times, sometimes in the rain, sometimes on a sunny day. This person might be her lover and the longing for him makes her wander there.

Second, the first couplet describes what Xue Tao is doing while composing. It is she who leans on the balustrade, drinking and beckoning something. The word "*zhao* 招" here can also mean "to call the soul back". Since this person is dead or far away from the mundane world and Xue Tao is a little drunk, it is reasonable that she unconsciously start to try to call his soul back. Xue Tao and him may meet with and separate from each other for many times on West Cliff. In Xue Tao's memory, his love is as strong as hers. He might once stop the horse just in order to take another look at her; he might hold her hand and listen together with her to the song of cicadas before departing. But all these things have gone for a long time and he has become a whale rider. Xue Tao at the moment of writing the poem still misses him, but only as a friend, not as a lover anymore. That is why she can be relatively disinterested in the first couplet. Another possibility is that this person is not her lover but only a very good friend. They might say goodbye to each other for many times on West Cliff. He might be leaving for somewhere very far away from Xue Tao and his future was uncertain. This can explain why he is so worried and depressed in the second couplet.

Although the emotion in the poem is very rich, the theme is ambiguous. It is Xue Tao who does not want to make it clear who is the whale rider. Since she is beckoning someone or calling someone's soul back, it is possible that while composing the poem she is trying to communicate with this person. This is a poem for this person and Xue Tao herself to call up in reminiscence.

Close Reading 07

試新服裁製初成三首

G. Three Poems on Trying On New Clothes Which Were Just Tailored

紫陽宮裏賜紅綃，仙霧朦朧隔海遙。霜兔毳寒冰繭淨，嫦娥笑指織星橋。

In the Ziyang Palace red silk is bestowed.

The heavenly mist is hazy, far away on the other side of the sea.

A rabbit as white as frost, its fine hair is cold, and ice-cocoons of silkworms are pure.

Chang'e, with a smile, points to the bridge for Vega Star.

九氣分爲九色霞，五靈仙馭五雲車。春風因過東君舍，偷樣人間染百花。

Nine Spirits split and become nine-colored clouds.

Five Magic Animals, immortals drive them to pull a Five-cloud Carriage.

Spring wind, because it travels by the place of King East,

Steals its patterns and goes to the human world to dye all the flowers.

長裾本是上清儀，曾逐羣仙把玉芝。每到宮中歌舞會，折腰齊唱步虛詞。

The long dress was originally in the Heaven of Supreme Purity with an elegant appearance,

And once followed immortals holding a jade mushroom.

Every time in the palace when there was a banquet for songs and dance,

She bowed her waist and sang Bu xu Lyric along with others.

These three poems are full of immortal atmosphere with a strong Taoist impression. Xue Tao uses a lot of Taoist expressions and mythic stories in them. Without related knowledge, they could be misread.

The first poem describes the quality of the fabric. How can she get it? It is bestowed as a gift from Ziyang Palace. Literally, Ziyang means purple-sun or purple-positive. However, it is a common title for ancient Taoist immortals. For example, the legendary Li Babai 李八百 in Zhou Dynasty is also called Ziyang zhen jun 紫陽真君 and Zhou Yishan 周義山 (80 B.C. – ?) called Ziyang zhen ren 紫陽真人. They both became immortals according to their legends. Also, *Ziyang* is used to name Taoist temples. Liu Changqing 劉長卿 (? – ca. 786) once wrote a poem called "From Ziyang Temple to Huayang Cavern, staying overnight in Taoist priest Hou's grass abode, together with Li Yannian," in which the Ziyang Temple is surely Taoist. Furthermore, Jia Dao 賈島 (779 –843) mentioned Ziyang Palace in his poem "Ti dai sheng 題戴勝" or "On A Bird", which is

星點花冠道士衣，紫陽宮女化身飛。能傳上界春消息，若到蓬山莫放歸。[53]

With tiny spots like stars and a garland, she is in a Taoist robe.

A maid from Ziyang Palace transforms into her, flying.

[53] *Quang tang shi*, p.6688.

She is able to spread the messages of spring from heaven.

If she arrives in Peng Mountain, then she will not be released.

"Ziyang Palace" was not popular in Tang poems. However, according to this poem, it is surely a fairy place for honorable Taoist immortals because of the magic power owned by the palace maid. She is in a Taoist robe and able to spread messages from heaven, but her status is no more than a maid in Ziyang Palace. It can be inferred that there are many noble and dignified immortals ruling the palace. Xue Tao's poem can also prove this: the red silk is bestowed in the palace. She uses "ci 賜" or "to bestow" instead of "to give" which shows the royal status of those in Ziyang Palace. By pointing out the origin of the fabric at the very beginning of the poem, she has already imbued the dress with immortal atmosphere.

How does the fabric look? It looks like heavenly mist, far away on the other side of the sea. So it must be very thin, like semitransparent gauze, and very light so that it will wave in the breeze. Also, it is mysterious because what in the heavenly mist is always unknown and has an air of romance.

What kind of materials were used to make this fabric? They are the hair of white rabbits and silkworm cocoons. From the materials it can be inferred that the main quality of the fabric is cold. The rabbit, whose fine hair is described as cold, is called "*shuang tu* 霜兔" which means its hair is as white as frost, or it is a frosty rabbit. And the pure cocoons are called "*bing jian* 冰繭" which is a common laudatory title for silkworm cocoons in classical poems. Both "frost" and "ice" can make people think of the feeling of cold.

Since Xue Tao emphasizes this special quality, the dress may well be made for summer time and the other qualities of thin and light also contribute to it.

But who in the world can make such a special fabric? It is very likely Chang'e 嫦娥, who is the Lady in the Moon in Chinese mythology. There are different versions of how she flew to the moon, but the main idea is that she swallowed an elixir of life which belonged to her husband, Houyi 后羿. She became lonely in the Palace of Great Cold and her only companion is the Jade Rabbit which is considered to be white. She has the ability to make the fabric. A Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 812 – ca. 858) once wrote "Chang'e 常娥" which says

常娥應悔偷靈藥，碧海青天夜夜心。[54]

Ch'ang-o should regret having stolen the elixir;

The green sea—the blue sky—her heart every night![55]

Since Chang'e is such a lonely immortal on the moon, why does she point to the bridge for Vega Star with a smile? It is because there is a romantic story, which is also known as a story of the cowherd and the weaver girl, about the Vega Star or in Chinese "*Zhi nü xing* 織女星". Zhi nü led a very happy life with Niu lang 牛郎 and had two children. Her mother, the Queen Mother of the West, was furious about their marriage because Niu lang was only a mortal. Finally, she scratched a wide river in the sky—the Milky Way—to separate them. However, once a year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar calendar month, all the magpies in the world would take a pity on them and fly up into heaven to

[54] *Quan tang shi*, p.6197.
[55] Liu, James J. Y., *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p.99.

form a bridge over the star Deneb in the Cygnus constellation so the lovers may be together for a single night. It is called *que qiao* 鵲橋 or the Bridge of Magpies. In Xue Tao's poem, the bridge for Vega Star must be it. It is the reunion of Zhi nü and Niu lang making the lonely Chang'e feel happy. She might make this magic fabric as a gift to Zhi nü and expecting her own lover at the same time. This also reconfirms that it was the summer time so that the dress must be made for hot weather.

It may be inferred from some allusions that the Ziyang Palace refers to *Guang han gong* 廣寒宮 or the Palace of Great Cold. It is in this palace that Chang'e lives with her Jade Rabbit on the moon, and both of them are present in the poem. Also, Xue Tao pointedly states that the materials for the fabric are cold, which corresponds to the Palace of Great Cold as well.

Xue Tao feels very lucky to get the dress made of such a special fabric. The fabric is so beautiful that it looks like it is from the Heaven, being made by the Lady of Moon and full of her good wishes to lovers. It seems that Xue Tao was expecting her lover too. The same as Zhi nü, she was planning to wear the new dress to meet again with her distant love. Her happiness is obviously, because even the unhappy Chang'e is willing to put on a smile.

The first poem shows that the fabric of the dress has a red color and maybe also a white color because the rabbit and cocoons are white; then the second poem focuses on the decorative patterns of the dress. The first pattern is nine-colored clouds transformed from Nine Spirits. "*Jiu qi* 九氣" or Nine Spirits is a Taoist term which means an air of pure glory. It also refers to the origin of all living things, including the spirit of *hun* 混, *dong*

洞, *hao* 皓, *min* 旻, *jing* 景, *dun* 遁, *rong* 融, *yan* 炎, and *yan* 演.[56] The nine colors from Nine Spirits are dark green, dark red, yellow, white, black, green, purple, red, and dark purple. Also, "*jiu se* 九色" can mean many colors, in which "nine" is an indefinite number. In Xue Tao's new dress, there is a decorative pattern like colorful clouds, which are not only pure and graceful but also echo the nature of the world.

Besides, there are some special designs among those clouds. The second line describes them as Five Magic Animals pulling a Five-cloud Carriage. The Five Magic Animals, according to the preface of *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 or Chronicle of *Zuo* by Du Yu 杜預 (222 – 284), are the unicorn, the phoenix, the turtle, the dragon, and the white tiger.[57] They are blessings and good omens for kings. And the Five-cloud Carriage usually refers to the high carriage for immortals with five-colored cloud mists on it. For example, in one of Wang Wei's poems there is

還瞻九霄上，來往五雲車。[58]

In addition I look afar to the Ninth Heaven.

Coming and going, there are Five-cloud Carriages.

Instead of running on the ground, the Five-cloud Carriages fly in the sky among the clouds. This corresponds to the nine-colored clouds in the first line. So, on the dress there is a sea of heavenly clouds with indistinctly visible immortals and their carriages. It is

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[56] Hu, Fuchen 胡孚琛 ed., *Zhong hua dao jiao da ci dian* 中華道教大辭典 (Beijing: Zhong guo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 1995), p.446.

[57] Yang, Jialuo 楊家駱 ed., *Zuo zhuan zhu shu ji bu zheng* 左傳註疏及補正 (Taibei: Shi jie shu ju, 1963), vol.1, Preface, p.6.

[58] *Quan tang shi*, p.1287. The title of the poem is "*Feng he sheng zhi xing Yuzhen gong zhu shan zhuang yin ti shi bi shi yun zhi zuo ying zhi* 奉和聖制幸玉真公主山莊因題石壁十韻之作應制" or "Written at Imperial Command to Harmonize with His Majesty's 'Visiting Prince Yuzhen's Country Villa and So Writing Ten poems on Stone Wall."

very colorful, but are there too many colors? The answer is no because it is an imitation of the nature of spring. In the second couplet, Xue Tao points out that it is the spring wind that dyes the patterns on her dress. This is a personification. The spring wind becomes an immortal traveling around. It loves the appearance of King East's palace and so copies it. "*Dong jun* 東君" or King East can be the God of Sun, but it also means the God of Spring. The latter meaning is more reasonable in that it is the spring wind. As a result, even though there are many colors, nine-colored clouds and carriages with five-colored clouds, they are all in harmony, the same as all flowers blooming in spring. It can be inferred that the patterns on the dress are brilliant and beautiful.

The third poem talks about the celestial fashion of the dress. It has a long flowing robe. "*Ju* 裾" in the first line refers to the large flap of Chinese dress, especially its lower border, and is a synecdoche signifying the whole dress. "*Shang qing* 上清" or the Supreme Purity in the first line is one of "*san qing* 三清" or the Three Purities in Taoism, the other two "*yu qing* 玉清" or the Jade Purity and "*tai qing* 太清" or the Grand Purity. Each of the three represents a Taoist heaven. By pointing out that her new dress was originally with an elegant appearance in the line of immortals in the Supreme Purity, Xue Tao may want to say that the dress belonged to an immortal who always held a jade mushroom. This is consistent with the first poem in which the fabric of the new dress is bestowed by immortals in a high rank. "*Yu zhi* 玉芝" or the jade mushroom is a white fabulous plant for long life in the land of immortals. Holding such a mythic mushroom shows not only the original owner's identity as an immortal but also her beauty. She might not be someone of high rank in the heaven, for she followed the other immortals.

However, she must be a talented one. She was so good at singing and dancing that she would never miss any banquet in fairies' palace. The song she sang is also special, called "*Bu xu ci* 步虛詞" which was originally a title of *Yue fu* poem 樂府 describing the beauty of immortals.

From this description of the former owner, it may be inferred that Xue Tao does not consider herself as being in possession of high social status. Although the new dress is celestially gorgeous, it is emphasized of being bestowed by someone with high rank. For example, the first poem points out the fabric is from Ziyang Palace; in the second one the patterns are from King East; and in the third one the elegant appearance of the dress is from the palace of the Heaven of Supreme Purity. Accordingly, it can be inferred that in the real world the new dress might be a gift from a high official. Also, the official might be her lover because of the illusions of Chang'e and the bridge for Vega Star, which are both related to love stories. And "spring wind" in the second poem could imply that too. As mentioned before, women were said to be longing for their love in spring time, and so spring wind can carry the information of love. Thus, undoubtedly, a gift from the lover can make Xue Tao especially happy.

Jeanne Larsen in her dissertation points out that these are "'thank you' poems" with a "complimentary tone".[59] This idea may be questioned. As we can see, while describing the beauty and myth of the dress, Xue Tao does give praise to the one who made it and the one who gave it to her. However, all the praises contribute to the theme of new dress instead of to the appreciation to the giver, some describing its beauty, some emphasizing

[59] Larsen, "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: the Life and Works of a Mid-Tang Woman", p.333.

its characteristic of supernaturalness. With all these glorified descriptions, she presents more a tone of show-off rather than of compliment.

From these poems, we can also see the impact of Taoism on Xue Tao and her poetry. There are many Taoist terms in these three poems, such as Ziyang, Nine Spirits, the Heaven of Supreme Purity, and so on. As a result, the new dress in the poems is described with a quality of Taoist immortality.

The tone of these poems is heartening and joyful. The speaker's happiness is shown through Chang'e because she smiled while looking at the bridge which connects two lovers. Also, the banter of spring wind stealing patterns shows the poet's good mood while writing. She emphasized in the last poem that all of its immortal histories were in the past by using two words "*ben* 本" or "originally" and "*ceng* 曾" or "once". So now it is Xue Tao's new dress to wear in the secular world. That is why she is so happy. The happiness also shows that there is a tone of woman in the poems. There is an old saying from *Zhan guo ce* 戰國策 or *Strategies of the Warring States*, which is "a girl will doll herself up for him who loves her."[60] Xue Tao may be looking forward to dress up in her new, good-looking dress, which can make her look like a immortal maiden, to meet with her lover in the poems. She is dolling herself up and happy. Also, we can see that she is sensitive to its material, patterns, and fashion, and imagines its past. She pays enough attention to all the details on the dress and tries to make them fit in with her specific situation. This sensitivity belongs more likely to a woman. To some degree, her

[60] Yokata, Koretaka 横田惟孝, *Zhan guo ce zheng jie* 戰國策正解 (Taibei: He luo tu shu chu ban she, 1976), vol.6, p.10. The original text is "女為悅己者容."

satisfaction with the new dress is pure, without adding additional desire, which make it read more with a tone of woman.

Close Reading 08

採蓮舟

風前一葉壓荷蕖，解報新秋又得魚。兔走烏馳人語靜，滿溪紅袂櫂歌初。

H. Lotus Picking Boat

Before the wind one leaf runs over lotuses.

News is reported that at the new autumn the fish is caught again.

Rabbits are running, crows are flying swiftly and people's talk is quiet.

Everywhere in the brook there are red sleeves and the sound of the beginning of a boat song.

菱荇沼

水荇斜牽綠藻浮，柳絲和葉臥清流。何時得向溪頭賞，旋摘菱花旋泛舟。

I. A Pond of Water Caltrops and Duckweeds

In the water the stems are drawing duckweeds slantingly, the green waterweeds floating.

Fine willow branches together with leaves are lying down on the clear stream.

At what time I will be able to face the brook, enjoying the scene,

Picking the blossoms of water caltrops, and then drifting about on the boat.

The reason I put these two poems together is that they both remind me of Li Qingzhao's early works. They both describe a young girl's life.

The season of “Lotus Picking Boat” is the end of the summer and the beginning of the autumn. It is a “new autumn” time when some lotus flowers are still in blossom. In the breeze, a small boat is sailing among lotuses which are so thriving that the boat looks like a piece of leaf covering over some of them. Although it is the boat to pick up lotuses, sometimes the people on board can also catch some fish. In the poem this has happened more than once. As time goes by, the boat goes further and further away and so does sound from it. On the land one or two rabbits come out and go away; in the sky some crows are flying; in the brook there are full of red flowers. The only thing you can hear now is a boat song.

The visual angle of the poet is from the bank. It is very likely that she is standing somewhere very close to the brook while the boat is approaching. The people on the boat may know Xue Tao or someone standing by her so that they tell the news about the fish. Later the boat sails away and Xue Tao may be left there alone and so she gets the chance to feel the serene atmosphere. It also could be viewed from a boat in the river when the lotus-picking boat comes and goes. Xue Tao may still be left behind. Her visual angle is relatively fixed, so she is able to wait until the river is quiet. The “*hong mei* 紅袂” or “red sleeves” she see in the water may not be the lotus flowers in blossom because at the beginning of the autumn they must have started to wither. A more reasonable explanation is that they are petals of lotus flowers. It is because “*cai lian* 採蓮” or “picking lotus” normally means to pick up lotus seeds in the middle of the flowers. Lotus pickers will take off the petals to get the tender seeds and so the petals are discarded to the water. Only in this situation the “red sleeves” can be “*man xi* 滿溪”, filling the brook. Also, the “*zhao ge* 櫂歌” is not necessarily “a boat song” since the sound of people is quiet. It may

be the sound of the oars paddling the water. No matter whether it is a song or the sound from the oars and water, it is harmonious with the atmosphere there.

"Lotus Picking" is a cliche in Chinese classic poetry. Lotus appears very early in *The Book of Songs* and there is a typical lotus picking poem in *Yue fu shi ji* 樂府詩集 in Han Dynasty. It is called "*Jiang nan* 江南" or "The Southern Rivershore" as follows

江南可採蓮，蓮葉何田田。魚戲蓮葉間。

魚戲蓮葉東，魚戲蓮葉西，魚戲蓮葉南，魚戲蓮葉北。

Gather lotus seed all the way!

How joyfully lotus leaves sway.

Among the lotus leaves fish play:

East of the lotus leaves fish play;

West of the lotus leaves fish play;

South of the lotus leaves fish play;

North of the lotus leaves fish play.[61]

In this poem the lotus picker is enjoying the scene of fish playing among the lotus leaves while working. Wen Yiduo 聞一多 (1899 – 1946) wrote in his "Shuo yu 說魚" or "Talking about Fish"[62] that "*lian* 蓮" is a homonym of "*lian* 憐" which means lovable or to love tenderly in this poem. Also, fish is a metaphor for men, lotus for women, and so the poem is actually talking about the love affair between men and women. "Lotus Picking Boat" has these two images too. Xue Tao may also suggest us a love affair in her

[61] Xu, Yuanchong 許淵沖 trans., *Gems of Classical Chinese Poetry* 新編千家詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), p.277.
[62] Wen, Yiduo 聞一多. *Wen yiduo quan ji* 聞一多全集 (Shanghai: Kai ming shu dian, 1970), p.121.

poem. However, she is always an observer of picking lotus seeds. She is not involved in such an affair. At last, she is even left far behind from the boat. She may feel lost or disappointed and that is why she stands there, chewing her sorrow but at the same time watching and listening to the natural world.

Furthermore, picking lotus seeds is usually considered as work for women, which is confirmed by many poems. For example, "*Xi zhou qu* 西洲曲", or "The Tune of West Bar", one of folk songs in Southern and Northern Dynasty, reads "Stepping outdoors, I do not see my spouse, And go to pick the lotus flowers red."[63] A girl is waiting for her lover, but he is late. So she goes out to pick up lotus seeds. This can also prove that there is a relationship between collecting lotuses and love. In Tang Dynasty, the situation was not changed. Li Bai once wrote "*Yue nü ci* 越女詞" or "Lyrics of Women of Yue" that "In Ye River there is a girl picking lotuses. Seeing visitors she sings a boat song while turning around."[64] Again, it is a woman who collects lotus seeds and the boat song is mentioned too, the same with Xue Tao's poem. As a result, it can be inferred that the people Xue Tao sees in the lotus picking boat are very likely women. Such a fact may be related to the analogy of "red sleeves". In many poems, the red sleeve is a synecdoche referring to a beauty. Bai Juyi once wrote "A pure song for now has been sung. Red sleeves also stop dancing."[65] The Red sleeves here must be one or more dancing girls. Xue Tao's use of "red sleeves" to analogize petals means that she believes that lotus is a symbol of woman. Also, the red sleeves are leftovers from the women on the boat. While

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[63] Wang, Rongpei trans., *300 Early Chinese Poems (206 BC—618 AD)* 漢魏六朝詩三百首 (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2006), p. 335. The original text is "開門郎不至，出門採紅蓮."
[64] *Quan tang shi*, p.1885. The original text is "耶溪採蓮女, 見客棹歌回."
[65] *Quan tang shi*, p. 4676. The original text is "清歌且罷唱,紅袂亦停舞" from "*Qin zhong yin* 秦中吟" or "Songs of Qin".

picking, their hands reach out of the boat and sleeves sway gently along with them. This could leave Xue Tao an impression of women's sleeves, mostly in red, still lingering around in the river although the boat has left.

The second poem, "A Pond of Water Caltrops and Duckweeds", is also describing a scene near water. It is a beautiful summer time because the willow has not withered and its branches are long enough to lie in the water. Also there are water caltrop flowers whose blooming season is the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. In such a season there are water caltrops, duckweeds, some other waterweeds, and willow branches floating in the pond. The water is so clear that the stems of duckweeds can be seen from the bank. The water is running slowly so that those stems stand in the pond slantingly. However, this beautiful scene is in somewhere far away from Xue Tao. She may be in a building from which the pond can be seen but not very clear. All the details of the scene in the first couplet may be her imagination of the pond. She is dreaming of going there personally, enjoying the scene on the bank, and boating in the water while picking some beautiful flowers of water caltrops, just as other women doing there.

The image of "*xing* 荇" has a long history in Chinese poetry, which first appears in the first poem of *The Book of Songs*. It is as follow:

參差荇菜，左右流之。窈窕淑女，寤寐求之。……

參差荇菜，左右采之。窈窕淑女，琴瑟友之。

參差荇菜，左右芼之。窈窕淑女，鐘鼓樂之。[66]

In patches grows the water mallow;

[66] Legge, *The Book of Poetry*, p.1.

To left and right one must seek it.

Shy was this noble lady;

Day and night he sought her...

In patches grows the water mallow;

To left and right one must gather it.

Shy is this noble lady;

With great zither and little we hearten her.

In patches grows the water mallow;

To left and right one must choose it.

Shy is this noble lady;

With bells and drums we will gladden her.[67]

There are a lot of arguments about this poem. However, fundamentally it is about finding a good and fair maiden as a match for a young man. The "duckweed", which is translated as water mallow by Waley, is used as a metaphor. The same as the duckweeds would be gathered, the beauty would be pursued. The duckweed symbolizes the love between young women and young men. Another image is "*liu* 柳". It is a homonym of "*liu* 留" or "to ask for stay" and also is a cliche in Chinese poetry. *The Book of Songs* also has verses about it, such as

昔我往矣，楊柳依依。[68]

Long ago, when we started,

The willows spread their shade.[69]

[67] Waley, *The Book of Songs*, p.5.
[68] Legge, *The Book of Poetry*, p.197.

These two lines come from "*Cai wei* 采薇" or "Plucking Bracken". The image of willow here symbolizes the unwillingness to part with lover, friends, or family. Later in the history of poetry, willow became a very popular image and so many other derived meanings were developed. However, its symbolizing the reluctance to part remained the basic meaning. For example, there is a couplet written by Wang Changling 王昌齡 (ca. 690 – ca. 756), which says that "Surprised to find the color of willows by the roadside, She regrets letting her man go after a marquisate."[70] The willow here represents the woman's longing for her husband. Anyway, willow can symbolize a feeling of missing or admiration.

The meaning of "*ling* 菱" is not as clear as the former two. Normally, a mirror is called a water caltrop flower mirror in poetry if it is hexagonal or has such a flower carved on the back. Such mirrors are always for women. Many poems also mention women's work of picking water caltrops. For example, in "*Cai ling xing* 采菱行" or "A Song of Gathering Water Caltrops" by Liu Yuxi there is "Drifting the boats, the wandering girls are full of the middle of the lake. Picking up water caltrops, they disregard the men on horseback."[71] Gathering water caltrop fruits, the same as lotus seeds, is considered as a job for women. Thus, the image of water caltrop is more or less associated with women.

All these three images together imply that the poet, Xue Tao, may be looking forward to a love affair. This feeling is not very strong but those plants in the natural world working as metaphors in poetry remind her of this. That is why she chooses these images in the

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[69] Waley, The Book of Songs, p.141.
[70] Lee, Joseph J. *Wang Ch'ang-ling* (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1982), p.107. The original text is "忽見陌頭楊柳色，悔教夫婿覓封侯."
[71] *Quan tang shi*, p. 280. The original text is "蕩舟遊女滿中央, 采菱不顧馬上郎."

poem. However, the same as in “Lotus Picking Boat”, Xue Tao is still an outsider. She is not able to get close to the pond, not to mention to pick flowers and boat in the pond and the river. It can be inferred that she cannot find a lover. Love for her is still a dream.

These two poems have a couple of things in common and the first thing is their points of view. As mentioned before, Xue Tao is an observer in both poems and keeps a certain distance from the scene she describes. She may feel disappointed about not being a part of the scene, which is more obvious in the second poem. The images in the poems imply that there is a longing for love hiding behind the beautiful scene. So Xue Tao’s disappointment is much likely related to her longing for love. However, her disappointment is not great. That happens in the poems are happy, good things, such as catching a fish, singing a song, appreciating a beautiful scene, picking up flowers, and drifting on a boat. On the other hand, if we treat the poems as simple *yongwu* poems, ignoring the extended meaning of those images, then we will find the tone of them is quite positive. What can we see in the first poem? A river of green lotus leaves with some pink or red flowers scattered among them. Some women are singing boat songs happily while working in the river. Rabbits and birds can be seen on the bank. The main color of such a picture is green and red, full of vitality. As for the second poem, the picture is a small pond connecting to a brook. All the things there are peaceful. The main color is green too. In either picture, there is no anxiousness or regret. There are only hopes and appreciation of the beautiful scenes. Thus, it may be inferred that Xue Tao composed these two poems at her younger age when she was still looking forward to pure love, at an age when she always dreamed of outdoor activities.

Close Reading 09

蟬

露滌音清遠，風吹故葉齊。聲聲似相接，各在一枝棲。

J. Cicadas

Cleansed by dew, their sound is pure and far.

The wind is blowing and the old leaves move in unison.

Singing and singing, they sound like close,

But each of them rests on a different branch.

鴛鴦草

綠英滿香砌，兩兩鴛鴦小。但娛春日長，不管秋風早。

K. Mandarin Duck Grass

Green flower buds fill the fragrant stairs.

In pairs, mandarin ducks are small.

They are only enjoying the long spring days,

regardless of the early coming of the autumn wind.

The style of these two poems is in resembles the genre of poems in *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*. They are both mourning for love.

The first poem, “Cicadas”, describes a picture in an autumn day. The dews in the morning may have not dried out, but the songs of cicadas can be heard. Their songs are pure and go a long way to the poet. The autumn wind blows over the dried-up leaves, which fly up and fall down in the wind in unison, and then may pile up tidily. Cicadas

sing again and again. They sound like very close to each other. However, with a close look, they are actually resting on different branches.

The poem can be divided into two parts. In the first couplet, Xue Tao may stand in a place where she can enjoy the scene and hear the songs. Cicadas sing harmonious and joyfully, which may arouse her interest; so she may walk closer to the place where the songs come from. The next picture is in the second couplet in which Xue Tao has already been close enough to the cicadas. It is like two shots while changing a view from different angles in a movie. The process of the walking is skipped and readers only get two pictures, one with a full view, the other one with details on cicadas.

The tone of the poem is sorrowful. The poet thought cicadas were happily singing together, but the truth is they are alone. The fact deviates from what she expected, which may make her disappointed. Also, such a fact is easily to be connected in the mind to the departed lovers. The lovers were together and had a happy time. They looked like the perfect match to each other. However, they are separated now. They may send letters and their souls still match, but their bodies are in different places. If it is the specific situation for Xue Tao, then she may be longing for her lover. That is why she eagerly wishes that cicadas were together, just as she wishes to be with her lover. Thus her disappointment is reasonable. She is not able to get together with her lover, so she wishes cicadas can do that. But even such a little is gone. How sad it is!

Moreover, the setting of the poem is sorrowful. It is an autumn day when leaves are dead and its color is withered yellow. With dews and wind, it must be cold. The sound we can hear in the picture is the blowing wind which brings cicadas' songs to further places. It is

quiet and lonely. Xue Tao may also feel sorry because the autumn cicadas are dying soon, but they may die alone.

The cicada is chanted again and again in Chinese Poetry. Ancient people thought it lives by drinking dews so that they treat it as a symbol for purity and nobility. Also, the singing cicada is definitely included in the lexicon of autumnal melancholy. “The Cicada Heard in Prison” written by Luo Binwang 駱賓王 (ca. 640 – ca. 684) is a good example. Normally, poets would like to use it in the poems according to their own situations. Thus, the cicada is never a fixed symbol. Xue Tao’s way of chanting the cicada is, to some degree, original in the history. Until Song Dynasty, there were other poems in Lyric form singing the cicada specifically, such as “Cicadas, To the Tune of Qi tian” written by Wang Yisun 王沂孫 (ca. 1230 – ca. 1291).

The title of the second poem is “Mandarin Duck Grass”. It is also called “*ren dong* 忍冬”, or “*jin yin hua* 金銀花”, which is one of honeysuckles, a kind of arching shrubs or twining vines. Its leaves are opposite, always in pairs. As a result, people give it a new name as mandarin duck grass. And “*yuan yang* 鴛鴦” or “mandarin ducks” are always shown in pairs. They are regarded to never change their lovers until death and so become a symbol of conjugal affection and fidelity. For example, in a well-known folk song “*Gu shi wei Jiao Zhongqing qi zuo* 古詩為焦仲卿妻作” or “An Old Poem Composed for the Wife of Jiao Zhongqing”, after the lovers’ death, there are birds around their tomb. It is said

中有雙飛鳥，自名為鴛鴦。仰頭相向鳴，夜夜達五更。

A pair of peacocks fly amid the leaves,

Like birds of love residing under eaves.

They echo each other in their song,

Singing in deep anguish all night long.[72]

Mandarin ducks are birds for love. They come to the lovers' tomb, guarding them and mourning for their love. Xue Tao's poem is not about the bird, but she uses the fancy name of the grass, instead of the other two. It definitely suggests that the poem is talking about love.

What is the picture in the poem? It is a spring day when mandarin duck grasses grow wildly to the stairs. Their small flower buds are still green, waiting for be blooming. They are in pairs, facing each other and giving out sweet odor. Just as mandarin ducks, they look like playing together in the warm spring wind. This is a scene described in the first couplet.

The second couplet talks about the feeling of the mandarin duck grasses. They feel so comfortable in such a beautiful spring day that they do not care about the coming of the autumn. And the autumn is the season when they are going to wither away and be departed. This could be a personification. The flower buds were endowed with personal qualities. They are young and innocent, and also happy to be together with their lovers. They never think of anything which could separate them. In this case, Xue Tao may be recollecting her memory in the past when she was young and happy with her lover, just like the mandarin duck grass. She is sorrowful for herself because she never thought that

[72] Wang, *300 Early Chinese Poems (206 BC—618 AD)*, p.127.

the departure of her lover came so fast. There is a tone of self-mockery because she was so naive to believe in forever love. However, she also cherishes those happy days with her lover, so the mandarin duck grasses in her eyes at that moment are still lovely and beautiful.

Instead of a personification, another possibility is that it is Xue Tao's feeling of the grass. She sees that they are flourishing, and so cannot help thinking of their withering in autumn. In other words, she is worried for their separation even though their love has just started. Why is she so pessimistic? It is much likely because she has experienced such a process, falling love, being together as body and shadow, and then the separation. If not so, why is she alone by the side of the stairs in such a lovely spring day? She is lonely, and the grasses may arouse her memories of the past. At that moment, she may be mourning for her own love and so feels sympathy for the flower buds in that their happiness is destined to be temporary.

These two *yongwu* poems are relatively simple and easy to be understood. They both focus on small things and the field of vision is not open. The pictures may be parts of an enclosed garden. Xue Tao, as a discarded woman, may be wandering in the garden while she finds the cicadas and mandarin duck grasses. She uses them to express her sorrow for love. This is quite similar to some poems in *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*. For example, there is a poem called "Mo shang sang 陌上桑" or "Mulberry up the lane" as follow:

嫋嫋陌上桑，蔭陌復垂塘。長條映白日，細葉隱鸝黃。

蠶飢妾復思，拭淚且提筐。故人寧知此，離恨煎人腸。[73]

Lithe, lithe mulberry up the path

Shades the path and overhangs the bank,

Long twigs reflecting white sunlight,

Fine leaves hiding oriole yellow.

Silkworm hunger turns my thoughts to love,

I wipe my tears and lift my basket.

How can my past love know of this?

The hate of separation seethes in my hearts.[74]

The scene of a mulberry reminds the poet's separation with her lover. She also pays attention to the details of the tree, and her view is not very open too. It is similar to Xue Tao's two poems, but its emotion is stronger and so more obvious. The difference is that it is not in an enclosed garden; instead, the scene is by the side of a path and the woman is working there. However, this is a poem imitating the style of ancient writers. In New Songs from a Jade Terrace, Birrell points out that "One of the most frequent representations of a woman in these poems is as a divorced or deserted wife…Another recurring role is that of a discarded courtesan…What they have in common is that the woman remains behind while the man moves on. The woman usually waits in hopeless longing within her boudoir…the passing of love is mourned."[75] Xue Tao's poems are not exactly the same to the description here, but her theme is very much the same. She is

[73] Xu, *Yu tai xin yong*, p.132.
[74] Birrell, New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry, p.163.
[75] Birrell, New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry, p.14.

discarded by her lover and enclosed in a garden. She is doing nothing except waiting for him and mourning for her love.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF XUE TAO'S POEMS

I choose 13 of Xue Tao's *yongwu* poems, which are all "lü shi 律詩" or regulated verses, to do close reading. Among them, there may be two, "West Cliff" and "A Pond of Water Caltrops and Duckweeds", which stand in the grey area between the *yongwu* poem and the landscape poem. Another one, "Reply to someone's 'Amusing ourselves among the bamboo trees after a rain'", may on the border of the *yongwu* poem and the reply poem. Further research uncovers that most of them are in the guise of chanting things but actually the main idea is expressing her feelings. Although the main characteristic of the *yongwu* poem is to convey feelings through the object, some of Xue Tao's poems go further than that. For example, in the "West Cliff" the description of the rock itself is completely skipped. The rock's only function is that it reminds Xue Tao of the whale rider. Another example is "Lotus Picking Boat" in which the boat is also not described in details. The poem is more like a short section extracted from one of Xue Tao's days, and the boat is something outstanding in that section. The most important thing hiding behind the scene is her feelings and thoughts.

Xue Tao follows the convention of classical poetry. She has extensive knowledge of Chinese culture, from *The Book of Songs* and *The Songs of the South* to Taoism and folk songs in Southern and Northern Dynasty, which can be inferred from her appropriate use of allusions in her poems. The allusions can always be integrated into the poems naturally. Also, the quantity of allusions in one poem is not too large, but they are always vital for readers to understand the whole poem. In some poems, such as "Autumn Spring" and "A

Pond of Water Caltrops and Duckweeds", there is no allusion, but traditional poetic images are properly used, such as autumn, *qin*, willow, water caltrop, and duckweed. This makes her, as Larsen suggests in her dissertation, a member in the literary community of Mid-Tang China.

However, Xue Tao also has her originality. In "Reply to someone's 'Amusing ourselves among the bamboo trees after a rain'", she analogizes bamboo to herself, giving a new meaning to the image of bamboo which traditionally symbolizes gentleman or man of goodwill. In "In Huanhua Pavilion accompanying the head of Chuan, Master Wang Bo, I compose a poem on early chrysanthemums together with him and his colleagues" she emphasizes the multiple functions of chrysanthemum, which is hardly seen in the poetic tradition. "Wind" follows the tradition of landscape poetry but mixed with emotions of a sorrowful exiled spirit as Qu Yuan, which is also not common in her time.

There is a female voice in many of her poems. Jeanne Larsen believes that in Xue Tao's poems "the borders between 'masculine' and 'feminine' personae blur," and "the number of poems that one would absolutely say must have been written by a woman are few."[76] However, my study supports a contrary view. For example, the poem "Reply to someone's 'Amusing ourselves among the bamboo trees after a rain'" reflects Xue Tao's worry about being older and her wish of being appreciated by men. The female voice here is quite clear. Another example is "Three Poems on Trying On New Clothes Which Were Just Tailored". The speaker's happiness originates from the beauty of her new dress and she is sensitive to the details of the dress, both of which contribute to the tone of a woman. Moreover, poems like "Cicadas" and "Mandarin Duck Grass" can be composed

[76] Larsen, "The Chinese Poet Xue Tao: The Life And Works of A Mid-Tang Woman", p.500.

by a man who imitates a girl's tone. This is very common and a part of poetic convention. And poems like "Lotus Picking Boat" and "A Pond of Water Caltrops and Duckweeds", the poet could be a man as a viewer from outside. He could see both the speaker and the scene, and so imagine the feelings of the speaker. However, all four poems surely has a female voice.

Xue Tao is restrained from expressing feelings. In those sorrowful poems, she uses setting to paint her sadness without tell readers directly how sad she is. "Wind" and "Autumn Spring" are two examples. The scenes of both poems are desolate, and its color is dark. The sound heard in the scenes can only make atmosphere more quiet and lonely. However, the speaker does not exist in neither of the scene. Although the "Autumn Spring" mentions "a sorrowful person", it is from a third-person point of view which means that the sorrowful person is not necessarily the poet herself. It looks like that the poet, Xue Tao, holds her sorrow while picturing the setting. Her way of expressing happiness is similar. In "Three Poems on Trying On New Clothes Which Is Just Tailored", she uses a smile of Chang'e, colorful patterns originated from God of Spring, a party in the heaven, etc., to build an atmosphere charged with excitement, so that her happiness can be shown.

Many poems have very rich meanings and can be read in different ways. The poem about bamboo can be a simple *yongwu* poem, but with a further study it can be construed as a poem praising the poet herself. In the poem "Moon", the speaker is enjoying the moon, or maybe she is also longing for her lover. Another possibility is that the scene of the moon is so beautiful that the speaker wants to share it with the other people in the world. The poem about chrysanthemum may be written for the sake of the flowers themselves, or for

Wang Bo and his colleagues. Furthermore, it is not clear which couplet in the “West Cliff” is refers to Xue Tao herself, and which couplet addresses her mysterious friend. Since there are multiple ways to read these poems, readers with different experiences may have different responses while reading them. A reader may even find that he or she will have various feelings while reading it in different periods of life.

The meanings of some of her poems are quite open. A good example is the “West Cliff ” whose theme is ambiguous. Whom is the speaker longing for? What is the relationship between them? Who is the hesitating one and who is the tipsy one? Those are questions without any clear answer; nevertheless, the emotions in the poem are rich. There are another two poems, “Wind” and “Autumn Spring”, which have open meanings. Both of them show the feelings of sorrow, but the causes of the sorrow are unknown. These poems are quite open and may easily arouse sympathy from readers.

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