Self-representation in Selected Poems of Gu Taiqing (1799-1877)

Li-Ting Chang

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2

Part of the Chinese Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.7275/24408251.0 https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2/1087

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
SELF-REPRESENTATION IN SELECTED POEMS OF GU TAIQING (1799-1877)

A Thesis Presented

by

Li-Ting Chang

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2021

Chinese
SELF-REPRESENTATION IN SELECTED POEMS OF GU TAIQING (1799-1877)

A Thesis Presented

by

LI-TING CHANG

Approved as to style and content by:

___________________________________________
Elena Suet-Ying Chiu, Chair

___________________________________________
Zhongwei Shen, Member

___________________________________________
Zhijun Wang, Member

___________________________________________
Bruce Baird, Unit Director
East Asian Languages and Cultures Program
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

___________________________________________
Robert G. Sullivan, Chair
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures
DEDICATION

To my family and Kyle Chang.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank my thesis advisor, Professor Elena Suet-Ying Chiu, for her time and advice. She has meticulously read every draft and paragraph of my thesis and provided insightful comments, which helped me grow and improve my academic writing as a researcher. Also, she has guided me on how to conduct academic research and do a close reading and recommended much helpful supplementary reading. I will always view her as my mentor and appreciate her guidance, efforts, and patience.

I would like to show my appreciation for Professor Zhongwei Shen and Professor Zhijun Wang for being my committee members. I have found my thesis topic and learned research skills with Professor Shen’s valuable suggestions. His dedication and passion for research have inspired me to put more effort into my thesis. Professor Wang’s genuine support and encouragement during my writing process have motivated me, which I am very grateful for.

I appreciate my classmate, Robert Canning, for his caring, help, and time. He has commented on multiple drafts of my thesis and helped me with proofreading them. Moreover, I want to thank my important emotional support, Kai-Hsiang Chang and Li-Wei Chang, for their encouragement and company in challenging situations. Without them, I could not have accomplished this thesis.
ABSTRACT

SELF-REPRESENTATION IN SELECTED POEMS OF GU TAIQING (1799-1877)

September 2021

Li-Ting Chang, B.A., NATIONAL TAIWAN UNIVERSITY
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Elena Suet-Ying Chiu

Gu Taiqing 顧太清 (1799-1877) is one of the most famous and prolific female writers in the late Qing. In this thesis, I focus on her poems and lyrics on three important subjects, self-portrayals, plum blossoms, and Qingfengge 清風閣 (Clear Breeze Pavilion), in her two poetry collections, Tianyou geji 天遊閣集 (Collected Poems of Heavenly Travels Studio) and Donghai yuge 東海漁歌 (Songs of the Fisherman of the Eastern Sea), in order to advance the current scholarship on this female author and Ming-Qing women’s writings and reveal the uniqueness of Gu’s poetry. My study addresses how she represents herself, recounts her life experiences, and engages in the poetic tradition established by men. By examining her voices and images embedded in her poems, I argue that she creates her own expressions of female voices as an elite woman, a mother, and a female companion for her friends and her husband through the incorporation of her life experiences, both inside and outside her inner quarters. Most female figures portrayed by male poets are desired, static, subordinate, and longing for their absent lovers in their boudoir. Differentiating from the common women’s image, Gu shows her literary creation and women’s subjectivity by taking an active role, as opposed to a passive one. She describes a self-contented life and creates a delightful atmosphere in the spatial setting of her inner
quarters. She also writes about her activities outside her boudoir and narrates her travel experiences as a female poet in her poems, in which she constructs her image as a subject that appreciates nature and is emotionally attached to her family. Moreover, my study discovers the approaches that she takes to negotiate between her reputation as a talented poet and her image as a learned lady, given the high moral standard expected from the late Qing elite women. Constructing her image associated with Confucian morality, she highlights her dedication to womanly learning and suggests that women’s literary talent and virtue are reconcilable.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 A Talented and Virtuous Woman</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 An Educated Woman in Her Inner Quarters</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 A Daoist Female Role</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 A Characterization of Women as Plum Blossoms</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Companionship of Plum Blossoms</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Plum Blossoms as a Subject Portrayed by Gu and Her Friends</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Flowers and Meditation</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The First Excursion to Qingfengge: The Female Poet’s Aspiration to Follow the Dao</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 The Outing Experience: The Relationship between Women and Nature</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Qingfengge and Female Voices as a Widow and a Mother</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Gu Chun 顧春, also known as Gu Taiqing or Yuncha Waishi 雲槎外史, courtesy names, Zichun 子春 or Meixian 梅仙, came from a Manchu family, the Xilin 西林 (or Xilin Jueluo 西林覺羅) clan of the Bordered Blue Banner (Xianglan Qi 鑲藍旗). She was one of the most famous Qing (1644-1911) female poets and was believed to be the author of the first Chinese novel written by a woman. I aim to shed light on the female voices in Gu’s poems and the uniqueness that she shows in a poetic tradition established by men. I argue that she creates her women’s expressions by integrating her life experiences as an elite woman, a female companion for her friends and Yihui, and a mother in her poetry.

To summarize Gu’s life, I highlight four points of her biography and autobiography provided by Ellen Widmer while also consulting other research conducted by scholars such as Zhang Juling 張菊玲 and Zhang Zhang 張璋. First, her life before 1824 is not clear since historical accounts of her early life are relatively few. Although Gu was a Manchu elite woman, she had a Chinese surname, Gu. This ambiguity has aroused controversy among scholars. Based on Wilt Idema and Beata Grant’s introduction, some scholars have believed that Gu was raised by a Chinese bondservant family by this surname, whereas others have stated that Gu attempted to escape the shadow cast by her family when she was married to Yihui. Besides Gu’s surname, scholars have held different views of where Gu lived in her childhood. Zhang Juling has stated that Gu lived in Beijing and probably went

---


2 Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 630.
to Fujian and Jiangnan.\(^3\) Jin Qicong 金啓 孚 and Jin Shi 金適 have argued that Gu lived in Xiangshan in Beijing before 1815.\(^4\) Zhang Zhang has claimed that Gu lived in Beijing before 1809 and pointed out that she once traveled to Fujian and Guangdong and stayed in Hangzhou and Suzhou for a while.\(^5\)

Second, Gu had a happy marriage as a concubine between 1824 and 1838 with Aixin Jueluo Yihui 愛新覺羅奕繪 (1799-1838, courtesy name Zizhang 子章), a grandson of the fifth son Yongqi 永琪 (1741-1766) of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795).\(^6\) Because Yihui was a distant relative of Gu, it is believed that they had fallen in love long before they got married.\(^7\) Gu learned how to write *shi* poems and *ci* lyrics from Yihui. Based on Zhang Juling’s work, they composed more than one hundred matching poems on a variety of themes.\(^8\) The titles of their lyrics collections are even matched with each other: Gu’s *Donghai yuge* 東海漁歌 (Songs of the Fisherman of the Eastern Sea) to Yihui’s is *Nangu qiaochang* 南谷樵唱 (Wood-cutter’s Songs of Southern Valley). In their leisure time, they shared poems, exchanged paintings, studied texts, and went on excursions to

---


\(^8\) For Gu and Yihui’s matching poems, see Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 75-88.
places near Beijing, such as Shuangqiao Temple, Tanzhe Temple, the Ci river, and many more sites.

Based on Zhang Zhang and Zhang Juling’s research, Gu and Yihui had a strong interest in Daoist and Buddhist philosophy and practice, especially Chan Buddhism. They often visited monasteries, attended religious festivals and lectures, and studied Daoist and Buddhist texts from 1833 to 1838. As Beata Grant has proved, Gu’s style name, “Taiqing,” refers to great clarity and the Daoist school, Shangqing 上清. The title of her poetry collection, Tianyou geji 天遊閣集 (Collected Poems of Heavenly Travels Studio), comes from the phrase “if the mind does not have its Heavenly wanderings, then the six apertures of sensation will defeat each other” (心無天遊, 則六鑿相攘) in “Waiwu” 外物 (External Things) of Zhuangzi. Grant has also highlighted the importance of the friendship among Gu, her husband, and a Daoist master named Zhang Kunhe 張坤鶴 (1770-1840). By examining Gu’s poems on Baiyun Guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Monastery) and Zhang Kunhe, Grant has argued that this set of poems represent a spiritual and emotional period of Gu’s life shared with Yihui. In light of Grant’s research, I am aware that as an individual, Daoism and Buddhism deeply affected Gu, and as a female poet, she wrote a significant number of poems featuring religious events and figures in her

---

9 Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cainü, 35-6; Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 3-7, 729.


literary works. I aim to advance Grant’s work by demonstrating how Gu’s Daoist and Buddhist understanding contributes to her female personas and images in her poetry.

Third, Yihui passed away in 1838. Gu lost her beloved husband and happy marriage. Within three months of Yihui’s death, Gu was forced to take her four children and leave Yihui’s mansion in Beijing. Why Gu was kicked out has been debated among scholars. Based on Widmer’s summary, one scholar has stated that Yihui’s eldest son, Zaijun (1818-1857), forced Gu to leave the mansion when he inherited Yihui’s title. Others have suggested that her banishment was due to the severe accusation of an affair with a Qing poet, Gong Zizhen (1792-1841).

Jin Qicong, however, has argued that Gu was asked to move out of the mansion because of Yihui’s mother. She heard a rumor that Gu intended to let Zaizhao (1825-1881), Yihui and Gu’s first son, inherit Yihui’s title. More importantly, since Yihui passed away on the same day of the birthday of Zaizhao, Yihui’s mother would be reminded of her son’s death every year when her grandson celebrated his birthday, which only reinforced her sadness for losing her son. As a result, Yihui’s mother kicked Gu and her children out of the mansion on October 28th, 1838.

Although Gu received financial support from Yihui’s mother, she still had to sustain herself and her children after being deprived of her right to live in the mansion. In a

---

12 For more discussion on the scandal of Gu and Gong, see Han Li, “Triangulating Filial Piety, Ethnicity, and Nation in Late-Qing China: The Lilac Affair in Zeng Pu’s ‘Niehai hua’” Asia Major Third Series, 26, no. 2 (2013): 89-120.

13 Jin Qicong and Jin Shi, Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian, 820-21.

14 Ellen Widmer, The Beauty and the Book, 187. For information on their children, see Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cainü, 35-6.
poem’s title, she recorded that she had no choice but to sell her jewelry to purchase a new house to live in, which shows the hardship that she went through:

On the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month, My Husband Departed This World and on the Twenty-eighth Day of the Tenth Month, I Was Ordered to Take My Two Sons, Zhao and Chu, and My Two Daughters, Shuwen and Yiwen, Leave the House and Move Out of the Neighborhood. Since We Had Nowhere to Go, I Sold Off My Gold Phoenix Hairpins, and by So Doing Was Able to Get a Place to Live. I Wrote This Poem as a Record of This.

七月七日先夫子棄世，十月廿八奉堂上命攜釗初兩兒，叔文以文兩女移居邸外，無所棲遲，賣以金鳳釵購得住宅一區，賦詩以紀之

Fourth, Gu’s friendships and the women’s poetry club, Qiuhong yinshe 秋紅吟社 (Red Autumn Poetry Club), were significant to her personal life and literary achievements. The members of the club included multiple famous female writers, Xu Yunlin 許雲林 (early nineteenth century), Xu Yunjiang 許雲姜 (early nineteenth century), Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808-1862), and more. They gifted their poems and paintings to each other. They also traveled together, such as climbing mountains, visiting temples, or gathering at a friend’s house. Moreover, several scholars, such as Zhang Juling and Cho Ching-Fen 卓清芬, have already proved that Gu’s female friends not only became her literary companions that shared the same hobbies and aesthetic standards, but they also alleviated Gu’s grief from her husband’s death.17

15 The original line is “Take My Two Sons, Jian and Chu, and My Two Daughters, Shuwen and Shuyi.” I replaced her children’s names, Jian and Shuyi with Zhao and Yiwen based on the poem in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 104.

16 For the poem in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 104. For the translation of the poem, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 633.

Women’s writing significantly increased during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing. In Hu Wenkai’s 胡文楷 Lidai funü zhuzuo kao 歷代婦女著作考 (A Study of Women’s Works Throughout the Dynasties), there were only about one hundred women writers recorded before the Ming, whereas there were approximately 4300 female writers in late imperial China.\(^{18}\) Also, as Xiaorong Li has observed, the anthology compiled by Yunzhu 惲珠 (1771-1833), Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji 國朝閨秀正史集 (Correct Beginnings: Women’s Poetry of Our Dynasty), was one of the largest collections of Qing women’s poems. This anthology and its sequel included more than three thousand poems by over 1500 women authors. It represented the expansion of women’s literary culture during the Qing.\(^{19}\) This trend shows that Gu lived in an era of unprecedented growth in women’s writing.

More women started to write literary works and attempted to publish them. However, through a well-known Chinese saying, “a woman without talent is virtuous” (女子無才便是德), it is worth noting the common view that being talented was not necessary for women in pre-modern China. One of the Confucian classics, Liji 禮記 (Records of the Rites/The Book of Rites), suggests that women should cultivate side 四德 (four womanly virtues): de 德 (morality), yan 言 (speech), rong 容 (appearance), and gong 功 (works).\(^{20}\)

---

\(^{18}\) Hu Wenkai, Lidai funü zhuzuo kao (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 1-36.

\(^{19}\) Xiaorong Li, “Gender and Textual Politics during the Qing Dynasty: The Case of the Zhengshi ji,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 69, no. 1 (June 2009): 75.

\(^{20}\) Chen Hao 陳澔 ed., Liji (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 325.
The writing was not an activity in which virtuous women should engage. Ban Zhao’s 班昭 (45? -117?) Nüjie 女誡 (Precepts for My Daughter) and the Tang texts, Nü xiaojing 女孝經 (Classic of Filiality for Women) and Nü lunyu 女論語 (Analects for Women), all of which emphasize the notion of side and provide detailed instructions on how women should practice the four virtues.\textsuperscript{21}

There was a considerable debate centering on whether writing talent should be a requirement for elite women during the eighteenth century. A famous Qing poet, Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798), encouraged his female disciples to compose poems and publish them. To argue against Yuan, Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801) stated that “Now talent requires study, and study values intelligence. As Confucius said, talent undisciplined by study is mere cleverness. A merely clever person who had no intelligence will have no talent” (夫才須學也，學貴識也，才而不學，是為小慧，小慧無識，是為不才).\textsuperscript{22} Zhang referred to the ancient classics, such as Zhouli 周禮 (Rites of Zhou), Yijing 易經 (Book of Changes), and Shijing 詩經 (Book of Odes/Classic of Poetry/Book of Poetry), to justify the idea that women should always compose poetry based on Confucian learning:

The women’s learning of ancient times always began with the rites and then turned to poetry. The women’s learning of today is just the reverse; it uses poetry to destroy the rites…To dress up a fashionable but middling writer and portray her as the best that the women’s quarters can produce, and then to use this as a basis for ranking her poetry is really nothing more than expressing a physical desire for her…The term to use in praising a woman is “serene.” To be serene is very near to learning. But the women who are called “talented” today— how they bustle around! What a dreadful noise they make!

\textsuperscript{21} For more explanation, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 11-6.

\textsuperscript{22} For the lines in Chinese, see Zhang Xuecheng, Wenshi tongyi jiaozhu 文史通義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 531-37. For the translation, see Haun Saussy and Kang-i Sun Chang ed., Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 794-98.
Zhang did not completely deny women’s writing, but he reinforced the view that learning was the foundation of writing by comparing contemporary women, Yuan’s female disciples in particular, and the women in ancient times. Women in the previous periods prioritized Confucian learning. However, from Zhang’s perspective, contemporary women only aimed for literary fame and ignored the importance of learning. Their writings were valueless and even violated the Confucian tradition.

The debate between Yuan and Zhang influenced women authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These authors would take approaches to legitimize their literary works when they published them. For example, Grace Fong has discovered that the prefaces (序) of Ming-Qing female authors’ collections usually center more on their contributions as female individuals than as female poets to emphasize their ethical character and strengthen the notion that their literary achievement affirms their dedication to virtue. Xiaorong Li has pointed out that Yunzhu highlights the concept of zheng 正 (orthodox/correct) in the anthology’s title: Correct Beginnings: Women’s Poetry of Our Dynasty because this concept refers to the “being gentle and earnest” (wenrou dunhou 溫柔敦厚) principle originated in The Book of Rites and the teaching of the Shijing (Shijiao...
Yunzhu aims to show that all women’s poems in her anthology follow and confirm Confucian morals. After carefully studying previous research, I am aware that Ming-Qing women authors tried to give the impression that their literary works were to confirm Confucian values and reinforce their womanly virtue instead of earning fame. In order to advance the existing scholarship on Gu and Ming-Qing women’s writing, I aim to shed light on the strategies this late Qing author takes to respond to the debate centering on women’s talent and virtue.

Writing for approximately sixty years, Gu was a prolific late Qing female writer. Based on Zhang Shuqin’s research, Gu composed 826 poems and 333 lyrics, two drama plays, and a novel. Gu had two collections: a poetry collection, *Collected Poems of Heavenly Travels Studio*, and a lyrics collection, *Songs of the Fisherman of the Eastern Sea*. She wrote the first extant Chinese novel authored by a woman, *Honglou Meng ying* (Shadows of the Dream of the Red Chamber), which was a sequel to the Qing novel by Cao Xueqin (1717? -1763?), *Honglou Meng* (The Dream of the Red Chamber).

Gu was more famous for her lyrics, but I also pay close attention to her poems because both her lyrics and poems are vital for me to comprehensively examine what kinds of voices and images that Gu creates in her poetry. I use Zhang Zhang’s *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji* as my primary resource to analyze Gu’s poems on three subject matters, self-

---

25 Xiaorong Li, “Gender and Textual Politics during the Qing Dynasty,” 82-3.


portrayals, plum blossoms, and Qingfengge 清風閣 (Clear Breeze Pavilion), in her two literary collections. Zhang’s edition, which consults other editions, is mainly based on the original manuscripts owned by Chen Shike 陳士可 (or Chen Shiyi 陳士毅). His edition also includes the comments made by two Qing critics, Kuang Zhouyi 冒周亷 (1859-1926) and Mao Guangsheng 冒廣生 (1873-1959). For the translations of Gu’s poems and other passages, I translate the major portion of them, but I also refer to the published translations by Idema, Grant, and other scholars as indicated in the footnotes.

Gu’s personal life and literary works drew attention from contemporary scholars. For example, Shen Shanbao and Kuang Zhouyi commented on Gu’s poetry. Shen, one of Gu’s very close friends, said: “all works in Collected Poems of Heavenly Travels Studio are entirely based on the spirit and they are never limited to the certain rules” (天遊閣集中諸作, 全以神行, 絕不拘拘綢繆) in Mingyuan shihua 名媛詩話 (Remarks on Poetry by Notable Women). Shen praised Gu’s poems, “ingenious thought and clever imagination, often unexpected” (巧思慧想, 出人意外). Moreover, Kuang Zhouyi claimed that Gu is comparable with one of the most distinguished male lyrics writers in the Qing, Nalan Xingde 納蘭性德 (1654-1685). In the preface to Songs of the Fisherman of the Eastern

---

28 For Gu’s poetry publication, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 702-18.

29 For the Chinese lines, see Shen Shaobao, Mingyuan shihua, in Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), j.8.2b. For the translation, see Qiaole Huang, “Writing from within a Women’s Community: Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) and Her Poetry” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 2004), 6-7.

30 For the Chinese lines, see Shen Shaobao, Mingyuan shihua, j.8.4b. For the translation, see Qiaole Huang, “Writing from within a Women’s Community,” 6-7.

Sea, Kuang indicated that Gu acquired her writing skills mainly from the Song poets, including Zhou Bangyan 周邦彦 (1056-1121) and Jiang Kui 姜夔 (1155-1221). In terms of styles, Kuang suggested that the beauty of her poetry does not lie in a single word or phrase; rather, it lies in its overall atmosphere:

The beauty of Taiqing’s song lyrics resides in their overall atmosphere rather than in [specific] words and phrases. If one looks for it in the total form or general organization, one finds it impossible to put one’s finger on any one or two things, or on the artistry and craft of this sound or that word.

Shen and Kuang’s comments and their aesthetic criteria have inspired my study. When I examine her poems, I pay close attention to the overall atmosphere and spirit embedded in her poems to highlight the uniqueness of Gu’s poems and how this female author engages in the poetic tradition.

Modern scholars in Asia, including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and more, have researched Gu and Ming-Qing women’s literary cultures. In Zhang Juling’s book, *Kuangdai cainü: Gu Taiqing*, Zhang has proved that Gu’s literary works are closely related

---


to her life events and has given readers one of the most detailed historical accounts of Gu’s life. Based on Zhang’s studies, I further demonstrate how Gu’s different female roles: an elite woman, a mother, a widow, and a female companion for her friends, contribute to the female articulation in her poetry.

Zhang Zhang has indicated that Gu’s poetry describes the vicissitudes of life and expresses the individual’s thoughts and sentiments because of her rich life experiences. As a late Qing elite woman who lived for seventy-nine years, her poems reflect the social changes during the late Qing and portray the ups and downs of a Manchu elite family. Also, Zhang Zhang has summarized three features of Gu’s poetry. First, her poetry reveals profound insight with simple and understandable language. Second, Gu often writes the xìng 形 (forms) of objects, such as flowers and birds, to portray their shen 神 (spirits) and explains her understanding of life through simple matters. Third, corresponding to Kuang’s comments, the beauty of Gu’s poems manifests through its overall atmosphere and organization.

Deng Hongmei 鄧紅梅 has examined around seventy female lyrics writers from the Tang (618-907) to the late Qing. As Deng has observed, most Ming-Qing poetesses convey their melancholic and depressed emotions in their writing. However, Gu centers more on how she transcends her turmoil, often through Daoist and Buddhist contemplation. Huang Yanli 黃嫣梨 has demonstrated the social and cultural changes in

---

34 Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cainü, 37-184.
35 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 5.
36 Ibid., 6-10.
terms of marriage, economy, and religion from the Qing to the early Republican period through the literary works of four women: Gu Taiqing, Xu Can 徐灿 (1628? -1681?), Wu Zao 吳藻 (1799-1863?), and Lü Bicheng 呂碧城 (1883-1943).³⁸

Although most Qing female authors wrote in the shi genre, Wang Li-Jian 王力堅 has examined their poems, dramas, letters, and Shen Shanbao’s Mingyuan shihua 名媛詩話 (Remarks on Poetry by Notable Women). Wang has argued that the Qing female authors tended to create masculinized voices in their literary works.³⁹ According to Ho Yu Hin 何宇軒, women’s texts contributed to the constructions of masculinities in the Ming and Qing through two approaches. First, women authors voiced their expectations of men, such as their sons, husbands, and brothers; second, they created their images as nüzhong zhangfu 女中丈夫 (heroes among women) and other different male roles in their literary works.⁴⁰ Wang and Ho have dedicated themselves to masculinized voices embedded in women’s literary works, but I aim to advance the scholarship on Ming-Qing women by showing feminized expressions of Gu, a late Qing poetess.

Many scholars in the West have conducted research on Gu and focused on various aspects of Ming-Qing women’s writings and cultures. McGill-Harvard-Yenching Library’s digitization project, Ming Qing Women’s Writings, has provided scanned manuscripts of women’s literary collections, helping scholarly researchers access free online resources.

³⁸ Huang Yanli, Qingdai sida nüciren: Zhuanxingzhong de Qingdai zhishi nüxing 清代四大女詞人: 轉型中的清代知識女性 (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 2002).

³⁹ Wang Li-Jian, Qingdai caiyuan wenxue zhi wenhua kaocha 清代才媛文學之文化考察 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2006).

⁴⁰ Ho Yu Hin, “A Study of Women’s Roles in Constructing Masculinities in Ming-Qing China” (PhD diss., Hong Kong Baptist University, 2017).
This project includes abundant resources on Gu: her two literary collections, her poems selected in anthologies: *Correct Beginnings: Women's Poetry of Our Dynasty* and *Guixiu cichao* (Women’s Lyrics Draft), and the comments on her poetry made by Kuang Zhouyi, Shen Shanbao, Mao Guangsheng, and more.41

Wilt Idema and Beata Grant have introduced Gu’s biographical and autobiographical information and translated over twenty of Gu’s poems and lyrics, as well as parts of *Honglou Meng ying*. They have maintained that Gu’s poetry gives a detailed account of her everyday life, and they have pointed out multiple unconventional subject matters that Gu wrote about, such as marionettes, children at play, and pets.42 I would like to summarize two points made by Idema and Grant to reply to these two scholars and indicate how my study moves their research forward. First, they have observed that Gu greatly conveys her remembrance of Yihui’s support as a husband and a father once she figured out where to live and how to support herself and her children financially.43 I focus on Gu’s poetry on one of the most important places to Yihui, Qingfengge, to examine how she reinforces her female expressions as a widow and a mother. Second, Idema and Grant have noticed that Gu shows a special fascination for plum blossoms.44 I further analyze her poems on this subject to demonstrate the correlation between the flowers and women’s articulation.

41 For more information on the project, see Grace Fong, “Ming Qing Women’s Writings: A Digital Archive and Database of Women’s Literature and History in Late Imperial China,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 217-25 and visit the website of *Ming Qing Women’s Writings*: https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/.


43 Ibid., 633.

44 Ibid., 636.
Wang Yanning has observed that Gu’s poems on travel reflect her strong desire to record her life experiences and to be seen by others via two main approaches: the long informative titles and the annotations (zizhu 自註) between poetic lines. Among these poems, Gu mostly creates pleasant atmospheres and writes about excursions to temples, scenic spots, and estates. In addition, Wang has pointed out that temples stand out as the most important subject matter in these poems because of Gu’s religious pursuit and cultural activities.

Lin Zhihui has examined the documentation on Qing women’s everyday lives, which concerns womanly appearance and womanly work in their literary works. Lin has suggested that the writing about women’s activities in their inner quarters, self-adornment, looking in the mirror, garment making, eating, and cooking reinforces their commitment to Confucian virtue. Hence, Lin has argued that women’s daily practices were not only womanly duties, but also an approach for late Qing female writers to empower themselves and show their female subjectivity.

In a master’s thesis, “Writing from within a Women’s Community: Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) and Her Poetry,” Qiaole Huang has reconstructed Gu’s interaction with the members of the Red Autumn Poetry Club to highlight the importance of the women’s community. Huang has observed that Gu’s innovation in the poetic convention is related to her poetry club experience. Ellen Widmer and Qiaole Huang have dedicated research

---

45 Wang Yanning, Reverie and Reality, 118.

46 Ibid., 141.


48 Qiaole Huang, “Writing from within a Women’s Community,” 16, 109.
on Gu’s friendships in the poetry club, but her other female roles deserve further examination. My study contributes to the research on Gu by addressing how her other female roles, such as an elite woman, a mother, and a widow, are associated with her poetry.

Changqin Geng has studied Gu’s poems, lyrics, and *Honglou Meng ying*, focusing on the themes of mirror, dream, and shadow, and has indicated that her poetry and novel truthfully represent her life events and inner emotions. According to Geng, Gu portrays herself and her friends as women scholars (*nüshi*女史) and expresses their strong desire to become famous in literature.\(^{49}\) However, I push further Geng’s research by suggesting that Gu highlights her womanly virtue and dedication to Confucian learning. From Gu’s perspective, women’s talent and virtue are reconcilable, and she portrays herself as a learned and talented Confucian lady.

In this thesis, I aim to address the following questions while consulting the previous studies on Gu: given that the poetic tradition is created by men, how does Gu engage it as a female poet? What kind of voices and images does she create and what is the uniqueness of her poems? How are her female roles, such as an elite woman, a female poet, a mother, and a female companion for her friends, related to her writing? What do gender differences in terms of theme, language, and metaphor her poems show? How does Gu’s Daoist and Buddhist understanding contribute to her images? As a late Qing female writer, how does Gu negotiate her fame as a poet and her image as a learned woman?

---

\(^{49}\) Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow: Gu Taiqing’s Life and Writing” (PhD diss., University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, 2012), 112-49.
Grace Fong has proved, “Ku’s [Gu’s] song lyrics contain a measure of allusive language and contemplative themes. Both are less common in song lyrics by women and deserve attention as examples of a female poet’s attempt, in self-definition, to insert herself (her image and her voice) into a male role.”50 I would like to go further and argue that Gu does not merely insert herself into a male role, but she also finds her own expressions of a female voice as an elite woman, a mother, a widow, and a female companion for her friends and Yihui in the poetic tradition created by men through the incorporation of her life experiences, both inside and outside her boudoir.

Moreover, Tani Barlow has argued that women only conceptualized within their kinship-defined roles, but Grace Fong, in her case study, has discovered the possibility of female authors acting in non-kinship roles such as friends, travelers, critics, and connoisseurs.51 In my study, I find a similar attempt in Gu’s poems, in which she creates her voices of a mother and her husband’s support and portrays herself outside her kinship-defined roles, such as a female traveler and a companion for her female friends.

I divide my thesis into three chapters. In the first chapter, I address how Gu portrays herself to discover what kinds of images that she intends to present to readers and argue the female subjectivity shown in her poetry. The female author constructs her images associated with Confucian morality to highlight her devotion to womanly learning and suggest that women’s talent and virtue are reconcilable. Grace Fong has already proved


that Gu inserts a male Daoist role in her poems, but I push further that she portrays herself as a Daoist woman and represents how both Daoist and Confucian worldviews influence her and how she encounters the mundane matters.  

In chapter two, I examine Gu’s poems on the subject, plum blossoms. Her courtesy name, Meixian, which means a plum blossom immortal, shows her love for the flowers. Given the rich cultural connotations of plum blossoms, analyzing Gu’s poems on the flowers is essential for me to answer how she engages in the poetic tradition as a poetess. Although scholars have already considered the significance of plum blossoms in Gu’s poems, what role the flowers play has not yet been addressed. I find multiple functions of plum blossoms in Gu’s poetry: to characterize herself, to accompany her in her inner quarters, to develop and maintain her friendships with other women, and to articulate her Daoist and Buddhist realization. I emphasize different functions of plum blossoms in Gu’s poems and argue that these poems strengthen her female expressions and subjectivity by providing innovative perspectives on the flowers and integrating her life.

In chapters one and two, I focus on Gu’s activities in her inner quarters; in chapter three, I shift the research scope to her life outside her boudoir and examine how she describes her travel experience as a female poet. I focus on her poems on a particular site in Yihui’s family villa, Qingfengge, and pay close attention to the locality, landscapes, and self-identification in her poems. Yihui designed Qingfengge by himself and put much effort into constructing its surrounding areas. Before his death, he and Gu had several pleasant excursions to Qingfengge; after he passed away, he was buried nearby, and Gu would bring her children to mourn him. Qingfengge had uniqueness in Gu’s life, and she was

---

52 For Fong’s argument, see Grace Fong, *Voices of the Song Lyric in China*, 135-36.
emotionally attached to this place. In my study, I introduce how Gu emphasizes her female personas as a female traveler, a mother, and a widow in her poetry on Qingfengge. She pictures Yihui and her utopian lifestyle that pursues the Dao, but this lifestyle could not come true since she dealt with life difficulties after he passed away. Therefore, I argue that this set of poems reinforces the tension between the imagination of her idyllic life and the reality that she confronts.
CHAPTER 1

GU TAIQING’S SELF-PORTRAYALS IN HER POEMS

As one of the most prominent late Qing female writers, Gu’s images in her poetry have drawn attention from scholars. However, the documentation on her images is not always based on reliable sources. Taking Mao Guangsheng’s lines for an example, he exercised his imagination to portray Gu’s image that she rode a horse with Yihui and visited Western Hills 西山 in the snow:

Taiqing used to ride a horse with Yihui to visit the Western Hills in the snow. She dressed like a palace lady, wearing a red cape, and playing the iron lute on the horse, and her hands were as white as jade. Whoever saw her claimed that she was the reincarnation of Wang Qiang [Zhaojun].

Mao constructed an image of Gu from a male’s perspective. He compared Gu to Wang Qiang 王嬙 (51? BC-15? BC), whose courtesy name was Zhaojun 昭君, to compliment Gu’s outstanding appearance, artistic talent, and noble character. However, given that Mao was born much later than Gu, it was not possible for him to see her riding a horse in person. Jin Qicong has condemned Mao’s portrayal of Gu because Mao neglected the Manchu cultural tradition of riding horses. According to Jin, it was common for young

---

53 Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 764. For the translation, the original line in Wang Yanning’s translation is “she dressed in the manner of a woman from a decent family.” I changed this line into “she dresses like a palace lady” based on the definition of neijia. See Wang Yanning, *Reverie and Reality*, 123.

54 Wang Zhaojun is one of the four beauties in Chinese history, and she is often portrayed on horseback and holding a lute. Also, the later literati sometimes praised Wang’s story as a behavior as a self-sacrifice to save the government. For more discussion on Wang, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush*, 91-5.

Manchu women to ride horses, and Gu always rode a horse with Yihui when they traveled to Beijing’s suburbs.\textsuperscript{56} Therefore, Jin has said that Gu’s image associated with the lute and Wang Qiang is inappropriate and unreliable.\textsuperscript{57} Also, Qigong 譚功 has critiqued that Mao was the one who started the rumor that Gu and Gong Zizhen had an affair solely based on his speculation.\textsuperscript{58} In order to avoid invalid sources and refer to more reliable information on the image of Gu, I center on her own poems and the personas that she creates in her poetry. One may argue that the self-portrayals in her poetry do not always truthfully represent her as an individual. However, her images in reality are not my main focus; instead, I aim to discover personas that she desires to be seen and read.

In this chapter, I address several questions: what public personas does Gu build, and how does she portray herself? What are the functions of her personas? What are the gender differences in terms of self-image between Gu and male writers? How does she negotiate herself as a socially acceptable woman? I emphasize her Confucian and Daoist public personas and argue that she creates feminine expressions as an elite woman, a virtuous Confucian lady, and a female Daoist. Through poetry writing, Gu highlights her dedication to Confucian morality and suggests that women’s virtue and literary talent are reconcilable in order to fit the high moral expectation for late Qing women.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Jin Qicong and Jin Shi, \textit{Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian}, 797.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} See Qigong, “Gu Taiqing ji xu” 顧太清集序, in Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 1-2.

\textsuperscript{59} Although Geng has also observed the importance of Confucian virtue to Gu, Geng has only briefly discussed it in the context of her daughters’ education. See Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 144-46.
Women’s figures are usually subject to men’s desires. They appear passive, static, subordinate, and waiting for their absent male lovers in the boudoir. Gu also portrays herself in the setting of her inner quarters, but she constructs an active female role. She represents her vivid image and depicts her delightful life in her boudoir by recounting her activities in detail, such as her interaction with her maid and appreciating the scenes outside her window. Even though she experiences frustration as a widow after 1838, she still expresses her courage for facing difficulties in life and how she deals with them.

Gu identifies herself as Daoren 道人 (Daoist), which is male-gendered, to deliver her Daoist realization and her mood of xian 閒 (idleness) in “Oucheng” 偶成 (Written Randomly) to the tune Langtaosha 浪淘沙 (Wave Washing the Sands), which Grace Fong has noted. However, I maintain that Gu creates a female role in her Daoist image. She portrays herself as an aging female Daoist and conveys her worldview. It is noteworthy that both Daoist and Confucian values affect her and the approaches that she copes with mundane matters. Gu expects people to be observers of their own lives and stays aloof from worldly pursuits that correspond to the concept of wuwei 無為 (nonaction) in Laozi.

1.1 A Talented and Virtuous Woman

To answer the question of how Gu portrays herself, it is important to examine her self-portraits. For example, a self-portrait of her, Tingxue xiaozhao 聽雪小照 (A Little Portrait of Myself Listening to the Snow) (see fig. 1), serves as a key resource for us to grasp her self-constructed image.

---

60 For Gu’s poem, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 186. For Fong’s argument, see Grace Fong, “Engendering the Lyric,” 135-36.
According to Mao Wen-Fang, Gu reveals her women’s agency and breaks the boundary between gazer and the gazed in her self-portrait.\textsuperscript{62} Mao has stated, “the male gaze is the motive of women’s portraits,” and has explained that most women in Chinese portraits do not make eye contact with the viewers.\textsuperscript{63} This painting convention reinforces the notion that women are regarded as objects and are always gazed at by the viewers. On

\textsuperscript{61} Heng Jipeng 恒紀鵬 once took a photo of the original painting. The photo was owned by Qigong, but the original painting was lost. In 1978, Pan Jiezi 潘桀茲 reproduced the original painting based on this photo per Li Yimang’s 李一氓 request. In 1994, Zhang Zhang took a photo of this reproduction of Gu’s self-portrait. Here, I use Zhang Zhang’s photo as a reference. For information on Gu’s self-portrait, see Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 741.

\textsuperscript{62} Mao Wen-Fang, \textit{Wu xingbie guankan: Mingmo Qingchu wenhua shuxie xintan} 物．性別．觀看: 明末清初文化書寫新探 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 2001), 370-71.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 331.
the contrary, in Gu’s self-portrait, she looks straight at viewers, showing the difference from other women’s portraits and highlighting her subjectivity.\(^{64}\)

The portrait gives viewers a direct visual impression of Gu and provides glimpses of the attributes that she aims to highlight in her image. She stands by a window, and her eyes look into viewers’ eyes. She wears a Manchu hairstyle, liangbatou 兩把頭 (two-fisted head), which indicates her identity as a Manchu elite woman. There are two piles of books on a table on the right and one lamp next to her. These objects, associated with reading and learning, construct Gu’s image as a diligent woman, which Changqin Geng has observed.\(^{65}\)

Outside the window, there is a huge plum tree blossoming on the left side, as well as some bamboo just beneath the portrait of Gu and on the lower right side. Both plum blossoms and bamboo are symbols to represent her Confucian virtue because of their cultural connotations. Since plum trees usually bloom between winter and early spring, male poets used plums to embody their integrity, purity, and perseverance in their struggling political careers as government officials. Bamboo often represents a junzi 君子 (gentleman), a Confucian moral model with an ideal personality.\(^{66}\)

Moreover, because pine trees, bamboo, and plum blossoms, different from most of the plants, do not wither during the cold and harsh weather, there is a Chinese term, suihan sanyou 歲寒三友 (three friends of the cold season), to symbolize the Confucian ideals and one’s unyielding moral character. Gu uses the symbolic meanings of plum blossoms and

\(^{64}\) Mao Wen-Fang, Wu xingbie guankan, 336-37.

\(^{65}\) Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 144.

\(^{66}\) This symbol comes from “Qi yu” 淇奧 in Shijing, and for more discussion on this poetic tradition, see Stephen Owen, An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 36.
bamboo created by men to emphasize her Confucian spirit. Through her wearing, bearing, and the objects in the portrait, Gu creates her persona as a learned Manchu woman. Her image also indicates the cultural hybridity, which demonstrates Manchu’s adaptation of some aspects of Chinese culture.

Gu composed a *tihuashi* 题画诗 (poetry inscribed on paintings) coming with her self-portrait, “Ziti tingxue xiaozhao” 自题听雪小照 (Self-inscription for My Little Portrait of Listening to the Snow) to the tune of “Jinlüqu” 金縷曲 (Song of Golden Thread). *Tihuashi* was one of the essential leisure activities for literati, and Gu actively engaged in it. According to Zhang Juling’s count, Gu wrote 248 *tihuashi* (150 *shi* and 98 *ci*).67 Gu would write *tihuashi* on her and her friends’ paintings and share the *tihuashi* with her female companions.68 The *tihuashi*, “Self-inscription for My Little Portrait of Listening to the Snow,” includes several images that correspond to this portrait, such as the lamp, the window, the bamboo, the plum blossoms, and the balustrade. This poem also enriches the portrait because it incorporates various sensory experiences that cannot be seen in the self-portrait.


68 *Tihuashi* is a subgenre of poetry written for the paintings of landscapes, flowers, animals, and people. *Tihuashi* came from *yonghuashi* 詠畫詩 (poems on paintings) and *huazan* 畫贊 (encomia on paintings) during the Six Dynasties (222-589). During the Tung, it became an established subgenre. Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) was believed to have initiated the practice of the *tihuashi*, and *tihuashi* was later reinforced and developed by the Song poets such as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105). For the definition of *tihuashi*, see Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen eds., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 432-34; for the Tang *tihuashi*, see Kong Shoushan 孔壽山, *Tangchao tihuashi zhu* 唐朝題畫詩注 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 1988), 1-29; for the contribution of Du Fu, Su Shi, and Huang Tingjian to the tradition of *tihuashi*, see Wang Shizhen 王士禎, *Daijing tang shihua* 帶經堂詩話 (Remarks on Poetry from the Hall of the Classics) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 650; for Gu’s *tihuashi*, see Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 145-64 and Mao Wen-Fang 毛文芳, “Yige Qingdai guige de shijiao: Gu Taiqing huaxiang tiyong xilun” 一個清代閨閣的視角: 顧太清畫像題詠析論, *Wen yu zhe* 8 (June, 2006): 417-74.
As Changqin Geng has noticed in Gu’s poems, “The quiet and cool night serves as an excellent atmosphere or background for writing; consequently, the chill she felt at that moment most likely was transmitted into her poetry.”69 In this poem, Gu records her impulse to compose poetry, the scenes that she observed, and the chill atmosphere sensed during a snowy night:

I read alone with a fading lamp.  
I listened, outside the window.  
The wind was soughing.  
Cold sound knocked on bamboo.  
I sat till late at night; the wind became more urgent.  
The walls were dim, and the lamp flames were like beans.  
I felt my emerald dress  
Was too thin that caused me to shiver.  
Thus I stood up, drew the curtain, and looked into the night.  
Snow pressed the plum branches as tons of flowing jade.  
Graupel swirled rapidly,  
And rang the tall house.

Like piled catkins, tangled clouds hid wide valleys.  
Entering endless Heaven and Earth  
There were frozen flowers and cold pistils;  
Woods and foothills were indistinguishable.  
So much poetic sentiment lingered in my ears  
The flower fragrance perfumed me.  
I especially portrayed it on  
A raw silk horizontal scroll.  
It is not because I am a big fan of snow;  
But it is because I would like to  
Preserve the authentic images in the human world.  
By the winding balustrade,  
I stood alone.

69 Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 82.

70 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 229-30.
The first stanza describes Gu’s activities and shows her connection to the environment through a detailed illustration of what she saw, heard, and felt; the second stanza centers on how the natural scenes inspire her to compose poetry.

There are multiple points that deserve to discuss to reveal the literary creativity of Gu and the self-image of her. First, as both Zhang Juling and Geng have pointed out, writing about the snow from the perspective of listening shows Gu’s novelty in literary creation.71 The female poet stresses her experience of hearing through the “listening to the snow” in the title and several descriptions of hearing sensations on the soughing wind, the sound knocking on bamboo, the ringing tall house, and even the lingering poetic sentiment in her ears.

Second, Gu projects herself onto the lady in the painting and narrates her own movements: reading alone during the winter night, relying on her hearing to perceive the outside world, and standing up to view the scenes outside the window. The description of her subsequent movements and her sensory experiences demonstrates her sensibility and how she connects her inner spaces with the outdoors and reacts to the externality.

Third, the female author reinforces her subjectivity as she is the one who “controls” the gaze. In Maureen Robertson’s research, she has proven that some Ming-Qing women authors tried to “control or neutralize the gaze that structures the literati-produced feminine voice.”72 The literati established the feminine voice in the poetic tradition, but these women figures were usually invited the gaze from men. To claim their women’s agencies, poetesses attempted to change the viewing angle of female figures portrayed by men. A

71 Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cai niu, 157; Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 142-43.

72 Maureen Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China,” Late Imperial China 13, no. 1 (June 1992): 84-7.
similar attempt could be found in this poem, in which the woman in her poem is no longer an object that is being gazed at; instead, she is the one who observes the scene and “controls” what she desires to see.

Forth, based on Wang Yanning’s interpretation, the authentic images in line ten of the second stanza refer to her physical image as well as her contribution as a female poet.\(^73\) In fact, given that Gu records her urge to compose poetry and her writing process in the second stanza of this poem, the authentic images are about Gu’s image and about what Gu sensed during the winter night. It is worth mentioning that she highlights the attribute of *zhen* 真 (authenticity/genuineness) to the images that she aims to preserve. *Zhen* is an important concept in Ming-Qing literature. According to Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), *zhen*, opposite to *jia* 假 (falsehood), is the heart of a child representing authenticity and purity in one’s mind.\(^74\) In Gu’s case, the authenticity highlights the beauty of scenes depicted in her poem and asserts her female personas as a pure and virtuous woman.

Last but not least, it is worth noting the reasons behind the life experience narrated and the objects chosen in this poem, which is associated with the image that this female author intends to represent to readers. The description of reading alone at night indicates her love for learning; the bamboo and plum blossoms (as I discussed in her self-portrait, A

---

\(^73\) Wang Yanning, *Reverie and Reality*, 120.

\(^74\) For example, in Li Zhi’s article, “Tongxin shuo” 童心說 (On the Heart of the Child), he wrote: “The heart of the child is absolutely not false but pure and true...If one loses the heart of the child then he loses his true heart.” (夫童心者，絕假純真...若失童心，便失真心). For the original lines in Chinese, see Li Zhi, “Tongxin shuo,” *Li Zhi wenji* 李贄文集 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2000), 92. For the translation, see Pei-Yi Wu, *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 147.
Little Portrait of Myself Listening to the Snow) and the expression of her image of youdu 幽獨 (loneliness) reinforces her dedication to Confucian virtue.

There was a long tradition of Chinese poets applying youdu to convey their loneliness and represent their integrity when facing political adversity. Youdu was derived from Qu Yuan’s 屈原 (340–278 B.C.) “She jiang” 涉江 (Crossing the River): 75

Alas, that my life should be so devoid of pleasure! 哀吾生之無樂兮
That I should live here, alone and obscure, 幽獨處乎山中
Among the mountains!
But I cannot change my heart and follow the vulgar crowd, 吾不能變心而從俗固
And so I must face 將愁苦而終窮
Bitter sorrow and a hopeless end as my lot.

Qu Yuan was a government official in the Chu state, but he was later banished by the ruler. Given that “Crossing the River” was written during the exile, Qu chose the term youdu to express his depression since he felt that his loyalty was no longer understood. In spite of his disappointment due to the banishment, Qu still remained loyal to the ruler and refused to make any compromises. Hence, youdu does not only refer to loneliness, but it also carries the meaning of an unyielding attitude, though Qu Yuan committed suicide, which can be seen as a political statement.

Later, other Chinese poets used youdu to voice a similar spirit when they were demoted or exiled. For example, Du Fu wrote, “soughing rain stagnated the cottage, empty mountains were nowhere to comfort my loneliness” (天雨蕭蕭滯茅屋, 空山無以慰幽獨)

75 “She jiang” is one of the poems in “Jiu zhang” 九章 (Nine pieces) of Chuci 楚辭 (Songs of Chu). Chuci, a poetry collection, was originally organized by Liu Xiang 劉向 (76–5 B.C.), and was later provided with commentary by Wang Yi 王逸 (89–158). See Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, A Guide to Chinese Literature (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997), 95-7.

) to express his lonely feeling because General Wang failed to meet with him and also because there was no chance for him to dedicate himself to the government at that moment. As shown, the images of youdu, plum blossoms, and bamboo all have the connotation of the morals of the male poets.

Although Gu borrows these images from men to reinforce her Confucian virtue, she brings newness to the poetic tradition by constructing the images associated with her female persona. Some Qing scholars, such as Zhang Xuecheng, condemned that their contemporary women authors merely aimed for literary fame but ignored the importance of womanly learning. In order to respond to this doubt that the Qing female writers encountered, this famous female poet embodies the images related to morals and affirms her devotion to Confucian virtue as an individual woman. She suggests that women’s morality and talent are reconcilable, and thus, she represents herself as a socially acceptable elite woman.

1.2 An Educated Woman in Her Inner Quarters

Gu shows her female agency by depicting her movements and reconciles her talent and virtue to meet the late Qing’s moral expectations for elite women; in this section, I also discover her female subjectivity demonstrated in her self-portrayals. However, I examine the emotions that she expresses when confronting frustration and the approaches that she takes to deal with it. Gu constructs her persona as an educated woman and articulates her life in her inner quarters in “Xuechuang mancheng” 雪窗漫成 (Composed the Poem

Randomly by the Frosty Window) to the tune of “Xue shi’er” 雪獅兒 (The Lion in the Snow), which she composed in 1840, two years after Yihui’s death:

By the low curtains, I laid down my head on the pillow; 低帷伏枕
I was reluctant to get out of double quilts, 重衾戀臥
The carved window showed the break of dawn. 疏窗清曉
The candle tore, bright and clear; 蠟淚盈盞78
A small pot of chrysanthemums, 小盎菊花香老
Their fragrance lasted long. 香氣生長
The crows were startled from the tip of branches. 鳥驚樹杪
I asked, last night, 問昨夜
How chiller it became, 寒添多少
I woke up and went to see, 起來看
At the foot of the stair, outside the balustrade, 階前欄外
A flurry of snow was drifting down. 亂瓊紛繞79

I reminded the maid: do not sweep the snow. 嘗咐雙鬟莫掃
I love nature as 愛天然作就
the source of my paintings and the material for my poetry. 畫材詩料
Speechless, she stood by. 袖手無言
When she understood it, she burst into laughter. 會處翻然成笑
I have been in dire straits for the first half of my life. 半生潦倒
I try to get myself drunk 拚一醉
To eliminate my aspiration. 消除懷抱
To whom I speak? 憐誰告
I entrust to the beauties and fragrant herbs. 託向美人芳草80


79 Qiong 瑝 refers to beautiful jade, which is commonly associated with snow. As Lu You’s 陸游 (1125-1209) poetic lines, “Who plants the jade in front of a thousand qing of the mountain?” (山前千頃誰種玉), Gu makes an analogy between the snow and the jade to illustrate the beauty of the snow. See Lu You, “Chongxue zhi yuqing jue linxue lianri buzhi” 衝雪至餘慶覺林雪連日不止 (Against the Snow the auspicious event, I Realize that the Snow in the Woods Has Not Stopped for Days), in Jiannan shigao 劍南詩稿 (The Poetry Drafts of Jiannan), SKQS, 13:8.

80 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 270.
The first stanza creates a scenario of Gu waking up on a winter morning, which reveals her sensibilities and the activities in her boudoir. The second stanza portrays her interaction with her maid to express her appreciation for natural scenes and introduces how she encounters her frustration. Since the images in the first two lines of the first stanza, such as the curtains, the blanket, and the double quilts, are usually associated with women, the poem indicates that Gu is in the boudoir, which is a space for women. The first five lines of the second stanza reveal her identity as an elite woman and demonstrate her uniqueness as a female poet because it is not common to read such intimate interactions with a maid portrayed in men’s literary works. As opposed to a passive female role, in this poem, Gu takes an active one, reiterating that she shows her female subjectivity through poetry writing.

Although Gu conveys her helplessness by using liaodao (in dire straits) to describe her life, she indicates the bravery of a woman facing her melancholic emotions. As Du Fu’s “despondent newly stop muddy wine cups” (潦倒新停濁酒杯), Gu aspires to get drunk to eliminate her aspirations. Nevertheless, she does not indulge in her grief but copes with it. Most Qing women’s poems focus on their sorrow, whereas Gu finds different approaches to confront her unhappiness based on her description of the last line of the second stanza that she entrusts her emotions to meiren (beauties) and fangcao (fragrant herbs).

The image of beauties invites three possible interpretations. First, it is possible that she borrows the images of beauties and fragrant herbs from Qu Yuan to reinforce her

---

81 Du Fu, “Denggao” (From a Height), in Dushi xiangzhu 條詩詳註, SKQS, 20:31. For the translation, see David Hawkes, A Little Primer of Tu Fu (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press), 222.
Confucian virtue because they are common symbols in Qu’s literary works which represent his morals. For example, in “Lisao” 離騷 (On Encountering Trouble), Qu composed: “I thought how the trees and flowers were fading and falling, and feared that my fairest beauty would fade too” (惟草木之零落兮, 恐美人之遲暮). Making an allusion to Qu’s work, Gu comforts herself by resonating with his virtuous and lonely spirit, which reveals the idea that she places importance on virtue.

Second, the image of beauties represents her female companions. Given that Gu composed this poem two years after her husband’s death, she likely experienced turmoil because of it, and her female friends helped her mitigate her depressed emotions. By referring beauties to her friends, she develops her self-image associated with her female companions and indicates the effectiveness and powerfulness of her friendships.

Third, since Gu mentions her love for paintings in lines two and three of the second stanza, the image of beauties might refer to the possible images in her painting. Engaging in artistic creation becomes a vehicle for her to deal with her sufferings, which creates her image as an educated woman with artistic interests. These three possible interpretations of the images of beauties not only enrich the readings of Gu’s poetry, but they also assert her active female persona and show a positive message that she delivers: though she experiences helplessness and frustration, she dares to cope with these emotions.

“Self-inscription for My Little Portrait of Listening to the Snow” and “Composed the Poem Randomly by the Frosty Window” highlight Gu’s female images and share multiple similarities: the snowy setting, the portrayal of her movements, her love for paintings, and her friendships.

---

82 For the lines in Chinese, see Qu Yuan, “Lisao,” Chuci buzhu, 8-9, 50. For the English translation, see Fusheng Wu trans., in How to Read Chinese Poetry, 41-2, 50.
literary creation, and her inspiration drawn by natural scenes. However, the atmospheres and the messages that she communicates are different in these two poems. Given that these two poems were composed in 1837 and 1840, respectively, the latter shows a sense of helplessness that is not read in the former. The former reinforces Gu’s devotion to Confucian learning and manifests the negotiation between her reputation as a talented woman and her image as a virtuous lady; the latter conveys the courage of a woman encountering her emotional sufferings.

### 1.3 A Daoist Female Role

In this section, I discuss how Daoism contributes to her image and female voice.

“Ziti Daozhuang xiāng,” 自題道裝像 (Self-inscription for My Portrait in Daoist Garb) is a *tihuashi* coming with a portrait of Gu painted by Huang Yungu 黃雲谷 (early nineteenth century) which is named *Daozhuang xiāng* 道裝像 (Daoist Garb). Although the portrait is not extant, this poem includes Gu’s interpretation of her self-portrait, thereby giving a glimpse of what kinds of Daoist image that she portrays.

As Gu wears a Daoist robe and appears as a Daoist in “Self-inscription for My Portrait in Daoist Garb,” she links herself to Magu 麻姑 (Hemp Maiden). Legend has it that Magu is a youthful woman with talon-like hands and supernatural power. Magu has watched blue seas turning into mulberry fields three times in a short period.³³ People also believe that this deity cultivates herself in a mountain and represents longevity since she never grows old.³⁴ In “Self-inscription for My Portrait in Daoist Garb,” the female poet

---

³³ See Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343), *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Accounts of the Immortals) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2003), 627-30.

³⁴ Ge Hong first recorded the legend of Magu in *Shenxian zhuan*. Later, the persona of Magu was inherited and developed. An influential Tang poet, Li Bai 李白 (701-762), or Li Bo, composed “Magu scratches
does not portray the traditional image of Magu, but she shows her own image in reality, revealing her poetic creativity.\footnote{Gu reinforces the existing persona of Magu in another poem. In the second and third couplet of the poem, “Ti Tang Yin hua Magu xiang” 题唐寅画麻姑像 (Inscribed on a Portrait of Magu Painted by Tang Yin), Gu composed, “With a composed manner, [Magu] stretches her white hands and long nails, her elegant face is flushed lightly with wine. When she looks back on blue seas; how many times have they changed? On a numinous terrace, for a long period, she plows and weeds.” (從容素手舒長爪，綽約酡顏帶薄醺。滄海迴看幾更變，靈臺曠劫自耕耘). The image of Magu corresponds to the features of Magu: attractive appearance, talon-shaped hands, and observing the changes of blue seas. For Gu’s poem in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 21.}

She depicts herself as a Daoist and expresses her worldview affected by both Confucianism and Daoism:

\begin{quote}
\noindent Double-coiled locks like those of a young girl, \\
And Daoist garb; \\
Looking back at the cloud-covered mountains: \\
What a long road! \\
Don’t tell me that \\
Gods and immortals know the secret of youth; \\
Even the Hemp Maiden’s temple hair \\
Has turned a frosty white! \\
I don’t recognize who, \\
When all is said and done, this person is; \\
Heavenly breezes stirring the silk hair \\
At the edge of her temples. \\
We humans \\
Still don’t understand the last remaining chess moves; \\
And so we still live in the world \\
Watching the game as it is played
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\noindent 雙峰丫髻道家裝 \\
回首雲山去路長 \\
莫道神仙顏可駐 \\
麻姑雨鬓已成霜 \\
吾不知其果是誰 \\
天風吹動鬢邊絲 \\
人間未了殘棋局 \\
且住人間看奕棋\footnote{Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 42-3. For the translation, see Beata Grant, “The Poetess and the Precept Master,” 335.}
\end{quote}

\footnote{Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590), a well-known Ming writer, detailed how Magu became a Daoist immortal based on Ge Hong’s narrative. In Wang’s story, the father of Magu, Ma Qiu 麻秋, forces his employees to work day and night. Unless the roosters crow, these employees are not allowed to rest. To save them from burning out, Magu then mimics the sounds of roosters. When Ma Qiu finds out what Magu has done, Magu escapes to a mountain and becomes a Daoist immortal. See Li Bai, \textit{“Xi Yue yun tai ge song Dan Qiu sheng” 過嶽雲臺歌送丹丘生 (A Song of Parting for Dan Qiu on Mount Hua’s Cloudy Peak)}, \textit{Li Bai quanjji biannian zhushi: Lun Li Bai 李白全集編年注釋: 論李白} (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2000), 486; Wang Shizhen, \textit{Huitu liexian quanzhuan 繪圖列仙全傳} (Taipei: Du zhong guo tushu gongsi, 1972), 232-34, 325-26.}
The first two couplets describe Gu’s appearance in Daoist garb and her awareness of aging; the last two couplets express her doubt about her Daoist identity and demonstrate her decision to engage the human world. In line two, the term *yunshan* 雲山 (cloud-covered mountains) carries the meaning of a place far from society or a residence of recluses or Buddhist monks and nuns. Hence, Gu here not only conveys that she feels distant from the mountains covered with clouds, but she also suggests a reclusive lifestyle that is detached from worldly concerns.

Although Gu includes Daoist images such as Daoist garb and the cloud-covered mountains, she questions her own Daoist identity. She certainly knows her true identity as a viewer of her self-portrait and a female poet. However, in the third couplet, she does not recognize the lady in the painting, suggesting that her Daoist image is just a work of art to her.

It is unusual to find two identical words appearing in a single Chinese poem. To emphasize that she decides to engage in the human world, Gu intentionally repeats *renjian* 人間 (the human world) twice in the last couplet. She makes an analogy between living life and playing chess. Because line seven of this poem says that humans do not know how the rest of chess moves, it is reasonable to believe that this chess game refers to the lives of all people/readers who live in the world. The term in the last line of this poem, *kan* 看 (watch), suggests that Gu expects people, including herself, to play roles as observers and watch their chess game of lives as it progresses. While Confucians hold an attitude of *rushi*

---

87 For example, Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831) wrote, “Do not be tired of reading sutras and sitting in the cloud mountain. It is when floating lives reach enlightenment” (雲山莫厭看經坐, 便是浮生得道時). See Yuan Zhen, “Xiu Guishan yuchi shi zhongseng” 修龜山魚池示眾僧 (Repair the Fishpond in Turtle Mountain to Show All the Buddhist Monks), in *Yuding Quan Tangshi* 御定全唐詩, *SKQS*, 423:9.
入世 (this-worldly) that aims to devote themselves to society, Daoists tend to be more *chushi* 出世 (otherworldly/transcendent) and have a detached worldview. Gu’s expression reveals the combination of Confucian and Daoist worldviews, as she neither aims to reach enlightenment and entirely detach from worldly matters, nor does she want to take control of her life, which corresponds to the concept of nonaction in *Laozi*’s philosophy.

Gu’s husband also composed a *tihuashi*， “*Ti Huang Yungu Daoshi hua Taiqing Daozhuang xiang*” 题黄雲谷道士畫太清道装像 (Inscribed on a Portrait of Taiqing in Daoist Garb Painted by Daoist Huang Yungu) to the tune of “*Jiangcheng zi*” 江城子 (River Town Lad) on the same portrait. In this poem, Yihui articulates his ideas about an ideal life to Gu, yet his and Gu’s opinions are quite different. While Gu intends to stay in the human world, Yihui expresses that detaching from mundane concerns is a better approach for her to live her life in the second stanza of his poem:

Glory and splendor,
Sons and daughters in front of our eyes.
We are temporarily in comfort,
[But these will] not last a hundred years.
We would rather wear straw sandals,
Thread through thousands of mountain peaks.
Just as wild cranes and idle clouds
Without burdens and attachment,
Life and death,
Are irrelevant.

榮華兒女眼前歡
暫相寬
無百年
不及芒鞋
踏破萬山巔
野鶴閒雲無掛礙
生與死
不相干

He mentions two different lifestyles: one is enjoying temporary happiness in life, and the other is transcending from worldly concerns. Since he fathoms the reality that the glory and splendor in life are temporary, he believes that the latter surpasses the former. Yihui’s

---

comprehension alludes to the motif in “Hao liao ge” (Won-Done Song), in chapter one of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which emphasizes human being’s delusive fantasy and the importance of enlightenment:

Men all know that salvation should be won,
But with their children won’t have done, have done.
Yet though of parents fond there is no lack,
Of grateful children saw I ne’re a one.

Children in “Won-Done Song” are a symbol of illusions in the human world. People understand the advantage of enlightenment, but they could not let go of the mundane fantasy. Yihui’s poem indicates a similar realization to “Won-Done Song” and introduces a Daoist approach to understand the futility of worldly matters. Although the two poems authored by Yihui and Gu come with the same portrait, Gu’s poem demonstrates her own self-expression and differentiates itself from Yihui’s portrayal of her or his wishful thinking of her.

The self-portrayals of Gu, such as life stories selected in the poems and the narration of these stories, reveal what kinds of images and private life that she intends to present to her potential audience. Under the socio-cultural context of high expectations of female morals, the late Qing woman recounts her activity of reading alone at night and portrays herself with images associated with Confucian virtue in order to emphasize her devotion to Confucian learning. By doing so, she suggests that women’s virtue and literary talent can be reconciled.

Gu reinvents the common women’s image by inserting an active female role as an educated woman who enjoys her inner space activities and conveys her love for nature and

---

art. As a widow after 1838, this woman conveys frustration and bravery in facing her life’s difficulties and suggests different approaches to confronting the difficulties, such as the feeling that she resonates with Qu Yuan’s spirits, her female friends’ emotional support, and her engagement with artistic works.

Moreover, Gu creates her persona as a female Daoist, but, at the same time, she questions her Daoist image and claims her determination to engage in the human world, which represents a reconciliation of Daoist and Confucian worldviews. From Yihui’s perspective, Gu’s ideal life is to adopt the Daoist approach that views worldly matters as futility. This woman differentiates her Daoist persona from Yihui since she views her Daoist image as just an artistic work and clearly states that she decides to stay in the human world instead of pursuing enlightenment.
CHAPTER 2
GU TAIQING’S SELECTED POEMS ON PLUM BLOSSOMS

In chapter one, I reinforce Gu’s Confucian and Daoist personas; in chapter two, I analyze how she writes about a subject matter: plum blossoms and examine the different images of the flowers that she constructs. I aim to address how this subject contributes to Gu’s female expressions and her interpretation of the flowers.

Flowers are one of the most popular subjects in Chinese poetic tradition. Gu conveys her love for flowers through her poetic lines, “for flowers; I portray the good spirits of them” (為花寫出好精神).\(^9\) In her two poetry collections, *Collected Poems of Heavenly Travels Studio* and *Songs of the Fisherman of the Eastern Sea*, Gu composed more than seventy poems and lyrics on flowers, including plum blossoms, crabapple blossoms, chrysanthemums, lotuses, and more. Her courtesy name, Meixian, which is a plum immortal, reinforces her fond of plum blossoms. Due to the significance of the flowers for Gu, it is crucial to pay close attention to both her poems and lyrics on plum blossoms and their roles in her literary works.

To examine how Gu participates in the writing of plum blossoms, I briefly summarize the functions of the flowers as a subject in the poetic tradition and the literati culture. Numerous literati have written about and painted plum blossoms since the Six Dynasties period. Fan Chengda 范成大 (1126-1193), a Song poet, introduced twelve different kinds of plum blossoms and mentioned multiple famous poetic lines about the flowers written by male writers such as Du Fu and Su Shi in *Fancun meipu* 范村梅譜 (*Fan Village Treatise on the Plum Blossoms*), which summarizes the images of plum blossoms.

---
during the Song and the previous periods.\textsuperscript{91} In the Preface, Fan highlighted the importance of the flowers in the literati culture:

The \textit{mei}/[-flower] is an extraordinary thing in the Underheaven. No matter whether one is wise and worthy or stupid and degenerate, neither would dare to have a contrary opinion. Literati who study gardening must always first plant mei/ [-trees]. Moreover, they never loathe having an abundance [of them]. As for other flowers, whether literati possess them or not, or whether they are numerous or few, is in no case connected to their worth.

梅，天下尤物，無問智賢愚不肖，莫敢有異議，學圃之士，必先種梅，且不厭多。他花有無多少，皆不繫重輕.\textsuperscript{92}

Fan regarded plum blossoms as objects because he described them as \textit{youwu} 尤物 (extraordinary things). To highlight the distinctiveness of plum blossoms, he stated that no one would deny the flowers’ remarkableness and suggested that planting the flowers was necessary for the literati to study gardening.

The juxtaposition between plum blossoms and women has a long Chinese literary tradition. \textit{Shijing} embodies women and feminine attributes in the image of plum blossoms. For example, in “Biao you mei” 摟有梅 (Plums Are Falling), the flower symbolizes women, and the falling of the flowers represents young women marrying.\textsuperscript{93} As Maureen Robertson has noted:

The plum blossom, for instance, is represented in literati poetry as an image of delicate, ethereal, almost virginal beauty. Feminine beauty is idealized in this image of the flower which is the first to bloom at a time when snow may still be on the ground. The juxtaposition of feminized beauty with coldness, suggesting purity and chastity, creates an ideal removed too far from life itself, and this the plum blossom

\textsuperscript{91} Since Waxy plums 蠟梅 does not belong to the same genus as the other kinds of plum blossoms, one may argue that there are only eleven kinds of plum blossoms because waxy plums cannot be viewed as one of them.


\textsuperscript{93} Stephen Owen, \textit{An Anthology of Chinese Literature}, 36.
confirms in time by duly “falling” into the mud where its “skirt” is ruined. The image thus implies a privileging of the youthful and virginal woman; it suggests that a fall into marriage or adult life is loss, a condition that no longer evokes romantic interest. This image coding is predicated on the assumption of a male readership and what that readership finds interesting.⁹⁴

Maggie Bickford has found a poetic pattern that integrates the flowers, beauty, and the transience of time. Xiao Gang’s 蕭綱 (r. 550-552) “Meihua fu” 梅花賦 (Rhapsody on Plum Blossoms) was the earliest literary work that initiated this poetic mode:⁹⁵

The spring wind blows plum petals,      春風吹梅長畏落盡
I fear they all will fall.             賤妾為此斂蛾眉
So I knit my moth-antenna eyebrows.   花色持相比
Blossoms and beauties are alike,       恒愁恐失時
We always worry time will pass us by.

Bickford has said that the combination of plum blossoms and beauty became more popular in literary works during the Song.⁹⁷ For instance, Su Shi, a master of this mode, frequently used images such as jade, snow, and ice to praise the quality of both the flowers and beauty.⁹⁸ Robertson and Bickford’s work has established how the image of plum blossoms has been associated with women in the poetic tradition. In light of their research, I pay close attention to how Gu, as a female poet, engages in the writing of plum blossoms. I aim to answer the questions: what kind of plum blossoms images does Gu construct? What are

---

⁹⁴ Maureen Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine,” 82-3.
⁹⁸ Ibid.
the functions of this subject matter? To what extent do plum blossoms relate to Gu’s self-images?

Plum blossoms enrich her life in her inner quarters. Given the cultural connotation of the flowers, plum blossoms represent lofty and decent spirits of her female friends and herself. Sometimes, the flowers become her companions in her boudoir. She expresses the enjoyable moments that she spends with the flowers and her mood of contentment. Gu and her female friends engaged in painting, and poetry writing on plum blossoms, and exchanged their artistic and literary work. The flowers serve as an essential subject matter for her to interact with her friends and show the deep friendship among these gentry women. Also, the fragrance of plum blossoms functions as a symbol of delusive fantasies based on the Buddhist worldview, on which everything is an illusion in the human world. By suggesting that there is no need to appreciate the fragrance of the flowers, she denotes beauty in general that reflects her in-depth Buddhist and Daoist contemplation. Based on multiple roles of the flowers, I argue that Gu emphasizes her women’s subjectivity and establishes her female personas by providing novel perspectives on plum blossoms and integrating the multi-aspects of her life as a lofty lady, a self-contented elite woman, a female friend in her poems on the flowers.

2.1 A Characterization of Women as Plum Blossoms

Many influential male authors created the symbolic meanings of plum blossoms and developed a methodology that characterized themselves as plum blossoms. For example, in “Yong mei” (On Plum Blossoms) to the tune “Busuanzi” (Fortuneteller), Lu You 陸游 (1125-1210) compared himself to plum blossoms to stress his integrity when he confronted political difficulties:
The plum blossoms had no intention to compete against
Numerous flowers to struggle to bloom in spring,
And let them be envied.
Withered and wasted, the plum blossoms turned into
The mud and were pressed to dust,
Their fragrance was still as before.

In Gu’s “Penmei” (The Potted Plum Trees) to the tune of “Rusai” (Entering the Pass), she adopts Lu’s approach that draws an analogy between herself and plum blossoms. However, she reveals her difference by reinforcing her personas as a virtuous woman in the boudoir and comparing her boudoir to the immortal residence:

Beautiful flowers,
Pure and fragrant,
Just about to blossom:
Like immortals who having finished a performance
Of “Rainbow Skirts” descended from Jasper Pond—
Red suits them well,
White suits them too.

The night is cool in the little tower
As the moon’s shadows shift,
Behind the low screen
The blanket is cold, dreams stay away.
Hidden from view in grotto heaven,
She guards her icy form,
Unbeknownst to the humming bees,
Unbeknownst to the butterflies.

According to Changqin Geng, “the language she applies is usually simple, plain, concise, yet very rhythmic and effective.”

---


100 For the lyrics in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 187. For the English translation, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 636.

101 Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 92.
and flavor through the repetition and parallelism: “red suits them well, white suits them too” and “unbeknownst to the humming bees, Unbeknownst to the butterflies” in the last two lines of the first and second stanza. In light of Geng’s analysis, I further point out that Gu demonstrates her outstanding writing skill and feminine sensibility by accurately capturing the beauty of the flowers with simple expressions.

For the structure of this lyric, Idema and Grant have meticulously examined:

In the first stanza of the following lyric, [which refers to “Rusai"], Gu Taiqing compares the purity of the plum blossoms to immortal maidens who have descended to earth after having performed the dance of “Rainbow Skirt” at the heavenly court of the Queen Mother of the West at Jasper Pond. (Legend had it that in a dream, Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang had been taken to the heavenly realms to enjoy a performance of this dance.) The second stanza then shifts to a characterization of the author herself as a plum blossom, and of the inner apartments of the princely mansion as a grotto heaven.

Gu connects the plum blossoms in the human world and immortals in the celestial world and uses the flowers to represent her decency and purity. To push Idema and Grant’s analysis further, I raise two points. First, based on their interpretation, the image of the flowers is associated with the immortal maidens. In fact, she also highlights the feminine beauty of the plum blossoms because nichang 霓裳 (Rainbow Skirts) in line three of the first stanza, which is a famous musical composition and dance, alludes to the image of Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719-756), one of the four Chinese beauties. “Changhen ge” 長恨歌 (The Song of Lasting Pain), composed by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) or Bo Juyi, narrated the love story of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756) and Yang Guifei. Bai chose the symbol of “Rainbow Skirts” to represent the beauty: “then kettledrums from Yu-yang came

102 Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 92.
103 Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 636.
making the whole earth tremble and shook apart those melodies” (漁陽鼙鼓動地來，驚破霓裳羽衣曲) and “wind blew upon the goddess’s sleeves, billowing as they rose, and it still resembled her [Yang Guifei] dancing ‘Coats of Feathers, Rainbow Skirts’” (風吹仙袂飄飄舉，猶似霓裳羽衣舞)\(^{104}\).

Second, in light of Idema and Grant’s observation of an analogy between Gu’s boudoir and immortal residence, I further elaborate on her space creation and discover that her boudoir’s function is to help her and the plum blossoms maintain their pure spirits and protect them from the outside world. The objects in the first three lines of the second stanza: the little tower, the low screen, and the cold blanket show the boudoir setting of this stanza. These three lines allude to the poetic lines in “The Song of Lasting Pain:” “the lovebird tiles were chill, heavy with flakes of frost, the kingfisher quilts were cold without someone to share” (鴛鴦瓦冷霜華重，翡翠衾寒誰與共)\(^{105}\). Gu depicts the chill winter night through the terms ye 夜 (night), liang 涼 (chill), and leng 冷 (cold). Nevertheless, the atmosphere that she creates and the feelings that she conveys are very different from the lines in “The Song of Lasting Pain.” She does not convey melancholy but seems to be satisfied with her life as indicated by expression in the second stanza’s last three lines, demonstrating her poetic creativity.

\(^{104}\)When Bai Juyi illustrated Emperor Xuanzong’s nostalgia for Yang Guifei after her death, “Rainbow Skirts” was again mentioned to symbolize her: “wind blew upon the goddess’s sleeves, billowing as they rose, and it still resembled her [Yang Guifei] dancing ‘Coats of Feathers, Rainbow Skirts’” (風吹仙袂飄飄舉，猶似霓裳羽衣舞). For the original lines in Chinese, see Zhu Jincheng ed., Bai Juyi ji jianjiao 白居易集箋校, vol. 12 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 659-81. For the English translation, see Stephen Owen, An Anthology of Chinese Literature, 442-47.

Given the second stanza’s boudoir setting, I interpret *bingzi* 冰姿 (icy form) as a description of both Gu and the plum blossoms. Gu uses *bingzi* to describe the beauty of the plum blossoms and symbolize her own decency. In the last two lines of this poem, she borrows the metaphor of butterflies and bees from men to represent the danger outside her inner quarters. For instance, in Lü Benzong’s 呂本中 (1084-1145) “Momei” 墨梅 (Ink Plum Blossoms), he composed “this departure prevents me from the suspicions by the bees and the butterflies” (此去保無蜂蝶猜), in which he used the images of butterflies and bees to represent people who might misunderstand or sabotage him.\(^\text{106}\) By saying that butterflies and bees do not know Gu and the plum blossoms deep in the boudoir, she suggests that the inner quarters help her and the flowers protect from the outside world.

Female poets sometimes conveyed their complaints to curtains since, in their poems, the objects serve as barriers to separate them from the external world and their lovers, which Changqin Geng has explained.\(^\text{107}\) Distinct from these women, Geng has observed that Gu appreciates her life in her inner quarters and view curtains not as blocks, but as barriers for her to distance outside world in “Benyi” 本意 (The Original Meaning) to the tune “Zhenzhulian” 珍珠簾 (Pearlsewn Curtains).\(^\text{108}\) A similar attempt is found in “The Potted Plum Trees,” and yet, she creates her female image associated with Daoism and portrays herself with plum blossoms to represent her purity, which is not seen in “Pearlsewn Curtains.”

---

\(^{106}\) For the Lü’s original line in Chinese, see Lü Benzong, “Momei,” in Quan Song shi, 1616:18140; for more discussion on Lü, see Ouyang jiong 歐陽炯, Lü Benzong yanjiu 呂本中研究 (Taipei: Wen shi zhe chubanshe, 1992).

\(^{107}\) Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 97-8.

\(^{108}\) Ibid.
Gu portrays the feminized beauty of the flowers and demonstrates her self-characterization as plum blossoms, which basically follows men’s methodology. However, she shows the uniqueness of her poetry and female subjectivity through her literary creation of her active female role and of the image of women’s inner quarters. Practicing plain and simple language, she accurately captures the beauty of plum blossoms and uses the flowers to symbolize her loftiness. She differentiates herself from men by creating her female image associated with Daoist residence and showcasing the lady in the boudoir that enjoys staying aloof from the outside world.

2.2 Companionship of Plum Blossoms

The lyric analyzed in the previous section demonstrates her literary reinvention in portraying plum blossoms, herself, and the boudoir. The poem, “Shiyue penmei zuohua yong Zhuye an ‘Yeshang penmei’ shiyun” 十月盆梅作花用竹葉庵夜賞盆梅詩韻 (The Potted Plums Blossom in October, Having the Same Rhyme as “Watching the Potted Plums” in Collected Poems of Bamboo Leaves Convent), reveals a similar attempt but characterizes plum blossoms as her companions.\(^\text{109}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Deep in the inner quarters, there is no dust.} & \quad \text{洞戶深深絕點埃} \\
\text{In the old pot, the last year’s plums blossom.} & \quad \text{老盆叢發去年梅} \\
\text{On the bright, plain wall,} & \quad \text{玲瓏素壁移花影} \\
\text{The flower’s shadows have moved;} & \quad \text{疏密豐苞積玉堆} \\
\text{Sparse and dense, the plump buds accumulate} & \quad \text{紙帳依稀塵夢遠} \\
\text{[Like] piled jade.} & \quad \text{畫屏勾引好詩來} \\
\text{The paper canopy looks vague,} & \quad \text{圍鑪自煮冰壺水} \\
\text{And the dream in the world of dust is distant;} & \quad \text{} \\
\text{The painted screen entices good poems.} & \quad \text{} \\
\text{By the fireplace, I boil an icy jar of water,} & \quad \text{} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{109}\) Gu follows the rhyme of “Yeshang penmei” 夜賞盆梅 (Watching the Potted Plums) in Zhuye an wenji 竹葉庵文集 (Collected Poems of Bamboo Leaves Convent), see Zhang Xun 張壷 (1640-1695), Zhuye an wenji, vol. 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 39.
Let us drink a cup of pure tea together.

The first and second couplets depict the appearance of the plum blossoms, and the third and fourth couplets describe Gu’s pleasurable moments shared with the flowers. *Qunian* 去年 (last year) and *laopen* 老盆 (the old pot) suggest the time change: that another year has passed. The terms, *donghu* 洞戶 (inner quarters) in the first line and *zhizhang* 紙帳 (paper canopy) in the fifth line, indicate the spatial setting of the woman’s boudoir.

By saying that there is no dust in her inner quarters, Gu distances herself and the plum blossoms from filthy things in the mundane world indicated by the term, *ai* 埃, which means dust and has the connotation of filth in this world or society. Gu’s description is relevant to Wu’s poetic lines in “Hanmei” 寒梅 (Wintry Plums), where he wrote, “the spirits of icy jade have no dust, and nothing in the human world is similar to the wintry plums” (冰玉精神絕點埃, 人間無物似寒梅). Gu reworks Wu’s lines by reinforcing her female image and regarding her inner quarters as boundaries that prevent the dirtiness of the human world from infiltrating her inner quarters. Moreover, referring to Zhang Wei’s 張謂 (711? -778?) poetic line, “the tree of wintry plums is like a twig of white jade” (一樹 寒梅白玉條), she compares the plum buds to piled jade and uses the whiteness of the plum blossoms to emphasize her pure spirit in the second couplet.

---

110 Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 60.

111 See “One who is newly washed must shake his clothes. How can I in my purity accept filthy things?” (安能以皓皓之白, 而蒙世俗之塵埃乎?), in Qu Yuan, “Yufu” 漁父 (The Fisherman), in Hong Xingzu, *Chuci buzhu*, 278.

112 Wu Fu, “Hanmei,” in *Hushan ji* 湖山集 (Collections of Hushan), *SKQS*, 10:5.

113 Zhang Wei, “Zaomei” 早梅 (Early Plums), in *Yuding Quan Tangshi, SKQS*, 197:10.
In line five, the term *chenmeng* 塵夢 (the dream in the world of dust) and the object, the paper canopy, connect to this-worldliness.\(^1\) However, a this-worldly dream is far away, and the paper canopy seems vague to Gu, thereby creating an indistinct boundary between this world and the other world. In the company of the flowers, she engages in leisure activities, such as composing poems, boiling water, and drinking a cup of tea. Viewing the plum blossoms as her friends, Gu goes beyond the traditional women that are imprisoned and suffering and provides her readers a glimpse of her self-contented life in her inner quarters. She transforms her boudoir into a space that allows her to find comfort, maintain her virtue and purity, and enjoy various activities.

Plum blossoms in another Gu’s poem, “Dengxia kan lamei” 燈下看蠟梅 (Watching the Plum Blossoms Under the Lamp) to the tune “Yulianhuan ying” 玉連環影 (The Shadows of the Jade Linked Rings), are her companions, but the images of the flowers are associated with Daoism:\(^2\)

\begin{verbatim}
Small, 瑣硰
Three or five golden buds, 三五黃金顆
Out of my love for the fragrance of the flowers, 為愛花香
I stand up and move my lamp 自起移燈坐
To sit [closer to the plum blossoms] 影珊珊
The shadows gracefully 舞仙壇
Dance in the residence of immortals. 蠟燭繪心
The yellowish petals and the pink pistils
\end{verbatim}

\(^1\) A Daoist poet, Cao Tang 曹唐 (797-866), drew a difference between this-worldliness and otherworldliness through *chenmeng* and the dreams of cranes (the image of cranes is associated with Daoist immortals): “they do not take the clear zither to play ‘Skirts of Rainbow,’ how could dreams in the world of dust know how long cranes’ dreams last?” (不將清瑟理霓裳, 塵夢那知鶴夢長). See Cao Tang, “Xianzi dong zhong youhuai Liu Ruan” 仙子洞中有懷劉阮 (The Immortals in the Grotto Long for Liu and Ruan), in Xu Zhuo ed., *Yuding Quan Tangshi lu*, SKQS, 95:14. For more discussion on Cao Tang’s use of Daoist imagery, see Edward Schafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time: The Taoist Poetry of Ts’ao T’ang* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

\(^2\) “Yulianhuan ying” is a tune pattern created by Nalan Xingde, see Wu Outing 吳藕汀 and Wu Xiaoting 吳小汀, *Zhongguo lidai cidiaoming cidian* 中國歷代詞調名辭典 (Taipei: Xiwei jingdian, 2015), 109.
Are similar to Daoist caps.

In lines three and four, Gu’s action of moving the lamp and seeing the shadows asserts her obsession with the flowers. Her expression is relevant to Lu You’s “Shiyi yue bari, yedeng xia dui meihua duzhuo, leiri laoshen po ziwei ye” (十一月八日夜燈下對梅花獨酌累日勞甚頗自慰也). In the Evening of November Eighth, Under the Lamp, I Faced the Plum Blossoms and Drank Alone. After Exhausting for Many Days, I Comforted Myself Well):

I move the lamp,
Watch the shadows [of the plum blossoms],
And pity them being thin.
I close the door to keep the fragrance.
People laugh at my foolishness.

Both Lu and Gu show their companionship of the flowers, and yet, Gu reinvents Lu’s lines by building the image of plum blossoms associated with Daoism. Portraying the delicate plum blossoms and their movements, she anthropomorphizes the flowers that dance gracefully in the immortals’ residence and compares their appearance to Daoist caps.

“The Potted Plums Blossom in October” and “Yulianhuan ying” reiterate Gu’s active female personas by viewing the plum blossoms as her companions and portraying her contented life in her inner quarters. However, the focuses of these two poems are different. The former centers on her own movements, such as composing poetry and painting; the latter portrays the movements of the plum blossoms and constructs the image of the flowers related to Daoism.

2.3 Plum Blossoms as a Subject Portrayed by Gu and Her Friends

---

116 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 187.

Few literary works on women’s friendship are extant, though it was not uncommon for female authors to develop their relationships via poetry, as Zhang Juling has observed.\(^{118}\) Hence, Gu’s poems sent to her female friends are significant resources for my study to grasp the communications among female writers. According to Qiaole Huang, one of the functions of writing in the Red Autumn Poetry Club, the club that Gu belonged to, was to initiate, develop, and maintain relationships, and plum blossoms are a popular subject in these literary works.\(^{119}\) Based on their research, I discover the way that this female poet transcends her kinship-defined roles and creates her voice as a female friend for other women.

In “Wei Chen Su’an jie huamei xiaofu” 為陳素安姊畫梅小幅 (A Painting of Plum Blossoms for Miss Chen Su’an) to the tune of “Changxiangsi” 長相思 (Endlessly Yearning), though the painting of it is not extant, Gu captures the beauty of the plum blossoms and uses them to praise her friend:

Deep rouge,  
Light rouge,  
Small buds and numerous flowers weigh the branches.  
The pure fragrance enters the dream slowly.

When the plums started to blossom,  
When the flowers are about to fade,  
Solid trunks are upright,

\(^{118}\) Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 130.

\(^{119}\) Qiaole Huang, “Writing from within a Women’s Community,” 62.

\(^{120}\) This line alludes to “the upright branches and the slanted shadows” (鐵幹橫斜影) in Aixin Jeuluo Hongli’s 愛新覺羅弘曆 (r. 1736-1795) “Shatou xiemei outi” 箕頭寫梅偶題 (A Chance Topic of Writing Plums on a Fan). The combination of *shouyin* 瘦影 (thin shadows) of the plum tree and east wind can also be found in “Shuying” 疏影 (Sparse Shadows) written by Wu Wenying 吳文英 (1212? -1272?), “East wind blows and splits [the snow] at dawn. The thin shadow of the horizontal branches sways alone” (凌曉東風吹裂, 獨自曳梢瘦影). See Aixin Jeuluo Hongli, “Shatou xiemei outi,” in *Yuzhi shiji* 御製詩集,
And the thin shadows have slanted.
The east wind blows at will.

As Zhang Juling has meticulously examined, Gu only uses a few poetic lines, but she creates vivid images of the plum blossoms in this lyric by portraying the color, the fragrance, and the sound of the flowers.\(^{121}\) I further point out that Gu reinforces the plum blossoms’ visual impact in the first stanza, in which she starts from the portrayal of particular, beautiful colors of the plum blossoms and then moves to their overall image. While the first stanza portrays the flourishing flowers, the second stanza depicts the different timing of the flowers: when they start to flower and when they are about to fade.

In the second last line of this lyric, Gu describes the solid trunks through the term \(zhengzheng\) 錚錚, which Chinese poets used this term to describe one’s righteousness or refer to a sound made by metal or jade. Given that the poem is about a painting for Gu’s female friend, this term does not only apply to the plum trees, but it also symbolizes Su’an’s decent spirits. The phrase of \(ren\ yi\ chiu\) 任意吹 (blowing at will) in the last line of this lyric emphasizes that the uprightness of the plums and alludes to the idea that her friends are not easily affected by others.

In this poem, Gu accurately portrays the beauty of the different timings of the plum blossoms by using simple language, showing her sensibility and excellent writing skill as a female poet. By portraying the flowers as a subject in her painting and poem, she

---

\(^{121}\) In pre-modern poems, east wind often means the wind blowing in spring. For the poem in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, \(Gu\ Taiqing\ Yihui\ shici\ heji\), 206.

122 Zhang Juling, \(Kuangdai\ caini\), 141.
constructs her role as a female companion for Su’an and uses the symbolic meaning of plum blossoms to highlight female decency and exalt her friend.

Gu composed “Xie Yunjiang mei huamei tuanshan, ci Jiang Baishi yun” 謝雲姜妹畫梅團扇, 次姜白石韻 (Appreciate Miss Yunjiang’s Painted Plums Fan, I [Wrote this] by Following Jiang Kui’s Rhyme) to the tune “Anxiang” 暗香 (Hidden Fragrance) to express her appreciation for her close friend in Hangzhou, Xu Yunjiang, and the fan given to her by Yunjiang. This poem, based on Zhang Juling’s investigation, was written after the first meeting of these two gentry women. Yunjiang sent Gu a fan, and when Gu received it, she composed this poem to thank her friend for the gift.123 When Gu portrays the scenario in which they first met, she compares Yunjiang’s image to plum blossoms to acclaim her friend’s purity in the poetic lines: “today I met you, a free and bright look, as clear as plum blossoms” (今始見君, 神情散朗, 清潔比梅花), which reinforces that the flowers play a vital role in the relationship between these two female poets.124

“Hidden Fragrance” is a very famous lyric written by Jiang Kui. As Zhang Juling has indicated, the fact that Gu dared to write the same tune pattern and the identical subject matter shows that she was very confident in her literary creativity.125 The scholar has also pointed out that “Hidden Fragrance” reveals Gu’s sensibility and creates a unique

123 Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cainü, 98.

124 For the original Chinese lines, see Gu, “Ti Yunlin fulianshi yincao” 题雲林福連室吟草 (Inscribed for Poetry of Fulian Room by Yunlin) to the tune “Yiconghua” 一叢花 (A Cluster of Flowers), in Jin Qicong and Jin Shi, Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian, 602. For the translation, see Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 135.

atmosphere distinct from Jiang’s lyric. In my analysis, I explain how Gu differentiates Jiang’s “Hidden Fragrance” and creates her female voice as Yunjiang’s friend:

The branches swaying in the wind against a blue sky
Surpass the spray from the waterfall.
The Qiang flute is blown;
Who, during the sunset,
Wears emerald sleeves
To fight the cold and pick a branch of plum blossoms?
Who portrays its
Delicate aroma and the calm manner?
With the immortal’s magic brush from Langxuan?
Feeling grateful that,
Yunjiang composed the poem on the fan
And sent it to me,
Accompanying me at banquets yesterday.

The southern part of the country
Is quiet under moonlight.
I recall Mountain Yuling and Five lakes,
And a thousand trees piling up.
The places where I traveled in youth
I have been missing them for thirty years,
Even in my dreams.
I love the images on the silk-made fan,
The bamboo leaves shape
A window of greenness.
Thanks to the master,
Jiang Baishi—

---


127 The qualities of the plum blossoms, shuxiang (delicate aroma) and lengyun (calm manner), are also seen in Zhao Bocheng’s 趙伯成 (around thirteenth century) “Lamei ershou” 蠟梅二首 (Two Poems on Plum Blossoms), “elegant plum blossoms with sparse fragrance along the lonely shores” (冷艷疎香寂寞淵). See Zhao Bocheng, “Lamei,” in Guo Yuanhua 郭元釪 ed., Yuding Quan Jinshi zengbu zhongzhouji 御定全金詩增補中州集, SKQ5, 38:9.

128 Langxuan is believed to be the place where the paramount deity of Tiandi places books. Later, Langxuan refers to the place with many precious books or the residence of immortals.

129 The southern part of the country refers to the south or the lower Yangzi region.
His old lyrics prove the beauty of the plum blossoms. 舊詞證得

In terms of the structure of this poem, the first stanza portrays the images of the fan gifted by Yunjiang and shows their shared interest in plum blossoms. The first six lines of the second stanza describe a different aspect of her life, the woman’s travel experience in her youth, and conveys her remembrance of the old times in the Jiangnan area. The last three lines of the poem say that Jiang’s work proves the beauty of the flowers. The male poet is mentioned because the images of the plum blossoms and the bamboo on the fan allude to Jiang’s poetic lines: “I only think it odd that the sparse flowers beyond the bamboo— their fragrance, cold, enters the jade [banquet] mat” (但怪得，竹林疏花，香冷入瑤席).

Although both Jiang and Gu write about plum blossoms, the female poet brings newness and creates her female voice by describing her life associated with her friendship and her travel experience. First, the first stanza of Jiang’s “Hidden Fragrance” recounts his memory with his lover, “I called my jade lady to rise, ignoring the chill, to pick blossoms with me” (梅邊吹笛，喚起玉人，不管清寒與攀折), whereas Gu’s first stanza provides her response to the fan and expresses the deep friendship between them. The first five lines of the first stanza include a detailed description of the images on the fan: the windy, clear weather, the Qiang flute, the woman picking up the plum blossoms. Lines six and seven compliment Yunjiang’s artistic skill by saying that she portrays the flowers with the

---

130 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 194.

131 For Jiang’s poetic lines in Chinese, see Huang Zhaohan ed., Jiang Baishi ci xiangzhu, 280. For the lines in English, see Michael Fuller, An Introduction to Chinese Poetry: From the Canon of Poetry to the Lyrics of the Song Dynasty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 429-30.

132 For Jiang’s poetic lines in Chinese, see Huang Zhaohan ed., Jiang Baishi ci xiangzhu, 280. For English translation, see Shuen-fu Lin, How to Read Chinese Poetry, 287.
immortal’s brush. It seems that both Gu and her friend adore plum blossoms, suggesting their mutual understanding and close friendship.

Second, Jiang’s second stanza of the poem is about the current situation, beginning with “the river countryside, just now is silent” (江國, 正寂寂), but the first six lines of Gu’s second stanza manifests her strong nostalgia for the south. The first two lines of this stanza allude to her imagination of the south; lines three and four integrate the scene that the female traveler saw when she was younger: Mountain Yuling, Five Lakes, and the piling trees. As mentioned, Jiang centers on his attachment to his lover, the jade lady (yüren 玉人). Nevertheless, revealing her literary creation and uniqueness, Gu constructs her female persona by expressing the deep friendship and her emotional attachment to her early life in the Jiangnan area, where Yunjiang lived.

This section, “Plum Blossoms as a Subject Portrayed by Gu and Her Friends,” demonstrates Gu’s sensibility and creativity as a female poet and reveals the way that she narrates her aspects of the life of being a companion for other women, a role that is not defined by kinship. The participation of writing plum blossoms functions as a medium to reflect the deep friendships and intimate interactions among the gentry women.

2.4 Flowers and Meditation

In “Zhegutian” 鶑鴣天 (Partridge Sky), Gu describes a moment of enlightenment during the setting of the winter night. As Idema and Grant have stated, “Traditionally, neither winter nor summer was the preferred season for poetry. The following unusual lyric not only describes a winter scene but also testifies to Gu Taiqing and her husband’s shared

---

133 For Jiang’s poetic lines in Chinese, see Huang Zhaohan ed., Jian Baishi ci xiangzhu, 280. For the lines in English, see Michael Fuller, An Introduction to Chinese Poetry, 430.
Based on Idema and Grant’s analysis, I examine how plum blossoms contribute to the author’s expression of her Buddhist and Daoist realization:

To the tune of “Partridge Sky” (Zhegutian) 鶓鴣天

On a Winter Night I Was Listening to My Husband Expounding the Way, When Suddenly the Water-Clock Announced the Third Watch. The Fading Blossoms of the Potted Plum Trees Gave Out a Fragrance, I Experienced a Moment of Enlightenment, and Composed the Following

冬夜，聽夫子論道，不覺漏三矣，盆中殘梅香發，有悟賦此

Staying up late, discussing the sutras—

夜半談經玉漏遲

The clock announced midnight:

生機妙在本無奇

The wondrous expediencies of life are in the end

We people of the world

世人莫戀花香好

Should not long for the flower’s fragrance:

花到香濃是謝時

For when the fragrance is most intense,

The flower is about to fade.

The bees produce their honey,

蜂釀蜜

The silkworms spit out thread:

蠶吐絲

How can their labors go unrecognized

功成安得沒人知

Once they are done?

恆沙有數劫無數

The sands of the Ganges can be counted

But kalpas never can—

The great myriad of phenomena

萬物皆吾大導師

Serves as our greatest teacher

The long subtitle offers readers the context of this lyric, in which she listened to Yihui’s explication of the sutras while sensing the fragrance given out by the fading plum blossoms during the winter night. The first stanza indicates Gu’s understanding of life and the negation of material pursuits; the second stanza elaborates on a moment of realizing Daoist and Buddhist ideas.


Although Gu reveals her fascination for the fragrance of plum blossoms in a poem examined in the previous section, “Watching the Plum Blossoms Under the Lamp,” the fragrance in “Zhegutian” transforms into a symbol of illusions in the human world. When the female poet states that people should not praise the fragrance in lines three and four of the first stanza, she denotes beauty in general and suggests there is no need to pursue the delusive fantasy. Her realization alludes to the lines in “Won-Done Song” in *Honglou Meng*:\(^{136}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Men all know that salvation should be won,} & \quad \text{世人都曉神仙好} \\
\text{But with ambition won’t have done, have done.} & \quad \text{惟有功名忘不了} \\
\text{Where are the famous ones of days gone by?} & \quad \text{古今將相在何方} \\
\text{In grassy graves they lie now, everyone.} & \quad \text{荒塚一堆草沒了}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Men all know that salvation should be won,} & \quad \text{世人都曉神仙好} \\
\text{But with their riches won’t have done, have done.} & \quad \text{只有金銀忘不了} \\
\text{Each day they grumble they’ve not made enough.} & \quad \text{終朝只恨聚無多} \\
\text{When they’ve enough, it’s a goodnight everyone!} & \quad \text{及至多時眼閉了}^{137}
\end{align*}
\]

“Won-Done Song” brings up people’s obsession with the pursuits of power and material and indicates that everything they seek does not last long and will eventually vanish as time passes. Gu delivers a similar message but uses the example of the flower’s fragrance to explain it. By creating the flowers as a subject that symbolizes beauty in the mundane world, she demonstrates the uniqueness and creation of her poetry on plum blossoms. She does not regard the plum blossoms as a particular kind of flower; instead, the flowers are a

\(^{136}\) *Honglou Meng* had a great impact on Gu’s life and literary works, and she wrote a sequel to it, *Honglou Meng ying*. For more discussion on *Honglou Meng ying*, see Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book*, 139-277.

\(^{137}\) Cao Xueqin, *Honglou Meng*, 12. For the translation, see David Hawkes and John Minford trans, *The Story of the Stone*, vol.1, 63.
subject representing beauty to voice her realization that the material pursuits are just illusions.

Kuang Zhouyi commented, “the beginning of the second stanza is a thorough enlightenment” (過拍具大澈悟). Gu says that the production of the bees and the silkworms are not recognized in the first three lines of this stanza. She makes a metaphor and states that they are following the Dao by pointing this out. At the end of this poem, she draws allusions associated with Buddhism and Daoism to voice her philosophical contemplation. The sands of the Ganges are a metaphor in Buddhist classics to represent large quantities; kalpas, or known as eons, are a measurement to calculate time in Buddhist cosmology. The incalculability of kalpas leads to another Buddhist notion called asengqi jie 阿僧祇劫 (incalculable eons; infinite eons), and the path of becoming Bodhisattva is believed to take three asengqi jie to complete. The term, dadaoshi 大導師 (greatest teacher), alludes to a chapter in Zhuangzi entitled “Dazongshi” 大宗師 (The Great and Venerable Teacher). “Dazongshi,” which means a role model for people, delights in every stage of life, even early death and old age because he fathoms that everything is interrelated, and all changes are alike.

The poetry analyzed in the previous sections demonstrates Gu’s obsession with plum blossoms, which are objects in the human world. This poem, however, reveals a

---

138 For Kuang’s words in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 204. For the translation, see Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 51.


140 Ibid.

141 Qian Mu, Zhuangzi zuanjian, 52.
transcendent worldview and her detachment from material pursuits. The coexistence of her opposite perspectives on the flowers corresponds to her courtesy name, a plum blossom immortal, which is a combination of earthly and spiritual concepts. Also, it indicates her rich interpretation of the flowers and suggests a tension between the reality that she is attached to worldly matters and the ideality that she intends to detach from them.

Multiple roles of plum blossoms reiterate the female poet’s strong interest in the flowers and demonstrate her literary creativity and versatility. First of all, plum blossoms function as a symbol to represent the images of her and her female friends as lofty women. Male poets developed a methodology that characterizes themselves as flowers to highlight their ethical characters and unyielding attitudes. Nonetheless, Gu enriches its use by showing her and her friends’ female personas and offering a novel perspective on plum blossoms and the inner quarters. The poet regards her boudoir as a space that protects herself and the flowers from the outside, going beyond the cliché that living in boudoirs deprives women’s freedom and also reflecting one of the approaches that this female author engages in the male-established poetic tradition.

Secondly, plum blossoms transform into Gu’s companions in her inner quarters. In the company of the flowers, the woman recounts various activities that she enjoys in her boudoir and expresses her contented mood, transcending the common women’s image portrayed by men and emphasizing her female subjectivity. Thirdly, given the popularity of plum blossoms among female poets, the flowers are a subject for Gu and her friends to participate in writing “presentation response poems” (zeng da shi 贈答詩), in which they painted, wrote about the plum blossoms, and exchanged their works with one another. Gu’s
zeng da shi on the flowers provides an example of a female poet creating a non-kinship-defined role and reflects her and her friend’s mutual understanding and deep friendships.

Last but not least, plum blossoms represent beauty in general instead of a specific kind of flower, which showcases Gu’s poetic creation. Under the context of listening to her husband’s explanation of the Way, Gu articulates her realization of the Buddhist idea that everything is just illusionary in the human world and says that people should not praise the fragrance of the flowers, for it conveys the futility of the pursuit of delusive fantasy. Her opposite opinions on plum blossoms reinforce the tension between the ideality that she aims to stay aloof from the mundane matters and the reality that she is attached to them.

By discovering rich interpretations of plum blossoms that Gu provides, this chapter sheds light on the demonstration of her poetic uniqueness and the way that writing about the flowers contribute to her active female roles. In her poems on the flowers, the female poet emphasizes her women’s agency and female personas as a lofty lady, a self-contented elite woman, and a companion for her female friends and Yihui by reflecting multiple aspects of her life to readers.
CHAPTER 3

LOCALITY, LANDSCAPES, AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION: CLEAR BREEZE PAVILION (QINGFENGGE) IN GU TAIQING’S POEMS

In the previous two chapters, I center more on Gu’s poems relevant to her life in the inner quarters and maintain that she differentiates her image from common women’s images. As an influential female writer, she shows her poetic uniqueness by constructing female personas that enjoy her life in her boudoir. In this chapter, I shift the focus to her activities outside her inner quarters and deal with locality and identity issues. I pay attention to her poems on Qingfengge and its surrounding landscape in order to address multiple questions: what are the functions of Qingfengge in Gu’s poetry? What roles does she insert in her poems on Qingfengge? How does she describe her excursions to Qingfengge as a female poet?

Recent studies have deepened the understanding of the mobility of elite women in late imperial China. According to Dorothy Ko, the Ming-Qing elite women were expected to abide by the Confucian dictum, Three Obediences, or Thrice Following (sancong 三從), and the doctrine of gender classification in which men control the public sphere and women are secluded in the inner boudoir. However, women were not always imprisoned in their inner spaces; instead, they engaged in various kinds of journeys, such as long-distance trips in their husbands’ company and excursions for pleasure with other women. Ko has argued that “the formula of separation is more prescriptive of an ideal norm than


143 Ibid., 12.
descriptive of the realities of gender interactions in the seventeenth century.” She has negated the concept of simple, static, and separate spheres between men and women and has suggested a dynamic process in which women negotiate the boundaries between inner and outer spaces. This trend was not unique in the seventeenth century but also flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a late Qing elite woman, Gu’s case supports Ko’s idea that women did not always seclude themselves in their inner quarters since Gu had ample travel experiences recounted in her poems. In light of Ko’s research on Ming-Qing women’s travel experiences, I pay attention to how she writes about these outing experiences as a female poet.

Gu enjoyed freedom to step out of her boudoir and go on excursions for pleasure, based on Zhang Zhang’s investigation. Unlike most elite Han women, she was not restrained by bound feet and knew how to ride a horse, which gives her the privilege to travel and move more freely. Zhang Zhang and Zhang Juling have believed that Gu had traveled to the south in her youth, though her early life was mysterious. Between 1824 and 1838, Gu and Yihui often visited sites in suburbs of Beijing, and they composed more than twenty matching poems to describe their journeys and express their intimacy with nature. However, after Gu married, she could not travel wherever she wanted but could

---

144 Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 12.

145 Ibid., 12-14.


147 Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 728-42.


only travel in close proximity to Beijing due to her identity as a Manchu prince’s concubine. According to the Qing law, the bannermen in Beijing were not allowed to travel to places over forty 里 从 the political center in Beijing. After Yihui passed away in 1838, Gu still frequently traveled and wrote more than sixty poems about her poetry club activities with her female friends.

According to Wang Yanning, “It must be pointed out that Yihui played an important role in Gu Taiqing’s life of traveling and writing.” Even though Gu composed literary works on multiple historical sites, in this chapter, I primarily center on her poems on Qingfengge because of its importance to Yihui. In 1834, Yihui bought an estate for retirement and a family cemetery in a suburb of Beijing located to the west of Yongding River and to the east of Dafang Mountain called Nangu or Nanyu (Southern Valley).

Qingfengge was one of the first buildings designed by Yihui as his family villa. Between 1835 and 1838, Qingfengge was used as a dwelling for Gu, Yihui, and their children when they visited Southern Valley. After Yihui passed away, he was buried near Qingfengge; Gu occasionally visited the place with her children and mourned her husband, even though she was kicked out of Yihui’s mansion in Beijing. Also, Gu resided in Qingfengge to

---


151 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 755-73.

152 Wang Yanning, Reverie and Reality, 123.

153 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 551-52.

154 Ibid.
convalesce from an illness between 1871 and 1876 and was buried near Qingfengge with Yihui in 1877. To Gu, Qingfengge was an important place since it was closely related to Yihui and the memory of him, and the poems on this site deserve analysis to advance the scholarship on Gu and her poems.

Gu’s poetry on Qingfengge provides primary material for my study to examine how she, as a female traveler, views landscapes and narrates her excursions to this place. When male poets wrote about landscapes, they often expressed their admiration for nature and aspiration to live as recluses like Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365? -427). Gu’s poems on Qingfengge show similar features, which support Wang Yanning’s observation: “Gu Taiqing’s poems on the countryside demonstrate her curiosity about the outside world and detailed observations of the rural landscape.” Also, given that the site was associated with Yihui, she creates her women’s expressions as her husband’s emotional support, a female traveler, a mother, and a widow, revealing her differences from male poets. After 1838, the year that Yihui passed away and Gu got kicked out of Yihui’s mansion in Beijing, Qingfengge became a place for her to find comfort and good old times. She articulates her and Yihui’s ideal lifestyle that follows the Dao through her poetry on Qingfengge, but she does not realize it for multiple reasons. I emphasize the female roles in her poems on Qingfengge and argue that these poems reinforce the tension between an idyllic life that Gu imagines and the reality that she faces.

3.1 The First Excursion to Qingfengge: The Female Poet’s Aspiration to Follow the Dao

155 Jin Qicong and Jin Shi, Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian, 788-90.

156 Wang Yanning, Reverie and Reality, 116.
Given Qingfengge’s location, traveling to this site allows Gu to temporarily distance herself from the political center and imagine a different lifestyle. In 1835, when Qingfengge was built, Gu and Yihui composed matching lyrics on it. Gu’s lyric, “Ci fuzi Qingfengge luocheng yun” (Written to the Rhymes of a [Lyric] Composed by My Husband on Completion of the Clear Breeze Pavilion) to the tune of “Gaoshan liushui” (High Hills and Flowing Rivers), shares the same tune, title, and rhyme as Yihui’s:157

The many mountains with their myriad ravines Draw out the long winds Which penetrate the woodland marshes. The dawn’s light is splendid; Beyond the tower the green shadows are deep, Leaning on the railing, We point especially toward the east. The waters of the Yongding River, Like the arc of a rainbow, Cool and fresh as can be. The valleys filled with the chattering of hidden birds: Green mist and drizzling rain. Let the sea and the heavens be boundless and vast, We will fly and leap amidst being and non-being!

The cloud’s shape Looks like either Guanyin or a hoary dog: To those of No-Mind

157 The title translated by Wilt Idema and Beata Grant is “Written to the Rhymes of a [Lyric] Composed by My Husband at the Clear Breeze Pavilion.” I changed it into “Written to the Rhymes of a [Lyric] Composed by My Husband on Completion of the Clear Breeze Pavilion.” For Yihui’s “Gaoshan liushui,” see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 670; for the translation of the title, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 631.

158 Hun river refers to the Yongding River, which was given its name by the Kangxi Emperor. It originates in Shanxi province, crosses over the Taihang Mountains, and passes through the Lugou Bridge to the southwest of Beijing, see Takehiko To, “Infrastructure Maintenance in the Jifu Region, Beijing Metropolitan Region During the Eighteenth Century,” in Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 202-15.
Such transformations are all Emptiness.
The slender grasses cover the craggy cliffs,
The cliff flowers so fine turn red in the sun.
The Clear Breeze Pavilion
Reaches up to the Milky Way,
The peaks lined up like children.
Which year will we be able to return.
And laughing and teasing, see who’s champion?

變化虛空
細草絡危巖
巖花秀媚日承紅
清風閣
高霄凌漢
列岫如童
待何年歸去
談笑各爭雄

For the structure of the poem, the first stanza portrays the beautiful scenes that Gu observed with her husband; the second stanza expresses her interpretation of the Dao and Buddhism and introduces her ideal lifestyle with a transcendent worldview.

Gazing from Qingfengge, Gu’s lyrical expression of the first stanza forms a magnificent picture during the morning through the portrayal of different scenes: the mountains, the ravines, the winds, the woodland marshes, the dawn’s light, the waters of the Yongding River, the valleys, the green mist, and the drizzling rain. The splendidness before Gu’s eyes offers a context for her to exercise her imagination. The term youwuzhong 有無中 (amidst being and non-being), in the last line of this stanza, alludes to the poem lines of Wang Wei:

The river’s flow is beyond heaven and earth,
The mountain’s scene is amidst being and non-being.

Wang depicts an endless scene of the waters and mountains, which breaks the boundary of heaven and earth, and being and non-being. Gu reworks his lines by projecting Yihui and

---

159 For the poem in Chinese, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 196. For the English translation, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 631-32.

160 Wang Wei, “Hanjiang lintiao” 漢江臨眺 (Ascend Height and Look into the Distance by the Han River), in Yuding Quan Tangshi, SKQS, 126:16.
her as viewers and insiders onto the blurred scene (the boundless and vast sea and heavens) to merge nature and people and obliterate the distinction between object and subject.

Gu’s articulation of the second stanza showcases that the philosophical reflection is a salient feature in her poetry on landscapes, which Zhang Juling has pointed out. One may wonder how Qingfengge’s surrounding landscapes inspire her philosophical contemplation and how her Daoist and Buddhist perspectives contribute to her female personas and expressions.

Given that this lyric was written in the same year that Yihui was dismissed from office, Gu intends to comfort him by seeing through the illusions in the mundane world. After Gu’s projection onto nature in the first stanza, she reveals her understanding of change by observing the clouds. Lines one and two of the second stanza describe the shape of the clouds as resembling Guanyin or a hoary dog (baiyi canggou 白衣蒼狗), which originates from Du Fu’s poems:

The clouds were soaring in the sky,  
That looked like Guanyin.  
In an instant, they have changed into hoary dogs.  
The past and the present together  
Constitute a single moment.  
A lifetime contains all the myriad events.

Gu draws a literary allusion to Du’s poetic lines that compare clouds shapes to significant changes in people’s lives but conveys her own thoughts on life’s fluctuations. She proposes

---


162 For the information on Yihui’s retirement, see Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 736-37.

163 For the poem in Chinese, see Du Fu, “Ketan” 可歎 (Pitiable), in *Yuding Quan Tangshi, SKQS*, 222:12. For the English translation, see Anne Burkus-Chasson, *Through a Forest of Chancellors: Fugitive Histories in Liu Yuan’s Lingyan Ge, an Illustrated Book from Seventeenth-Century Su-zhou* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), 143.
a transcendent perspective that follows the Dao and Buddhism by using the terms in lines three and four of the second stanza, *wuxin* 無心 (no-mind) and *xukong* 虛空 (emptiness).

The concept of no-mind is relevant to the Dao. It alludes to “The sage’s mind of impermanence” (聖人無常) in *Dao De Jing* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue), which points out that the sage does not have an egocentric point of view.164 A renowned Neo-Confucianism scholar, Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032-1085), developed the idea of no-mind in a letter to Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077) entitled “Dingxing shu” 定性書 (Letter on Calming Nature). Cheng mentioned that one should follow *tianli* 天理 (the principle of heaven), which is self-sufficient, self-evident, and governs everything, and eliminate the intention and emotion that involve subjective perspective:165

The constant principle of Heaven and Earth is that their mind is in all things, and yet they have no mind of their own. The constant principle of the sage is that his feelings are in accord with all creation, and yet he has no feelings of his own.

夫天地之常，以其心普萬物而無心；聖人之常，以其情順萬物而無情166

Gu introduces the attitude of no-mind towards changing life circumstances. Based on *Classic of the Way and Virtue* and “Letter on Calming Nature,” the idea of no-mind in her poem does not refer to an absolute negation of feelings; instead, it corresponds to the Dao that detaches from the fixation to the egocentric perspective and subjective intention.

---

164 Xu Dachun 徐大椿 (1693-1771), *Dao De Jing zhu* 道德經注, SKQS, 2:7.


166 For the lines in Chinese, see Huang Zhen 黃震 (1213-1280), *Huangshi richao* 黃氏日抄 (Huang’s Daily Draft), in SKQS, 33:29. For the English translation, see Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 525-26.
Emptiness (*kong 空*) is another term for the female poet to convey the attitude towards the encounter of uncertainty in life and console Yihui. According to *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, emptiness means space or spatiality, the sky or the ether.\(^{167}\) There are two discrete denotations of it. First, like the space in a door frame, emptiness is an absence that delimits forms. Second, it refers to the absence of obstruction and one of the permanent phenomena, for it does not change moment by moment.\(^{168}\) Only if one realizes that emptiness is the reality of phenomena can he/she enter the realm of Buddha. This philosophical realization is relevant to Su Shi’s well-known writing on change and changelessness in “Chibi fu” 赤壁賦 (Rhapsody on Red Cliff). In 1082, when he was exiled to Huangzhou, he wrote:

If you look at the things from the viewpoint of the changes they undergo, nothing in Heaven or Earth lasts longer than the blink of an eye. But if you look at them from the viewpoint of their changeless traits, neither the objects of the world nor we ever come to an end.

蓋將自其變者而觀之，則天地曾不能以一瞬；自其不變者觀之，則物與我皆無盡也\(^{169}\)

People’s viewpoints determine how they understand the change from Su Shi’s perspective. Gu delivers a similar message that all changes become continuation if people regard them not as finite phenomena but as infinite successions, which those with no mind would view. The scenes in Qingfengge inspire her to express her transcendent perspective on life’s

---


\(^{168}\) Ibid.

fluctuation. The approach that she suggests to confronting transformation in life and alleviating Yihui’s feelings is to negate the fixation of egocentric worldview and fathom that mundane matters are illusionary, which follows the Dao and Buddhist worldviews.

Gu’s expression in the last five lines of this lyric reveals her idyllic life that enjoys nature, similar to what she comments on Qingfengge, “When having fewer house chores after twenty years, we, together with each other, take pleasure roaming in this place” (後二十年家事少，相隨此地共遨遊).\(^{170}\) The female author anticipates freedom and reclusive life and negates the worldly pursuits of power and material, but the term *henian* 何年 (which year) in the second last line of this lyric suggests she cannot fulfill her expectations at that moment.

In sum, this poem shows Gu’s similar attempt to male poet’s poetry on landscapes, in which she expresses her admiration for nature and a reclusive lifestyle that pursues the Dao. Nevertheless, Gu provides her own interpretation of the fluctuation of life with a transcendent view and creates her female voices, differentiating herself from men and demonstrating her literary creation. She portrays her image associated with Yihui by capturing the beauty of the scenes that they both appreciate, consoling him as his emotional support, and picturing her future life with him.

### 3.2 The Outing Experience: The Relationship between Women and Nature

After Qingfengge was built, Gu and Yihui stayed at Qingfengge when they traveled to Southern Valley and its nearby areas. In 1836, Gu composed a set of poems (*zushi* 組詩) entitled “Chunyou shishou” 春遊十首 (Ten Poems of a Spring Outing) sharing the same

---

theme: a spring excursion with Yihui and their children. During this trip, Gu and her family went to Qingfengge, Tanzhe Temple, Rong Tower, the Ci River, Eastern Slope, and Clouded Ridge. The female writer organized “Ten Poems of a Spring Outing” in chronological order, from February nineteenth to twenty-ninth, 1836. According to Wang Yanning’s observation of this set of poems:

Under this general title, there are ten poems with subtitles, and three of the ten poems share the same subtitle. Each subtitle marks the basic elements such as the date and the destination. These titles, together with the poems, give a rather concrete outline of the traveler’s schedule and routes.

Among “Ten Poems of a Spring Outing,” two poems are associated with Qingfengge, which Gu and her family visited. One is “Nian yi Qingfengge xiaowang” (On the Twenty-First, I Gazed from Qingfengge at Dawn), and the other is “Nian qi deng Qingfengge hou xibei zuigao fengding” (On the Twenty-Seventh, I Climbed onto the Highest Northwestern Peak behind the Clear Breeze Pavilion). Both of the poems record the date that she traveled and the schedule that she had. The former portrays the scenery that Gu gazed at from Qingfengge; the latter describes her experiences as a female poet that stepped out of her boudoir and went mountain climbing.

The poem, “On the Twenty-First, I Gazed from Qingfengge at Dawn,” centers on the portrayal of the scenes sensed through Gu’s sight and represents the harmony between landscapes and her as a woman. This poem captures what Gu saw: the birds, the clouds, the dawn, the mountains, the smoke above the village, the flowers, and the trees. These

---

171 For “Chunyou shishou,” see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiping Yihui shici heji, 68-71.

172 Wang Yanning, Reverie and Reality, 121.
natural objects together form a picture of rural life, reflect the author’s mood of xian (idleness), and create a peaceful atmosphere:

I came to Southern Valley twice.
The green trees surrounded the graveyard.
Birds’ twittering startled my dream;
Glittering clouds and people were sharing idleness.
The high tower prolonged the dawn;
Facing the distant mountains, I put on morning makeup.
New smoke emerged from the village.
Flowers and trees, I distinguished each and every kind of them.

The first couplet specifies the time setting and her life event to give readers the context of this poem; the following couplets depict the landscapes surrounding Qingfengge and show the individual woman in harmony with nature. The author’s expression in which she says that she shares the idleness with the clouds in line four alludes to a Chinese saying that describes a free spirit, xianyun yehe (idle clouds and wild cranes). It also exemplifies that things of the same category move one another (tonglei xianggan 同類相感), suggesting that Gu and the clouds can enjoy idleness together is because she achieves a state of calm at that moment.

The third couplet in which Gu faces the distant mountains draws an allusion to Xin Qiji’s 辛棄疾 (1140-1207) poetic lines: “the view of the lush green mountains is ever so enchanting; perchance its view of me is this way also” (我見青山多嬌媚, 料青山見我應是). The woman reinvents Xin’s poetic lines and indicates her female image by using

---

173 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 69.

174 For the original lines, see Xin Qiji, “Hexinlang” 賀新郎 (Congrats the Bridegroom), Jiaxuan ci 稼軒詞 (Lyrics of Jiaxuan), SKQS, 1:12. For the translation, see Zheng Kai, The Metaphysics of Philosophical Daoism (New York: Routledge, 2021), 176.
the term *chenzhuang* 晨妝 (morning makeup) to refer to herself. Through the combination of her makeup and the mountains, Gu brings newness to the poetic tradition since she connects her female image with the landscapes instead of a cliché that women face the mirror or other objects in the inner quarters as in Li Maoying’s 李昴英 (1201-1257) “facing the mirror to put on morning makeup” (晨妝對鏡)。\(^{175}\) The various interactions with nature narrated in this poem reflect the female traveler’s appreciation for rural scenes and her free, calm spirit. They, on the other hand, reinforce Gu’s female subjectivity because the narrator, who is the author herself, serves as a viewer that enjoys the beauty of nature rather than a desired object to be gazed at.

The poem, “On the Twenty-Seventh, I Climbed onto the Highest Northwestern Peak behind the Clear Breeze Pavilion,” recounts the female poet’s experience of mountain climbing and her engagement with nature. Although it was not uncommon for Ming-Qing elite women to step out of their inner quarters, there was only a small number of poems on mountain climbing written by women compared to male poets. Thus, it is vital to analyze this poem to find how Gu portrays herself climbing the mountain as a female poet and a traveler.

Ascending high is a famous poetic theme, which is the so-called “gesture of ascent and observation” (*denglin* 登臨). Because of the poetic tradition’s concept that “poetry expresses in words intent” (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志), literati tend to claim their moral ambitions via the *denglin* theme. Based on Paula Varsana’s observation, numerous Chinese male poets participated in writing “climbing high and looking below” as a method to console

\(^{175}\) Li Maoying, “Shuilongyin” 水龍吟 (The Water Dragon’s Chant), *Yuxuan lidai shiyu*, SKQS, 76:3.
their real-life situations of being exiled to the hinterlands. Take Du Fu’s “Denggao” (From a Height) for an example:

The wind is keen, the sky is high; apes wail mournfully.  
The island looks fresh; the white sand gleams;  
Birds fly circling.  
An infinity of trees bleakly divest themselves,  
Their leaves falling, falling.  
Along the endless expanse of river  
The billows come rolling, rolling.  
Through a thousand miles of autumn’s melancholy,  
A constant traveler  
Racked with a century’s diseases,  
Alone I have dragged myself up to this high terrace  
Hardship and bitter chagrin  
Have thickened the frost upon my brow.  
And to crown my despondency  
I have lately had to renounce my cup of muddy wine!

Du creates his image as a lonely and sick man who climbs up to the terrace. He depicts the autumn scenes and conveys his depression via the terms, *ai* 哀 (mournful), *bei* 悲 (melancholy), *jiannan kuhen* 艱難苦恨 (hardship and bitter chagrin), and *liaodao* 潦倒 (despondency). However, Gu engages in writing on this theme differently. Her poem reads:

I step onto the highest peak;  
By the steep cliff, there is a little path.  
Around the dark cliff, rare birds are flying,  
At the precipice, the innocent child is climbing.  
(The boy Duan Ba can pick the mountain flowers)  
Along the precipice.)  
The valley extends widely in the southeast,  
While the colors of the flowers

---


177 For the lines in Chinese, see Du Fu, “Denggao,” *Dushi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳註, SKQS, 20:31. For the translation, see David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu*, 220-22.

178 I changed “rocks” in Wang’s translation into “cliff.”
Fill up the Northwest.
Atop the mountain,
The world underneath seems tiny,
As far as I can, I look into the indefinite celestial spheres.

Wang Yanning has pointed out that the first four lines of the poem are full of descriptions of danger through the terms: *gao* 高 (high), *chan* 嶂 (high and dangerous), *yin* 險 (dark), and *jue* 絕 (steep), and Duan Ba, Gu and Yihui’s servant boy, shifts to the brighter and broader scenes in the last four lines. In this section, I raise three points to deepen the analysis of this poem.

First, Wang has noticed very different pictures between Gu’s depiction of the first four lines and the second four lines. I further suggest: the first and second couplets depict a close-up scene, whereas the third and fourth couplets describe a distant view and capture the landscape’s entire appearance by portraying the scenes of more expansive valleys in the southeast and the bushes of pretty flowers in the northwest together.

Second, Gu portrays her movements in detail, creating her active role as an actor and a doer. Her description of the highest peak and the cliff in the first two lines alludes to poetic lines composed by a Tang poet, Jia Dao 賈島 (779-854), “in the north of the prefecture, the highest peak: the steep cliffs block the road of the clouds” (郡北最高峯, 嶂嚴絕雲路). Jia writes about his observation, but Gu reworks Jia’s original lines by

---

179 I consult the translation provided by Wang Yanning, *Reverie and Reality*, 120-21, but I also offer my own interpretations of some expressions.


181 Jia Dao, “Yizhou deng Longxing silou wang junbei gaofeng” 易州登龍興寺樓望郡北高峰 (In Yizhou, I Climbed onto the Longxing Temple, and Gazed at the High Peaks in the North of the County), in *Quan Tang shi*, 571:6627.
introducing her movements and recounting what she saw during the trip. The narration of her story of mountain climbing suggests her women’s mobility and strengthens her female agency.

Third, the view on the top of the mountain in the last two lines of this poem alludes to Gu’s Buddhist understanding and showcases how this female poet participates in the writing of the common theme of ascending high in the poetic tradition. The last couplet expands the space and forms a grand view by depicting a scene of looking down from a high place and another scene of looking upward into the end of the vision. Here, Gu makes an allusion to Liu Yong’s 柳永 (987? -1053?) lyrical lines:

The evening sun, in the sky beyond the flocks of birds;  
The autumn wind, on the plain  
As far as I can, I look into the frontier of the celestial spheres.

Gu follows Liu’s lines that describe a vast scene of the celestial spheres but replaces chui 垂 (frontier) with kong 空 (emptiness). Chui implies the existence of the boundary, whereas kong alludes to an indefinite realm. More importantly, she transforms these lines into a creative, new depiction of the scene that she viewed. The term, xiajie 下界 (the world underneath) in the second to last line, has double meanings. First, it refers to the human world. Because Gu is on the highest mountain’s peak, the human world underneath looks small to her. Second, it suggests a cosmological concept of Buddhist use. According to Dorothy Wong, there are three spheres from the bottom to the top in the universe, the Worlds of Desire (yujie 欲界), Form (sejie 色界), and Formlessness (wusejie 無色界). These three spheres include all kinds of beings. The world underneath refers to yujie, the

---

sphere that consists of various beings such as hell dwellers, ghosts, animals, and people. As explained, Gu distances herself from worldly desires and the human world and conveys her Buddhist comprehension by saying that this world seems tiny to her in the last two lines. This poem manifests her literary creativity and reinforces her female agency by providing a description of her movements as a female traveler and sensory experiences and conveying her Buddhist contemplation while she is on the top of the mountain.

In the same year, 1836, the female author composed another poem on Qingfengge, “Zhongqiu hou yiri tong fuzi wang Nangu su Qingfengge” 中秋後一日同夫子往南谷宿清風閣 (The Day after the Mid-autumn Festival, My Husband and I Went to Southern Valley and Stayed at Clear Breeze Pavilion). This poem pictures the autumn scenes and presents a different kind of natural beauty from the two previous poems associated with Gu’s spring outing:

The west wind [blew] the luxuriant grass on the plain.
We viewed the horizon.
The stream was full of the small yellow flowers;
In mid-autumn,
The clear dews moistened the graceful flowers.
Today the green mountain entertained me.
People should catch the right timing to
Enjoy beautiful scenes.
Waking up from my dream,
The shadow of the waning moon is by the western window,
And [the shadow of] old pine branches
Move across my pillow.

---

183 The World of Form is for saints and deities, and the World of Formless is for beings without substantial shapes. See Dorothy Wong, “The Mapping of Sacred Space: Images of Buddhist Cosmographies in Medieval China,” in The Journey of Maps and Images on the Silk Road (Boston: Brill, 2008), 51-79.

184 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 78.
The title indicates Gu’s female identity as Yihui’s travel companion. There is a time change between the first six lines and the last two lines since the former setting is daytime, whereas the latter shifts to night. The first six lines center on the north’s beautiful autumn landscape that Gu enjoyed during the daytime: the luxuriant grass, the horizon, the yellow flowers by the stream, the dew moistening the flowers, and the green mountain, and the last two lines depict an even more splendid picture while waking from the dream at night, which Zhang Juling has also observed.\textsuperscript{185} The scenes that Gu portrays are very colorful, though it is in fall, indicating her sensibilities as a female poet. Moreover, her expression in lines five and six anthropomorphizes the green mountain by saying that it treats her with its beauty and suggests her realization of time’s transience. When she looks at these scenes, she knows that the beautiful scene in front of her eyes would not last forever, and thus people should enjoy the beauty of nature before it is too late.

Composed in the same year, “On the Twenty-First, I Gazed from Qingfengge at Dawn,” “On the Twenty-Seventh, I Climbed onto the Highest Northwestern Peak behind the Clear Breeze Pavilion,” and “The Day after the Mid-autumn Festival” reveal Gu’s intimacy with nature and her female roles. However, the seasons, the atmospheres, and the messages delivered in these poems are different. The first poem demonstrates Gu as a woman in harmony with nature and conveys her calm and peaceful mental state while enjoying her surrounding landscapes on a spring morning. The second poem constructs her active persona as a female mountain climber and a doer to reinforce her women’s agency. The third poem depicts colorful scenes in autumn that she appreciates with Yihui and suggests her time consciousness that these scenes do not last permanently.

\textsuperscript{185} Zhang Juling, \textit{Kuangdai cainü}, 51.
3.3 Qingfengge and Female Voices as a Widow and a Mother

In 1838, Gu and her children were forced to leave Yihui’s Beijing mansion. As Wilt Idema and Beata Grant have investigated, Gu experienced a great sense of nostalgia after she had solved difficulties that she encountered:

Once the immediate problem of where to live had been settled, Gu Taiqing turned back to memories of her departed husband. She greatly missed his support as husband and father, and also the times they spent writing and enjoying poetry and other aesthetic pursuits together.186

Qingfengge had always been a place where Gu shared memories with her husband. After 1840, Gu and her children visited Qingfengge to commemorate Yihui and recalled the good old times. I examine her poems on this important site after 1838 in light of the historical account provided by Idema and Grant.

According to Wang Yanning, “as a widow, Gu Taiqing still visited the South Valley with her children, but this time, the pleasure trips turned into painful trips, and the poems on travel turned into elegies.”187 The poems associated with Qingfengge prior to 1838 convey Gu’s aspiration as a female traveler to live a reclusive life that pursues the Dao and illustrate her aesthetic enjoyment of nature. Since she had to encounter difficulties after Yihui died and she was kicked out of his mansion in Beijing, her poems on Qingfengge after 1838 reflect that her utopian life could never come true. Thus, her poems on this place strengthen the tension between the ideal lifestyle that she pictures and the reality that she confronts.

186 Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, The Red Brush, 633.

187 Wang Yanning, Reverie and Reality, 128.
A poem written in 1840, “Gengzi Qingming qian yiri shuai wu’er Zaizhao ba’er Zaichu su Qingfengge yehua yougan jianshi liang’er” (庚子清明前一日率五兒載釗八兒載初宿清風閣夜話有感兼示兩兒 (A Day Before the Qingming Festival, in the Year of Gengzi [1840], I Brought the Fifth Son Zaizhao and the Eighth Son Zaichu to Stay at Clear Breeze Pavilion. When We Talked at Night, I Had Some Thoughts; I Wrote This to Share with Them), highlights Gu’s female personas as a mother who attempts to educate her children and conveys her emotional attachment to Yihui as a widow. Given that there is only a small number of poems written from a mother’s perspective, it is vital to analyze this poem to advance the existing scholarship on Chinese poetry and Gu:

The constant conditions of green grass and mountains
Have not changed.
The luxuriant willows and the red apricots in the past are
Just as today.
Souls can transform into cranes and leave an immortal trail;
Dreamers can communicate with spirits
Who would deliver good news.
Nothing is more important than children’s filial piety,
[Yet] Daoist’s endeavor of the one-hundred-year
[Plan for Southern Valley] is in vain.
We trimmed the lamp and talked about the old days.
Sorrow and fury mixed together,
And our tears were all over our robes.

Initially, my late husband intended to implement a one-hundred-year plan. Every flower and tree, a few mu of fruits and vegetables, as well as several cow pens and pig sheds in Southern Valley were all [recorded] in the poems. See the fifteenth volume of Flowing Water Collections in the section of Hall of Clarity and Charity. Now, because the eldest son Zaijun, rented out the valley, we would only receive one thousand and sixty of rent per year. I do not [intend] to expose his unfilial [behavior] but to admonish the people in the world who plan for their descendants.

---

188 Gu makes an allusion to Song Qi’s 宋祈 (998-1061) lines: “cold at dawn is light beyond luxuriant and green willows; spring feelings are noisy on the branches of red apricots” (綠楊煙外曉寒輕, 紅杏枝頭春意鬧). See in Song Qi, “Chunjing” 春景 (The Spring Scene) to the tune of “Mulan hua” 木蘭花 (Magnolia Flowers), in Yuxuan lidai shiyu, SKQS, 31:7.
The annotation at the end of this poem brings out the idea that Southern Valley’s fate intertwined with Gu’s fate: after she got kicked out, Yihui’s eldest son rented out Southern Valley. It also reflects her role as a mother that feels responsible for educating her children, which she particularly emphasizes that she does not aim to criticize her son but give advice to people who plan for their offspring like her husband.

Because of the low rent that Southern Valley brought every year indicated in the annotation, it is reasonable to doubt why Zaijun rented it out. On the other hand, there are three possible reasons to justify it. First, in view of Jin Qicong, Zaijun always followed regulations and believed in fengshui (geomantic principles). Second, the price of the maintenance of Southern Valley might be very high, which made it hard for Yihui’s family to afford it. Third, Zaijun might not be emotionally attached to this place and wanted to relive the good old days as Gu did.

In the first and second couplets strengthen her nostalgia for Yihui by expressing her feelings of the so-called wushi renfei (things remain the same, but people are different) that contrast scenes and people. The spring scenes: bicao (green grass), qingshan (green mountains), liuyan (luxuriant willows), and xinghuo (red apricots) stay the same, but her most important companion, Yihui, is absent. Gu can communicate with him now only through the dreams and his soul that transforms into cranes after death.

---

The third and fourth couplets manifest Gu’s voice as a mother. The term Daoren 道人 (a Daoist) in line six refers to Yihui, who was interested in Daoism. Corresponding to her words in the annotation, she reinforces her motherly solicitude towards how Zaijun dealt with Southern Valley. She then creates a scenario in which she and her children recollect their memories of Yihui and cry at night to convey their intense sadness and anger, which was caused by her harsh life in general after Yihui passed away.

The female author’s emotions conveyed in this poem, such as her strong sense of reminiscence of Yihui and the urge to educate her children, reveal her female voices and subjectivity. This poem is also an example of how a woman empowers herself through poetry writing. Given that she did not dwell in the mansion owned by Yihui’s family at that time, this poem reinforces the importance that she places on these kinship-defined roles and suggests the idea that her self-identification as a mother and a widow is based on her emotional attachment to her family rather than where she lived physically.

Another poem on Qingfengge written in 1841, “Chujiu Qingfengge wang Zhao’er” 初九清風閣望釗兒 (On the 9th Visiting Zaizhao in Clear Breeze Pavilion), also shows Gu’s persona as a mother:190

With blurred eyes I’m too old to see clearly from a height, 老眼凭高看不清
Suddenly I heard a neigh in the woods 忽聞林際馬嘶聲
Now the rider galloping up the mountain, 今朝騎馬登山者
Was born seventeen years ago! 十七年前此日生191

190 To be consistent throughout my thesis, I changed Geng’s translation of Qingfengge from “Pure Breeze Pavilion” to “Clear Breeze Pavilion.” According to Jin Qicong, in this poem, Gu aims to clarify that Yihui’s mother was why she and her children had to leave Yihui’s mansion in Beijing. However, since I did not find any textual evidence that shows Gu’s complaint about her mother-in-law, I did not analyze the poem based on Jin’s words. For Jin’s work, see Jin Qicong and Jin Shi, Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian, 821.

191 For the original Chinese lines, see Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 130. For the translation, see Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 37.
The poem successfully represents a mother’s happiness, deepest anticipation, and incredible pride, which Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 has highly praised. Changqin Geng has explained that seeing her grown-up son reminds Gu of the moment that she gave birth to him and made her very proud of this child. Su and Geng have already observed Gu’s mother voice in this poem, but I further point out the differences between “A Day Before the Qingming Festival” and this poem, both of which create her female expressions. The former manifests a mother’s admonishment and intention to educate her children, whereas the latter centers on this mother’s satisfaction and contentment because of her son growing up. Instead of directly expressing her feelings toward her child, she starts from hearing a horse sound and then recognizes that Zaizhao is the one riding it. She conveys a mother’s pride through her son’s image in front of her eyes, which evokes her recall of when he came to the world.

The following poem recounts that Gu and her children visited Qingfengge in 1841 and develops her female persona as a widow who misses her love:

On the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month, in the Year of Xinchou (1841), on the Third Anniversary of My Late Husband, I Brought the Sixth Daughter Zaitong, the Seventh Daughter Zaidao, and the Eighth Son Zaichu, to Visit Southern Valley to Pay Our Respects to Him. Since the Fifth Son, Zaizhao, had a Public Duty, He Was Not Able to Come Together with Us. We Watched the Dawn and Had Some Thoughts at the Clear Breeze Pavilion on the Seventh.

辛丑七夕先夫子下世三週年矣率六女載通七女載道八兒載初恭謁南谷因五兒載釗有差未克同來初七同通兒清風閣看初日有感
At dawn, we, in the tower in the mountains, Gaze at the sunlight. In the distant villages, we have not yet seen any people. Changes of the dawn clouds are mostly unpredictable;


193 Changqin Geng, “Mirror, Dream and Shadow,” 38.
The autumn’s water, vast and expansive, has an edge.
The dew moistens, the tall grass.
And the insects’ drones are low;
The wind blows, the tall woods.
And the calls of the birds are clamorous.
Those years, the old lines, are hard to forget.
(In the spring of the bingshen year [1836],
Together with my late husband,
We gazed from the Clear Breeze Pavilion at dawn,
And had the lines, “the high tower prolongs the dawn;
Facing the distant mountains, I put on morning makeup.”)
Would his soul recall me?

The long title contextualizes this poem and reveals Gu’s identity as a mother and a widow.
The first couplet includes the images of the dawn’s scenes: the tower, the mountains, and
the distant villages; the second couplet contrasts the natural objects in heaven and on earth.
The clouds’ changes in heaven are boundless, whereas the phenomena on earth have their
own boundaries. Although this poem is entitled “Watched the Dawn,” the third couplet
does not limit the female poet’s visual depiction but includes different sensory experiences:
the moistening dew, the blowing wind, and the sound of the insects and birds. The portrayal
makes the images of the landscapes more vivid, demonstrating Gu’s sensibility as a female
poet and enabling her to take her readers on a tour of the area around the villa.

The last couplet and the annotation between the last two lines contrast the past and
present to reinforce Gu’s attachment to Yihui and highlight her female role as a widow.
The similar scenes that she saw around Qingfengge allude to the poetic lines that she
composed in 1836: “the high tower prolongs the dawn; facing the distant mountains, I put
on morning makeup,” which records her spring outing with her family.195 These landscapes

195 Ibid.
remain the same, but Yihui can no longer appreciate the beauty of nature with her, strengthening her current emotional sufferings.

Given that people believe that linghun 靈魂 (souls) is different from a person’s physical form and does not vanish after death, the last line of this poem suggests that this female author could only communicate with her dead husband via his soul.¹⁹⁶ There is a similar expression in the second couplet of “A Day Before the Qingming Festival:” “souls can transform into cranes and leave an immortal trail; dreamers can communicate with spirits,” but their focuses are different.¹⁹⁷ The former is a more general statement, but this poem specifies Gu and her husband’s communication. This poem represents Gu’s female voice by conveying her grief and longing as a widow. The female author creates scenarios similar to her poem “On the Twenty-First, I Gazed from Qingfengge at Dawn” to stress her turmoil and the sad, mournful atmosphere in this poem.

Gu’s poems on Qingfengge reflect her travel experience as a female poet and traveler and create her articulation as Yihui’s companion, a widow, and a mother. The long titles and annotations shown in this chapter offer very specific details of her outings, which makes the set of poetry on Qingfengge like this female author’s traveling diary.

Qingfengge was a place for her to temporarily distance herself from the political center in Beijing and appreciate the beauty of nature with her husband. Gu creates her role as Yihui’s companion by picturing their ideal lifestyle that pursues the Dao and comforting him through a Buddhist value that everything is an illusion. After Yihui’s sudden death,

¹⁹⁶ The Chinese concept of linghun was first mentioned in Qu Yuan’s Chuci, “my soul desired to return” (羌靈魂之欲歸兮). See Qu Yuan, “Ai Ying” 哀郢 (Lament for Ying), Chuci buzhu, 193.

her poetry on Qingfengge transforms into the remembrance of her love. As a lamenting widow, she conveys her nostalgia for her husband by recalling the beautiful landscapes they appreciated.

Gu strengthens her female subjectivity by writing about her excursions to Qingfengge. She portrays harmony between herself as a woman and the landscape and expresses her free, peaceful, and calm spirit. Through her mountain climbing adventure, she depicts her movements and narrates what she saw, creating her female persona as a doer or an actor. Moreover, she provides perspectives from a mother, which is rarely read in Chinese poetry. She speaks as a mother to educate her children, deliver her concern, and express her pride and contentment.

Gu’s poetry on Qingfengge reveals her different emotions and thoughts in different life stages. She aspires to follow the Dao and Buddhist worldview and picture her reclusive lifestyle. However, because she encountered difficulties in life after she and her children were kicked out of Yihui’s mansion in Beijing, she could not fulfill her idyllic life as she aimed. Therefore, Gu’s poems on this site reinforce the tension between her idyllic life that pursues the Dao and the reality that she has to encounter.
CONCLUSION

My study demonstrates that Gu creates her own female articulation in her poetry by integrating her life experiences as an elite woman, a mother, and a female companion for her friends and Yihui. I emphasize her Confucian and Daoist public personas in her poetry to argue that her self-constructed images reinforce her female agency. The author portrays herself as a woman in the boudoir, but she transcends the common image of women and reveals her literary creativity by drawing her images from a woman’s perspective. Taking an active female role, she details her activities that she enjoys and her vivid movements, depicts her sensory experiences, and primarily conveys her pleasant mood in her inner quarters.

Gu’s dedication to Confucian learning highlighted in her image reflects Qing’s social expectation for women’s virtue and indicates what aspects of her and her life that the female author intends to represent. By suggesting that women’s talent and virtue can be reconciled, she negotiates her reputation as a female author and her image as a learned lady. Furthermore, Gu’s self-image as a female Daoist suggests the coexistence of Confucian and Daoist worldviews because her poem shows that she is affected by these two worldviews. Although she conveys her interests in Daoism, she does not seek enlightenment but stays in the human world as an observer of her life.

Although the subject, plum blossoms, has rich cultural connotations, Gu demonstrates her uniqueness and versatility in the poetic tradition by narrating her multi-aspects of life and providing innovative perspectives on the flowers. The set of her poems on plum flowers strengthens her female subjectivity and her roles as a female poet, an elite woman, and a female companion for her friends and her husband.
Many male poets used plum blossoms to symbolize their integrity and perseverance when they were demoted and exiled. Gu follows men’s methodology to represent her loftiness, purity, and dignity, but she further differentiates herself from men poets by constructing her image associated with plum blossoms and boudoir settings. Gu’s boudoir transforms into a boundary that protects herself and the flowers from filth and dirtiness in the outside world.

Plum blossoms sometimes become her friends. She portrays herself as an elite woman living in her inner quarters that is very different from female figures established by men. In the company of the flowers, she describes various activities that she enjoys, creates a delightful atmosphere, and conveys her contented mood.

Given the popularity of plum blossoms among female poets, Gu and her female friends usually drew and wrote about plum blossoms and shared their works. She writes this subject to represent the deep friendships with her friends and their mutual understanding, as they both adore plum blossoms. Moreover, Gu shows her creativity by constructing the image of plum blossoms associated with her Daoist and Buddhist contemplation. She uses the fragrance of the flower as a metaphor to symbolize the delusive fantasy in the human world and negates the pursuit of worldly illusions that follows the Buddhist worldview. The coexistence of her attachment to and detachment from the flowers demonstrates her various interpretation of plum blossoms. It reinforces the tension between the ideality that she aims to see through material pursuits and the futility of mundane matters and the reality that she is obsessed with the beauty of the flowers.

The analysis of Gu’s poems on Qingfengge shows how she describes her travel experiences and her activities outside the boudoir as a female poet and traveler. She voices
herself as Yihui’s companion and emotional support by appreciating Qingfengge’s surrounding landscapes with him, comforting him through the Buddhist value, and imagining their idyllic life following the Dao. Also, she strengthens her women’s subjectivity by narrating her outings. She creates perfect harmony between nature and herself as a woman and conveys her peaceful and calm mind; she constructs her active role as a doer by portraying her movements of mountain climbing.

After Yihui passed away, Qingfengge transformed into a site for the lamented widow to find comfort and mourn him. She establishes her female persona as a widow to express her nostalgia for Yihui and their good old times. Since Yihui’s son rented out Qingfengge, she writes about her concern and admonishments to educate her descendants from a mother’s perspective. Seeing her son growing up, she conveys her pride and gladness as a mother. These female voices indicate the female poet’s self-identification to her roles as a mother and a widow and emphasize her emotional attachment to her family.

Gu’s poetry on the site manifests her pursuits of a reclusive lifestyle and the Dao, but the poetry composed after 1838 reveals that these pursuits did not come true because she had to deal with difficulties in life, such as finding a new place for her and her children to live after they were forced to leave Yihui’s mansion. Therefore, this set of poems strengthens the tension between the utopian lifestyle that she pictures and the actual situation that she confronts.

My study of Gu’s poetry reveals how a female poet, in the social and cultural contexts of the late Qing, shows the uniqueness of her poetry, engages in the poetic tradition, creates her images and voices, and narrates her life experiences to the audience. The coexistence of a male voice and female voice in Gu’s poetry reflects the differences
between literary creation and one’s real life, and it suggests that readers cannot always take her words at face value. Gu shows her female subjectivity through active women’s roles in her poetry and her public personas highlighting that she is both the subject of her poems and the author of her life stories.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Fong, Grace. “Ming Qing Women’s Writings: A Digital Archive and Database of Women’s Literature and History in Late Imperial China.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 217-25.


———. *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008.


Han Li. “Triangulating Filial Piety, Ethnicity, and Nation in Late-Qing China: The Lilac Affair in Zeng Pu’s ‘Niehai hua.’” Asia Major Third Series 26, no. 2 (2013): 89-120.


———. A Little Primer of Tu Fu. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2016.


Ho Yu Hin 何宇軒. “A Study of Women’s Roles in Constructing Masculinities in Ming-Qing China.” PhD diss., Hong Kong Baptist University, 2017.


Huang Yanli 黃嫣梨. Zhuantai yu zhuantai yiwai: Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu lunji 妝臺


Ko, Dorothy. Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-


Ouyang jiong 歐陽炯. Lü Benzong yanjiu 呂本中研究. Taipei: Wen shi zhe chubanshe,


———. “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China” *Late Imperial China* 13, no. 1 (June 1992): 63-110.


Wong, Dorothy. “The Mapping of Sacred Space: Images of Buddhist Cosmographies in


