

The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji



Poems from a courtesan in
Tang Dynasty China

translated by Leonard Ng

The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji: Poems from a courtesan in Tang Dynasty China.

Simplified character edition.

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加之。有客自京师来者示予；因次其韵。 / Guang, Wei, and Pou, three sisters orphaned in their youth, wrote a set of incomparable verses after they had grown beautiful. Even the Xie family's verses on the snow wouldn't be able to add anything to it. A visitor from the capital showed it to me, and I've written this poem based on their rhyme-words. 104

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Foreword

The forty-nine poems translated in this volume are all that remain of the writings of Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机, also romanized as Yü Hsüan-chi). She lived as a courtesan in the Tang Dynasty capital of Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), in the pleasure district of the city.

We know very little about the facts of her life. She was probably born around the year 844, and was executed in her mid-twenties for murder around the year 868. Her biographers seem to have been particularly interested in presenting her as a specimen of scandalous womanhood, a promiscuous, uncontrollable woman who eventually received her just deserts after beating her maid to death. In our own era she has been the inspiration for pornographic films. One volume of her poems was published in her lifetime; this has since been lost, and the poems translated here were collected a few hundred years later as part of a Song Dynasty anthology of literary grotesqueries (which also includes poems by such outré figures as foreigners and ghosts).

Her poems, however, seem to tell a different tale. Written for the most part in a clear autobiographical style, they present to us a portrait of a woman mercurial, passionate, gifted, forlorn, pleasure-loving, often lonely, longing deeply for companionship, to love and to be loved. They constitute the record of a short tempestuous life, passionately lived. We have no way of knowing how representative these poems are, since they were essentially selected by moralizing redactors for their shock value. But the image they present today is tantalizing, vital, and profoundly sympathetic, and even those biographers who condemn her as an example of wayward womanhood acknowledge her intelligence, ability, and wit.

Here follows what little we know of her life. Yu Xuanji lived in Chang'an, the capital of China's golden age and—as the eastern terminus of the Silk Road—one of the capitals of the medieval world. It was a major centre of learning, culture, administration, religion, trade, and intercultural exchange. Yu was a resident of Chang'an's pleasure district; we have no way of knowing if she

grew up there, but we do know that she was there by the time she was sixteen. At that age she became the concubine of Censor Li Yi; marriage, at that time, was one of the few ways by which a woman of the pleasure district could leave it. Yu Xuanji, however, does seem to have genuinely loved Li Yi.

Based on her poems, it seems that Li Yi later took Yu with him on a trip to the south of China; but he was away for long periods, eventually abandoning her (possibly due to his wife's jealousy). Yu Xuanji then seems to have lived by herself in the mountains for a short time before returning penniless to Chang'an. She then entered a Daoist convent, and seems to have made a sincere attempt to live according to Daoist ideals. This did not last long, however; Daoist temples were often seen as hotbeds of moral laxity, and Daoist religion was not above employing sexual techniques for purposes of "physical cultivation". Eventually, according to the biographies, she murdered her maidservant (in an alleged fit of jealous rage), and was executed for the crime soon after.

Some modern western commentators consider her to be a kind of proto-feminist poet. I do not know if that assessment is justified; as far as I can tell she seems to have been a woman trying to live her life as best she could in the world she found herself in, and while she does wish in one poem that she could be taken seriously as a poet (women were generally viewed as unworthy of consideration), she never truly seems to have protested against the patriarchal mores of the period. It is better, I think, to understand her as a gifted, passionate woman whose life was unfortunately circumscribed by the fact of her womanhood. Yu, in that sense, was a victim of her circumstances and times.

Yu Xuanji's poems were subsequently re-collected as part of the 17th-century *Quan Tang Shi* (*Complete Tang Poems*) project, where they constitute Chapter 804. The order of the poems presented here follows the *Quan Tang Shi* numbering.

I thank all those who have helped me with the translation of these poems, and I particularly thank Xu Shi Meng for her careful comments and advice.

These translations would not be what they are without her help. I am also significantly indebted, especially in the brief notes on the poems, to Jan W. Wall's doctoral thesis *The Poetry of Yü Hsüan-chi: A Translation, Annotation, Commentary and Critique* (Indiana University, 1972).

鱼玄机诗集

The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji

赋得江边柳

翠色连荒岸，烟姿入远楼。
影铺秋水面，花落钓人头。
根老藏鱼窟，枝低系客舟。
萧萧风雨夜，惊梦复添愁。

A poem for the willows by the river

Jade green stretches by the river's barren banks;
misty clouds dance themselves into distant mansions.
Reflections unfold upon the autumn river;
flowers fall on the heads of fishermen.
Old roots hide the haunts of fishes;
branches bend to moor visiting boats.
The night sighs and sighs with wind and rain,
and unsettling dreams only deepen my gloom.

赠邻女

羞日遮罗袖，愁春懒起妆。
易求无价宝，难得有心郎。
枕上潜垂泪，花间暗断肠。
自能窥宋玉，何必恨王昌？

Sent to a neighbour girl

I block the shame of daylight with a silken sleeve,
too listless to get dressed this melancholy spring.
It's easy to come by a pearl without price;
what's hard is to find a lover with a heart.
Hidden teardrops fall on my pillow,
my heart breaks secretly among the flowers—
but still I can peep at Song Yu;
why then regret Wang Chang?

寄国香

旦夕醉吟身，相思又此春。
雨中寄书使，窗下断肠人。
山卷珠帘看，愁随芳草新。
别来清宴上，几度落梁尘？

To Guo Xiang

From dawn to dusk I'm drunk and singing,
lovesick with every new spring.
There's a messenger with letters in the rain;
there's a broken-hearted girl by the window.
Rolling up beaded blinds, I see mountains;
each sorrow's renewed like the grass.
Since last we parted, at your feasts
how often has the rafter dust fallen?

寄题炼师

霞彩剪为衣，添香出绣帏。
芙蓉花叶□，山水帔□稀。
驻履闻莺语，开笼放鹤飞。
高堂春睡觉，暮雨正霏霏。

To the Perfect Master

Rosy clouds cut into clothing,
fragrant incense from embroidered veils:
the flowers and leaves of the lotus are ____,
the ____ cloak of the landscape is thin.
Halt your steps—hear the orioles singing,
open the cage—let the crane fly free.
Sleep in spring in the high hall!
Wake to the heavy dusk rain.

寄刘尚书

八座镇雄军，歌谣满路新。
汾川三月雨，晋水百花春。
囹圄长空锁，干戈久覆尘。
儒僧观子夜，羁客醉红茵。
笔砚行随手，诗书坐绕身。
小材多顾盼，得作食鱼人。

To Grand Secretary Liu

The Eight Ministries control the valiant troops;
songs and carols fill the road anew.
On the River Fen, third-month rains;
on the Jin River, a hundred-flower spring.
Prisons and jails have been locked up empty;
weapons of war are now covered in dust.
Scholars and monks watch Midnight perform;
visiting guests get drunk on scarlet mats.
The brush and inkstone move at ease in your hand;
poems and letters sit surrounding you.
Even those of minor talent are well cared for;
they are men who may dine on fish.

浣纱庙

吴越相谋计策多，浣纱神女已相和。
一双笑靥才回面，十万精兵尽倒戈。
范蠡功成身隐遁，伍胥谏死国消磨。
只今诸暨长江畔，空有青山号苕萝。

Silk-Washing Temple

As the states of Wu and Yue piled plot upon plot,
the silk-washing goddess offered ease;
a pair of laughing dimples turned the prince's head,
and a hundred thousand soldiers let fall their shining spears.
Fan Li, successful, became a recluse;
Wu Xu died for his advice. His country was wiped out.
And yet, today, by the long river at Zhuji,
there's nothing but a green hill named Zhu Luo.

卖残牡丹

临风兴叹落花频，芳意潜消又一春。
应为价高人不问，却缘香甚蝶难亲。
红英只称生宫里，翠叶那堪染路尘。
及至移根上林苑，王孙方恨买无因。

Selling wilted peonies

Facing the wind, she raises a sigh as the petals fall and fall;
fragrant thoughts all sink and vanish with yet another spring.
No one asks about them because their price is high,
though even butterflies can't match the sweetness of their fragrance.
These red petals should have grown in the palace,
jade leaves tainted by the dust of the road—
if only they were moved into the imperial gardens,
young nobles would regret having no means to buy!

酬李学士寄箴

珍箴新铺翡翠楼，泓澄玉水记方流。
唯应云扇情相似，同向银床恨早秋。

Thanking Scholar Li for his gift of a bamboo mat

The precious mat is newly spread in my kingfisher-green chamber,
a deep, clear river of jade turning at right angles.
Yet surely it must share the feelings of the cloudlike fan,
facing the silver bed together, fearing an early autumn.

情书（一作书情寄李子安）

饮冰食檠志无功，晋水壶关在梦中。
秦镜欲分愁堕鹊，舜琴将弄怨飞鸿。
井边桐叶鸣秋雨，窗下银灯暗晓风。
书信茫茫何处问？持竿尽日碧江空。

A love letter (To Li Zi'an)

Eating ice, chewing bark, wishes unfulfilled;
Jin River, Hu Pass—only in my dreams.
Although I'd split the mirror, I fear the magpie's flight;
although I'd play the *qin*, I resent the flying geese.
By the well, paulownia leaves sing of autumn rain;
beneath the window, silver lamps are darkened by dawn breeze.
Where in all the world may one ask after a letter?
My lines are cast all day, but the green river remains empty.

闺怨

靡芜盈手泣斜晖，闻道邻家夫婿归。
别日南鸿才北去，今朝北雁又南飞。
春来秋去相思在，秋去春来信息稀。
扃闭朱门人不到，砧声何事透罗帏。

Boudoir lament

Hands full of herbs, I weep at slanting sunbeams,
hearing that the husband next door has returned.
The day we parted, southern geese had just begun to fly north;
this morning, northern geese are flying south again.
Spring comes, autumn goes, lovesickness remains;
autumn goes, spring comes; letters remain scarce.
My vermilion doors are barred, and no one comes.
Only the sound of fulling-stones passes my bed curtains.

春情寄子安

山路欹斜石磴危，不愁行苦苦相思。
冰销远涧怜清韵，雪远寒峰想玉姿。
莫听凡歌春病酒，休招闲客夜贪棋。
如松匪石盟长在，比翼连襟会肯迟。
虽恨独行冬尽日，终期相见月圆时。
别君何物堪持赠，泪落晴光一首诗。

Spring feelings (to Zi'an)

The mountain paths are steep and sheer, the stones are dangerous,
but the journey doesn't grieve me; I grieve from lovesickness.
Ice melts in distant streams—I miss your clear voice;
snowy, distant mountain peaks—I think of your jade form.
Don't listen to street songs or get drunk with wine in spring;
cease to entertain idle guests. Don't long for chess at night.
Our union will endure as the rocks and pines;
we're paired wings, joined lapels; we can bear delay.
Though it's sad to walk alone on the last day of winter,
we'll finally meet again when the moon is full.
Parted now, what may I send as a gift?
Fallen tears glittering on a poem.

打球作

坚圆净滑一星流，月杖争敲未拟休。
无滞碍时从拨弄，有遮栏处任钩留。
不辞宛转长随手，却恐相将不到头。
毕竟入门应始了，愿君争取最前筹。

Playing polo

Firm, round, clean, smooth, the ball's a shooting star;
crescent-sticks are struggling to strike without pause.
When there's no obstruction, they flick the ball about;
when the way is blocked, they keep it in the hook.
Don't be afraid to bend and turn; keep the ball at hand;
fear only lest you miss a shot at your opponent's goal.
Send it through the arch at last! Bring this to an end;
I hope your struggle wins you the very first prize.

暮春有感寄友人

莺语惊残梦，轻妆改泪容。
竹阴初月薄，江静晚烟浓。
湿觜衔泥燕，香须采蕊蜂。
独怜无限思，吟罢亚枝松。

Feelings at the end of spring (sent to a friend)

The voices of orioles wake me from sad dreams;
light makeup hides the tear-stains on my face.
The bamboo grove is shadowy in the moon's faint light;
the River lies silent beneath the night's thick mist.
Swallows are wet-beaked from carrying mud;
bees are sweet-whiskered from gathering pollen.
I alone am pitiful, in my endless longing.
I'll sing no more of pines with laden limbs.

冬夜寄温飞卿

苦思搜诗灯下吟，不眠长夜怕寒衾。
满庭木叶愁风起，透幌纱窗惜月沈。
疏散未闲终遂愿，盛衰空见本来心。
幽栖莫定梧桐处，暮雀啾啾空绕林。

To Wen Feiqing on a winter's night

In bitter longing I sought poems to recite beneath the lamp,
sleepless through the long nights, fearing a cold quilt.
Leaves strewn across the courtyard lamented when winds rose;
through gauze window curtains I grieved at the setting moon.
Thoughts scattered and released, at last I found fulfillment:
through the emptiness of rise and fall, I saw True Mind.
Now roosting in seclusion, away from paulownias,
an evening sparrow twitters, simply circling the grove.

酬李郢夏日钓鱼回见示

住处虽同巷，经年不一过。
清词劝旧女，香桂折新柯。
道性欺冰雪，禅心笑绮罗。
迹登霄汉上，无路接烟波。

In response to Li Ying's poem "Returning from fishing on a summer's day"

Though we live on the same lane,
we haven't met all year;
now clear words urge your old girlfriend
to pluck a new cassia twig.
But the Way's nature is like frozen snow;
the Zen heart laughs at delicate silks.
My steps have mounted to the vastness of heaven
where no roads cross the misty waves.

次韵西邻新居兼乞酒

一首诗来百度吟，新情字字又声金。
西看已有登垣意，远望能无化石心。
河汉期赊空极目，潇湘梦断罢调琴。
况逢寒节添乡思，叔夜佳醪莫独斟。

Written using the rhyme-words of my new neighbour to the west,
and humbly asking him to share some wine

A poem arrives; I chant it a hundred times,
fresh feelings making each word sound golden.
Already, looking west, I feel like climbing the wall;
I gaze into the distance, but my heart won't turn to stone.
The Star Festival draws near, but in the distance I see nothing;
my dreams of the south are broken; I've stopped tuning the qin.
Thoughts of home increase as the cold season approaches.
Good wine on a quiet night shouldn't be poured alone.

和友人次韵

何事能销旅馆愁，红笺开处见银钩。
蓬山雨洒千峰小，嶰谷风吹万叶秋。
字字朝看轻碧玉，篇篇夜诵在衾裯。
欲将香匣收藏却，且惜时吟在手头。

With a friend, using the same rhyme-words

What could dispel the gloom of staying in an inn?
Opening a red letter, I see silver strokes.
Rain on Penglai Mountain makes a thousand peaks seem small;
Xie Valley winds blow a thousand leaves into autumn.
I read each word at daybreak, more precious than jasper;
I chant page after page at night under quilts.
I'll keep your letter tucked away in a scented chest,
but I'll take it in hand to recite now and then.

和新及第悼亡诗二首

一

仙籍人间不久留，片时已过十经秋。
鸳鸯帐下香犹暖，鹦鹉笼中语未休。
朝露缀花如脸恨，晚风欹柳似眉愁。
彩云一去无消息，潘岳多情欲白头。

二

一枝月桂和烟秀，万树江桃带雨红。
且醉尊前休怅望，古来悲乐与今同。

With a new graduate, grieving over the loss of his wife: two poems

i.

Immortals don't remain long in the world of men;
suddenly you'll find ten autumns have gone past.
Incense will still be warm beneath mandarin-duck curtains;
conversation won't cease in the parrot's cage.
Morning dew dots the flowers like a sorrowful face;
The night wind bends the willows like melancholy eyebrows.
Coloured clouds, once gone, leave no word behind;
Pan Yue is full of love, though his hair grows white.

ii.

A sprig of moon cassia blends with grace into the mist;
a thousand river peach trees grow red with drops of rain.
Get drunk with the winecup! Leave these thoughts of loss;
joy and sorrow in the past were as they are today.

游崇真观南楼，睹新及第题名处

云峰满目放春晴，历历银钩指下生。

自恨罗衣掩诗句，举头空羡榜中名。

Visiting Lofty-Truth Monastery and viewing the names of new graduates at the south tower

Cloudy peaks fill my eyes this clear spring;
Silver strokes spring to life beneath my fingertips.
How I hate this silken gown which obscures my poetry!
Uselessly I envy the names on the list.

愁思

落叶纷纷暮雨和，朱丝独抚自清歌。
放情休恨无心友，养性空抛苦海波。
长者车音门外有，道家书卷枕前多。
布衣终作云霄客，绿水青山时一过。

Melancholy thoughts

Falling leaves fill the evening, mingling with the rain;
I stroke vermilion strings alone, sing a pure song.
I let go my resentment at having no soulmate;
I cultivate my character, leave the bitter sea's waves.
Wealthy people's carriages pass outside the dark gate;
piles of Daoist books lie stacked before my pillow.
Commonly clad once, now a traveller of the sky,
at times still I pass green waters, verdant hills.

秋怨

自叹多情是足愁，况当风月满庭秋。
洞房偏与更声近，夜夜灯前欲白头。

Autumn lament

I sigh—so many sentiments crowd my heart with sorrow,
even as the wind and moon fill the autumn courtyard.
The bedchamber—so close to the watch-drum's sound.
Night by night before the lamp my hair grows white.

江行

大江横抱武昌斜，鸚鵡洲前户万家。
画舸春眠朝未足，梦为蝴蝶也寻花。

烟花已入鸚鵡港，画舸犹沿鸚鵡洲。
醉卧醒吟都不觉，今朝惊在汉江头。

River travel

The River holds Wuchang in the crook of its arm.
At Parrot Island—look!—the doors of ten thousand homes.
Spring sleep in a pleasure barge isn't done by morning.
I dream that I'm a butterfly seeking flowers too.

Misty flowers drift now into Cormorant Harbour,
though the painted barge still skirts Parrot Island.
Drunk we sleep, awake we sing, quite aware of nothing,
till morning surprises us at the Han River's mouth.

闻李端公垂钓回寄赠

无限荷香染暑衣，阮郎何处弄船归？
自惭不及鸳鸯侣，犹得双双近钓矶。

Sent as a gift, upon hearing that Censor Li has returned from fishing

Your summer robe's been perfumed by endless lotus fields;
from whence have you returned, Master Ruan, with your boat?
How I wish we could match what the partnered mandarin ducks
have for themselves, as they swim paired by your fishing stone.

题任处士创资福寺

幽人创奇境，游客驻行程。
粉壁空留字，莲宫未有名。
凿池泉自出，开径草重生。
百尺金轮阁，当川豁眼明。

On Master Ren's founding of Blessings-Bestowed Temple

The recluse has established a marvellous place
for travellers to rest on their way;
the whitewashed walls are still uninscribed,
the lotus hall still lacks a name.

You dig a pond—a spring emerges;
you open a path—grass grows anew.
The Gold Wheel Pagoda, a hundred feet high,
facing the river, opens eyes to the light.

题隐雾亭

春花秋月入诗篇，白日清宵是散仙。
空卷珠帘不曾下，长移一榻对山眠。

A fog-shrouded pavilion

Spring flowers and the autumn moon enter into poems;
bright days and clear nights suit immortal hermits.
Idly, once, I raised my blinds—never let them fall;
moved my couch instead to sleep facing the mountains.

重阳阻雨

满庭黄菊篱边拆，两朵芙蓉镜里开。
落帽台前风雨阻，不知何处醉金杯。

Held up by rain on the Double Ninth

The hall's full of chrysanthemums plucked by the fence;
two lotus blossoms are blooming in the mirror.
I'm at Fallen-Hat Pagoda, held up by wind and rain;
where may I go now to get drunk from cups of gold?

早秋

嫩菊含新彩，远山闲夕烟。
凉风惊绿树，清韵入朱弦。
思妇机中锦，征人塞外天。
雁飞鱼在水，书信若为传。

Early autumn

Chrysanthemums—so delicate—are filled with new colours.
Evening mist shrouds the distant lazy hills.
A cool wind is rustling among emerald treetops;
pure notes are passing through vermilion strings.
Here's a loving wife, lost in her weaving;
her husband marches at the edge of the sky—
wild geese fly. Fish swim.
So too do letters pass on.

感怀寄人

恨寄朱弦上，含情意不任。
早知云雨会，未起蕙兰心。
灼灼桃兼李，无妨国士寻。
苍苍松与桂，仍羨世人钦。
月色苔阶净，歌声竹院深。
门前红叶地，不扫待知音。

Sending a letter to express my feelings

All my anguish passes into these vermilion strings
as I hold my thoughts back, keep my feelings in.
Had I only known the nature of our tryst of wind and rain
I'd never even have bothered to rouse my orchid heart.
The peach and the plum shine so brightly;
I won't encumber such a statesman's way.
The pine and the cassia, so green,
long ever for the world's admiration.
Moonlight falls cleanly on the moss-covered stairs,
deep in the bamboo courtyard there's the sound of a song—
but I won't sweep the leaves from the ground before my gate
till someone comes at last who knows my melody.

期友人阻雨不至

雁鱼空有信，鸡黍恨无期。
闭户方笼月，褰帘已散丝。
近泉鸣砌畔，远浪涨江湄。
乡思悲秋客，愁吟五字诗。

On a meeting with a friend called off because of rain

The goose and the fish have borne meaningless letters;
the banquet laments our lack of a meeting.
Closing the door to my moonlit cage
I raise the blinds, tattered and threadbare:
nearby springs are singing in their channels,
distant waves brim the river's banks.
Homesick and sad, this autumn traveller
unhappily chants her five-character poems.

访赵炼师不遇

何处同仙侣，青衣独在家。
暖炉留煮药，邻院为煎茶。
画壁灯光暗，幡竿日影斜。
殷勤重回首，墙外数枝花。

Visiting Master Zhao and not finding him

Where might you be, with your immortal companions?
Only your servant is home;
you've left herbs cooking on the warm brazier,
tea leaves brewing in the next courtyard.
The painted walls start to fade in the lamplight,
your flagstaff's shadow begins to slant—
again and again I look around,
but beyond the wall, only flowers.

遣怀

闲散身无事，风光独自游。
断云江上月，解缆海中舟。
琴弄萧梁寺，诗吟庾亮楼。
丛篁堪作伴，片石好为俦。
燕雀徒为贵，金银志不求。
满杯春酒绿，对月夜窗幽。
绕砌澄清沼，抽簪映细流。
卧床书册遍，半醉起梳头。

Expressing my feelings

At leisure at last, free from care, alone I wander this landscape
where the moon shines through scattered clouds over the river;
there's a boat, ropes undone, adrift on the sea.
On the qin I play a tune of Xiaoliang Temple;
I chant poems about Yuliang Tower.
Bamboo groves make worthy companions,
and stone slabs will do for friends;
swallows and sparrows are good enough for me;
my heart doesn't long for silver and gold.
My cup is filled with spring wine;
quietly the window gazes on the moonlit night.
I tread on stepping stones clear in the pure water;
my hairpin, drawn out, glistens in the stream.
I lie in bed with books strewn everywhere,
rising at times, half-drunk, to brush my hair.

寄飞卿

阶砌乱蛩鸣，庭柯烟露清。
月中邻乐响，楼上远山明。
珍簟凉风著，瑶琴寄恨生。
嵇君懒书札，底物慰秋情。

Sent to Feiqing

By the stone steps, a confusion of crickets;
out in the courtyard, misty dewdrenched branches.
Music from the house next door echoes in the moonlight;
Hills seen from the room above shimmer in the distance.
A cool breeze softly strokes the precious bamboo mat;
the jadelike qin pours forth sorrow.
It seems that you, sir, are too lazy to write letters;
lesser things, I guess, will have to soothe these autumn feelings.

过鄂州

柳拂兰桡花满枝，石城城下暮帆迟。
折牌峰上三闾墓，远火山头五马旗。
白雪调高题旧寺，阳春歌在换新词。
莫愁魂逐清江去，空使行人万首诗。

Passing by Ezhou

Willows brush the orchid oars; flowers load down limbs;
boats pass slowly in the dusk beneath Stone City's wall.
Qu Yuan's grave is there on Broken-Tablet Peak;
there's a prefect's flag flying on Distant-Flame Mountain.
The white snow's high tune tells of ancient temples;
sunlit spring's song is taking on new words.
Mochou's ghost has gone to pursue purer rivers.
Travellers fill the space she left with ten thousand poems.

夏日山居

移得仙居此地来，花丛自遍不曾栽。
庭前亚树张衣桁，坐上新泉泛酒杯。
轩槛暗传深竹径，绮罗长拥乱书堆。
闲乘画舫吟明月，信任轻风吹却回。

In summer, living in the mountains

I've moved to this dwelling fit for immortals,
artless flower blossoms blooming everywhere.
Before the hall, clothes hang on a forked tree;
I sit by the spring, drifting winecups along.
Corridor rails fade into deep bamboo paths;
silken gowns lie draped over clumsy stacks of books.
Lazing in a pleasure boat, I sing to the bright moon,
trusting to the gentle breeze to blow me back again.

暮春即事

深巷穷门少侣俦，阮郎唯有梦中留。
香飘罗绮谁家席，风送歌声何处楼。
街近鼓鞞喧晓睡，庭闲鹊语乱春愁。
安能追逐人间事，万里身同不系舟。

Scribbled in a moment at the end of spring

A deep lane, a poor door; few companions now;
handsome lovers stay with me only in my dreams.
The scent of a perfumed gown!—oh, who is celebrating?—
Songs, carried on the wind!—from whose chamber now?
Drumbeats in the street nearby cut short my morning sleep;
magpies in the garden interrupt my springtime sorrows.
How can I keep following these affairs of the world,
drifting for a thousand miles like an untethered boat?

代人悼亡

曾睹天桃想玉姿，带风杨柳认蛾眉。
珠归龙窟知谁见，镜在鸾飞话向谁。
从此梦悲烟雨夜，不堪吟苦寂寥时。
西山日落东山月，恨想无因有了期。

Elegy written on someone's behalf

A young peach calls to mind her face and jadelike posture;
willow branches in the breeze retrace her moth-eyebrows.
The pearl is back in the dragon's cave—who can see it now?
The phoenix is gone, though the mirror remains—who now will hear it sing?
Sad dreams from now on will fill the misty, rainy nights;
how inexpressible the bitterness of these lonely hours!
The sun sets on the western hills, there's moonlight in the east,
but these thoughts of sorrow go on, never coming to an end.

和人

茫茫九陌无知己，暮去朝来典绣衣。
宝匣镜昏蝉鬓乱，博山炉暖麝烟微。
多情公子春留句，少思文君昼掩扉。
莫惜羊车频列载，柳丝梅绽正芳菲。

Rhyming with someone else's poem

Without a friend, how endlessly the Nine Streets go on;
I've been out from dawn to dusk pawning my embroidered gowns.
My box mirror's darkened, my curls are disheveled;
the incense burner's warm, but the scent of musk is thin.
How lovingly, kind sir, you left your springtime poem,
though thoughtlessly I closed my doors to the day.
Don't be displeased at having to ride here in your carriage twice;
willows and plum blossoms, after all, are fragrant now.

隔汉江寄子安

江南江北愁望，相思相忆空吟。
鸳鸯暖卧沙浦，鸂鶒闲飞橘林。
烟里歌声隐隐，渡头月色沈沈。
含情咫尺千里，况听家家远砧。

Sent across the Han River to Zi'an

Sadly I gaze south and north of the river,
singing of lovesickness in vain;
mandarin ducks sit warm on the sandbank,
lovebirds fly lazy in the tangerine grove.
The sound of singing is lost in the mist,
the crossing lies sunken in moonlight—
but whether it's a few feet or a thousand miles,
desolate, I listen to families fulling.

寓言

红桃处处春色，碧柳家家月明。
楼上新妆待夜，闺中独坐含情。
芙蓉月下鱼戏，蟾蜍天边雀声。
人世悲欢一梦，如何得作双成。

An allegory

Red peaches everywhere the colour of spring;
jade willows by every house gleam in the moonlight.
A freshly made-up woman waits upstairs for nightfall;
another sits lonely in her room, filled with love.
Beneath the moon, fish are playing among the lotuses;
from a distant rainbow, the sound of sparrows chirping.
Human life—a dream of joy and sorrow mingled;
why is it that, gaining one, the other also comes?

江陵愁望寄子安

枫叶千枝复万枝，江桥掩映暮帆迟。
忆君心似西江水，日夜东流无歇时。

Sent to Zi'an while gazing unhappily into the distance at Jiangling

Maple leaves: a thousand—no, ten thousand—branches;

a bridge hides slow sails reflected in the dusk.

Longing for you, my heart is like this western river's water,
flowing eastward day and night, without ever resting.

寄子安

醉别千卮不浣愁，离肠百结解无由。
蕙兰销歇归春圃，杨柳东西绊客舟。
聚散已悲云不定，恩情须学水长流。
有花时节知难遇，未肯厌厌醉玉楼。

Sent to Zi'an

A thousand farewell cups won't wash away my sorrow;
my heart's tied in a hundred knots that cannot be undone.
Orchids pass on to their rest; they won't return till spring.
Willows to the east and west hinder visiting boats.
Meeting, parting—alas for this fickleness of clouds!
True affection ought to be an endless flowing river.
I know that in this flower season it's hard for us to meet,
but I won't keep swaying drunk on this jade terrace.

送别

秦楼几夜惬心期，不料仙郎有别离。
睡觉莫言云去处，残灯一盏野蛾飞。

Farewell

I spent those nights of comfort in the Qin Tower
without ever realising my lover had to go...
Waking now, I don't ask where the clouds have gone;
round the lamp, now almost spent, a wild moth is circling.

迎李近仁员外

今日喜时闻喜鹊，昨宵灯下拜灯花。
焚香出户迎潘岳，不羨牵牛织女家。

Welcoming Squire Li Jingren

How fortunate today to hear the happy magpie!
I watched the lamp blossom all night long.
I've lighted incense, gone out the door to greet Pan Yue;
I don't envy the cowherd or his weaver maid.

送别

水柔逐器知难定，云出无心肯再归。
惆怅春风楚江暮，鸳鸯一只失群飞。

Farewell

Water fits itself to the vessel that contains it.
Clouds drift artlessly, not thinking of return.
Spring breezes bear sorrow over the Chu river at dusk:
separated from the flock, a lone duck is flying.

左名场自泽州至京，使人传语

闲居作赋几年愁，王屋山前是旧游。
诗咏东西千嶂乱，马随南北一泉流。
曾陪雨夜同欢席，别后花时独上楼。
忽喜扣门传语至，为怜邻巷小房幽。
相如琴罢朱弦断，双燕巢分白露秋。
莫倦蓬门时一访，每春忙在曲江头。

Zuo Mingchang, coming from Zezhou to the capital, sends a messenger

I've stayed here idle, writing poems through these years of sorrow;
that journey past Wangwu Mountain was a long time ago now.
I chant poems like a thousand tangled peaks to east and west,
like a horse following a stream from the south to the north.
At a banquet one rainy evening we kept each other company;
after parting, now, I climb the stairs alone in the flower season.
Sudden joy: a knock on the door bringing word from you
to this quiet lonely house in its sad little lane.
Xiangru gave up his qin, breaking the vermilion strings;
a pair of swallows break their nest in the white dew of autumn.
Come and visit when you can! Don't mind this rustic gate;
every spring's a busy one along the Qujiang river.

和人次韵

喧喧朱紫杂人寰，独自清吟日色间。
何事玉郎搜藻思，忽将琼韵扣柴关。
白花发咏惭称谢，僻巷深居谬学颜。
不用多情欲相见，松萝高处是前山。

Harmonizing with someone else's rhyme-words

Purple and vermilion clash in the noisy world of men;
left alone, I sing pure songs in the sunlight.
So why have you, good sir, gathered these fine sentiments
and come knocking suddenly at my closed brushwood gate?
White blossoms make me sing, but I'm no Xie Daoyun;
I live deep in a back lane like a fool, like Yen Hui.
There's no need for all these words of longing and desire.
The place where the pine dwells is first among mountains.

光、威、哀姊妹三人少孤而始妍乃有是作精粹难
俦；虽谢家联雪何以加之。有客自京师来者示予；
因次其韵。

昔闻南国容华少，今日东邻姊妹三。
妆阁相看鹦鹉赋，碧窗应绣凤凰衫。
红芳满院参差折，绿醕盈杯次第衔。

恐向瑶池曾作女，谪来尘世未为男。
文姬有貌终堪比，西子无言我更惭。
一曲艳歌琴杳杳，四弦轻拨语喃喃。

当台竞斗青丝发，对月争夸白玉簪。
小有洞中松露滴，大罗天上柳烟含。
但能为雨心长在，不怕吹箫事未谙。

阿母几嗔花下语，潘郎曾向梦中参。
暂持清句魂犹断，若睹红颜死亦甘。
怅望佳人何处去，行云归北又归南。

Guang, Wei, and Pou, three sisters orphaned in their youth, wrote a set of incomparable verses after they had grown beautiful. Even the Xie family's verses on the snow wouldn't be able to add anything to it. A visitor from the capital showed it to me, and I've written this poem based on their rhyme-words.

I'd long heard that little was lovely in the south,
but now I've learnt of these three sisters in the east;
together in the dressing-room they read the "*Fu* on Parrots";
seated by jade windows they embroider phoenix robes.
Carefully they pick crimson blossoms in the garden,
raising cups of clear green wine one after the other.

Perhaps they were once fairy maidens by the Jade Pond,
sent in punishment to the dusty world—but not as men!
Wenji had beauty, yet endured comparison;
Xishi was wordless, yet I feel more ashamed.
an alluring melody floats faint from their zithers
as they touch the strings lightly, singing softly.

Before the mirror they vie against each other's silken tresses,
wear jade-white hairpins in competition with the moon.
In the Fairy Cave, dew drips from pine trees;
in the Highest Heaven, mist envelops willows.
But as long as one has a mind for love
there's no need to fear ignorance of the flute story.

Mama's scolded them for exchanging words among the flowers
with handsome men who've met them a few times in their dreams.
A momentary encounter with their pure verse is heartbreaking;
for a glimpse of their loveliness even death would be sweet.
Gazing sadly, I wonder what will become of them;
the passing clouds drift to the north, to the south.

折杨柳

朝朝送别泣花钿，折尽春风杨柳烟。
愿得西山无树木，免教人作泪悬悬。

Breaking willow twigs

Morning after morning I say goodbye,
crying into my gilded hairpin;
the willow twigs have been plucked bare
in the spring breeze and mist.
How I wish West mountain
didn't have any trees.
Then I'd be spared these tears,
endlessly falling.

句

焚香登玉坛，端简礼金阙。

*

明月照幽隙，清风开短襟。

*

绮陌春望远，瑶徽春兴多。

*

殷勤不得语，红泪一双流。

*

云情自郁争同梦，仙貌长芳又胜花。

Fragments

Bearing lighted incense, I mount the Jade Altar,
bearing the tablet of the Gold Palace.

*

The bright moon shines through a quiet crack.
A fresh breeze blows my short gown open.

*

The path is lovely with spring, gazing far;
a precious motif, bearing many spring feelings.

*

All this effort, yet no word.
Scarlet tears fall one after another.

*

Clouds of unhappy passion struggle in one dream against each other.
The immortals' faces bloom forever, beyond even the flowers.

Notes on the poems

A poem for the willows by the river

Standing at the head of Yu Xuanji's collection, this poem acts as a perfect introduction to her work. Willows are an oft-used symbol for women in general (and for courtesans in particular), and the images of fish and fishermen can be understood as veiled references to the poet herself. The surreal imagery, descending into darkness, also effectively prefigures the melancholy tone of many of Yu Xuanji's poems.

Sent to a neighbour girl

Song Yu was, after Qu Yuan, probably the most famous poet of the Warring States period. He once wrote about the daughter of his eastern neighbour, who stole glances at him over the wall for three years; the expression "to peep at Song" thus refers to a girl stealing longing glances at a boy (or, in this case, a poet). Wang Chang occasionally appears in Tang poems as a poetic equivalent to the boy-next-door. Jan Walls has paraphrased the last two lines in this manner: "Even the superficial and fleeting relationships with men of great talent and influence are better than the routine life I might have led as Mrs. So-and-so."

To Guo Xiang

Guo Xiang, "Fragrance of the Nation" (or simply "Orchid"), is probably the name of a fellow courtesan. The last line is a reference to a poem by Lu Ji, in which a spirited carouse causes the very dust on the rafters to fly.

To the Perfect Master

One character is missing from line 3, and another from line 4. The "Perfect Master" of the title is probably a Daoist adept, and it is possible that the last two lines are veiled references to sexual activity. The "crane" in line 6 is a Daoist symbol of immortality; it is therefore possible to interpret this poem as an invitation to give up asceticism ("let the crane fly free") for worldly pleasures such as singing-girls (the "orioles" of line 5) and sex.

To Grand Secretary Liu

Midnight (子夜) was a singing-girl of the Jin dynasty (265-420); a very influential group of love poems is attributed to her. The last line seems to be an allusion to the story of Feng Xuan, a retainer who complained he was not well

provided for because he had no fish to eat. Fish, of course, may also be a double entendre for Yu Xuanji herself.

Silk-Washing Temple

This poem is based on a very well-known episode that took place during the Spring and Autumn period (c. 772–481 BCE). The temple is dedicated to Xi Shi, one of the legendary Four Beauties of Ancient China, who originally laundered silk for a living (line 2) in Zhuji (line 7), capital of the state of Yue. King Gou Jian of Yue, acting on the advice of his minister Fan Li (line 5), had Xi Shi trained in seduction and espionage and sent as a gift to King Fu Chai of the neighbouring state of Wu. Fu Chai was seduced by her, forgot all about state affairs, and killed his advisor Wu Zixu at her instigation (line 6). Yue then successfully invaded and conquered Wu. The current Xi Shi Temple stands at the foot of the Zhu Luo hill (line 8), on the banks of the Huansha River.

Selling wilted peonies

Peonies are symbolic of love and womanhood; it is therefore possible to understand this poem as the depiction of a courtesan past her prime. Flowers suggest the women of the pleasure district; butterflies represent their clients.

Thanking Scholar Li for his gift of a bamboo mat

Line 2 makes reference to a poem by Yan Yanzhi, which includes the line 玉水记方流，璇源载圆折 (jade-bearing waters turn at right angles; rivers bearing nephrite have rounded corners). The bamboo mat and fan are associated with the hot weather of summer; in autumn they are put aside. Yu is thus subtly indicating that she hopes Scholar Li won't lose interest in her.

A love letter (To Li Zi'an)

Quite a number of Yu Xuanji's extant poems are addressed to Li Zi'an (Li Yi), whose concubine she was. In this poem Yu seems to be making reference to places they once visited together in Shanxi; there seems to have been a long separation between them since then. The magpie in line 3 makes reference to a folktale where an adulterous woman's mirror turns into a magpie to inform her husband of what has transpired. In her loneliness, then, Yu seems to be finding it hard to stay faithful.

Boudoir lament

In this poem, Yu Xuanji compares herself to an abandoned wife, and envies those whose husbands do return. Half a year has passed since she last saw her lover, and there have been few letters between them. Fulling-stones, indicating the preparation of winter clothing, are a traditional symbol of autumn.

Spring feelings (to Zi'an)

This is another poem written in a period of separation from Li Zi'an; its hopeful tone contrasts with that previously seen in "A love letter". The loving admonitions seem very much to be those of a wife to her husband.

Playing polo

Though ostensibly about a game of polo, it is entirely possible to read this poem in terms of erotic allegory. Polo—a Persian import—was extremely popular in Tang Dynasty China, and Chang'an had several polo fields.

Feelings at the end of spring (sent to a friend)

Here, a comparison is being made between the poet and her surroundings. The world she describes—at daybreak just before sunrise—is a perfect one for lovers, with the shadowed grove and misty river. The images of swallows gathering mud for their nests and the bees gathering pollen for the hive are images of family life in the natural world, which contrast with the poet's own isolation. The pine in the last line is an image of fidelity; by saying she'll sing no more of the pine, Yu Xuanji seems to be hinting that she's giving up waiting for a man who never comes.

To Wen Feiqing on a winter's night

The paulownia tree often grows by the side of a well, and as such is a symbol of community and domesticity. This poem seems to have been written at a time when the poet had come to accept and embrace Daoist doctrine, giving up her dreams of domestic life. Wen Feiqing is another name for the poet Wen Tingyun.

In response to Li Ying's poem "Returning from fishing on a summer's day"

Li Ying is not the same person as Li Yi, but instead a different man (and poet) who seems to have known Yu Xuanji in Chang'an. "Plucking the cassia" was a metaphor for gaining the *jinshi* degree in the Imperial examinations. It seems

that Li Ying may have been encouraging Yu Xuanji to take a new graduate for her husband—an idea she seems to reject, citing her Daoist convictions.

Written using the rhyme-words of my new neighbour to the west, and humbly asking him to share some wine

In men's verses, the figure of the "eastern neighbour" tended to be a young woman in love with her western neighbour (see also the poem "Sent to a neighbour girl"). In this poem, Yu Xuanji is taking on that persona for herself. Line 4 alludes to the legend of a virtuous woman who gazed into the distance after her husband (who was on military service) for so long that she eventually turned to stone. Yu, however, is suggesting that she is no such woman, and thus her request to share wine might involve more than just that. Having said that, however, the second half of the poem sounds a note of sadness: the Star Festival in line 5 celebrates the yearly meeting of the Herdboy and the Weaver Girl across the Milky Way, but Yu herself is no longer expecting her husband to arrive. It is almost as if she is asking her new neighbour to give her some comfort.

With a friend, using the same rhyme-words

Line 2 literally talks about "silver fishhooks", an elegant way of describing the beauty of her friend's calligraphy.

With a new graduate, grieving over the loss of his wife: two poems

Yu's two poems seem to genuinely sympathise with the new graduate who, instead of being able to celebrate, has to mourn instead. The 4th century poet Pan Yue (poem I, line 8) composed three poems lamenting the death of his wife; the moon cassia in line 1 of poem II alludes to the myth that there is a cassia tree on the moon, with a woodcutter who keeps trying to cut it down but never succeeds. The river peach trees in line 2 of that poem may be a reference to courtesans or female entertainers. Yu thus commiserates with the graduate for his loss, tells him that he'll get over it, and encourages him to forget his grief by enjoying the pleasures of wine and beauty—the natural response of a courtesan in such a situation.

Visiting Lofty-Truth Monastery and viewing the names of new graduates at the south tower

Women were not allowed to take the Imperial examinations, and thus could not become graduates. One of the criteria for passing these examinations was the ability to express oneself in verse; Yu had the requisite ability, but her being a woman kept her from gaining the same recognition.

Melancholy thoughts

This poem seems to have been written at a time when Yu Xuanji had given up secular life to live the life of a Daoist nun; thus “a traveller of the sky”. Yet the title of the poem seems to suggest that she has not yet completely forgotten her secular life, and evinces a certain longing for the summery “green waters and verdant hills” of the last line.

Autumn lament

The reference to hair growing white is a stock poetic image of the Tang Dynasty. Given that Yu Xuanji died in her mid-twenties, the line probably need not be taken literally.

River travel

Since these two consecutive poems obviously deal with the same subject matter, I have taken the liberty of combining them into one. The butterfly reference in line 4 could possibly be a reference to a famous tale from the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, where Zhuang Zhou dreams himself to be a butterfly and then, on waking, is unable to tell whether he is a man who dreamed he was a butterfly or is a butterfly dreaming he is a man. However, the idea of butterflies seeking flowers can also be seen as a euphemism for men seeking lovers; if this is the case, then Yu appears to be appropriating the male point of view for herself.

Sent as a gift, upon hearing that Censor Li has returned from fishing

Censor Li in this case is probably Li Ying, last encountered in the earlier poem “In response to Li Ying’s poem ‘Returning from fishing on a summer’s day’”. In contrast to that poem, however, where Yu Xuanji seems to have been rejecting a meeting, here she appears to be asking for one. Master Ruan (line 2) is probably a reference to Tao Yuanming’s famous poem about a fisherman who discovered, and then returned, from the idyllic land called the Peach Blossom Spring.

On Master Ren's founding of Blessings-Bestowed Temple

It was customary for poets to leave commemorative verses on the walls of temples (line 3) where they spent the night; since this temple is newly established, however, no such poems have yet been inscribed. The references to the “lotus hall” and “Gold Wheel” suggest that this is a Buddhist temple, not a Daoist one.

A fog-shrouded pavilion

As with the poem “In summer, living in the mountains”, Yu Xuanji seems to have lived alone in the mountains at some point. This poem suggests a kind of aesthetic appreciation for the beauties of mountain landscapes.

Held up by rain on the Double Ninth

The Double Ninth—the ninth day of the ninth month—was (and is) a seasonal autumn festival, where it was customary to have an outing. Chrysanthemums were traditionally associated with the festival. The lotus blossoms in the mirror (line 2) are a reference to Yu's rouged cheeks; she's prepared for a celebration, but the rain has cancelled it.

Early autumn

Yu Xuanji does not appear to be writing of herself here. The image of the wife with an absent husband in lines 5 and 6 is a stock image of a woman waiting for a man abroad on a military campaign.

Sending a letter to express my feelings

The “tryst of wind and rain” in line 3 refers to a short-lived love affair with a man (probably Li Zi'an) who has abandoned her in pursuit of ambition. The phrase *zhi yin* (知音) in the last line, “to understand one's melody”, is a reference to the story of the musician Yu Boya and his good friend Zhong Ziqi; when Ziqi died, Boya broke the strings of his qin, for there was no longer any one who could understand his music.

On a meeting with a friend called off because of rain

“Five-character poems” in the last line refer to poems written with five characters in each line, such as this one.

Visiting Master Zhao and not finding him

“Visiting the hermit and not finding him” was an extremely popular theme among Tang poets; the most famous version was probably written by Jia Dao. Such poems generally carry an air of respect for the pure, unfettered, reclusive existence of the hermit, who was often thought to possess mystical powers. Having said that, however, the last line’s reference to “flowers” is suspect: what exactly *has* the hermit been up to with his immortal companions, anyway? In the last line, Yu seems to imply that she knows.

Expressing my feelings

This poem was probably written when Yu was living alone in the mountains. In contrast to the title, the feelings in the poem are never explicitly mentioned.

Sent to Feiqing

Feiqing is the poet Wen Tingyun (last seen in the poem “To Wen Feiqing on a winter’s night”).

Passing by Ezhou

Ezhou and Stone City are old names for places in present-day Hubei. Mochou appears to have been a well-known singing-girl from the area.

In summer, living in the mountains

Like the poem “Expressing my feelings”, this mountain poem creates its effect through the simple description of everyday activities.

Scribbled in a moment at the end of spring

Written while the poet was living in Chang’an, this poem seems to express Yu’s desire to renounce the “affairs of the world” and enter a Daoist convent.

Elegy written on someone’s behalf

This poem of lament was written at the request of a person in mourning, though it is not known who exactly this person was. Line 3 makes reference to a story about a pearl which could only be found beneath a dragon’s chin at the bottom of a deep pool. Line 4 refers to the story of a man who owned a phoenix which had not sung for three years; hearing that it would sing if it saw its own reflection, he placed a mirror before the bird. On seeing its own reflection, however, the phoenix simply spread its wings and died.

Rhyming with someone else's poem

Written in Chang'an. Yu Xuanji is responding to a gentleman caller who has left a verse at her door, expressing her regret that she was not able to receive him and asking him to call again. She also compares herself to the Han dynasty poet Zuo Wenjun in the sixth line (the Chinese literally reads "thoughtless Wenjun closed her doors to the day", possibly because Zuo had been a widow before she met her future husband (the poet Sima Xiangru). Thus, Yu seems to be saying that she too has lost her husband (due to her abandonment by Li Yi).

Sent across the Han River to Zi'an

The last line uses a traditional symbol of autumn—that of wives fulling cloth to make winter clothes for their husbands and families. As such, Yu is drawing a contrast between her own solitary loneliness and the domestic lives of the families she can hear.

An allegory

It is hard to say if this allegory refers to any specific event. However, the note of fatalism which comes through in the last line is unmistakable.

Sent to Zi'an while gazing unhappily into the distance at Jiangling

Another poem sent across the water to Li Yi, probably while Yu Xuanji was living at Wuchang.

Sent to Zi'an

Another poem sent to the absent Li Zi'an. The last line, however, seems to harbour the threat that, if he doesn't return soon, Yu won't be waiting for him.

Farewell

The "Qin Tower" in line 1 refers to a tower built by Duke Mu of Qin for his music-loving daughter, whom he married to a famous musician. One day, however, as they were playing the flute a phoenix appeared and bore the couple away. The tower appears here as a metaphor for a pleasure house.

Welcoming Squire Li Jingren

No one seems to know who Squire Li Jingren is. The first two lines make reference to omens of good fortune. The 4th-century poet Pan Yue (line 3) has been mentioned previously in the poem "With a new graduate, grieving over

the loss of his wife”. In Chinese myth, the cowherd and the weaver maid (the stars Vega and Altair) are lovers condemned to live on opposite sides of the Star River (the Milky Way) and to only meet once a year, on the seventh night of the seventh month.

Farewell

The phrase “Clouds drift artlessly” (云出无心) in line 2 comes from a poem by the 4th-century poet Tao Yuanming, and has now become an idiom for spontaneous, unplanned action. Given that paired mandarin ducks are a traditional symbol of couplehood, the solitary duck in line 4 makes for a particularly poignant image.

Zuo Mingchang, coming from Zezhou to the capital, sends a messenger

Zuo Mingchang may have been someone who knew Yu Xuanji during her travels in the south, suggested by the mention of Wangwu Mountain (also called Tiantan Mountain, in Shanxi). The Han dynasty poet Sima Xiangru (line 9) was the husband of the poet Zuo Wenjun. The Qujiang river (line 12) was a river in Chang’an where, each spring, banquets would be thrown in honour of new graduates.

Harmonizing with someone else’s rhyme-words

“Purple and vermilion” in line 1 could symbolize either high office or the clash between good and evil. The 4th-century poet Xie Daoyun (line 5) is celebrated for having helped with a poem on snow at a family banquet; Yen Hui (line 6) was one of Confucius’ disciples. The last line connotes a sense of retirement from the world, and suggests that Yu wrote this at a time when she genuinely desired to live according to Daoist principles.

Guang, Wei, and Pou, three sisters orphaned in their youth, wrote a set of incomparable verses after they had grown beautiful. Even the Xie family’s verses on the snow wouldn’t be able to add anything to it. A visitor from the capital showed it to me, and I’ve written this poem based on their rhyme-words.

This is easily the longest of Yu Xuanji’s surviving poems; the original poem by the three sisters has also survived. Xie Daoyun, in the previous poem, was a member of the Xie family referenced in the title; *fu* (line 3) were long poems (sometimes translated as “prose-poems”, “rhapsodies”, or “rhymeproses”) popular during the Han Dynasty; Wenji and Xishi (lines 9 and 10) were

famous beauties from the past; *wei yu* (为雨) in line 17 was an elegant metaphor for lovemaking; and the flute story in line 18 probably refers to the story in line 1 of the first “Farewell” poem encountered earlier. Given the unusual reference to “Mama” (阿母) in line 19, it is possible that the three sisters were in fact courtesans themselves.

Breaking willow twigs

It was customary to pluck willow twigs at parting during the period, owing to the similarity between the words “willow” and “to stay” (both pronounced *liu*, with only a difference in tone).

Fragments

These fragments are all that remain of the rest of Yu Xuanji’s poems.

About the translator

Leonard Ng is a freelance writer, poet, editor and translator. Born and raised in Singapore, he has been translating classical poetry into English since 2005. His other translations include *The Song of Songs*, the *Laozi Daodejing*, and Lu Ji's *Rhapsody on Literature*. His work has appeared in a variety of places, including the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, the anthology *Love Gathers All* and his own site, rainybluedawn.com. *This Mortal World*, his first collection of poems, is due to be published in mid-2011.



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