

Writing from within a Women's Community:

Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) and Her Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life and poetry of the woman poet Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) within the context of a community of gentry women in mid-nineteenth century Beijing. This group of women was a “community” in the sense that their contact, sociability, friendship and poetry writing were meaningfully intertwined in their lives. The thesis is divided into three interconnected chapters. Two separate biographical accounts of Gu Taiqing’s life – one centered around the relationship with her husband, and the second around her relationship with her female friends – are reconstructed in the first chapter. This biographical chapter underlines the importance of situating Gu in the women’s community to understand her life and poetry. The second is comprised of a reconstruction of this women’s community, delineating its members and distinctive features. In the third chapter, a close-reading of Gu’s poems in relation to the women’s community focuses on the themes of *xian* (leisure), parting, and friendship. This chapter shows how each of these themes are represented by Gu and how her representations are closely related to the experiences of this women’s group.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse examine la vie et la poésie d'une femme poète, Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) dans le contexte d'une communauté de femmes nobles à Pékin au milieu du dix-neuvième siècle. Ce groupe de femmes est entendu comme « communauté » puisque les contacts, leurs relations sociales, leur amitié et leur écriture poétique les lient entre elles de manière significative. Ce travail se divise en trois chapitres. Le premier chapitre se compose de deux récits biographiques de la vie de Gu Taiqing – le premier s'intéressant aux relations entre la poète et son époux, et le second concernant les rapports de celle-ci avec ses amies. Ce premier chapitre biographique souligne l'importance de situer Gu au sein de la communauté féminine pour comprendre sa vie et sa poésie. Le second comprend une reconstruction de cette communauté féminine, en faisant à la fois une esquisse de ses membres, et en montrant aussi la particularité des traits de leur personnalité. Une lecture approfondie des poèmes de Gu en rapport avec cette communauté féminine va ensuite se concentrer sur les thèmes de *xian* (loisir), de la rupture, et de l'amitié. Ce dernier chapitre montre comment chacun des ces thèmes sont représentés par Gu et comment ses représentations sont intimement liées aux expériences de ce groupe de femmes.

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Writing from within a Women's Community:

Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) and Her Poetry

Introduction

The subject of my thesis is Gu Taiqing 顧太清 (1799-1877), a noted woman writer of the late Qing dynasty (roughly 1800-1911).¹ Gu's given name was Chun 春, but she was widely known by her style name Taiqing. She also had two courtesy names, Zichun 子春 and Meixian 梅仙, and a second style name, Yuncha waishi 雲槎外史.² She was born into a Manchu family, the Xilin (or Xilinjueluo 西林覺羅) clan of the Trimmed Blue Banner 鑲藍旗, and after her marriage, as a concubine, at twenty-six *sui* 歲 to Yihui 亦繪, a prince of the Manchu imperial clan, Gu resided only in Beijing.³

As is well documented, the late Qing was a period of substantial social change and upheaval – coastal areas were faced with the increasing presence of foreign commercial and military threats, and China was affected by the deterioration of an increasingly corrupt bureaucracy and the disruption of several severe internal rebellions.⁴ However, because Gu Taiqing was a woman poet of the “inner chambers,” these changes went

¹ The late Qing period includes the reigns of five Qing emperors: Jiaqing (1796-1821), Daoguang (1821-1851), Xianfeng (1851-1862), Tongzhi (1862-1875) and Guangxu (1875-1908). These reign names often occur in the titles of Gu's poems as an indication of the time of composition.

² There has been no evidence showing that Gu used different style names and courtesy names during different time periods of her life, but “Yuncha waishi” seems to be a style name that she used in her late years. See Zhang Zhang's preface to *Yihui Gu Taiqing shici heji* (hereafter referred to as *Heji*), 1.

³ I follow the Chinese way of counting age. A child is one *sui* when s/he is born. Yihui was a great-grandson of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (reign Qianlong). He inherited in 1815 the rank of a prince of the third degree. Yihui was a poet, a calligrapher, as well as a connoisseur. For more information on Yihui, see Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 386-387.

⁴ For general information concerning late Qing China, see Twichett and Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 10 (Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911).

largely unnoted in her writings. In fact, only when such social disorder directly affected her family members or close friends did she make references to them in her poetry.⁵

In general, the radical changes of the late Qing period did not have a negative effect on the flourishing of women's writing and literary activities, and Gu Taiqing's writings, like those of many other gentry women writers of the late Qing, were influenced more by the broader developments in women's culture in the late imperial period (1368-1911) than by the specific socio-political background of her own time.⁶ The late imperial period witnessed an unprecedented growth in the production of Chinese women's literature, a phenomenon reflected today in the ongoing rediscovery and research of women poets and women's poetry collections.⁷ According to Hu Wenkai's comprehensive catalogue of women writers, simply in the Qing dynasty, more than three thousand women writers have left behind over four thousand individual collections and anthologies.⁸ In contrast, the number of women known to have produced literary works in earlier periods of Chinese history are few and far between – Cai Wenji 蔡文姬(176?-early 3rd century), Zuo Fen 左芬(255?-300), Xue Tao 薛濤(768- ca.832), Yu Xuanji 魚玄機(ca.844-ca.871), Li Qingzhao 李清照(1084-ca.1151), and Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑真(1063?-

⁵ For example, see "Accompanying the Rhyme of a Poem from Xiangpei" 次湘佩寄詩韻, *Heji*, 163; "Thinking of Yunlin and Xiangpei on the Ninth Day" 九日憶雲林湘佩, *Heji*, 161; and the quatrain written when the foreign allied forces attacked Beijing in 1860, and Gu lost contact with her sister Xilin Xu and her friend Shen Shanbao, "On the Double Ninth in the Year Gengshen of Xianfeng (1860)...." 咸豐庚申重九, *Heji*, 168.

⁶ For more about the developments of women's culture in the Ming and Qing, see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, and Mann, *Precious Records*.

⁷ See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao*. Scholars such as Kang i-sun Chang, Grace Fong, Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann, Maureen Robertson, Ellen Widmer, and Zhong Huiling have been actively involved in the research of women's culture and women's literature in late imperial China. For a preliminary summary of the scholarship in this area, see Emma Teng's "The Construction of 'Traditional Chinese Women' in the Western Academy: A Critical Review."

⁸ These statistics are from Susan Mann and Paul Ropp, see Mann, *Precious Records*, 225; Ropp, " 'Now Cease Painting Eyebrows, Don a Scholar's Cap and Pin': The Frustrated Ambition of Wang Yun, Gentry Woman Poet and Dramatist," 87-88.

1106) are among the few still widely known. As Kang-i Sun Chang points out, “[n]o nation has produced more anthologies or collections of women’s poetry than late imperial China.”⁹ Chang attributes much of this change to “the male literati’s overwhelming support of contemporary women poets.”¹⁰ This hypothesis has been confirmed by historians such as Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko, who have also pointed to evidence from material culture, particularly the role played by the printing industry in the Ming-Qing era.

Gu Taiqing has been celebrated as one of the foremost women poets of the Qing. She was a prolific writer, leaving behind more than eight hundred *shi* poems and three hundred *ci* lyrics. In recent years, scholars have also demonstrated Gu Taiqing’s authorship of the *Honglouloumeng ying* 紅樓夢影, a sequel to the great novel *Honglouloumeng* by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1717-1763).¹¹ Gu’s *shi* poetry collection *Tianyouge ji* 天游閣集 (Collection from the Tower of Celestial Wandering), was named after the pavilion of the same name at the residence of Gu and her husband in Beijing. The title of her *ci* lyric collection is *Donghai yuge* 東海漁歌 (Fisherman’s Songs from the Eastern Sea), chosen obviously in parallel to the title of her husband’s *ci* lyric collection, *Nangu qiaochang* 南

⁹ See Chang, “Ming and Qing Anthologies,” 147.

¹⁰ See Chang, “Ming-Qing Women Poets,” 2. In this article, Chang also points out that there were men who opposed the publishing of women’s writings, such as Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠. But in general, the support from the male literati “was quite unprecedented.” For male literati’s support of women’s writing, also see Clara Ho’s article “Encouragement from the Opposite Gender: Male Scholars and Women’s publications in Ch’ing China, A Bibliographic Study” in *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past*, ed. by Harriet T. Zurndorfer, 308-353.

¹¹ See Zhao Botao 趙伯陶, “*Honglou meng ying* de zuozhe ji qi ta” (紅樓夢的作者及其它), *Honglou meng xuekan* 41 (1989), 343-51; Ellen Widmer, “Ming Loyatism,” in Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang, eds. *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, 366-396, and “*Honglou Meng Ying* and its Publisher, Juzhen Tang of Beijing,” *Late Imperial China* 23.2 (2002): 33-52; Wei Jianxun 魏鑒勛, *Mingzhu diechu* 名著迭出, 168-172; Zhang Juling 張菊玲, *Kuangdai cainü* 曠代才女, 165-184. The author of this novel used the pseudonym Yuncha waishi. The extant copy is the version printed in the third year of Guangxu (1877). Scholars have suggested two reasons for this sequel to be identified as written by Gu. One is that the style name Yuncha waishi also appears in one of Gu’s poetry collections. The other is that among Gu’s extant poems, there is one poem mourning her friend Shen Shanbao’s death, in which Gu mentions that she wrote *Honglouloumeng ying* and that Shen Shanbao composed a preface to it; see *Heji*, 169-170. The novel was reprinted in 1990, see *Guben xiaoshu* 古本小說集成, vol. 149.

谷樵唱 (Wood-cutter's Songs from the Southern Valley). Both of her poetry collections are arranged more or less chronologically, very possibly by Gu herself. However, the collections do not seem to have been published during Gu's lifetime, but rather circulated in manuscript form for several decades after her death; they appear to have been finally published in the early twentieth century.¹² Among the various extant manuscripts and published editions of Gu's poetry collections, three are worth our attention.¹³ One is a handwritten *Tianyouge ji* owned by Chen Shike 陳士可 (dates unknown); this edition is noteworthy because it apparently bears Gu's own annotations.¹⁴ Another is a printed version of *Donghai yuge* with Kuang Zhouyi's 况周頤 (1859-1926) comments, published by the Xiling Publishing House 西泠印社 in 1913. Kuang Zhouyi was a famous *ci* writer as well as a critic of song lyrics in the late Qing. He is believed to have modified and even deleted portions of Gu's works, so this printed version is not true to the original. Nonetheless, it was the most popular printed version of the time. The third significant edition is a manuscript of *Tianyouge ji* and *Donghai yuge* owned by the renowned Japanese sinologist, Naitō Konan (1866-1934), which provides evidence of the circulation and preservation of Gu's collections in Japan.

The primary source for this thesis is *Yihui GuTaiqing shici heji*, the combined edition of Gu Taiqing and Yihui's poetry collections compiled by Zhang Zhang 張璋 and published in 1998. This edition includes almost all the extant manuscript and printed

¹² Hu Wenkai notes that the publishing year for *Tianyouge ji* was 1910 and for *Donghai yuge* was 1913. As Ellen Widmer suggests, although these may not be the earliest dates, they are close to the earliest. See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai*, 800, and Widmer, "Honglou Meng Ying and its Publisher, Juzhen Tang of Beijing," 51.

¹³ For detailed information on different manuscript and printed editions of *Tianyouge ji* and *Donghai yuge*, see Zhang, *Heji*, Preface, 10-12 and Appendix 2, 702-706.

¹⁴ I have not been able to locate Chen Shike and this manuscript; all the information concerning it is from Zhang Zhang, see *Heji*, Appendix 2, 702.

versions of Gu's poetry collections, and is the most complete and comprehensive collection of Gu and Yihui's poetry thus far.¹⁵ Another important source for my study is Shen Shanbao's 沈善寶(1808-1862) *Mingyuan shihua* 名媛詩話 and *Mingyuan shihua xuji* 名媛詩話續集. These works consist primarily of Shen Shanbao's comments on selected poems or lines of poems by more than six hundred women poets from the beginning of the Qing dynasty to Shen's own time.¹⁶ They also include valuable records of Shen's personal contact with many women poets of her own day, including her relationship with Gu Taiqing.

As a prominent and prolific writer, Gu Taiqing's life and literary production have long attracted the attention of scholars. In order to locate my own study within current scholarship, I will summarize some of the principle studies of Gu's life and works.

Scholarly studies of Gu Taiqing's literary production can be roughly divided into two categories. In the first are the comments by traditional Chinese critics that emphasize Gu's poetic skills; these comments appear most commonly in the genres of *cihua* 詞話 and *shihua* 詩話.¹⁷ Because Gu was a renowned woman poet even during her lifetime,

¹⁵ Zhang Zhang spent sixteen years compiling, comparing, and collating Gu Taiqing and Yihui's poetry. In addition to Zhang's compilation, I recently rediscovered *Mingyuan shihua xuji* 名媛詩話續集 (A Sequel to *Remarks on Poetry of Notable Women*) in the series *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書, in which I found six poems written by Gu, one of which is not included in the collection compiled by Zhang. See Shen, *Mingyuan shihua xuji*, *zhong*, 2a and 21a-b. Among the six poems, the one not included in the edition compiled by Zhang Zhang is a seven-character regulated verse, a parting poem written on the occasion when Gu's friend Shen Shanbao left the capital in 1849. As for the other five that appear in *Heji*, four of them are grouped as a series under the same title, see *Heji*, 161; the other one has different titles in the two works: "Expressing My Emotions on the Ninth Day" 九日書懷 in Shen's collection, and "Thinking of Yunlin and Xiangpei on the Ninth Day" 九日憶雲林湘佩 in Zhang's edition. See *Heji*, 161.

¹⁶ The statistics is from Grace Fong, who has done much research concerning Shen Shanbao and *Mingyuan shihua*, see "Writing Self and Writing Lives," in *Nan Nü*, 2.2 (2000): 259-303, and "Real and Imagined Communities," Conference paper: Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. Washington D.C., April 4-7, 2002.

¹⁷ Entries on Gu Taiqing can be found in *Mingyuan shihua* and *Mingyuan shihua xuji* by Shen Shanbao; *Huifeng cihua xubian* 蕙風詞話續編 by Kuang Zhouyi; *Jinci conghua* 近詞叢話 by Xu Ke 徐珂(1869-1928), see *Cihua congbian* 詞話叢編, vol.5, 4219-20; *Xiaosanwuting cihua* 小三吾亭詞話 by Mao

comments on her literary production began to be written as early as the nineteenth century. Some of the earliest extant critical remarks on Gu's poetry can be found in the entries on her in Shen Shanbao's *Mingyuan shihua* and *Mingyuan shihua xuji*. Here Shen states, "All Gu's poems in *Tianyouge ji* are expressed with the spirit; they are never restricted to particular rules" (天游閣集中詩作, 全以神行, 絕不拘拘繩墨).¹⁸ She also points out that in Gu's poems, "the closure is most vigorous" (太清詩結句最峭).¹⁹ With respect to Gu's *ci* lyrics, Shen comments that they are characterized by "ingenious thought and clever imagination, often unexpected" (巧思慧想, 出人意外).²⁰ Shen's comments on Gu's poetry focus on two issues. One is the structural devices that Gu uses in her poems, regarded by Shen as both original and brilliant, particularly in the special attention paid to the closure. The other is the free spirit expressed in Gu's poems, which makes the poems appear to be not restricted by particular rules. Although Shen Shanbao only uses the term *shen* 神 and not *xing* 形, she is employing common critical terms used in discussions of poetry and painting, in which *shen* symbolizes the spirit and the content, *xing* refers to the rules and the form, and the former is always superior to the latter.²¹

Guangsheng 冒廣生(1873-1959), see *Cihua congbian*, vol.5, 4676-77; *Ranzhi yuyun* 燃脂余韻 by Wang Yunzhang 王蘊章 (1884 - ?), see *Ranzhi yuyun*, j.6.15b-16b. Most of the above and some concise excerpts on Gu and her writings that appear in various traditional sources and some modern scholarly works can be found in Zhang Zhang's compilation, see *Heji*, Appendix 5, 755-773. However, in Zhang's compilation, in the entry on *Mingyuan shihua*, the name of the poetry club, the Autumn Red Poetry Club 秋紅詩社, to which Gu Taiqing belonged, is incorrectly recorded as the Autumn River Poetry Club 秋江詩社, see *Heji*, 757; the name of the scholar Jin Qicong 金啓琮 is mistaken as Jin Qisun 金啓孫, see *Heji*, 772.

¹⁸ See Shen, *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.2b. In *Mingyuan shihua xuji*, Shen made similar comments on Gu's poetry: "[Gu's poems] dissolve traces of brush and ink; all proceed from the spirit" (直化去筆墨之痕, 全以神行). See *Mingyuan shihua xuji*, *zhong*, 21b.

¹⁹ See Shen, *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.4b.

²⁰ See Shen, *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.22a.

²¹ For example, in the chapter "Qingcai 情采" in *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, Liu Xie 劉勰(465-ca. 522) argues that a good piece of literature must be a collaboration of form and content, while the more important one of the two is content. See Wang Yunxi 王運熙 and Gu Yisheng 顧易生, eds., *Zhongguo wenxue pipingshi* 中國文學批評史, vol. 1, 157-163.

Another early characterization of Gu's poetry appears in Kuang Zhouyi's *Huifeng cihua xubian* 蕙風詞話續編, a sequel to his well-known work of critical comments on *ci*, the *Huifeng cihua* 蕙風詞話. In this work, Kuang praises Gu as comparable to the most famous Manchu male writer of *ci* lyrics, Nalan Xingde 納蘭性德 (1654-1685). He remarks that both Gu and Nalan are able to "pry into the profundity of [the *ci* lyrics of] the Northern Song" (直窺北宋堂奧). He further states that if one takes "style and tune" (格調) as the criteria, Gu in fact surpasses Nalan Xingde.²² Kuang's comments draw attention to two important issues. One is the view that Gu's *ci* style is close to that of the *ci* writers of the Northern Song dynasty, when *ci* developed into a literati genre.²³ Gu frequently composed song lyrics to match the rhymes of those by Northern Song *ci* writers, such as Liu Yong 柳永 (*jins* 1034) and Zhou Bangyan 周邦彥 (1056-1121), and her acquisition of *ci* lyric writing skills from emulating these poets was clearly reflected in her poetry.²⁴ Secondly, the comparison with Nalan Xingde serves to elevate Gu to a position of great prominence among Qing poets.²⁵ While these traditional comments on Gu's song lyrics successfully identify Gu's linkages to previous and contemporary poets, providing an exploration of the poetic tradition behind Gu's lyric practice, they are often fragmentary, too impressionistic, and too general.

²² See Kuang, *Huifeng cihua xubian*, j.2.9a-b.

²³ For more information on the evolution of the *ci* genre, see Chang, *The Evolution of Chinese Tz'u Poetry*.

²⁴ For example, see "*Shuangyefei*: Matching the Rhymes of Zhou Bangyan's *Pianyuci*" (霜葉飛: 和周邦彥片玉詞), *Heji*, 183.

²⁵ It was not Kuang, but another *ci* critic of the Qing, Wang Pengyun 王鵬運 (1849-1904, style name Youxia 幼遐, courtesy name Bantang laoren 半塘老人, a native of Guangxi), who first made this comparison; see You Zhenzhong 尤振中 and You Yiding 尤以丁, eds., *Qingci jishi huiping* 清詞紀事會評, 669. But because of the prestige Kuang enjoyed and his ample discussion about Gu's *ci* widely circulated, his appreciation of Gu's *ci* lyrics became a benchmark for later critics and his high regard for Gu's lyrics has been widely reflected in the writings of modern scholars. For instance, scholars such as Huang Yanli, Ma Qingfu, and Zhang Jiasheng all refer to Kuang's rather than Wang's comments on Gu's *ci*.

Studies in the second category are written by modern scholars who are either actively involved in compiling and editing Gu's poetry, or who are involved in the study of Ming-Qing women writers. Several of these scholars have produced studies focusing on Gu Taiqing's life.²⁶ Among these, Liu Sufen's 劉素芬 discussion of Gu's life from the perspective of her Manchu ethnic identity is one of the most important. By comparing the entries on Gu and her family members in *Yudie* 玉牒 (Jade Genealogy)²⁷ with the biographical information available in Gu's poetry, Liu points out that in Gu's case, inaccuracy in the entries in the Jade Genealogy was due to the conflicts between Han and Manchu cultures. Although born into a Manchu family, Gu Taiqing excelled at Han arts such as poetry writing, painting, and calligraphy. After her marriage into another Manchu family Gu experienced conflicts between Han and Manchu culture with several family members, including Yihui's son by his principal wife. Liu's article not only sheds light on significant events in Gu's life, but also helps the reader to further understand Gu's writing within a historical and familial context. While Liu's purpose is not to offer analysis of poetic texts, she does employ many of Gu's poems as the underpinning for several of her arguments. Surprisingly, however, there is no discussion of whether or how Gu's ethnic identity or the cultural conflicts between Manchu and Han are reflected in her poetry. In addition, some of Liu's conclusions are debatable. For instance, Liu claims that Gu had been to Guangdong and Hangzhou because descriptions of the scenery of these two places appear in her poems. However, my reading of these poems within the

²⁶ Liu Sufen, "Wenhua yu jiazu – Gu Taiqing ji qi jiating shenghuo" 文化與家族: 顧太清及其家庭生活 (Culture and Lineage: Gu Taiqing and Her Family Life); Manshu QiGong 曼殊啓功 "Shu Taiqing shi" 書太清事 (Writing on Things about Taiqing); Jin Qicong "Manzu nü ciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*" 滿族女詞人顧太清和東海漁歌 (A Manchu Woman Poet: Gu Taiqing and *Donghai yuge*); Ma Qingfu 馬清福, "Manzu nü ciren Gu Taiqing" 滿族女詞人顧太清 (Gu Taiqing: a Manchu Woman Poet); and Zhang Zhang and Zhang Juling's *Nianpu* 年譜 (bio-chronologies) of Gu Taiqing in their respective books.

²⁷ The Jade Genealogy is the record of the lineage of the imperial family during the Qing dynasty.

context of a women's community leads to entirely different conclusions regarding the extent of Gu's travels. This will be discussed in Chapter 1.

While Liu's article focuses on Gu's life, some scholars, particularly those influenced by recent Western feminist literary theory, attempt to explore Gu Taiqing's self-representation in her writings. One of these scholars, Huang Yanli 黃嫣梨, proposes to study Gu Taiqing through reading her poetry.²⁸ Huang's article is divided into three parts. In the first part, she offers a brief account of Gu's life; in the second, she draws conclusions regarding five aspects of Gu's character based on her reading of Gu's poetry: "elegance, sensitivity, emotion, benevolence, and optimism" (賦性高雅賢淑, 感覺敏銳細膩, 情感豐富爛漫, 宅心慈惠仁厚, 意識樂觀開明); in the third, she praises the genuineness 真, grace 雅, and casual elegance 瀟灑 of Gu's poetic style. The features that Huang proposes as definitive of Gu's character as well as her poetic style are not only rather general and vague, but they could also be easily used to describe many other Ming-Qing women poets.

Not as general as Huang, Deng Hongmei's 鄧紅梅 close reading of Gu's poetry reveals a contemplative and rational female persona.²⁹ Deng underlines the difference between Gu and other women poets of the time, and she suggests that Gu was distinct from other women poets in her transcendence of the emotional melancholy that was frequently expressed in poems by women, and in her manifestation of a contented self. Deng also tries to delineate the changes in Gu's poetic styles over time and she suggests that Gu's poetic style and the content of the poetry written after her husband's death

²⁸ Huang, "Gu Taiqing de sixiang yu chuanguo" (Gu Taiqing's Thinking and Her Literary Production) in *Zhuangtai yu zhuangtai yiwai – zhongguo fu nü shi yanjiu lunji* 妝臺與妝臺以外 -- 中國婦女史研究論集, 87-103.

²⁹ Deng, "Gu Chun ci" 顧春詞 (*ci* lyrics by Gu Chun), in *Nüxing cishi* 女性詞史, 454-488.

differ sharply from that written before. Deng also thinks highly of Gu's *ci* lyrics and claims that she was as prominent as Wu Zao 吳藻(1799-1863), a well-known woman *ci* poet who was Gu Taiqing's contemporary. Many of Deng's observations are original, but some of her conclusions lack solid textual analysis. For instance, while she argues that Gu's fascination with wine symbolizes her longing to be a "natural" woman (自然女性) rather than a woman restricted by "gender prohibitions" (性別禁忌), she does not offer any examples to support this claim.³⁰ The studies of both Huang and Deng are further limited by the fact that neither takes Gu's involvement with other gentry women into full consideration.³¹ As a result, neither study questions the seemingly contradictory representation of a contented self even in poetry written after the tragic event of her husband's early death. As I will show in my study, Gu Taiqing's relationships with other women provide significant clues that can lead to a deeper understanding of both her life and writing.

Published in 2002, Zhang Juling's book, *Kuangdai cainü Gu Taiqing* 曠代才女顧太清 (An Incomparable Talented Woman – Gu Taiqing), is by far the most comprehensive study. Zhang's book is divided into six chapters, in which she attempts to discuss Gu Taiqing's life and writings in six areas: Gu and her husband, Gu and her female friends, Gu and her children, Gu's *ci* lyrics, Gu and painting, and Gu and her novel *Hongloulou meng ying*. This latest publication not only provides a well-rounded picture of Gu's life and writing, but also suggests the potential for further study in many areas.

³⁰ See Deng Hongmei, *Nixing cishi*, 464-465.

³¹ In a revised version of Huang's article on Gu Taiqing in 2002, she points out Gu's friendship with some other gentry women. See Huang, "Gu Taiqing de sixiang yu shehui jiating guannian" 顧太清的思想與社會家庭觀念 (Gu Taiqing's Thoughts and Her Social-familial Concepts) in *Qingdai sida nü ciren* 清代四大女詞人, 52, 55-56, and 61.

For instance, Zhang shows in her study that Gu was a talented painter and had many poems inscribed on her own paintings and those by others. This suggests a new perspective on some of Gu's poems by focusing on the relationship between her paintings and her poetry.³²

Zhang Juling's study pays particular attention to the friendship between Gu and her female friends as well as its effect on Gu's writings, which is overlooked by many other scholars. Zhang focuses on the poetry club established in 1839 by these women, and draws our attention to three women poets (Xu Yanreng, Xu Yanjin, and Shen Shanbao), who seem to have had the most intimate relationships with Gu. However, as I will show in my analysis, Gu's relationships with her female friends began four years before the establishment of the poetry club in 1839, and the number of Gu's female friends was much higher than Zhang suggests.

While the coverage of the chapters is undoubtedly significant, however, Zhang's book suffers from poor organization. On several occasions, the content of one chapter overlaps with that of another. For instance, Gu's enthusiasm for painting and her experiences of viewing others' paintings are addressed in a similar way in both Chapter 1 and Chapter 5. Another problem is the repeated use of the same poems in different parts of the text – examples are sometimes given in full text twice or even more than twice.³³

In Western scholarship, there has not been much research devoted to Gu Taiqing and her literary production. Ellen Widmer's articles on Gu Taiqing focus primarily on

³² Although Gu Taiqing's paintings were not included in *Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists, 1300-1912*, according to Zhang Juling, some of her paintings are still extant. See, *Kuangdai cainü*, preface, 17.

³³ For instance, "*Cangwuyao*: Inscribed on my painting the 'Ink Peony Painting' on the Third Day of the First Month" (蒼梧謠: 正月三日自題墨牡丹) appears on both pages 66 and 154.

her novel *Hongloumeng ying*.³⁴ With respect to studies of Gu's poetic production, less than twenty poems have been translated into English,³⁵ and only Grace Fong's 1994 article "Engendering the Lyric" provides significant analysis of Gu's song lyrics. Fong's article is not exclusively a study of Gu, but it does raise two important issues that provide a point of departure for my study. First, Fong points out that Gu's poetry reads "like a record of her daily life because of the detailed prefaces she provided for the individual pieces."³⁶ I will show in my analysis that in addition to these prefaces, autobiographical references are also found in the poems themselves and in Gu's own notes 自注 to the poems. As Stephen Owen argues, Chinese poets wrote, and traditional Chinese readers read, under the assumption that poems were "authentic presentations of historical experience."³⁷ Therefore, the main assumption underlying my reading of Gu's poetry is that her poems are authentic representations of her experience, albeit mediated by poetic language and conventions. Secondly, Fong mentions that Gu was actively involved in a women's literary circle.³⁸ Although she does not elaborate on this point in her discussion, the observation suggests a new approach to the study of Gu's poetry by situating her writing within a women's community. I hope to demonstrate in this thesis that this is a more productive way of understanding Gu Taiqing's poetry and reconstructing her life.

Dorothy Ko's research on women's culture in late imperial China provides the background for studies of such women's communities. In her book *Teachers of the Inner*

³⁴ See Widmer, "Ming Loyalty and the Woman's Voice in Fiction after *Hong lou meng*," 366-396; "*Honglou Meng Ying* and its Publisher, Juzhen Tang of Beijing," 33-52. The title of her forthcoming article "*Honglou meng ying* and Three 'Women's Novels' of Late Qing" indicates that it will be another study of this novel, see note 11 to the article "*Honglou Meng Ying* and its Publisher, Juzhen Tang of Beijing".

³⁵ Sixteen poems by Gu translated by David McCraw, Grace S. Fong, and Irving Yucheng Lo are included in Chang and Saussy eds, *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 589-600.

³⁶ See Fong, "Engendering the Lyric: Her Image and Voice in Song," 135.

³⁷ See Owen, "Transparencies: Reading the Chinese Lyric," in *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, 57.

³⁸ Liu Sufen and Zhang Juling have made the same observation; see Liu, "Wenhua yu jiazu," 44 and 49; Zhang, *Kuangdai cainü*, 89-117.

Chambers, Ko shows that although women in late imperial China were still largely restricted to the domestic area, “they managed to create a meaningful and colorful world of their own within the constraints of their historical time and space.”³⁹ Reading and writing clearly played an important role in the construction of this world. In spite of the debates surrounding the appropriateness of women’s involvement in writing poetry, reading and writing were viewed as important aspects in the education of gentry girls, skills which would make the girls more valuable in the marriage market and eventually add value to the husbands’ patriline as they became the primary mentors of the next generation. This flourishing of women’s education and women’s writing in late imperial China potentially threatened a basic concept of patriarchal society that women were morally and intellectually inferior to men.⁴⁰ As Ko argues, the discrepancies between Confucian normative gender relations and the practice of gender relations in late imperial China allowed women to enjoy more freedom.⁴¹ For instance, some of women’s literary activities, such as literary gatherings and publication of their works, transcended the confinement of the family, and became social and public, or at least semi-public. Some women became the disciples of famous male literati such as Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798) and Chen Wenshu 陳文述 (1775-1845); and others established poetry clubs of their own, such as the Banana Garden Poets 蕉園詩人 of Hangzhou in the early Qing period.⁴² The formation of poetry clubs indicates that while many women continued to be isolated

³⁹ See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 150.

⁴⁰ See Ko, “Lady-Scholars at the Door,” 198.

⁴¹ See Ko, “Lady-Scholars at the Door,” 215.

⁴² On Yuan Mei and his female disciples, see Liang Yizhen 梁乙真, *Qingdai funü wenxue shi* 清代婦女文學史, 61-103; Zhong Huiling 鐘慧玲, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu*, 清代女詩人研究, 206-229; and Meng Liuxi, *Qu Bingyun*. On Chen Wenshu and his female disciples, see Liang Yizhen, 165-177; and Zhong Huiling, 229-238. On the “Banana Garden Poets,” see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 234-237; Zhong Huiling, 173-181; and Liang Yizhen, 23-34.

within their marital and/or natal families, some did find a way of connecting with others through the practice of poetry. Among them, Gu Taiqing is a salient example.

Gu Taiqing played an active role in a group of women poets in mid-nineteenth century Beijing. The interactions between Gu and these female friends were important motivating forces in her life and poetry writing (as they were for the other women). To the extent that their contact, sociability, friendship and poetry writing were meaningfully intertwined in these women's lives, I consider them as constituting a "community," broadly defined. In sociology, "community" is used to refer to a group of individuals who hold something in common – this can be a shared geographic area (such as "neighborhood"), a shared social class (such as "proletariat"), or a presumed shared identity (such as "a group of women").⁴³ My definition of "communities of women" is situated in the context of the flourishing women's culture of late imperial China and refers to those groups of women who shared each other's interests in literary activities, such as reading, writing, and painting.⁴⁴ The term "community" not only connotes belonging, but also indicates exclusion. Therefore, in my study of the "women's community" around Gu Taiqing, I will study not only the members of the community but also explore those who were defined by these women as "the other(s)" of the community. Although the function of a "community" can either be empowering – enabling its participants to exert power or to find their voice, or serve to reinforce existing power relations, in my analysis of Gu's women's community, I will focus on how it empowered its members to find their own voices and to support each other.

⁴³ See Taylor, *Public Policy in the Community*, 34-38.

⁴⁴ My usage of "women's communities" primarily follows Dorothy Ko, who defines the term in the context of seventeenth-century Jiangnan as women's culture built on their shared literary activities. See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 14-15.

Gu Taiqing's literary production in relation to this women's community will form the central focus of my thesis. According to my investigation, at least 168 of Gu's *shi* and *ci* poems can be identified as writings related to the women's community. In other words, out of every seven poems she produced, at least one is directly associated with the members or activities of the community. Based on my analysis of Gu Taiqing's writings (here I mean her poems and the prefaces to the poems) pertaining to this women's community, this thesis is divided into three chapters organized around three central issues:

1) The significance of women's community in the study of Gu Taiqing's life and writings: in Chapter 1, I provide two biographical accounts of Gu Taiqing's life, one based on her marital relation, the other on her relationship with her female friends. By doing this, I aim to show that situating Gu and her literary production in the context of a women's community is a more productive way of understanding her poetry and reconstructing her life.

2) The centrality of writing to the identity and dynamics of this community: in Chapter 2, I reconstruct the women's community around Gu Taiqing from the information contained in her poetry collections and additional available sources. I intend to elucidate the distinctive features of this women's community, such as its independence and self-sufficiency, its fluidity, and the central role of writing in it. I will focus on the intimate relationship between Gu's writing and this community.

3) The negotiated themes that run through many of Gu Taiqing's community-related poems: *xian* (leisure), parting, and friendship. In chapter 3, through close analysis of selected poems, I examine how these themes were written differently by Gu, and how these differences are closely related to the experience of this group of women.

Chapter 1. Gu Taiqing's Life: Two Biographical Perspectives

As observed by Stephen Owen, an individual's "*bieji*" 別集 (collected works) was a form of autobiography in premodern China. He also points out that such collections were made up of literary texts, poetry in particular, which were often edited by the authors themselves, arranged in chronological order, and "contextualized by prefaces and notes."¹ The poetry collection of Gu Taiqing is such a typical example. The collection is arranged in chronological order, very possibly by Gu herself; occasional poems are specially abundant, and many of them are accompanied by prefaces and notes which specify the occasions when the poems were composed. The proximity between Gu Taiqing, the poet, and her poetry leads us to examine Gu's life experience, as a prerequisite for and a key to understanding her poetry. In this chapter I will provide two biographical narratives of Gu Taiqing's life. The first biographical narrative is primarily focused on the axis of Gu's relationship with her husband, which draws on the works of several scholars who base their reconstructions on information gleaned from Gu Taiqing's poetry collections, *Yudie* (imperial genealogy), and Yihui's poetry collections. The materials I have used in this part include Liu Sufen's article "Wenhua yu jiazu – Gu Taiqing ji qi jiating shenghuo" 文化與家族: 顧太清及其家庭生活 (Culture and Families: Gu Taiqing and Her Family Life); Manshu QiGong's 曼殊啓功 "Shu Taiqing shi" 書太清事 (Writing on Things about Taiqing); Jin Qicong's "Manzu nüciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*" 滿族女詞人顧太清和東海漁歌 (A Manchu Woman Poet: Gu Taiqing and *Donghai yuge*); Ma Qingfu's 馬清福, "Manzu nüciren Gu Taiqing" 滿族女詞人顧太清 (Gu Taiqing: a Manchu

¹ Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography," 73.

Woman Poet); and Zhang Zhang and Zhang Juling's Nianpu 年譜(bio-chronologies) of Gu Taiqing in their respective books. In addition, I have relied on Shen Shanbao's *Mingyuan shihua* and *Mingyuan shihua xuji* as resources, which previous studies have not used. I have also arrived at additional information or different interpretations based on my reading of Gu's poems. Supplementing this standard account, I will provide an alternative biography reconstructed on the axis of Gu's relationship with her female friends, which will emphasize the effect the women's community had on her life and her writing, and also to lay a foundation for my later exploration of Gu's writings pertaining to this community.

I. Biography on the Axis of Gu Taiqing's Relationship with Her Husband

On the axis of Gu Taiqing's relationship with her husband, her life can be roughly divided into three phases: before her marriage to Yihui in 1824, her marital life before Yihui's death in 1838, and her life after her husband's death.

Very little is known about Gu Taiqing's life before her marriage to Yihui.² Even her own poems contain only a few vague clues and indirect references to her natal family and childhood life. Gu does mention that she had one older brother named Shaofeng 少峰 and one younger sister named Xiaxian 霞仙.³ However, she makes no mention of her parents, her birthplace, or the source of her artistic training in writing, calligraphy, and

² She was married to Yihui at the unusually "old" age of twenty-six. In her time, the normal marriage age for girls would be under twenty.

³ See the poem entitled "On the Fourteenth Day of the Fourth Month, with My Elder Brother Shaofeng, Younger Sister Xiaxian and My two Sons, Zhao and Chu...." (四月四日同家少峰兄霞仙妹携釗初兩兒....), *Heji*, 117. "Xiaxian," according to Hu Wenkai, was the courtesy name of Xilin Xu 西林旭, *Lidai*, 814. Hu also notes that she was the younger sister of Gu Taiqing.

painting. This paucity of information makes her early childhood a problematic area in accounts of her life.

Nonetheless, scholars, such as Liu Sufen and Zhang Juling, have gleaned some information regarding her ancestral background from various sources. It is now widely accepted that Gu Taiqing was the descendant of E'ertai 鄂爾泰(1680-1745), who was known as one of the most sinicized Manchu officials during the reigns of Yongzheng (1723-1736) and Qianlong (1736-1796).⁴ E'ertai was involved in the factional struggle with Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉(1672-1755), an official highly favored by Emperor Yongzheng, and the only Han official who received the honor of having his name celebrated in the Imperial Ancestral Hall.⁵ According to Ma Qingfu's study, E'ertai's nephew, E Chang 鄂昌, was the grandfather of Gu Taiqing. E Chang was involved in Hu Zhongzao's 胡中藻 case of *Wenzi yu* 文字獄(literary inquisition) and was ordered to commit suicide by the Qianlong emperor.⁶ Following E Chang's execution, his family declined rapidly in prominence. One of his sons, E Shifeng 鄂實峰 is thought to be Gu Taiqing's father. He occupied only relatively low positions such as aide on the private staffs of officials.⁷

⁴ On E'ertai, see *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 601-604; Hong Zhou 弘晷, *Baqi manzhou shizu tongpu*, 八旗滿洲氏族通譜, 232.

⁵ During the reigns of Yongzheng and Qianlong, E'ertai and Zhang Tingyu enjoyed almost the same recognition and both became leaders of officials who were their disciples and admirers. On the factional struggle between E'ertai and Zhang Tingyu, see *Cambridge History*, vol. 9, 255-257. On Zhang Tingyu, see *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 54-57.

⁶ The case was about a collection of poems entitled *Jianmosheng shichao* 堅磨生詩鈔 by Hu Zhongzao, which was alleged to have referred to the Manchus disrespectfully. As a result, Hu and several of his friends who had contributed to the publication of this collection or had exchanged poems with him were punished. This case happened almost ten years after E Ertai's death and has no direct relation with him, but E was still blamed posthumously for having fostered factional dispute. On Hu Zhongzao's case, see Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Ch'ien-Lung*, 94-96.

⁷ See Ma Qingfu, "Manzu nü ciren Gu Taiqing," 109-110; Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü* 1.

As the grand-daughter of E Chang, Gu Taiqing's original surname would be Xilinjueluo 西林覺羅. Gu's close friend, Shen Shanbao, clearly identifies Gu Taiqing as Manchu and refers to her as "Xilin Taiqing Chun" 西林太清春 in the main entry on Gu Taiqing in *Mingyuanshihua*.⁸ The reason why she was also known by the surname Gu is particularly obscure. Some scholars conjecture that in order to facilitate her marriage to Yihui, she had to hide the fact that she was the descendant of a criminal. Because Yihui was a prince of the imperial clan of the Qing dynasty, his marriage was under the supervision of the administrative bureau in charge of imperial family affairs, the *Zongrenfu* 宗人府. His status would have made his marriage to the descendant of a criminal quite unacceptable, even though he was only taking Gu as a concubine.⁹ Scholars also point out that because Yihui's grandmother was the granddaughter of E'ertai, Gu Taiqing was actually in the same generation as Yihui's aunt. Marriage between generations was viewed as a severe offense at that time and Gu's decision to have her surname changed may have reflected a need to avoid identification with this generation.¹⁰

As I mentioned above, some of Gu Taiqing's poems contain "indirect" references to her early life that allow us to reconstruct a "fragmentary picture" of her childhood. These references generally occur in poems whose occasion of composition "forced" her to recall the past. For example, in a note she wrote to the poem "Matching the Original Rhymes of My Husband's Poem 'Inscribed for the Shuangqiao New Residence on the Day of Qingming'" (次夫子清明日雙橋新寓原韵) she mentions that she had visited this

⁸ See *Mingyuanshihua*, j.8.2b.

⁹ See Ma Qingfu, "Manzu nü ciren Gu Taiqing," 110.

¹⁰ See Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 1-3, 37-41.

place (which was in Beijing) with her father twenty-five years earlier.¹¹ From this reference, it appears that Gu lived in or was in Beijing around the age of ten or eleven. The belief that Gu also lived in Fujian for some time is based on a song lyric in which she writes about eating lychee and comments that the occasion reminds her of her time spent in Fujian.¹² Several other *shi* or *ci* describing the scenery of Guangdong and Hangzhou have led Zhang Zhang and Liu Sufen to claim that Gu Taiqing had also spent some time in these two places;¹³ Liu further contends that Gu had also been to Yangzhou because of her *ci* on Yangzhou's scenery.¹⁴ However, as I will show below, my reading of these poems in the context of a women's community leads to a different conclusion: Gu Taiqing had not been to Guangdong and Hangzhou.

As with Gu's childhood, little is known about Gu's meeting with and her eventual marriage to Yihui. In Gu's own writings, such autobiographical references are entirely absent and only very obscure clues can be found in Yihui's poems.¹⁵ For example, in a song lyric inscribed for their residence, the Tower of Celestial Wandering 天游閣, Yihui wrote:

Today you are in the Tower of Celestial Wandering,
In years past, you had tasted much bitterness and grief,
I still remember when we pledged our love in the spring of Jiashen (1824).

¹¹ See Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 39. The poem can be found in *Heji*, 29.

¹² See Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 2. This song lyric is entitled "Dingfengbo: Thanking Yunjiang for Sending Me Honeyed Lychee" (定風波: 謝雲姜妹贈蜜漬荔枝有感), see *Heji*, 216.

¹³ See Liu Sufen, "Wenhua yu jiazhu," 46-48; Zhang, *Heji*, Introduction, 3. These *shi* or *ci* will be further discussed in the next section.

¹⁴ See Liu Sufen, "Wenhua yu jiazhu," 47. This *ci* is entitled "Qingpingle: On the Tenth Day of the Second Month, Madam Jin Sent Me Yuntai Vegetable...." (清平樂: 二月十日, 金夫人惠藝薑菜....); see *Heji*, 210-11.

¹⁵ For examples, see Yihui's song lyrics: "Shengzhazi: Recording Verses Composed in a Dream" (生查子: 記夢中句), *Heji*, 644; "Huanxisha: Fragrant Trees" (浣溪沙: 芳樹), *Heji*, 644; and "Jiangcheng meihua yin: Plum Blossoms" (江城梅花引: 梅), *Heji*, 645.

Through calamitous fate, we became a couple,
For half of our lives we have devoted our minds to writing poetry,
Gazing at each other, we are both in a dream.¹⁶

此日天游閣裏人，當年嘗遍苦酸辛。定交猶記甲申春。 曠劫因
緣成眷屬，半生詞賦損精神。相看俱是夢中身。

From this *ci*, it appears that Yihui and Gu Taiqing met and fell in love with each other before their marriage. It also suggests that their marriage was not easily arranged; they must have overcome many difficulties before they were finally able to be together. However, once together, Gu and Yihui enjoyed a companionate marriage. As we can readily observe, their poetry collections contain many poems matching each other's pieces on numerous occasions. Moreover, after his principal wife, Miaohua 妙華, died in 1830, Yihui remained content with Gu Taiqing and never married another principal wife.¹⁷ Finally, after Yihui died at the age of forty, Gu composed many poems mourning his death and recalling their happy life together.

Three months after Yihui's death, Gu Taiqing and all four of her children were expelled from Yihui's family residence by her mother-in-law. This episode is the third problematic area in Gu's life. It has been said that her expulsion was due to a scandalous love affair with the prominent poet, Gong Zizhen 龔自珍(1792-1841). However, this

¹⁶ This song lyric is from a series entitled "*Huanxisha*: Three *Ci* Inscribed for the Tower of Celestial Wandering" (浣溪沙: 題天游閣三首), see *Heji*, 655.

¹⁷ Yihui and Gu Taiqing were both born in 1799; Miaohua was one year older than them. She was married to Yihui at the age of sixteen and died at the age of thirty-three. According to the information contained in Yihui's poetry collections, Miaohua was also able to compose poems but her works are no longer extant. The relationship between Gu and Miaohua is very vague, since Gu seems to have attracted most of Yihui's attention after their marriage and all of Yihui's children born after his marriage to Gu in 1824 were by Gu. However, Gu did compose a poem recording an excursion to a temple with Miaohua and her mother-in-law; she also wrote several poems recalling Miaohua after her death. See, *Heji*, 6 and 68.

view has been refuted by modern scholars who have shown it to be entirely ungrounded.¹⁸ Recently, Liu Sufen has offered an alternative consideration. She suggests that the expulsion can be examined from the perspective of cultural conflicts between the Manchu and the Han. Liu claims that Gu was a very sinicized Manchu woman while Yihui's son by Miaohua, Zaijun 載鈞, who inherited as head of the family, was a stubborn Manchu youth who allowed no space for Gu to continue her Han cultural practices at home. As Liu suggests, Zaijun also may have borne hostility towards Gu because of his own mother's grief and loneliness after Gu came into the family.¹⁹ However, I do not believe that cultural differences alone can account for the speed (three months after Yihui's death) and the totality of the expulsion.

In the preface to the poem written on this occasion, Gu clearly records: "On the seventh day of the seventh month, my husband died. On the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month, according to the order of my mother-in-law, I, with my two sons – Zhao and Chu, two daughters – Shuwen and Yiwen, moved out of the family residence. We had no place to reside, so I sold my gold phoenix hairpin to buy a house. I composed a poem to record this." 七月七日先夫子弃世。十月廿八，奉堂上命携釧、初兩兒，叔文、以文兩女移居邸外。無所栖遲，賣以金釧購得住宅一區。賦詩以記之。 In the poem, after the line: "Wrongly accused for stolen meat, who will clear me from a false charge?" (亡肉含冤誰代雪), Gu adds a note indicating it is an allusion to *The Biography of Kuaitong* (蒯通傳).²⁰ In *The Biography of Kuaitong*, there is a story about a woman who was suspected of having stolen some meat, and because of this, unjustly expelled from the

¹⁸ For example, see Jin Qicong, "Manzu nü ciren," 4-9.

¹⁹ Liu Sufen, "Wenhua yu jiazuo," 54-58.

²⁰ See *Heji*, 104.

family by her mother-in-law. When the woman's neighbor learned about the incident, she (the neighbor) went to explain to the mother-in-law that it was her dog that stole the meat. So the woman was asked by the family to return home.²¹ Although in this poem Gu does not indicate what unjust accusation she received, this allusion suggests that the incident could be related to lost or stolen properties. It is also possible that Gu's mother-in-law and stepson Zaijun resented the favoured position Gu held long before Yihui's death – the "lost properties" may have simply been an excuse for them to drive Gu and her children out.

Both Liu Sufen and Zhang Juling suggest that Gu went back to the family residence no later than 1842, four years after she was driven out. Gu's poems indicate that she was actually back waiting on her mother-in-law in 1840. In 1842, she invited her female friends to a poetry gathering at the Tower of Celestial Wandering.²² According to Liu Sufen, after her husband's death, Gu Taiqing spent most of her time and energy on educating her children and arranging their marriages.²³ However, as I will show in the next section, in addition to her maternal devotion, Gu was also actively interacting with many women poets. This female community became an indispensable part of her life after Yihui's death. Gu Taiqing died at the age of seventy-nine, and was buried with her husband at Nangu 南穀.²⁴

²¹ See Ban Gu 班固(32-92), *Hanshu* 漢書, vol.7, 2166.

²² Jin Qicong claims that Gu went back to the family residence twenty years later; Zhang Juling and Liu Sufen claim that Gu went back to the family residence four years later. See Jin, "Manzu nü ciren," 6; Liu Sufen, "Wenhua yu jiazhu," 54; Zhang Juling, *Kuangdai cainü*, 22-23. For the poem concerning Gu waiting on her mother-in-law, see *Heji*, 122; for the poem recording the poetry gathering of Gu and her female friends, see *Heji*, 134. Although this poem itself is not dated, it belongs to the batch written in the year of Renyin (1842).

²³ See Liu Sufen, "Wenhua yu jiazhu," 58-61.

²⁴ Nangu is in the suburb of Beijing, to the west of the Yongding River 永定河, east of Mount Dafang 大房山, and close to the Tiantai Temple 天臺寺. Yihui had decided to make it the family burial ground. See *Heji*, 35.

II. Alternative Biography on the Axis of Gu Taiqing's Relationship with Her Female Friends

This biography is not meant to be a substitute for the “traditional” biography based on the axis of Gu Taiqing's relationship with her husband, but aims to offer an alternative perspective and emphasis in understanding Gu Taiqing's life. The value of this alternative reconstruction of her life lies in three areas. First, it helps to explain Gu's literary activity in the period following her husband's death. Specifically, it explains why Gu remained so prolific and presented such a contented self in her writings even after her husband's death. It will also help to elucidate some prevalent themes in her poetry of this period. Among the poems written after her husband's death (about half of her entire corpus), two themes are prevalent: on the one hand, she mourns Yihui's death; on the other, she celebrates her friendship with other women by recording her interactions with them.

Secondly, it will enable us to clarify some details concerning Gu Taiqing's early life. For example, while Gu is said to have lived in the south, a careful reading of her poetry in the context of the women's community makes it doubtful that she ever lived in Guangdong and Hangzhou. In the song lyric that Liu Sufen and Zhang Zhang use as evidence that Gu once lived in Guangdong, the lines in question read: “*Yue* mountains and the Pearl River are both sceneries of past years,/ [Madam Kang] Sent the painting to female friends in the capital, to have it inscribed fully with poems” (粵嶠珠江當年景, 寄都門、女伴 題詩滿).²⁵ Because “*Yue*” is the ancient name for Guangdong and the Pearl River is located in Guangdong, Liu and Zhang surmise that Gu had lived in Guangdong. Liu even insists that Gu maintained her relationship with her female friends

²⁵ See “*Hexinliang*: Madame Kang Jiemei Enjoins me to Inscribe on the Painting ‘Whiling away the Summer under the Shade of the Banian Tree’” (賀新涼: 康介眉夫人囑題榕陰消夏圖), *Heji*, 216.

while she was there because she asked them to inscribe her painting with poems.²⁶ However, their reading completely ignores the fact that this *ci*, entitled “Madame Kang Jiemei Enjoins me to Inscribe on the Painting ‘Whiling away the Summer under the Shade of the Banyan Tree’” (康介眉夫人囑題榕陰消夏圖), was inscribed on a painting in response to the request of Madame Kang Jiemei. Inscribing poems on each other’s paintings was a common literary activity in the women’s community with which Gu Taiqing was associated. Given this background, it is apparent that this painting was not painted by Gu – the description of the mountains and waters in Guangdong could be an indication of Madame Kang’s hometown, or simply a representation of the images in the painting.²⁷ A reading of this poem as a literary activity in the context of the women’s community suggests that it is not related to Gu’s place of residence in the past.

A similar criticism can be raised in regard to the assertion by both Liu Sufen and Zhang Zhang that Gu Taiqing once lived in Hangzhou because the end of one of her poems has the note: “Thinking of Early Plum Blossoms by West Lake” (憶西湖早梅).²⁸ They are right to locate “West Lake,” one of the most famous sightseeing places in China, in Hangzhou, but they fail to notice that this poem was an exercise written in the poetry club 社中課題 that Gu and her women friends formed in Beijing. “Thinking of Early Plum Blossoms by West Lake” was the topic they had to write a poem on, and the next poem in the same poetic series has the topic “Red Leaves” indicated at the end. Both poems were noted to be written on the occasion of poetic exercise of the poetry club. Such poetic exercise required a poet to compose poems about a given topic, and/or use a

²⁶ See Liu Sufen, “Wenhua yu jiazu,” 48.

²⁷ I have not been able to identify Madame Kang, or the painting mentioned in this poem.

²⁸ See *Heji*, 110.

given rhyme word. The poet was not, however, required to reflect his or her real life experience in the poem; it was rather an exercise of the imagination.

Thirdly, reconstructing an alternative biography on the axis of Gu's relationship with her female friends highlights another series of events – the interaction with other women poets in Gu's life, and underlines the effects of these events on her life. On this axis, we can see distinct periods of Gu's life from these events, divided roughly into five phases. The first phase was prior to her encounter with Xu Yanjin 許延錦 (courtesy Yunjiang 雲姜), Shi Shanzhi 石珊枝, and Li Jiezu 李介祖 (courtesy Renlan 纫蘭) – three women who became her close friends in 1835. The second phase was between 1835 and 1837, a period during which she enjoyed the friendship of these women. This period ended as these women began to leave the capital with their husbands in 1837. The third phase was between 1837 and 1839; during this period Gu's husband died and many of her friends were not in Beijing, but she began to develop relationships with some other women poets. The fourth phase was between 1839, when she and her female friends established a poetry club of their own, and 1869, when one of her most intimate friends Xiang Xun 項巽 (courtesy Pingshan 屏山) died. The last phase was from 1869 until her death in 1877, when Gu was in her seventies and her women friends either passed away or lost contact with Gu.

The first phase, before Gu developed friendships with other women poets, includes her childhood years and the first eleven years of her married life. Despite the length of this period, we find relatively few poems. Only one *juan* of *shi* poems and about 30 out of her more than 300 *ci* lyrics can be identified as having been written in this

period.²⁹ The prevalent themes in her poetry of this period were those matching the poetic works of her husband or renowned poets of the past. In other words, many were literary exercises. In this period, Gu also wrote poems to her younger sister Xilin Xu, who later became part of the women's community with which Gu was associated.³⁰

The second phase started with Gu Taiqing's encounter with Xu Yanjin, Shi Shanzhi, and Li Jiezu, who all hailed from prominent scholar-official families from the south. Gu met them on an excursion to view crab apple flowers at the Fayuan Temple 法源寺 in 1835. This phase ends in the autumn of 1837 when these women friends began to leave the capital. This period, during which Gu composed more than two *juan* of *shi* poems and two *juan* of *ci* lyrics in just two years and a half, was the first high point in her poetic production.

Xu Yanjin was from Qiantang, Zhejiang, and was the daughter-in-law of Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849, courtesy name Boyuan 伯元, style name Yuntai 芸臺), who was one of the most famous scholars and a high official of the late Qing.³¹ Her mother, Liang Desheng 梁德繩 (1771-1847, courtesy name Chusheng 楚生, style name Guchunxuan 古春軒老人), was a well-known woman poet from Qiantang.³² Xu Yanjin and her elder sister Xu Yanreng 許延礪 (courtesy name Yunlin 雲林) were both skilled in poetry,

²⁹ *Tianyouge ji* has seven *juan* and *Donghai yuge* has six *juan*. Although the number of poems in each *juan* varies, it does not vary much. Thus the average number, around 120 poems in each *shi juan* and around 50 *ci* lyrics in each *ci juan*, can still provide a rough number of poems that Gu produced if we estimate that according to *juan* numbers.

³⁰ One of these poems is entitled "An excursion with my seventh sister Xiaxian to the Wanshou Temple after the rain in the late spring of Jichou (1829)" (己丑暮春雨后同霞仙七妹游萬壽寺作), see *Heji*, 7.

³¹ On Ruan Yuan, see *Eminent Chinese*, 399-402.

³² Liang was known as a learned poet and her poetry collection is entitled *Guchunxuan shicha* 古春軒詩鈔. She was also the writer who completed the *tanci* narrative *Zaisheng Yuan* 再生緣 by Chen Duansheng 陳端生 (1751-1796?). See Hu Wenkai, 544.

painting, music and seal-carving. The two sisters each had published a poetry collection.³³

Shi Shanzhi, a native of Suzhou, Jiangsu, was the daughter of the famous scholar-official as well as calligrapher – Shi Yunyu 石韞玉 (1756-1837, courtesy name Zhiru 執如, style name Duxue laoren 獨學老人).³⁴ Shi Shanzhi was the wife of Xu Naipu 許乃普 (d.1866, style name Diansheng 滇生), a one-time President of the Board of War 兵部尚書.³⁵

Because Xu Naipu's mother adopted Gu Taiqing as her daughter, in Gu's poetry, she addresses Xu as her sixth brother.³⁶ Li Jiezu, also from the south, was the daughter-in-law of Qian Yiji 錢儀吉 (1783-1850, courtesy name Airen 藹人, style name Kanshi 崑石), a one-time supervising censor of the Board of Revenue and Population 戶部給事中, and the author and compiler of many works, including the *Guochao beizhuan ji* 國朝碑傳集.³⁷

Gu recorded this encounter with Xu Yanjin, Shi Shanzhi and Li Jiezu in a poem entitled “When viewing crab apple flowers at the Fayuan Temple, I met Ruan Xu Yunjiang, Xu Shi Shanzhi, and Qian Li Renlan. I immediately presented them with two poems matching the rhymes of the poem by the venerable Qian Baifu carved on the wall” (法源寺看海棠，遇阮許雲姜，許石珊枝，錢李紉蘭；即次壁刻錢百福老人詩韻二首

³³ See the entry on Xu Yanren and Xu Yanjin's father – Xu Zongyan 許宗彥 (1768-1819)— in *Eminent Chinese*, 324, and entries on Xu sisters in Hu Wenkai, 560. Xu Yanjin's poetry collection is entitled *Yutingxuan shichao* 魚聽軒詩鈔 and Xu Yanren's is entitled *Fulianshi ji* 福連室集.

³⁴ On Shi Yunyu, see *Eminent Chinese*, 658-59.

³⁵ Not much information on Xu Naipu is available except that he was the editor of *Huanhai zhinan* 宦海指南. Zhang Zhang mentions that Xu also left behind a collection of writings entitled *Kanxizhai ji* 堪喜齋集. See, *Heji*, Appendix 7, 787.

³⁶ See the entry on Xu Naipu in Zhang Zhang of people who were part of Gu and Yihui's social network, *Heji*, Appendix 7, 787.

³⁷ On Qian Yiji, see *Eminent Chinese*, 151.

贈之).³⁸ In the poem, Gu wrote: “Encountering beautiful ladies from Jiangnan by chance/.... I composed poems and sent them to those who share my interests” (邂逅江南秀,.... 題詩寄同好).³⁹ According to the title and the poem, at their first meeting, these women probably chatted about their family backgrounds, and talked about their common interests, such as poetry writing.

As can be observed in Gu’s poems, after their first meeting, these women immediately began composing poems to present to each other, exchanging small gifts, and arranging gatherings. This can be illustrated by the titles of the following poems:

“Three Poems Using the Rhyme Word of the Previous Poem Inscribed on a Fan Painted with Crab apple Flowers in Response to Yunjiang’s Request”

疊前韻題畫海棠扇答雲姜三首(*Heji*, 49)

“Thanking Yunjiang for Presenting Me Food”

謝雲姜惠食物 (*Heji*, 52)

“A Poem Composed at the Gathering with Shanzhi and Renlan in Yunjiang’s Room of Eastern Warmth”

同珊枝、紉蘭集雲姜東暖室作 (*Heji*, 61)

At the same time, Gu’s circle of acquaintances quickly expanded to include other women poets whom she met through the social and family networks of these three female friends. For example, she became familiar with Xu Yanreng, the elder sister of Xu Yanjin, Liang

³⁸ To mention the surname of her husband before her own name was sometimes practiced in referring to a woman in premodern China. “Qian Baifu laoren” was Qian Zai 錢載 (1708-1793, courtesy name Kunyi 坤一, style name Tuoshi 葦石), a one-time vice-president in the Board of Ceremonies and a famous painter during the Qianlong period. Qian Zai actually came from the same Qian family, which Li Jiezu was married into. See *Eminent Chinese*, 156.

³⁹ See *Heji*, 49.

Desheng, the mother of Xu Yanreng and Xu Yanjin, and Ruan Enluan 阮恩灤 (style name Shourong 手蓉), Xu Yanjin's daughter.

With her extended social network, Gu Taiqing also became more aware of other women's writings. Not only did she inscribe a poem on Xu Yanreng's poetry collection, she also had poems inscribed on Wu Zao's 吳藻 (1799-1863, courtesy name Pingxiang 蘋香) *ci* lyric collection, Zhang Xiyi's 張錫英 (?-?, courtesy name Mengti 孟緹) painting, and Li Peijin's 李佩金 (early 19th century, courtesy name Renlan 纫蘭) poetry collection.⁴⁰ She also entrusted Xu Yanreng to ask her cousin Wang Duan 汪端 (1793-1838, courtesy name Yunzhang 允莊) to inscribe poems on her own portrait. Wu Zao, Zhang Xiyi, Li Peijin and Wang Duan were all celebrated contemporary women poets in Jiangnan, with whom Gu had never met. Wu Zao was a native of Renhe (Hangzhou), Zhejiang, who was born into a merchant household and was married to a merchant. She was famous for her *ci* lyrics and her *zaju* drama *Qiaoying* 喬影. The two *ci* collections she left behind were *Huanlian ci* 花簾詞 and *Xiangnan xuebei ci* 香南雪北詞. Zhang Xiyi was a native of Yanghu, Jiangsu; she was one of the four talented daughters of Zhang Qi 張琦 (1764-1833) – Zhang Shanying 張綽英 (courtesy name Weiqing 緯青), Zhang Xiyi, Zhang Lunying 張綸英 (courtesy name Wanxun 婉紳), and Zhang Wanying 張紈英 (courtesy name Ruoyi 若綺), who all excelled at writing and calligraphy. Her poetry collection was entitled *Danjuxuan shigao* 澹菊軒詩稿. Li Peijin was a native of Changzhou, Jiangsu, who was known as “the Autumn Geese Poet” 秋雁詩人 because of the four famous poems she wrote entitled “Autumn Geese.” Her collection of verse

⁴⁰ This is to be distinguished from Gu's close friend Li Jiezu, whose courtesy name is also Renlan.

was *Shengxiangguan shici* 生香館詩詞. Wang Duan was a native of Qiantang; she was the daughter-in-law of the well-known patron of women's writing – Chen Wenshu 陳文述, and the niece of Liang Desheng. Wang Duan was reputed for her historical learning and insightful literary judgments as shown in an anthology of Ming poetry by men compiled by her – *Ming sanshi jia shixuan* 明三十家詩選. Her writings were published posthumously as *Ziranhaoxuezhai ji* 自然好學齋集.⁴¹

During this period, the two most prevalent themes in Gu's poetry writing were her engagements with her female friends and her husband. The increasing number of poems matching her husband's was primarily due to Yihui's dismissal from office in 1835, after which he was able to spend substantially more time with Gu at home. As represented in her poetry, this period of Gu's life was busy and joyful. However, beginning in late 1836 and early 1837, a new topic began to appear in Gu's poetry: seeing her female friends off. As related in Gu's poetry, Xu Yanjin left for Yangzhou on the seventh day of the first month in 1837; on the fifth day of the seventh month in the same year, Shi Shanzhi left for Wulin 武林 (Hangzhou); and in the autumn of the same year, Li Jiezu left for Daliang 大梁 (Kaifeng).

In less than one year, three of her most intimate friends left the capital, and the grief at separation gradually became one of the main themes in Gu Taiqing's poetry. For instance, concerning Xu Yanjin's departure, Gu wrote three *shi* poems and two *ci* lyrics:

⁴¹ On Wu Zao, see Hu Wenkai 317, *Women Writers* 601-2, , *Mingyuan shihua*, j.6.7b-10b, 25b-26b; on Zhang Xiying and her sisters, see Hu Wenkai 530-31, *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.6b-12b; on Li Peijin, see Hu Wenkai 330, *Women Writers* 566, *Mingyuan shihua*, j.4.4a; on Wang Duan, see Hu Wenkai 357, *Women Writers* 577-78, and , *Mingyuan shihua*, j.6.4b-7b. For Gu's poems inscribed on their poetry collections or paintings, see *Heji*, 206, 282, and 206. For Wang Duan's poems inscribed for Gu's portrait, see Wang Duan's *Ziranhaoxuezhai shichao* 自然好學齋詩鈔, j.10.33a-34b.

“Hearing that Yunjiang will Return South on the Ninth Day of the New Spring, I Quickly Composed this”

聞雲姜定于明春九日南旋賦此 (*Heji*,81)

“At Year’s End, I Send this to Yunlin in the South of the City, as I Present this to Yunjiang to Say Farewell”

歲暮寄雲林城南兼送雲姜 (*Heji*,83)

“At the Guanyin Temple in the Snow on the Seventh Day of the First Month, Seeing Yunjiang and Her Husband off as They Accompany Madame Xie’s Coffin back to Yangzhou”

人日雪中觀音院送雲姜夫婦扶謝太宜人柩歸揚州 (*Heji*,86)

“*Sijiake*: On the Ninth Day of the Twelfth Month, with Yunlin, Yunjiang, Renlan and Peiji, We Gathered at Shanzhi’s Place. At that Time, Yunjiang was about to Leave; Peiji Played ‘Yangguan sandie,’⁴² and We Enjoyed Ourselves for a Whole Day. On My Way Home, the City’s Gate was about to be Closed, I Chanted this Poem in the Carriage”

思佳客: 臘九日, 同雲林、雲姜、紉蘭、佩吉集于珊枝齋中, 時雲姜行有日矣, 佩吉鼓陽關三疊, 盡一日歡。歸途城門將闔, 車中口占 (*Heji*,224)

“*Manjianghong*: Seeing Yunjiang off to the South at the Guanyin Temple on the Seventh Day of the First Month”

滿江紅: 人日觀音院餞雲姜南歸 (*Heji*,227)

⁴² “Yangguan sandie” was commonly performed on the occasion of parting.

Gu's poems and song lyrics indicate that the reason for Xu Yanjin's departure was to accompany Xu's mother-in-law, Madame Xie's coffin back to Yangzhou for burial. The reason for Shi Shanzhi's departure is vague, but according to a poem by Gu, it may have been to attend her father's funeral.⁴³ Li Jiezu left Beijing when her father-in-law was dismissed from his office in 1837 and accepted an offer to teach in the *Daliang shuyuan* 大梁書院 (the School of Daliang).⁴⁴

The third phase of Gu Taiqing's life was the two-year period between 1837 and 1839. Because of the departure of her intimate friends, her output declined sharply: Gu composed less than one *juan* of *shi* and no more than one *juan* of *ci* during this period. The death of Yihui in 1838, actually brought her writing to a complete standstill for some time. As Gu states in the preface to a poem written after her husband's death, "After my husband's death, I intend not to compose poems" (自先夫子薨逝后, 意不爲詩).⁴⁵

Among the poems of this period, the predominant theme is Gu Taiqing's longing for her female friends who had left Beijing. This theme is illustrated by the following titles:

"*Langtaosha*: On the Twenty-Seventh Day of the First Month, Hearing the Geese, I Thought of Yunjiang"

浪淘沙: 正月廿七聞雁憶雲姜 (*Heji*, 229)

"*Genglouzi*: Thinking of Yunlin"

⁴³ See "On a Winter's Day, Receiving Shanzhi's letter on Her Arrival at Gusu" (冬日接珊枝舟抵姑蘇信), *Heji*, 98.

⁴⁴ See Mao Guangsheng's note to Gu's poem "When viewing crab apple flowers at the Fayuan Temple, I met Ruan Xu Yunjiang, Xu Shi Shanzhi, and Qian Li Renlan. I immediately presented them with two poems matching the rhymes of the poem by the venerable Qian Banfu carved on the wall" (法源寺看海棠, 遇阮許雲姜, 許石珊枝, 錢李纫蘭; 即次壁刻錢百福老人詩 韵二首贈之), *Heji*, 49.

⁴⁵ See "After my husband's death, I do not have the intention to compose poems...." (自先夫子薨逝后, 意不爲詩....), *Heji*, 103.

更漏子：憶雲林 (*Heji*, 230)

“*Lan’ganwanglixin*: Hearing the Sound of the Rain, I Thought of Yunlin”

欄杆萬裏心：聽雨憶雲林 (*Heji*, 234)

Even in her poems written about excursions with women friends, Gu expressed a deep longing for those absent. Two couplets from her poem entitled “During an Excursion to Wuchi Village with Yunlin and Xiangpei, I Thought of Renlan” (同雲林、湘佩游五尺莊懷紉蘭作) are a poignant example:

....

As the mist clears, summer trees encounter new rain,
Water lilies filled with fragrance, I recall my old friend.
Separated by one thousand *li*, we should still think of each other,
I remember clearly our previous trip here.⁴⁶

....

烟開夏木逢新雨，
香滿池蓮憶故人。
千裏關心應念念，
舊游回首記真真。

....

Nonetheless, during this period, Gu made the acquaintance of several women poets, including Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (courtesy name Xiangpei 湘佩), who later became her intimate friend. Shen, a native of Hangzhou, who also spent many years in Beijing, was a

⁴⁶ See *Heji*, 102.

renowned woman poet of both *shi* and *ci*. Shen's mother, Wu Shiren 吳世仁 (?-?), courtesy name Huansu 浣素), was also a gifted woman poet and had a poetry collection *Xiaoyinlou shiwenji* 簫引樓詩文集 published.⁴⁷ However, because Shen's father died when Shen was still very young, her family underwent many difficulties, but Shen still turned out to be exceptional in her abilities in painting and poetry. Her poetry collections are entitled *Hongxuelou shixuan* 鴻雪樓詩選 and *Hongxuelou ci* 鴻雪樓詞. Shen was also famous for her critical remarks on women's poetry: the twelve-juan *Mingyuan shihua* and a three-juan sequel to it.⁴⁸ According to Shen's account, she first met Gu Taiqing at Xu Yanreng's place, and they nearly "fell in love" at first sight. Shen showed Gu her poetry collection, and in Gu's two *shi* poems and one *ci* lyric inscribed for Shen's poetry collection, she, the older of the two, offered high praise for Shen's poetic talents.⁴⁹

In this period, Gu's intimate friend, Shi Shanzhi died and Gu composed a poem mourning her death.⁵⁰ After this poem, elegies for her friends' death became frequent, especially in the later years of her life.

The fourth phase of Gu Taiqing's life was the thirty-year period between 1839 and 1869, from when she was forty-one to seventy-one. I view this phase as the second peak in Gu's writing, because half of Gu's extant poems were written during this period. Although Gu was still mourning her husband's death in 1839, she and her friends in Beijing established a poetry club of their own – the Autumn Red Poetry Club (秋紅詩社) – that served as a great stimulation for her poetry writing. Neither Shen Shanbao nor Gu

⁴⁷ On Wu Shiren, see Hu Wenkai, 301; *Mingyuan shihua*, j.6.13b-15b.

⁴⁸ On Shen's life experience, her poetry collections and the *Mingyuan shihua*, see Fong's article "Writing Self and Writing Lives," 259-330.

⁴⁹ For their first meeting, see *Mingyuan shihua* j.8.2b. For Gu's poems inscribed on Shen's poetry collections, see *Heji*, 96 and 244.

⁵⁰ See "Mourning Shanzhi's Death from a Distance" 聞珊枝棄世遙挽, *Heji*, 100-01.

Taiqing mentioned why the poetry club was named as such, but I would assume that it was because the club was founded in the autumn,⁵¹ and quite possibly at Gu's residence of that time – the Red Rain Pavilion 紅雨軒. The “Red” might allude to the autumn flowers of the crab apple trees planted around the pavilion.⁵²

According to Shen's account, the original members of the poetry club, in addition to Gu and herself, included Xiang Pingshan 項屏山, Xu Yunlin, and Qian Bofang 錢伯芳. “Pingshan” was the courtesy name of Xiang Xun 項巽(?-1869), the woman who married Xu Naipu after his first wife Shi Shanzhi died in 1838. Xiang was from Hangzhou; both she and her younger sister Xiang Ren 項綢(?-?, courtesy name Zuxiang 祖香) were talented women poets. Xiang Xun's poetry collection is entitled *Hemingguan shigao* 和鳴館詩稿.⁵³ “Bofang” was the courtesy name of Qian Jifen 錢繼芬, a gifted woman poet from Jiaying, Zhejiang. She was the second wife of Ruan Hu 阮祐, who was the younger brother of Xu Yanjin's husband Ruan Fu 阮福.⁵⁴ Therefore, Qian Jifen was actually the sister-in-law of Xu Yanjin.

According to the preface of a poem written by Gu in 1862 entitled “Thinking of the Past by a Rainy Window” (雨窗感舊), this poetry club continued to recruit other

⁵¹ Shen said the poetry club was established in the fall of 1839. See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.23a-b.

⁵² In the preface to a poem, Gu writes that “During the long summer of the first year of Tongzhi (1862), among the messy books in the Red Rain Pavilion, I found the poems written about crab apple flowers planted in pots When crab apple blossoms piled up on my desk, in this Red Rain Pavilion, we had a contest in writing about potted flowers; when catkins flew over steps, at the Tower of Celestial Wandering, we each composed beautiful verses.” (同治元年長夏，紅雨軒亂書中檢得咏盆中海棠諸作 海棠堆案，紅雨軒爭咏盆花；柳絮翻階，天游閣分題佳句。) See *Heji*, 170.

⁵³ On Xiang Xun, see *Mingyuan shihua*, j.6.3a.

⁵⁴ Qian Jifen is not included in Hu Wenkai's book. Qian Derong 錢德容 (style name Mengduan 孟端), who was the cousin of Qian Jifen and was the first wife of Ruan Hu according to Shen Shanbao's account, was identified as the second wife of Ruan Hu by Hu Wenkai. There is an obvious conflict between Hu and Shen's recording. However, because Shen offers more relevant details and she knew of both Qian Derong and Qian Jifen, I am more inclined to agree with Shen that it was Qian Jifen (Bofang) who married Ruan Hu as his second wife after the death of Qian Derong. See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.10.2b-3a.

women poets after its establishment. These later members included Xu Yanjin, Dong'e Zhenzhuang 棟鄂珍莊(courtesy name Shaoru 少如), Dong'e Wuzhuang 棟鄂武莊 (courtesy name Xiuhuang 修篁), and Fucai Huadu 富蔡華篤 (courtesy name Ruixian 蕊仙), the last three all Manchu women:

During the long summer of the first year of Tongzhi (1862), among the messy books in the Red Rain Pavilion, I found the poems written about crab apple flowers planted in pots. Previous trips and pleasurable affairs became floating clouds at the edge of the sky; my sick body of the final years is like the morning dew among flowers. When crab apple blossoms piled up on my desk, in this Red Rain Pavilion, we had a contest in writing about potted flowers; when catkins flew over steps, at the Tower of Celestial Wandering, we each composed beautiful verses. Now, Xu Yunjiang accompanied her husband to his post in Hubei; Qian Bofang accompanied her husband to the post in Xichuang; Dong'e Shaoru went to live with her son in Gansu; Fucai Ruixian, Dong'e Wuzhuang, Xu Yunlin and Shen Xiangpei have passed away. Of those in our poetry club, only I and sister Pingshan remain. In twenty years, stars disappeared and clouds scattered. How it grieves me!⁵⁵

同治元年長夏，紅雨軒亂書中檢得咏盆中海棠諸作。舊游勝事，竟成天際浮雲；暮景羸軀，有若花間曉露。海棠堆案，紅雨軒爭咏盆花；柳絮翻階，天游閣分題佳句。今許雲姜隨任湖北，錢伯芳隨任西川，

⁵⁵ See *Heji*, 170.

棟鄂少如就養甘肅，富蔡蕊仙、棟鄂武莊、許雲林、沈湘佩已作泉下人，社中姊妹惟屏山與春二人矣。二十年來星流雲散，得不傷心耶！

Gu's reminiscence indicates that during this period, she also extended her social network through her children's marriage, because Dong'e Zhenzhuang was the mother of her daughter-in-law, Xiutang 秀塘, and Dong'e Wuzhuang was Dong'e Zhenzhuang's sister. Both of them were capable of writing and painting. Their mother, Ruting furen 如亭夫人 was an exceptional Manchu woman poet.⁵⁶ Fucai Huadu was also Manchu, who had a poetry collection entitled *Shiyin ji* 矢音集.⁵⁷ Obviously, this was a women's community that comprised both Han and Manchu gentry women.

During this period, in addition to poems related to her interaction with her female friends and poems mourning her husband, Gu Taiqing also composed poems to her children. The poems to her sons mostly show concern about their official careers, while the poems to her daughters and daughters-in-law focused primarily on their literary activities. Gu's own comments suggest that this difference may have been partially due to the fact that her sons were not interested in poetry writing.⁵⁸ Those poems Gu wrote about her relationship with her female friends covered a broad range of topics including: poems recording their gatherings, poems inscribed on other women's poetry collections or paintings, epistolary poems sent to distant friends, or poems mourning the deaths of her friends. Towards the end of this period, as both Gu and her friends were growing old, poems expressing the grief she felt over her friends' deaths or reflecting on the passage of time became more common, one example being the poem preface quoted above.

⁵⁶ See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.1a-2a.

⁵⁷ See Hu Wenkai, 816.

⁵⁸ See Gu's annotation to the poem "Composed at Random on a Spring Day" 春日偶成 in *Heji*, 152.

The event that marked the end of this period was Xiang Xun's death. Xiang Xun's husband, Xu Diansheng, who was also Gu's "sixth brother," died in 1866. On the twelfth day of the seventh month in 1869, Xiang accompanied her husband's coffin back to his hometown. At that time, Xiang was Gu's last intimate friend dwelling in Beijing. Gu not only felt sorrow over her departure, but also worried about her health on the long journey home – so much so, in fact, that she accompanied Xiang to Tongzhou 通州 (in Hebei). On Gu's return journey to Beijing, in Malanyu 馬蘭峪 (in Hebei) on the eleventh day of the ninth month, she learnt that Xiang had already died on the way on the ninth day of the eighth month in Linqingzhou 臨清州 (in Shandong).⁵⁹ When Xiang died in 1869, Gu was already seventy-one. Xiang's death also marked the conclusion of her friendship with other women poets, most of whom had either passed away or lost contact with Gu.

During the fifth phase of Gu's life, from 1869 until her death in 1877, the number of poems Gu composed was substantially fewer. Much of this was due to the illnesses of old age – she was completely blind by 1875 at the age of seventy-seven;⁶⁰ and, as we learn in her poetry, she also suffered from other illness during her final years. Gu passed away at the age of seventy-nine.

In this chapter, I have offered two biographies of Gu Taiqing, one on the axis of Gu's relationship with her husband, the other on the axis of Gu's relationship with her female friends. It can be readily observed from the second biography that Gu's engagement with the women's community played a significant role in her life and writing.

⁵⁹ See the two poems Gu composed when she accompanied Xiang Xun to the south, *Heji*, 174 and 297.

⁶⁰ See *Heji*, 177.

First, this engagement stimulated Gu's poetry writing. After she encountered her female friends, the quantity of her writing increased rapidly; following the departure or death of her female friends, her writing decreased sharply. Secondly, it enriched Gu's poetry writing. When associated with other women poets, the range of Gu's poetic themes was broadened – the communal activities of the group, Gu's longing for departed friends, and elegies for those friends who had passed away – all became common themes in Gu's poetry. Thirdly, her engagement with other women poets made her life more colorful and helped her to overcome sorrow over her husband's death and other hardships. Not only did she receive emotional support from these female friends, she also received material support from them in difficult times.⁶¹ Fourthly, within this women's community, Gu became more aware of other women writers, an awareness which broadened her horizons and inspired her own writing. Finally, with real readers who were appreciative and supportive of her poetry writing, Gu gained more confidence in her writing and became more productive.

⁶¹ One example can be seen in the preface to a *ci* lyric "*Tangduoling*: On the Moonlit Night of the Tenth Day of the Tenth Month, Sister Pingshan Sent an Old Servant to Give Me a Bag of Bran to Feed Pigs; I Wrote a Short Lyric to Express My Thanks" (唐多令: 十月十日, 屏山姊月下使蒼頭送糠一袋以飼豬, 遂成小令申謝), see *Heji*, 263.

Chapter 2. A Community Composed: Membership and Features of Gu Taiqing's Women's Community

In this chapter, I will delineate the membership of the women's community with which Gu Taiqing was associated. In addition to identifying the specific members of this women's community, I will investigate its distinctive features and explore the centrality and diverse uses of writing in the practice of its members.

Before we proceed to discuss the members and features of Gu Taiqing's women's community, I would like to elaborate further on my use of the term "community." First, my definition of "communities of women" is situated in the context of the flourishing women's culture of late imperial China. In essence, these communities were composed of women who shared a mutual interest in the pursuit of literary activities such as reading, writing, and painting; as such, they existed only so long as these literary pursuits – and the friendships and sociability on which they were founded – remained meaningfully intertwined in the lives of the group members. Secondly, the demarcation of these communities may be obscure. There are no easily specifiable dates of founding or disbanding; membership was rarely clear-cut or exclusive; and it is extremely difficult to argue that all the participants consciously identified themselves as members of a specific women's community. With this understanding in mind, I am more interested in examining the extensive network in which a particular group of gentry women interacted, and my criteria for mapping out Gu's community will be flexible and inclusive rather than rigid or artificially exclusive. Thirdly, although my reconstruction of Gu's community will be centered around Gu Taiqing, this should not be taken to imply that she

was, in fact, the central figure of this community, or, even more inaccurately, that the women in this community owed her their exclusive allegiance. Many women associated with Gu's community were also active participants in other communities of women ranging from family networks to groups of women outside of Gu's community.¹ Therefore, while this chapter is an effort to reconstruct a women's community from the viewpoint of a particular historical participant in this community – Gu Taiqing, it should not be viewed as the only version of the story.

I. A Reconstruction of Gu Taiqing's Women's Community

With the above caveats in mind, the following categories will be used to define membership in the women's community to which Gu Taiqing belonged:

1. Women who were members of the Autumn Red Poetry Club.
2. Women who attended one or more gatherings with Gu where the gathering was not exclusively for family members.
3. Women whose engagements with Gu were related to literary activities, such as inscribing poems on fans, paintings, or poetry collections.

Based on these criteria, I exclude Gu's mother-in-law, Yihui's principal wife Miaohua, and Yihui and Miaohua's daughter, Mengwen, from this women's community. While they were present at Gu's family gatherings, they were not acquainted with the other women of this community. However, I include Gu Taiqing's daughters Shuwen and

¹ For example, Xu Yanreng and Shen Shanbao were also members of another poetry club "Xiaoxia She" 消夏社, see *Mingyuan shihua*, j.7.15b.

Yiwen as well as Xu Yanjin's daughter Ruan Enluan, all of whom participated frequently in the communal activities of the women's literary circle.

Altogether, I include thirty-seven women in this women's community, all of whom were from gentry-official families, except Wu Zao, who was from a merchant family.² These women belonged to three different generations: the older generation represented by Liang Desheng, the mother of Gu's friends Xu Yanreng and Xu Yanjin, Gu's own generation, and Gu's daughters' generation. Four were members of Gu's family: her younger sister Xilin Xu, her daughters Shuwen and Yiwen, and her daughter-in-law Xiutang. The community was comprised of both Manchu and Han women. In addition to Gu Taiqing and her family members, there were four other Manchu women: Fucai Hua'e, Pucha furen, Dong'e Zhenzhuang, and Dong'e Wuzhuang (the last two were Gu Taiqing's relatives by marriage). Five women in the community, who were occasionally referred to as her "sisters with different surnames" 異姓姊妹 by Gu Taiqing, had particularly close relationships with Gu, as is indicated by the large number of poems Gu presented to them. These women were Xu Yanjin, Xu Yanreng, Li Jiezu, Shen Shanbao, and Xiang Xun. Another five women, Shi Shanzhi, Zhang Xiang, Yu Jiying, Chen Xu'an, and Qian Jifen, appear less frequently in Gu's poetry and thus seem to have had a somewhat less intimate relationship with Gu. They were, however, often present at communal gatherings. The others appear very infrequently in Gu's poetry – usually in only one or two poems written in response to requests for inscriptions on either poetry collections or paintings. While Gu's poetry indicates that she had face-to-face meeting with most of these women, there were several with whom her engagement took place

² For a complete list of all these women, including their names, style names, origins, and relationship with Gu, see Appendix.

through an intermediary – another woman, an exchange of poetry, or inscriptions on paintings. For instance, Gu's request that Wang Duan inscribe poetry on her painting was made through Wang's cousin Xu Yanreng; and Gu appears to have never met Wu Zao, but only made her acquaintance through friends who were familiar with Wu, such as Shen Shanbao, and through reading Wu's *ci* collection.

As I have already pointed out, it is notoriously difficult to provide a specific date for the establishment and disbanding of Gu's women's community. Nonetheless, changes to the membership of this women's community can be traced broadly over a period of more than thirty years. The community gradually came into being following Gu's first encounter with Xu Yanjin, Shi Shanzhi, and Li Jiezu in 1835; it became more formal when the Autumn Red Poetry Club was established in the fall of 1839; it began to decline when more and more members left the capital for personal reasons or simply passed away; and it finally disintegrated entirely when Xiang Xun, the last poetry club member besides Gu who resided in Beijing, died while escorting her husband's coffin to Hangzhou in 1869.

According to Shen Shanbao's account, there was a joint collection of the poetry by members of the Autumn Red Poetry Club, but this collection seems never to have been published:

In the fall of Yihai (1839), Taiqing, Pingshan, Yunlin, Bofang and I established the Autumn Red Poetry Club. In our preliminary collection we wrote lyrics on the morning glory, using the rhymes of the tune pattern Queqiaoxian.

己亥秋日，余與太清、屏山、雲林、伯芳結秋紅吟社。初集咏牽牛花，

用雀橋仙調。³

Although neither Gu nor Shen wrote specifically about the routine activities of the poetry club, it did serve as a medium which brought these women together and provided them a social, communal space in which to practice poetic composition. As illustrated by Gu's poems written on these occasions, more than ten topics were used for the club members to practice poetry writing (社中課題), such as "Autumn Willow," (秋柳) "Listening to the Zither," (聽琴) and "Tricolour Amaranth" (雁來紅).⁴

Gu was the only member of the community who resided in Beijing during the entire period of the group's existence. The length of time during which other members were associated with the community was related directly to their absence from or presence in the capital. Some, who arrived relatively late in Beijing, had only a brief acquaintance with the community, and others who had been in Beijing at the early stages of the community often had to leave the capital, sometimes returning and sometimes not. However, new members joined the group through the family or social networks of existing members. Therefore, as the chart in the Appendix indicates, many of the members were related to each other as mothers, daughters, or relatives of other members.

The instability of membership in the group can be tied more specifically to one of the most apparent characteristics of the community, namely, the fact that the majority of

³ See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.23a-b. The poem under the same title that appears in the collection compiled by Zhang Zhang is slightly different from the one recorded by Shen. See *Heji*, 264-5.

⁴ See *Heji*, 109, 262, and 265. Some other club members' poems under the same titles are extant as well: one is Shen Shanbao's poem entitled "Autumn Willow," the other is Xiang Xun's poem entitled "Tricolour Amaranth." See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.12a and j.6.3a. Shen noted that both were poetic exercises in the Autumn Red Poetry Club.

the community's members were Han gentry women from Jiangnan.⁵ The presence of these women in Beijing was generally linked either to their husbands' official assignments to new posts in the capital, or to their husbands' having to come to the capital for requisite reporting to the emperor. The presence of this large contingent of highly educated women from Jiangnan illustrates a trend noted by Dorothy Ko: "[since] the late sixteenth century, gentry lady poets, poetry clubs and publication of their verse have flourished in the commercialized region of the River Yangzi delta, known as Jiangnan."⁶ Many of the members of this women's community from Jiangnan, such as Xu Yanreng and Shen Shanbao, were renowned women poets whose poetry collections had been published before they came to Beijing. Often they were already involved in local women's literary circles in Jiangnan. Although women's writing and literary activities were particularly prominent in the Jiangnan area, other areas of China, such as Fujian, were also home to a significant number of women writers.⁷ This activity in southern China was soon transplanted to Beijing where at least one other prominent community of women writers was active in the mid to late Qing. This second group centered around two famous women poets – Yang Yun 楊芸 (early 19th century, style name Ruiyuan 蕊淵) and Li Peijin 李佩金, both of whom were originally from Jiangsu. As noted by the critic Guo Lin 郭麐 (1767-1831) in *Lingfenguan shihua* 靈芬館詩話, "At that time, [Yang and Li] accompanied [their husbands] on their official postings to reside in the capital. They established a poetry club and distributed topics [for poetry

⁵ Gu Taiqing was not the only Manchu within this women's community, but Han gentry women were obviously the majority.

⁶ See Ko, "Lady-Scholars at the Door," 200.

⁷ For example, see *Minchuan guixiu shihua* 閩川閩秀詩話, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*, vol.1705.

writing among themselves]” (時俱從官京師, 結社分題).⁸ In this sense, both Yang and Li’s group and Gu’s group could be viewed as a kind of continuation of Jiangnan women’s communities when those Jiangnan women moved to Beijing. Nonetheless, there are certain features of Gu’s women’s community that make it distinctive, and these features will be elaborated in the next section.

II. Features of Gu’s Women’s Community

Dorothy Ko defines “women’s communities” in the context of women’s writing and education in seventeenth century Jiangnan as culture built on their shared literary activities. Based on membership and activities, she divides these women’s communities into three categories: domestic, social, and public. By “domestic communities,” Ko means those communities comprised exclusively of family members, and whose activities “were enmeshed in everyday family life.” By “social communities,” she refers to those communities that included members from the neighborhood and friends from afar, but whose activities were little different from those of domestic ones. By “public communities,” Ko means those communities that were publicly visible because of publications or the literary fame of their members. The members of this community could be “[family members], neighbors, fellow students, or simply like-minded writers.” Ko

⁸ Yang Yun’s poetry collection was entitled *Qinqingge ji* 琴清閣集; for more information on Yang, see Hu Wenkai, 672-73. Li Peijin is discussed in Chapter 1, page 31. On the women’s community centered on these two women poets, see *Lingfenguan shihua*, j.12.1b, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*, vol. 1705. This is the only entry about Yang and Li’s women’s literary circle I have come across. If there were more information, it would be interesting to compare this women’s community with the one that Gu Taiqing was associated with.

argues that the divisions between these three categories are not clear-cut and can often be viewed as different phases in the life span of one community.⁹

Using Ko's categories, the women's community with which Gu Taiqing was associated had the characteristics of both social and public communities. This community included family members, friends from afar, and like-minded writers; and some of its members enjoyed literary fame. In this sense, it would be a public community. However, at the same time, the prominence of its individual members was often unrelated to their association with this women's community. Moreover, it seems that their joint collection was never published (or, at least, was never publicly acknowledged).¹⁰ In this sense, the group would fit only the criteria of the social community. While Ko's categories suggest the possibility of a macro approach to the study of women's communities, I have chosen to employ a micro approach focusing on three features specific (though not exclusive) to Gu's community: its independence and self-sufficiency, its fluidity, and, most importantly, the central role of writing.

- **Independence and Self-Sufficiency**

The first feature of this women's community is its independence and self-sufficiency. Recent scholarship has pointed to the female disciples of Yuan Mei, Chen Wenshu, and Ren Zhaolin 任兆麟 (ca.1776-1823) as outstanding examples of communities of literary women.¹¹ In the Ming-Qing era, it was common for male literati to be involved as

⁹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 15-16.

¹⁰ Its mention in *Mingyuan shihua* by Shen Shanbao is the only one that I have encountered.

¹¹ On Ren Zhaoling and "Wuzhong shizi," see Ko, "Lady-Scholars at the Door," 198-216.

teachers in women's literary activities; and male mentors, such as Yuan Mei and Chen Wenshu, played an important role in bringing women poets together. These mentors gave direction to women's writing, and occasionally compiled and published their works. However, the women's community to which Gu Taiqing belonged did not have a male mentor and explicitly refused the involvement of men. The preface to one of Gu's poems clearly shows her disdain towards Chen Wenshu:

Old Mr. Chen from Qiantang, whose style name is Yunbo, claims himself to be an immortal. His *ci* lyric collection is entitled *Collection from the Jade City Immortal Lodge*, and it is full of pretty words. Moreover, he has more than ten female disciples boasting for him. Last autumn, he entrusted Yunlin with one scroll of "lotus raft,"¹² and two sticks of ink to present to me. As I scorn his behavior, I refused to accept them. Now, in a letter he sent to Yunlin, I see there is a regulated verse by Xilin Taiqing inscribed for his *New Songs in the Capital*, and he even composed a regulated verse to match the rhyme of that poem by "Taiqing." This is so ridiculous! What's so funny is that I do not know whether that Taiqing is this Taiqing or not. Therefore, I use his rhyme word to compose a poem to record this.

錢塘陳叟字雲伯者，以仙人自居。著有碧城仙館詞鈔，中多綺語，更有碧城女弟子十余人代爲吹噓。去秋曾托雲林以蓮花筏一卷、墨二錠見贈。予因鄙其爲人，避而不受。今見彼寄雲林信中有西林太清題其“春明新咏”一律，并自和原韵一律。此事殊屬荒唐，尤其覺可笑：

¹² Although I cannot determine what exactly the "lotus raft" refers to, according to the context, I assume it is a kind of stationery.

不知彼太清此太清是一是二？遂用其韵，以記其事。¹³

“Yunbo” was the courtesy name of Chen Wenshu, who compiled a selection of his female disciples’ poems entitled *Bicheng xianguan nüdizi shichao* 碧城仙館女弟子詩鈔. Like Yuan Mei, Chen was also a well-known literati scholar who gave overt support to women’s writing and had gathered a large group of women poets as his disciples. However, Gu Taiqing showed great disdain towards his engagement with gentry women.¹⁴ In this poem, she claims that:

....

I would feel ashamed if I were added to the ranks of the Jade City,
All the while, everyone has scorned this mister.

....

碧城行列羞添我，
人海從來鄙此公。

....

Gu was particularly outraged when Chen falsely attributed a poem to her, and then proceeded to show it off to others. She said:

....

I’ll let you speak nonsense for a laugh,
Because floating clouds will not block off the red sunlight.

....

¹³ *Heji*, 116.

¹⁴ Gu Taiqing’s vehemence towards Chen Wenshu has puzzled some scholars, particularly when he was the father-in-law of Wang Duan, from whom Gu requested an inscription. Furthermore, Wu Zao, whose poetry Gu admired, was one of Chen’s female disciples.

任爾亂言成一笑，

浮雲不礙日光紅。

....

We do not know whether Chen actually composed the false poem or not, but Gu's refusal to have any literary relations with Chen indicates that she did not want to identify herself with a male mentor. Furthermore, the preface and poem suggest her belief that Chen Wenshu was using the literary reputations of women writers to bolster his own search for fame.

Not only was this community conspicuous for its absence of a male mentor, Gu's women's community also consciously refused other types of male involvement. These women poets were the wives or daughters of officials, men we can assume to have been well-educated literati. For instance, both Xu Yanjin's father-in-law, Ruan Yuan, and Yu Xiusun's father, Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821-1907), were prestigious scholars.¹⁵ Furthermore, Gu herself had personal contact with several male literati. Nonetheless, these women had a social life separate from their husbands or fathers, which was independent and self-sufficient, suggested by four lines in one of Yihui's *ci* lyrics about one of their social gatherings:

Yulouchun: Ten Sisters

....

They try on their light silks in the first warm breeze,

¹⁵ Yu Yue (courtesy name Yinfu 蔭甫, style name Qu Yuan 曲園) was a renowned philologist, textual critic, and a calligrapher in the late Qing. His wife Yao Wenyu 姚文玉 (1820-1879), who left behind a poetry collection entitled *Hanzhang ji* 含章集, as well as his second daughter Yu Xiusun (1849-1883), who was involved in Gu's women's community, were both talented women poets. See *Eminent Chinese*, 944-45.

Comparing with each other their soft or heavy make-up.

Who are these sisters leaning against the railing?

By painted beams and pearl curtains, they are near but seem faraway.

....

(*Heji*, 685)

玉樓春 十姊妹

.... 輕羅乍試薰風信，濃澹梳妝較分寸。誰家姊妹倚欄杆，畫棟珠
廉人遠近。

In this *ci*, Yihui records his uninvited observations on the gathering of Gu and her female friends. Because he was not a participant, he had no choice but to observe them from afar – as is indicated by his inability to identify the “sisters” leaning against the railing.

Even on the rare occasion when a man invited these women to get together, they cautiously avoided his involvement. A couplet from the following poem attests to this:

Three Days before the Winter Solstice, My Sixth Brother Xu
Diansheng Invited Me, as well as Yunlin, Peiji, and Xiaxian to
View Chrysanthemum at Kanxi Studio ; I Composed this after
I Came back, while also Thinking of Pingshan¹⁶

....

I like to write and report to you our elegant gathering,

But it is hard to send you autumn's looks from afar.

....

¹⁶ “Lidong” is a solar term, literally meaning “the beginning of winter,” which falls around November 7-21. “Kanxi Studio” was at Xu Diansheng and Xiang Xun’s residence.

(Heji, 154)

立冬前三日，許溟生六兄招同雲林、佩吉、家霞仙堪喜齋

賞菊；歸來賦此，兼憶屏山

....

好書雅會遙相報，

難把秋容遠寄將。

....

According to the title, this poem was composed after Gu and several of her female friends had returned from viewing chrysanthemums at the invitation of Gu's foster brother Xu Naipu (Xiang Xun's husband) when Xiang herself was away in Hangzhou. Surprisingly, Gu does not express her thanks to the host of this gathering, as she would have usually done on this sort of occasion.¹⁷ Instead, she records her thoughts regarding the absent member of this women's community, Xiang Xun, the host's wife, who would have participated in the gathering if she had been in the capital.

Given that Confucian ideology regarded the separation of the inner and outer spheres as fundamental to proper gender relations, it would be normal for gentry women of this period to regard male involvement in women's social life as inappropriate. However, it can also be argued that these women were taking advantage of this ideologically imposed segregation: they were creating an exclusive sphere in which they could both celebrate the freedom and pleasure they shared, and create and preserve an independent world from which to further the group's interests (as defined and articulated

¹⁷ Another possibility would be that Gu might have written another poem to thank him, but it is not extant any more.

from within the group itself). Because this sort of independence was not directly antagonistic to pervasive Confucian ideology, there was little risk of societal intolerance.

Of course, on a personal level, these women might still be close to their husbands, brothers, and other men. For instance, Gu was not only happily married to Yihui, she also composed many poems that recorded her interactions with other male literati, such as Ruan Yuan. Furthermore, the exclusion of male involvement in the community's activities did not hinder their relationships with those women who were closely tied to male mentors. For instance, despite Gu's obvious scorn for Chen Wenshu, she thought highly of the literary talents of Wu Zao, one of Chen's more than thirty female disciples,¹⁸ viewing Wu as her *zhiyin* 知音 (the one who knows the tone). She also entrusted Xu Yanreng to ask Chen's daughter-in-law and well-known poet, Wang Duan, to inscribe poems on her portrait – Wang eventually composed eight quatrains in response.

- **Fluidity of this Women's Community**

When viewed in comparison to other women's communities of the late Ming and Qing, the membership in Gu Taiqing's community was remarkably fluid. The communities of Shang Jinglan 商景蘭 (1605-ca. 1676) and Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635), for example, were comprised primarily of family members and/or routinely visiting friends; similarly, local women's communities in Jiangnan, such as the Banana Garden Poets, included mainly female relatives or women poets from the neighborhood.¹⁹ Most members of Gu's

¹⁸ On Chen Wenshu's female disciples, see Zhong, *Qingdai nüshiren*, 229-38; Wu Zao is cited on 235.

¹⁹ On the community of Shang Jinglan, see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 226-32; on the community of Shen Yixiu, see 202-7; on the Banana Garden Poets, see 234-7.

community, on the other hand, were not natives of Beijing, but were the wives or daughters of officials on assignment in the capital. As such, they came and went with great frequency. These women would often accompany their husbands or sons to new posts, escort the coffins of in-laws or husbands back to their hometowns when they died in the capital, or simply return to their hometowns for other family affairs. Therefore, as is illustrated by the following list of titles, parting poems and epistolary poems are especially abundant in Gu's writings:

“*Manjianghong*: Seeing Yunjiang off to the South at the Guanyin Temple on the Seventh Day of the First Month”

滿江紅：人日觀音院餞雲姜南歸 (*Heji*, 227)

“*Jinlüqu*: Seeing Sister Renlan Off to Daliang”

金縷曲：送紉蘭妹往大梁 (*Heji*, 240)

“*Langtaosha*: Seeing Shanzhi Off on Her Return to Wulin”

浪淘沙：送珊枝歸武林 (*Heji*, 234)

“*Yijianmei*: A Letter from Yunjiang Crossing the Yellow River”

一剪梅：聞雲姜渡河信 (*Heji*, 230)

“*Jiangcheng meihua yin*: On a Rainy Day Receiving a Letter from Yunjiang”

江城梅花引：雨中接雲姜信 (*Heji*, 238)

“Composing a Poem instead of a Letter in Reply to Renlan and to Express My Thanks to Her for Presenting Me Rice and Lily Buds”

以詩代簡答紉蘭兼謝見贈粳米百合 (*Heji*, 100)

“To Match the Rhyme of the Poem that Xiangpei Sent to Me”

次湘佩寄詩韻 (*Heji*, 163)

As I have mentioned in the biographical account of Gu Taiqing, the first peak in her composition of parting and epistolary poems was in 1837 when several of her close friends – Xu Yanjin, Li Jiezu, and Shi Shanzhi – left the capital. Later on, Gu developed close friendships with other women poets, such as Xu Yanreng, Shen Shanbao, and Xiang Xun, to whom she also composed a significant number of parting and epistolary poems.

Perhaps because of the fluidity of this women's community, the role of Gu Taiqing, as the "permanent" member in Beijing, became more salient.²⁰ Without her continuing presence, the community would have likely disintegrated with the departure of her female friends beginning in 1837. Instead, Gu's presence ensured that these women maintained a certain shared 'connection' with Beijing, a connection that was reestablished and enhanced each time they returned. It appears to me that Gu became a source of significant stability for this extremely unstable community.

Although the physical ties of this women's community were particularly tenuous, its group 'identity' was maintained through correspondence among the members. These writings included letters, epistolary poems, and inscriptions for paintings or fans, as can be seen in the following poem titles:

²⁰ As mentioned earlier, because her husband was a Manchu prince, who was not permitted to leave the capital without the emperor's consent (see *Kuangdai cainü*, 10), Gu lived in the capital during the entire course of the existence of this women's community.

“*Changxiangsi*: On the Twenty-fourth Day of the First Month in the Year of *Jiyou* (1849), by the Snowy Window, I Sent Two Poems to Xiangpei, Using the Style of *Dumuqiao*”²¹

長相思：己酉正月廿四，雪窗寄湘佩二首，用獨木橋體 (*Heji*, 290)

“*Taoyuanyiguren*: Inscribed on Sister Renlan’s Portrait of Reading Books in Orchid Breezes”

桃園憶故人：題紉蘭妹蘭風展卷小照 (*Heji*, 282)

These women also continued their communal literary exercises even while they were physically apart. Take the following poem titles for example:

“Matching the Rhymes of Four Regulated Verses Sent by Xiangpei Entitled ‘Spring Willows,’ Using *Chun*, *Di*, *Yan*, and *Si* as Rhyme Words Respectively”

次湘佩寄春柳四律，以春、堤、烟、絲爲韻 (*Heji*, 165)

“I Received Several Scores of Poems on ‘The Birth of Spring’ from Renlan by Her Whole Family. She Also Invited Me to Compose Poems [on the Topic] with them. Accordingly, I Used the Original Rhymes of Yuan Weizhi, but Completed Only Ten Poems. I Sent These Poems in Place of a Letter”²²

紉蘭寄到闔家共賦春生詩數十首，且約同賦。遂用元微之原韻，僅成

²¹ “*Dumuqiao* pattern,” also called “*Futang* pattern” 福唐體, is a special *ci* rhyme pattern, in which the same rhyme word is used throughout the *ci*. See Ma Xingrong 馬興榮, Wu Xionghe 吳熊和, and Cao Jiping 曹濟平 et al. eds, *Zhongguo cixue da cidian* 中國詞學大辭典, 16 and 21.

²² Weizhi was the courtesy name of a famous Tang poet, Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-813), who composed a series of sixty poems entitled “Sixty Rhymes on ‘Spring.’” See *QuanTangshi*, ch. 408 (Beijing, 1960), 4537-39.

十章; 詩以代簡 (*Heji*, 113)

These poetic words of exchange and communication point to another feature of this women's community – the central role of writing.

- **The Central Role and Diverse Functions of Writing**

Within Gu Taiqing's women's community, "writing" can be roughly divided into two categories. First, "writing" itself was the central activity at these women's gatherings, such as when they composed exercise poems as an activity in the poetry club 社中課題; secondly, writing was used to record other activities in which writing was not the central activity – for example, the composition of poems about excursions to temples and other sites. Needless to say, because of the central role that writing played in all their activities, valuable information about the community was preserved. The availability of these writings allows for the possibility of reconstructing the community – that is, identifying its members and their communal activities. The centrality of writing was a feature shared by many other women's communities in late imperial China. As observed by Dorothy Ko, "[a]lthough the exchange of souvenir objects such as fans, portraits, paintings, and shoes was frequent, the *raison d'être* of the communities was the appreciation, production, and propagation of the written word."²³ Among the women with whom Gu Taiqing was associated, we can see clearly that writing served several important functions. For the remainder of this chapter, I will elaborate on these functions to illustrate the diverse purposes of writing in this women's community.

²³ See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 16.

First, writing was used to record communal activities. Among Gu Taiqing's poems pertaining to the women's community, a substantial number record the social and cultural activities in which she and her friends participated: poems inscribed on paintings, poems about playing and listening to the zither and other musical instruments, poems about excursions, or poems about viewing flowers.

These poems exemplify themes frequently adopted by other poets involved in women's communities at the time. Zhong Huiling suggests that the typical poetic themes in women's communities can be summed up by the "Ten Pleasures of the Orchid Boudoir" (蘭閨十樂). According to Zhong, this term was first used by the Qing woman poet Liu Xiaomei 劉小眉 (dates unknown), who was actively involved in a woman's community and proposed the "Ten Pleasures of the Orchid Boudoir" as thematic titles that others in the community could use in their poetic practice. The ten pleasures which gentry women enjoyed are:

Making up in front of the morning mirror, copying calligraphy by a sunny window, viewing paintings on a long day, watering flowers after the rain clears in evening, working on poetic lines under the eaves, by a small table watching a game of chess, playing the zither in the moonlight, asking about diction by a lamp, opening a book in a cool night, and making tea when tired in the afternoon²⁴

曉鏡理妝、晴窗臨帖、晝長讀畫、晚霽澆花、巡檐覓句、隱幾觀棋、
月下撫琴、燈前問字、夜涼攤卷、午倦烹茶

²⁴ See Zhong, *Qingdai nüshiren*, 200-1.

These activities conform to the four types of literati arts – *qin*, *qi*, *shu*, and *hua* (zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting) – popularly enjoyed by traditional male literati. The list contains four additional activities: making up, watering flowers, chanting poems, and making tea. This modification can be analyzed on two different levels. Some of these activities are gender-specific. For example, putting on cosmetics every morning was obviously related to a female subject. Others enhance the meaning and quality of life of these women in the inner chambers. Women are shown to enjoy as many cultivated pleasures as, if not more than, men. Although Gu's writings did not completely cover all of these ten pleasures, they do provide a significant record of the community's activities. The following poem titles provide some salient examples:

“Four Poems Composed with Xiangpei using the Titles of “Zither, Chess, Calligraphy, and Painting” Proposed by Her”

湘佩擬琴棋書畫四題同作 (*Heji*, 158-9)

“*Zuiwengcao*: Inscription on a Painting by Xu Yanreng Entitled ‘Zither Swathed in Moonlight by a Lake’”

醉翁操: 題雲林湖月沁琴圖小照 (*Heji*, 270)

“*Duoli*: Inscription on a Painting by Lady Scholar Weng Xiujun Entitled ‘Reunion of Flowers’”

多麗: 題翁秀君女史群芳再會圖 (*Heji*, 282)

“Four poems entitled ‘Boudoir Lyrics,’ each with Fixed Rhyme-Words Proposed by Yiwen”

以文擬閨詞四題各限韻 (*Heji*, 157-8)

Secondly, writing in this women's community functioned as a medium for initiating, developing, and maintaining relationships. This function is especially obvious when poetry collections were given as gifts and poems of inscription were written in response. For instance, Gu Taiqing's *ci* inscribed on Xu Yanreng's poetry collection, the *Fulianshi yincao* 福連室吟草, reads as follows:

Yiconghua: Inscribed on Yunlin's *Fulianshi yincao*

I admire your family where you are connected like branches of a jade tree;²⁵

You are blessed with superior talents by Heaven.

Learning of each other's names, we already felt familiar,

I regret that we were obstructed by

Countless barriers of clouds and rivers.

Only today, I meet you for the first time:

Your spirit is open and at ease,

As pure as that of plum blossoms.

The new poems you show me cannot be more marvelous;

Your lyric melodies deserve even more praise.

For painting, you possess a skillful brush,²⁶

Drawing lakes and mountains,

Blue mists and red clouds.

²⁵ "Connected branches" alludes to brothers and sisters. Here this refers to Xu Yanreng (Yunlin) and her sister Xu Yanjin (Yunjiang), and perhaps other siblings.

²⁶ "*Shenghuabi*" literally means "brush that produces flowers." This is a common term used to describe people with great writing or painting skills.

Pearls are coughed up from your mouth,²⁷

By the pond a dream forms,

Spring grasses grow all over, till the edge of Heaven.

(Heji, 223)

一叢花 題雲林<<福連室吟草>>

連枝玉樹羨君家，天與好才華。知名彼此情先熟，恨萬重、水障雲

遮。今始見君，神情散朗，清潔比梅花。新詩示我妙無加，

詞調更堪誇。丹青更有生花筆，寫湖山、翠靄朱霞。咳唾成珠，池

塘結夢，春草遍天涯。

In the first stanza, Gu Taiqing recounts that she and Xu Yanreng knew of each other before they actually met. This indicates that they were members of a group of women friends who discussed each other's poetic and artistic accomplishments. Xu Yanreng showed Gu her poetry collection containing *shi* poetry and song lyrics, and also seems to have shown Gu some of her landscape paintings. Therefore, after praising Xu's skill in both *shi* and *ci*, Gu also expresses praise for Xu's artistically adept depiction of nature. The last two lines of the song lyric paraphrases a famous line by Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385-433): "The pond grows spring grasses, / Willows in the garden transform to singing birds" (池塘生春草，園柳變鳴禽).²⁸ Here, the allusion serves to draw a comparison between the poetic skills of Xu Yanreng and this renowned male poet of the Six Dynasties, a further indication of Gu's high regard for Xu Yanreng's poetry.

²⁷ This line can be literally translated as "your cough and spit become pearls." It is a common term used to describe people who are able to chant beautiful poems.

²⁸ This couplet is from the poem entitled *Ascending the Tower over the Pond* (登池上樓). See Xie, 73.

In the opening of this song lyric, Gu refers to Xu's "enviable" family of talented women. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Xu Yanreng was the daughter of the learned matriarch of Hangzhou, Liang Desheng. Her sister, Xu Yanjin, was also a talented poet and a member of Gu Taiqing's women's circle. This shows Gu's concern for women's education, especially women's education as a family tradition. This poem to Xu Yanreng also indicate that Gu and Xu immediately became close friends.²⁹ It seems that Xu Yanreng's poetry collection served as the catalyst for an increasingly intimate friendship, and as a medium through which their mutual understanding could be enhanced. Xu's presentation of her poetry collection to Gu was not a unique event among women poets of the time. As recorded in *Mingyuan shihua*, Shen Shanbao sent her own poetry collection to established women poets before she met them in person. When they accepted and read it, they would discover Shen's poetic talent and a friendship would ensue.³⁰ These women's practice of presenting their poetry collections to others before they met points to the significant way in which poetry was perceived as an expression and embodiment of the self. Therefore, circulating their poetry collections became a conduit through which women could establish a kind of spiritual contact before their face-to-face encounter. As is evident in the example of Xu Yanreng and Gu Taiqing, those who received these

²⁹ Another example is the song lyric entitled "*Qindiao xiangsi yin*: Sister Yunlin Presented me a Wild-Goose-Foot Desk Lamp, and I Composed this short lyric to Thank Her" (琴調相思引: 雲林妹見贈雁足書燈, 以小令申謝).

³⁰ For example, before Shen Shanbao met Pan Suxin (dates unknown, courtesy name Xubai 虛白), a famous older woman poet from Zhejiang, Pan read Shen's *Qiuhuai shi* 秋懷詩, very possibly sent to Pan by Shen herself; she thought highly of Shen's poetic talents, and became friends with her. In addition, Pan's daughter Wang Xun 汪恂 (dates unknown, courtesy name Xunru 恂如, not included in Hu Wenkai) had a poem inscribed on Shen's *Hongxuelou shigao*. Shen also records that another woman poet — Qiu Sun 邱蓀 (dates unknown, style name Yunyi 雲漪, not included in Hu Wenkai), with whom Shen began her acquaintance after she arrived at the capital, also had a poem inscribed on Shen's *Hongxuelou chuji*. These poems, together with Gu Taiqing's *shi* and *ci* inscribed on Shen's collections, suggest that Shen often employed her own poetry collections as a medium to initiate contact with other women. See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.7.4b, 6b, 15b. On Pan Suxin, see also Hu Wenkai, 727. For Gu's poems inscribed on Shen's collections, see *Heji*, 96-97, and 244.

collections were often established women poets with whom the author of the collection hoped to make some personal contact, with the ultimate goal of connecting with other women who shared their literary interests and appreciated their poetic talents. This kind of dynamic is evident in Gu's *ci* which was inscribed on Wu Zao's song lyric collection, the *Hualianci*. It reads:

Jinlüqu: Inscribed on *Huanlian*ci and Send to Lady Scholar Wu

Pingxiang (Wu Zao), Using the Rhyme Words in the Collection

How fortunate to know your name long ago.

I love the spring silk-worms,

Tenderly making cocoons,

Each strand winds and coils.

Having finished sewing the brocade of the Heavenly Maid, who shifted her position seven times,³¹

Colorful threads and gold needles are all cleared away.

Though we are one thousand *li* apart,

It ties our thoughts to each other.

But it is not in our destiny to fulfill our desire to meet.

Moreover, you and I are both getting old.

Let's not turn our backs on

Such fine talent.

Falling flowers and flowing water, things hard to predict.

³¹ This allusion comes from poem # 203 in the *Book of Songs* 詩經 about how the weaver – the star Vega changes position seven times at night. Here, it is used to describe the excellence of Wu's poems.

Just now,
 Icy strings are expressing complaints,³²
 On cloud-patterned paper a draft is begun.
 There's a beauty leaning against a tall bamboo,
 When will she come on a light boat?
 I lament: in the empty valley,
 Those who know the tone are so few.
 Only orioles and flowers can suit my inspiration
 Facing the scenery of lake and mountain, I let out a long whistle.
 I hope you will send me
 Your recent drafts.
 (Heji, 206)

金縷曲 題花廉詞寄吳蘋香女士，用本集中韻
 何幸聞名早。愛春蠶、纏綿作繭，絲絲縈繞。織就七襄天孫錦，彩綫
 金針都掃。隔千里、繫人懷抱。欲見無由緣分淺，況卿乎與我年將
 老。莫辜負，好才調。 落花流水難猜料。正無妨、冰弦寫怨，雲
 箋起草。有美人兮倚修竹，何日輕舟來到。嘆空谷、知音偏少。只有
 鶯花堪適興，對湖光山色舒長嘯。願寄我，近來稿。

In this poem, Gu Taiqing expresses her sincere admiration for Wu Zao's literary talents
 and makes an overt effort to establish personal contact with Wu Zao. She views Wu as
 her *zhiyin*, an allusion to the famous story of Bo Ya 伯牙 and Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期 in

³² "Icy strings" refers to the zither.

which Bo Ya determines never again to pluck the zither following the death of Zhong Ziqi, the only person who could understand the intentions expressed in his music.³³ It might seem strange that Gu considers a woman she had never met as her *zhiyin*. However, herein lies the significance of this song lyric. Wu's talent was so great and her poetry so touching that Gu, after reading her poetry, felt as though they had been long-time friends. Though the two women never met, Wu Zao's poetry collection brought them together. As a reader, Gu Taiqing express her admiration for Wu's literary talent and her desire for friendship and mutual understanding.

The third function of writing in this women's community was to maintain the interrelations among its members, thus preserving a sense of group identity while they were physically apart. Gu's two epistolary poems remembering Xiang Xun read:

Remembering Pingshan: Two Poems

I.

One day seems like three autumns, how many more are three months;
Gazing at the clouds how often I paced back and forth?
Missing you, I buy all the carps by the riverside,
But I don't find any letters from Jiangnan.³⁴

II.

When cassias were flowering, I saw you off to the South;
Now, the plum blossoms are once again filling the branches.
All of us sisters in the capital are saddened [by your absence],

³³ See *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋, j.14.4b.

³⁴ The carp is believed to be able to deliver letters; this is from the story of a man who found a letter inside a carp. See Xu Ling, *Yutai xinyong jianzhu*, 31.

Someone under a flowering tree is counting the days till your return.

(*Heji*, 155)

憶屏山二首

I.

一日三秋況三月，
望雲幾度自徘徊。
思君買盡沿河鯉，
不見江南尺素來。

II.

送君南去桂花時，
又到梅花開滿枝。
惆悵都門諸姊妹，
有人花底數歸期。

According to Gu Taiqing's song lyric composed on the occasion of seeing Xiang Xun off, Xiang Xun left for Hangzhou in the autumn, but Gu does not specify the reason for Xiang's departure.³⁵ These two poems were composed three months after their parting. As indicated by these two poems, Xiang Xun and Gu Taiqing corresponded with each other through letters while Xiang was in Hangzhou. Because carps were believed to be able to deliver letters, Gu writes that she "buys all the carps by the riverside," but does not "find any letters from Jiangnan." This purchasing of carps is obviously an exaggeration but it is a trope that effectively expresses Gu's longing for her friend. This

³⁵ See "Yirenren: Seeing Pingshan off to Hangzhou" (憶人人：送屏山往杭州), *Heji*, 289.

type of hyperbolic language is also present in the first line of the poem where the three months apart are experienced as many years. The “cassias” and “plum blossoms” in the second stanza are used to indicate time; cassias blossom in the autumn and plums blossom in the early spring. In the final couplet of the poem, Gu indicates that Xiang Xun’s absence not only saddens Gu, but also affects the other women of this community.

Correspondence between these women while they were apart was, in fact, consciously encouraged by members of the community as they saw each other off. In Gu’s song lyric written on the departure of Xu Yanjin, “*Manjianghong*: Seeing Yunjiang off to the South at the Guanyin Temple on the Seventh Day of the First Month,” (滿江紅：人日觀音院餞雲姜南歸) she writes: “Please send me often words of your safe journey; / Don’t be remiss” (報平安兩字寄書頻，君休惰).³⁶ In another *ci*, “*Jinliuqu*: Seeing Sister Renlan Off to Daliang” (金縷曲：送紉蘭妹往大梁), she writes: “From now on, send me often words of your safe journey, / To give comfort to my many sad thoughts” (此后平安書頻寄，慰我愁懷種種).³⁷ In the lyric “*Langtaosha*: Seeing Shanzhi Off on Her Return to Wulin” (浪淘沙：送珊枝歸武林), she writes: “If it’s convenient to send news in a letter, / Please often ask the traveling geese [to deliver it]” (一紙音書脫有便，頻倩征鴻).³⁸

The fourth function of writing in this women’s community was to educate children. While it might be argued that the education of children had no direct association with the community as such, I contend that educating children was also a communal

³⁶ See *Heji*, 227.

³⁷ See *Heji*, 240.

³⁸ See *Heji*, 236.

activity for these women rather than just an individual activity for two reasons. First, as recorded in her poems, Gu used poetry to offer encouragement not only to her own daughters, but also to the children of other women poets. The exchange of poems and inscription for paintings also occurred between generations. For instance, one of Gu's poems was entitled "Inscribed on a Fan with White Lotuses, Sent to Shourong, My Niece" (題手蓉甥女白蓮花團扇).³⁹ Shourong was the daughter of Xu Yanjin; by calling her "her niece," Gu Taiqing considered her close friend Xu Yanjin "her sister." Gu also inscribed a poem on a fan painting by Xiang Xun's son.⁴⁰ At the same time, her own daughters received encouragement from other members of the community. As recorded in *Mingyuan shihua*, when Yiwen was fifteen years old, she composed a poem to match the rhyme of Shen Shanbao's poem, garnering praise from Shen for her poetic talents and literary learning.⁴¹

Secondly, the younger generation was truly involved in the communal activities of the group. For instance, one of Gu's poems is entitled "After the Rain, I Traveled in a Boat on the Lu River with the Three Sisters Shaoru, Wuzhuang, and Su'an, as well as My Children. In the Boat, I Harmonized with a Poem by Shaoru" (雨后同少如、武莊、素安三姊妹及兒女輩泛舟潞河; 舟中次少如韵).⁴² On this occasion, Gu and her female friends were accompanied on an excursion by their children who would likely have participated in poetry practice along with their elders. In some cases, women would hire members of the community to teach their children. As recorded in *Mingyuan shihua*,

³⁹ See *Heji*, 55.

⁴⁰ See "In the Year of Tongzhi Jiazi (1864)...." (同治甲子), *Heji*, 171.

⁴¹ See *Mingyuan shihua*, j.8.4b.

⁴² See *Heji*, 144. In addition to Gu's children, as indicated by Gu's note to line 5, Dong'e Wuzhuang's child also participated in the activity.

Chen Su'an (dates unknown, courtesy name Dinglin 定林), one of Gu Taiqing's friends, was hired by Gu to teach her daughters, Shuwen and Yiwen.⁴³ These examples indicate that the education of children was no longer confined within the boundaries of family but shared by women as part of the larger community. For Gu Taiqing, poetry writing was more specifically associated with educating her daughters and daughters-in-law.⁴⁴ We can see this women-centred activity in one of her poems:

At the End of Spring, in Leisure, I Chanted Four Lines. At this
Time, Xiutang, My Daughter-in-law, and My Two Daughters
Shuwen and Yiwen were Learning to Write Poetry. They Asked
Me to Compose Poems in Their Place. So I Wrote this Regulated
Verse

After the Grain Rain period, the fine scene has passed.⁴⁵
Flowers fall as the wind blows; wind combs through the willows.
My grief is temporarily relieved by means of poetry,
It is difficult to dispel my worries by wine.
When people forget to scheme, they will make even birds feel tame,
Without real learning, you will be shamed in front of "Insects" and "Fish."
My spoiled children do not understand the great pains I take,
Carving and painting the radicals,⁴⁶ they ask me to compose a poem for
them.

⁴³ See Shen, *Mingyuanshihua*, j.6.13a. On Chen Su'an, see Hu Wenkai, 588.

⁴⁴ Gu's sons were not interested in studying, see Gu's note to the poem "Randomly Composed on a Spring Day" (春日偶成), *Heji*, 152.

⁴⁵ The "Grain Rain" refers to a solar period from about April 20th to May 4th.

⁴⁶ "Pianpang" refers to the radical of a character.

(*Heji*, 134)

暮春閑吟將得四句；值秀塘媳、叔文、以文兩女姑嫂學詩，

倩予代寫，遂足成此律

好景已過穀雨後，

花隨風落柳風梳。

憂愁暫借詩消遣，

煩惱難將酒破除。

人到忘機馴鳥雀，

胸無實學愧蟲魚。

嬌兒不識予苦心，

刻劃偏旁索代書。

The title indicates the occasion on which this regulated verse was composed. Chen Su'an, once the teacher of Shuwen and Yiwen, must have assigned some homework for her students, very likely consisting of some poetic exercise. The children might have thought this difficult and asked their mother, Gu Taiqing, to write a poem on their behalf. The result is a regulated verse, in which the first two couplets express Gu's own emotions at the end of spring, while the last two couplets are responses to her daughters, and daughter-in-law's request to compose a poem for them. The implications of this poem are worth further elaborating.

Structurally this poem falls into two rather unrelated halves. In the first half, the persona appears to be moved by the passage of time and tries to relieve her grief by writing poetry and drinking wine. It addresses the "End of Spring" in the title. The second

half turns to the occasion and she responds to the young women's request. In the third couplet, the first line alludes to a parable in the *Liezi* 列子, which tells of a child who often played with seagulls on the beach. However, when his father suggested to him to catch the seagulls, they no longer came near him.⁴⁷ Purity and innocence constitute the state of perfection and harmony with nature. Through this allusion, Gu Taiqing may be suggesting that in comparison to men, women could have a purer relationship to writing. As women were excluded from participation in the examination system and the public sphere, there was no need for them to "scheme" for gain through their writing. In the second line of the couplet, the term *chongyu* 蟲魚 alludes to two chapters – "*Shichong*" 釋蟲 (Explaining Insects) and "*Shiyu*" 釋魚 (Explaining Fish) in the *Erya* 爾雅, the earliest authoritative dictionary in China. If women (in this case, Xiutang, Shuwen and Yiwen) do not study hard and obtain real learning, they should feel ashamed for not knowing the literary canons. I believe Gu is arguing that although women live within the domestic domain and their study will never lead them to an official career, they should still feel ashamed if they fail to acquire true learning.

In the fourth couplet, Gu expresses how her children does not recognize her intention in urging them to study. The radical, which is only one side of a character, is obviously not the whole character. In other words, her children pay too much attention to the tiresome, one-sidedness of learning – the "carving of radicals" – and ignore the fuller significance of their learning – mastering the skills of writing poetry. The poem rather suggests a tone of disappointment with her children. We can infer that Gu did not simply

⁴⁷ See *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, 67-8.

compose a poem in their place, but took the opportunity to urge the children on to greater diligence.

The literary education of children could also take the form of light-hearted literary games between mother and daughter. For example, Gu Taiqing once composed a series of four poems using the title “Boudoir Lyrics: Four Topics” (閨詞四題) as proposed by Yiwen. This kind of poetic exercise generally begins with the daughter proposing specific titles, *ni* (擬), meaning to imitate a model; after this, the daughter and mother would obtain different rhyme words (very possibly decided by lot), and the game proceeds with both composing poems according to the specific theme and rhyme words.⁴⁸ In the example of “Boudoir Lyrics,” the four topics are “Rolling up the Curtain to Wait for Swallows”(卷簾待燕), “Putting on a Hairpin in front of the Mirror”(對鏡簪花), “Trimming the Lamp and Listening to the Rain”(剪燈聽雨), and “Angling by the Railing”(倚闌垂釣).⁴⁹ Gu also wrote another series of four poems with Yiwen on the occasion of seven consecutive rainy days. These poems may have been intended to bring some amusement into their lives as they were trapped indoors by the bad weather.⁵⁰

In this chapter, I have used Gu Taiqing’s poetry along with Shen Shanbao’s *Mingyuan shihua* and *Mingyuan shihua xuji* to reconstruct the women’s community to which Gu belonged. This community has been shown to be a complex, extensive, and intertwined network. Despite being a woman poet of the “inner chambers,” Gu

⁴⁸ The literary games between mother and daughter resemble those games popular among women’s poetic circles during the Ming-Qing era, although the latter may give more emphasis on evaluating and ranking. See the example of “Qinxi yinshe” (清溪吟社) in *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu*, 189-192.

⁴⁹ See *Heji*, 157-8.

⁵⁰ See *Heji*, 156-7.

developed relationships with more than thirty women poets. This community of women shared artistic interests, celebrated the freedom of writing and reading, and developed intimate interrelations – sometimes life-long friendships – among themselves. I have also examined the features of this particular women’s community: its fluidity, the centrality of writing, and its independence and self-sufficiency. Finally, by a close reading of Gu’s poetic texts, I have explored the various functions of writing in this women’s community. More detailed exploration of Gu Taiqing’s writing pertaining to this women’s community will be pursued in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Negotiating Themes: Gu Taiqing's Writings from within a Women's Community

I have shown in the previous two chapters that Gu Taiqing's interrelations with the other women of the community comprised an indispensable part of her life. In this chapter I undertake a more focused analysis of Gu's poems related to the women's community to investigate how she represented her experience with this group of women. My analysis will be organized around three themes that run through many of these community-related poems: *xian* (leisure), parting, and friendship. Within the context of the women's community, these themes can be more precisely articulated as: women's leisure, partings between women, and women's friendship. As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Gu wrote at least 168 poems related to this women's community, among which more than half fall under one of these three themes. These works not only comprise a significant portion of Gu's corpus, but also serve as a strong proof of Gu's poetic talent and sophisticated utilization of the poetic tradition. Leisure, parting, and friendship were not unprecedented thematic choices, but in Gu's poems they were creatively manipulated and inscribed with new meanings. It is in this sense that I suggest these three themes were "negotiated themes," in which the dominant (masculine) literary modes were recognized and accepted, but with adjustments and adaptations by Gu Taiqing.¹ Furthermore, within the context of the women's community, these adjustments and adaptations were drawn mainly from the experience of a particular group of women. Therefore, this chapter will try to illustrate how these themes were written differently by

¹ For a more detailed exploration of the concept of "negotiation," see Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine," 65, note 4.

Gu, and how these differences were closely related to the experiences of these women as a group.

Before moving on to a more specific discussion of these poems, it will be useful to outline several features found throughout Gu's poetry pertaining to the women's community. First, there is an abundance of social occasional poems. Poems recording the social and cultural activities of Gu and other members of the community account for more than half of the 168 poems. Common among these poems are accounts of the performance and enjoyment of music, excursions, and flower viewing. These poems also include parting poems and elegies – poems written on the occasions of parting and mourning over friends' deaths – as well as poetic games, poetic exercises undertaken as part of the activities of the poetry club, and inscriptions on other women's poetry collections 題詞. Hans Frankel has stated that the view of poetry writing as a social activity led to the prevalence of poems dealing with "social contacts among men."² Gu Taiqing's poetry writing from within the women's community shows that this tendency was not limited to men, but also imbued much of the poetry of women writers. While these poems may appear relatively innocent, they stood in contrast to the Confucian gender system in which women's roles were restricted to those of dutiful wife or filial daughter, neither of which included the expectation of participation in social activities outside the family, much less the composition of poetry to record these activities. Although it has been shown that numerous women of the Ming-Qing period were well educated, literate, and able in various ways to transcend domestic boundaries, most scholars who make these arguments have written from an historical perspective; few have undertaken a textual analysis of women's writings about their own social activities or

² Hans Frankel, *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady*, 33.

explore their significance. Therefore, a close textual analysis of Gu Taiqing's occasional poems, particularly her parting poems, will be at the centre of this chapter.

Gu Taiqing's occasional poems are products of negotiation. To a large extent these poems follow the styles and themes of the traditional occasional poetry composed by men. For instance, exercise poems in the poetry club are characterized by an abundance of allusions, and inscriptions on other women's poetry collections are characterized by eulogistic expressions. These similarities demonstrate Gu's recognition and acceptance of the established tradition of poetry writing as a social activity as well as her understanding of the ways in which different literary modes could be called upon in different social occasions. With this in mind, I believe textual clues will provide hints as to how this process of negotiation operated, that is, how these traditional modes were inscribed with Gu's adaptations based on the experience of this group of women.

The second important feature of Gu Taiqing's poems on the women's community is her balanced use of both *shi* and *ci* genres; out of the 168 poems, 82 are *shi* and 86 are *ci*. Gu seems to be very comfortable with both genres and shows no clear preference for either one. However, in her larger corpus she composes far more *shi* than *ci*: more than 800 *shi* and only about 300 *ci*. In other words, only about one out of ten of Gu's *shi* poems were written about the women's community, while one out of three or four *ci* lyrics were written about the women's community. The equal use of *shi* and *ci* in the context of the women's community, then, can be taken as a sign of unusual preference for the *ci* genre. Several factors may help to explain this preference. First, the *ci* genre,

according to many scholars, has a strong relevance to women and the feminine voice.³ The perceived affinity between the genre and the content – poems to or about women – may have made Gu Taiqing feel more comfortable in employing *ci*. Secondly, it is apparent that Gu enjoyed a reputation as a *ci* poet, and her talent and skill in composing song lyrics must have gained further encouragement from the appreciative readers in the community. This makes it reasonable to infer that Gu was more inclined to demonstrate her poetic talent within such a supportive context. It can also be observed that routine activities in the women's community such as poetic exercises and records of gatherings were often written in the *shi* genre,⁴ while *ci* were generally reserved for the more emotional epistolary and parting poems.⁵ Gu may have felt that the dynamic short and long sentences of the *ci* genre were better suited to the emotional expression of parting and longing. Finally, it should be pointed out that the extensive range of tune patterns 詞牌 used by Gu reflects her expertise and erudition in the *ci* and her self-conscious attempt to appear as such. She manages to employ a total of at least 60 tune patterns for the 86 *ci* lyrics under discussion.

Thirdly, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Gu Taiqing demonstrates a particular concern for three themes in her writings about the women's community: women's *xian* (leisure), partings between women, and women's friendship. Gu's representations of women's leisure can be broadly divided into three categories. In the first, women's leisure is comprised of the precious and enjoyable moments in their lives;

³ More discussion can be found in "Lun cixuezhong zhi kunhuo yu huajianci zhi nüxing xuxie jiqi yingxiang" (論詞學中之困惑與花間詞之女性叙寫及其影響), in *Jialing lunci congkao* 迦陵論詞從稿 by Ye Jiaying 葉嘉瑩, 178-228; *Zhongguo cixueshi* 中國詞學史 by Xie Taofang 謝桃坊, 17-22.

⁴ An example is "A Poem Composed at the Gathering with Shanzhi and Renlan in Yunjiang's Room of Eastern Warmth" (同珊枝、紉蘭集雲姜東暖室作), *Heji*, 61.

⁵ An example is "*Lan'ganwanglixin*: Hearing the Sound of the Rain, I Thought of Yunlin" (欄杆萬裏心: 聽雨憶雲林), *Heji*, 234.

in the second, “women in leisure” are depicted as peaceful and self-sufficient rather than lonely and gently melancholic; in the third, “women in leisure” are compared to recluses. In Gu’s poems about parting, she directly and/or indirectly inscribes this traditional poetic theme with a gendered dimension, most predominantly through the reiteration of her desire for future reunion with her female friends. A large majority of Gu’s poems written about the women’s community can be grouped under the generic theme of “friendship,” because they show how these women enjoyed their common artistic interests and offered mutual support in life and writing. However, the focal point of my discussion of women’s friendship is Gu’s rewriting of women’s “pining” and “longing” with a reference to love (as found in male representation) into descriptions of the friendship between women.

Xian

Xian, roughly translated as “leisure” or “idleness,” was a popular poetic theme in premodern China. As James Liu has suggested, the term does not mean simply idling away an empty day, rather, it often signifies “a state of mind free from worldly cares and desires and at peace with itself and with Nature.”⁶ Liu also notes that the famous Tang poet, Wang Wei (701-761), who employs “*xian*” as one of the key words in his poetry, “raise[s] *xian* to the level of philosophic and aesthetic contemplation.”⁷ These two aspects of *xian* can often be found in male literati’s self-representations. However, *xian* could also “signif[y] a nonchalant, listless, and wistful state of mind that resembles

⁶ Liu, 53.

⁷ Liu, 53-54.

‘ennui.’”⁸ This kind of listless sorrow or gentle melancholy is often found to have a feminine association or characteristic, particularly in the *ci* genre. For instance, in the writings of famous *ci* writers, such as Feng Yansi 馮延巳 (903-960), Liu Yong 柳永 (*jinshi* 1034), and Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1081-ca. 1141), “listless sorrow” 閑愁 is frequently used to describe a female persona who is alone and occupied by complex emotions such as thinking of someone absent 相思.⁹ Although “listless sorrow” can be seen as a product of literary cultivation, it serves to tie women’s *xian* to an emotional state of listlessness, boredom, or groundless sorrow. For women, then, *xian* seems to have lost half its meaning – the merging with nature and transcendence of social obligations are simply not within women’s domain.

However, Gu Taiqing’s poetry rejects this limited view of women’s *xian*. She not only fully restores a more complex dimension to this mental and emotional state for women, but in fact tries to subvert the image of an unoccupied woman. The complexity is evident in her three uses of *xian*. In the first, she represents *xian* as the precious moments in a woman’s life. According to the orthodox Confucian vision of dutiful wives and filial daughters, women were not to be *xian*. Although they were basically confined to the domestic domain, women had various duties, such as taking care of in-laws, educating the children, and managing the household.¹⁰ Privileged gentry women might be partially freed from the physical housework, but they were still responsible for other familial

⁸ Liu, 54.

⁹ For example, “The same type of longing,/ Listless sorrow at two places” (一種相思, 兩處閑愁) in *Yijianmei* 一剪梅 by Li Qingzhao, see *Tangsongci jianshang cidian* 唐宋詞鑒賞詞典, 1191; “The goose flies by itself,/ the person sits alone.... /Behind the curtain,/ On the moss-grown ground, / Who believes one can get drunk due to listless sorrow? 雁孤飛, 人獨坐,簾幕裏, 青苔地, 誰信閑愁如醉....” in *Genglouzi* 更漏子 by Feng Yansi, see *Tang wudai liangsong ci xuanshi* 唐五代兩宋詞選釋, 107-108. For more in-depth study on this topic, see Maija Bell Samei’s forthcoming book *Gendered Persona and Poetic Voice: The Abandoned Woman in Early Chinese Song Lyrics*.

¹⁰ In fact, a large portion of Gu Taiqing’s poetry are about these duties.

duties that were demanding enough to keep them busy. Therefore, “leisure” for women, regardless of their social status, was comprised of the treasured moments that they enjoyed after their work had been done. Within the context of a women’s community, as represented by Gu Taiqing’s poetry writing, many of these leisure moments were shared with female friends. In the following examples, she explicitly incorporates the character *xian* to depict women’s shared leisurely activities:

Huanxisha: Lyrics from the Inner Chambers in the Four Seasons #3

Pleasant weather cheers one up on a clear autumn day,
Leaves fall on the silver bed; a tender cool has arisen,¹¹
In leisure, I invite female friends to try the melon-shaped lanterns.

....

(*Heji*, 291)

浣溪沙 四時閨詞之三

爽氣怡人秋日清，銀床落葉嫩涼生。閑邀女伴試瓜燈。....

Yundanqiukong: Sister Pingshan Invites Me to View Osmanthus

Blossoms on the Twenty-first Day of the Eighth Month

Near noon, the news suddenly arrives:
A good friend invites me
To view the autumn scenery together.
Drifting – the scent of golden millet,¹²
Pale are the clouds in the azure sky,
In a decorated pavilion, we are in leisure.

¹¹ “Silver bed” refers to the colour of the ground in the moonlight.

¹² Gu uses the term “golden millet” to describe the colour and shape of the clusters of osmanthus blossoms.

....

(Heji, 292)

雲淡秋空 八月廿一屏山姊招看桂花

傍午忽傳，良朋邀我，秋色同看。金粟香飄，碧天雲淡，畫閣人
閑。

Of course, a state of *xian* can also be described even without the character *xian*. Take, for example, the following two couplets describing a leisurely moment that Gu Taiqing enjoys with her women friends and her children:

After the Rain, I Traveled in a Boat on the Lu River with the Three
Sisters Shaoru, Wuzhuang, and Su'an, as well as My Children. In
the Boat, I Harmonized with a Poem by Shaoru

The heavy rain washed out a pure autumn,
Streams and mountains appear to be in a painting.¹³
We invite water and wind to be our company,¹⁴
Together, we travel on boat.¹⁵

....

(Heji, 144)

雨後同少如、武莊、素安三姊妹及兒女輩泛舟潞河；舟中次
少如韻

一雨傾盆洗素秋，

¹³ “Wang” refers to viewing through the window; this indicates that seen from inside through the window, the mountains and streams outside seem to be in a picture framed by the window.

¹⁴ “Pei” (ornament worn as a pendant) and “shang” (garment) are used by human beings. Here Gu uses them on water and wind to make the scenery more vivid.

¹⁵ “Fujia fanzhou” (浮家泛舟) refers to living on the boat and floating anywhere.

溪山如畫望中收。

邀將水佩風裳侶，

同放浮家泛宅舟。

....

In these lines, women's leisure is represented as the enjoyable moments that Gu shares with her women friends, mostly at their convivial gatherings. In contrast to male *ci* poets who used the female persona to represent sadness and ennui, as in Feng Yansi's song lyric *Genglouzi*, Gu Taiqing records the undisguised happiness associated with moments of leisure enjoyed by women. And her exploration into and manipulation of the theme of "leisure" does not stop here. Gu Taiqing suggests, secondly, that leisure for women is enjoyable because it is possible also for women to experience a calm and peaceful mind in harmony with nature. The following *ci*, which Gu inscribed on a self-portrait by her friend Xu Yanreng, illustrates this view:

Zuiwengcao: Inscription for a Painting by Yunlin Entitled "Portrait
with a Zither Swathed in Moonlight by a Lake"¹⁶

Far, far away

A distant sky

Limpid waters

Lost in a lakeful of mist

Vast and boundless.

Resplendent is the clear light of the moon;

There's the Fairest One, the flying immortal.

¹⁶ I have followed the translation by Irving Yucheng Lo with some modifications, see *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 597-8.

Quietly, without a word,
Rolling up the sleeves, she presses on the lilting strings.
Shining on the weeping willow, the pale moon's shadow moves aslant.

How much I esteem your mind that dwells
On flowing streams and towering peaks!
Let me ask: at such moments
Is your heart attuned to the ease of mountains and rivers?
Clouds, by themselves, drift; the sky is vast;
The moon, by itself, is bright; dew drops gather.
New sounds harmonizing and perfectly matched;
Pure chords ever so gently, gently plucked.
Transcendent music is broadcast all over the world;
The moon bright, the breeze calm, and autumn night chill.

(*Heji*, 270)

醉翁操 題雲林湖月沁琴圖小照

悠然。長天。澄淵。渺湖烟。無邊。清輝燦燦兮嬋娟。有美人兮飛
仙。悄無言，攘袖促鳴弦。照垂楊、素蟾影偏。 羨君志在，流
水高山。問君此際，心共山閑水閑。雲自行而天寬，月自明而露溥。
新聲和且圓，輕徽徐徐彈。法曲散人間。月明風靜秋夜寒。

This song lyric describes the manner in which Gu Taiqing imagines Xu, as pictured in the painting, playing the zither in moonlight by a lake. Redefining *xian* is a focal point of this *ci* lyric. As suggested by Gu's question to her friend ("Is your heart attuned to the

ease of mountains and rivers?”), *xian* is a state of peace attributed to nature – the mountains and rivers. In the space of the painting and the song lyric inscribed on its surface, Xu Yanreng’s peaceful mind coexisting with the ease of mountains and rivers represents a state of *xian* experienced by a woman. Gu goes on to elaborate on this state of *xian* by drawing attention to natural processes: “Clouds, by themselves, drift; the sky is vast; / The moon, by itself, is bright; dew drops gather.” The focus of these two lines is emphasized by the repetition of the character *zi* 自, which literally means “a state of being itself,” or “being natural.” This scene not only describes the natural environment in which Xu is located in the painting, but also symbolizes her state of leisure – a state of self-contentment and peace. In this *ci*, Gu suggests that women’s leisure is a desirable moment of merging with nature, of acquiring peace and self-satisfaction.

Xian as a state of mind that was deemed superior to a preoccupation with social and political obligations can be commonly observed in the poetry of scholar officials and literati where it was used for the self-representation of men who deliberately rejected worldly obligations. However, it was a new topical territory for women, who, as a class, had never been permitted access to the public sphere. Could women, already free of (or banned from) the obligations of public career, negotiate this kind of *xian* in representation? In the song lyric “*Hexinliang*: Writing on a Summer’s day When Yu Jiying Invited Us to Drink at the Pure Green Mountain Villa” (賀新涼：夏日余季瑛招飲綠淨山房作), Gu appropriates terms that are conventionally gendered male to express this possibility:

....

Choosing to construct a mountain house, you become a great recluse,
I admire our dashing hostess, who can detain the visitors.

.....

When the place is remote, minds are detached, free of dusty traces.

Filling limpid goblets

A group of worthies gathered together,

Feeling elated, we let our eyes roam.

....

(*Heji*, 235)

....卜築山房成大隱，羨主人瀟灑能留客。....地偏心遠無塵迹。倒清
樽、群賢咸集，騁懷游目。

When reading this *ci*, one might ask: who were the “group of worthies” (*qunxian* 群賢), a term that, without specific gender qualification, designates men of virtue? Gu uses the term to refer to the people who attended the gathering, but fails to provide any specific identifications. The title of another poem by Gu helps to clarify this:

“On a Winter’s Day, Jiying Invited Us to Drink and View

Chrysanthemums at the Pure Green Mountain Villa; on That Day, Sisters

Yunlin, Yunjiang, Xiangpei, and Peiji were Present. However, because I

was Restricted by the Hours of the City Gate(for returning to the city), I

Could Not Enjoy myself to the End. As Soon as I Came back, I Composed

a Poem to Match the Rhymes of Xiangpei.”

冬月季瑛招飲綠淨山房賞菊，是日有雲林、雲姜、湘佩、佩吉諸姊妹

在座；奈余爲城門所阻，未得盡歡；歸來即次湘佩韵¹⁷

¹⁷ See *Heji*, 123.

From this title, which records another gathering of women friends at Yu Jiying's residence on a winter day, we can infer that those who were present at the gathering on a summer day in the lyric "Hexinliang" were also some female friends shared by Yu Jiying and Gu Taiqing. Their common friend Shen Shanbao described Yu Jiying as a hospitable hostess who often invited her female friends to view flowers at her residence.¹⁸ In the lyric "Hexinliang," by referring to these women as *qunxian*, Gu appropriates the male language of signification to articulate new social identities or roles for women outside of family or lineage.

Also of importance in the lyric "Hexinliang" is Gu's reference to Yu Jiying as a "great recluse" who has chosen to build a mountain home. This contains an allusion to the lines: "Small recluses dwell in mounds and marshes, great recluses dwell in courts and markets" (小隱隱陵藪，大隱隱朝市) in "Poem against Summoning Recluses" (反招隱詩) by Wang Kangju 王康琚 (dates unknown).¹⁹ In Gu's view, even though Yu Jiying has retired to the mountains she remains a great recluse. Yet, far from isolating herself from society, she remains active in organizing gatherings for her women friends. In this lyric, Gu also alludes to one of the most famous recluses in China, Tao Qian 陶潛 (372?-427), through the paraphrasing and inversion of Tao's description of reclusion in one of his poems: "I built my hut beside a traveled road / Yet hear no noise of passing carts and horses. / You would like to know how it is done? / With the mind detached, one's place becomes remote" (結廬在人境，而無車馬喧。問君何能爾？心遠地自

¹⁸ See Shen Shanbao, j.6.20a-b.

¹⁹ See *Zhaoming Wenxuan*, 118.

偏).²⁰ Gu reworks Tao's lines: "When the place is remote, minds are detached, free of dusty traces." To be sure, the mountain retreat is the property of Yu Jiying's husband,²¹ nonetheless, these women managed to remove themselves from the hustle and bustle of everyday life to enjoy a moment of homosociality.

What, then, is the significance of viewing these women as *qunxian* (worthy men 群賢) and *yinshi* (recluses 隱士)? In pre-modern China, *xianren* 賢人 and *yinshi* were terms used exclusively in reference to men. The former implies adherence to Confucian virtues, required of a male subject, in particular loyalty and service to the ruler and state. The latter is defined against this system of political involvement, and implies detachment from, or even disdain for wealth, fame, and power – the rewards of office. Women were excluded from this discourse because they had no access to political power. Nonetheless, as Maureen Robertson has observed, references to Tao Qian and his utopian retreat, the "Peach Blossom Spring," also occur frequently in women's poetry.²² She suggests that this gendered use of the figure of the recluse draws on the similarities between the segregated domestic life of women and the life of recluses spent in tranquility and integrity detached from worldly affairs.²³ Gu Taiqing's manipulation of the concept of *xian* conforms to Robertson's observation: by comparing "women in leisure" to worthy people and recluses, she redefines *xian* as women's peaceful enjoyment of nature and each other's company, having put aside a busy daily life rather than public political obligations.

²⁰ These two couplets belong to #5 of Tao's poem series entitled *Yinjiu* 飲酒 (Drinking Wine). The poem is translated by James Robert Hightower; see Hightower, 130.

²¹ See the note to the poem, in Zhang Zhang, 123.

²² See Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring" in *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*, translated by Hightower, 254-258.

²³ Robertson, "Changing the Subject," footnote 4, 447-448.

However, while Gu attempts to re-present her women friends in unconventional roles by comparing Yu Jiying to a recluse and describing other female friends as worthy women, she has to employ the figure of a traditional male recluse and terms that were developed in a male social and literary world. This suggests the predicament of a woman poet who exhibits a degree of contravention in her writing, but still has to negotiate with traditional models and representations. When Gu wants to describe the noble characters of her female friends and the social life that women enjoyed during their leisure time, she turns to the image of the recluse for a comparable model.

Parting

As I have already mentioned, most members in the women's community to which Gu Taiqing belonged were wives or daughters of officials posted in Beijing. When their husbands or fathers received new assignments elsewhere, these women had to accompany them. The intrinsic instability of this group meant that parting poems and epistolary poems were especially abundant in Gu's writings. Of course, parting is a two-way process, in which the people who are parting and those who are remaining behind can compose poems to each other. However, due to the fact that Gu Taiqing resided in Beijing throughout the existence of the women's community, I will examine only the poems that she, as the one woman who remained a constant in the community, wrote to those who left. This choice is dictated by Gu Taiqing's situation rather than a limited definition of parting poetry.

Parting poems were not written exclusively by women. However, parting poems by men and women were often written on different occasions. Those written by men

were generally composed for occasions when they were assigned to new posts, when they left their hometowns for the civil service examinations, or when they retired from public life. In contrast, when a woman wrote a parting poem to her parting friend, as exemplified by Gu Taiqing's writings, it was most commonly written on the occasion when a woman friend left with her husband to a new post, escorted her in-laws or husbands' coffins to their hometowns, or left for other family reasons. In other words, the "parting" that women experienced was often more passive, in the sense that it was generally required of them, rather than a choice they themselves made. How then did Gu Taiqing handle the theme of parting when her women friends so often had to leave Beijing? My reading of Gu's parting poems suggests that she reinscribes this conventional theme with details drawn from women's sphere of experience. Take the following poem as an example:

Manjianghong: on the Seventh Day of the First Month Seeing

Yunjiang off to the South at the Guanyin Temple²⁴

You are returning home;²⁵

Afraid of you leaving,

For a little while, I keep you sitting here.

Words cannot exhaust

Our grief of separation;

Tears fall as we talk.

In rustic inns on a long journey, you should take care of yourself.

²⁴ The term in the original is "Renri," which is the seventh day of the first lunar month.

²⁵ This line is a direct quote from the famous rhapsody of Tao Qian, *The Return* (歸去來兮辭), which he composed immediately before resigning his official post and becoming a recluse. See Hightower, 268-70. It is used here to suggest that to accompany her mother-in-law's coffin back to the hometown, Yunjiang had to part.

Oiling wheels and feeding horses, these chores you must supervise on your own.

Please send me often words of your safe return;

Don't be remiss.

New Year's affairs,

Pass by quickly.

The ice begins to melt;

The east wind blows hard.

Separated by a thousand *li* of river passes,

What can we do about our longing?

After we part today, when will we see each other again?

Guanyin doesn't care about people's feelings.

Saying "Take care", you leave – no way to detain you.

How it grieves me!

(*Heji*, 227)

滿江紅 人日觀音院餞雲姜南歸

歸去來兮，怕君去，少留君坐。說不盡，離愁彼此，泪隨聲墮。野店
長途當自愛，脂車秣馬須親課。報平安兩字寄書頻，君休惰。

新年事，匆匆過。冰初解，東風大。隔江關千裏，相思無那。

今日分襟何日見，觀音不管人些個。聽一聲珍重去難留，傷心我。

In this lyric, there are several indications of female gender. First, the speaker in this lyric makes reference to Guanyin. As is widely known, Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of

Compassion, was believed to have a special concern for women's sufferings and to offer particular protection for women. According to the title of this poem, Gu and Xu Yanjin parted at Guanyin Temple, so it would be especially fitting for Gu to appeal to Guanyin to ease her sorrow at her friend's departure. Ironically, however, Gu states that "Guanyin doesn't care about people's feelings." The Bodhisattva of Compassion could neither keep her friend from leaving, nor help to relieve her grief. Secondly, in addition to urging her friend to maintain their friendship through writing, Gu Taiqing expresses strongly her uncertainty about their reunion: "After we part today; when will we see each other again?" Though there is no certainty that Gu and her friend will ever meet again, a desire for eventual reunion remains. This concern, expressed with particular frequency in Gu's parting poems, becomes a gendered issue, as I will explain below.

While the desire for reunion is not an exclusively female topic, I would suggest that it has strong connections with these women's experience. In order to illustrate this, I have conducted a statistical study of *Tangshi sanbaishou* 唐詩三百首, the popular anthology of Tang poetry compiled in the eighteenth century.²⁶ Of the 310 poems in this collection, forty are parting poems, all of which were written by male poets. These poems illustrate the three most common situations in which men had to part from each other: the first situation, illustrated by the poem "Sending off Vice-prefect Li Degraded to Xiazhong and Vice-prefect Wang Degraded to Changsha" (送李少府貶峽中汪少府貶長沙) by Gao Shi 高適(707-765), was when the departing friend accepted or was demoted to an

²⁶ I use the edition of *Xinzhū Tangshī sanbaishou* 新注唐詩三百首, annotated by Zhu Dake 朱大可, Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1974. My choice of this particular anthology is mainly due to the fact that parting poems account for a significant portion of *Tangshī sanbaishou*, although I am aware that this comparison is limited by the social-historical differences between the Tang and the Qing dynasties.

official position at another place (赴任 or 貶謫).²⁷ The second was when a man parted from his friends and family to travel to the capital to take civil service examinations and afterwards when he returned to the hometown (赴考 and 還鄉). This situation is exemplified by the poem “Sending off Qiwu Qian on His Return Home after Failing in the Examination” (送綦毋潛落第還鄉) by Wang Wei.²⁸ The third common situation was when an official left his friends to go into retirement (退隱), such as in Wang Wei’s poem “At Parting” (送別) when he addressed the poem to a friend who resigned his official position and left to reside in the mountains.²⁹ These parting poems most often express consolation for a friend or colleague’s career setback, or contain general expressions of grief on parting. In fact, only two of these forty poems express the poets’ hope for reunion.³⁰ However, in all twelve of Gu’s parting poems, she reiterates her strong desire for reunion with her friends,³¹ sometimes by lamenting the impossibility or uncertainty of seeing the friend again:

Yirenren: Seeing Pingshan off to Hangzhou

....

At the fork of the road, holding onto your sleeves, I ask when you will
return,
Don’t be too strongly attached to looking at
Hills and valleys in your hometown.

²⁷ *Xinzhu Tangshi*, 113.

²⁸ *Xinzhu Tangshi*, 6-7.

²⁹ *Xinzhu Tangshi*, 6.

³⁰ These two poems are “Four Rhymes Presented to Mr. Yan at the Fengji Post Station” (奉濟驛重送嚴公四韻) by Du Fu 杜甫 and “Seeing Friend off to Travel East” (送人東遊) by Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠. See *Xinzhu Tangshi*, 85 and 105-106.

³¹ “Twelve” may not seem a large number, however, one should remember that it refers to twelve actual partings.

(Heji, 289)

憶人人：送屏山往杭州

....臨歧把袂問歸期，莫戀看、家山丘壑。

Langtaosha: Seeing Shanzhi off on Her Return to Wulin

(Hangzhou)

....

Heart-broken – you leave from here to the sky’s edge,

No date for us to meet again.

....

(Heji, 236)

浪淘沙：送珊枝歸武林

....斷腸天涯從此去，無日重逢。....

Whether she is expressing hope and desire for her friend’s return, as in the first example, or hopelessness at the impossibility of seeing her friend again, as in the second example, Gu Taiqing’s emotional register revolves around the idea of reunion.

Surprisingly, in Gu’s poems mourning the deaths of her female friends, where talk of reunion is clearly detached from any physical possibility, she proclaims an even stronger intention for reunion, as in the following poem mourning the death of her long-time friend Shen Shanbao:

Weeping for Third Sister Xiangpei

Our thirty-year affection is like that between siblings,

I ask Heaven: why let this person die?

All your life, you had a virile personality;

Your great talent was not recognized because you are a woman.

Illusory Realm of the Red Chamber originally has no proof,³²

By chance, I took up a brush to add a few chapters.

Your long preface is excessive in praise,

And you frequently sent me lovely letters to inquire about the book.

[Author's note: By chance, I added a few chapters to *Honglouloumeng*, which is entitled *Honglouloumeng ying*. Xiangpei wrote a preface to it. She would not wait until I finished a chapter, but would ask me to show her the draft. She once blamed me for laziness, playfully saying that: "You are almost seventy years old now. If you don't hurry up, I am afraid that you won't finish it."]

Talking heart to heart, we always resented being separated by the city walls.

Holding each others' hands, neither wanted to leave.

What you once said has finally become prophecy today:

We will be brothers in our lives to come.

[Author's Note: Sister died on the eleventh day of the sixth month in the first year of Tongzhi (1862). When I went to visit her on the twenty-ninth day of the fifth month, she suddenly said: "How can I pay back your affection?" I answered: "Why talk about paying back between sisters? I only wish that we will be the same in the next life as we are in this life." She said: "Not only in the next life, but I wish that we will be brothers in all our lives to come." I said: "We have each other's promise." Who would know that ten days later she would leave this world forever? How much it grieves me!]

Talking about your hometown, your eyes would become tearful,

So that clouds obscured your sight.³³

You worried about your ancestors' tombs;

³² This refers to the "Illusory Realm of the Supreme Void" 太虛幻境 described in the famous novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹. This poem is a major evidence for which scholars who argue for Gu's authorship of *Honglouloumeng ying*, a sequel to *Honglouloumeng*. See Widmer, 394.

³³ Gu explains below that Shen lost her sight in one eye.

Maybe you could return to your hometown on an immortal's carriage.³⁴

[Author's Note: Because Hangzhou was invaded several times; messages were blocked. You didn't know whether the tombs there were safe, whether relatives were alive.³⁵ So, your right eye became blind.]

For years, we could see each other without any special business;

Now, I miss you but we have no chance for reunion.

Your smiling face and your voice are still in my eyes,

I pick up my brush but am afraid of writing heart-breaking poems.

(Heji, 169-70)

哭湘佩三妹

卅載情如手足親，

問天何故喪斯人？

平生心性多豪俠，

辜負雄才是女身。

紅樓幻境原無據，

偶耳拈毫續幾回。

長序一編承過譽，

花箋頻寄索書來。

余偶續紅樓夢數回，名曰紅樓夢影，湘佩爲之序。不待脫稿即索看，嘗責余性懶，戲謂曰：“姊年近七十，如不速成此書，恐不能成其功矣。”

談心每恨隔重城，

³⁴ “Can” refers to the two outside horses of a team of four abreast; “luan” is a kind of fabulous bird.

“Canluan” is used to refer to immortals who travel on fabulous-bird carriages.

³⁵ Gu is referring to the Taiping rebellion (1851-1864), during which Hangzhou was under attack and fell in 1861.

執手依依不願行。

一語竟成今日讖，

與君世世成弟兄。

妹没于同治元年六月十一日。余五月廿九日過訪，妹忽言：“姊之情何以報之？”余答曰：“姊妹之間，何言報耶？願來生吾二人仍如今生。”妹言：“豈止來生，與君世世爲弟兄。”余言：“此盟訂矣。”相去十日，竟悠然長往，能不痛哉！”

言到家山泪滿眶，

致教雲影翳波光。

關心念念愁先壟，

或可驂鸞返故鄉。

因杭城屢犯，音問不通，墳墓不知安否，親戚不知存亡，是以右目失明。

年來無事長相見，

今日思君無會期。

笑貌音容仍在眼，

拈毫怕寫斷腸詩。

Elegies have some relationship to parting poems in that they too talk of separation, but this is a permanent parting without any hope of reunion in this life. Nonetheless, even in these poems Gu maintains the hope of reunion, only now it is a hope for reunion in the next life. This elegy lamenting the death of Shen Shanbao is a case in point. The poem begins by lamenting Shen's death and the talents that were wasted because of her being a woman. Gu then recalls her close relationship with Shen, their interactions, and Shen's support for Gu's writing of *Hongloumeng ying* in particular. The poem ends with Gu's deep longing for reunion with Shen and a reiteration of her sorrow over Shen's death. As

agreed on by Shen and Gu when Shen was still alive, their reunion should not only occur in their next life, but in all their lives to come. The following couplets, excerpted from elegies written for other deceased women friends, further illustrate Gu Taiqing's strong wish to be reunited with her deceased friends and her despair at not being able to do so:

[on Xiang Xun's death]....

I can only shed grievous tears weeping for my friend,

Don't forget our promise to become brothers.

(*Heji*, 174)

....

惟將痛淚哭朋友，

毋忘盟言作弟兄。

[on Shi Shanzhi's Death]

....

I don't know whether you had read my old verses,

We really have no chance for reunion in this life.

(*Heji*, 100-1)

....

舊句未知曾見否？

此生真個無會期。

What, then, is the significance of Gu Taiqing's reinscription of parting poems? In the first place, these parting poems offer substantial proof that Gu's friendship with other women had become an indispensable part of her life. Gu's insistence on reunion suggests that these women valued their friendships and the social and emotional space carved out

in their close relationships. In contrast to men who had many opportunities to foster new social relationships and realize their ambitions, these women treasured the friendships that could be established within their restricted domain. Secondly, because women spent most of their time within the family context, they were more inclined to project their affection for family members onto their friends, in other words, to view them as virtual family members. This leads Gu to write of her hope that the reunion with her friends in future lives would be as sisters or brothers. Thirdly, Gu may have employed these parting poems as a kind of metaphorical resistance towards women's "passive partings," which were not of their own volition, nor for their own interests. The longing and suffering that resulted from the partings with her friends were partially offset by the hope of their future reunion. Of course, this hope was often illusory, because ultimately neither the parting nor the reunion was under their control.

Friendship

In "Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China," Maureen Robertson discusses how women, as a group subordinated under patriarchal ideology, "could articulate their 'otherness' within the accepted discourse."³⁶ That is, how women avoided "being spoken" but utilized traditional representations and models to "speak." Robertson notes that this is a mixed process of acceptance and resistance. She also points out that one of the forms of negotiation that women employed to produce feminine voices out of masculinized language was the use of a shifting voice or ambiguity in voicing in poetry

³⁶ Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine," 66.

about friendship addressed to other women.³⁷ Robertson suggests that the lack of precedents on which to model the description of women's friendship ensured that the language employed was often a mixture of both friendship poetry and love poetry. This shifting position between love and friendship leads to the ambiguity in expression. However, as Robertson also argues, "[t]he context of reading determines that sexual interest is 'read out' and friendship is read in." That is, the addressee of such a love/friendship poem knows how to interpret the poem in the intended way. While my reading of Gu Taiqing's poems about women's friendship does conform to Robertson's observation of the admixture of the themes of friendship and love, I will also show in this section that Gu's poems about women's friendship suggest that there were ways that a woman poet could diminish the theme of love and accentuate the theme of friendship, which go beyond what Robertson suggests. Therefore, in this section, I will show how descriptions of love are appropriated by Gu to describe friendship, and what allows the sexual interest to be "read out" and friendship "read in" in such poems.

The history of Chinese love poetry can be traced back to the *Book of Songs* 詩經, the earliest Chinese anthology dated from the ninth to the seventh century BC. Love poetry is also abundant in folk songs of the Han and Six Dynasties. The most famous love poetry anthology in Chinese history – *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 (New Songs from a Jade Terrace) was compiled in about 545 by Xu Ling 徐陵 (507-583), a court poet in the Liang 梁 Dynasty (502-557), in response to the flourishing of *Gongti shi* 宮體詩 (palace style poetry), what Anne Birrell calls "the love poetry of Southern Dynasties court poets."³⁸

³⁷ Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine," 82.

³⁸ Birrell, Introduction, 1. Palace style poetry can be viewed as a sub-genre in the *shi* genre particularly devoted to the description of palace life, inner-chamber affairs and female images. Generally, in palace

As pointed out by Birrell, such poems were usually composed by men, but took on “the literary persona of a woman in love, expressing in descriptive and lyrical terms her deep emotions.”³⁹ Another important feature identified by Birrell was that “the woman’s lover must be absent from the love scenario.”⁴⁰ Thus, the woman’s deep emotion is more concretely represented as her pining and longing for the absent male lover. In such a typical love poem composed by man, the woman is generally portrayed as an object of the male gaze: decorated, lonely, and pining for love. In Gu Taiqing’s song lyrics and poems about female friendship, the traditional “longing” for the male lover is deflected toward a desired reunion with a female friend, and the traditional woman’s “pining for love” is redirected into a “pining for friendship.” Gu Taiqing’s song lyric expressing her longing for Xu Yanjin after their parting in 1837 exemplifies women poets’ renegotiation of the language of heterosexual love for the language of homosocial friendship. It reads as follows:

*Jiangcheng meihua yin: On a Rainy Day Receiving a Letter from
Yunjiang*⁴¹

Letter from a friend a thousand miles away:

Open it quick!

Open it slow!

What’s in this letter?

Is she well or not? My mind is a blank.

Since our parting, cool and hot seasons have come and gone;

style poetry, women were no more than the object of male observation. For more information about palace style poetry, see Hsiung, 107; Anne Birrell, 1-28; and Ronald Miao, 1-42.

³⁹ Birrell, Introduction, 8.

⁴⁰ Birrell, Introduction, 8.

⁴¹ Translation by Irving Yucheng Lo. See, *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 599-600.

But north and south of the River
Arouse in me the grief of separation as I pace to and fro.

To and fro, to and fro, I long for someone far away
At the far end of the world,
Beyond the water's edge.
I dream, I dream;
Yet in my dream I cannot see your hairpin and skirt of those days.
Who would remember the dark clouds?
I stand transfixed waiting, my heart tied in knots.
Next year when you return and see me again
I should not be
My old self at the time of our parting.

(*Heji*, 238)

江城梅花引：雨中接雲姜信

故人千裏寄書來。快些開，慢些開，不知書中安否費疑猜。別後炎涼
時序改，江南北，動離愁，自徘徊。徘徊，徘徊，渺予懷。天一
涯，水一涯，夢也夢也，夢不見，當日纔釵。誰念碧雲凝佇費腸回。⁴²
明歲君歸重見我，應不似，別離時，舊形骸。

This *ci* provides a description of the female persona's feelings – ranging from anxiety as she waits for a letter from her friend, to ecstasy when receiving the letter, and finally to an

⁴² Irving Lo's translation of this line follows the version revised by Kuang Zhouyi. The original line is “誰念西風翹首寸心灰”, see *Heji*, 238, note 1.

even deeper distress and longing after reading the letter. The persona, here the poet herself, hesitates to open the letter, although she is eager to know its contents. The two friends lived a great distance apart, with Gu in the capital and Xu Yanjin having returned to Yangzhou in the south. Since Gu had not received a letter from Xu for a long time, she is understandably anxious to know how her friend is doing. At the same time, her feeling of excitement is tempered by a fear that the letter may bring some bad news. The second stanza suggests her state of mind after reading the letter – she sinks into an even deeper depression, because this letter cannot assuage her yearning for reunion with Xu Yanjin.

It is clear that the persona of this poem, the female subject, is pining for her absent woman friend. Gu Taiqing appears to be purposely deflecting the description of a woman's anxious waiting for her lover, so commonly found in poetry written by men, by introducing a new kind of longing and pining that rises out of the friendship between women. Also take for example the following couplets:

To Match the Rhyme of the Poem Sent by Xiangpei

...

One month's longing makes [my life] even more upside down,
Yearning for you seems like one who is thirsty yearning for the fountain.

....

(*Heji*, 163)

次湘佩寄詩韻

....

一月相思更倒顛，
思君仿佛渴思泉。

....

Shaoru Sent Someone to Present Me with Brocade from Shu
(Sichuan) and also Asked for a Poem; I Immediately Composed
Forty Characters to Express My Appreciation

....

Longing for each other, we are unable to hold hands,⁴³
Expecting each other, we seem like those hungry in the morning.

....

(*Heji*, 145)

少如遭人送蜀錦并索詩率成四十字致謝

....

相思難把晤，
相望若朝饑。

....

As Gu puts it, the psychological suffering – the longing for her female friends – is comparable to the physical suffering brought on by thirst and hunger; this suffering turns her life “upside down.” In these couplets, Gu does not state explicitly that she is pining for her friends, but she effectively describes intense longing by comparing it to basic physical needs. She even contemplates whether a less intimate friendship with her friends would be preferable to the pain she experiences due to their absence:

To Match the Rhyme Words of Xiangpei’s Poem in Inverse Order

....

⁴³ “Bawu” literally means “grasping hands,” and “bawu biehou” 把晤別后 (since we grasped hands and parted) is a common opening phrase in letters.

Flowers on the tip of brushes mislead people most,⁴⁴
They do not add any pleasure but deepen my grief.
[I am] inferior to the empty mountain, which knows no one,
Sings freely, showing its pride to mist and clouds.

....

(*Heji*, 136)

倒次湘佩韵

....

誤人最是筆頭花，
樂事無多恨轉賒。
不及空山無所識，
放歌隨意傲烟霞。

Without the poetic titles, which specify the occasions of composition, these couplets could easily be mistaken for poems written about the feelings of longing between a man and a woman in love. Take the following two poems from *Yutai xinyong* as example:

Cold Bedroom by Liu Huan

After we parted the spring pool looked different,
Lotus died, ice seemed to form.
In my sewing-box the shears felt cold,
On the mirrorstand my face-cream froze.
My slender waist become so frail
Can hardly bear the coldness of the clothes.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ "Bitou hua" here refers to letter writing between Gu and her female friends.

寒閨 劉綏

別後春池異，
荷盡欲生冰。
箱中剪刀冷，
臺上面脂凝。
纖腰轉無力，
寒衣恐不勝。

Spring Longing by Wang Sengru

Snow stops, twigs are quite green,
Ice cracks, water quite emerald.
Once more is heard the oriole's voice,
It makes me write a song of missing you.⁴⁶

春思 王僧孺

雪罷枝即青，
冰開水便綠。
復聞黃鳥思，
令作相思曲。

The personas of these two love poems written by male poets are also feeling the sorrow of absence. In the first example, such longing results in obvious pining as indicated by the loss of weight suffered by the “frail waist.” In the second example, the coming spring

⁴⁵ Translation by Anne Birrell, see *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*, 220.

⁴⁶ Translation by Anne Birrell with modifications, see *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*, 280.

with pleasant natural changes deepens the persona's longing as the separation from her lover remains unchanged.

Nonetheless, it is worth considering whether there is anything in Gu Taiqing's poems, apart from their titles and the reading context, that might diminish the theme of love and accentuate the theme of friendship. I would suggest that this accentuation of friendship is achieved in two ways: through the clear statement of shared interests in poetry writing, and through expressions of appreciation for one another's literary talents. Neither of these sentiments is normally expressed in love poems. For instance, in the poem "To Match the Rhymes of the Poem Sent from Xiangpei," Gu states: "Who can hold the bull's ear? Only you can take the lead in the *ci* lyric Hall" (座中牛耳問誰持? 詞壇惟許君爲主). "To hold the bull's ear" is an expression used to describe a person who can manage well and has leadership skills. Gu's couplet indicates that Shen Shanbao was the leader in writing *ci*. In the poem sent to Dong'e Shaoru in response to her gift – brocade from Shu, Gu writes: "Because of sorrow [due to your departure], my poetic inspiration has declined" (詩興緣愁減). In her poem inversely matching Shen Shanbao's rhyme words quoted above, Gu writes: "By the morning window, I read aloud poems by an old friend" (曉窗欣誦故人詩). Here, the "old friend" is Shen Shanbao. Based on examples such as these, it is evident that the bond between Gu and her female friends was based on their shared literary interests; this, along with the frequent expressions of mutual appreciation of literary talents, effectively highlights the theme of women's friendship. Thus, I argue that Gu redefines the "longing" and "pining" of women as an emotion directed toward other women and based on friendship among women, a friendship closely associated with their shared interests in poetry writing.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the life and poetry writing of Gu Taiqing through her interactions with members of the women's community to which she belonged. In my biographical account of Gu, I emphasized the significance of her engagements with the women's community. Using her poetry and other available sources, I reconstructed this women's community and delineated its features and membership. I underscored the important role played by writing as a defining characteristic of this particular women's community. In my close reading of Gu's poems, I have focused on Gu's community-related poems on three themes – *xian* (leisure), parting, and friendship, and discussed how she approached these themes differently from previous male poets and how these differences are related to the experience of this women's group.

As a prolific and prominent woman poet, Gu Taiqing's life and writing can be approached from many fruitful perspectives. The poems matching each other's rhymes (唱和之作) written between Gu and her husband Yihui, for example, provide ample material for research into the construction of Gu's self-representation in relation to her husband. I have pointed out that the marriage between Gu and Yihui was celebrated as a companionate one; and both shared an interest in reading, writing, and painting. The joy that they shared in this relationship is evident in their parallel courtesy and style names as well as in the titles of their poetry collections.¹ The poetry collections of both Gu and Yihui contain a considerable number of poems written on the same occasions, resonating

¹ Gu's courtesy name is Zichun and Yihui's courtesy name is Zizhang 子章; Gu's Taoist style name is Taiqing and Yihui's Taoist style name is Taisu 太素; another of Gu's style names, Yuncha waishi, parallels Yihui's style name Huanyuan jushi 幻園居士; the title of Gu's *ci* lyric collection is *Donghai yuge*, while the title of her husband's *ci* lyric collection is *Nangu qiaochang* (南谷樵唱).

with each other's sentiments and experience. These poems were composed on many different occasions: during excursions, birthday celebrations, while inscribing paintings, or simply doing poetic exercises. They were similar in their lifestyle in many regards to other companionate couples, such as Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081-1129), Shang Jinglan 商景蘭 (1604-ca.1680) and Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1602-1645), and Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635) and Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁 (1589-1648). However, as observed by Zhang Zhang, the number of poems they composed in each other's company was unprecedented and unsurpassed.² The sheer size of their collections offers a unique opportunity to explore how a wife within a companionate marriage identifies herself through poems exchanged with her husband.

In my own study, however, I have chosen as my focus Gu's poems written in relation to other women. I have also taken Gu Taiping, the author, as the originator of meaning and the authority over the texts she produced. I have not attempted to demonstrate how Gu's Manchu identity and status as a concubine might have influenced her writing; instead, I have taken another type of life experience – her engagements with her female friends – as central to an understanding of her life and writing. As I have shown, she was actively involved in the women's community and played a significant role in both its establishment and maintenance. Gu's engagements with her female friends clearly provided an important way for her to transcend a limiting situation in life. Gu's writing in relation to the women's community was not only an emotional outlet, but also a way of preserving and celebrating the freedom and pleasure that she shared with other women poets. Furthermore, these writings contributed to the cultivation of a group

² See Zhang's preface to *Heji*, 1 and 13.

identity based on shared artistic interests. I have aimed to show in this thesis how significantly the idea of a gendered “community” affects the life and literary production of a late imperial Manchu woman poet.

Gu Taiqing had lamented how women’s talents were wasted in an inequitable social system. But now the literary efforts of these women, so often an effect of their interaction with each other, are generating some of the most exciting scholarship in Chinese cultural and literary studies, both in China and in the West. She should feel vindicated in her endeavors.

Appendix

The Women's Community to Which Gu Taiqing Belonged¹

#	Name	Courtesy Name or Style Name	Place or Ethnic origin ²	Relationship with Gu Taiqing	Relationship with other members of the community	Face-to-face meet-ing	Evidence (as they first appear in Gu's poems or poem titles)	Page number in Hu Wenkai	Number of poems Gu composed related to this woman
1	Xilin Xu 西林旭	Xiaxian 霞仙	Hanjun 漢軍 Manchu	younger sister	aunt of Gu's daughters and daughter-in-law	yes	己丑暮春雨后同霞仙七妹游萬壽寺作 p.7	p.814	8
2	Xu Yanjin 許延錦	Yunjiang 雲姜	Qiantang 錢塘	friend	younger sister of Xu Yanren, daughter of Liang Desheng	yes	法源寺看海棠，遇阮許雲姜，許石珊枝，錢李紉蘭；即次壁刻錢百福老人詩韵二首贈之 p.48	p.560	26
3	Shi Shanzhi 石珊枝 ³		Wuxian 吳縣	friend		yes	法源寺看海棠，遇阮許雲姜，許石珊枝，錢李紉蘭；即次壁刻錢百福老人詩韵二首贈之 p.48	n/a	11
4	Li Jiezu 李介祖	Renlan 紉蘭		friend	sister-in-law of Qian Jifen	yes	法源寺看海棠，遇阮許雲姜，許石珊枝，錢李紉蘭；即次壁刻錢百福老人詩韵二首贈之 p.48	n/a	16

¹ My reconstruction of the women's community around Gu Taiqing is based on information gleaned from her poetry collections and additional available sources, Shen Shanbao's *Mingyuanshihua* and *Mingyuan shihua xuji* in particular. These women are arranged in the chronological order of their first appearance in Gu's poetry. All page numbers refer to the corresponding pages in *Heji* unless otherwise specified.

² The ethnic origin of a woman poet is Han unless otherwise indicated.

³ Zhang Zhang identifies Shi as Xu Naipu's daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Xu Jinqiao 許金橋. I do not agree with this for three reasons. First, Gu clearly identifies Xu Jinqiao's son as Shi Shanzhi's grandson in her poem. See *Heji*, 98. Secondly, Gu refers to Shi as her *sao* 嫂 (sister-in-law), which only makes sense if Shi was the wife of Gu's "sixth brother" Xu Naipu. In addition, when Xu Jinqiao died at the age of 28, Gu was 39; it would be unreasonable if Gu called Xu Jinqiao's wife *sao*. Thirdly, the *jishi* 繼室 ("successor" wife) of Xu Naipu, Xiang Xun, first appears in Gu's poetry only after Shi's death. See *Heji*, 231 and 787.

5	Chen Su'an 陳素安	Dinglin 定林	Wuxian 吳縣	friend	teacher of Shuwen and Yiwen ⁴	yes	四月廿二雲姜招同珊枝、素安... p. 50	p.588	8
6	Liang Desheng 梁德繩	Guchun-xuan Laoren 古春軒老人	Qian-tang 錢塘	friend	Xu Yanreng and Xu Yanjin's mother	no	答古春軒老人 p. 58	p.544	4
7	Ruan Enluan 阮恩灤	Meichuan 媚川	Yi-zheng 儀徵	'niece' ⁵	Xu Yanjin's daughter	yes	題手蓉甥女白蓮花團扇 p. 55	p.346	1
8	Li Peijin 李佩金	Renlan 綉蘭	Chang-zhou 長洲	not clear		no	木蘭花慢: 題長洲女士李佩金 生香館遺詞 p. 194	p.330	1
9	Wu Zao 吳藻	Pingxiang 蘋香	Renhe 仁和	literary friend	Shen Shanbao's intimate friend	no	金縷曲: 題花廉詞寄吳蘋香女士... p. 206	p.317	1
10	Jin furen 金夫人			acquaint- -ance		yes	三月十五, 同...素安、金夫人、徐夫人... p. 212	n/a	1
11	Xu furen 徐夫人			acquaint- -ance		yes	三月十五, 同...素安、金夫人、徐夫人... p. 212	n/a	1
12	Kang Jiemei 康介眉			acquaint- -ance		possi- -ble	康介眉夫人囑題榕陰消夏圖 p. 216	n/a	1
13	Liu Jixiang 劉季湘			not clear		not clear	金縷曲: 題劉季湘夫人海棠巢樂府 p. 217	n/a	1

⁴ See Shen, j.6.13a.

⁵ Gu calls Ruan Enluan her "niece" in her poetry. This may be because she viewed Ruan's mother Xu Yanjin, who was her close friend, as her "sister."

14	Qian Shuwan 錢叔琬			not clear		yes	贈聞詩室女士錢叔琬 p. 221	n/a	1
15	Zhu Baoyu 朱葆瑜			not clear		not clear	題朱葆瑜女史鋤月種梅圖 p. 221	n/a	1
16	Xu Yanreng 許延初	Yunlin 雲林	Qian- tang 錢塘	friend	elder sister of Xu Yanjin, daughter of Liang Desheng, close friend of Shen Shanbao	yes	一叢花: 題雲林福連室吟草 p. 223	p.560	39
17	Zhang Xiang 張祥	Peiji 佩吉	Qian- tang 錢塘	friend		yes	十五雪后同....佩吉天寧寺看西山積雪.... p.82	n/a	4
18	Yu Tingbi 余庭璧	Jiying 季瑛	Qian- tang 錢塘	friend		yes	賀新涼: 夏日余季瑛招飲綠淨山房 p.234	n/a	3
19	Sun Yingru 孫瑛如			acquaint- ance		possi- ble	凌波曲: 孫瑛如女士囑題吹笛仕女團扇 p. 239	n/a	1
20	Shen Shanbao 沈善寶	Xiangpei 湘佩	Qian- tang 錢塘	friend	intimate friend of many other women of this community	yes	題錢塘女史沈湘佩鴻雪樓詩集二首 p. 96	p.366-7	36
21	Wu Meng- fang 吳孟芳			friend		yes	西子妝: ...邀余季瑛、吳孟芳、錢伯芳... p. 257	n/a	1

22	Qian Jifen 錢繼芬	Bofang 伯芳		friend	sister-in-law of Xu Yanjin and Li Jiezu	yes	西子妝: ...邀余季瑛、吳孟芳、錢伯芳... p. 257	n/a	3
23	Xiang Xun 項巽	Pingshan 屏山	Qian-tang 錢塘	friend	"successor" wife of Xu Naipu after Shi Shanzhi died in 1838	yes	江神子: 聽屏山姊(巽)彈琴 p. 258	n/a	17
24	Wang Duan 汪端	Yun-zhuang 允莊	Qian-tang 錢塘	indirect contact	Xu Yanren and Xu Yanjin's cousin; Liang Desheng's niece	no	表妹許雲林自京師以太清福晉聽雪圖索題爲效蕊夫人宮詞體書八絕句以應之 ⁶	p.357	0
25	Pucha furen 蒲察夫人		Manchu	indirect contact		no ⁷	題蒲察夫人閨塾千字文 p. 269	n/a	1
26	Shuwen 叔文		Manchu	daughter	Shuwen was the elder sister; Yiwen was the younger sister	yes	...值秀塘媳、叔文、以文兩女姑嫂學詩... p.134	n/a	3
27	Yiwen 以文		Manchu	daughter		yes	...值秀塘媳、叔文、以文兩女姑嫂學詩... p.134	n/a	4
28	Xiu Tang 秀塘		Manchu	daughter-in-law	Dong'e Zhen-zhuang's daughter; Zhongwen, Shuwen, and Yiwen's sister-in-law	yes	...值秀塘媳、叔文、以文兩女姑嫂學詩... p.134	n/a	2

⁶ This is from Wang Duan's 汪端 *Ziranhaoxuezhai shichao* 自然好學齋詩鈔, j.10.33a-34b.

⁷ Gu expresses her desire to meet Madame Pucha.

29	Dong'e Zhenzhuang 棟鄂珍莊	Shaoru 少如	Ning-guta 甯古塔 Manchu	relative by marriage	Zhenzhuang was the mother of Xiutang; she and Wuzhuang were sisters	yes	次棟鄂少如親母韵... p. 134	n/a	8
30	Dong'e Wuzhuang 棟鄂武莊	Xiuhuang 修篁	Ning-guta 甯古塔 Manchu	relative by marriage		yes	雨後同少如、武莊、素安三姊妹及兒女輩泛舟潞河... p. 144	n/a	3
31	Zhang Xiying 張英	Mengti 孟緹	Yanghu 陽湖	not clear	Shen Shanbao's intimate friend	not clear	惜黃花：題張孟緹夫人澹菊軒詩社圖 p. 282	p.530	1
32	Weng Ying 翁瑛	Xiujun 秀君 ⁸	Wuxian 吳縣	not clear		not clear	多麗：題翁秀君女史群芳再會圖 p. 282	p.489	1
33	Wu Shufang 吳淑芳			not clear		may-be	題吳淑芳夫人... p.286	n/a	1
34	Cai Qinghua 蔡清華			not clear		possible	早春怨：題蔡清華夫人... p. 289	n/a	1
35	Menglan furen 夢蘭夫人			not clear		not clear	鬢雲松令：題夢蘭夫人畫扇 p. 293	n/a	1

⁸ This is written as “綉君” in Hu, see 489.

36	Fucai Huadu 富蔡華 篤	Ruixian 蕊仙	Manchu	friend		yes	雨窗感舊 p.170	p.816	2
37	Yu Xiuxun 俞綉孫	Caishang 彩裳	De Qing 德清	not clear		yes	金縷曲：題俞彩裳女史慧福樓詩集 p. 415 p. 296		1

⁹ The title of Yu's collection is given as *Huifulou yincao* 慧福樓吟草 in Hu Wenkai's book, see 415; and as *Huifulou shiji* in *Heji*, see 496.

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