MIRROR, DREAM AND SHADOW:
GU TAIQING’S LIFE AND WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

Gu Taiqing is one of the most remarkable and prolific poetesses of the Qing dynasty. This study attempts to present critical and comprehensive research on Gu Taiqing’s writing so to unearth and illustrate Taiqing’s own life and mentality, in order to enrich our understanding of the role that writing has played in the lives of the pre-modern women.

Overall Taiqing’s writing can be interpreted in terms of three categories: mirror, dream and shadow. This dissertation applies these three concepts to build up a theoretical framework as the three concepts bear rich meanings in both interpreting Taiqing’s works per se and analyzing the relationship between Taiqing’s writing and her life.

This dissertation consists of three parts. The first part examines Taiqing’s aspiration for ascending to the heavenly world, reluctance to leave the mundane world, and time consciousness and philosophical speculations. The second part focuses on analyzing Taiqing’s writings, *shi* poems, *ci* poems and the novel *Honglou meng ying*. Taiqing’s poems on traveling, the special imagery and poetic realms in her *ci* poems are explored in this work. The third part is a study of Taiqing’s friendship with other talented woman within and beyond the Autumn Red Poetry Society. This part also addresses issues regarding women scholars and their endeavors to establish a type of immortality through words.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ ii
ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... iii
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... v
INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................... 1
PART I. THE ENDURING TENSION IN TAIQING’S LIFE ......................................................... 18
    Chapter 1. Aspiration for Ascending to the Heavenly World ........................................... 19
    Chapter 2. Reluctance to Leave the Mundane World ....................................................... 34
    Chapter 3. Time Consciousness and Philosophical Speculations ................................. 46
PART II. TAIQING’S WRITINGS ......................................................................................... 57
    Chapter 4. Gu Taiqing’s Shi Poems .............................................................................. 58
    Chapter 5. Taiqing’s Ci Poems ...................................................................................... 73
    Chapter 6. The Novel Honglou meng ying ................................................................. 101
PART III. SISTERHOOD IN THE FLOWER COUNTRY: TAIQING AND OTHER TALENTED WOMEN ................................................................. 112
    Chapter 7. Within and Beyond the Autumn-Red Poetry Society ................................ 113
    Chapter 8. The Women Scholars ............................................................................... 132
CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................... 150
BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................................ 152
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Portrait of Gu Taiqing</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

v
INTRODUCTION

Gu Taiqing (顧太清 1799-1877) is one of the most remarkable and prolific poetesses of the Qing dynasty and has always been the subject of intense scholarly interest. Her surname was originally Xilin (西林), and her ethnic identity was a Manchu of the bordered blue banner. Her more widely recognized name, “Taiqing,” is actually her Daoist name.

Gu Taiqing has a shi anthology Tianyouge ji (天游閣集  Anthology of Heavenly Roaming Pavilion), a ci collection Donghai yuge (東海漁歌  Fisherman’s Songs of East China Sea) and a novel Honglou meng ying (紅樓夢影  Shadow of Dream of the Red Chamber), a sequel to the masterpiece Honglou meng (紅樓夢  Dream of the Red Chamber).

There has been some research on Taiqing’s biographical background, life experience and her literary achievement on ci poems. However, research on Taiqing’s shi poems is comparatively weak, and the distinctive images and poetic realms in her lyrics are rarely examined. Taiqing’s philosophical speculations, her poetry society, the meaning and significance of her friendship with other talented women have also not been carefully studied. Moreover, little research has been conducted on her novel Honglou meng ying. Subsequently, there is substantial room for further research concerning Gu Taiqing’s poetry.

This dissertation attempts to present critical and comprehensive research on Gu Taiqing’s writing so to unearth and illustrate Taiqing’s own life and mentality, in order to enrich our understanding of the role that writing has played in the lives of the pre-modern women. Taiqing’s writings will be interpreted in terms of three categories: mirror, dream and shadow. This dissertation applies these three concepts to build up a theoretical framework as the three concepts bear rich meanings in both interpreting

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Taiqing’s works per se and analyzing the relationship between Taiqing’s writing and her life.

There are three parts to this dissertation. The first part examines Taiqing’s aspiration for ascending to the heavenly world, reluctance to leave the mundane world, and time consciousness and philosophical speculations. The second part focuses on analyzing Taiqing’s writings, shi poems, ci poems and the novel Honglou meng ying. Taiqing’s poems on traveling, the special imagery and poetic realms in her ci poems are explored in this part. The third part is a study of Taiqing’s friendship with other talented woman within and beyond the Autumn Red Poetry Society. This part also addresses issues regarding women scholars and their endeavors to establish a type of immortality through words.

Literature Review

Existing literature from China and the United States on Gu Taiqing primarily consist of biographical studies, textual research on her works, reading and analyses of her lyrics, and on the characteristics and achievements of her lyrics. A biography by Zhang Juling concentrates on trying to resolve Taiqing’s “life mystery” by uncovering Taiqing’s life experiences; however, this book stresses historical account at the expense of literary research and only briefly introduces Taiqing’s literature. Some papers have dealt with the controversial issues about her life, such as the origins of her natal family, her nationality, and her affairs with Gong Zizhen (龔自珍 1792-1841). Other works convey brief appreciation and evaluation of her works on some aspects of her lyrics.

2To improve readability, the Chinese characters for an author’s name are absent if presented in the bibliography.
While Taiqing’s novel *Honglou meng ying* was an important step toward joining feminine literary creativity with the *xiaoshuo* (小說, novel) genre,\(^5\) it has not received sufficient academic attention. Ellen Widmer dedicates one chapter to discuss Taiqing’s *Honglou meng ying* in biographical and literary perspectives in her work, *The Beauty and the Book*. She discussed how Taiqing created a fictional world that Taiqing is personally familiar with. Widmer also explores Taiqing’s literary communication with other women poets, focusing especially on Taiqing’s friendship with a contemporary poetess, Shen Shanbao (沈善寶 1808-1862). This dissertation analyzes Taiqing’s novel by reviewing the novel in conjunction with Taiqing’s life in order to see how Taiqing fictionalized real experiences, as well as seeking to interpret the meaning of Taiqing’s fictional world as being a reflection of Taiqing’s own anxieties, expectations, and hopes. The symbolic relationships among mirrors, dreams, and shadows, and how they come into play within Taiqing’s novel is the primary nexus for this analysis.

**Historical Relevance**

Describing the role of women in history often forces us to rely on fragmentary historical records in order to recapture the past. Luckily, the integrity of Gu Taiqing’s literary works provides us a unique opportunity to look into her life through her writing. During the Qing Dynasty, when women writings were extremely prevalent, women poetesses shared many similarities with one another. However, women poetesses held different family backgrounds, nationalities, social experiences, and diverse influences arising from education and personal inclination. This leads to unique attributes which differentiate the poetesses. While this dissertation focuses on Taiqing’s intact works and the rich information they have supplied about Taiqing’s life, it also provides an opportunity to connect literary research with women’s studies. Taiqing’s direct and emotionally honest poems have uncovered aspects of her lived experience. Taiqing’s Manchu identity also bestows upon her some distinctive

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qualities in personality and mind, and this paper seeks to capture some shadows of Manchu awareness within her works. Her works are precious historical materials which enable us to understand more about the lives of women poets.

**Methodology**

The methodology of this dissertation primarily consists of textual reading and analysis. As Hu Siao-chen pointed out, no matter how one tries to establish the canonization of women’s literature or to strengthen the status of women’s works, the goal relies on textual research and thus should be the starting point of literary study.\(^6\) In this study, a large portion of Taiqing’s poetry needs to be translated into English, where the interpretation of traditional Chinese poetry opens an additional arena for interlingual critique.

Examined as a whole, all of Taiqing’s writing can be interpreted in terms of three categories: mirror, dream and shadow. This dissertation applies these three words to build up a theoretical framework. Frequently appearing within Taiqing’s poetry and novel, the three words require further interpretation in order to achieve a deeper understanding of Taiqing’s work and her life. These three words bear rich meanings in both interpreting Taiqing’s works per se and analyzing the relationship between Taiqing’s writing and her life.

First of all, as traditional literary images, the mirror, dream and shadow frequently occur in Taiqing’s poetry and contribute to a unique artistic style. Taiqing has a preference for creating illusory and unsubstantial realms within her lyrics, and uses blurry imagery to achieve an esthetic effect, whereupon scenes in her poetry become viewed or portrayed through the lens of a dream.

Her novel is also infused with the three categories, and is titled with “dream and shadow.” “Honglou meng ying” means either “Shadow of the Dream of Red Chamber” or “Shadow and Dream of the Red Chamber.” Both the dream and shadow symbolize an essential motif within the novel—that life, desire, aspiration, happiness

and sadness are really nothing but illusion. The mirror and dream also serve as important framing devices and facilitate the plot development.

Secondly, these three categories also provide mirrors, dreams, and shadows about Taiqing’s personal life. Her literature serves as a “mirror” into the hazy, dream-like clear and unclear biographical information about Taiqing. Taiqing’s poetry, especially her shi poems, presents an honest and straightforward (zhibai, 直白) description of her real life feelings and thoughts. Women’s writings in the Ming and Qing dynasties were especially praised for their “pure and fresh” (qing, 清) quality, which is to say the presence of sincerity, naturalness, and truthfulness in writing. In Teachers of the Inner Chambers, Dorothy Ko linked the popularity of women’s poetry to the new literary theories that emphasized the importance of sincerity, naturalness, and truthfulness in writing, and the assumption that women, divorced from the artificiality and hypocrisy of public life, were naturally better able to express these qualities. Just like a mirror, Taiqing’s poetry faithfully reflects her personal world. Women’s poetry was so powerfully revealing about their life and thoughts because “girls—who were barred from taking examinations or holding office and who were not groomed with these goals in mind—had no clear use for their writing.”

Unsurprisingly, Taiqing’s poetry offers substantial autobiographical data to the readers as the use of her writing skills was not focused on the competitive needs of public life. Moreover, the rise and fall in Taiqing’s personal life “mirrored a historical scroll-painting of eighty-year-long changes from prosperity to decline of a feudal Manchu official family.”

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7 Taiqing’s poetry can be read under the old tradition “shiyanzhi” 詩言志 (The poem articulates what is intently on the mind, Stephen Owen’s translation). It is similar to James Liu’s interpretation, “poetry has two connotations: poetry expresses the moral inclination, will or ideal in the mind, and poetry expresses one’s personal wish, desire and emotion.” See James J. Y. Liu, The Art of Chinese Poetry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 72; Stephen Owen, ed., Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40.


While the mirror presents a clear window into Taiqing’s life and thinking, the shadows sketch the blurry, unclear, and mysterious traces of her life; and dreams symbolize her fantasies or those fictional writing in her works, especially in the novel.

Thirdly, the mirror, dream, and shadow all share the trait of “illusion” as a result of Buddhist doctrines. Taiqing’s use of these three categories is a reflection upon her interpretation of life as an “illusion,” the result of her philosophical speculation on life and spiritual pursuits that are inherent in Daoism and Buddhism. Taiqing’s poetry and novel convey a strong sense of Daoist and Buddhist disillusionment and transcendence. She frequently employed Buddhist and Daoist doctrines as a means of interpreting happiness, sufferings and hardships in life. Taiqing’s philosophical speculation is vital to understand her writings and their artistic styles. As a result, it is of particular interest to explore the three categories in the broad scope of Chinese spiritual tradition.

**Mirror**

The fundamental characteristic and function of mirror is to “reflect” (zhao, 照) so as to help people view their image by reflecting things that come in front of it; this metaphor was also extended to serve in additional functions: “to admonish,” “to illuminate,” and “to enlighten.” Most scholars of classical Chinese philosophy are well aware that Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, especially the Chan School, employ the mirror metaphor of viewing heart-mind (xin, 心) as a mirror, although their meanings and connotations vary in different contexts.

Confucian texts emphasize the practical and didactic function of mirror for admonishment, and advocate learning from history and others. For Xunzi, one must have a heart-mind like a mirror in order to learn about the Way. The well-known “three mirrors” brought up by the Emperor Taizong in the Tang dynasty reads, “Using bronze as mirror, one can correct one’s clothes and hat; Using antiquity as mirror, one

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10There are some mysteries remaining unsolved about her life, such as her experience in early years, the reason why she was kicked out by her mother-in-law, and the romantic affair between Taiqing and Gong Zizhen. Unless new historical material is uncovered, it is difficult to reveal the truth.
can know rise and fall of a dynasty; Using other people as mirror, one can understand gains and losses.”\(^{11}\) The notion of “seeing history as a mirror” (yi shi wei jian, 以史為鑑) so as to learn from the past was deeply implanted in people’s minds.

The Daoist classic Zhuangzi also makes use of the metaphor of the heart-mind as a mirror. According to the Chapter “Fit for Emperors and Kings” of Zhuangzi, “Hold on to all that you have received from Heaven but do not think you have gotten anything. Be empty, that’s all. The Perfect Man uses his mind as a mirror—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing.” (至人之用心若鏡, 不將不迎, 應而不藏.)\(^{12}\) Here to be empty means to make one’s mind as clear as a mirror which perfectly reflects reality, and a mind polished free from impurities is returned to its natural state.\(^{13}\) The mirror also carries the notion “stillness,” another significant Daoist concept. According to Laozi, Chapter 16, one should “Extend your utmost emptiness as far as you can, And do our best to preserve your equilibrium (jing, 靜).”\(^{14}\) (致虛極, 守靜篤.) In Zhuangzi, “a heart-mind should be as still as a mirror in order to reach the ideal state of unity with the Way” and “the sage’s heart-mind is so still. It is the mirror of Heaven and earth, and of the ten thousand things.”\(^{15}\) (聖人之心靜乎！天地之鑑也，萬物之鏡也.) Here, “stillness” is closely related to “mirror,” as “stillness” can lead to a state of heart-mind as pure and bright as a mirror. The philosophy of “stillness” is also explored by Taiqing, and she diligently dedicated herself into the practices of “stillness” to reach an ideal state of purity and equilibrium of her mind. This argument will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

\(^{11}\)Sima Guang, Zizhi tongjian (Siku quanshu lieyin ben), vol. 196.
\(^{15}\)“The Way of Heaven” in Zhuangzi. For a detailed discussion on the mirror metaphor in the Zhuangzi, see Erin M. Cline, “Mirrors, Minds and Metaphors,” Philosophy East and West 58, no.3 (July 2008): 337-57.
In Buddhism, the mirror is a metaphor widely used for Buddhist dharma, doctrines, spirit of Buddha, wisdom and heart-mind, and is strongly associated with enlightenment. Shenxiu’s famous mirror metaphor is applied to advocate diligent learning and practice in order to achieve enlightenment: “The body is the tree of the awakening; The mind is like a clear mirror. Be unceasingly diligent in wiping and polishing it, So that it will be without dust.” Shenxiu’s fellow student Huineng (惠能 638-713), later regarded as the sixth patriarch of the Chan school of Buddhism, wrote another doctrine verse to challenge Shenxiu, as he believed in an immediate and direct approach to Buddhist practice and enlightenment. His approach was considered as the “sudden teaching” (dun jiao, 頓教), while Shenxiu’s was the “gradual teaching” (jian jiao, 漸教).

The relationship between mirror and mirror image is also used to explore the difference between true and false, reality and illusion. In reality, mirrors are physically used to reflect the reality of an outside world (e.g., one’s own appearance); however, the images reflected by a mirror are actually not real, but a reflection of the reality. In other words, the reflected images portrayed by use of a mirror are nothing but illusion. The use of “flowers in mirror and moon in water” (jinghua shuiyue, 鏡花水月) is a well-known Buddhist metaphor for illusion. The mundane life is often viewed as an illusion from a Buddhist perspective in Chinese literature.

16Shen Xiu (神秀 606-706) was one of the most influential Chan Buddhist masters of his time, and was labeled a teacher of the “Northern School” (Beizong, 北宗) of Chan.
18Huineng’s verse reads:
   Awakening entails no tree at all, 菩提本無樹,
   Nor does the clear mirror entail any material frame. 明鏡亦非臺.
   The Buddha-nature is eternally pure; 佛性常清靜,
   Where could there be any dust? 何處惹塵埃.
Ibid., 14.
19The most famous case used in this sense is the novel Jinghua yuan (鏡花緣) by Li Ruzhen (李汝珍 1763-1830) in the Qing dynasty.
In Chinese literary tradition, the mirror has always been an important image associated with women. Under traditional literature, as written by men, mirror primarily reflects the beauty of a particular woman that the author wishes to portray and conveys the author’s longs or desire towards her. The most famous example is probably Wen Tingyun’s famous lines in Deva-like Barbarian, “To see the flowers, mirrors in front and back, The flowers and her face reflect each other.” In some cases, male authors used mirror images to indirectly describe the unhappy, languishing appearance of a woman suffering from the absence of her missing lover. Interestingly, when poetesses apply mirror images in their poetry as a means of self-portrait, the majority depicted themselves as wan and thin, unhappy, depressed, and gloomy. In poetry, the mirror also carries significant philosophical messages and serves as a crucial image to illustrate Daoist or Buddhist theory. Namely, looking through a mirror, poets could see through life, and sometimes achieve enlightenment.

Based on its rich philosophical and religious connotations, mirrors are often endowed with mysterious and magic power in traditional Chinese fiction. In the example of the demon-detecting mirror (zhao yao jing, 照妖鏡), the mirror is believed to be able to reflect the ultimate reality, similar to Daoist religious practice where the mirror is often applied to detect and reveal the true form of a demon. Demon-detecting mirrors impressed readers in some chuanqi stories and The Journey to the West by their ability to determine the ultimate reality—the truth of good and evil. In Honglou meng, the fengyue baojian (風月寶鑑, Mirror of Romance) serves

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21 There are certainly some exceptions, for instance, the mirror in Li Qingzhao’s “Ugly Clown,” “At night comes wind and rain, washing away heat and light. Put away the reeds of panpipe, and then put on light make up facing the mirror.” (晚來一陣風兼雨, 洗盡炎光. 理罷笙簧, 卻對菱花淡淡妝.) See Xu Peijun, ed., Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 181.
22 Wang Du’s chuanqi story “The Story of An Ancient Mirror” is about an old mirror that can detect demons and evil spirits. Wang Du’s story can be found in Taiping guangji, entitled “Wang Du.” In Journey to the West, the demon-detect mirror appears many times. For instance, in Chapter 39 Buddha Manjusri helped the monkey to seize the evil spirit by taking out a demon-detecting mirror which made the demon immediately return to its original form. Wu Cheng’en, Xi you ji (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980), 479.
as a significant device in the story, which invites diverse interpretations and serves as a mystical element within the novel.

In Taiqing’s poetry, mirrors, without exception, first appear as a woman’s accessory, as seen in the word “jinglian” (鏡匣) which is women’s dressing case with mirror. By looking into the mirror, she sees the disappearance of her youth, as in “I feel ashamed to look into the mirror, fading appearance, gray hair grows at temples.”23 However, the more important role that the mirror plays in Taiqing’s works is to serves as a device for enlightenment and to reflect Taiqing’s state of mind by mirroring her life and mind through her writings. To Taiqing, the practice of reading and writing itself is a process of polishing “a bronzer mirror whose natural bright purity is revealed as soon as we wipe away the surface dust”24 so to reach the ideal state of preserving a pure heart and mind. Moreover, Taiqing’s act of poetry composition resembles the process of making and polishing a mirror. Back in ancient times, the creation of a mirror required significant polishing of bronze, and the act of polishing required laborious work. Taiqing’s creation of poetry is similar in the amount of required effort; she needs to unceasingly polish the bronze in order to shine a light onto the world.

The big bronze mirror in Taiqing’s novel Honglou meng ying echoes with the Mirror of Romance in the original novel. It functions as a medium to reach a moment of enlightenment and plays a significant role in story twists, which I will address in Chapter 6.

Dream

Dreams are an extension of reality. It can be a fantasy, and an important channel to go beyond reality. According to Buddhism, life is as illusory as a dream, and it is a Chinese literary tradition to envision life as a “dream.” Numerous examples can be

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easily given, such as Su Shi’s (蘇軾 1037-1101) famous lines, “Life is like a dream, Sprinkle a cup of wine for the River and the Moon.”

Judith Zeitlin in her *Historian of the Strange* discussed late Ming interest in dreams. She states, “Liaozhai’s preoccupation with dreams was part of a contemporary cultural phenomenon—the surge of interest in the dream among literati circles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which was expressed not only in drama and fiction (both classical and vernacular), but also in scholarly treatises and compendia, informal essays, autobiographical writings, poetry, and even paintings and woodblock illustrations.”

Chinese scholars developed different theories for the interpretation of dreams. Chen Shiyuan (陳士元 1516-1597), in his *Treatise on Dream Interpretation* (Zhan meng yi zhi 占夢逸旨), singles out two major approaches to the dream, as prophecy (zhao, 兆) and as illusion (huan, 幻). The first holds that dreams predict the future and thus reveal the workings of fate. The second approach treats the dream as a means to question the boundaries between illusion and reality. Both approaches share an understanding of dreams as a possible means of communication either between parallel worlds (e.g., the dead and the living, the divine and the human) or a means by which to communicate with someone for whom ordinary avenues of communication are blocked. To a certain extent, dreams can compensate for some regrets or dissatisfaction in reality and this approach is extremely evident in Taiqing’s novel *Honglou meng ying*, where she applied the concept of dreams to resolve the major conflict between Daiyu and Baoyu.

A significant poetic theme in Taiqing’s poetry is drawn from dreams. Life filled with unpredictable changes is often compared to dreams within Taiqing’s poetry. The remembrances of the past are presented in the form of dreams. Her unhappy early

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27 Ibid., 138.
28 Ibid., 138-39.
years are recounted as a “nightmare.” Occasionally, she wrote poems inspired by dreams, or partially composed in a dream and reconstructed upon waking. Not surprisingly, Taiqing also discussed the characteristics of “dreams” in one of her lyrics.

Tune: *Treading on Grass “Dream, Using Pingshan’s Rhyme”*  
踏莎行: 夢, 次屏山韻

Illusory shadows and floating foams,  
Originally without any evidence (of its existence).  
The changes in it are as numerous as strands of threads.  
Sometimes it brings joys, sometimes sorrows.  
In it there is seemingly some supernatural ability.

Earnest remembrance and true feelings,  
Multitude of thoughts.  
Uncertain when to meet again, it gracefully left.  
As light as a butterfly, as creamy as cloud,  
Cold quilt was unable to bear the dawn rain.

Taiqing illuminates the features of a dream at the very beginning; like shadows and bubbles, dreams are illusory, transient and transforming. Dreams can make one happy or sad, and are controlled by some supernatural power. However, in the second stanza she points out that dreams are probably caused by earnest remembrance, true feelings, and true thoughts; the occurrence of dreams cannot be formally anticipated or scheduled. The second to the last line recalls Zhuangzi’s famous butterfly story. The butterfly dream is always fascinating and charming to readers. Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, but after waking up he could not tell whether he is Zhou who dreams that he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams that it is Zhou. Here, reality and dream, truth and illusion, are so well merged that the boundaries cannot be differentiated.

Taiqing likes writing about dreams. A large number of Taiqing’s *shi* and *ci* poems involve dreams, and on certain occasions dreams are a means for her to achieve
transcendental experience. She often fantasized the immortal’s life in dreams, of which there are several examples. Among the examples is River City Song “Recording a Dream,” which describes a journey to visit immortals. In several other poems, dreams enable the persona in the poem to transcend time and space so to meet the person she is longing for, although on some occasions it failed.\(^29\)

**Shadow**

A shadow (ying, 影) is an outline, form, or silhouette of a thing, and a reflection of certain objects or scenes (jing, 景). It deals with the relationship between “light” and “shadow.” Taiqing’s writing serves as a mirror through which we can observe Taiqing’s reflections (ying, 影): her life traces, her thoughts, fantasies and dreams.

According to Buddhism, everything in this world is as illusory as shadows, not real.\(^30\) Shadows, along with dreams, symbolize the unsubstantial reality within Taiqing’s poetry.

As one of the most significant images in Taiqing’s poetry, shadows emerge in various forms: tree shadows, flower shadows, cloud shadows, moon shadows, goose shadows, sun shadows, river shadows and so on. In Taiqing’s poetry, these shadows have different functions based on context.

All shadows in Taiqing’s poetry often suggest the lapse of time, as well as the writer’s sensitiveness to time. The movements of shadows are her direct and visual response to the flow passage of time, such as “Moon shadows in midnight,”\(^31\) and “The shadow has just come off the winding corridor, yet it climbs to the eastern


\(^{30}\)According to Surangama Sutra, all the affairs in the dusty world are shadows. Fan Chengda in the Song dynasty wrote, “Constructed dharmas are only shadowy things, No thoughts should be the way of life” (有為皆影事, 無念即生涯) in “Two Poems Harmonizing the One on Li Ziyong’s Visit to Me.” See Fan Chengda, Fan Shihu ji (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 371.

The poem below is a good example demonstrating Taiqing’s sensitiveness to shadows.

Tune: *Sand of Silk-washing Stream* “Written on the Mid-Autumn Day”

| Have you noticed the autumn chill out of the tower? | 樓外秋寒知不知, |
| Take a look, it is chrysanthemum time again. | 看看又到菊花時, |
| Half window of bright sun, shadows are moving fast. | 半窗白日影如馳. |
| Many days have already gone, with few days left. | 去日已多來日少, |
| How joyful upon coming, how sad upon leaving. | 來何歡喜去何悲, |
| Just pour nice brew, facing the pure moonlight. | 且斟美酒對清輝. |

This lyric discusses the awareness of passage of time. Taiqing visualizes the flow of time with the shadow’s quick movements. Shadows remind her of the days that have passed, and she seems to have dispelled worries about the loss of time and encourages an enjoyment of the present.

The shadow of the poet serves as a counterpart to the shadow reflecting the passage of time. When the poet is spending a lonely night by him or herself, it is natural for him or her to view the shadow as a partner. The famous lines by Li Bai (李白 701-762) “I raise up my cup to invite the moon, Drinking with my shadow to form a three-man company” and “When I dance, my shadow is frenzied” are typical examples. Taiqing also views her own shadow as a silent partner or another form of herself from time to time. For instance, she writes, “A lonely lamp with bean-like flame, shine on the clear shadow,” \(^{33}\) and “Shine on a lonely shadow, the fading lamp is burning with a bean-like flame.” \(^{34}\)

Shadows are also frequently employed to create a blurry poetic realm that manifests Taiqing’s vision of life. Both shadows and dreams are applied to symbolize

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the unreal, insubstantial and illusory nature of life. Taiqing’s particular vision or view towards life contributes to some artistic characteristics of her poetry. She likes applying cold images to create an immortal’s world which she admires and blurry images to build up a blurred realm as the background for her poetry. This feature will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

To Taiqing, life is insubstantial, hazy, and illusory, especially when the topic concerns past memories and dreams:

Human affairs, originally are illusory. Where the twelve green jade cities are difficult to discern, Coming and going is illusory.

……

A companion in blue garment at that time, As in a vague and dim dream, Endless tears of an elderly woman, How to bear meeting again. Writing a poem on the painting, I suspect it’s a dream. Waking up from the dream, not knowing who is real and who is illusory?

In the following poem, mirrors, shadows and dreams are well integrated into one body, and it triggers two meaningful readings:

Ode to Mirror in a Dream

Precious mirror casts round shadows. Pure and clear light coexists with the bright moon. Gentle breeze blows the curtains apart. Illuminating the two lotuses.

36 Gu Taiqing, Young Swallow Flying “Inscribed on the Painting Shadows of Clouds and Traces of A Dream” (#1). See Lu Xingji, Gu Taiqing ci xinshi jiping, 81.
37 Gu Taiqing, Young Swallow Flying “Inscribed on the Painting Shadows of Clouds and Traces of A Dream” (#2). See Lu Xingji, Gu Taiqing ci xinshi jiping, 84.
38 Lotus could refer to the pattern on the mirror, people who are practicing Buddhist meditation, or the grand Buddhist dharma.
Due to the symbolic attributes of the images, this poem can be interpreted in two different ways. On the surface, a mirror in a chamber, moonlight, curtains and two lotuses on the quilt create a typical boudoir setting, and the “two lotuses” conveys a strong sense of conjugal love. There is a visual division caused by light and shadows, which brings about two parallels: bright and dark, visible and invisible. Additionally, there is a spatial division created by the curtains. At first, everything behind the curtains is invisible, but when the breeze blows in and allows for the entry of moonlight, two lotuses are revealed. As this poem is recording a dream, it is possible that the persona is longing for the missing lover.

While this poem could be romantic at the first glance, on a deeper level, it can be interpreted as describing a Buddhist enlightening moment within a dream. There could be someone practicing Buddhist meditation, and the last two lines vividly illustrate an enlightening moment. When the breeze blows open the curtains that had previously veiled the object and blocked one’s view, the moonlight is finally able to shine through on the lotuses and reveal the true image—the Dharma realm.

Not coincidentally, Taiqing once wrote a lyric about lotus which refers to the Dharma realm (fajie, 法界), and two lines read “I love these pure and clear lotuses most, Once I experienced the Dharma realm in a dream.”39 (最愛妙蓮清淨，法界夢中曾歷.)

The two readings are seemingly contradictory, but according to Buddhist doctrines, everything visible is empty. Thus, no matter what kind of dream one has, all dreams remain both illusory and void. On the one hand, her writings are traces, shadows, and fantasies of her life—these writings mirror her life, what she saw, heard, and thought in those years; yet on the other hand, in her eyes, all these records about her life along with her creation in boudoir, and even life itself, is nothing but illusions—like mirror images, shadows and dreams. This is what Taiqing’s writings tell us.

Thus the most important thing is to preserve a pure heart and mind, and unceasingly polish the purity to keep it unobscured. Bearing this understanding in mind, it is time to embark on a journey to explore a genuine yet illusory poetess Gu Taiqing.
PART I. THE ENDURING TENSION IN TAIQING’S LIFE
Chapter 1. Aspiration for Ascending to the Heavenly World

This part will first give a brief account of Gu Taiqing’s life and background, and address the tension that runs throughout her life and literary works. Taiqing seeks spiritual freedom or transcendence in the mortal life throughout her life. She tends to view herself as a flower goddess who was exiled from the heavenly world and temporarily stays in the human world. She has a strong desire to escape from mundane society and return to the place where she originally belonged to, yet in the meanwhile she lingers in the human world in pursuit of worldly happiness.

The enduring tension between returning and staying is a striking feature of her poetry. The tension creates a dilemma where she hesitates between the two worlds. On the one hand, the ambiguous identity caused by hiding her true origin, the misfortunes and pains in her life, and the frustration of being unable to put her talents to good use made her yearn for a free and unfettered life as an immortal living in a fresh and cool heavenly world. She wished to transcend the mundane world and cast off her sufferings. On the other hand, she enjoyed the joy and happiness in her life, and deeply loved her husband Yihui (奕繪 1799-1838), her children and friends—thus binding her sentimentally to the dusty world, and making her reluctant to leave this place.

Gu Taiqing was a Manchu of the bordered blue banner and from the Xilin (西林) or Xilin jueluo (西林覺羅) clan. She was originally surnamed Xilin jueluo, with her family name later changed to Gu. Her first name was Chun (春), and her styles were Meixian (梅仙) or Zichun (子春). She had a Daoist name Taiqing, and called herself “Yuncha waishi” (雲槎外史) in her later years. Usually, she used Taiqing Chun (太清春), Xilin Taiqing Chun (西林太清春) or Yuncha Waishi (雲槎外史) as her pen names. Born in the fourth year of Jiaqing (1799), she lived through Daoguang, Xianfeng and Tongzhi periods and died in the third year of Guangxu (1877).

While Taiqing’s marvelous poetry and talents were celebrated by her contemporaries and later generations, the mysteries concerning her life experiences may have equally stymied scholars who attempted to unravel her life. Taiqing’s works
primarily outlines her experiences after marriage, while saying little about her life during her early years. However, it is known that Taiqing experienced great disasters and endured many hardships during her youth, leaving Taiqing with a lifelong trauma.

Taiqing’s true origin was ambiguous for a long time. Her original family name was once a contentious question within academic circles, but a common understanding has been achieved that Taiqing is the descendant of E’ertai (鄂尔泰 1677-1745). According to Qingshigao and the Biography of E’ertai of Qingding baqi tongzhi, E’ertai came from Xilin, so Gu Taiqing was also likely from Xilin.

Taiqing’s grandfather E’chang was E’ertai’s nephew. E’chang (鄂昌 1700-1755?), once the Provincial Governor of Gansu, was charged with the literary inquisition of Hu Zhongzao’s poetry in the 20th year of Qianlong (1755), and subsequently ordered to kill himself. The E family was involved in this crime, and the family members became disgraced as descendants of a criminal. When Yihui, a great-grandson of Qianlong, took Taiqing as a concubine, her identity and background was reportable to the Clan Government. Taiqing was passed off as a daughter of the guard Gu Wenxing of the Rong Mansion, and her family name subsequently changed to Gu. Zhang Zhang has contributed a detailed study of Taiqing’s family and life experiences and he assumed that Taiqing pretended to be from the Gu family in order to hide her identity as a criminal descendant and marry Yihui.

Yihui, styled Zizhang (子章), had a Daoist name Taisu (太索), and also called himself Huanyuan jushi (幻園居士 A Lay Buddhist of the Illusory Garden). He was born in 1799—the same year as Taiqing—and died in 1838 at the age of forty. Yihui

40 Some scholars believed that Taiqing was the granddaughter of Minister Gu Badai, some held that she was the great granddaughter of E’ertai, and was brought up by a Gu family. See Wen Tingshi, “Qinfeng yutan” in Wen Tingshi ji (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1993); Sun Jing’an, Qixiaoyecheng (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1999); Lu Xingji, Gu Taiqing ci xinshi jiping (2005).
41 Zhao Erxun, Qingshigao (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 34:10229.
was the grandson of Prince Rongchun Yongqi (永琪), the fifth son of Emperor Qianlong, and the son of Junwang Rongke Mianyi (绵亿). In the twentieth year of Jiaqing (1815) and at the age of seventeen, he inherited the title “Beile” and was promoted to the rank of General of Han Troops in the Plain White Banner. Yihui studied military arts and prepared for war; he was also educated in poetry, prose, painting and calligraphy. He wrote *Guangu zhai miaolian ji* (觀古齋妙蓮集 Anthology of Wonderful Lotus at the Guangu Studio), *Xiechun jingshe ji* (寫春精舍集 Anthology of Writing-spring Vihara), *Mingshan tang wenji* (明善堂文集 Anthology of Mingshan House), and *Kangxi zidian kaozheng* (康熙字典考證 Textual Criticism of Kangxi Dictionary) which was co-authored with Wang Yinzhi (王引之 1766-1834). Yihui’s legal wife, Miaohua, who was one year older than Yihui and Taiqing, died at the age of thirty-three. Yihui did not take any new wife after that and led a happy life with Taiqing before dying young.

Gu Taiqing had no sense of belonging. Concealing her true identity, namely, as a criminal’s descendant, contributed to her identity crisis. She even needed to change her surname in order to marry her husband. A striking feature of her poetry is that she almost never mentions her childhood, parents and the life before marriage—differing greatly from the subject matter of literature by other talented women who frequently wrote poetry on their premarital life and parents. We know very little about Taiqing’s maiden years, and she seldom mentions any premarital memories within her works. We can surmise from this lack of poetry about her pre-marital life that Taiqing’s experiences during that period may have been too miserable for her to recall.

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44 A rank of the Manchu nobility next to Prince.

45 A rank of the Manchu nobility below Prince.

46 *Mingshantang wenji* includes *Liushui bian* (流水編 Collection of Flowing Water) and *Nangu qiaochang* (南谷樵唱 Woodcutter’s Songs in the Southern Valley).

47 We can only see a note underneath a couplet in her *shi* poem “Harmonizing My Husband’s Rhymes on the New House at Twin Bridge on the Tomb-Sweeping Day”:

The event on this day last year, 

During these twenty-five years. 

The note goes as “I once visited this temple with my late father twenty-five years ago.” Zhang Zhang, ed., *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 29.
It is also possible that Taiqing deleted all the verse lines concerning her origin in attempt to conceal her real identity, as we can find some evidence that some lines were once deleted by her.\textsuperscript{48} As a result we can only dimly guess at her hardships before marriage based on her and Yihui’s shi and ci poems. Taiqing repeatedly applies “dreams” to refer to her past, as those early years eventually become so unreal and blurry, and such unpleasant memories are even labeled as “nightmare.”

\begin{flushright}
Tune: \textit{Quelling Windswept Waves “A Nightmare”}\textsuperscript{49}
\end{flushright}

Think it over carefully: everything happens for some reason;  
I have experienced all difficulties for half my life.  
Look into the distance, a line of geese\textsuperscript{50} are flying without a destination.  

\begin{flushright}
Sun sets,  
Siblings Tears wet my sashes on the wagtail plain\textsuperscript{51}.
\end{flushright}

I wish to write down my sadness, but already feel tipsy.  
Wan and thin,  
Drowsy, my body is no longer a young one.  
I feel more scared after waking up from a nightmare,  
By the window,  
Fluttering petals and falling leaves always frighten me.

This poem vaguely tells us about Taiqing’s past. The title “nightmare” summarizes the arduous life of her early years and the traumatic memories associated with her youth. The second line in the first stanza sums up her life experience before marrying Yihui.

\textsuperscript{48}Taiqing deleted the first two of the four poems “On the 9th Climbing the Mountain behind Our House,” in which there are lines saying “I could not bear that many relatives and friends have passed away, I returned alone with a yellow flower in my hair,” and “Look back at events that happened those years in my hometown, On festivals I wrote poems about cakes to entertain my mother.” Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 10-11.

\textsuperscript{49}Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 194.

\textsuperscript{50}Geese fly in an orderly manner, just like seniority among siblings, so “goose line” often refers to siblings.

\textsuperscript{51}“On the wagtail plain” means that siblings are in danger. This allusion originates from the song “Chinese Bush Cherry” in the \textit{Book of Songs}, “Wagtails are on the plain, brothers are in great danger.” See Zhu Xi, ed., \textit{Shi jizhuan} (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 102.
The next several lines invite two possible readings. On the surface, it reads, when sun sets, she has nowhere to go; she weeps alone at dusk on a wild plain, just like the helpless goose that flies without a destination. On a deeper level, as both geese and wagtail refers to siblings, these lines tells the disastrous situation where she and her siblings were separated and experiencing great danger. Taiqing and Yihui’s poetry reveal that Taiqing’s family was labeled as descendants of a criminal. The stigma forced Taiqing’s family to live in poverty, and wander great distances, from Beijing, to Jiangnan, to Suzhou, then Hangzhou, and even as far as Guangxi and Guangdong.

The second stanza says that the haunting nightmare still terrifies her, though she has pined away, no longer a young girl. She often wakes up from nightmares, and even a falling petal and leaf could startle her. Another poem expressed similar feeling:

My Fortieth Birthday

I cannot control various feelings from my heart,
Thinking of my parents today, and shedding tears in vain.
No messages arrived for several years after the geese left,
My poetry volume grows with each passing year.
Beautiful springtime passes by quickly like flowing water,
Frightening human affairs equal to bubbles on water.
How can I stand to recall my childhood once again?
Are there any dreams about the past in the east wind?

The unusual and traumatic life experiences in her early years led to her loneliness and helplessness. As time passed, Taiqing herself became confused and perplexed about her past. She tried to seek out the past in dreams as stated in the last line, and the answer to the questions is provided in another poem, where “it is hard to search for the past in dreams.” (Charming Eyes “Sitting Up at Night” 秋波媚：夜坐)

According to Qinfeng yutan by Wen Tingshi (文廷式 1856-1904), Taiqing first married a Stipend Scholar, and subsequently married Yihui as a concubine after her husband’s death. However, Zhang Zhang has not mentioned this matter in his chronicle of Taiqing’ life. Today, we only know that Taiqing and Yihui fell in love and finally got married after a long struggle. Yihui offered a detailed description in his
“Sheng Chazi” (Recording Words in a Dream)\textsuperscript{52} and in “Wu ti” (Untitled). He wrote a lyric concerning their marriage:

\begin{quote}
The figure in Tianyou Pavilion today,
Endured all bitter difficulties in those years.
I still remember our betrothal in the spring of Jiashen,\textsuperscript{54}
A destiny tested by disaster: we finally became husband and wife.
For half a life lyrics and prose have consumed our energies;
Looking at each other, we both feel as in a dream.
\end{quote}

The lyric reveals that Taiqing’s early life was full of frustrations and their marriage was not easily achieved. After they went through a lot of trials, they felt their marriage was too good to be real, just like in a dream. Taiqing’s life before marriage remains mysterious and, unless new materials are discovered, we cannot dispel all the mysteries. However, this does not affect our reading and understanding of her shi and ci works, as in some sense these mysteries contributes to the vague and blurry beauty of her poetry.

If Taiqing’s early years were a nightmare, then her marriage was a sweet dream that she was unwilling to wake up from. Unexpectedly, while Taiqing immersed herself in family happiness after marriage, Yihui suddenly passed away on July 7\textsuperscript{th} of 1838. Another misfortune followed subsequently; on October 28\textsuperscript{th} her mother-in-law threw Taiqing and her children out of the family.\textsuperscript{55} We do not know why Taiqing was...

\textsuperscript{52}Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 644.
\textsuperscript{53}Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 655.
\textsuperscript{54}Taiqing and Yihui got married in the year Jiashen (1824).
\textsuperscript{55}See “On the 7th of the Seventh Lunar Month, My Late Husband Passed away; On the 28th of the Tenth Lunar Month I followed my mother-in-law’s order and moved out of the mansion with my two sons and two daughters. We have nowhere to stay, so I sold my gold hairpin to buy a residence. I write this poem to record it.” See Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 104.
kicked out, and the reasons could be complex. As she was a descendant of a criminal, it is possible that Yihui’s family had opposed their marriage from the beginning.

More discussion has been conducted on the rumor that she had a love affair with Gong Zizhen.\(^{56}\) Taiqing once wrote some poems in response to Gong Zizhen, and Gong’s “Jihai zashi” (#209)\(^{57}\) and his notes provide some degree of support to those who believe that Taiqing and Gong had a relationship. For example, Mao Guangsheng’s (冒廣生 1873-1959) “Six Poems to Record Incidents about Taiqing” and Li Boyuan’s (李伯元 1867-1906) *Nanting sihua* mentioned this; Zeng Pu (曾樸 1871-1935) exaggerated this anecdote in his novel *Nie hai hua* (孽海花 A Flower in the Sea of Sin). Successive textual research by Meng Sen (孟森 1869-1937), Kuang Zhouyi (況周頤 1859-1926) and Su Xuelin (蘇雪林 1897-1999) revealed no affair between Gong Zizhen and Gu Taiqing. However, Qi Yijun and Zhou Xifu rebutted them anew.\(^{58}\) Zhang Juling in the Conclusion of her book *An Unrivalled Talented Woman Gu Taiqing* refuted the rumor in detail once again.\(^{59}\) Lu Xingji also explored this problem elaborately in “Concerning Lilac Case” in his book, assuming that the love between Gong and Gu was just gossip.\(^{60}\) His criticism is fairly reasonable as he related Taiqing’s bitter attack to Chen Wenshu.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{56}\)This is the famous Lilac Case concerning whether Gong and Gu had an affair.

\(^{57}\)Miscellaneous Poems Written in the Year of Jihai (#209):

Upon empty mountain I leaned my tired wandering body; 空山徙倚倦游身,  
In a dream, I saw Spring (Chun) in jade garden west of the city. 夢見城西閬苑春.  
A horseman with my letter arrived at the red village,  
In the wind he handed it to the figure in white.  
Gong Zizhen notes himself below this poem, “I recall the lilac by Taiping Lake within the Xuanwu Gate.” See Gong Zizhen, *Gong Zichen quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975), 529. This poem attracted attention because those who thought Gong and Gu were in an affair interpreted the figure in white as Taiqing, who lost her husband the year prior to the writing of the poem. Moreover, Yihui’s mansion happened to be in the west of the capital.

\(^{58}\)Huang Yanli, *Qingdai sida nüciren: Zhanxing zhong de Qingdai zhishi nüxing* (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 2002), 28.


\(^{60}\)Lu Xingji, *Gu Taiqing ci xinshi jiping*, 648-63.

\(^{61}\)Gu Taiqing, “The Old Man Chen Yunbo from Qiantang Calls Himself an Immortal. He Once Wrote *Bicheng xianguan cichao*, Which Was Filled with Flowery Language. What’s More, Over Ten Women
The rumor about Gong and Taiqing remains unproven, and “the main reason for her banishment might be the conflict among the mother-in-law, son of the legal wife, the legitimate son in other words, and the son of a concubine.” \(^\text{62}\) After Manchus came into the Central Plain, the conflicts within Manchu families became similar to those of traditional Han families. Just as Ding Yizhuang said, one consequence of polygamy was that it fomented a variety of conflicts and disputes in families, which resulted not only from jealousy, but also from economic issues and fights over inheritance because children of a legal wife and those of concubines differed in status and in their priority to inherit. \(^\text{63}\)

Evidence can be found in some of her poems and annotations where Taiqing implies some disagreement and dissatisfaction with the legitimate heir, Miaohua’s son Zaijun. See, for example, in the second year after Yihui’s death, she wrote a poem “Inscribed at the End of the ‘Songs of Thunder Spring’ by Late Husband, the Well Was Filled Up by the Oldest Son Zaijun” to recall a place where both Taiqing and Yihui visited and composed poems. The well was ruined by Zaijun, so she wrote, “I want to write poems, but feel more disconsolate; tears come out of my blurred sick eyes.” (我慾題詩倍惆悵，模糊病眼淚絲懸。) In the poem “I Took My Sons Zhao and Chu, Daughters Shuwen and Yiwen to Visit Southern Valley after the Two-year Mourning for My Late Husband,” she complained that “There is no one guarding the lord’s mausoleum; Weeds grow at will in the hall and on the grave.” (諸侯園寢無官守，丙舍廊廡任草堆。) It shows that the oldest son Zaijun failed to take good care of his father’s tomb. She also criticized Zaijun’s bad management of the Southern Valley in her poem “I Stayed in Pure Breeze Pavilion with Zaizhao and Zaichu the Day before the Tomb-Sweeping Festival in the Year of Gengzi (1840), I Wrote Down My Thoughts after Our Night Talk and Showed It to My Sons.”

Disciples Praised Him…” See Zhang Zhang, _Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji_, 116.

\(^\text{62}\) Huang Yanli, _Qingdai sida nüciren_, 26.

\(^\text{63}\) Ding Yizhuang, _Manzu de funü shenghuo yu hunyin zhidu yanjiu_ (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 97.
Later the lengthy poem title “On the 21st of the Seventh Lunar Month Guards of Southern Valley Came to Report that the Roof of My Late Husband’s Mausoleum Collapsed Because of Water Flowing from the Mountains…” further reveals her anger towards Zaijun. After discovering her husband’s grave flooded from heavy rain, she wrote angrily, “With hero’s course and outstanding writings, Why do you have such a benumbed son?” Moreover, she repeatedly stresses filial piety in her poems that appear to allude to Zaijun. Based on Taiqing’s attitude towards Zaijun, it is possible that Taiqing was kicked out of the family due to conflicts within the household.

After Yihui’s death, Taiqing shouldered the family burden and became the breadwinner in place of Yihui. She could not stop missing her husband or cease the pain in heart. She composed many poems to mourn for Yihui and express her immeasurable sorrows.

On My Birthday of the Year Jihai (1839), Cry for My Late Husband

己亥生日哭先夫子

In this empty room, the east wind blows cold; 虚室東風冷，
I live alone, tears rushing out like a spring. 幽居瀉淚泉。
Last year we made merry together; 去年同宴樂，
Today apart—one on earth, one in heaven. 此日隔人天。
Life and death are actually illusory, 生死原如幻，
How can this frail body hope to transcend? 浮休豈望仙。
Nothing but grief is in this broken heart: 斷腸空有恨，
Hard to convey it to you. 難寄到君前。

Taiqing cried in an empty room and wrote poems as an outlet to her sadness. She found it difficult to accept the sudden changes in her life. She reminisces about her past joys and contrasts it to her present loneliness. The sharp contrast makes her see

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64 See Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 119.
65 As in “Black Mouth,” by praising dogs’ loyalty, she blamed those people who forgot their origin and others’ kindness. See Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 172.
through the nature of life and death—both illusory, but she remains unable to dispel the grief in her heart.

At that time, Taiqing absolutely fell into dire straits, without any material or spiritual support to rely on. She wrote a poem with a lengthy title to let out her sadness:

After My Late Husband’s Death, I’ve Had No Desire to Write Verses. Reading His Posthumous Works by the Wintry Window, I Find Many Verses We Exchanged with Each Other. What Strikes the Eye Stirs Deep Feelings. It’s Hard to Forget Lifelong Bonds, so I Write down a Few Words; Not That I Dare Complain, but to Record Misfortunes in My Life. Shown to My Sons, Zhao and Chu.

自先夫子薨逝後，意不為詩。冬窗檢點遺稿，卷中詩多唱和，觸目感懷，結習難忘，遂賦數字，非敢有所怨，聊記予生之不幸也。兼示釗，初兩兒

Dusky sky, it’s going to snow.

昏昏天欲雪，

Sitting round the stove under the south eave,

圍爐坐南榮。

I open a book and read your poems;

開卷讀遺編，

So stricken, I can’t even cry out.

痛極不成聲。

Ah, this failing, ailing body;

況此衰病身。

Eyes blurred by too many tears.

淚多眼不明。

Since you became an immortal,

仙人自登仙，

You’ve flown back to the Jade Palace.

飄然歸玉京。

Our sons—clumsy and naughty;

有兒性癡頑，

Our daughters—still babies.

有女年尚嬰。

Even a dou of grain, a foot of cloth,

斗粟與尺布，

Are sometimes hard to manage.

有所不能行。

This humble room in a mean alley,

陋巷數椽屋，

Feels no different than an empty gully.

何異空谷情。

Boo hoo—the children cry;

嗚嗚兒女啼，

Shaken, stirred—my heart is grieved.

哀哀搖心旌。

How many times I’ve wished to die and join you,

幾欲殉泉下，

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66 See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 103.
67 It refers to the place in Heaven where immortals live.
68 In A New Account of Tales of the World, “Yan Zhongbi was a whooping crane by riverbank and a white horse in an empty gully.” See Yu Jiaxi, ed., Shishuo xinyu jianshu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 511. Also, Wang Wei (王維 701-761) writes in his poem “Thanking Yang Yuanwai of Bibu for Sending Me the Poem When He Stayed in Zither Terrace for the Night…,” “In an empty gully the returnees are few; The green mountain is chilly with its back facing the sun.” (空谷歸人少，青山背日寒.) See Quan Tang shi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 4:1267.
But I dare not make light of this life.
Not because I cherish myself,
But because I must teach our children

In this poem she lists the difficulties she faced in life: her longing for Yihui, her sick body, her young children, and her material poverty. The poverty and sorrow nearly made her commit suicide; however, she could not abandon her children, knowing her responsibilities as a mother. In fact, no women showed contempt for their responsibility as wives and mothers, though numerous women suffer great pain because of these duties.69

As a widow kicked out of her family, Taiqing suffered from the grief of losing her husband and from the subsequent poverty. She had nobody to rely on and four children to feed. Though most widows led a constrained life during the Qing Dynasty,70 she still had to find some means of livelihood, to care for the children and to take charge of their education. It is not difficult for us to imagine how arduous her living was. Nevertheless, after this low period in her life, she shouldered the heavy burden with great courage and strong will. We do not know the details about how she made her living, but we can surmise what she did from her works. Aside from selling some jewels,71 she raised some livestock. In Tangduoling, she recorded that she was grateful to a friend who had sent her some pig feed.72

70 Manchu women did not need to remain a widow before coming into the Central Plain; after they got the regime, the rulers inherited Ming’s system of conferring honors on the virtuous widows. The women of Eight Banners did not differ from Han women either in conception or behavior.
71 As in “On the Seventh Day of the Seventh Lunar Month, My Late Husband Passed Away. On the Twenty-eighth Day of the Tenth Lunar Month, I Took My Mother-in-law’s Order and Moved Out of the Mansion with My Two Sons and Two Daughters. We Had No Where to Stay, So I Sold My Gold Hairpin to Buy a House. I Wrote This Down to Keep a Record.” (七月七日先夫子棄世, 十月廿八日奉堂上命, 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, 賦詩以記之) See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 104.
72 The original lines are:
A bag of chaff embodies deep affection;
Thank you for your gift,
I can feed my pigs fat.
(Tune: Tangduoling “On the 10th of the Tenth Lunar Month, Pingshan Made Her Servant Send Me a
Though Taiqing sometimes was as sentimental and fragile as most traditional talented women were, on most occasions she managed to dispel oppression and melancholy by herself. In many poems she expressed a positive optimism, as in “Warm Kang”\(^\text{73}\) (暖炕), where she wrote: “Human power can triumph over heavenly powers; Heat and cold actually can be transformed,” encouraging herself to struggle against her misfortunes.

In addition to suffering from poverty and the loss of her true origin and identity, she also felt depressed by her inability to utilize her outstanding artistic talents. Like a frustrated talented man, she found no way to achieve her aspirations and ambitions. Taiqing was born in a famous family, “endowed with both beauty and talents,”\(^\text{74}\) and well educated with Confucian culture. According to Mingyuan shihua (名媛詩話 Poetry Talks of Famous Beauties), Taiqing had superb talents and could write poems in a short time. She was honest to others and not haughty at all.\(^\text{75}\) She once wrote a heptasyllabic regulated verse for her son for an early court meeting,\(^\text{76}\) which reveals her ability to compose practical verses. But in reality, poetesses could not fully realize their aspiration to participate in the male-dominated fields of politics and business. Under the patriarchal conventions that restricted women, she could do nothing except to comply. She saw women’s unequal status, yet failed to challenge the status quo. Like most women of that time, she failed to regard her work as a tool by which she could express alienation, objection, resistance or an independent spirit.\(^\text{77}\)

Taiqing realized the unequal status between men and women, and women are often viewed as pitiful flowers; however, she did not seek men’s pity and sympathy.

Bag of Chaff for Pigs, so I Wrote This Short Lyric to Thank Her”) See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 263.

\(^{73}\)A kang is a heatable brick bed used in the north of China. See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 111.


\(^{75}\)Shen Shanbao, Mingyuan shihua, 8.11, in Xuxiu Siku quanshu (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002).


\(^{77}\)Mann, “Shiba shiji de Zhongguo zhishi nüxing,” 206.
She held a lofty and pure character, and always showed the graceful disposition of a worthy beauty. A stronger subjectivity and more self-confidence are conveyed in her works.

Tune: Cangwu Song “On the 3rd Day of the First Lunar Month, Inscribed on My Ink Peony Fan”

You!
Lightly swaying branches, waiting for a good wind.
Planted in Jade Terrace,
Not content to be a pathetic red flower!

The flower in this picture actually is an embodiment of the poetess herself. She discarded self-pity of a conventional boudoir beauty. She feels completely self-confident, and kept her unique individuality. She writes, “I know I don’t share the same makeup with others: why ask the painted eyebrows dark or light?”78 (自知不共世人妝，何必問，畫眉深淺?) “Sneering at others of this world, heavy rouge and thick powder, make up in that way.”79 (笑世間，濃脂膩粉，那般妝點.) Superficially, she appears to be commenting on flowers and woman’s makeup, but her real intent is to express that she is a distinctive character who does not follow popular fashion.

Taiqing often conceived herself as a lotus, which is “naturally clear, though its root entwines in mud.”80 (蓮花自然潔凈，那管根芽淤泥汙.) She lived in the turbid mundane society, yet she preserved her individuality and refused to drift with the currents. Her counterpart could be found in those distinguished icy flowers, cold pistils, and flying immortals that are free from convention. These images mirror her appearance and spirit vividly. She “washes off powder, wipes away tawdry gestures;

Light make-up is especially elegant.”81 (洗鉛華，掃盡俗態, 淡妝別樣嫻雅.) With light make-up, like the winter daphne which is “disinclined to compete with ordinary flowers,”82 (懶與凡葩爭艷冶) she feels it is not worth contending with ladies of the mundane world. Taiqing is unwilling to be pitiful like ordinary flowers, which implies high appraisal of her noble personality. She enjoys sufficient confidence to liken herself to icy flowers and cold pistils, and seldom suppresses her independent spirit or follows current fashions.

Taiqing admires those flying beauties in sky with ethereal bearing, graceful poise and ice-jade spirit.

Tune: *The Old Tippler’s Tune “Inscribed upon Yunlin’s Painting Lake Moonlight Pervades a Cither”*83 醉翁操: 題雲林 “湖月沁琴圖”

Far and slow, endless sky. 悠然，長天.
Pellucid depths, vague lake mists, no border. 澄淵，渺湖，無邊.
Pure light coruscating brimmingly bright. 清輝燦燦兮嬋娟.
There’s a beauty, A flying sylph. 有美人兮飛仙.
Silent, mute; Sleeves rolled hasten droning strings. 悄無言，攘袖促鳴絃.
Shine on droopy willow, Hoary Toad-rays on the bias. 照垂楊，素蟾影偏.

I admire your intent aimed. 羨君誌在，
At flowing water, lofty alp. 流水高山．
I ask you: at such moments 問君此際，
Does your mood fix on alps, on water? 心共山閒水閒．
Clouds move on, Heavens broaden. 雲自行而天寬．
Moon shines on, Dewdrops abound. 月自明而露漙．
Novel sounds, tempered & full. 新聲和且圓．

Light on frets, plucking legato. 輕徽徐徐彈．
Dharma-tune dispersed to our world. 法曲散人間．
Night steeps in scented haze, not from orchid or musk. 月明風靜秋夜寒．

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Stanza One first sketches a cool, broad and misty background. In brimming moonlight by a lake, the beauty’s grace and elegance while playing the cither harmonize with the pure and cool realm, without any mundane taste. The figure and scene are merged as a whole. The image of a beauty flying under the moon leaves plenty of room for imagination. In Stanza Two, Taiqing jumps into the picture as an understanding friend (zhìyín, 知音) from a connoisseur’s perspective. She admires the beauty and has the same intent and mood. Her aspirations, too, aim at flowing water and lofty alps. Having escaped from the noisy and mortal world, Taiqing feels like passing clouds and flowing water. She has also experienced being a flying immortal by appreciating the picture and composing the lyric.

Taiqing felt caged, trapped in this life, and on many occasions, she expressed her desire to leave this world to pursue an immortal’s life. To her, flying immortals symbolized freedom, with their attitude of surpassing conventions, freeing themselves from worldly cares, and literally flying into the sky as sylph. This suggests her strong desire to escape the hubbub and pursue a clear and peaceful mind. She creates an empty and illusory immortal’s world and conveys her strong longing for immortals’ idle and roaming life.

Throughout Taiqing’s life, she has an aspiration for ascending to the heavenly world, because she frequently treats the world of immortals as her permanent home and the human world as her temporary stay. With an ultimate destination in mind, she can be detached from this life’s twists and sufferings, cast off the confusion about her origin and identity, and eliminate the frustration of wasted talents. While Taiqing yearns for an immortal’s life in the pure and cold world, she never completely transcends the dusty world or frees herself from earthly cares. She persistently pursues worldly happiness and feels reluctant to leave this warm and dusty world.
Chapter 2. Reluctance to Leave the Mundane World

While Taiqing assiduously sought spiritual freedom, she enjoyed the joy and happiness of the human world. The harmonious marriage, family happiness, and friendship with other talented women made her deeply attached to this world and reluctant to leave the mundane world.

Taiqing’s happy marriage was a prominent subject of many of her works, though the happiness did not last long. Yihui and Taiqing were congenial companions. They wrote poems together, appreciated antiques, inscribed paintings, went horseback riding, and visited various places near the capital. They were not only husband and wife, but also understanding friends. Her works titled “harmonizing my husband” or “written with my husband” occupy a large part of her anthologies.

As members of the imperial family, they enjoyed royal privileges and led a comfortable life. The famous scholar Pan Futing once wrote to Yihui, “A happily married couple in Jade Terrace, Enjoying refined things together.” (玉臺仙眷屬，韻事共流芳.) At one time they composed poems to commend the couple Zhao Mingcheng (趙明誠 1081-1129) and Li Qingzhao (李清照 1084-1151), who both enjoyed antiques and wrote poems together. Taiqing and Yihui much resembled the well-known companionate couple; “the number of poems they exchanged outrivals those of any other couples in any dynasty.”

Tune: Wind Blowing in Pines “Spring Lantern, Harmonizing My Husband’s Poem” (#2)

風入松：春燈次夫子韻二首

In the magnificent hall during the warm springtime was set a spring banquet, 華堂春暖設春宴,
Colored lanterns and moonlight under the sky. 燈彩月華天.
On Lantern Festival the South Pole Immortal held a luxurious banquet, 上元南極開芳宴,

84 Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cainü Gu Taiqing, 46.
85 It refers to the God of Longevity. As the poem is also written to congratulate Yihui on his birthday, it must refer to Yihui.
Feasting the immortals,
With Savory food in plates.
Children in colorful clothes in the courtyard,
Gentlemen in marten coats.

According to Spring immortal’s talismanic writing, you are destined live long,
How could pines and cypresses wither?
I’m so happy that we are of the same age,
Wish for the Three-more\(^{86}\),
And more happiness than before.
What do you think of a good day like tonight?
New poems are recorded in my books.

This is one of the two poems that Taiqing wrote, under the same title, to reply to Yihui. It recorded a happy Lantern Festival night. Luxurious residency, gorgeous clothing, delicious food, adorable children, and respectable guests form a picture of a royal family celebrating a festival. She cared about the “three-more” just like any conventional woman who prays for family prosperity. It was an example of the good days when she was completely immersed in family happiness. Just as she wrote, “Free and unfettered, I deeply enjoyed family happiness; I tried to cast off these mundane concerns, but I am bound to the worldly net.”\(^{87}\)

As a Manchu woman, Taiqing could ride a horse and she would often ride to famous historical sites near Beijing with her husband. During these trips, she would “write down some verse lines when coming across a fine landscape.”\(^{88}\) In fact, each time they came back from a trip, they wrote a great number of poems to record their travel experiences and feelings. They often took the children along for a trip and fully enjoyed family happiness.\(^{89}\)

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\(^{86}\)“Three-more” refer to more happiness, more official emoluments, and greater longevity.
\(^{89}\)Yihui had five sons and four daughters, among which five were of Taiqing’s blood. They are Zaizhao, Zaitong, Zaidao, Zaichu, and Zaitong (died young).
to live leisurely in the mountains and woods. Thanks to his princely privilege, he still retained half of his original salary after resignation. From then on, Taiqing and he read and discussed poetry, went traveling together, and whiled away time in writing and replying to each other’s poems. After her husband died, the marriage was often nostalgically recollected during Taiqing’s later years.

Besides being a wife, Taiqing was also a mother of five children, and her lyrics explored some areas that male poets never did: the experiences of being a mother. With her pen, Taiqing wrote down her responsibilities, expectations, happiness, sorrows and hopes as a wife and mother in her poems.

Tune: Joy of Greeting Spring “On the 4th of the First Lunar Month in the Year of Yiwei (1835), Watching Zhao’er and Other Children Pluck Capillary Artemisia”

迎春樂：乙未新正四日，看釗兒等採采茵蔯

How much east wind has come recently? 東風近日來多少?
Seeing again—so early—some bees! 早又見，蜂兒了．
Several kites floating in the sky; 紙鷗幾朵浮天杪，
Touching the cleansed sunny day. 點染出，晴如掃．

In warm places, thickly dotted fine grass. 暖處有，星星細草．
Watching the children, 看群兒，
Searching round along the steps, 緣階尋繞．
Pick and pick, capillary Artemisia and Asiatic plantain, 采采茵蔯芣苢，
With a little basket. 提個籃兒小．

Written during her marriage period, this lyric is set to a sprightly tune, painting a natural and fresh picture. There is a striking high-low contrast in this poem: several kites high in the sky, fine grass, and several little children on the ground. Her views move from low to high, then to low and near. However, the different horizontal levels in this poem place the children (the future adult ren, 人) between Heaven and the earth, with a mother’s expectation of her son discernable in this arrangement. Another feature of this lyric is that everything is tiny and small in order to fit the cute kids: bees, kites in the high sky, fine grass, little plant and tiny basket. Written in spoken
language, the light tempo of the tone and fresh scenery in the vigorous spring conveys a mother’s merged feelings of happiness, expectation and hope.

Concerning the “mother” theme, most works are written by men to recall their mothers or grandmothers. They always mention memories of childhood, expressing gratitude for their mother’s sacrifice and devotion. These sons or grandsons, as bystanders, witness the hardship of their mothers or grandmothers and attempt to interpret their mother’s feelings. However, Taiqing’s poems are one where the mother is expressing her own thoughts, with no need to rely on description by a third party.

On the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of the Twelfth Lunar Month I Cried for My Ninth Son Zaitong
臘月廿二日哭九兒載同

Tong’er was less than one year old, 同兒未周歲,
He left me and died. 一旦舍我死.
Who says you can forget this after a long time? 誰謂久能忘,
Tears of an old woman never stop. 老淚無時已.

One of her babies died young; she, a mother, could not stop recalling the son and wrote this poem to convey the pain of losing a child. Shut out from the mainstream of literary canons, women poetesses often wrote on their own experience and on themes where male writers seldom appreciated or touched. Women poets not only wrote in conformity with moral standards designed by male society, but also expressed their own expectations and desire skillfully.\textsuperscript{90} Taiqing often wrote on particular experience that only a mother could feel, as in the poem:

On the 9\textsuperscript{th} Watching Zaizhao in Pure Breeze Pavilion
初九清風閣望釗

With blurred eyes I’m too old to see clearly from a height, 老眼憑高看不清,
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.

In this poem Taiqing expresses her pride as a mother on seeing her son grow up. The grown-up son in front of her reminds her of the time when he was born. It should be extremely meaningful for a mother to see the children mature and marry, and Taiqing recorded the significant moment through poetry.

On the 18th of the Twelfth Lunar Month in the Year of Xinchou (1841), Zhao’er Got Married, I Was So Happy that I Wrote Down My Thoughts
辛醜十二月十八釗兒娶婦，喜而有感

......

I took charge of children’s marriages, to handle the remaining problems for you;
代君善後司婚嫁，

Ashamed that I’m incompetent—sick and indolent.
愧我無能病懶慵．

I only wish you to bless our family in the Nine Springs91，
惟願九泉加護佑，

Katydid92 will develop into a prosperous clan from now on．
螽斯從此衍華宗．

After Yihui died, she took up the responsibility of her children’s marriages, and this poem was actually written to inform her husband that she was fulfilling her duties and expressed her hope of a flourishing family. In the poem “Written on the First Day of the Year Renyin” she conveyed her wish to have grandchildren as a mother, saying “With a stick of hearty incense, I pray devoutly; I wish to play with babies as soon as possible.”

As for her children’s education, she concentrated on moral and intellectual education, primarily based on Confucian ethics and on the necessary rudimentary knowledge for a scholar. She also taught them to develop good study habits. The function of “mother education” in ancient China has been recognized for a long time, ever since Mencius’ mother moved her home three times for her son’s sake, and Yue Fei’s mother tattooed characters on his back to remind him of his duties. Industrious mothers repeatedly strengthen our impression of a picture in which a mother is working at spinning wheel while teaching her son to read. In Ming and Qing families,

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91It means “the world after death.”
92It signifies Taiqing’s family.
the concern that mothers showed for their sons’ education and future was no less than that of fathers, and in many instances, it was much more intense. Taiqing reinforced this impression with her own self-portrayal, as in “In Summer Listening to My Children Dao and Chu Reading” (夏日聽道初兩兒讀書) where she writes: “When free, I teach my sons and daughters by the window; Reading ‘Zhounan’ in breeze on a sunny day.” She not only studied diligently herself, but also encouraged her son to work hard. When her son left home, she urged him once again to keep study in mind besides eating and sleeping well: “Don’t neglect horsemanship and archery in free time; You’d better keep studying during the trip.”

Taiqing also emphasizes “filial piety” when educating her children. “Kind crow” already had the special meaning of filial piety in Chinese literary language, especially after Bai Juyi’s (白居易 772-846) poem “Kind Cawing Crows at Night” (ciwu yeti 慈鳥夜啼) became widely disseminated. This poem also exerted a great impact on later poems, including one on the same theme by Taiqing.

Crow Feeding Mother in Return

An old crow on the wall was about to hatch eggs in spring.
Clamorous and husky, they flew around my house.
The old crow would not eat what she had got,
Her children followed her, cawing and crying.
By June the nestlings had grown up,
Long feathers, big mouths and hoarse voices.
Stealing bird eggs or fighting for meat,
They returned to feed the old crow.
In the high nest, the old crow is free and happy,
Alas! Please see the filial crows on the wall,
How would sons in the world feel?

93 Xiong Bingzhen, “Ming Qing jiating zhong de muzi guanxi: Xingbie, ganqing ji qita,” in Xingbie yu Zhongguo, ed. Li Xiaojiang (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi Sanlian shuid, 1994), 524.
94 “Zhounan” includes eleven songs from the “Guofeng” part of Book of Songs.
95 Gu Taiqing, “On the 24th of the Third Lunar Month, Seeing Zhao’er Off to Wan County for Field Inspection and Showing this to Him.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 124.
Taiqing sees her own shadow in the old crow, and as a mother, she has expressed her ardent expectations. She tries to urge all the sons under heaven to possess filial piety and feed their parents in return.

In addition to her beloved family members, Taiqing had many friends in her life, and they are one of the reasons for her reluctance to leave the mundane world. What should be mentioned is that when Taiqing was suffering hardships after Yihui died, her female friends greatly assisted her in starting a new life. They started poetry societies, went traveling together and cared for one another. The friendship helped her survive difficulties in life, enriched her life and nurtured her artistic talents. Her friendship with other talented women will be further discussed in the third part of this dissertation.

Beside her family and friends, Taiqing was concerned about other lives under heaven. As Taiqing had once led a poor and miserable life, with deep experience of hardships, she could understand and sympathize with hard-working commoners.

Song of the Silkworm-raising Woman

Thickly dotted new-born silkworms, 星星初破卵,
Wriggling then sleeping on their bed. 蠟蠆漸眠床.
Clean but chill, the boudoir beauty. 潔潔寒閨秀.
Picking mulberry leaves by the path. 采采陌上桑.
I’ve picked many, and few leaves remain; 采多桑葉稀,
Returning late, I fear the silkworms may die. 遲歸恐蠶僵.
Who’s that wife in her upper apartment? 樓上誰家婦,
Enjoying flowers and sneering at my haste. 看花笑我忙.

Taiqing contrasts the different living conditions and attitudes of two women who have completely different backgrounds: the silkworm-raising woman picks mulberries while the boudoir beauty views flowers; the former must hasten because she worries
about her silkworms, while the latter laughs at her rush. The verse recalls the famous ancient poem “The Roadside Mulberry”\(^{96}\) (陌上桑):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{……} \\
\text{Travelers saw Luofu}, & \quad \text{觀者見羅敷}, \\
\text{They dropped the loads they carry and stroke their beards;} & \quad \text{下擔捋髭須;} \\
\text{Young men saw Luofu}, & \quad \text{少年見羅敷}, \\
\text{Doff their hats and make salute.} & \quad \text{脫帽著帩頭;} \\
\text{The ploughman thinks not of his plough,} & \quad \text{耕者忘其耕}, \\
\text{The hoer leaves in the field his hoe.} & \quad \text{鋤者忘其鋤}. \\
\text{Back home, they find fault with their wives,} & \quad \text{來歸相怨怒}, \\
\text{All because they have seen Luofu.} & \quad \text{但坐觀羅敷}. \\
\text{……}
\end{align*}
\]

This poem portrayed a faithful and beautiful woman in contrast with a frivolous governor. These eight lines describe the impression Luofu left on the onlookers. Here the onlookers are all men, without a single woman, possibly to strengthen Luofu’s beauty reflected in men’s eyes. Taiqing reworked this theme by writing from a novel and interesting prospective. The onlooker became a woman from another social status; the two women lived in different ways and cared about diverse things. Within several lines, Taiqing deftly points out sharp class divisions and showed her concern for the mulberry girl. Also in “Song of Picking Up Water Caltrops,” (採菱歌) she conveys her care about caltrop pickers, “When picking up water caltrops, don’t hurt your hands…Take care of yourself, caltrop picker! Cold wind is blowing on the lake.” (采菱復采菱, 采菱莫傷手……珍重采菱人, 涼風動湖口.)

These poems illustrate her awareness of class differences and sympathy with those who are suffering difficulties; only with her similar experiences in poverty and a sympathetic heart could she speak out such words. In another poem, Taiqing reacted to farmers’ suffering during a drought: “Where could I get 1000 feet of Lushan waterfall, In hundreds of streams, flowing into every farmer’s field?”\(^{97}\) (安得廬山千

\[^{96}\text{“The Roadside Mulberry” is one of the best-known narrative poems supposedly collected by the Music Bureau of the Han dynasty. Guo Maoqian, ed., Yuefu shi ji (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 411.}\]

\[^{97}\text{Gu Taiqing, “Suffering from Heat.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 22.}\]
The theme is similar to Du Fu’s (杜甫 712-770) lines “How could I get an immerse house with thousands of rooms: To make all the poor scholars under heaven take welcome shelter!”(安得廣廈千萬間，天下寒士俱歡顏.) Taiqing often pays close attention to farming and common people’s livelihood, as in “Now we are all expecting the rain; The Spring wheat should be ploughed in time.”(方今正望雨，宿麥及時鋤.)

### Filling the Barn (#1)

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In a harvest year, children are happy with big cakes; 豐年餌大兒童喜,
For the Spring Sacrifice the elders enjoyed fat chicken. 春社雞肥父老嘗.
The rich especially should know about farming. 富貴更須知稼穡,
The scenes have remained the same from ancient to present. 古今原不異風光.
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This poem portrays an old custom in Beijing. By juxtaposing the different foods children and elders eat on Spring Sacrifice day, Taiqing portrayed the people’s happiness during harvest time. As expressed in her lines, the rich ought to care about farming and how common people live.

In her poetic world, Taiqing pays much attention to other life forms, such as plants and animals. She showed great interest and curiosity to things in Nature and human world. Aside from her favorite crab-apple blossoms, mume and narcissusm, other plants also emerge in her poems, such as “horse-milk” grapes, climbing fig, fall lotus, jujube, dry nasturtium, pig-weed, golden peach, calabash and so on. Her love for animals is often expressed in her works: she writes songs for cicadas, bustards,

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100Taiqing annotates, “On that day in the capital, people generally eat meat even in neighborhoods of commoners and narrow lanes. The custom is especially valued in the countryside. I heard that a certain temple fair is held for people to offer sacrifices to thank the gods.” Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 46.

crows, woodpeckers, turtles, rabbits, cold butterflies, katydids, dogs, etc. Many of these animals are endowed with human characters.\footnote{101}

When Taiqing was fifty-nine years old, Miaohua’s son Zaijun died. As the legitimate son Zaijun had no male heir, Zaizhao’s eldest son Fumei (Gu Taiqing’s grandson) inherited the title Duke Zhenguo; thus Taiqing finally resumed her status in Rong Mansion. Her sons and grandsons all succeeded in official careers, and her remaining years took a favorable turn. After having fulfilled her onerous duties to manage her children’s marriages, she was blessed with children and grandchildren and spent her remaining years in comfort.

Tune: \textit{West River Moon} “On an Afternoon in the Second Year of Guangxu (1876), I Visited the Temple of Setting Sun in a Dream”

\begin{verbatim}
I found the small temple of setting sun,  丗得夕陽小寺,
Plum trees have just bloomed at the edge of water.  梅花初放厓阿
A stream of flowing water goes around the slope,  一灣溪水繞陂陀,
A narrow slanting path leads to a bridge.  細路斜通略彴
\end{verbatim}

\footnote{101 One example is “Black Mouth,” in which she described a dog’s loyalty to its masters to admonish human beings.

“Black Mouth”

(Taiqing notes: “In the eleventh year of Xianfeng [1861], I carried three of Zaichu’s puppies home in my pocket, one called Sheep, one called Monkey, and the other named Black Mouth. Now they are seven years old. They always go out to greet Zaichu and his wife as soon as they hear their steps. They also show affection to the servants from their home. Alas! Some people betray their origins and forget others’ kindness; they cannot measure up to dogs!” 咸豐十一年，從初兒處用口袋盛來三小狗，一名羊，一名猴儿，一名黑嘴，今已七年，每聞載釗夫妻履聲即出迎，見彼處童婢亦不勝眷戀。嗚呼！人有背本忘恩者，去黑嘴遠矣）

Carried back in a pocket,  一袋盛來,
Two females and a male.  兩牝一牡.
Barks were not formed then,  吠不成聲.
Now they run well.  今已善走.
Once meeting old friends,  每見故人,
They are reluctant to leave their side.  依依襟肘.
Drinking water without thinking of the source,  飲不思源.
Humans are inferior to dogs.  人不如狗.
\end{verbatim}

Lingering in the good dream, I feared waking up,  好夢留連怕醒，
Unfortunately no much time is left.  偏教時刻無多。
It is so enjoyable to climb mountains and approach water,  登山臨水樂如何，
How can one have a good dream very often?  好夢焉能長作。

This lyric about a dream experience was written in 1876 when Taiqing was seventy-eight years old. She visited a temple during sunset in the dream and expressed her reluctance to wake up from the nice dream. To a certain extent, this poem is quite symbolic and meaningful. Written a year before her death, the setting sun implies her old age and approach to the end of life. However, the scenery around the temple remained marvelous and attractive. She realized it was a dream and felt the limitations of time. In reality, the happy days all seemed like a dream to her and she felt unwilling to come out of it. In short, all the worldly happiness, as well as her love and care about the world, makes her linger on this world and reluctant to leave.

After the mid-Qing, China was forced open after the Opium War in 1840. Western learning gradually spread in the East, and many scholars in China began to question tradition and advocated innovations. This era became more open than previous times, but the change is not obviously noticed in Taiqing’s writing. In her later years, frequent wars ruined the peace; in the meantime, she continuously experienced the sorrows of losing relatives and friends. It made her more mournful when her children died earlier than her. In 1877, she left the world at the age of seventy-eight, and she was buried in the Southern Valley where she had abundant beautiful memories with Yihui.

As a typical elite woman, Taiqing lived in the world for nearly eighty years, from Jiaqing, Daoguang, Xianfeng, and Tongzhi to early Guangxu. She enjoyed untold wealth and high honor, and also survived the hardships of life; she possessed a happy marriage, and as a widow, she also led a lonely and miserable life for many years. She witnessed domestic troubles and foreign invasion, as well as the wane of the Qing government.
As a talented woman with unusual life experience, Taiqing aspired to ascend to the heavenly world in order to discard frustration and sufferings. However, as a traditional boudoir lady, she was concerned about the earthly world. She could not bear to give up her happy marriage, family happiness, or sisterhood with her female friends. She was also infatuated with beauty and happiness in the mundane world. As she wrote in “On the 11th of the Fourth Lunar Month I Listened to the Old Man Zhang Kunhe Lecturing on *Yuandu lü* at Baiyun Guan,” (四月十一日白雲觀聽張坤鶴老人說元都律) “May I ask the sightseer what he got? Fragrant dust all the way, I almost forgot to return home.” (借問遊人何所得？香塵一路淡忘歸.) The lines in “Writing Four Erotic Poems for Fun” are a portrayal of her life. She considered herself as a banished immortal from the Jasper Lake who lives in the human world that she does not belong to; yet she felt reluctant to abandon worldly happiness and leave the dusty world. The dilemma and tension as to whether to stay or to go is a major feature within Taiqing’s lines.
Chapter 3. Time Consciousness and Philosophical Speculations

Time is always an old and puzzling problem within philosophy, and many literati of ancient China offered unique understandings and perceptions about “time,” such as “Who saw the moon by river first? When did the moon over the river begin to shine on people? Lives never stop generation to generation, The moon looks similar year after year,”\(^ {102}\) (江畔何人初見月？江月何年初照人？人生代代無窮已, 江月年年望相似.) and “When did this glorious moon come into being? With a cup in hand, I ask the azure sky; Also wondered, in the heavenly palace, what year is it now?”\(^ {103}\) (明月幾時有？把酒問青天. 不知天上宮闕, 今夕是何年?) Confucius, once standing by a river, said: “What passes is perhaps like this; It does not let up day or night.”\(^ {104}\) (逝者如斯夫，不舍晝夜.) After this famous exclamation, the metaphor of water became widely used by literati to describe time. Unsurprisingly, Taiqing also applied the water metaphor to describe her perception of time.

In Taiqing’s eyes, time is just like flowing water. She writes in Conductus of Taichang “Beginning of Spring on the 7\(^{th}\) of the First Lunar Month” (太常引: 人日立春) that, “The flowing days seem like water; Wind and flowers are unstable; Recalling happiness in the past.” (流光似水，風花無定，歡樂記從前.) In “Just Passing the Age of Forty,” (四十初度) “Fleeting youth becomes flowing water, heart-stirring human affairs are equal to froth.” (過眼韶華成逝水，驚心人事等浮漚.) Time is an eternal river, its water carries away people’s youth, and human affairs are just like froth drifting on the river, fragile and transient. These vivid metaphors visualize Taiqing’s perception of time. In Waking in the Toad Palace “The Solstice Day,” (步蟾宮: 至日) she writes: “Facing poetry books sit by a bright window, watching wild horses passing one after another.” (詩書相對坐晴窗，看野馬，紛紛過眼.) Here, she recalls Zhuangzi’s metaphors: “Wavering heat, bits of dust, living things blown about

\(^{102}\) Zhang Ruoxu, “Night with Flower and Moon of the Spring River,” in Quan Tang shi, 1:267.
\(^{104}\) Zihan,” Lunyu (The Analects of Confucius) in Sishu zhangju, ed., Zhu Xi (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1992), 89.
by the wind.”

“yema (野馬)” has two meanings in Taiqing’s poem: floating mist enveloping the fields, and flowing time. By transforming invisible and imperceptible time into visible and perceptible mist before her eyes, she captured her feeling towards time.

Just like mist which vanishes quickly in sun, Taiqing has realized that the splendor of youth passes by like water and transient clouds; moreover, like most other women who are always very sensitive to changes in their looks, she worries about aging and fading appearance. Consider “The young lady no longer looked like before; It is worse, when facing a broken heart and withered grass” and “Ashamed to look into the mirror, aged looks appear, white silk grows at the temples.” Women peer into mirrors to manage their appearance, but their reflection in the mirror reminds them of the lapse of time. In the face of the unforgiving passage of time, Taiqing often feels miserable, depressed and helpless.

As Taiqing went through all kinds of hardships and difficulties in her early years, she possessed a very strong sense of changeable life. Once she wrote:

The present and the past are originally like this;
Sighing about life,
It’s just like flying flowers and floating floss;
Gone with the wind.
Fallen into mud or grass, there’s no fixed destination,
Especially a lonely official and an unfilial descendant.

Taiqing believes that life is unpredictable, like fallen flowers and flying catkin; people’s lives are short and helpless, controlled by wind. Blown by the merciless wind, numerous people lead a wandering life. She says “The travelers need not keep a sense

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107 Gu Taiqing, Conductus of Taichang “Beginning of Spring on the 7th Day of the First Lunar Month.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 189.
108 Gu Taiqing, Song of Gold Thread “Official Wang Zilan Sent Me a Lyric to Praise Me, I Wrote This to Thank Him and Harmonize with His Rhymes.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 271.
of homeland and country; you are just a gull between the earth and heaven.”

Compared with others, Taiqing probably has more profound understanding of being a gull, due to her rootless wandering prevalent in her early years.

Life is transient, unstable and fluctuating, so Taiqing maintains that people should enjoy life while they can. Once she wrote, “Green mountains have been waiting for me till today, Beautiful scenes can please people: you should hurry up.”

(碧山待我有今日，好景娛人須及時。)

Keeping in mind that time never waits for anyone, Taiqing always tries to make good use of time to read and write. Consider the poem below:

Written on the Night of the 13th of the Ninth Lunar Month (A Leap Month) in the Year of Renchen (1832)

Don’t spend your daytime idly.
Time doesn’t stay.
Reading is truly beneficial.
To observe life profoundly and endlessly.
Melons and fruits still hang in cold,
Cobwebs gradually shrink in the cool weather.
Human feelings and innate laws of things,
Frequently been sought in quietness.

Written at night, this poem records Taiqing’s thoughts about time and study. At the beginning of the poem Taiqing cautions herself that we should not waste time because time never stays. She praises the benefits of reading—to help people better understand life and the world. The last couplet presents her own experience; in a quiet atmosphere, one can reflect over things more rationally. The concept of “stillness” (jing, 靜) in the last line recalls Laozi, “Staying active beats the cool, Keeping still beats the heat. Purity and stillness can bring proper order to the world.”

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111 Laozi, Chapter 45. See Ames, Dao de jing, 147.
Taiqing often remains still and peaceful and forgets all the troubles in a quiet environment, completely immersed with reading or writing.

Taiqing wrote several poems on “sitting quietly” (jing zuo, 靜坐), and her practice of sitting quietly is a significant meditative method.

Written Incidentally While Sitting Quietly

静坐偶成

To temper oneself, and to overcome obstacles.
When understanding immortality, your heart will be free.
How do one to reach the true origin?
Luxuriant branches and messy leaves should all be cut off.

This poem says that people need to temper themselves and overcome great difficulties to reach enlightenment. Once awakened, people’s hearts will be freed from worldly cares. One should also eliminate all of the branches and leaves in order to arrive at the true origin. Here, branches and leaves refer to various desires, passions and worries in life.

Taiqing’s meditative method resembles Shenxiu’s approach towards enlightenment because both ways emphasizes unceasing efforts. Shenxiu says one need to “diligently wipe and polish one’s mirror” and get rid of dust to keep its natural bright purity; Taiqing has mentioned the hardships one needs to experience before awakening. The metaphor of true origin reminds us of the famous mirror metaphor in Buddhism. Just as dust blurs the bright purity of mirror, branches and leaves conceal the true origin. Taiqing’s “true origin” signifies one’s pure heart or heart-mind. As branches, leaves can easily grow wildly around a water origin, and so should be removed on a regular basis. Taiqing’s other poem “Written Incidentally in Rain (#1)” (雨中偶作其一) restates the significance of a pure heart.

Green locust trees and tall willows face my door,
A pure heart can dispel all the worries.
Put down the curtains and open the icy bamboo mat,
I sit by my plantain window, transcribing books.

（雨中偶作其一）

綠槐高柳對門居，
心淨能教萬慮除。
放下筠簾展冰簟，
芭蕉窗裏坐抄書。
In this poem Taiqing emphasizes that a pure heart can eliminate all the worries and enables one to study peacefully.

Keeping a pure mind and diligent study are mutually beneficial to Taiqing. A pure heart keeps Taiqing undisturbed from other things, and allows her to focus on reading and studying; when she reads and writes, Taiqing is actually working on “polishing her mirror of the mind,” approaching enlightenment step by step. When reading and writing in a quiet environment, Taiqing was exposed to the pure state of her heart, and often encountered moments of awakening, especially when she was studying and writing. Most of the times these awakening moments were inspired by Daoist or Buddhist wisdom.

While studying or writing, she tends to reflect over historical change, personal fate and living conditions from a philosophical perspective. Her philosophical thoughts do not just rest on a perceptual level, but delve deep into rational speculation and demonstrate some profundity, which we may attribute to her fondness for Daoism and Buddhism. Partly this was because she was deeply influenced by her husband, who held great interest in Daoism and Buddhism, as well as her desire to achieve spiritual freedom by applying wisdom from Daoist and Buddhist doctrines. Subsequently, she habitually interpreted and reflected on life in the light of Daoist and Buddhist doctrines.

Yihui was familiar with the Book of Changes, music, Daoism, Buddhism, mathematics, architecture, Sanskrit, and so on. After his resignation at the age of 37, he whittled away his time in “mountains and woods,” and led a leisurely life. Yihui often discussed “Dao” with Taiqing, which allowed her to learn from him.

Tune: Partridge Sky “On a Winter Night, I Listened to My Husband Discuss the Way. Before We Knew, It Struck Midnight. The Withered Mume in Pot Was Diffusing Sweet Scent; I Felt an Enlightening, and Thus Wrote Down This Lyric”

鷓鴣天: 冬夜聽夫子論道, 不覺漏下三矣. 盆中殘梅香發, 有悟賦此

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112McCraw, Women and Old Chinese Poetry, 171-72.
Midnight talk on sutras—jade clepsydra drips slow.  
Life’s mystery — profoundest just where it’s most mundane.  
Worldly folks, don’t cherish the finery of flowery scents:  
When flowers smell sweetest, it’s time to wither away.  
Bees brew up honey, silkworms spin out silk.  
When the task gets finished, how could no one realize?  
Sands of the Eternal River\(^{113}\) are countable, and misfortunes are uncountable.\(^{114}\)  
Everything in the world is my dharma guide.  

Kuang Zhouyi remarks, “The beginning of the second stanza is a thorough enlightenment.”\(^{115}\) In Stanza One she points out the most precious moments of wonder of life, its triggering secrets/impulses/mysteries, inhabit the most ordinary things.\(^{116}\) The next two lines provide a special example. The last line of this stanza is similar to the idea from Laozi, “It is upon misfortune that good fortune leans, It is within good fortune itself that misfortune crouches in ambush,”\(^{117}\) both stressing the idea where “things turn into their opposites when they reach their extremes.” Although bees and silkworms can make themselves recognized by people, they still will die one day as, in the light of Buddhist thought, everything has its own opposite: if there is life, there is death; if there is existence, there is extinction. Therefore, Daoists maintain that worldly people need not diligently strive for anything,\(^{118}\) and Buddhists believe that everyone should get rid of worldly cares. The last line echoes with the theme of this lyric, that one can learn mysterious truth from all the things on the earth.

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\(^{113}\)A Buddhist term. Eternal River refers to the Ganges in south Asia, and “sands of the Eternal River (hengsha)” is used to describe an extremely large number.  
\(^{114}\)The last two lines are in accordance with the edition of Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 203.  
\(^{115}\)Kuang Zhouyi’s comment. See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 204.  
\(^{116}\)McCraw, Women and Old Chinese Poetry, 172.  
\(^{117}\)Laozi, Chapter 58. See Ames, Dao de jing, 167.  
\(^{118}\)Daoism regards transcending worldly matters, giving up making achievements and striving for nothing as the highest realm of life.
In fact, much of Taiqing’s insights about life came from her observations and reflections over everyday life. For example, Yihui and Taiqing both wrote verses for Yun Nantian’s album of paintings; Yihui only depicted the scenes and objects in the painting, while Taiqing expressed her philosophical thinking and expressed some resonance with the painter.

Two Wild Ducks Coming out of Water

The ducks on sands forget the world,
They echo with each other deep in the reeds.
Roaming, they don’t admire phoenix-like bird couples,
Red knotweeds and yellow reeds can fully entertain them.

Taiqing, as a painter and a reader, is happy together with the fish, birds, insects which she paints in her own paintings. Thus in the two poems she can imagine that she is the fish in water and wild birds in reeds who enjoy roaming contentedly. No matter whether she painted herself, evaluated famous paintings, or inscribed poems on those paintings, she expressed philosophical thoughts and esthetic attitude about life, Nature, and art in a way permeated by Laozi and Zhuangzi.119 Sometimes a new discovery or awareness could even be achieved from a game.

Tune: Shadow of a Chain of Jade Rings “On the New Year’s Day Untwining a Chain of Nine Rings”

Linked together, each ring is bound.
Once untwined, they are actually not entangled.
Bind a chain of rings, and undo it.
I smiled: all things on earth are like this.

This short lyric describes a game during the New Year where Taiqing discovered a philosophical theory from it—that everything can be connected to form complex combinations, and on the contrary, each complicated thing can be simplified into independent units. Also, in Cherishing the Parted Clasp “Watching the Kids Play with

a Barrel-twirl,” she “lodges philosophical truths in concrete experience;” by watching her children play a game, she realized that “nearly all make vessels to contain a deep intent” and expressed her understanding of “void” (kong, 空) through a particular practice.

The rise and fall in her life seriously impacted her attitudes towards present happiness. When she was in a joyous mood, she kept worrying about the possibility that the current happiness would suddenly disappear. In *Drunken in Penglai*:

“Harmonizing with Huang Tingjian,” (醉蓬萊: 和黃山谷) Taiqing wrote:

Such a scene in the world, when can it be seen?  此景人間，幾曾得見。
The moon embracing the cold tide,  月擁寒潮。
Boundless clouds and water.  無邊雲水。
Fill the cup full with heavenly wine;  滿酌天漿。
Entertain the Daoist priest of Hongdu.  宴鴻都道士。
Secret of longevity, drastic changes:  秘訣長生，滄桑變化,
Facing gorgeous appearances and silk sleeves  對錦顏羅袂。
A dusty world in disorder, at chess-game’s end:  鹿世紛紛，殘棋一局,
Who is wrong, who is right?  誰非誰是?

While facing beautiful sceneries and happy times, she is unable to dispel fear of drastic changes in life. She finds out that the dusty world is in disorder and still tries to tell right from wrong. Ups and downs in her early life had seriously hurt her, thus when she was enjoying present happiness, there remained a nagging worry in her mind about change and loss. At that time, however, she was still entangled by external things, and had not seen through life. As time went on, and as her experiences increased and her knowledge grew, Taiqing gained thorough insights into life, as in the lyric below:

*Tune: Wave Washing the Sands “Written Perfunctorily”*  浪淘沙: 偶成

Lives compete endlessly,  人世競無休。
Post-horses and farm cattle.  驛馬耕牛。
No grief emerges on eyebrows of Daoists.  道人眉上不生愁.

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Holding a book at ease, and sitting by my window. 
What else will one desire?

Time is flowing slowly; 
Years are hard to keep back.
A hundred years later, all people become earthen mantou. 
Pack and place body and heart in a peaceful place. 
Push the boat downstream.

In the first stanza, Taiqing has compared two different ways of living: some people compete with others, as busy as horse and cattle; while Daoists have no desire but immortality. Stanza Two shifts to Taiqing’s exclamation about time and life. She realizes that everyone will die one day no matter how different they live in this life, so she deals with things in accordance with their natural tendency as symbolized by the last line “Pushing the boat downstream.” She has understood life and death thoroughly, so she is able to stand aloof from mortal involvements, just as she says in the poem “Inscribed for My Portrait in Daoist Clothes,” (自題道裝像) “The world has not finished its chess game, so just live in the world watching the game.” (人間未了殘棋局，且住人間看弈棋.) Staying aloof from mundane matters, she can calmly treat human feelings in the world and misfortunes in life.

As revealed above, Taiqing was greatly affected by Daoist doctrine of being placid, doing nothing, and conforming to Nature. Daoist and Buddhist thoughts serve to help her dispel pent-up emotion or frustration and enlighten her. When her youngest son died young, she tried to bring herself to reason with Buddhist thoughts —“I also know that separation and reunion depend on destiny (yinyuan, 因緣), I should understand all the chains of cause and effect, reunions and separations are void.” (亦知離合因緣假，應解牽連聚散空.) In the poem below, she reinforces her acceptance of the Buddhist concept of “void” or “emptiness.”

On the 2nd Day of the Eighth Lunar Month, Matching My Husband in Rain

The revolving wheel of dharma: the universe is eternal; Mantou (steamed buns) are a metaphor for tombs, as they look similar in shape.
The picturesque jade house is actually void.
Human affairs are handled in succession at any time;
See through life: happiness is ample.

瓊樓如畫本空虛.
紛紛人事隨時應，
識破浮生樂有餘.

Here, Taiqing realizes that everything in the world is void and that only Buddhist law is permanent. She tries to keep her emotions under control by persuading herself to enjoy the present pleasures instead of grieving over external things. She assumes that once people have seen through life and no longer taken life or death to heart, they will enjoy more happiness.

When the society she knew fell into the chaos of war, life could hardly be secured with “war flames all over the city.” Taiqing suffered from hardships caused by war, and wrote down what she saw and felt during a war.

On the 10th, Pleased to Meet Xiaxian

In turbulence I can see my blood sister,
I’m delighted she survived the tiger’s mouth.
I’m old but you are not,
Just spend day and night in deep mountains.

初十日喜晤霞仙

乱离得见同胞妹，
虎口余生喜尚存。我已暮年君未老，
深山姑且度朝暮。

Possibly as a consequence of her old age and the influence of Buddhist thought, she could see through life and death and chose to withdraw from society when facing these disasters. She suggested to her sister to seek refuge in the mountains in order to avoid the war, as she knew that they could do nothing about it, being particularly helpless before such human disasters.

Reply to “Letian zhiming” by the Master of Guansheng Study, Harmonizing the Original Rhymes

答觀生齋主人樂天知命並次原韻

122 Gu Taiqing, “On the Double Ninth Festival in the Year Gengshen of Xianfeng (1860) I Received a Letter From Xiangpei Asking for Shelter from the War, but She Didn’t Show Up after Several Days. I Also Heard That the Camp for Elite Troops Was Burnt Down by Gangsters. My Sister Xiaxian Was Missing, I Sent Some People to Look for Her, but No Results. So I Wrote This Poem to Record It.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 168.
Ninety days of springtime fly in front of eyes,
Those lovely flowery matters are actually blurry.
The boundless world is nothing but illusion,
Seven-treasure tower was originally void.
Observe life and death in bright mirrors,
Follow your destiny and fate within your heart.
One must know there’s no secret for immortals and Buddha,
Loyalty and filial piety are always the first achievement.

Taiqing has realized that people’s life span is really short and everything in the world is illusory and void, so people need to do nothing but follow one’s fate. The “mirror” here entails the great knowledge and secrets about life and death, and it also symbolizes enlightenment. Facing the bright mirror, what man should do is to “observe” as an outsider, rather than to be involved as an insider. The following line says that one should always listen to one’s “heart” to find the right track and to become an immortal or Buddha.

Yet, as a traditional worthy woman, Taiqing always regarded Confucian doctrine as a permanent value. When asked how to become an immortal or Buddha, Taiqing gives an answer which conforms to Confucian doctrine: “loyalty and filial piety.” Obviously, Taiqing holds a deep-rooted concept of family and country, which determines that it is impossible for her to cast off attachments and thoroughly transcend from the mundane world.

In conclusion, Taiqing’s practice of studying and writing as a process of polishing her mirror of the mind makes it possible for her to encounter some awakening moments. Taiqing’s interest in Daoist and Buddhist doctrines allows her to skillfully choose a relevant and appropriate teaching to interpret what happens in life. Though Taiqing habitually applied Daoist and Buddhist thought in practical ways to interpret life, she never converted to any religion. Her interest in Daoism and Buddhism enables her to appear as a free spirited poetess who possesses the power to transcend worldly cares.
PART II. TAIQING’S WRITINGS
Chapter 4. Gu Taiqing’s Shi Poems

In Ming and Qing times, the prosperous economy produced many aristocratic and well-known families which provided excellent cultural opportunities for women.\(^{123}\) The relatively broad-minded society somehow encouraged women to write and showed much understanding and sympathy with their writings.\(^{124}\) There was also a change in the way Chinese saw poetesses and their social roles,\(^{125}\) therefore, those talented women in Taiqing’s time have already dismissed their fears of spreading poetic fame, in contrast with those women who burned their own poems and books.\(^{126}\)

Taiqing attempted to fight oblivion, by establishing a life through poetry to stay against the flow of time. Taiqing frequently wrote her thoughts and state of her mind into her poetry. Her poetry serves as a mirror of Taiqing’s mind. When she was working on poetry, she was actually polishing the mirror to reveal its bright purity.

Taiqing often relies on two genres to convey her message: shi poems to narrate and ci poems to convey emotions. However, there is no clear dividing line between the two genres. Taiqing’s shi poems extensively mirror her life experiences, due to her straightforward and honest language and intended goal of addressing various practical matters. Shi and ci poems no longer just serve to dispel gloom or kill time; they serve many useful functions: as letters, travelogues, personal diaries, invitations and letters of congratulations, etc. Taiqing’s writing style departs from her predecessors in that she does not limit herself to concise poem titles. She also deemphasizes the quantitative harmony between titles and the body of a poem in favor of utilizing titles as a narrative function. The titles of lyrics become longer and longer: some record an event or an incident, others express her thoughts.

If shi poems allow for narratives and ci poems explore various emotions, then when it comes to Qing women, everything could now be rewritten into ci. Thus the

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\(^{123}\) Zhang Hongsheng, Qingdai cixue de jiangou (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1998), 180.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 182.

\(^{125}\) McCraw, Women and Old Chinese Poetry, 120.

\(^{126}\) Kang Zhengguo, Fengsao yu yanqing (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2001), 348.
poetic world in Taiqing’s *ci* poems undergoes great expansion beyond traditional themes, such as the boudoir life.\(^{127}\)

From a wandering descendant of a criminal official to a noble concubine of a prince, and then to the life of an impoverished widow, the ups and downs in Taiqing’s life offered her a rich range of feelings and experiences, which diversified her verse’s contents and styles. Her *shi* and *ci* poems record her joys and sorrows, partings and reunions, warm and cold human relationships, and convey her personal thoughts and feelings. She tries to recapture and preserve the present. Her works unfold and present a historical scroll-painting of a worthy Manchu woman’s arduous life.

Taiqing’s poetry reveals a mastery of language, a directness of diction and an honesty of tone. Her *shi* poems demonstrate a kind of “natural” quality, beautiful but not gaudy, demonstrating poems of a “high-class” style. The dominant style of her lyrics is pure, fresh and natural,\(^{128}\) and her works are filled with pure, cool and dimly blurred images and realms. Her lyrics are not only novel in content, but also display a Qing woman’s spirit differing from most traditional women.\(^{129}\) Taiqing demonstrates a more confident, unrestrained, and free-spirited character in her lyrics.

Taiqing was also one of the few women who experimented with the “novel” genre, with her contribution entitled *Honglou meng ying*. This sequel to the masterpiece novel *Honglou meng* is a good source from which to examine Taiqing’s literary talents.

*Shi* poems, as the literati’s first choice for creation, developed into a type of writing to record the poets’ words and deeds and often bore autobiographical characteristics, no matter whether the poets are conscious or unconscious about this feature of their poetry. Taiqing’s *shi* poems actually open a window into her life. She wrote poetry to record daily trifles and used poems as a diary to describe her living conditions: reality and dreams, happiness and sadness, rise and fall. Taiqing would

\(^{127}\) Zhang Hongsheng, *Qingdai cixue de jiangou*, 165.


\(^{129}\) Ibid., 472.
sometimes compose a poem as a window into her genuine state of mind even if there was nothing special to state. In contrast with utilitarian writings, Taiqing’s shi poems are true depictions of women’s life, and thus precious historical materials which enable us to understand the mental state of women of Taiqing’s era, especially those of upper-class status.

The strong sense of time in her shi and ci further demonstrates her intent to record her life. For example:

“On the 22nd, Visiting Tianning Temple from White Cloud Temple”
“On the 23rd, It Snowed Heavily, Using Yesterday’s Rhymes”
“On the 24th, the Weather Turned Sunny, Using the Previous Rhyme Again”

Here, Taiqing gave specific dates in titles and wrote in sequence, from which it is clear that her intent was to keep a daily journal, recording the major activity of that day, in the form of poetry. Other examples include:

“On the 17th, We Visited Yunju Temple in the Rain and Had Breakfast in Fangshan County”
“On the 18th, It Turned Sunny in the Afternoon, We Looked for a Water Source for Our Western Lands. It Rained Again That Night”
“On the 19th, Sunny in the Morning, I Composed This Poem in a Carriage on the Way Back to Southern Valley”
“On the 20th, Visiting the Daoist Priest of Beiyin Cave”
“On the 21st. We Made an Inspection Tour to Field Boundaries and Came back Late”
“On the 22nd, We Went Back to the Capital and Had Breakfast in Yungang Village”

Here, the strong sense of time and weather further illuminates her intention to keep a diary. While the incidents that she writes are trivial to the reader, these events are important experiences to her. Her sphere of activity as a woman is limited; however, within the little world, she has made efforts to record her real life and sketch the traces
of her life through poetry. She often uses “writing this down to record it” in the titles of her *shi* and *ci* poems, which again speak to her purpose of documenting her life.

So far we have not found any prose by Taiqing, but there are prose passages in her poems. Many titles and forewords following titles are short but interesting prosaic passages, such as:

“On the 15th of the First Lunar Month, the Old Daoist Priest Miao Sent Us Two Seven-inch-long Little Monkeys. Once Given Fruits, They Always Share With Each Other, Like Lovers, Thus I Wrote This as a Record”

“On a Winter Day, Xiangpei Sent Me Fen Wine, and in the Letter She Told Me That the Official of Fen Region Asked Her for a Mume Painting and an Inscription, Thus She Wrote ‘Carry a thousand flowers from Yu Mountain, Drink a hundred bottles of Fen wine at ease.’ The Official Repaid Her with Wine Made in Apricot Blossom Village of Fenzhou, and She Sent Me Several Liters as a Gift. I Composed This Poem to Thank Her”

“On the 7th of the Seventh Lunar Month, My Late Husband Passed Away. On the 28th of the Tenth Lunar Month I Followed My Mother-in-law’s Order and Moved Out of the Mansion with My Two Sons and Two Daughters. We Had No Place to Stay, So I Sold My Gold Hairpin to Buy a House. I Write This Down to Keep a Record”

“On the 21th of the Seventh Lunar Month the Guards of Southern Valley Came to Report that the Roof of My Late Husband’s Mausoleum Collapsed Because of Water Flowing From the Mountains. There Used to Be a Guard in Charge of Field Affairs. Since Zaijun Inherited the Noble Title, That Position Was Cancelled and Only Five Soldiers Were Left There. Now the People He Trusted Are Generally Peddlers and Chefs. They Are All Flatterers, Unfamiliar with Substantial Duties, Yet Zaijun Rewards Them Excessively. Though There Are Several Former Servants, If They Try to Admonish Him, They Will be Fined or Even Fired. Zaijun Is Hoodwinked by Those Petty Men All Day Long and Has Paid No Attention to the Sacrifices. However, I Can Do Nothing as Zhao’er and Chu’er
Are Still Young, and We Don’t Even Have Enough Food or Clothes, Let Alone Money for Renovations. When Thinking About It, I’m Very Anxious: How Can I Not Get Depressed?

Lengthy poem titles are rare, which suggest Taiqing emphasized the recounting of the event as opposed to meeting the demands of literary aesthetics. Taiqing did not concentrate on prose, yet there are a great many prosaic poems or titles which can be viewed as short prose (xiaopin wen, 小品文), a genre that prevailed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Women were not allowed to read history books, visit famous mountains and big rivers, or to make friends with scholars or officials. Consequently, few women were able to write majestic and emotionally bold prose, and most prose women writers excelled in composing exquisite and wonderful shi and ci poems. Taiqing faithfully records her thoughts and feelings in poems, which allows us to directly perceive her mentality under certain circumstances. Consider the poem below:

In the Third Lunar Month, Gengwu of Tongzhi (1870), My Great-grandson Yuqian and Yudui Both Suffered from Smallpox; They Died One after the Other in Half a Month. How Can a Seventy-two-year-old Woman Take this? How Can My Heart Tolerate It? How Can I Not Grieve?

I feel pitiful as the new ghosts are so young,  
Who understand this old woman’s sadness?  
In a twinkling—there is not much time left,  
When will the good udumbara wither and fade?

When Taiqing was old and sick in her later years, what made her even sadder were her friends’ deaths in succession, and grief over her descendants’ deaths.

Taiqing reveals a wide poetic world in her poems. For instance, her “Pickling Vegetables” is very unique for a boudoir beauty as she explains in details the whole process of pickling vegetables, from time selection to storage. Though this type of

\[130^{See \text{ Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 119.}\]
poems does not explore grand views or substantial content, they offer reflections on life’s vignettes. As in “Written in the Late Spring Rain” (暮春雨中即事):

Like fine thread, it is drizzling from dawn to dark;  
In the rain flower branches are too weak to sway.  
It gets dark— the east wind is blowing cold;  
Light the bedside candle, and close the door early.

The content of this poem is pedestrian and plain, but we can feel her peaceful mind and relaxing mood. Just as Kang Zhengguo observes, women’s writings are usually spontaneous and casual, in contrast with those by men who wrote for practical purposes or to convey conventional “soaring” ambitions.  

In Taiqing’s shi anthology, her poems on traveling and painting inscriptions are especially interesting and noteworthy. Compared with the women before her time, Taiqing has an enlarged field of movement. Though women in the Ming and Qing had many chances to leave home and travel far, most followed their husbands, who went hither and thither in pursuit of an official position.

In Taiqing’s case, she frequently went out from her narrow boudoir and traveling became a habitual part of her life. She went out for a spring outing almost every year, and it became a fixed habit. There were places to go throughout the year.  

One can see Taiqing’s itinerary from her poem titles, such as “Thoughts on the Visit to Shuangqiao Temple,” “Traveling to Sanguan Temple in the South of the City and Reaching White Cloud Temple,” “Walking to the Foot of Cuiwei Mountain at Night and Sleeping in Longquan Nunnery,” “The Next Day Visiting Mimo Cliff,” “Visiting Lingguang Temple and Seeing Old Vine and Aged Junipers on the Way Home,” “Went Boating East of the City on a Summer Day,” “Written after Returning,” “Searching for the Old Location of the ‘Dressing Table’ from the Liao Dynasty” and so on.

131 Kang Zhengguo, Fengsao yu yanying, 348.
132 They went to Fayuan Temple for crab-apple blossoms, Wuchizhuang for lotus, Sanguan Temple for osmanthus, etc.
As Grace Fong observed, the seventeenth century in particular and subsequent Qing period witnessed a great number of women “out in the open.” In peaceful times, women celebrated and recorded in poetry their visits to local temples and excursions to historical or scenic sites, often in the company of family member of female friends.\(^\text{133}\) A large portion of Taiqing’s poems deals with visits to scenic sites. Her poems were not confined the women’s little world—a chamber and a courtyard, but unfolded to a wide view of Nature. As Taiqing says in one of her poems, she “writes down some verse lines when coming across a fine landscape,”\(^\text{134}\) leaving behind her footprints on mountains and old temples in the capital and nearby. She said, “There are many scenic spots one hundred li west of the city; Nothing is merrier than traveling among mountains and waters.”\(^\text{135}\) Thus Taiqing’s poems about traveling serve as good examples for us to explore the relationship between women and the natural world.

In contrast with male writers who treated returning to Nature as a form of psychological withdrawal from officialdom or mundane world, Taiqing treats Nature as an independent aesthetic object, and maintains a psychological distance from it. In male writers’ poems on this theme, the persona portrayed is either of a farmer doing field work in fields or gardens, or a hermit who is in complete harmony with the natural world. Taiqing’s poems are slightly different, as demonstrated in this example:

On the Rainy Day of the 25\(^{\text{th}}\) in the Fifth Lunar Month, Mrs. Ruan of Quiet Spring House Invited Yunlin, Renlan and Me to View New Wheat in Tianning Temple; I Improvised This Poem

五月廿五日雨中，靜春居阮劉夫人招同雲林，紉蘭過天寧寺看新麥，即席作

We tasted food cooked by the attendant chef from the Prime Minister’s mansion.

相府行廚共飽嘗,

\(^\text{133}\)Grace Fong, \textit{Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2008), 86.


In the Buddhist temple, air is so fresh and cool.
Ladies from deep chambers gathered—like a host of wise and virtuous people.
The flourishing age can tolerate our wildness.
Luckily the warm southerly breeze began to touch our clothes,
We watch the new wheat coming to stage.
Timely entertainment is hard to get,
Even stained by mud: we don’t care!

Taiqing and her female friends often went out of their boudoirs to search for poetic elements in Nature, by visiting beautiful scenery, boating on lakes, and appreciating flowers. This poem records their outing in summer and unveils the lifestyle of upper-class women, who are free from worries about food and clothes. They need not grow the crops themselves, and they consider wheat as a special esthetic objective. Taiqing stays away from a farmer’s lifestyle, with no intention to portray a woman farmer or to describe the joy of farm working. From the last line we can see that typically Taiqing and her female friends do not go out in “mud,” so their experience of walking in mud seems quite wild to them. They consider themselves as virtuous men, indicating an obvious purpose of imitating male scholars. Wise and virtuous men meet to discuss learning problems, argue on philosophical issues, talk about history and other refined things. These ladies regard viewing new wheat in the rain as a refined pleasure, and experiences like this provide them with good poem themes and resources.

Sometimes Nature seemed mysterious and curious to Taiqing, and she could not resist its attraction and often went out to find out the truth. In “Ascending the Grotto of Immortal Wang and Watching the Precious Spring,” she says, “An immortal’s grotto is said to be there, thus I paid a special visit there early in the morning.” She once explored Jade-Room and Heavenly Abode, sought for Seven Dou Spring and visited Concealed-Truth Cave.\(^\text{136}\) The words “explore,” “seek,” and “visit” indicate

\(^{136}\)Taiqing wrote “Exploring Jade-room and Heavenly Abode,” “Seeking for Seven Dou Spring and Concealed-Truth Cave)” and “Visiting Hidden-Truth Cave.”
that in some sense Taiqing treats her traveling as adventures. She climbed mountains, waded streams and traveled around on a horse to explore the world beyond the world that she is familiar with. Moreover, Taiqing’s poems on traveling unfold scenery and traveling experiences from a woman’s perspective, and present a refreshing picture on traveling.

Exploring Jade-room and Heavenly Abode

Ascending in slow steps to the mountain summit,
Flowers in rocks grow much more bright-colored.
The precipice opens up a cave door,
A jade-hole drinks limpid spring.
Soaked in clouds, my clothes felt cold,
My hair was blown aslant by wind.
Grasping the purple reins, I hurried my way home;
Mist rose from the stream in the dusk.

In this poem, Taiqing does not purely describe the landscape, but weaves her personal experiences and feelings into it. Even when she is climbing up a cliff, what she cares about is not the danger of her trip, but the slanting hair blown by the wind, which reflects her consciousness of maintaining an elegant appearance as a noble lady. In the poem “I Went to Haidian after the Snow, and Wrote down What I Saw,” (雪後往海甸書所見) she writes, “A village woman by the wall peeps at the walking horse; Under the tree a farm ox is sleeping in the shed.” (墻頭村婦窺遊騎, 樹底耕牛臥草欄.) Both curious about each other, the village woman is looking at the speaker while the speaker looks at her. The two women from different backgrounds also become each other’s scenery. The following poem has portrayed another picture of rural scenes:

On the 19th, a Sunny Morning, Written in the Cart Back to the Southern Valley

The sun rose, freshly sunny, autumn grass fragrance.
Dark cliff, chilly dew gradually turned into frost.
Several thatched cottages reside along the mountain.
A gust of west wind scratches my face—cold.
Fine water flows on sand, pure and clear.
Wild flowers and village women wear light make-up. 野花村婦淡梳妝.
Willows by the stream have most feelings, 多情最是溪邊柳,
Reluctantly seeing off guests to pass a small hill. 送客依依過短崗.

The two lines in the first couplet form a contrast between warm and cold images, such as bright weather, sun, fragrant grass, dark cliff, chilly dew and frost. These images merge all that she has seen, smelt and felt in travel. The thatched cottages, wild flowers and village women are all fresh to her. From the last couplet, the word “guest” (ke, 客) suggests Taiqing considers herself an outsider to the unfamiliar place that she does not belong to.

In Taiqing’s eyes the natural world remains unchanged in comparison with the human world, as in this example:

The road is just the one twelve years ago, 十二年前路,
The scenery remains the same when I come back. 重來景尚同.
Companions are not the ones that day, 人非當日伴,
Flowers still wear previous red. 花著舊時紅.
…… 137

These lines recall to Liu Xiyi’s “Flowers are similar year by year; while people are different year after year”138 (年年歲歲花相似，歲歲年年人不同.) and Cui Hu’s famous poem “Inscribed for the Southern Manor in the Capital.” (題都戶南莊) Nature provides the objective background for human affairs, and seems eternal in comparison with the human world which is filled with physical mobility, births, growth, aging and deaths. The contrast between Nature and the human world reveals the transience and mortality of human life.

Additionally, what Taiqing saw and felt on her trip causes her to reflect upon life, history and the rise and fall of human world. As in the lyric to the tune Spring in a Pleasure Garden “Visiting Mr. Chang’s Deserted Garden, Use the Rhymes of

137 Gu Taiqing, “On the 29th of the Second Lunar Month, I Stayed at Tanzhi with My Husband and Children. I Once Accompanied the Late Madame on a Visit Here. Today When I Came Back Again, the Mountain Path Remains the Same, but the Human Affairs Are Different.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 68.
‘Visiting Mr. Kong’s Deserted Garden’ by Zhang Xun, (沁園春: 遊常氏廢園, 用竹葉庵再遊孔氏廢園韻) she writes:

What my eyes touch is bleak and desolate, 觸目荒涼.
Winding paths and corridors, 曲徑回廊,
White walls, all dilapidated. 粉壁頹矬.

......
Recall the prosperity of those days, all has gone today. 想當日繁華, 如今休矣,
In a day all dismissed, graceful dances and light songs. 一朝散盡, 妙舞輕歌.
Bead shoes and gold hairpins, 珠履金釵,
Incense and candles vanished; 香消燭灺,
Passing visitors only felt all sorts of emotions. 過客空增感慨多.

......

Paths, corridors, walls are all the physical traces that still exist in the natural world; however, dances, songs, shoes, hairpins, and other things related to human activities are all gone. All these changes take place in a day, indicating the minuteness of human world in contrast with the eternal cosmos. From the scene in front of her eyes to the deep reminiscence of history, these lines expressed a kind of disillusion that life vanishes like a dream.

Climb the Mountain behind My House on the Ninth (#1)
九日登後山其一
On the ninth I climbed a mountain with a sad look, 九日登臨一愴顏,
Luckily I have free time to travel. 從遊幸喜此身閒.
A talented man’s marvelous words startle the gods and ghosts, 高人語妙驚神鬼.
Goddess’ soul returned with a cold decorative ring.139 帝子魂歸冷珮環.
One hundred years is nothing but true dreams and illusions, 百年無非真夢幻.
Rivers and mountains remain the same after 1000 years. 千年猶是舊河山.
I cannot bear relatives and friends passing away, 不堪親故雕零甚.
With a yellow flower in my hair, I returned home alone. 鬢插黃花獨自還.

139 This line recalls Du Fu’s lines describing Wang Zhaojun (王昭君) in the Han Dynasty, “Seeing the painting without knowing the real face, With a decorative ring the soul returned on a moon night.” (畫圖省識春風面, 環佩空歸月夜魂) See Du Fu, “Poems Written on Historical Sites to Meditate on the Past,” (#3) in Quan Tang shi, 7:2510.
This poem records Taiqing’s sentiments and thoughts while visiting the mountain behind their house. She mentioned little about the trip itself, but conveyed rich feelings towards life. She points out that one hundred years of life is just a dream and an illusion, and only mountains and rivers eternally exist. With the death of her relatives and friends, Taiqing feels extremely lonely when faced with the everlasting Nature.

For those women who have stayed inside boudoirs, traveling was a major event. Like a bird released from a cage, leaving their homes brings them great joy. Even if they could not go out themselves, they felt happy if their friends had the chance and could tell them about everything on a trip after coming back. In the foreword to “Harmonizing Rhymes by Yunjiang,” Taiqing says, “Yunjiang writes to ask me whether I have traveled or not recently.” Apparently, what they see and hear during their travels became an important topic of conversation as well as a significant content in letters among them. During Taiqing’s trip, “letters from my friends arrived time and time again.” Her friends wrote to her out of curiosity as well as out of their concern about their friend’s safety on a trip.

Interestingly, it is easy to notice that Taiqing’s poems on painting and traveling are closely related. On many occasions she experienced a journey through her imagination while inscribing a painting; she also painted what she saw and heard during her travel. When she is enjoying a painting, especially a landscape painting, the beauty of Nature seems to invite her out; and it is common for her to have a spiritual journey while she is looking at pictures. When facing the “green peaks and thin rain” in a painting, she speaks out her aspiration, “When can I realize the cloud-approaching aspiration? Stand alone the summit of mountains.” Apparently she hopes to practice what Du Fu says “One day I shall definitely climb to the summit; To dwarf all the surrounding mountains” and what Wang Anshi says “I have no fear

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141 Du Fu, “Looking at Mountain Tai,” in Quan Tang shi, 7:2253.
that floating clouds may blur my eyes, For I am standing on the topmost storey."\textsuperscript{142}

Taiqing has realized this dream, and the poem "On the 27\textsuperscript{th} of the Second Lunar Month, Reaching the Summit of Mountains behind Pure Breeze Pavilion in the Northwest" (廿七登清風閣後西北最高峰頂) records the moment:

\begin{align*}
\text{Step to the highest mountain peak,} & \quad \text{步上最高峰,} \\
\text{A small path leads to overhanging rocks.} & \quad \text{巉巖小徑通,} \\
\text{Strange birds are flying under dark cliffs.} & \quad \text{陰崖飛異鳥,} \\
\text{The honest servant walks by the precipice.} & \quad \text{絕壁走憨童.} \\
\text{The mountain opens wide in southeast,} & \quad \text{山豁東南闊,} \\
\text{Flowers bloomed in northwest.} & \quad \text{花光西北豐.} \\
\text{Ascending up: world sinks below;} & \quad \text{登臨渺下界,} \\
\text{I can see the sky on all sides!} & \quad \text{目斷四天空.}
\end{align*}

Taiqing ascended to the summit through narrow paths, stood before the summit, and surveyed all things below. On the top of the mountain, she saw overhanging rocks, cliffs, strange birds, and precipice. A close observation of those things usually inaccessible to women excited her; she could see things from all directions, with a great view of the sky and the open area below.

Through traveling, Taiqing acquired various experience and temporarily escaped from daily routines. As compared with men, women poets had limited experiences and writing resources. Traveling was especially meaningful and important to Taiqing and her contemporary poetesses. It provided a good opportunity for them to step out of their narrow boudoirs, gather together and gain inspiration from the natural world for creating poems, paintings and other artistic formats.

Aside from traveling, painting was Taiqing’s another interest, and she excelled at painting inscriptions. Taiqing wrote in her poem “Birthday,” “I write down some lines of verse when coming across a fine landscape, and paint facing beautiful twigs of flowers.”\textsuperscript{143} (遇佳山水留詩句，對好花枝費筆尖.) Nurtured by the literary


\textsuperscript{143}Underneath this poem, Taiqing noted herself that she likes climbing and knows something about painting. See Zhang Zhang, \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}, 85.
atmosphere of Rongwang Mansion, Taiqing’s gifts and talents were fully exploited with the help of her talented husband. Yihui said in his poem: “Fine wood grows well both in the south and the north, you’re suitable for painting while I’m fit for verses.”¹⁴⁴ (嘉木南宜北也宜，卿宜為畫我宜詩.) Later, Taiqing’s fame at verses and paintings spread, and royal members, imperial clansmen, dukes, ministers and her female friends all came to request paintings.¹⁴⁵

Like Wang Wei, who is famous for picturesque poetry, she wrote many excellent inscriptions filled with picturesque beauty. Though we cannot see those original paintings, we can visualize those vivid and exquisite paintings after reading Taiqing’s wonderful descriptions.¹⁴⁶

A large number of Taiqing’s excellent lyrics are scroll inscriptions, and it indicates that inscribing for paintings is a way for women to broaden their artistic arena. Evidence can be easily found in Taiqing’s poems. Taking one of Yunlin’s paintings as an example, Shen Shanbao wrote “Inscribed for the Painting Lake Moonlight Pervades a Cither by Yunlin” and Wu Zao composed Tall Balcony “Sister Yunlin Asked Me to Write for Her Painting Lake Moonlight Pervades a Cither.” To these women sometimes a painting, especially their own works, can be a good theme to write poems about. As women poetesses have limited experiences and writing sources, these paintings are doubtlessly welcomed, not only for their potential and value as a writing topic, but also for the fact that these paintings themselves trigger various mood and feelings among the audience. While these talented women enjoy the act of inscribing for the paintings, they also experience a tremendous spiritual journey.

¹⁴⁴ Yihui, “Two Quatrains Inscribed for Paintings by Taiqing.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 566.
¹⁴⁵ Unfortunately, except her self-portrait, only one painting was passed down. It was painted to recall the apricot blossom by the ferry in Southern Valley in 1837, and a lyric, Swallow Returning to the Roof Beam, was written on it.
¹⁴⁶ Tao Qiuying, Zhongguo funü yu wenxue (Shanghai: Beixin shuju, 1933), 242.
It is common for women to travel in dreams or embark upon a spiritual journey while appreciating paintings or other literary works, by roaming boundlessly in unbridled imagination. To those women staying back behind doors, it was an essential way for them to learn more about Nature and other new experiences. In The Tallest Tower “Inscribed on Landscape Paintings by Qian Yuanchang” (最高樓: 題錢元昌山水) Taiqing places herself into the picture and writes out the particular feeling in the scene:

The deep forest and thick leaves veiled paths,  林深葉密不知路,
In distant mountain and cold weather, one can’t bear the chill. 山深日冷不禁寒.

To a certain extent these spiritual tours allow them to temporarily transcend reality and experience something fresh and exciting.

In conclusion, these poems may not be very exquisite, but faithfully trace Taiqing’s daily life. She kept a diary of her family life, traveling experiences, communications with friends, her sorrows and happiness, as well as those trivialities which occurred in her life. Even though the artistic achievement of these poems as a whole is not very significant, her poems display a wide scope of the world around her and present a woman’s true and honest heart.
Chapter 5. Taiqing’s Ci Poems

Taiqing wrote shi, ci, and a novel in her lifetime, but won fame mostly as a lyricist. Her lyrics achieved great success, just as Yu Biyun said, “There are three distinguished boudoir lyricists in the Qing Dynasty. Xiangpin (Xu Can 徐燦 1617?-1698?) emerged early; Gu Taiqing and Wu Zao (吳藻 1799-1862) carried forward the success later on. They are absolutely the most famous women in lyric circles.” Kuang Zhouyi remarks on Manchu ci writers in the Qing Dynasty: “Someone once said ‘among men the most successful is Cheng Rongruo, among women is Taiqing Chun.’” Her lyrics are believed to be as good as Nalan Xingde’s (納蘭性德 1655-1685). This chapter will focus on the artistic characteristics of Taiqing’s ci poetry.

Kuang wrote the preface for Taiqing’s ci anthology Donghai yuge and said, “Taiqing benefited a lot from her study of Zhou Bangyan (周邦彥 1056-1121) and Jiang Kui (姜夔 1155-1221); her lyrics are steady and composed, neither over-ornate nor hasty, completely the style of Song lyricists. Maybe she never read post-Song lyrics, so her works are not slim or gaudy (xiányan, 繡艷) at all.” It is indeed a pertinent comment. On the one hand, her lyrics are filled with pure and chilly (qingleng, 清冷) images, and she likes employing these images to create pure and cool poetic realms which resembles an immortal’s world. Just as she wrote in her lines, “A flying jade lives in the pure and cool world,” writing cold rhymes with a celestial brush. On the other hand, she applied a large number of blurry images to build up a cool and dimly blurred realm. Like the mystery that mists Taiqing’s life, the poetic realms she has created are usually hazy and dimly discernible.

150 The name of an immortal maiden from “The Inner Biography of Emperor Wu of the Han.” Later it refers to a female celestial in the general sense.
These two distinctive features mainly contribute to the unique characteristics of Taiqing’s poetry.

**Chilly, Pure and Cold Imagery and Poetic Realms in Taiqing’s Lyrics**

Women love flowers by nature, and flowers are a common theme in boudoir lyrics. Their delicacy, gorgeousness, weakness, fragility and short period of flowering all win sympathy from women. There are many songs on flowers in *Donghai yuge*; however, these flowers are generally chilly and cold ones, such as mume, osmanthus, narcissus, pear blossom, gardenia, white crab-blossom and so on. Her love for flowers can be read between lines, and she likes to describe them with “icy poise” (*bingzi*, 冰姿) which demonstrates a pure, lofty and refined gesture, as in:

- Icy poise differs from ordinary flowers. 冰姿不共凡葩.
- Shining on flowing water, pure-heart expressing itself. 照流水, 清心自誇.
- Cold flower colors, 冷淡花光,
- Dimly blurred moon shadows, 朦朧月影,
- Whose is this deep courtyard? 深院誰家.

A light gauzy round fan limns icy poise. 輕羅團扇寫冰姿,
Why bother to put on powder and rouge? 何勞膩粉施.

- Adding charm, 增嫵媚,
- On two branches dwell tearful eyes. 二枝凝淚眼,
- Loving these elegant icy poises, 愛冰姿綽約,
- I take pains to produce this poem. 特費清吟.

- A little pavilion in cold night, with moon shadows moving. 小樓夜涼月影移.
- Short screen, cold quilt, late dream. 短屏山, 衾冷夢遲.
- The deep heavenly abode protects the icy poise. 洞天深處護冰姿.
- Bees don’t know, butterflies don’t know. 蜂不知, 蝶不知.

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Aside from icy poise, the flowers above share many common qualities: plain and clear colors, subtle and faint fragrance, icy soul and snowy spirit, as well as lofty and pure disposition. Women are conventionally compared to flowers in Chinese literature, and flowers normally mirror the authors’ self-images. The flowers they love, in some way, reflect their own characters. In Taiqing’s lyrics, flowers and human are often merged both in appearance and spirit, as in:

Puff by puff, a gentle breeze blowing on aromas.  
Both figure and flowers are clear and pure:  
Thin silk clothes, not allowing dust to stain.  
Sitting on a rock, facing the fragrant islet.  

Here, flowers are endowed with human nature; the lotus and beauty are so naturally merged that it is hard to distinguish one from the other. Taiqing loves crab-apple blossoms best—in particular the white crab-apple flowers. To Taiqing, crab-apple blossom best represents the delicate, beautiful and unadorned appearance of women; in some sense, the blossom is a portrayal of herself. Like a pretty woman, the beautiful crab-apple blossoms are deeply hidden in a heavenly grotto, wearing light make-up and never chasing the popular fashion.

Tune: Recalling Qin Lady “On White Crab-apple Blossoms” 惆秦娥: 白海棠

Spring is getting late,  
A tree-full of green shade and drizzling rain.  
Drizzling rain,  
Crab-apple flowers blossom, extremely pale but elegant.

Fairy-like in steps treading the waves;  
Gracefully, fearing the jealousy of the east wind.  
Jealousy of the east wind.  
Ice and snow on every bough, thin mist and light fog.

155 Gu Taiqing, Celebrating the New Cool “Inscribed for the Painting Deep Bamboos and Cool Lotus.”
See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 296.
Taiqing successfully sketches the poise of crab-apple blossoms with a few strokes. There are only two colors in this lyric: green and white, so the whole picture is visually quiet and plain in color. In the first stanza, green shades and the drizzling rain are both dimly blurred images, and the crab-apple blossoms are foregrounded by this blurry backdrop. The second stanza focuses on the blossoms’ beauty. “Ice and snow” echoes with “pale but elegant” in Stanza One; “thin mist and light fog” corresponds to the shades and rain. Taiqing sketched a scene not tainted with earthly flavor and fully unveiled the beauty of the white crab-apple blossoms. She likes them for their elegance and exquisiteness which cannot be found in vulgar ones. Taiqing loved this flower the best, and wrote over ten lyrics to limn its appearance and temperament. She composed songs for white crab-apple blossoms, autumn crab-apple blossoms, crab-apple blossoms in the rain, crab-apple blossoms east of the wall, and inscribed on her own crab-apple painting to display their various poses.

Along with these icy flowers, the images of wave-treading fairies, flying beauties in sky and Chang’e in the Moon Palace abound in Taiqing’s lyrics. Her beauties have ethereal bearing, graceful poise and ice-jade spirit. These women resemble the Guye shenren (姑射神人) in an otherworldly disposition. The pure and icy narcissus is always called the wave-treading fairy and her lyric on it reads:

Tune: Quelling Windswept Waves “On Narcissus”

Green ribbons drooping, clouds condensed.  
On a jade plate pure dew pours out golden essence.  
Especially when, late at night, all have gone to bed.  
They shine—
A window-full of cool moonlight shining on graceful limbs.

Clouds cleared up, vast sky over the river, with better fragrance.

Zhuangzi writes in “Free and Easy Wandering,” “There is a Holy Man living on faraway Ku-she Mountain, with skin like ice or snow, and gentle and shy like a young girl. He doesn’t eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas.” Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, 27.
Dim and hazy.
Wave-treader, hard to recall the sound of your jade pendants.

A pillow-full of wandering immortals, light as floss:
No trace.
A dreaming soul hopelessly circles several green peaks.

Stanza One concentrates on narcissus’ looks and the echo between the flower and the moon on a quiet night. The narcissus in reality also gets echoed by the unsullied fairy in the dream within Stanza Two. The dream and reality are merged together, allowing this poetic realm to partake from both truth and illusion.

In addition, Taiqing’s lyric *The First Branch in Fall Wind* “On Osmanthus” depicts a lightly made-up fairy listening to pure music on a cool night with osmanthus scents floating everywhere. And in *Numerous Beauties* “Inscribed on the Woman Scholar Ms. Wen Xiujun’s Painting *Flowers’ Reunion,*” Taiqing compares women scholars to immortals from Pistil Palace, who are enjoying a make-up competition in the Flower Country; while in *Jade Across Branches* “On the Lantern Festival, Pingshan’s Birthday, I visited Kanxi House…” she again views white peony as a Pistil Palace fairy just coming down from Jasper Lake. The beauty also has a graceful quality by nature and does not need to rely on make-up. Taiqing is so attached to the fairy that she worries that it may fly back to the sky on a phoenix.

The cold flowers, icy pistils and beautiful flying fairies echo each other in her lyrics, forming a unique constellation of images.

Another group of images frequently emerging in Taiqing’s lyrics are the moon, dew, frost and a lonely lamp, by which she builds up pure, quiet and cold poetic realms. In *Song of Gold Thread* “Inscribed for Liu Jixiang’s Crab-apple Nest Ballads” Taiqing comments on others’ lyrics as “Piling up snow and cutting ice to write excellent lyrics, not boasting flowers or chewing pistils,” (疊雪裁冰詞絕妙，不共吹花嚼蕊.) which expresses her esthetic preference for pure and chilly lyrics. “Pile up snow and cut ice” refers to application of plain and pure language to weaken any tint
of sensuous romance and to create a cold and refined realm. As the moon, dew, frost and lone lamp are all pure and cold images, they are widely used in Taiqing’s works. Take “the moon” for example, in Donghai yuge, this image appears in sixty to seventy percent of her lyrics, which indicates her preference for it. She has fully expressed her love for the moon in her lyrics, as in:

Tune: Fond of the Moonlight, I Sleep Very Late “The Original Meaning”

愛月夜眠遲: 本意

Tree shadows dimly blurred. 樹影朦朧,
Gazing at the “little toad” just surging out. 望小蟾乍湧,
I stand in the wutong tree shadows. 人立桐陰.
By grass roots insects sing; 草根蟲語,
Wetting clothes, dew falls; 沾衣露下,
Pair on pair of sound-asleep birds. 雙雙睡穩胎禽.
Plantain leaves screen the red lamp, 芭蕉掩卻紅燈,
On city streets night colors deepen dark. 天街夜色深沈.
In whose house now, 又誰家,
Sound after sound, 一聲聲,
Someone unceasingly struck the cold washing-block? 不住敲動寒砧.

Facing the full moon and gentle breeze, 當此月滿風微,
Play icy strings again, 把冰絲再鼓,
Compose music on the jeweled zither. 譜入瑤琴.
Beyond railings, 井欄桿外,
Glimmering unstably, 閃閃不定,
A few fireflies are hard to seek. 螢火幾點難尋.
Pure moonlight stealthily shifts across flowery twigs; 清輝暗轉花梢,
A moment of this precious night worth a thousand in gold. 良宵一刻千金.
I wonder if Chang’e, 想嫦娥,
Just like me, 也如我,
Loves moonlight, heedless of the hour. 愛月不顧更深.

The lyric tune and title tell us that the author goes to sleep late because of her fondness for the moon. Standing alone in tree shadows, she enjoys the moon and

157 Deng Hongmei, Nüxing cishi, 485.
158 See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 256.
159 It is said that there is a toad in the moon in Chinese mythology, thus “toad” and “toad palace” refer to the moon when used in Chinese poetry.
listens to insects chirping in the dusky night. Then she moves indoors from the outside, where she spends the fine night playing the zither and composing poems. The lamp flame indoors echoes with several fireflies outdoors; her figure under the tree and Chang’e in the Moon Palace look at each other from afar. The lyric sets up a misty background with wutong tree shadows and dim moonlight. On this murky canvas Taiqing highlights something bright and shimmering, like crystal-like dew, a red lamp’s flame and twinkling fireflies. This work presents an attractive scene that often occurs in her other lyrics, as in:

Clear clouds in sky,  
Sit on steps in the dew,  
Glossy glistening night.  
A cooling fan,  
A bright moon,  
A sparse wutong.  

Golden wind in pale autumn,  
Dew dimly gives off luster.  
The sky lightens in dark night,  
Hanging a hook of moon.  

Lonely empty courtyard and a moon.  
Lamp flame in the window,  
Sky’s light through the curtains.  

When the moon shines upon the vast world on a silent night, people usually feel lonely and chilly. With moon, dew, frost, snow, mume, bamboo, osmanthus and some other images, she excels at portraying clear and cold pictures, like “moonlight shining upon a lake, cold after snow,” “the endless sky looks as clean as a mirror after rain,” “secret scents on the breeze and flying sylphs by wind in the moonlight.”

The mood in the lyric above is very typical. Here outdoors is portrayed with desolate night and chilly moonlight, accompanied with the indoors framed with a lone figure accompanied by a lamp and her shadow. Such a scene reminds her of the past, making her feel chilly. She has to drink alone on Mid-autumn night—a reunion holiday—in order to dispel her depression. In accordance with the chilly background, Taiqing’s often uses “pure shadow” (qingying, 清影) and “limpid tears” (qinglei, 清淚) to indicate loneliness. Taiqing excels at conveying desolate and lonely emotions by creating clear and cold scenes.

163 It refers to the moon.
164 In a Chinese legend Chang’e stole and ate her husband’s longevity elixir. Chased by her husband, she fled to the moon where she became immortal and was secluded forever. She has been living in Vast-chill Palace ever since then.
In addition, her lyric *Empty Step Song* “On Mid-Autumn” portrays a scene filled with desolation: she listens to the sheng accompanied by the moon, dew and floating clouds. *New Wild Geese Passing by the Dressing Chamber* “Hearing Wild Geese,” too, recounts that she heard wild geese and missed her friends on a frosty cold night. She frequently conveys a cool, cold or chilly feeling in her lyrics that the readers can easily detect.

Taiqing’s fondness for clear and cold images and poetic realms is closely related to her noble and unsullied character, the influence of Daoist thought on her esthetic attitude, and the particular time span of her writing.

Women writings were unprecedentedly prosperous in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and literati of those eras extended the esthetic theory of purity (qing, 清) to talented women. They are inclined to parallel purity with the qualities of women’s poetry. Poetesses in the Ming and Qing times often advocated poetry with qing quality. Wang Duan (汪端 1793-1838) once elaborately discussed the purity of poems; she believed that “poems should not be impure, and above all, should not be dishonest. Purity (qing, 清) is the spirit of poetry.” As for Taiqing, purity plays a leading role in her esthetic perception, and she often evaluates things and people with the standard of purity. Her Daoist name “Taiqing” has already signified her fondness of “qing.” She employs qingli (清麗, elegant and pure) to describe flowers, poetry, and music, qingwan (清婉, pure and graceful) to limn beauties, qingyou (清幽, quietly pure and secluded) to portray paintings, and qingqi (清奇, pure and novel) to praise Wu Zao’s lyrics.

Secondly, Daoist thoughts exerted a significant impact on her esthetic attitudes. Taiqing and her husband both loved Daoism, and they made friends with Daoist priests. I have discussed her religious feelings in Chapter 3, so here I will not go into

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165 A reed pipe wind instrument.
166 Kang-i Sun Chang, “Cong wenxue piping li de ‘jingdian lun’ kan Ming Qing cainü shige de jingdian hua,” in *Yelu: Xingbie yu wenhua* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 213.
168 Taiqing once inscribed on Shen Shanbao’s lyric collection *Hongxuelou ji* (Anthology of Geese-Snow House).
detail. In point of fact, her predilection for the moon is an illustration of her fondness for Daoism, as “in ancient Daoist documents, the moon is an emblem of Dao.” The Moon is extremely cold (yin, 隱) and is traditionally related with the special quality of being desolate and cold (youleng, 幽冷). Furthermore, the image of flying sylphs comes from Daoist thought pertaining to immortals. “The ultimate aim of Daoist religion is to help the followers who practice austerities achieve longevity and become immortal,” thus the consciousness of immortality is deeply rooted in Daoists’ mind and “literary works depicting fairyland reflect their ideal pursuit.” Taiqing never converted to Daoism, and what attracts her is not immortality per se, but the proud attitude of surpassing conventions and freeing oneself from worldly cares, as well as the romantic experience of flying up into the sky as sylph. As discussed in Chapter 1, Taiqing has a strong desire to escape the hubbub of dusty world and pursue a clear and peaceful mind. She also wants to induce other people to long for the immortals’ idle and roaming life by describing cool and pure fairylands.

Finally, the chilly realm is a manifestation of her real feelings. Above all, “chilly” is Taiqing’s physical perception. She generally studies and writes in the evening; as a result, her actual sensations are transmitted into her verses. We have already known Taiqing wrote considerable poems about “sitting up at night” and she often studies or writes poems on peaceful nights when she could immerse herself into her own private world of imagination without distraction from family obligations. Her works with the theme “sitting up at night” and the night scenes that she portrayed presumably depicted what she saw, heard and felt at that time. 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.

In the meanwhile, “chilly” is also Taiqing’s psychological feeling. The “cold” perceptions are the exterior projection of her particular feelings. The pure moonlight

169 Zhan Shichuang, Daojiao wenxueshi (Shanghai: Shanghai wenxue chubanshe, 1992), 323.
170 Qing Xitai, ed., Daojiao yu Zhongguo chuantong wenhua (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1990), 224.
171 Ibid., 226.
helps to strengthen a sense of solitude, and the chilly poetic realms reflect her lonely feelings. Things around her even get infected by her chilly loneliness, and turn icy-cool, as in “Blossoms everywhere around the eastern fence, cold scents wafted away”\(^{172}\) (東籬乍滿冷香飄) and “Cold and gorgeous, a little pond.”\(^{173}\) (冷艷小池塘)

By Taiqing’s time some poetesses had already realized that it was impossible for women to actively participate in society,\(^{174}\) and they received echoes from some male writers;\(^{175}\) but women’s status and living condition could not change completely. As a woman, Taiqing could not put her superb talents to full use; after her husband’s death, her solitude and desire for understanding friends grew even stronger, but her friends were often far away from her. When she felt lonely, the “chilly” sense in her lyrics grew in intensity.

Yan Dichang once commented Taiqing’s lyrics as “free, honest,” and “the charm lies in the spirit.”\(^{176}\) Through Taiqing’s lyrics, one can perceive Taiqing’s spirit and her desire to remain independent and individual. What makes her unique is that she can put aside conventional seasonal laments, depression and sadness, and surmount the self-depression and self-pity which previous poetesses could not dispel and depict herself as a free and elegant flying beauty.\(^{177}\) With her masterly skill at arranging cold images and realms, Taiqing constructed for herself a heavenly “pure and cool world” (qingliang shijie, 清涼世界)\(^{178}\) far away from the hot and dusty human society, and created a unique esthetic realm for her readers.


\(^{173}\)Gu Taiqing, Unforgotten Affection “Inscribed on My Painting Plum and Bamboos.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 235.

\(^{174}\)Yun Zhu, Shen Shanbao, Luo Yilan and some other poetesses all addressed the issue in their preface of their books that it was more difficult for women to write good verses and spread fame. Also many poetesses voiced this kind of opinion.

\(^{175}\)Zhang Hongsheng, Qingdai cixue de jiangou, 183.

\(^{176}\)Yan Dichang, Qing cishi (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1990), 558.

\(^{177}\)Deng Hongmei, Nüxing cishi, 459.

\(^{178}\)Taiqing mentioned the “pure and cool world” three times in her poems, as in Celebrating for the New Cool “Ms Kang Jiemei Asked Me to Inscribe for the Painting Whiling Away the Summer in Banyan
The Dimly Blurred Images and Poetic Realms in Taiqing’s Lyrics

Another hallmark of Taiqing’s lyrics is her predilection for dimly blurred images and hazy, blurry poetic realms.\(^{179}\) Her lyrics are full of green mist, green clouds and shades, red rain (falling flowers), willow mist, shadows of flowers and trees, light smoke, evening mist, thin fog, drizzling rain and so on. She excels in portraying “dimly blurred” scenes to “foreground one clear image, our central focus of attention,”\(^ {180}\) and creating a sense of isolation. Probably related to her knowledge about painting, she excels at “using obscurity to superb effect.”\(^ {181}\) In one poem inscribed on a painting, she limns pear blossoms in the picture in this way:

Ten Poems Inscribed on Painting Album by Zou Xiaoshan, Written with My Husband in the First Lunar Month of the Year Xinmao (1831)
(#1) 辛卯正月同夫子題鄒小山畫冊十首 其一

Faint moonlight envelops insubstantial shadows, 淡月籠虛影.
Gentle breeze blows with furtive scents. 微風度暗香.
So distinct after a light rain, 分明疏雨後.
With tears, they are leaning by the winding railings. 含淚倚回廊.

The first couplet stresses the blurry background featured by light moonlight and illusory shadows. In the second couplet, the brightness and limpidity of “tears” make

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Shades” (賀新涼: 康介眉夫人囑題榕陰消夏圖):

Deep courtyard, idle pool and pavilions. 深院閑池館．
This is immortals’ cool world, 此神仙．清涼世界．
Far away from heat of the dusty world. 熱紅塵遠．

“On the 6\(^{th}\) of the Seventh Lunar Month, Xu Qingshi Invited Us to Visit Chinese Pagoda, so I Harmonized the Poem on the Wall to Celebrate His Birthday” (七月六日許青士三兄招遊龍爪槐，即次壁上韻以為壽):

In a pure and cool world the immortals gather, 清涼世界神仙會．
Please allow me to write a poem to record this. 可許新詩紀一篇．

Wave Washing the Sands “Ice Lantern ” (浪淘沙:冰燈):

A thirteen-story pagoda, 寶塔十三層．
On the tower watch the amazing scene. 樓觀飛驚．
In the pure and cool world dwell the flying immortals. 清涼世界住飛瓊．

\(^{180}\)Ibid., 160.
\(^{181}\)Ibid., 159.
the blossoms jump to the front from the dim background. “Leaning” refers to their pose, and “distinct” (fenming, 分明) again describes the clear and pure appearance of the blossoms. Consequently, one can easily visualize the fresh and white pear blossoms after rain.

Aside from the purpose of foregrounding the central objects, Taiqing skillfully applies dimly blurred images to construct a sense of isolation (ge, 隔). Here “isolation” is not the estrangement of poetry that Wang Guowei discussed in his Prosody of Ci Poet.\(^\text{182}\) In Taiqing’s lyrics, isolation exists in two ways.

Firstly, the substantial obstacles, either as huge as folds of mountains and waters, or as small as red rails, green curtains, windows and screens in her chamber, all become firm obstacles which separate the persona and the missing counterpart. Among many examples, consider:

Knowing each other’s name—we became familiar first.
Hate thousands of folds,
Waters obstruct and clouds veil.\(^\text{183}\)

With eyes filled with autumn scenes,
Annoyingly, who placed these manifold alps and rocks?\(^\text{184}\)

I hate it’s so hard to invite you for good wine.
A big city—
Keeping us as distant as a thousand miles.\(^\text{185}\)

\(^{182}\)According to Wang Guowei, the estrangement (ge) in lyrics means: “From the readers’ perspective, if the scene and feeling the author describes can face toward the reader directly, there is no estrangement; if the scene and feeling cannot face toward the reader directly, the reader has to explore the literal meaning in a round-about way, and maybe still get nothing, that is estrangement. From the poet’s perspective, if one describes scenes and feelings without mixing up other unrelated things in the works, there is no estrangement; if one cannot express the original appearance and has to rely on allusions or other allusive words to present the content, the feeling or scene is veiled by a mist of allusions, and that is estrangement.” See Xu Fuguan, “Shici de chuangzao guocheng jiqi biaoxianxiaoguo,” in Zhongguo wenxue jingshen (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1976), 38.

\(^{183}\)Gu Taiqing, A Cluster of Flowers “Inscribed for Poetry of Fulian Room by Yunlin.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 223.

\(^{184}\)Gu Taiqing, Bells Ringing in the Rain “Harmonizing Rhymes by Liu Yong.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 182.

\(^{185}\)Gu Taiqing, A Twig of Mume Blossoms “Cut Chrysanthemum in the Rain and Send Them to Renlan.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 220.
The east wind is evil,
Deep deep courtyard,
Layer on layer of curtains.\textsuperscript{186}

Spatial obstacles increase the physical distance between the lyricist and her family members or friends. They miss each other, yet they cannot meet or reunite, which causes Taiqing much vexation and complaint.

Tune: \textit{Apricot Blossom Sky} “Yunlin and I Visited the Southern Valley Together, She Went Back First; I Felt So Disappointed and Wrote This Down”

Leaning upon the door in my loft, I watched you go back;
I can’t see the end of the road, deep into the apricot blossoms.

Your carriage shifted away from the path before the mountain;
Annoyingly, it is veiled by drooping willows.

In the seven days,
Together we exchanged poems;
In a hurry,
You returned without looking back.
Though a short separation, it’s hard to express my worries,
We long for each other.

This lyric is written with deep and sincere emotion. Taiqing is reluctant to let Yunlin leave, and with her eyes chasing Yunlin’s carriage, her sorrows of parting grow more and more intense as the distance between them widens. The word “veiled” intensifies their distance, and the word “annoyingly” (\textit{ku}, 苦) delivers her complaints. Drooping willows in this lyric play an antagonistic role, mercilessly screening them off.

Secondly, Taiqing’s dimly blurred scenes also form a type of psychological estrangement, where visual vagueness and haziness reflect her feelings. The real-world obstacles between the lyricist and her friends and family cast a shadow

upon her heart; as a result, things before her eyes are wrapped in a thin veil. The combination of green mist, flower shadows, light smoke and other blurry images envelope her lyric realms in a light, lingering mist. She often writes with a painterly skill to achieve a hazy and blurred sense of beauty.

Tune: *Quelling Windswept Waves* “In Stile Antico”\(^{187}\)

Tower and terrace blossom-wrapped, cannot see for sure.
Green willows block and screen off a figure in the tower.
Who said it’s the held-in sorrows you can’t glimpse?
On whole swath…
Peach blossoms her face in dear, affecting Spring.

Fragrant grasses lush and lovely, the skies far or near.
So hard to ask…
Wherever his horse’s hooves go, they always sear a soul.
I’ve counted every last single flock of homing crows.
Perverse to add…
Dim and dour evening rains—again—as dusk turns dun.

This lyric explores the theme of wifely longings from “Nineteen Ancient Poems.” The way that Taiqing sets up obstacles in this lyric is extremely successful. First, Taiqing imagines that she is the woman in the tower. The first two lines apply green willows to block off the figure in tower and use blossoms to wrap the tower and terrace. Green willows reappear as a barrier. As a result of the “held-in sorrows” and longing, the vague scenes cannot be seen for sure; she perceives an invisible power forcing apart herself and the figure that she misses. In the second stanza, even the crows know to return to the nest; by contrast, the lonely wife still cannot see her husband. At closure, the curtain of darkness, along with the drizzling rain, form two more folds of obstacles, strengthening the emotional distance. Kuang Zhouyi remarks that this lyric “bears a beauty of blurred mist and water.”\(^{188}\) Many lyrics by Taiqing feature this kind of beauty, as in:

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\(^{188}\) See Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 190.
It’s time for flowers to blossom,  正好開花天，
From light and gloomy shade rises up willow mist.  漠漠輕陰飏柳煙.

Blowing willow catkins,  吹柳絮，
Green floss won’t stay,  綠綿不定，
Faint mist and drizzling rain;  淡霧微雨，
Clearing up fading flowers,  掃盡殘紅，
Fallen flowers seem like tears.  落花如淚.

The reoccurrences of dimly blurred images in Taiqing’s lyrics are closely related to the theme she chooses. She likes writing about memories and dreams which are always illusory and hazy, as illustrated in the following example:

Tune: River City Song “Recording a Dream”  江城子: 記夢

Mist envelops the cold water, moonlight envelops the sand;  煙籠寒水月籠沙，
I row a magic raft, to visit the immortals.  泛靈槎，訪仙家．
All along the clear streams, two oars part the mist, paddling;  一路清溪雙槳破煙劃.
Just past the small bridge, scenery changed,  才過小橋風景變，
Under the bright moon, see the plum blossoms!  明月下，見梅花．

Thousands of plum trees, shadows criss-cross.  梅花萬樹影交加，
At mountain’s edge, at water’s edge.  山之涯，水之涯．
Vast still lake and sky, its beauty is always worth praising.  淡蕩湖天韶秀總堪誇．
I want to tour all this fragrant Sea of Snow;  我欲遍遊香雪海，
Startled awake from my dream, curse the calling crows.  驚夢醒，怨啼鴉．

This lyric describes an experience of visiting the immortals in a dream. Mists on water, dim moonlights, and plum tree shadows create an illusory background. Sitting in a

magic boat, the poetess went on a supernatural journey to search for the immortals. The first line is loaned from Du Mu’s famous poem “Stop by Qinhuai River” to construct a blurred realm filled with mist, moonlight and water. The blurry scene is echoed by tree shadows in the second stanza. As this lyric describes a dream, the blurry images and realm highlights the unsubstantial and illusory features of a dream.

The usage of the magic raft here is quite impressive. Firstly, the lightness of the boat fits in with the unsubstantial dream, as dream itself is weightless. The light raft moving on water resembles the movement of a flowing dream. Also, the swiftness and smoothness of the moving boat reveal the poet’s eagerness to see the immortals. The most wonderful word in the first stanza is “parting.” (po, 破) Two small oars and a light boat show that there is no noisy sound, which again matches the peacefulness of a sweet dream. The two oars split the misty screen, which breaks up the static state of being mist-wrapped. By breaking out of the stillness and restraints, the author has gained a chance to move forward freely. As the boat passes by the bridge and plum blossoms come into view, the whole view gets clear and her joy flows uninhibitedly.

In the second stanza, tree shadows echo with the dimly blurred scene in the first stanza to keep the tone unified. At the closure, the cawing crows startle the author awake from a vague dream; the word “startle,” once again, breaks up another kind of obscurity.

Taiqing especially loves the process of moving forward by parting smoke or clouds. Here are some more examples:

With pine as awning, laurel as oars, Parting the clouds to flow.\(^{192}\)

Riding a horse back, step in fragrant mud, Mountain shadow sets in the west, Mandarin ducks fly up, parting the green mist.\(^{193}\)

\(^{191}\)Yuan Xingpei, *Zhongguo shanshui shixuan*, 128.


Playing a fisher’s flute from time to time,
Wild geese have just flown in a line,
The light boat advances by dashing through smoke.194

Here, clouds, mist or smoke forms a comparatively static state of visual confinement, and the “parting” (po, 破) and “dashing through” (chong, 衝) surpass obstacles and generate a perception of freedom and breakthrough. The use of one word renders the whole lyric vigorous and dynamic.

In harmony with the dimly blurred scenes, the words “vague and hazy” (yixi, 依稀) are widely used,195 as in:

Remember trimming candles in a mountain tower, 　　記得剪燭山樓，
Watching flowers in an ancient temple; 　　看花古寺，
Turn back in a dream, vague and hazy (yixi).196 　　回首夢依稀。

Remember the grass approaching to the sky, 　　記草色連天，
Flowers are like fog, 　　花光似霧，
Traveling in the past remains fresh in my memory.197 　　歷歷前遊。

Point to the village and see, vague and hazy: 　　指點前村依稀見，
Wild fire and lone lamp shine on each other.198 　　野火孤燈相映。

Traveling in the past, vague and hazy; 　　恍惚舊遊，
Return to where the winding path lies.199 　　依稀重到，曲徑斜臨。

the Way Home, We Passed by Ci Stream and Saw Numerous Mandarin Ducks. I Created This Short Lyric on Horseback.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 211.

194 Gu Taiqing, A Hundred Words’ Song “Inscribed on the Painting Twenty-four Mountains on Golden Walls by Li Sheng.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 217.


196 Gu Taiqing, Spring of Longevity House “Late Spring.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 248.


198 Gu Taiqing, Buying Wine with Marten Coat “Inscribed on a Fan with the Couplet: ‘The cock crows, the moon over a thatched cottage; Someone’s tracks in the frost on a wooden bridge.’” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 248.

There is a figure’s face, 有人面，
Vague and hazy, like the one from the past. 依稀似舊年。

All these “yixi” express a sense of uncertainty, which is a characteristic of memories and dreams. Taiqing also creates blurry realms in her shi poems to describe memories. The poem “On a Summer Day Boating in the East of the City, Written after Coming Back” expresses a kind of isolation caused by remoteness in time. The first couplet is: “For thirty years I didn’t go to the east of the city; Clouds and water are hazy and misty, approaching the far-off sky.” (卅年不到城東去，雲水空蒙接遠天.) The last couplet reads “Sobered up by the blowing wind all the way; Watching west, I saw the city screened by heavy smoke.” (一路薰風吹酒醒，重城西望隔蒼煙.) Here, the blurry scene conforms to her vague memories. She is trying to search for the traces of a memory from thirty years ago while facing the present-day scene before her eyes.

Visiting Tianxi Prosperous Fortune Palace in the West of the City in the Eighth Lunar Month of the Year Wuzi (1828) 戊子八月雨中遊城西天禧昌運宮廢址

Green misty foliage, yellow bean leaves; 煙葉青青豆葉黃,
Buckwheat in the rain seems like condensed snow and frost. 雨中蕎麥凝雪霜.
By a wild river, clover flowers are brilliantly colorful; 野水蘋花自采采,
The empty pavilion and old trees are deep green. 虛亭老樹更蒼蒼.
Across the river appear green tiles, vague and hazy; 隔岸依稀露碧瓦,
Beyond the bridge dilapidated red walls pile up. 過橋斷絕堆紅墻.
The face of Buddha cannot be recognized, 諸天法象人不出,
The War God’s Temple is buried deeply in weeds. 荒草深埋真武堂.

This poem begins with misty leaves, rain, snow and frost setting up a dimly blurred background, which is echoed by the “vague and hazy” in the third couplet. The first three couplets create a dusky mood to foreshadow the last couplet: the very temple could no longer be recognized. By depicting the blurry scene and deserted palace, this poem conveys a sense of historical isolation, and her melancholy feelings about Gu Taiqing, Spring in a Pleasure Garden “Harmonizing with My Husband in Peach Blossom Source.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 208.
historical change. In this poem, the adoption of diverse colors is extremely obvious and meaningful. Green, yellow leaves, white smoke, snow and frost, colorful flowers, dark green trees, green titles and red walls are unified within one picture in a depressing tone. These bright colors, especially the red walls and green tiles which are manifestations of past prosperity, stimulate her perception and intensify her sadness for the present desolation.

Other Aspects of Taiqing’s Lyrics

Other than the characteristics previously discussed, Taiqing’s lyrics excel in other aspects. First of all, the language she applies is usually simple, plain, concise, yet very rhythmic and effective.

Tune: *Early Spring Lament “Inscribed on Parasol Shadows and Beautiful Ladies*  
by Ms. Cai Qinghua”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese (Pinyin)</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>清空, 净天空</td>
<td>Clear clouds in sky,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>臺階露坐</td>
<td>Sit on steps in the dews,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>夜色溶溶</td>
<td>Glossy glistening night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>一扇微凉</td>
<td>A cool fan,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>一轮明月</td>
<td>A bright moon,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>一树疏桐</td>
<td>A sparse parasol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>安排肥瘦纖濃</td>
<td>Arrange thin and fat, dark and light;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>費老手</td>
<td>By a masterly hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>傳神特工</td>
<td>Vivid and especially skillful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>紙上豐姿</td>
<td>Charming poise on the paper,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>畫中態度</td>
<td>Expressions in the painting,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>誰個真容</td>
<td>Are whose true appearance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first stanza portrays a fresh and pure scene within a picture with very concise language. The lyricist uses three “a” to form a parallelism and make the tempo quite intense. The second stanza evaluates the painter’s mastery and praises her lifelike drawing with a question at closure. Another example is the lines “Red is suitable, white is suitable” (红也宜，白也宜) and “Bees don’t know; butterflies don’t know”
The repetition and parallelism add much charm and flavor.

Secondly, Taiqing’s lyrics feature diverse artistic styles. Before the Qing dynasty, what women wrote in their lyrics seldom transcended the boudoir, and their style was rather monotonous. Qing women’s lyric styles became more diverse, which can be attributed to their enriched social life, broader minds, and women’s awakened consciousness to create works of art. In Taiqing’s lyrics, she excels at building artistic realms which are as integral and indivisible (huncheng, 渾成) as those of Yan Shu (晏殊 991-1055) and Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修 1007-1072). Kuang Zhouyi assumes that lyrics by Nalan Xingde are more exquisite and elegant than those by Taiqing; yet as to style, he is inferior to Taiqing. The accomplishment of her lyrics rests on her artistic style, not on any separate word or line. Xia Weiming also says that “many boudoir lyrics in the Qing are excellent but too delicate and weak (xianruo, 纖弱). Lyrics with a bold and vigorous style as those by Taiqing are rather rare.” In fact, Taiqing’s bold and unrestrained lyrics within her anthology demonstrate elements of masculinity.

Tune: The Water Tune Song “Harmonizing Rhymes in Lyrics of Bamboo Slope by Zhou Zizhi” 水調歌頭: 和周紫芝<竹坡詞>

Driving rain beats against rocks in the gully, 急雨響巖壑,
Trees in the wood turn dimly dark. 林木暗濛濛.
The wind sweeps through the mountain tower on all sides, 山樓四面風滿,
A streak of red lightning. 一線電光紅.
After rain the endless sky washed clear; 雨過長天如洗,
Dispelling all that bothersome summer heat, 收盡無邊煩暑,
Moist air glossing the high peaks. 潤氣潤高峰.
Sit facing the moon over Eastern Mountain, 坐對東山月,
Pure shadows cast into my cup. 清影落懷中.

Lu Xingji, Gu Taiqing ci xinshi jiping, 52.
Zhang Hongsheng, Qingdai cixue de jiangou, 171.
Kuang Zhouyi’s comment. See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 333.
Invite the bright moon,
To drink choice wine,
With the old mountain man.  
Why not talk and laugh:
Just sing and dance at ease among the bottles.
Growing old, my mood remains as ever,
Don’t waste the precious night and lovely scene:
Departing days cannot be kept back.
Where wind and moon can’t reach,
Heaven and earth the same, from ancient to present.

This lyric begins with a grand view of an enormous storm with pouring rain, sweeping wind and flashing lightning. The scene suddenly turns calm and clear, after all the swiftness and violence. She unifies two poetic realms in one stanza and presents the readers with a distinctive esthetic experience. In Stanza Two the lyricist recalls lines from “Drinking Alone under the Moon” by Li Bai, “Raise up my cup to invite the moon; With my shadow, forming three figures.” Taiqing turns Li Bai’s “three figures”—the author, his shadow and the moon—into “the author, the moon, and the Eastern Mountain.” The mountain is considered an old man, and in this way, she eliminates the solitude of drinking with her own shadow. She thinks that people have no need to grieve for the past; they should enjoy present happiness and grasp life in front of them. This bold-styled lyric demonstrates her broad mind and unrestrained character.

Tune: Drinking Fire “On the Day after Waking of Insects in the Year Jihai (the 6th of the third lunar month, 1839), I Visited Yunlin in Snow. When I Came Back, the Snow Had Fallen Deep, so I Composed This Little Lyric by Lamplight”

After long separation, affection is still warm;
With deep friendship, the words come even faster.

206 Mountain Man refers to Shan Jian (山简 253-312) from the Jin dynasty. Shan Jian loved drinking, according to A New Account of Tales of the World, his contemporaries made up a song for him: “Once the Mountain Man (Shan gong, 山公) gets drunk, he heads for Gaoyang Pool directly.” See Yu Jiaxi, Shishuo xinyu jianshu, 866. Later, “drunken Mountain Man” was often used to depict the natural and unrestrained poise of a drunken person.

207 Li Bai, “Drinking Alone under the Moon,” in Quan Tang shi, 6:1853
My friend keeps me for some fragrant brew.  
Already time for you to rest,  
Window shadows approaching dusk.  

East wind caresses the cheeks—cold;  
All over the sky spring snow falls whirling.  
Returning drunk: who’s afraid the city gate will shut.  
All the way—jeweled glitter;  
All the way—covering cart-tracks.  
All the way—far hills and nearby trees;  
Decorating a world in jade.

The highlight of this lyric lies in the last lines. The three lines all start with “all the way” to form a parallel structure and transforms from two syllables, then to three syllables, and finally to four syllables, forcing the tempo and strengthens the tone, in conformity with her state of drunkenness.

Also in the lyric Slow Song of Magnolia Flower “Harmonizing Rhymes in Lyrics of Yu Lake by Zhang Xiaoxiang” (木蘭花慢：和張孝祥 “於湖詞”), Taiqing writes:

Body and heart roam free beyond worldly things;  
Boundless deep green waves,  
Floating away all grief past and present.  
Stand alone on the summit of Lotus Peak,  
Looking down at nine flecks—the Nine States.

Here she stands on a summit and takes in the world below at a glance, conveying a broad mind. She preserves a grand view of the past and present and tries to treat the world with objective detachment. Furthermore, she attempts to seek spiritual freedom

208 This line recalls the chapter “Free and Easy Wandering” by Zhuangzi.
209 The Nine States refers to the nine administrative divisions of China in remote antiquity.
like Zhuangzi. Her *Candle Rays Shiver Red* “Hear Pear Garden Eunuch Chen Jinchao Play the Cither” presents forty years of historical change and conveys solemn and stirring feelings in mournful tone by describing a palace entertainment through a eunuch’s perspective.

All these lyrics show her profound reflection and keen insights on history and personal fate. Taiqing’s unaffected bold and liberated character, along with the recognition of her own superb talents, make her superior to other women lyricists in constructing bold and vigorous poetic realms.

Nevertheless, most of Taiqing’s lyrics are composed in a gentler style, conveying her boudoir longings, laments, love for her family and friends, and her appreciation of other art forms, such as others’ writings, paintings, music, and so on.

Tune: *Flight of Frosty Leaves* “Harmonizing Rhymes by Zhou Bangyan”\(^{210}\)

霜葉飛: 和周邦彥 <片玉詞>

Lush and lovely fragrant grass;  婆娑芳草．
Beyond an open forest.  疏林外．
Lunar splendor first climbs above the trees.  月華初上林表．
Broken bridge, flowing water, dusky mists grow dim;  斷橋流水暮煙昏．
Just now: as night cools, folk quiet down.  正夜涼人悄．
By sands’ margin, a chilly cicada meanders its way.  有沙際，寒蛩自曉．
Twinkling stars: a few drifting glowworms—tiny.  星星三五流螢小．
See: silvery dews up into sky’s void,  見白露橫空．
How then to face;  那更對．
Lone lamp’ flame, pea-shrunken,  孤燈如豆．
Clear rays shining down upon…?  清影相照．

In last night’s dream, so vividly distinct,  昨夜夢裏分明．
I followed sojourning geese afar.  遠隨征雁．
A thousand leagues remote, too hard to reach.  迢遞千裏難到．
How many folds of alp is the west wind blowing past?  西風吹過幾重山．
Long for: a bosom friend’s fond embrace.  惆故人懷抱．
Imagine hedge-side yellow flowers, blooms all done.  想籬落，黃花開了．
Before the cups: who will sing a mournful melody?  尊前誰唱淒涼調？
Please think of me,  應念我．
Where feelings freeze,  凝情處．

Listening to the wind and rain,  
Filling with how much rancor?  

Stanza One presents a picture of a clear and cold fall night. The moonlight and white dew shine on each other, and stars over the sky are accompanied by flying glowworms. However, the author is sitting by herself in the room with a lone lamp. The moon and dew, stars and glowworms form couples and echo with one another, while she cannot receive any response from the lamp. This contrast conveys her loneliness and reminds her of friends far away. Stanza Two concentrates on her longing for her friends. She hopes to fly to her friend on goose-back in a dream, but it is too far to reach her. Her efforts fail, so she hopes that her friend will think of her in return.

In boudoir lyrics, women writers sometimes express their complaint or resentment to curtains, because they serve as ruthless blocks or barriers to separate them from the outside world and their lovers. However, Taiqing shifts her perspective and shows distinctive attitudes toward curtains, as she does not considered herself as “imprisoned” in a cage, deprived of freedom. We do not see much description about loneliness and emptiness in her boudoir, as she seems quite satisfied to spend her time in her private room, and she enjoyed the state of being protected from the outside world.

Tune: Pearlsewn Curtains “Idem”

Hazy blurred, not letting thru the slanting light.  
Toss an uneven swath of silken ripples—wrinkly.  
Idled to death on a little silver hook,  
Left to endure this vexing, endless day.  
Done watching every last fallen flower and flying floss;  
So let oriole cries from whenever lightly filter down.  
As before…  
This lovely scene and fine morning hours,  
These, too, we can withstand.

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211McCraw, Women and Old Chinese Poetry, 164.
How much of bitter rain and sour wind,
Blocks: roving bees cannot invade,
Sunlit floss can hardly tease.
Clouds darken, my veiled room deepens;
Listen to pulley’s haul by silvery well.
Screened beyond a ruddy lamp, beyond flower shadows,
Chill dews fall; incense throngs over a golden beast.
Yet again…
When moonlight’s cast on drifting saffron,
When nighttime’s growing cool.

The main function of beaded blinds is for “blocking,” and it seems that the pearl blinds successfully separate the outside world from her inner boudoir. The first line reveals that the use of the beaded curtains is brought into full play as even the sunray cannot get in, implying that the person behind the curtains is completely separated from the world outside. This line echoes with the “sunlit floss” (qingsi 晴絲, which is a homonym of 情絲 (lingering affection) and 情思 (affection, sentiment) in Stanza Two, which is another element that is blocked from entering her room. The second stanza praises the beaded blinds for protecting her. They keep bitter rain, sour wind and roving bees out of the room, and make her undisturbed. In an isolated room the idle time is considered as “fine morning hours,” and she enjoys the free and peaceful state. Taiqing cast off feelings of loneliness, desolation or misery, and instead of being seen as pathetic and pitiable, she appreciated the quietness and isolation from the outside world. There seems to be a dynamic conflict between the external and internal elements in this poem. In this lyric she created an extremely feminine inner quarter for women. The outside world is represented by sunlight, bitter rain, sour wind, roving bees and sunlit floss, while the inner chamber is featured by a dark and deep room. The negative verbs “not allowed,” “not enter,” and “hard to linger or stay” demonstrate the failure of the attempted invasion from outside force into the inside realm. From this lyric we can see that women deep in boudoir did not always complain about their quiet and closed life; sometimes they enjoyed and appreciated the simple and idle life.
Women poets are generally sensitive and careful, and they can often grasp beauty in the twinkling of an eye and present distinctive and exquisite descriptions from a woman’s perspective. Taiqing shows masterly skill in depicting transient scenes in lyrics. As in Song of Gold Thread “Harmonizing Lyrics of Dreamy Window by Wu Wenying,” Taiqing writes: “Morning mist is rolled up, the world turns distinct.” The word “roll up,” \((\text{lian, 斂})\) is extremely brilliant, illuminating the gradual change in vision when fog fades away. The sensation from obliqueness to clearness also releases a feeling of liberation. Another example is “Countless spots, tiny golden balls,”\(^{212}\) with only several words, she vividly portrayed the visual effect of watching the lamp flame with tearful eyes.

The last aspect of Taiqing’s lyrics which should be mentioned is that Taiqing started writing lyrics by studying traditional canons; therefore, she naturally inlays her lyrics with whole old verse lines or borrows images and realms from literary ancestors. Taiqing creates familiar, yet unique poetic worlds abundant with these traditional images and realms.

Tune: *A Twig of Mume Blossom* “Hearing the News that Yunjiang Has Crossed the Yellow River”

I heard that you have crossed the Yellow River on your way; 北有淮南，
North of Yangtze River and south of Huai, 時雨浪浪。
It is raining heavily. 錦書春信遠相將，
Beautiful letters and spring messages come to you and me, 嗟我懷人，
I’m sighing: 真彼周行。
My dear lover is away on the Zhou road. 

Green mountains on both banks of the river, a traveler’s dream prolongs...

A thousand-mile longing—
Always hard to forget every single day.
Green willows by city walls approach Thunder Pool.
Where can she be seen?
Beyond the stream.

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\(^{212}\)Gu Taiqing, *Conductus of Brahman Watching the Moon* “Walking in the Moon on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of the Seventh Lunar Month.” See Zhang Zhang, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, 201.
In Stanza One the closure uses the lines from “Juan’er” (Songs Collected South of the Capital) from the Book of Songs to tell that the person she is longing for is delayed on her way, and the closure of Stanza Two depends on lines from “Jianjia” (Songs Collected in Qin, Modern Shaanxi) to express her deep yearning for Yunjiang. Lines conveying love between men and women are applied to the feelings between two women friends. And in “When it grows into a shade and bears fruits, please think of the planter,” (Transcendent Who Presides over the River “Planting Crab-apple Trees the Day before Pure Brightness) the second line recalls Liu Kezhuang’s Transcendent Who Presides over the River “Growing Flowers in a County Garden.”

Taiqing also transformed old verses into her own form, which “demonstrates her mastery of old verse models.”213 She reworks Li Bai’s line “Playing a jade flute in Yellow Crane Tower”214 and Cui Hao’s (崔顥 704-754) “The transcendent has already left by a yellow crane,”215 and converts them into a witty and unique lyric.

Tune: Cangwu Song

Listen!
Three or two sounds in Yellow Crane Tower.
The immortal has already gone,
Heaven and earth turn green.

听，
黄鹤楼中兩三聲.
仙人去，
天地有餘青.

In conclusion, Taiqing received much recognition as a successful lyricist. Like an immortal who lives in a pure and cool world, she wrote hundreds of beautiful lyrics with a magic brush. Her talents and skills in literature are fully unfolded in this genre. She illuminates her knowledge of women’s existence and contributes to enhancing the artistic achievement of women’s lyrics.216

214 Li Bai, “Drink with Shi Langzhong, Listening to the Flute from the Yellow Crane Tower,” in Quan Tang shi, 6:1857.
215 Cui Hao, “Yellow Crane Tower.” See Yuan Xingpei, Zhongguo shanshui shixuan, 43.
216 Deng Hongmei, Nüxing cishi, 465.
Chapter 6. The Novel *Honglou meng ying*

*Honglou meng ying* was published in the third year of Guangxu (1877).217 The novel was written by “Yuncha waishi” (雲槎外史 Cloud Raft Immortal), but it is generally acknowledged that Gu Taiqing is the author behind the pen name. Prefaced by Gu Taiqing’s close friend Shen Shanbao, the novel consists of 24 chapters (or 130,000 characters in length).

The novel title itself hints that Taiqing’s story is a *ying* (影, shadow) of the parent work *Honglou meng*, suggesting that the concept of the “shadow” is critical to interpreting this novel. We can see the author’s “shadow” (*yingzi*, 影子, reflection, or traces of her life experience) in this novel. Shadows also serve to summarize Taiqing’s belief that life is illusory in nature, as similarly expressed in her poetry. As mirrors, dreams and shadows are used to convey important concepts for interpreting this novel, the relationship among mirrors, dreams, and shadows, as well as the intense tension between dreams and reality, are the focus of this chapter.

This novel may not be considered a literary masterpiece, but it does add to a better understanding of Taiqing’s writing as a whole, as well as of women’s fictional creation during the late Qing dynasty. Taiqing fictionalized her real experiences and merged her anxieties, expectations, and hopes into this novel. As Widmer points out, “it managed to fictionalize some of Gu’s personal experiences, and it draws on material from the feminine literary culture of her day.”218

It is not difficult to notice Taiqing’s shadow or reflections in this novel. For example, as a descendant of a criminal, Taiqing went through many hardships and had to change her surname in order to marry Yihui. Similarly, the Jia family had their property confiscated at the end of the original story in *Honglou meng*. Like Taiqing, the Jia family became “descendants of criminals.” However Taiqing revived and restored the Jia family to their original status in her story, explaining the reason in

217From Taiqing’s poetry we can know that she created this sequel when she was old and sick, and Shen Shanbao’s encouragement helped her accelerate her writing and finish the writing.

Chapter 5 as follows: “Criminals surely should be punished, but the wise emperor granted a pardon to the Jia family in consideration of their previous achievements and contribution. Jia Zheng inherited the title Duke Rongguo, and the family gradually restored its prosperity.” This rationalization more or less reflected Taiqing’s own hopes. Taiqing’s ancestor was also a political criminal, but was not fortunate enough to receive pardon from the emperor. As a criminal’s descendant, she had to wander around in her youth, go through twists and turns, and experience hardship. Taiqing’s attempts to create a perfect ideal world within the novel could be interpreted as internalized psychological compensation for the setbacks and regrets from her own life.

Like many other sequels to *Honglou meng*, *Honglou meng ying* renders a happy story that aimed to satisfy the expectations of its readers—which can be understood as an aesthetic tendency among Chinese readers. In Taiqing’s *Honglou meng ying* the Rong Mansion is a place full of love and laughter, where success in civil service exam, career advancement, marriage and child birth take place. Taiqing created a harmonious and happy world to make up for the imperfection in her life.

Another example is the perfection of the character Ping’er. Martin Huang states in his book *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation*, that “using female figures to project a male literati author’s anxieties or autobiographical concern is a time-honored convention in traditional Chinese literature.” It is common for Chinese author to use a figure to project the author’s life experience. In Taiqing’s case, we see how she used Ping’er to project her concern and desire in her story. The largest similarity in the marriage situation between real-life Taiqing and fictionalized Ping’er: they are both concubines. After Wang Xifeng died, Ping’er had a son for Jia Lian and was

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219 Almost all the sequels to *Honglou meng* attempt to change the tragedy into a comedy, an approach which was widely reviled by later critics. For instance, Lu Xun criticizes the obsession with a happy ending for the main characters in these sequels in his works. See Lu Xun, “Lun zheng le yan kan,” (On Opening Eyes to See) in *Fen* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1972), 217-23 and Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), 156-57.

elevated to the status of legal wife—all attributed to her merits in everyday life. Taiqing herself was potentially concerned about her own identity as a concubine. If it is regretful to Taiqing, in some sense Ping’er’s experience realized Taiqing’s personal aspiration.

Another kind of “shadow” or “reflection” in this novel is that Taiqing fictionalized much of her own life experience, rendering the novel of some autobiographical value. As Zhang Juling points out, “Taiqing’s own experience is reflected through the description of plants and things in Honglou meng ying.”

Taiqing’s novel is realistic narrative based, and abandoned the non-real life practice commonly seen in other sequels to Honglou meng. Many of the subject matters in her novel are from her own real experience. In reality, Taiqing has experienced the noble life style that was portrayed in her novel.

Taiqing often chanted and wrote poems with her female friends, and founded the Red-Autumn Poetry Society. A large quantity of Taiqing’s poems focuses on her social life with other talented women. With these personal experiences, Taiqing skillfully wrote about women’s literary activities in the Grand View Garden. For example, in Chapter 14, Tanchun invited her sisters to form a poetry society and compete in poem composition. In Chapter 19, Tanchun and her sisters wrote nine poems under the same theme “Relieving winter coldness,” and these poems directly borrowed from the sixth volume of Taiqing’s anthology of Tianyouge ji, without any deviation in word choice. If we compare women’s literary activities in the Grandview Garden with those of Taiqing and her friends, it is obvious that those literary activities in the Grandview Garden are a truthful recounting, or a “mirror,” of Taiqing’s activities with her friends. In Chapter 12, the women in Grandview Garden went out for a spring outing, which echoes with Taiqing’s experience with other talented

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222 Wang Xuchuan, Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushu yanjiu (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2004), 330.
women. As Widmer noticed, “The cloistered view of the outside world in *Honglou meng ying* can be seen as reflecting the experience of an upper-class woman.”

Taiqing also applies the experience and feelings of being a wife and mother to her writing, making her novel one which explored areas seldom addressed by male writers. Chapters about marriage and child-bearing are among the unique aspects of *Honglou meng ying*. For instance, the detailed description about the moment when Baochai was about to give birth, and about the process by which Ping’er delivered a baby is considered unique.

While Taiqing applied a considerable amount of dream and shadow images in her poetry, she also employed “meng” and “ying” in her novel’s title, which carried rich symbolic meanings. Taiqing also wove the story by playing with the four concepts: mirrors (*jing*, 鏡), realms (*jing*, 境), dreams (*meng*, 夢), and shadows (*ying*, 影). It is necessary and meaningful to examine how she shaped the story through the four concepts, and how these words came into play within the story.

The story begins with a shadow, which in some sense is an echo with the title. In the original story of *Honglou meng*, Baoyu disappeared after finishing the civil exam. At the very beginning of the *Honglou meng ying*, Baoyu returns on stage from snowy shadows (*xue ying*, 雪影): “Suddenly in the blurry shadows of snow, a bald man, barefooted, wearing a red cape, keeled in front of Jia Zheng.” The man turns out to be Baoyu, and then the reason for his disappearance is explained. Baoyu was bewitched by the Daoist priest and the Buddhist monk who gave him the jade in the original story, and was forced to confuse people and swindle money by pretending to be an immortal. By coincidence, Baoyu recognized Jia Zheng’s boat on the way and managed to escape from those swindlers. Afterwards, in an inn where they stayed on their way home, Jia Zheng found a couplet written on the wall perfectly describing Baoyu’s experience:

“The curtain shadows invite people from all over the world, 簾影招來天下士, The rooster’s crow awakened the man in a dream.” 雞聲喚醒夢中人.

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223*Widmer, Beauty and the Book*, 185.
If we visualize this couplet, we can see Baoyu went into some curtain shadows, and came out as an awakened man rising from a dream. Both “shadow” and “dream” symbolize the mysterious experience that Baoyu went through. Jia Zheng interpreted Baoyu’s strange experience as a “dream” where Baoyu lost self-consciousness. As Baoyu was awakened from the dream, he changed much and became a completely different Baoyu. He showed not only emotional maturity and intelligence, but also more sophistication in dealing with governmental duties and domestic responsibilities. He no longer viewed the pursuit of an official career as a shackle on life and experienced less internal struggles with his emotions. Baoyu ultimately would be successful in performing his responsibilities as a loyal official, a filial son, a good husband, and as a father.

While “dream” is used to explain Baoyu’s disappearance and bring him back to reality, dreams are also a means to transcend time and space, in order to fulfill those hopes or wishes that cannot be fulfilled in reality.

While the original *Honglou meng* is wholly structured on a magic, fantastic, and phantasmagoric design much like the mechanism of dreams, the most significant contribution of dream to Taiqing’s story is that it enables Baoyu to reconcile with Daiyu and resolve the tension between them—an issue which has always been difficult to address by sequel writers. Many writers revived Daiyu from death and had her united with Baoyu to dissipate the regret that most readers felt. However, in real life, it is impossible to revive the dead and meet with a deceased relative. Taiqing resolved this challenging problem in a realistic manner, as she did not believe that the real intent of *Honglou meng* was to have Baoyu and Daiyu be together. Here, Taiqing applied “dream” to settle the conflict between the *yin* and *yang* worlds. In Chapter 8, when it was Daiyu’s birthday, Baoyu went to Daiyu’s Xiaoxiang House and held a sacrifice for Daiyu. After the memorial service, Baoyu stays the night, and the story reads:

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Let’s now talk about Baoyu. Though he lied down, he didn’t fall asleep, thinking of the time when Daiyu was still alive. As fair as a flower and the moon, she was always stunningly beautiful whether she elegantly cracked a joke or grumbled coyly...he saw a beauty coming over slowly helped by a maid. After she came in, Baoyu looked at her carefully, it was Daiyu! ...Baoyu said, “You are still annoyed at me!” ...“I didn’t fail to be loyal to your love, it is all because of my parents’ order. Since the time you died, I have been missing you and never forgot you. If you don’t believe me, I can take out my heart and show it to you!” Daiyu said, “I don’t understand any of your words. Since you moved out of the garden, every day I did nothing but play with parrots, appreciated bamboos and enjoyed the pleasure of life.” At this moment, Baoyu seemingly had married Daiyu, and it was their wedding day. He said to Daiyu with a smile, “After several years’ pain, finally we meet today.” He also pondered, “They all said that I have married Baochai, actually I married Daiyu. Looking at her eyes and eyebrows, Baoyu couldn’t help himself, and Daiyu yielded with a show of reluctance.

The next morning Baoyu was woken from the dream by a crowing rooster; however, he could still see Daiyu’s beautiful shadow in quilt and smell the fragrance she left behind. He could not tell whether last night’s experience was a dream or not. Baoyu thought, “If it was a dream, why was everything so clear before my eyes? If it was not a dream, why am I now alone in bed? Anyways, it matters not whether it was a dream or not, as I have fulfilled my wish.”

Through a dream, Taiqing enabled Baoyu and Daiyu to resolve their misunderstanding, and in this way Taiqing addressed the issue that every sequel faced. Daiyu appeared in a dream in which Baoyu could not differentiate between reality and dream, but this opened an opportunity for Baoyu to explain his situation and dispel his

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regret. The combination of “real” and “unreal” leads to an ambiguity about Baoyu’s experience, but the tension between Daiyu and Baoyu was resolved.

Additionally, Wang Xifeng appeared in Jia Lian’s dream to lecture and admonish him to be a good person, and to stay away from the four cardinal vices: alcohol, women, wealth and temper. She also showed up in Ping’er’s dream to express her gratitude as Ping’er good deeds made it possible for Jia Lian to have a son, although Jia Lian did not deserve any.

These dreams are all illusory realms designed to deal with the main characters that died in the original story. It is an echo with the original novel, but more importantly these dreams are always encouraging and enlightening. Baoyu’s dream enables him go on with his life without any guilt, regret or hesitation, and Jia Lian’s dream made him face his own weakness and become a righteous man.\(^{226}\)

In Taiqing’s story, while Baoyu was trying to be a good husband and son, deep in his heart, he never stopped struggling and looking for methods to get rid of vexations. In Chapter 24 Baoyu went to Xichun for help because he “could not find a way to do away with frustrations.” Xichun replied, “Vexations all come from yourself. It’s like a man living in a room; if he keeps the room clean and tidy, and closes the door and windows, no matter what happens outside, he will not be affected. If he has the door and windows open, everything could easily come in.” Xichun’s words recalls Taiqing’s poem below:

In the Eighth Lunar Month, the Year Xinwei of Tongzhi (1871), I Was Recuperating at Southern Valley and Wrote This Poem to Show to My Children\(^{227}\)

Don’t try to tell right from wrong,  
Don’t bring trouble on yourself.  
One should stay away from human world,  
And nurture his heart in deep mountains.  

\(^{226}\) Later in Chapter 23 of Honglou meng ying, Jia Lian gave up a good government position in another part of the country, in consideration of his old parents, and won good reputation as a filial son.\(^{227}\) Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 174.
Both Xichun’s words and Taiqing’s poem went back to Huineng and Shenxiu’s “mirror” metaphor. The “room” Xichun mentioned is another metaphor for one’s heart. To Xichun, the only way to stay away from vexation is to keep one’s heart clean and pure, away from being affected by anything from the external world. Taiqing’s poem expresses the same idea. The mirror metaphor from Buddhist theory exerted a great impact on Taiqing’s philosophy about life, and correspondingly influenced her writings. How one can preserve the purity of heart in the chaotic human world is a theme that this novel tries to explore.

In the original story, mirrors serve as a significant transcendental vehicle for Baoyu to enter into the illusory realm. In Taiqing’s novel, mirrors continue to serve as the pivotal vehicle for Baoyu to transcend into the spiritual world, and a device that connects the earthly and heavenly realms.

Baoyu entered the Land of Illusion through a bronze mirror in the original story, and the Land of Illusion refers to the supernatural world, an actual land of enlightenment. Within the mirror is an enlightened state. In this realm, Baoyu was able to see all the truth behind illusions. By staring at the mirror, Baoyu managed to enter another realm, the “Land of Illusion.” Here, mirrors symbolize transcendence and enlightenment. In the illusory realm, what Baoyu has read and seen is actually “real” and “true.”

Being a “shadow” or counterpart of the mirror in the original story Honglou meng, the mirror in Xichun’s room leads Baoyu to another realm of illusions, and his transcendental experiences took place in a dream-like world. All the elements are united together, and create a powerful ending for Taiqing’s story.

In the last chapter of Honglou meng ying, when Baoyu came to Xichun to seek a way to eliminate vexations, Xichun instructed two maids to carry out a round bronze mirror and put it on the table. The story then reads:

Baoyu sat on the chair, fixed his eyes on the mirror and watched carefully, and then he felt confused and lost. He walked to a place and looked up, it is a white
archway engraved with four characters, “Land of Illusion.” Baoyu said, “I have been here before.”

Baoyu examined the scenery in this garden and faintly heard the wind chimes. It was better for him not to have looked around; otherwise he would not run into romantic injustice. A red chamber stood north of him with several sections of vermilion railings, upon which Baochai, Daiyu, Xiangyun, and Baoqin were leaning. They are talking and laughing. Baoyu smiled, “You are here! Why don’t you let me know when you come to visit this immortal place?” He sees that the girls are smiling and waving hands to him, seemingly a signal to go upstairs. Baoyu almost danced with joy, and walked into the room to find stairs. He searched five to seven rooms, but could not find anyone. He pondered, the stair should be outside. Baoyu went out and walked around the red chamber for several times, still there were no stairs. He thought, “That day I heard a song saying, ‘it is hard to go up and down without stairs.’ Can it be that there are actually no stairs? But how could they go up without stairs?” He fretfully considered the problem, and went back and forth. A sudden gale blinded his eyes, and Baoyu dropped to the ground to avoid it. After the wind passed by, he opened his eyes and looked around. How could there be red chamber and green windows? There was only a pathetic and desolate wildness, and many human skeletons were dancing. Baoyu was greatly shocked, yet he could not tell whether it was real or not.

This is how Honglou meng ying ends. This ending comes right after Taiqing has created a harmonious society and a happy family where loyalty, filial piety, integrity and righteousness were dominant values and well executed. Honglou meng portrayed a realistic world where life was full of change and cannot be forever satisfactory. Taiqing created a perfect and harmonious world to compensate for the sad ending in the original story, and to express her own wishes towards life. However, she realized

228Gu Taiqing, Honglou meng ying, 193-96.
that this perfection cannot be achieved in reality. Taiqing designed an unexpected ending for *Honglou meng ying*, which conveys many significant messages.

Firstly, the joyous tone of the book ends with a sudden dismal twist, poetic but ironic. Taiqing here conveys a strong sense of nothingness or emptiness. It makes Taiqing wonder, has the harmonious society and happy family she took great efforts to build ever existed? It also makes readers wonder whether the story in *Honglou meng ying* was merely Taiqing’s illusion. When Baoyu could not tell whether the scene before his eyes is real or not, it also leaves space for the readers to reflect upon Taiqing’s story. The “ying” in the title is explained at the final moment, as a shadow following the parent novel, the story in this work is nothing but an illusion, or a fantasy.

Secondly, Taiqing made efforts to pursue happiness and perfection in life, but she realized the difficulty of achieving what she was working for. Just as she said in Chapter 23 of the story, Baoyu recalled the dream with Daiyu in which there was a song singing “Use a bamboo basket to carry water, pick flowers in a mirror; it is hard to make the person in dream stay, no matter how hard you try.” Noticeably, Taiqing has merged her hope and dream into the story. However, when she was seeking the ideal life, disappointment and sadness are the inevitable results from this process.

The red chamber without stairs is a metaphor, signaling that there is no way for people to reach that place. One can see it, but can never get close to it. This seems pessimistic, but Taiqing has seen through the nature of life, and the conflict between reality and ideal. She clearly realizes that it is hard to make her dream come true. The powerful ending nullifies all her hopes and aspirations, leaving only a strong sense of disillusionment and emptiness.

Lastly, when Taiqing realizes that all her efforts for building up a harmonious society were in vain, it returns to Xichun’s caution—“the best way to avoid vexations is to keep your room clean and closed.” In other words, the attempt to build up a perfect society is actually a kind of trouble and frustration she has created for herself.
In order to stay away from vexations, the best solution is to discard her desires and aspirations, and preserves a pure heart that is impervious to the outside world.
PART III. SISTERHOOD IN THE FLOWER COUNTRY: TAIQING AND OTHER TALENTED WOMEN
Chapter 7. Within and Beyond the Autumn-Red Poetry Society

This part is an extension of the previous two parts. In this part I will examine Taiqing’s poetry society and her literary activities and interactions with other women. At the center of the thriving Beijing literati circle, Taiqing and some other talented women in the capital gathered and established a poetry society (shishe, 詩社) named the Autumn-Red Society. Though this poetry society was not as famous as the Plantain Poetry Society led by Xu Can or the Emerald Citadel Poetry Society by Wu Zao, it was a big event in Taiqing’s life. The poetry society not only enriched her life and stimulated her artistic creation, but also helped her develop friendship with other worthy beauties.

When reading Taiqing’s poetry, one can easily discover an image of “woman scholar” standing out of those poetry lines. Recognized as “talented women” by others, it is interesting to see how Taiqing and other talented women were perceived and portrayed in her poetry, and what kind of hard work lay behind their success.

Before examining Taiqing’s poetry society, it is necessary to examine the background for women’s poetry societies. It was a common practice for male literati in late Ming to found poetry societies, write poems and hold cultural and learning activities. It was a refined fad for literati to form societies, enabling members to raise their social prestige through mutual praise among the members. Their prose or poetry meetings and mentor-student relationships were probably what those talented women admired and sought. Just as Taichun wrote in the founding letter for the “Begonia Club” in Grandview Garden in Honglou meng, “Why should the founding of poetry clubs be the sole prerogative of the whiskered male? Why are female poets allowed a voice in the tunable concert of the muses only when some enlightened patriarch sees fit to invite them?”

Influenced by the conduct of forming “societies” or “groups,” women in late Ming and early Qing periods went out of their boudoirs, assembled and founded a

229McCraw, Women and Old Chinese Poetry, 122.
great number of poetry societies. Yun Zhu (惲珠 1771-1833) records that “the Plantain Poetry Society\(^{230}\) (蕉園詩社) spread as a charming tale in literary circles.” Women’s poetry societies became a salutary story, which means people at that time, whether male or female, praised and supported this type of activity. The Plantain Society enjoyed great fame among women literary circles in early Qing, and it certainly propelled later talented women to establish their own circles.

In a relatively open society that tolerated women’s literacy, the popularity of reading and the intensive cultural atmosphere provided women with fertile literary soil, in which they assimilated cultural nutrients to develop their own poetic talents. As these women cultivated distinguished talents which could compete with men, they sought to do the same things as men, so long as conventions permitted or tolerated them. In certain sense women’s poetry societies were a kind of imitation of the men’s version; however, these literary activities were very meaningful to them. In Taiqing’s case, even if the Autumn-Red Poetry Society (秋紅詩社) was not a big success, it should not be neglected when we are studying Taiqing.

With a bunch of talented women like Shen Shanbao around her, Taiqing collected talented women in the capital or nearby, and founded the “Autumn-Red Poetry Society.” Regretfully, there is only a short statement about this group in extant Qing documents. Shen Shanbao, another leading member of this society, recorded in her *Poetry Talks of Famous Beauties*: “On an autumn day of the year Jihai (1839), Taiqing, Pingshan, Yunlin, Bofang and I founded Autumn-Red Society. The first topic was morning glories, to the tune *Immortals at the Magpie Bridge*.”\(^{232}\) From this we can learn that the poetry society was established in 1839 when Taiqing was forty-one

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\(^{230}\) According to Liang Yizhen there were five members in the salon at first; they were Xu Can, Chai Jingyi, Zhu Rouze, Lin Yining and Qian Yunyi. Later Li Yining and some women in her hometown founded a seven-member salon, including Lin Yining, Chai Jingyi, Gu Si, Feng Xian, Qian Yunyi, Zhang Hao, and Mao Anfang. Liang Yizhen, *Zhongguo funü wenxue shigang* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1990), 385-89.


years old, the second year after she lost her husband. The core members are as follows.

Xu Yanreng (許延祿) styled Yunlin (雲林), also styled Yinjiang (因姜), came from Renhe (Hangzhou) of Zhejiang, and was the daughter of Xu Yanzong, the principal official in the Board of War. She married a Stipend Scholar (gongsheng, 貢生) from Xiuning Sun Chengxun, the son of Sun Qiu who was the Imperial Supervisor. She had an anthology Fulian shi ji (福連室集 Poetry of Fulian Studio), but it apparently did not survive.\(^\text{233}\) She and her sister Yunjiang were good at poetry, painting, music and engraving, both taught by Liang Desheng\(^\text{234}\) (梁德纘 1771-1847).

Xu Yanjin (許延錦), styled Yunjiang (雲姜), was Yunlin’s younger sister and the wife of Ruan Fu, who was the son of Ruan Yuan, the Prime Minister and famous scholar of Confucian classics. Her anthology Yuting xuan shichao (魚聽軒詩鈔 Poetry of Fish-listening House) did not survive.\(^\text{235}\) Both of the Xu sisters were famous worthy beauties in Jiangnan; they became acquainted with Taiqing during their stay in Beijing and became Taiqing’s best friends in life.

Shen Shanbao, styled Xiangpei (湘佩), from Qiantang (Hangzhou), was the daughter of Shen Xuelin, a state judge of Yining, Jiangxi. She married Wu Lingyun from Anhui, the city magistrate of Shuoping, Shanxi. She wrote Hongxuelou ji (鴻雪樓集 Anthology of Geese-Snow House) and Mingyuan shihua (名媛詩話 Poetry Talks of Famous Beauties), which both still exist.\(^\text{236}\) According to Brief Biographies of Boudoir Poetesses of the Qing Dynasty, “Xiangpei was quite smart, honest and extremely filial to her parents, thus her poems convey true feelings, which accord with the goal of poetry, being gentle, kind and peaceful. Her father drowned in the

\(^{233}\)Hu Wenkai, Lidai funü zhuzuo kao (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 560.
\(^{234}\)Liang Duangsheng, the wife of Xu Yanzong, styled Chusheng, is the successive author of the famous tanci The Destiny of Rebirth. In her late years, she called herself the old figure of Ancient Spring House. She has an anthology Poetry of the Ancient Spring House.
\(^{235}\)Hu Wenkai, Lidai funü zhuzuo kao, 560.
\(^{236}\)Ibid., 367.
West River and left his family with nothing. Xiangpei, still in early childhood, studied hard all day long. A few years later, people came to ask for her paintings one after another. With this income, she supported her mother and paid for her younger brother’s education. She even paid expenses to bury her distant relatives; thus, people far or near all praised her for her filial piety and virtue. She met Taiqing in Yunlin’s house when she got to Beijing, and in the seventeenth year of Daoguang (1837), Xiangpei visited Taiqing’s Tianyou Pavilion with her first anthology, *Poetry of Geese-Snow House*. Taiqing was so excited that she immediately composed two quatrains “Inscribed for *Poetry of Geese-Snow House* by the Woman Scholar Sheng Xiangpei from Hangzhou,” as well as a lyric *A Cluster of Flowers* “Inscribed for Xiangpei’s *Lyric Collection of Geese-Snow House*.” From then on, the two poetesses developed their deep friendship that lasted nearly thirty years.

Xiang Jianzhang (項絸章), also named Xun and styled Pingshan (屏山), came from Hangzhou, and was the daughter of Xiang Fudi and the second wife of an official Xu Naipu. She excelled in lyrics, rhapsodies and painting. She wrote a collection, *Hanmo heming guan ji* (翰墨和鳴館集), which did not survive. Her paintings were especially wonderful, and there was an anecdote about her painting skill. One day when her husband was on duty in the emperor’s study, the emperor asked him to let her wife draw flowers on four pieces of paper which were tribute paid by foreign countries. When Pingshan had finished three paintings, some guests came, so she hid them behind the curtains. Unfortunately, the last blank paper was stained after the guests left. Her husband was afraid of getting blamed, but Pingshan calmly painted a stone by several withered bamboos on the paper. The emperor praised and rewarded her husband.

Li Jiezhi (李介祉), styled Songbing (誦冰) or Renlan (紉蘭), from Kunshan, married Qian Baohui from Jiaxing. She served her father-in-law who worked as an

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official in the capital for over twenty years. She was good at seal characters, and a continuous flow of people in Beijing sought her works. She enjoyed great fame at that time.

Fucha Huadu (富察華篤), styled Ruixian (蕊仙), was a Manchu worthy woman and wrote a now-lost collection, *Shiyin ji* (矢音集). In addition, Qian Bofang (錢伯芳), Dong’e Wuzhuang (棟阿武莊), Dong’e Shaoru (棟阿少如, who was Taiqing’s son’s mother-in-law), and Yu Jiying (余季瑛, the wife of Xu Qingshi), were once club members and Taiqing’s good friends.

Most of these members were daughters of illustrious families and wives of officials and scholars, so they shared rich lifestyles, and were well educated and versatile. As there is no specific record about the activities of the poetry society, we have to explore the information between lines through their *shi* or *ci* poems. In Taiqing’s anthologies, many works concerning those club activities may give us some hints.

The principal purpose of the poetry society was to help them practice and improve their poem writing; accordingly, they always tried to compose poems in diverse ways: on the same theme, to the same tune, with provided rhymes or in the form of linking verses. They also contended to write within a given time limit. According to *Poetry Talks of Famous Beauties*, “Taiqing wielded her brush and improvised on the spur of the moment; with no need to wait till the strike of the bronze bowl ended, she had already finished her poems.”

Apparently, Taiqing’s superb literary talents greatly impressed her friends. In the poem below we can see how they got together and interacted with one another.

On a Winter Day, Jiying Invited Us Over to Her Green Purity Mountain House Drink for a Chrysanthemum-viewing Party. Yunlin, Yunjiang, Xiangpei, and Peiji

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240 A style of Chinese calligraphy, often written on seals.


242 A way of composing a poem in which each participant improvises one or two lines so that all the lines in sequence form a complete poem.

Were All There That Day. But, Constrained by the City-wall Curfew, I Didn’t Fully Enjoy Myself. Returning Home, I Harmonized These Rhymes by Xiangpei244

冬日，季瑛招飲緣淨山房賞菊。是日，有雲，雲姜，湘佩，佩吉諸姐妹在座。奈予為城門所阻，未得盡歡，歸來即次湘佩韻

Immortal's grotto-mansion, far away from the dusty world; 神仙洞府遠塵寰,
The sisters sit circling around Jasper Lake245. 小坐瑤池姊妹環.
Since we can keep and hide flowers in a warm greenhouse, 既可留花藏暖室,
Who needs to build a hut in remote mountains? 何須結屋必深山.
Cold fragrances urge forth good lines246, 寒香有意催佳句.
No chance to have silvery candles shine on my drunken face. 銀燭無緣照醉顏.
Ashamed that I can’t write as well as Shen Yue247, 自愧題詩輸沈約.
I write seven-pace poems248 to while away time. 吟成七步竟消閑.

From this poem we see that while they were having a gathering, their chamber is transformed into a transcendent grotto-mansion, far away from worldly noise and disturbance, and they become immortals by Jasper Lake. They appreciate flowers, drink wine, chant poems and chat with one another. Sometimes they even get drunk, but nobody cares. With abundant confidence in themselves they even try to compete with Shen Yue, which demonstrates their soaring ambition. When these talented women stay together, they find an inviting and ideal circumstance in which to compose poems, and their parties accentuated their interest and enthusiasm in artistic creation. Their themes for writing are often yongwu verses, like autumn willows, icy bed, warm kang, morning glories, crab-apple flowers, faded lotus and so on. As these women are gifted in many ways, they evaluate paintings and play the zither together, which is also mentioned in their poems.

244 See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 123.
245 A place mentioned in classical Chinese mythologies as a lake in the Kunlun Mountains where the Queen Mother of the West lives.
246 This line recalls Jiang Kui’s Charm of a Maiden Singer “Memories of the Past at Red Cliff,” “Elegantly floating, cold scent flies into my verse lines.”
247 Shen Yue (沈約 441-513) was the leader of the literary circle in the Qi and Liang period. Later his name was used in poems to refer to people with poetic talent.
248 An allusion to the literary genius Cao Zhi (曹植 192-232), the third son of Cao Cao (曹操 155-220) in the Three Kingdoms, who was once forced by his elder brother Cao Pi (曹丕 187-226) to compose a poem within the time to walk seven steps, otherwise he would lose his life.
Tune: *High Mountains and Flowing Waters* “Listening to the Zither” (Written in the poetry society)²⁴⁹

On seven strings, composing tender feelings.
Strand by strand, play the sounds of autumn.
Wind buffets the little curtained window;
Right in the flowers’ shade, someone is listening.
Plantain shadows screen the red lamp.
Obviously it is:
A lost tune of flowing waters and high mountains²⁵⁰.
Tapping on jade, knocking on ice.
It’s a pendant made of orchid,
Sending forth fragrance by your wrist.

Clear and far-reaching, geese fly in void sky.
Beyond the cold riverside lie still water and smooth sand.
Where to resent Cangwu²⁵¹?
Send fallen leaves dancing in gentle breeze.
Shut the red curtains;
Tempo slowed down, strings stopped.
Late night,
I fear my long and slender finger,
Pointing at wrong bright stars.
Silent, without a word;
Dim as a few green peaks over the river.²⁵²

This lyric is homework from the poetry society. Probably one of the club members played the zither, and afterwards the others wrote poems about it. This work is

²⁵⁰It refers to an anecdote of the two great friends Boya and Zhong Ziqi in the Spring and Autumn period. Here it means sublime music and understanding friends.
²⁵¹According to *Bowu Zhi* by Zhang Hua (張華 232-300) of the Jin Dynasty, Emperor Shun made an inspection tour of the south and died in Cangwu. His wives Ehuan and Nüying raced there and wailed in sorrow. Then they drowned themselves and became the Goddesses of Xiang River. See Fan Ning, ed., *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* (Beijing: zhonghua shuju, 1980), 93. Qu Yuan’s “Goddess of River Xiang” and “Lady of Xiang” from the *Chuci* are likely based on this folklore. Here, it means the music is mournful.
²⁵²This line comes from Tang poet Qian Qi’s famous “The Xiang Goddess Playing the Cither, Written for the Provincial Examination,” *省試湘靈鼓瑟* “When the music is finished, nobody can be seen; Only a few green peaks over the river.” (曲終人不見，江上數峰青.) See Qian Qi, “The Xiang Goddess Playing the Cither, Written for the Provincial Examination,” in *Quan Tang shi*, 8:2651.
remarkable for its description of sound. In Stanza One Taiqing concentrates on the
description of music and the performer’s amazing skill which makes the audience
listen carefully. They are all understanding friends, like Boya and Zhong Ziqi. The
music even can be felt by the sense of smell as it floats to audience with the scent of a
pendant by the performer’s wrist. Stanza Two depicts the images that the music has
brought to mind. By these vivid substantial symbols, like geese in the sky, water and
sands by river, and the sad story of Goddesses of Xiang River, she limns the changeful
music movement. At closure she focuses on the audience’s intoxication with the
music, which lingers in the air long after the performance. In this lyric, Taiqing has
applied a combination of all senses, visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinetic, to
portray the invisible music. Here she commends both the outstanding performer and
understanding audience, and in reality she and her women friends are just like them.

Autumn–Red Poetry Society failed to bear rich fruits; however, through such a
literary phenomenon we can see women’s literary ambitions, as well as their active
literary activities. Women’s literary societies generally had no fixed rules or
restrictions, and these women usually followed their husbands wherever they were
assigned to different posts; consequently, there was great turnover in its members.
Autumn–Red society could not escape from the same fate. As several major members
left Beijing, this poetry society only lasted three or four years, yet it nurtured these
women’s friendship that went beyond time and space.

The most important friends to Taiqing, doubtlessly, are those talented women, and
their interaction forms the mainstream of Taiqing’s social activities. These talented
women dwell in a world beyond the mundane called the “Flower Country” (Zhong
xiang guo, 翠香國). She refers to the Flower Country for three times in her works
and actually constructs a country for women. Taiqing tends to consider herself as an

252 Zhang Juling, Kuangdai cainü Gu Taiqing, 94.
253 The other two occasions are: in Numerous Beauties “Inscribed on the Woman Scholar Ms. Wen
Xiujun’s Painting Flowers’ Reunion,” she compares women scholars as fairies from Pistil Palace in the
Flower Country; in Heavenly Happiness “Inscribed for Prince Fuzhai’ Painting Carrying Courtesans in
a Boat,” she mentions the Flower Country again.
immortal banished from the heavenly world. In her poetry, she dwells in the dusty world as a flower goddess exiled from the heaven, and all those talented women are flower goddesses from the Flower Country. Each kind of flower corresponds to a talented woman in the earthly world and a flower goddess in the heavenly world. We should not overstress Taiqing’s consciousness of women’s independence and rights, but it is evident that as least in her mind there exists such a place in which women sympathize and care for each other.

Tune: *Slow Song: Wave Washing the Sands* “For a Long Time, No Letter Comes from Yunjiang; I Use Liu Yong’s Rhymes”

浪淘沙慢：久不接雲姜信，用柳耆卿韻

Again, I looked forward to hearing from my friends—
No sign, late in winter.
Even worse, after the snow,
With several wintry plum blossoms,
Green buds look like beads of water.
Facing the furtive scent and sparse shadows, I miss my good friends.

Thinking it over,
We’re both missing each other in two places.
I fear our traces in dream will go astray,
And both of us will grieve.

Endless.
My twisted vitals—wringed by hidden resentment.
No closer than the edges of the sky and the corners of the sea.

It’s so hard to send my heartsick tears.
Though a short separation, it makes my heart hurt.

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255 This line suggests that the buds’ green color is so rich and vibrant that it would drip off the tree like water droplets.

256 This line recalls the famous “Poem of Mume Blossoms” by Lin Bu (林逋 967-1028) in the Song dynasty, “Sparse shadows criss-cross, water is limpid and shallow; furtive scent floating and a moon in dusk.” See Zhang Jingxing, ed., *Songshi biecai ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 72. Later Jiang Kui created lyric tunes “Furtive Scent” and “Sparse Shadows,” which usually refer to plum blossoms.

257 This line recalls Li Qingzhao’s lyric lines, “One longing leaves traces, but overflows in two places.” See Xu Peijun, *Li Qingzhao ji jianzhu*, 20.
Looking back—
We flowers cared for each other in the Flower Country.

Makes no sense—winters come, summers leave,
And people grow more distant every day.
When can we lean by the winding railings?
Sit at the western window, trim the candle,
And share thousands of words, on and on,
All about previous yearnings.

The Xu sisters were Taiqing’s best friends, and in this lyric she showed deep affection for Yunjiang. As she did not hear from Yunjiang for a long time and missed her so much, she composed this lyric to convey her longings for her. The first word “again” tells us that she was always expecting letters from Yunjiang. Stanza One concentrates on her present longing for Yunjiang’s letter, and Stanza Two focuses on her present feelings and precious memories. In Stanza Three she imagines their reunion.

“Trimming the candle at the western window” recalls Li Shangyin’s famous poem “Sent to the North on the Rainy Night,” “When can we trim the candle by the western window together, and talk about the time when it was raining in the Ba Mountains?” Taiqing properly applies this allusion to imagine the intimate talk she would have with Yunjiang when they meet. Kuang Zhouyi comments this lyric “simply expresses feelings in the means of Song lyricists, which cannot be achieved merely through delicate and flowery style.”

Taiqing constantly recalls the days with Yunjiang and other sisters in the Flower Country, as those women’s friendship has become an important part of her life. Their departures always brought her deep sorrows. Concerning Yunjiang and Yunlin’s leave, Taiqing composed a series of excellent shi and ci poems, such as “Hearing That

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258 The Flower Country refers to the garden full of flowers. It comes from a story in Buddhist sacred literature. According to Xiangji fopin in Weimojie jing, “There is a country named Zhongxiang (many flowers), with a religious name Xiangji.” See Kumarajiva, trans., Weimojie jing (Taipei: Zhonghua Yaoshishan jushi foxue xuehui, 2002), 338.

259 Quan Tang shi, 16:6150.

260 Lu Xingji, Gu Taiqing ci xinshi jiping, 341.
Yunjiang Has Decided to Go Back to the South on the 9th of the First Lunar Month Next Spring, I Wrote Down This.” “At the End of the Year Written to Yunlin and Seeing Yunjiang Off in the South of the City,” “On the 7th of the First Lunar Month, Yunjiang and Her Husband Took Mrs. Xie’s Coffin Back to Yangzhou, I Sent Them Off at Mother Buddha Temple in the Snow,” Recalling Good Guests “Yunlin, Yunjiang, Renlan, Peiji and I Gathered in Shanzhi’s Room, Yunjiang Had to Leave Soon, So Peiji Played ‘Yangguan sandie,’ I Couldn’t Bear Listening to It. We Enjoyed Ourselves That Day. The City Gate Would Close on My Way Home, and I Composed This Lyric in My Carriage,” Redness All over the River “On the 7th of the First Lunar Month, Sending Yunjiang Off to the South in Mother Buddha Temple.” After Yunjiang left, she wrote Wave Washing the Sands “On the 27th of the First Lunar Month, Hearing the Wild Geese I Recalled Yunjiang,” A Twig of Mume Blossoms “Hearing Yunjiang Has Crossed the Yellow River,” Slow Song: Wave Washing the Sands “For a Long Time, No Letter from Yunjiang; I Use Liu Yong’s Rhymes” and Conductus: River City and Prunus Blossoms “Receiving a Letter from Yunjiang in the Rain.”

Supposing these women’s friendship was not so essential to Taqing before her husband’s death, they did become indispensable to her after Yihui passed away. Taqing’s poem “After My Late Husband’s Death, I’ve Had No Desire to Write Verse…” presents her difficult position both in life and mind after her husband’s death. Taqing was so helpless and desperate during that time that she even wanted to commit suicide. At that moment emotional support and encouragement from her friends provided her timely help and hope in life. Their social contact and activities alleviated Taqing’s pain at losing her husband, and helped her to get out of the low tide of life.

Taqing relied on them emotionally when she was gloomy or desperate; a word or two from her friends became a straw for her to clutch at. Once she received no letters from Yunjiang for a long time, which caused Taqing to suffer bitter longings and great upset. When she finally got the letters that she has been expecting, the excitement and uneasiness when she opens the letter reveals her hidden feelings.
Tune: *Conductus: River City and Prunus Blossoms* “Receiving a Letter from Yunjiang in the Rain”\(^{261}\)

My old friend 1000 leagues away, sent a letter here.
Open it fast, open it slow.
Not knowing if it says you’re well or not, plagued by fearful doubts.
Heat and cold after parting—seasons alter and pass,
North and south of the Yangtze River,
Stirring up parting grief.
Alone, pace back and forth.

Forth, back. Back, forth. Send my heart far and vague.
Heaven’s other shore, Water’s other shore.
Dream on, dream on, dreams cannot reveal…
Your old skirt and hairpin, who thinks of?
Slate clouds frozen in wait: plagued by heart-pangs.
Next year, when you return and see me once again,
You likely won’t see…
My old form from when we parted last time.

Her excitement and ecstasy caused Taiqing to open her mail in a flurry. As she is so worried about Yunjiang, she hesitates to read her letters. If we ignore Taiqing’s identity, this lyric would likely be regarded as a love poem written to Yunjiang by a male lover. What deserves our attention is that Taiqing’s affection for her female friends seemingly exceeds the feelings between sisters or friends, but seems more like the affection between lovers. Looking through Taiqing’s poems, on the contrary, she seldom writes poems to show her husband such deep love. Even in verses mourning her husband, she keeps controlled and calm language. We observe how writing conventions for women exert an influence on Taiqing. To the male, they generally maintained reserved demeanors and adhered to the rule “not to display the words indoors to the outdoors,”\(^{262}\) (*neiyan bu chu*, 内言不出) while to other women, there were no such taboos—thus they could express their feelings explicitly and frankly.

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\(^{262}\) Yang Tianyu, ed., *Liji yizhu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), 335.
When Taiqing was all alone in love, affection from her friends became a spiritual sustenance to her. Restricted by moral principles, she, a widow, would not have too much contact with men, and her female friends filled in for the role of her husband. In the emotional world, her gender role was blurred as in some of her poems, where sometimes those sisters seemed like her male lover, while sometimes she was theirs. Taiqing’s choice of such a substitute for love was unconscious, yet when she expressed her affection and feelings, her unrestrained and gushing passion imperceptibly transgress sisterhood and partake into feelings between lovers.

Tune: *Song of Water Clock at Night “Recalling Yunlin”* 更漏子: 憶雲林

(#1)
Drizzling, drizzling rain; Gentle, gentle wind, 雨絲絲，風細細．
All soul-searing feelings. 盡是消魂滋味．
Gentle, gentle wind; Drizzling, drizzling rain. 風細細，雨絲絲，
Yearning for each other for the full twelve hours 263．相思十二時．

I miss you, you miss me; 我憶君，君憶我，
Both feelings are indispensable. 兩意一無不可.
You miss me, I miss you; 君憶我，我憶君．
Careworn hearts like a revolving wheel. 愁腸似轉輪．

(#2)
Soft willow mist, fine flower shadows, 柳煙柔，花影細，
Who knows the hidden feeling? 誰解個中滋味．
Confused gloom, thousands of strands, 亂愁緒，萬千絲，
How long can spring last? 春光能幾時?

Helpless—you; melancholy—me; 奈何君，惆悵我，
What cannot be done? 有甚雲為不可．
Melancholy—me; Helpless—you; 憐我，奈何君，
The flowing years go fast as wheels. 流年快似輪．

The tune “Water Clock at Night” was created by Wen Tingyun (溫庭筠 812?-866), saying “Fine long willow branches, Drizzling spring rain, Sounds of water clock

263In ancient China, a day was divided into twelve hours, using the twelve Earthly Branches to designate each hour.
beyond flowers seems remote.”  The tune is suitable for themes on longings and lovesickness. Taiqing also employs the drizzling rain and gentle wind to describe her sentimental longing; the scenes and her feelings are merged together. Written in colloquial language, the lyrics are quite straightforward, natural and sincere, and Taiqing’s natural and deep affection gushes like fountain. The repetition in the first stanza adds some musical flavor to the lyric. A distinctive feather, both in form and language, is echo and repetition: the lines with “rain” and “wind,” “you” and “me” all echo with each other by switching the word order, as if mimicking correspondence between two people. This makes Taiqing’s longing interactive and dynamic, as she is not the only person who misses her friend. Both her friend and herself share the same longing and frustrations. But neither the poetess nor her friend can change the situation or become reunited, and they can do nothing but miss each other as time passes by.

Two Poems on Recalling Pingshan

(1)
One day apart seems like three years: let alone three months.
Watching clouds several times by myself,
Miss you—I’ve bought all the carps by the river.
Still I don’t see letters arrive from Jiangnan,

(2)
I saw you off to the south, when osmanthus blossomed.
Now again plum blossoms: filling every bough;
Melancholy—all sisters at the city gate;
Someone waiting below the blossoms is counting the returning date.

A three-month long separation makes her days wear on like years, and she keeps looking forward to her letters. She counts the days for a reunion. We can see that the worst thing for Taiqing is the departure of her friends. When they have to separate,

“grasping your clothes and holding your hands,” she finds it so hard to let them go. Once separated, she thinks of them all the time: “Expecting your letters, even if several words, you should write them yourself.” When these women are blocked in different places, they keep in touch with each other by letters; therefore letters serve as a significant tool in women’s social and literary communication.

Separations among men are often broadminded and positive, like “On the roads ahead surely will be friends dear and true; who don’t know you throughout the land?” and “Understating friends exist within the four seas; Even at the earth’s end, we would seem next door,” which show absolute confidence and valiant sentiments, or “Come, drink one more cup of wine; You will meet no more old friends west of the Sunny Pass,” which demonstrates a relaxing and unrestrained spirit. When Taiqing’s friends are going to leave, they are not as broadminded as men, perhaps because they know how difficult and unlikely they are going to meet again. Women are also more sensitive and emotional than men, so it is always hard for them to extricate themselves from the sadness of separation. Women’s poems on parting are comparatively garrulous and provide meticulous advice regarding the trips.

Tune: Redness All Over the River “On the 7th of the First Lunar Month, Sending Yunjiang Off to the South in Mother Buddha Temple”

滿江紅: 人日觀音院餞雲姜南歸

Returning home!
I fear you leave,
Keep you to sit for a while.
We can’t tell each other all the sorrows of parting;

歸去來兮，
怕君去，
少留君坐。
說不盡，離愁彼此。

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266 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 297.
267 As Grace Fong states, letters served different functions in women’s life; they were a form of critical reading, and women used letters as means of discussion. For a full discussion, see Fong, Herself an Author, 123-29.
268 Gao Shi, “Farewell to Dong Da,” in Quan Tang shi, 6:2243.
270 Wang Wei, “Seeing Yuan Er off on a Mission to Anxi,” in Quan Tang shi, 4:1306.
Tears drop along with our voices.
Wild inns and long journey: you should take care of yourself.
Grease the carriage and feed horses: you should do it yourself.
To inform me of your safety, do send me letters frequently.
Don’t be lazy!
Affairs about the New Year, passed quickly.
Ice has just melted, East wind is blowing heavily.
Separated 1000 li by the river, nothing but yearnings.
Today we part: when will we meet again?
Mother Buddha doesn’t care about such things.
Saying “Take care!” you left, hard to make you stay,
So sad I am.

In this lyric, Taiqing expresses her reluctance to see Yunjiang off and states her concerns about Yunjiang’s food, clothes, shelter and means of transportation. She advises, or even orders Yunjiang to look after the carriage and horses in person in order to ensure a safe journey. She mentions melted ice and heavy wind that may result in a difficult trip. Taiqing pays attention to meticulous details and thinks about every aspect of her friend’s trip, which demonstrates women’s particular sensitivity.

Taiqing wrote a lengthy narrative verse to Xiangpei in her later years which well summarized her interaction with those talented women:

Harmonizing the Poem Xiangpei Sent to Me

Seemingly bright, yet not; window shadows sank.
I sat up toward dawn with my clothes on.
Right after morning make-up, the gatekeeper arrived,
My friend’s letter came in, to please my heart.
Everything on her journey was written in the letter,
It’s extremely arduous to travel far in summer.
It’s difficult to go on a journey in such hot weather,
Eating vegetables, living in caves, and seeing deserted scenes.
Spring flowers and autumn moon\textsuperscript{271}, we enjoyed our time. Recalling the former years: we happily wrote poems and drank brew.

Trying to explore flowers, we reached agreement to meet in the morning. Together composing poems on the cold toad\textsuperscript{272}, we didn’t sleep at night. Those who gathered in the boudoir are all immortals, We competed writing poems of the same title—to accumulate original lines.

Among the seats, let’s ask who holds the cow ear\textsuperscript{273}? In the lyric circles only you can be the host. Sometimes we took a carriage to the South of the city, We stopped the horse whenever we came across a small inn. You especially sympathize with me because of my old and sick body,

We never got tired of the whole day’s talk. The prefect was about to move following the new order, At our farewell banquet, tears in our eyes, sorrows in the wine cups.

Holding sleeve and clothes, we bore not to separate. True words express endless worries. One month’s longing leaves me in despair. I miss you, like the thirst for spring. After reading your letter, my heart turned grieved, From distance I know you wrote it with deep feelings. I inquired about your hometown whenever I met someone, It is said the war ceased in several places.

I wish the heavy autumn rain will wash the armors and weapons\textsuperscript{274}. I know you have deep affection for your hometown. Two words “safe and secure” were sent to the Shanxi city, I attached my unpolished poems to repay your affection. I have one more word that may comfort you,

There may some harvest in the autumn fields.

This poem starts with a morning when she woke up and applied makeup. Afterwards she received a letter from an old friend, which is a highlight of her day.

\textsuperscript{271}It refers to happy days, but also indicates the flight of time.\textsuperscript{272}It refers to the moon.\textsuperscript{273}Cow ear means the first place, or the ruling place.\textsuperscript{274}It means the war will end.
Her friend wrote in the letter of what she saw and heard on the journey, and Taiqing thinks of the difficulties during the journey: hot weather, long distance, poor food and lodging. Then she recalled the good time they spent together when they drank brew, wrote poems, went to see flowers in the morning and wrote poems until late night. She also mentioned their gathering and competition in writing poems. From the twenty-first line, she recalled the time when Shen had to leave and her longings after their separation. After that, she came back to the letter she was reading, expressed her hope towards the future and came up with a reply to Xiangpei. Taiqing merged the present, past and future into this long poem. It provides much information about Taiqing’s life and women’s communication and interaction.

These talented women shared interests, hobbies, vexations, worries, complaints and depression, thus they could thoroughly understand one another and have mutual sympathy. They could thoroughly be themselves in the Flower Country. The understanding and love among them was different from emotional ties to parents and conjugal affection; they were themselves, independent and equal, no need to hide or pretend. Though some husbands and wives shared similar interests and deep love, wives were in a subordinate status; after all, they always had to keep reserved and present their best side to their husbands. Occasionally, they wrote poems or harmonized poems by the husbands to please them, compete for masculine affections, and help establish closer relations with their husbands. Fortunately, these women could enjoy freedom and equality in their own group. They cherished and cared for one another in the Flower Country.

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275Taiqing once said in her Cangwu Song “My Husband Bought an Ancient Jade Lute with Ten Taels of Gold, and Asked Me to Write Songs with Him. He Finished a Song of Green Feather First; the Good Song Was Composed, So I Dared Not to Compose a Slow Song Again. I Sincerely Wrote Song of Sixteen Words to Finish My Work, Just for His Entertainment.” Obviously, Taiqing wrote a lyric to make her husband happy; possibly she could write a slow song much better than Yihui. Nevertheless, she did not do so partly due to her love for Yihui, partly due to her restricted attitude in front of her husband.

276McCraw, Women and Old Chinese Poetry, 122.

277As in “In the Provincial Examination of the Year Gengzi (1840), Ziwan Succeeded in the Civil Service Exam at the Provincial Level, I Send This Poem to Renlan to Congratulate Her…,” she says,
In conclusion, Taiqing’s poetry society provided a chance for her and other talented women to get together, write poems, and develop life-long friendship. Literary exchange among these women doubtlessly encouraged and spurred their writings, especially after the poetry society was dissolved.

Various social activities with her friends eased Taiqing’s loneliness and enriched her life. The friendship serves as her emotional support because those women were not only her close understanding friends within the boudoir, serving as sisters and brothers in life, but also her lovers in a certain sense.

Taiqing and her friends founded poetry societies and “establish a new women’s culture.” Women’s poetry societies seemingly just developed sisterhood, but as a matter of fact, they embodied ample male values. Their friendships and communications stimulated them to dedicate more efforts in writing and competition with other sisters. From the annotations of “Crying for Xiangpei,” we can see that the affection among women is like men’s friendship, perhaps even deeper. They wished to be sisters and brothers for all generations and nurtured a friendship that transcended life and death, time and space.

“Next year when the Imperial Academy confers honorary titles, don’t let down the wife who has shared her husband’s hard lot and written poems (for her husband).” As Renlan once sold seal characters to finance Ziwan’s study, it seems that Taiqing asked Heaven or Ziwan not to disappoint her friend, because she knew about Renlan’s hardship.

As discussed before, they ascended mountains, crossed waters, visited scenic spots, drank wine and listened to music together.

Shen Shanbao used “di xiong” 弟兄 to refer to her relationship with Gu Taiqing. See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 169.


Ibid., 333.
Chapter 8. The Women Scholars

According to Confucianism, a man can become “immortal” (buxiu, 不朽) in three ways: by establishing a good example through virtue, by achievements in one’s career, and through establishing words by writing. In Taiqing’s times, most women poets held strong aspiration to be immortal by writing. Within Taiqing’s Flower Country, women diligently read, write and exchange poems. They work so hard to cultivate their talents and to spread their fame. Taiqing’s poetry presents a “mirror” through which we can see how Taiqing and those talented women are portrayed as “women scholars.” (nüshi, 女史) In Taiqing’s eyes, women with great talents and knowledge are all considered woman scholars, and she often uses this word to address those talented women in her poetry in order to convey respect.

Taiqing once wrote in her poem “Written Perfunctorily in Spring,” “Wherever old friends meet, we ask about the poetic mood (shixing, 詩興),” they ask about poetic mood to show their concern about the friend’s writing progress. This phenomenon implies a true condition about women’s writing—that is, reading and writing have become so common and important in the lives of talented women that they nearly led a “literati life.” They inquire about their poetic mood, ask for poems and exchange recent work. Through direct contacts and networks between women themselves, these talented women grew more conscious of themselves as readers, with critical views and responses.

With a consciousness of a limited life, Taiqing held an intense aspiration for immortality in literature, as in “The gist of Xiaoya and Lisao, wonderful poems, a
pursuit for half a life, thus a name for a thousand years,”(小雅>, <離騷>旨. 好文章，半生事業，千秋名字.) which shows that Taiqing has a strong ambition for literary fame. Her poetry annotations indicate that she always has an imagined audience in her mind. She believes that writing can be a women’s cause too, and that women can also enjoy a literary fame that transcends time and space.

In Taiqing’s works, those talented women show strong subjectivity and self-confidence. In her poems to Shen Shanbao, Taiqing expresses her appreciation for Xiangpei’s talents, and regret over the fact that she cannot give full play to her ability.

Two Poems Inscribed for Poetry of Geese-Snow House by Shen Xiangpei, a Woman Scholar from Hangzhou

(#1)
Light sail and two oars came by wind,
You show me your book—I open it fast.
Good lines read all-too strong:
I regret your wasted practical talents.

(#2)
A heroic woman is distinguished from vulgar people,
Roaming freely south and north of the Yangtze River.
Little luggage on the wide road in spring,
A half load of new poems, a half load of grief.

Shen Shanbao is a typical woman scholar from Taiqing’s times. The first couplet of the first poem says Taiqing could not wait to read Xiangpei’s lyrics when she received it; then in the second couplet Taiqing praises Xiangpei’s poems and feels pity for her wasted talent. Taiqing always felt confident about her and her friends’ talents, as she wrote in the poem “On a Winter Day, Ji Ying Invited Us over to Drink…,” they all possessed “seven-pace talent” like Cao Zhi; however, they could not fully apply their talents in society. If they had such chances, they would be willing to put their talents to practical use. The word “pity” adequately expressed Taiqing’s mood. In the second

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287Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 96.
poem, she regards Xiangpei as a heroine, who can compete with men. As Xiangpei’s whereabouts covered a wide range, she converted what she saw and heard on the journey into poems which formed her primary luggage.

Poems Written in Response to Xiangpei Again 再叠韵答湘佩

(#1)
In the afternoon I was informed that my guest had come, 日午忽传有客来,
Cloudy windows and green curtains were all opened. 雲窗翠幕一齐开.
Talk and talk at ease, without any containment: 從容笑语无拘束,
I begin to believe—there are people of great talents in boudoirs! 始信闺中俊逸才.

(#2)
Don’t allow the Washed Jades288 to monopolize free spirits, 不容漱玉擅风流,
A volume of new lyrics to record wonderful travels. 一卷新词记胜游.
Wherever the geese claws left marks in the snow289, 鸿爪雪泥留印处,
How could these sad melodies imitate womanly grief? 悲歌豈效女兒愁.

In the first poem, she records the condition when they met for the first time. The “open” (kai, 開) in the second line is very symbolic; it not only opens the curtain and windows in Taiqing’s boudoir, but also eliminates the blocked state between Taiqing and Xiangpei, and starts their friendship. The second couplet describes Xiangpei’s manlike manner. She stresses “I begin to believe…” partly to commend Xiangpei’s bearing, and partly to prove a conception which has long existed in her mind, that

288The anthology Shuyu ci (漱玉词, Lyrics of Washed Jades) by Li Qingzhao, the most famous woman lyricist in China.
289“Geese footprints in snow” refer to traces of past events. In fact, here Taiqing has explained the source for Xiangpei’s book of poems. This line recalls Su Shi’s poem “Matching Ziyou, at Mian Pond, Thinking of the Past”:

Human life everywhere, do you know what it resembles? 人生到處知何似,
It is just like a flying wild goose treading on snow or mud. 應似飛鴻踏雪泥.
On the mud it by chance leaves a footprint. 泥上偶然留指爪,
When the goose flies away, how can you reckon to the east or west? 鴻飛那復計东西.

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“there are extremely talented women in boudoirs.” In the second poem, obviously she aspires to compete with Li Qingzhao. As Li Qingzhao was so successful in literary history, later poetesses always considered her as both an idol and a role model to surpass. Taiqing also wrote the following lines to praise Xiangpei’s lyrics:

Large passages of writing,  
In quaint and elegant style,  
No less graceful than ancient people.  

Such words can always give a woman scholar ample acknowledgement and compliments to boost confidence in their writing. Taiqing is not stingy with her words whenever she describes her friends’ physical appearance or talents. Her compliments to her friends about literary achievements and fame are easy to be found, as in:

Tune: A Cluster of Flowers “Inscribed for Poetry of Fulian Room by Yunlin”  
一叢花: 領雲林 “福連室吟草”

A jade tree with branches—I admire your family.  
Heaven bestows you with good talents.  
Knowing each other’s name—we got familiar first.  
Hate thousands of folds: waters block and clouds veil.  
Today I met you,  
A free and bright look,  
As clear as plum blossoms.  

You show me new poems—so wonderful,  
The tunes worth more commendation;  
You are also ingenious at painting,  
Depicting lakes and mountains, green mist and rosy clouds.  
Words uttered by a talented person become pearls,  
Weave dreams by the pool,  
Spring grass grows all over the world.

290 Gu Taiqing, A Cluster of Flowers “Inscribed for Selected Lyrics of Geese-Snow House by Xiangpei.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 244.
291 It means that there are many talented women in Yunlin’s family.
292 The last two lines recall Xie Lingyun’s (謝靈運 385–433) famous line from “Climbing the Tower by the Pond,” “By the pond grows Spring grass.” (池塘生春草) See Lu Qinli, Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nan Bei chao shi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 1161.
Stanza One describes the situation when Taiqing and Yunlin met for the first time. They had heard of each other long before they met. As Yunlin lived in Hangzhou and her fame spread early before arriving in Beijing, Taiqing might have long wished to know her, so she hated those “waters and clouds” that blocked them off. Stanza Two concentrates on Yunlin’s superb talents at painting and poetry, and Taiqing highly praised Yunlin’s artistic gifts. She commended Yunlin’s appearance and expressed her admiration.

Literary fame is very important to these women, so knowing one’s name early is always a good compliment, as in Fragrance of White Clover Fern “To Ms. Qian Shuwan of Wenshi Room,” Taiqing says, “We met like old friends; Having known your name for long, today I saw you for the first time.”

Tune: Song of Gold Thread “Inscribed for Lyrics of Flowery Curtains to Send to Ms. Wu Pinxiang, Using the Rhymes in the Anthology”

金縷曲：題<花簾詞>寄吳蘋香女士，用本集中韻

So lucky your name spread early. 何幸聞名早．
Love spring silkworms, intertwined to spin a cocoon; 愛春蠶，纏綿作繭，
Entangled, silk by silk. 絲絲縈繞．
Weave gorgeous brocade, 織就七襄天孫錦，
Colorful threads and gold needles are shuttling. 綵線金針都掃．
A thousand miles away, I miss your embrace. 隔千里，系人懷抱．
There’s no way to meet you—our destiny! 欲見無由緣分淺，
What’s more, you and I are getting old. 况卿乎與我年將老．
Don’t waste good talents. 莫辜負，好才調．

Fallen flowers and flowing water, hard to predict. 落花流水難猜料．
Just as well, icy strings play resentful music. 正無妨，冰絃寫怨，
Draft on snow-white paper. 雪箋起草．
There is a beauty and tall bamboos. 有美人兮修竹．
When will the light boat arrive? 何日輕舟來到．
Sighing—in empty valley understanding friends are few. 嘆空谷，知音偏少．

293 Zhang Hongsheng discussed in detail Shen Shanbao’s aspirations, anxieties, and pursuit of literary fame in his article “Cainü jiaolü yu xingbie yishi: cong Shen Shanbao kan Ming Qing nü shiren de wenxue huodong,” in Ming Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu, ed. Zhang Hongsheng (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002), 823-45.
294 Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 206.
Only orioles and flowers are enjoyable.
Facing lakes and mountains, let out a long and loud cry.
Wish you to send me recent writings.

Wu Zao295, another featured Qing poetess, was very famous in Jiangnan areas.
Taiqing expressed her admiration to her, the wish to meet her one day, and imagined the scene if they were together. The first line can be read either as “You are so lucky to become famous at a young age” or “I’m so lucky to know your name early.” Either interpretation is a compliment to Wu Zao. The next four lines focus on praising on Wu’s excellent lyrics. Taiqing and Wu Zao never met in their life, but by letters, they could remain in contact with each other. At closure, Taiqing voiced her craving for Wu Zao’s recent work, which meant that she desired literary communication.

In second stanza Taiqing spoke out her regret that there were few understanding friends. Women scholars, just like male ones, yearn for understanding friends to have literary communication.

To become a scholar is not easy for women, as it requires much more time and efforts. At the beginning of the book Mingyuan shihua, Shen Shanbao wrote, “I think boudoir beauties’ study is different from that of (male) scholars, and dissemination is more difficult than that of scholars as well. Scholars study Confucian classics and history since childhood, and extend their study to poetry and rhapsody. They have fathers and brothers who teach them, and teachers and friends to discuss with, while boudoir beauties have no transmission from teachers like male scholars, and they cannot fully focus on studying poetry or prose. Therefore, unless incomparably intelligent, they will not be able to write poems.”296 These words reveal how hard Shen found it for women to write. She mentions specifically the significance of instructions from fathers and brothers and discussions with teachers and friends, so women’s communication may compensate for the lack of the latter. Their friendships

295 Wu Zao (吳藻 1799-1862), styled Pinxiang, also called Yu Cenzi, from Hangzhou, excelled at lyrics. She wrote Hualian ci (花簾詞 Flowery-curtain Lyrics) and Xiangnan xuebei ci (香南雪北詞 Lyrics from South of Scents and North of Snows).
296 Shen Shanbao, Mingyuan shihua, 1.1.
enlarge their connection with society, promote the exchange of information with the outside world and broaden their mind, all of which contributes to their writings.

As a matter of fact, since Xie Daoyun (謝道鸞) in the fourth century chanted on willow catkins, young talented women have developed a self-consciousness of being a writer since childhood. In order to achieve literary success, women poetesses generally worked very hard, and they needed to make the best use of their time. As Grace Fong points out, “the women themselves had to be creative with how they approached their literary endeavors, negotiating time and space outside what was required to fulfill their normative roles as dutiful wife and caring mother or doubling up their pursuit of learning with such roles.” When women conducted literary creation, “the actual writing activities often conflict with daily work and rest, or certain human affairs, thus, their writing time is generally fragmentary, which is different from men’s condition, because writing is their lifelong aspiration and career.” Consequently, most women choose to read and write at night. If they are busy and restrained during the daytime, then at night when all other family members are asleep, they can spend their time freely.

As time never stays for anyone, Taiqing expresses her anxiety to study and achieve fame in literature. In Taiqing’s poetry, she enjoys the peaceful night while she is alone and expresses her gratitude to it in her poems. Although sometimes

298 Fong, Herself as Author, 122.
300 Taiqing particularly likes reading at night, as she says, “Chilly boat and cold moon, shadows criss-cross. At this moment, when many families sleep sound, reading by lamp is especially interesting.” Gu Taiqing, “In Winter Facing Narcissus at Night, I Read Poetry of Zhongya Study, Using Rhymes of ‘Sitting in the Dew’ in the Anthology.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 149.
301 Plenty of examples can be found in Taiqing’s works. Take the poem below for example: “Harmonizing Xiangpei’s Poem ‘Facing the Moon on a Spring Night’” (Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 151)

I sat for a long time, completely forgot the night.
Late at night I am still reluctant to sleep.
Taiqing feels lonely at night, most times she makes good use of her time to read, write and meditate on life while sitting alone at night.

Tune: *Charming Eyes* “Sitting Up at Night”

Laugh at myself back then laboring hard at chanting poems,
Bygone traces are so hard to seek in dreams.
Several volumes of poems,
A few scrolls of paintings,
And this little stretch of time.

Strike broken the spitting pot, frequently scratch my head;
Wearing away former aspirations.
Now I’ve won:
A thousand strands of tears,
And a single anxious heart.

“Laboring hard at chanting poems” (*kuyin*, 苦吟), points out her endeavor to write good verses. In poetic history, there were poets famous for their assiduous work at poems, like Meng Jiao (孟郊 751-814), who once said “I studied at night till dawn without a break; Laboring hard at chanting poems makes the gods and ghosts upset,” and Jia Dao (賈島 779-843), who once said on enjoyable nights I recall my good friends. What we admire mutually are poems.

Here Taiqing enjoys the nights recalling friends and reading poems, and conveys her gratitude to the peaceful night.

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On enjoyable nights I recall my good friends.
What we admire mutually are poems.

302 In *A New Account of Tales of the World*, General Wang Dun (王敦 266-324) cherished lofty ambitions, but never had a chance. Once he was chanting Cao Cao’s lines “An old steed in the stable, Still aspires to gallop a thousand miles” (老驥伏櫪, 誌在千里) while striking the pot to beat time. He hit so hard that the pot was cracked all around the edge. See Yu Jiaxi, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 703.

303 Scratching hair usually refers to perplexity, or to being lost in thought while writing poems. It recalls to “The Gentle Maid” from the *Book of Songs*, “I can find her nowhere; Perplexed, I scratch my hair.” (愛而不見, 搔首踟躇) See Zhu Xi, *Shi jizhuan*, 26. It also recalls Du Fu’s “Spring View,” “I cannot bear to scratch my grizzled hair; It grows too thin to hold a light hairpin.” (白頭搔更短, 浑欲不勝簪) See Du Fu, “Spring View,” in *Quan Tang shi*, 7:2404.

“Two lines took me three years; Once chanting I shed two strands of tears.”

Li He was also distinguished for his deliberation on the right words. They all inherited the creative style of Du Fu who said “I’m not quite as other men, being simply fond of writing good lines; Unless I can compose really excellent ones that startle others, I will keep on trying right up to death.” They paid substantial attention to finding the best words or lines and consequently spent much time agonizing over each word. Although a woman, Taiqing has the same problem as Wang Dun, as there is also no chance for her to realize her aspirations. Time passes away silently when Taiqing sits up at night, and gradually wears away her aspirations. The poem also uncovers a sad tale; many women made efforts at first, waited for a chance, became disappointed, and then gave up their ambitions.

Here Taiqing also tells of her efforts in writing good verse lines, and the several volumes of poems and paintings are the culmination of her hard work. Taiqing gives us an impression that she worked diligently on poetry and, just as Hu Siao-chen regards, these talented women have a strong sense of poetic fame, authorship and an aspiration to show their assiduousness to others.

These women studied so hard that some of them supposedly died from the hard work of laboring at chanting poems. For instance, Yu Bi, a talented woman from Liangxi, spit blood and then died supposedly because of laboring hard at chanting poems. Another poetess, Wang Jinggu, liked reading history and writing poems. She lost her mother when she was young and lived in poverty. She practiced needlework and sold her work for food. However, as long as she had some free time, she chanted poems. On the night before her marriage, when her aunts and sisters were

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305 Jia Dao, “Inscribed below the Poem,” in Quan Tang shi, 17:6692.
306 Du Fu, “Seeing River Waters are Like the Sea, I Wrote Several Short Lines,” in Quan Tang shi, 7:2443.
307 Hu Siao-chen, “Cainü cheye weimian,” in Zhongguo nü shiren yanjiu, eds. Zhang Hongsheng and Zhang Yan (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 199-224. Although in this paper Hu Siao-chen deals with female tanci writers in late imperial China, I regard that the conclusion is also applicable here.
308 Shi Shuyi, Qingdai guige shiren zhenglüe, 8.6.
helping in preparing the dowry, she was still reading a history book contentedly by a
dresser. Some women even used “female bookworm” (niu shu chi, 女書癡) to
address themselves, and entitled their anthologies with this term, such as Qian
Huixiang’s Poetry of a Female Bookworm (女書癡書稿). From this we can see that
women no longer tried to avoid telling others of their love for study and writing, as
they actually wished the outside world could know about how hard they tried to
succeed.

The previous lyric is a typical example about the theme of “sitting up at night.”
Taiqing repeatedly shows her preference for reading at night, and we can say that to
her, staying up at night or sitting quietly is an important life style and study habit.
Aside from the ones with the title “Sitting Up at Night,” like Charming Eyes “Sitting
Up at Night” and Silk-washing Stream “Sitting Up at Night,” there are many poems in
Taiqing’s anthologies describing her experience of staying up at night. Her Song of
Gold Thread “Inscribed for My Little Painting Listening to the Snow,” The River Tune
Song: “Drinking Alone on Mid-Autumn Festival, Using Su Shi’s Rhymes” and other
lyrics on an autumn night are all good illustrations.

As a matter of fact, other Qing women often write on this theme as well, such as
Song of Pounding Clothes “Sitting Up at Night”310 and Silk-washing Stream “Sitting
Up at Night in Early Spring”311 by Shang Jinglan, A Dreamlike Song “Sitting Up at
Night” by Li Yuzhao,312 etc. They sit up late into the night, partly because they
cannot sleep due to longing for relatives or friends; however, on most occasions, they
are reading or writing, which manifests their literary endeavors. Taiqing attempts to
present a picture of her industrious study as a “scholar” by sitting at night quietly
when she is alone; at this moment she is not longing for a missing lover, but reading,
writing, and reflecting on life.

309 Ibid., 8.23.
310 Quan Qing ci: Shun Kang juan, compiled by Quan Qing ci Compiling Committee of Department of
311 Ibid., 232.
312 Ibid., 1448.
Aside from Taiqing’s poetry, her habit of staying up late for study and her endeavor in study can be supported by the picture “Listening to the Snow” by Taiqing, along with its inscription.

**Tune: Song of Gold Thread “Inscribed for My little Painting Listening to the Snow”**

金縷曲:自題聽雪小照

Reading alone by a faint lamp.  \( \text{兀對殘燈讀。} \)

Listen! By the window, \( \text{聽窗外，} \)
The wind is soughing and sighing; \( \text{蕭蕭一片，} \)
Cold sound hits on bamboos. \( \text{寒聲敲竹。} \)

Sit till late night, the wind gets even stronger; \( \text{坐到夜深風更緊，} \)
Dim walls and beanlike lamp flame. \( \text{壁暗燈花如菽。} \)

Feeling green sleeves, \( \text{覺翠袖。} \)
Thin clothes make me shiver. \( \text{衣單生粟。} \)
I hook the curtains and gaze into the night sky; \( \text{自起鉤簾看夜色，} \)
Weighing down plum branches, thousands of floating jades. \( \text{壓梅梢萬點臨流玉。} \)

Flakes of snow fall in a rush, \( \text{飛雪急，} \)
Whistling round the high house. \( \text{鳴高屋。} \)

Misty clouds, dim and hazy, blurred the empty gully. \( \text{亂雲黯黯迷空谷。} \)

Embracing the vast and hazy, \( \text{擁蒼茫} \)
Icy flowers and cold pistils, \( \text{冰花冷蕊，} \)
Indistinct are the woods and mountains. \( \text{不分休麓。} \)
Many poetic feelings frequently exist in my ears, \( \text{多少詩情頻在耳，} \)
Flower scents perfume people—so fragrant. \( \text{花氣熏人芬馥。} \)

Painted down specially, \( \text{特寫入，} \)
Upon a horizontal raw-silk scroll. \( \text{生綃橫幅。} \)
Why do I have this predilection for snow in my life? \( \text{豈為平生偏愛雪，} \)
It preserves the true face of the human world. \( \text{為人間留取真面目。} \)
By winding rails, \( \text{欄幹曲，} \)
I’m standing alone. \( \text{立幽獨。} \)

Stanza One first describes the sound of snow, then points out the chill that she feels, and ends with a visual portrayal of heavy snow. In Stanza Two Taiqing imagines a scene of the snowy world triggered by the sound of snow, and tells us that the snow brings her much poetic inspiration. She writes about snow from the perspective of “listening.”

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which demonstrates her novelty in composing poems. In this poem she stresses the state of “reading alone by lamplight.” At first when she heard the sound of snow striking on bamboos, she paid no attention. She was so involved in reading that nothing else could distract her. Taiqing continued reading until late at night when the wind became fiercer and she felt chilly. Not until this moment did she stand up and look outside to find out what was happening. She seems to impress the readers with her diligence by giving these detailed descriptions on her study experience on a late night. Furthermore, the book stack in the picture below strengthens such an impression. The lyric which comes with this picture gives us an even stronger feeling about her hard work on reading.

Figure 1. Portrait of Gu Taiqing

This painting\textsuperscript{314} is the only one from which we can see Taiqing’s real appearance; unfortunately, the original has been lost. Today we can only see its photograph in \textit{Cixue jikan} in the 1930s, and a drawing copy of the photo by Mr. Pan Qiezi. This picture is extremely precious, however, because it not only enables us to see Taiqing’s graceful bearing, but also conveys important and valuable information about her. The picture is painted by Taiqing herself, so the background and decorations were

\textsuperscript{314}This painting is from Zhang Zhang’s \textit{Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji}.  

143
carefully and consciously chosen. In the picture, there is plum, snow, lamp and books on a table. Taiqing is styled Meixian which literally means “Plum immortal,” thus obviously plum blossom is one of her favorite flowers. Plum symbolizes being noble, unsullied and elegant. As to snow, Taiqing says, “Why do I have a predilection for snow in my life? It preserves the true appearance of the human world.” (豈為平生偏愛雪，為人間留取真面目.) Her selection of items for the background of the painting reveals the poetess’ disposition and refined sentiment to a certain extent.

What most deserve our attention in this painting are the two stacks of books on the table, which manifests the owner’s identity as a scholar. Rather than women’s accessories or ornaments, such as mirror, cosmetics or needlework, Taiqing reserved space for books and lamp in this self portrait. Unsurprisingly, Taiqing often regards herself as a scholar rather than just a woman. Not coincidentally, most talented women in Taiqing’s age placed piles of books in their chambers. Through her poem lines we can see the phenomenon is prevalent, as in “Book piles on table, and a quiet chamber.” Those women scholars usually have stacks of books on tables in their chambers, thus “chamber-like study” has become a feature of a refined women’s room.316

These talented women not only study hard themselves, but also pay great attention to their daughters’ education. By Taiqing’s times, Manchus were so assimilated by Han Chinese that there was no longer any cultural dividing line between the two.317 Manchu rulers exerted all their strength to standardize women’s

315 Gu Taiqing, “On a Hot Summer Day I Visited Ms. Fucha Ruixian after the Rain and She Made Me Stay for Drink. When I Came Back, It Was Already Midnight. I Wrote This to Thank Her.” See Zhang Zhang, Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji, 119.
316 Many examples can be found in Shi Shuyi’s Qingdai guige shiren zhenglue, like Qi Peilan and her husband Sun Zixiao (6.1), Wang Yuru (6.9) and so on.
317 The most obvious distinction between the Qing Dynasty and other minority regimes (like the Yuan Dynasty), is that it accepted Confucian doctrines so thoroughly that their worship of Confucianism made Han society wince. This formed the core of Manchu viewpoints about women and relations between both sexes in the Qing society. See Ding Yizhuang, “Qingdai funü yu lianxing guanxi,” in Zhongguo lishi zhong de funü yu, eds. Du Fangqin and Wang Zheng (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2004), 352.
lives and marriages with Confucian ethics. When Taiqing was young, she received traditional Confucian education and absorbed conventional Confucian values. She believed that women should possess the four womanly virtues, but also believed that women ought to possess a good education.

On the 6th Day of the Second Month in the Year Wushen (1848), My Seventh Daughter Yiwen Married Mr. Fucha, I Wrote this to Show Her

戊申二月初六，七女以文歸富察氏，占此示之

The four virtues are women’s foundation, Women’s tenderness is handed down from the sages. Serve your mother-in-law with filial piety, Treat the servants tolerantly. Don’t learn laziness from your brothers, Study from your elder sister’s virtue. If you still have time beside needlework, Be sure not to neglect your books.

Taiqing normally absorbed Confucian culture and ethics, and generally accepted various constraints on women as determined by the patriarchal family system. In this poem, Taiqing has fully accepted the traditional four virtues. It is a poem to her daughter for her marriage, and it reveals Taiqing’s views about the roles of married women in family. As for herself, though she was a concubine of Yihui, Taiqing conducted herself as a good wife and mother, and played her role well in her family. She got along well with Yihui’s legal wife Miaohua, and waited upon Yihui’s mother respectfully.

Four virtues refer to proper virtue, proper speech, proper countenance, and proper merit, which were formulated by Ban Zhao in the Han dynasty. She wrote the Lessons for Women (女誡) to advice on how women should behave properly.

Below this line Taiqing notes, “Shuwen has no resentment towards life.”

For example, after Miaohua died, Taiqing once wrote “On the 3rd of the Seventh Lunar Month, a Year after Madam’s Death, I Sent My Son Zaizhao to Hold a Memorial Ceremony for Her, I Wrote Two Quatrains Mournfully” to convey her longings and sadness.

Taking Zaijun’s Bride to Visit Madam’s Grave
You overworked all day, expecting your son to grow up;
The son has matured and got married, yet you left forever.

率載鈞新婦謁夫人殯所
劬勞終日望兒成．
兒長成婚君永行．
However, in terms of education, Taiqing insists that women should study just like men. She asked her daughter not to forget to read and study after marriage. Aside from fulfilling responsibilities as a wife and as a daughter-in-law, women should always leave some time for study. When her daughter Shuwen got married, she composed four septasyllabic quatrains to exhort her to study more.

The Sixth Daughter Shuwen Is Going to Marry Mr. Xitala, I Wrote These to Show Her (#3) 六女叔文將歸於喜塔拉氏占此示之 其三

“No talent is womanly virtue:”
Don’t ignore study because of this saying.
Our poor family cannot provide you gold or jades to your new house,
Only Confucian classics as dowry.

Taiqing accepts the four virtues for women, but she discards the concept of “No talent is a womanly virtue” and instead emphasizes woman’s study. In her view, classical books can be used as dowry. She realizes that conventional society has brainwashed and shaped women’s thoughts and consciousness. Virtuous women were not expected to possess talents. She questions the concept, renounces the unreasonable statement, and voices her own opinion. Just as Paul Ropp observed, literate women easily experienced hopes and aspirations that conflicted directly with the demands of the patriarchal family system, and some women responded to these conflicts by raising questions regarding their society’s constraints on women.

Taiqing values education for her daughters and has them study together with her sons. Her poem “I Chanted in Late Spring and Wrote Four Lines; Coincidently, My Daughter-in-law, Daughters Shuwen and Yiwen were Learning Poems, They Asked

These eight years I often miss and admire your voice and appearance; 八載音容常戀慕.
Today I’m drenched with even more tears. 今朝涕淚更縱橫.

Zaijun was Miaohua’s son, and after Miaohua died, Taiqing began to take care of him. 321 Concerning Qing women’s complaints about the saying “No talent is a womanly virtue,” see Huang Yanli, Cong shici kan Zhongguo funü xintai (Hong Kong: Bowen shuju, 1983), 59.
Me to Write for Them, thus I Composed this Regulated Verse” has sketched a scene where all the women in her family study poetry together. In addition, she says in this poem, “Having no real learning, one will feel ashamed to see insects and fish,” where she stresses again that women should study.

Women’s education brought about popularity of women’s literacy, which made it possible for women to build up a network where they could exchange poems and talk about different artistic interests. Those women scholars also followed a male scholar’s lifestyle. They often ask their friends for inscriptions, and write poems in reply, which formed an important means of literary exchange among them. As she records, “In Spring Around My Visit to Fayuan Temple, I Wrote Five Poems in Reply to Assistant Minister Qian, Yunjiang Composed Six, Renlan Wrote Seven, and also Sent Me a Long Heptasyllabic Poem in Seal Characters. I Couldn’t Do that, thus I Composed Three Poems Again with the Former Rhymes.” This long title illustrates those women’s effort to compete with each other; apparently, regardless of the quality of their poems, they tried to excel in quantity, because quantity can also demonstrate their talents in composing poems.

It is universal that women scholars long for understanding friends, as understanding friends and opportunity for literary communication are extremely necessary to the growth of women’s poetic talents. We can find companionate marriages and famous families with many talented women very common since the late Ming and early Qing. Whether women cherish pleasant friendship or an understanding husband even impacted their writing style.

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323 Poetesses are always eager to make conversation and look for soul mates. Yu Xuanji, a representative of awakening women in the Tang Dynasty, frequently conveyed her depression about the difficulty of finding an understanding friend, as in “Red leaves on ground before the door, don’t clean them—waiting for an understanding friend” (門前紅葉地，不掃待知音. Yu Xuanji, “Writing My Thoughts and Sent to Someone,” in Quan Tang shi, 23:9047.) and “In the vast nine states, there are no intimate friends.” (茫茫九陌無知己. Yu Xuanji “Poem in Response to Someone,” in Quan Tang shi, 23:9053.)

324 Wang Yuru, good at poetry and painting, had much complaining lines in her verses as she did not marry a companionate husband. Shi Shuyi, Qingdai guige shiren zhenglüe, 6.9.
women create some space for them to make conversation and dispel literati depression, which was particularly vital to widow poetesses who might not have understanding husbands.

On some occasions, literati depression could kill a poetess if she had no understanding friends. It is recorded that a poetess called Wang Yunmei from Changshu of Jiangsu in the Qing died of melancholy when young, for the reason that she did not marry a man of letters.\textsuperscript{325} In Taiqing’s poems, however, there is no such depression, but only appreciation and gratitude toward her bosom friends.

Sometimes other woman scholar played a supervisory role to them; they would oversee their friend’s work and encourage her to work harder.

Crying for Xiangpei

Thirty-year-long feeling, as close as brothers;  歳載情如手足親，
Ask Heaven: why did it make this person die?  問天何故喪斯人？
In life you were courageous and chivalrous;  平生心性多豪俠，
A waste of great talents: you were a woman.  辜負雄才是女身。
The dreamland of Red Mansion is groundless,  紅樓幻境原無據，
Occasionally with brush, I write a few chapters.  偶而拈毫續幾回。
A long preface with excessive compliment;  長序一編承過譽，
Flowery letters sent to me frequently.  花箋頻寄索書來。
(Taiqing notes, “I have worked intermittently on a sequel to Honglou meng in several chapters, called Honglou meng ying. Xiangpei wrote a preface to it. She asked for it without waiting for the completed manuscript. She once chided me for my laziness and teased me, saying, ‘You are almost 70 years old now. If you don’t finish this book quickly, I’m afraid you will never be able to complete it.’”) When chatting, we hate that we are separated by several cities;

Holding your hands—I’m reluctant to leave.  話心每恨隔重城，
A word has become today’s prophecy unexpectedly,  一語竟成今日讖，
I want to be brothers with you for all generations.  與君世世為兄弟。

\textsuperscript{325}Shi Shuyi, Qingdai guige shiren zhenglüe, 7.1.
\textsuperscript{326}Below this line, Taiqing notes, “The sister died on the 11\textsuperscript{th} of the sixth lunar month, the first year of Tongzhi (1862), I called on her on the 29\textsuperscript{th} of the fifth lunar month, she asked me suddenly, ‘How can I repay you for your loving-kindness?’ I answered, ‘we are sisters, why do you talk about repaying? I hope we will be the same as now in our next life.’ She replied, ‘Not only in the next life, we’ll be brothers from generation to generation.’ I said, ‘The oath has been taken.’ Ten days later, she passed
Here Xiangpei’s role as a supervisor is obvious from Taiqing’s annotation. In frequent letters, she urged Taiqing to finish the book as soon as possible. There is no doubt her compliment and encouragement made Taiqing accelerate her work, although she was very old and blind by then. Taiqing finally finished her book *Honglou meng ying* and published it in 1877.

In conclusion, these women, as a group, present us with some aspects of their life as women scholars. Those women temper their boundless talents with unceasing efforts and create an affluent atmosphere within their limited space. In that era, writing became an ideological act to women, as by writing women could build another self and identity, and achieve great fame beyond their silent social roles as daughters, wives and mothers.\(^{327}\)

\(^{327}\) Hu Siao-chen, “Cainü cheye weimian,” 213.
CONCLUSION

In literary tradition male writers created an ideal woman’s image by emphasizing the beauty of their person and attire, insisting on the intensity of their feelings and loyalty, and by avoiding men’s presence. Meanwhile, women in reality are not always subject to men’s imagination. They have their own thoughts and self-recognition, especially when it came to the Qing dynasty, where we see more colorful images of women with different backgrounds and diverse voices.

Taiqing’s complete works make it possible for us to piece together her whole life, to understand her, and to shed some light on women’s life and writings in the nineteenth century. Just as mirrors can reflect the real world, most of Taiqing’s shi and ci poems tell us about her life experiences, and we can read Taiqing’s poetry as biographical materials that faithfully record her personal life, her social and literary communications with other talented women. She reconstructed a real and lively women’s world in her writings. Her writings also reveal her memories, dreams and aspirations in life. Her poetry constantly described outside sensations and inner feelings: memories of happy times, nostalgia for friends, desire to escape from mundane society and lingering pursuit of worldly happiness. Through this mirror we are able to perceive Taiqing’s mentality.

As Taiqing was greatly influenced by Daoism and Buddhism, her works are filled with Daoist and Buddhist thinking. Taiqing frequently claimed that life is just an illusion, temporal and transient, like mirror images, where shadows and dreams are all but insubstantial in nature. Her philosophical reflections enable her to transcend, claim room for spiritual freedom, and see herself as a free-spirited poetess. To Taiqing, it is very significant to preserve the purity of one’s heart. Her Daoist name “Taiqing” (太清) means “to be extremely pure and clear” or “great purity,” which indicates her aspiration to preserve the great purity of her heart-mind. And to her, writing is a process of polishing the mirror of her heart and mind. In other words, poetry is her mirror, and she diligently polished it to reveal the bright purity of her heart-mind.
Through her hard work, she was able to use her talents to achieve an everlasting fame in literature. Through Taiqing’s poems, we see her attempt and endeavor to establish a type of immortality through words. By presenting and reading Taiqing’s undying literary works, I try to understand her, appreciate her, and finally to add to my efforts to explore the important roles that Chinese women have played in both literature and culture.
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