7. Xu Wei's Early Modern Rhapsodies: Catalogue and Critique, Lyricism and Logic

Casey Schoenberger

Critics like Craig Clunas and Philip Kafalas have noted a shift toward the realm of individual taste in seventeenth-century Chinese art and criticism.[1] The propensity for educated elites to narrow their focus to the realms of idiosyncratic enjoyment,[2] and the manner, rather than the object, of possession, manifests especially in the lifestyle writings of connoisseurs like Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585–1645) and Li Yu 李漁 (1610–1680), and the belletristic *xiaopin* 小品[3] essays of tastemakers like Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610) and Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–

[1] Craig Clunas argues that the lifestyle treatises of connoisseurs like Gao Lian 高濂 (1573–1620) and Wen Zhenheng reflect a shift in focus from the objects of consumption to the manner of consumption. This may have been a way for underemployed literati to differentiate themselves from *nouveaux riches* of the crass sort depicted in *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (Plum in the golden vase). Kafalas describes *xiaopin* "as part of a larger emerging conceptual mode which acts to legitimize a realm of personal being apart from political activity." Though there are examples of eccentric collector figures, such as Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107), prior to the Ming, eccentricity as rhetorical stance became much more popular in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. See note 7; Clunas, *Superfluous Things*; and Kafalas, "Weighty Matters," 52, 54.

[2] Jonathan Hay notes: "As decoration proliferated, taste played an ever-greater role. Taste may be understood as a rhetoric of sensibility . . . These stylistic rules guided both consumers and the producers who catered to them . . . Moreover, the purchaser who acquired a mastery of the rules could use taste to engage in a dialogue with, or distinguish himself from, like-minded consumers, either by identifying himself/herself narrowly with one rhetoric of sensibility or, on the contrary and probably much more commonly, *by combining different rhetorics in a personal way*" (emphasis added). Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 26–27.

[3] Literally, "little appraisals," the term first appeared in the Six Dynasties in reference to digest versions of Buddhist *sūtras*. In the late Ming, however, the term gained currency as the name of a type of lifestyle and connoisseurship-focused prose writing by authors like Wen Zhenheng, Zhang Dai, and Li Yu.

1679).[4] Materially, this change is attributed to the rapid development of early modern commerce; in thought, most often to the iconoclasm of Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1472–1529, better known as Yangming 陽明) and those whom he influenced, including Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) and the "Taizhou School."[5] This essay argues that the literature of lifestyle and individual taste finds another, perhaps unexpected, precursor in the fu poetry of sixteenth-century polymath, Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593), himself a follower of Yangming neo-Confucianism, among other schools of thought,[6] and an original thinker on par with Li Zhi.

Xiaopin writers' focus on personal idiosyncrasies is well known.[7] Equally well known are the personal idiosyncrasies of Xu Wei, but not because he himself emphasized them. On the

[4] Yuan Hongdao's biography (see note 8) is the most famous account of Xu's life and work; Zhang Dai's great-grandfather, Zhang Yuanbian 張元忭, helped secure Xu's early release from prison. Duncan Campbell notes that a friend of Zhang Dai's reportedly dreamed that Zhang was a reincarnation of Xu, and that Zhang burned some of his early poetic efforts due to his concern that they were too derivative of Xu. See Duncan Campbell, "Flawed Jade."

[5] Despite its title, Li's "Book to Burn" (*Fenshu* 焚書), which encouraged egalitarianism, individualism, and critical thought, circulated widely in the seventeenth century. It is not clear to what, if any, extent, Li influenced Xu or vice versa, but both thinkers were influenced by the individualist syncretism of Wang Yangming, and both exerted influence on seventeenth-century artists like Yuan Hongdao and Li Yu. See Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn*, "Introduction," xvi–xvii.

[6] Among Xu Wei's known teachers and friends are Yangming disciple Ji Ben 季本 (1485–1563), Zen monk Yuzhi 玉芝, and Daoist adept Jiang Ao 蔣鏊, with whom Xu's older brother, Huai 淮, studied from an early age, though possibly to his final detriment. See, for example, his "abnormal" chronology," "Jipu" 畸譜 and "Memorial to Teachers" (Jishi 紀師) Xu, *Xu Wei ji* (hereafter abbreviated *XWJ*), 1325–1333 and such poems as "Yu Ji Changsha gong fan Yumiao" 與季長沙公泛禹廟 ("Rowing with Master Ji Changsha to the Temple of Yu the Great"), "Yu gong fende Huang zi, shi yi xian qu, dai zuo yishou" 玉公分得黃字，時以先去，代作一首 (Master Yu was Assigned the Character "Yellow," but Having Left Early, I Composed One Poem in his Stead), "Wuyan gushi" 五言古詩 (Pentasyllabic old style poems), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 4, *XWJ*, 74, and "Jiang Fugou gong shi" 蔣扶溝公詩 (Poems for Master Jiang Fugou), ibid., 79–82.

[7] See, for example, Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 61–74 for a discussion of late imperial "obsessions" (*chipi* 癡癖) of the sort admired by Zhang Dai.

contrary, Xu's own prose accounts of his mental illness, self-mutilation, uxoricide, imprisonment, drinking, and iconoclasm are terse and prosaic. It is in his poetry and drama, and in the palpable movements of his calligraphic brush, where connoisseurs of the strange and marvelous find "wild man" Xu Wei. Yuan Hongdao is known for helping "discover" this version of Xu,[8] and for his contribution to the *xiaopin* genre of literature of personal taste.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics know Xu primarily as a painter and, more recently, a dramatist.[9] As Yuan Hongdao has become better known in recent centuries for his lifestyle essays as compared to his poetry (the reverse of his situation in life), Xu's own poetry, and especially his poetry in the complex fu genre, have received little attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But it is in Xu's fu poetry where one finds many of his most eloquent and detailed statements on art and personal taste—viewpoints that presaged and likely influenced, directly or indirectly, many poets, essayists, and tastemakers of the seventeenth century. This essay argues that Xu adapted special characteristics of the fu genre—its blending of lyricism with logical argumentation and commemoration with remonstrance—to the purposes of an early modern critique of poetic expression and artistic consumption, and that, in so doing, he not only breathed new life into the fu genre, but made a major early contribution to the burgeoning literature of individual taste.

Why search through Xu's poetry to discern his views on taste when he speaks to such questions relatively directly in several prefaces? These are also worth consideration—and have

---

[8] See his famous "Xu Wenchang zhuan" 徐文長傳 (The story of Xu Wenchang) in *XWJ*, 1342–4.

[9] On his painting, see, for example, Ryor, "Bright Pearls Hanging in the Marketplace." On Xu's drama, recent works in English include Yuming He's "Difficulties of Performance" and Shiamin Kwa's *Strange Eventful Histories*.

been the primary object of work on Xu's aesthetic views heretofore.[10] However, Xu's view of the nature of poetry might lead us to look more closely at his poems themselves:

> Someone asked me: "Can poetry be perfectly Confucian?" I said, "In the past it could, but now it cannot." He said, "Then, can Confucianism be perfectly [expressed through] poetry?" I said, "Now it cannot, though in the past it could." Asked to elaborate, I said, "In the past, Confucianism and poetry were one; for this reason, any discussion of principle was Confucian and any harmonious words were poetic. Today, Confucianism and poetry are two; for this reason, not all discussions of principle are harmonious, nor all harmonious words principled."
>
> 或問於予曰：「詩可以盡儒乎？」予曰：「古則然，今則否。」曰：「然則儒可以盡詩乎？」予曰：「今則否，古則然。」請益，予曰：「古者儒與詩一，是故談理則為儒，諧聲則為詩。今者儒與詩二，是故談理者未必諧聲，諧聲者未必得於理。」[11]

Though he harkens back to an ancient, idealized notion that poetry should be both perfectly expressive and perfectly virtuous, as the original *Poems* were thought to be, Xu also speaks here to contemporary concerns. The notion of "principle" (*li*), or logical argumentation, and its proper place in relation to lyrical expression, was a matter of debate in Xu's day. Arguably the most notable poetic controversy of the sixteenth century was that between the advocates of a certain brand of "archaism" (*fugu* 復古 or *gu wenci* 古文辭), associated especially with the so-called "Seven Former and Latter Masters" (*Qianhou qizi* 前後七子), and those, such as the so-called

---

[10] His preface for the Northern play, *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (Romance of the western wing), for example, include a famous statement, pondered by many critics premodern and modern, on the difference between so-called "original color/form" (*bense* 本色) in art, and the "imitative" (*xiangse* 相色). In the same passage he also states his rhetorical preference for unpopular or unusual artistic treatments, relevant to discussion below:「眾人所忽，余獨詳，眾人所旨余獨唾。嗟哉，吾與誰語。」("What everyone overlooks, I alone [study] in detail; what everyone savors, I alone spit out. Alas! Where can I find an understanding listener?"), "Xu" 序 (Prefaces), *Xu Wenchang yicao* 1, *XWJ*, 1089.

[11] "Caoxuan tang gao xu" 草玄堂稿序 (Preface to *Reed Shade Hall Drafts*), "Xu" 序 (Prefaces), *Xu Wenchang yigao* 14, *XWJ*, 906.

"Tang-Song faction" (唐宋派), who preferred later models, or who aimed, rhetorically, at least, at more novel expression.[12]

This notion of "principle," moreover, possessed philosophical overtones related to a continuing debate within neo-Confucianism, namely that between the orthodox Cheng-Zhu "School of Principle" (*Lixue* 理學), and the "Heart/Mind School" (*Xinxue* 心學) of Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193), revived by Wang Yangming. That Wang Yangming emphasized the "heart/mind" did not mean he denied the importance of "principle." Rather, Lu-Wang neo-Confucianism emphasized the unity of "principle" and "heart/mind" via the concept of "extension of [innate] knowledge of the good" (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知). Knowledge of the good was not external to the aspirant but found inside each person through self-examination. Extended to the artistic realm, self-expression did not depend on appeal to earlier precedents, examples, and allusions, but could and should reflect the individual artist and his real-life circumstances.

---

[12] The style of the two groups of "Seven Masters" is traditionally encapsulated: "wen bi Qin Han; shi bi sheng Tang" 文必秦漢，詩必盛唐 (prose must [imitate] the Qin and the Han; [*shi*] poetry must [imitate] the High Tang): prose should imitate the direct, expository style of the likes of Sima Qian 司馬遷, whereas *shi* poetry should express emotions without delving into philosophical analysis (*li* 理) of the sort typical of Song poets like Su Shi 蘇軾. The Tang-Song faction, associated with poets like Wang Shenzhong 王慎中 (1509–59) and Tang Shunzhi 唐順之, by contrast, did not eschew the work of Tang dynasty prose masters like Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), nor the mixing of argumentation and lyricism found especially in the work of Song authors. Moreover, they did not reject the "regulated rhapsody" (*lüfu* 律賦) of the Tang and Song, as the "Seven Masters" generally did. In a preface to Xu Zhenqing's collected works, one of the founding "Former Masters," Li Mengyang, famously defended the archaist's view:「宋人主理作理語.....作詩話教人，人不復知詩矣。詩何嘗無理，若專作理語，何不作文而詩為耶？」("People of the Song emphasized principle and words of principle… They wrote poems [*shi*] to instruct people, with the result that people no longer knew what poems were. How could poems lack principle? But if they are nothing but principle, how can they still be called 'poems'?") Li Mengyang, *Kongtong ji*, 52: "Xu Digong ji xu" 徐廸功集序 (Preface to *The Collected Works of Xu Digong*). For more on the debates shaping these times, see Ong, *Li Mengyang*.

Alluding nostalgically to a time when logic and euphony did not belong to separate realms, Xu suggests that such a unity is desirable, if not entirely possible under the belated poet's burden of "anxiety of influence."[13]

Xu's own style more closely aligns with the "Tang-Song faction," his work having supposedly been mistaken for that of Tang Shunzhi 唐順之 (1507–1560), and he opposed the "Latter Masters" for personal, as well as stylistic reasons.[14] He also greatly admired the calligraphy and poetry of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101),[15] and aimed to combine logical argumentation with poetic lyricism in a manner more typical of Song writers.

Dreams of Good Taste: "What Others Ignore, I, Alone Study in Detail"

[13] Though seemingly always in awe of the ancients, Chinese poets arguably first experienced the "anxiety of influence" to a significant degree during the Song dynasty, when poets like Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), Su Shi, and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) endeavored to escape the long shadow of towering figures of Tang poetry, like Wang Wei 王維, Li Bai 李白, and Du Fu 杜甫, even as they imitated them in many ways. The late-Ming debate between archaists and the Tang-Song faction is, in some sense, part of that ongoing mediation between the power of classic models and the desire for authentic self-expression. See Chen, *Songdai shiren*.

[14] Tao Wangling 陶望齡 (1562–1609), who knew Xu in life, reports a story that General Hu Zongxian, wanting an expert opinion on the quality of Xu's prose, showed a sample to Tang Shunzhi, who at first mistook it for something he had written. See "Xu Wenchang zhuan" 徐文長傳 in *XWJ*, 1339. Xu resented the "Latter Seven Masters" poor treatment of Xie Zhen 謝榛, one of their members, who, like Xu, had not attained a higher degree. See "Nianba ri xue" 廿八日雪 (Snow on the twenty-eighth), "Qiyan gushi" 七言古詩, *Xu Wenchang sanji* 5, *XWJ*, 143–44. See *Ming shi*, "Xu Wei zhuan" 徐渭傳 (The story of Xu Wei), Vol. 288, 7388, for a more detailed account of Xu's interactions with this group.

[15] See, for example, his praise of Su Shi in "Shu Su Changgong Weimo zan moji" 書蘇長公維摩贊墨跡 (Calligraphy on Su Changgong [Shi]'s "Praise of Vimalakirti" Brushwork), "Ba" 跋 (Postscripts), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 20, *XWJ*, 572.

For an example of how Xu combines argumentation and lyricism in his poetry, and of how that argumentation relates to the discourse on taste, consider how the opening to his "Zuiyue xunhua fu" 醉月尋花賦 (Rhapsody on drinking with the moon while flower gazing) comments on the tension between the desire to associate oneself with one or more existing rhetorical sensibilities and the desire for individualized self-expression:

> My classmate, Lu, had seen my "Four Flowers" rhapsodies at the home of old man Teng Zhongjing and developed a special fondness for them. And so he asked me to write a fu on the theme of his own sobriquet, "Acorn Peak." I replied, "Rhapsodizing on a sobriquet is not the style of the ancients." Lu said, "At my home, we frequently enjoy boating under the moonlight. Please rhapsodize for me on the topic of a boat under the moon." Not long after that, Lu had a dream in which someone spoke to him the following words: "Xu is a genius unnoticed by the world. You must procure a piece of his writing! You can offer him the topic of 'drinking under [an autumn] moon while flower gazing,' and ask him to rhapsodize on that." Given Lu's excellent taste, and unwilling to deny the words of a dream, I was unable to demure further. I rhapsodized thus:
>
> 同學陸君，自仲敬滕叟家見某所作四花賦，私悅之，遂以其所號樣峯屬焉。某曰：「賦號，非古也。」陸君曰：「某居常好於月夜泛舟以為樂，子其為我賦月舟。」無何，陸君夢人與語曰：「徐子世之佚才，宜必得其篇章。君可授以醉月尋花題，令賦之。」而陸君雅致，固不負夢中之言者，某聞而不辭也。賦曰：[16]

The prose introduction begins with a reference to another series of fu, created for a different patron and dedicated to flowers of the four seasons. Here is fashion in action: Lu has seen Xu's work hanging in the home of Teng, but simply owning a copy of that work, or even an original piece of calligraphy or painting by Xu Wei is not enough. Lu wants a Xu Wei original made especially for him and appropriate to his own sentiments. As Jonathan Hay notes, "fashion requires both reproduction (I want one too) and originality (I've never seen anything like it)."[17]

[16] "Fu" 賦, *Xu Wenchang yigao* 9, *XWJ*, 876.
[17] Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 23.

But in seeking someone else do his self-expression for him, Lu may have received "more than he bargained for":[18]

My weedy, flawed works, / What have they to do with spirits?
The essence of your affection and esteem, / Reached them in a dream.
I picked up the brush but didn't begin, / For fear of betraying a spiritual grace.
The flowers only beautiful in spring, / The moon at its clearest in fall,
I sigh that each only excels in one season,
Truly these two excellences are hard to find together.
Oh,
When the moon's its clearest on an autumn eve,
The flowers
Have long ago flown on the wind.
When the flowers come along with spring weather,
Then the moon's
Obscured by misty rain or fog,

Causing
The flower searchers to point at the moon and sigh.
When it's time for drinking under the moon, no flowers are to be found.
This is the way of seeking joy in man's life;
To search for endless flourishing, what is the point?
Only the detached and empty spirit of the broad-minded man,
Can sink and float with the whims of creation . . .
Flower gazing is for spring,
And drinking with the moon is for fall.
But how could one miss the spring moon?
Surely it is equally admirable as the flowers,
Which makes the autumn flowers worth picking
To enjoy alongside the moon.

When the breath and the bosom are even, / Emotions molded and nature at ease,
Examining truth or illusion in deepest mysteries,
And knowing the transience of Heaven and Earth.
One waxing and waning, / Even the moon is reluctant to go,
Growth and decay are banished, / Even flowers escape their grasp.

A song, a cup, / With words, with silence,
With cane, with shoe, / With mountains, with marshes,
Sharing spring with creation, / One thousand years meet in one evening.

But if one relies on scenes to draw forth intent,

[18] I have changed the arrangement of poetic lines in *Xu Wei ji* to reflect the difference between prose and poetic passages, to show parallelism, and to indicate rhyme with bold characters. Spaces between lines indicate a change in rhyme scheme.

Everything you encounter only deepens the sorrow,
Grasping a moonlit eve to sing of your heart,
Facing flowery dawn to deepen your thoughts . . .

These are
The sentimental associations of boys and girls,
How
Could a grown man expect such a thing?!
These words, I imagine, sound insincere,
You can ask about them in your dreams!

蕪穢之作，何關神**明**，好尚之**精**，遂通夢寐；
既援毫而不下，恐有孤於靈惠。
花惟春麗，月以秋**澄**，嗟一時之各擅，信二美之難**并**。
當夫
月皎秋宵，
花則
從風飆於既久，
迨於花乘春**令**，
月或
濛霧雨於初**零**，

遂使
尋花者指月以咏嘆，醉月者無花之可**尋**，斯人生之行樂，求絕盛其何**心**。

惟達士之寥廓，與造化而沉**浮**.....
尋花則春，醉月於秋。苟春月之可**誤**。
諒與花其均賞，使秋花之堪掇，遂并月而兼**酬**。

當其感息懷平，情陶性**逸**，審幻真於眇微，覺天地之瞬**息**。
一盈虧，則月於焉而低回，
黜生**滅**，使花亦為之解**釋**，

一咏一觴，以語以**默**，
一杖一履，以山以**澤**，
與造物而同春，會千古於今**夕**。

若乃因景抽**志**，觸物增**悲**，懷月夕以永念，對花辰而致**思**.....

斯乃

兒女子之嬰情，

豈

大丈夫之所**期**！

諒斯言之匪衷，於夢寐而質**之**。[19]

The topic of the poem is the natural impossibility of drinking under an autumn moon while viewing spring flowers—a metaphor for the "best of both worlds," but it is not a straightforward lyrical exploration. Rather, Xu's persona takes the opportunity to reprimand the would-be consumer of such wonders for preconceived biases: why always write about the autumn moon and the spring flowers rather than the spring moon and the autumn flowers? The implication is that such conventional notions (and, by extension, the use of conventional poetic allusions) lessen, rather than enhance, aesthetic enjoyment.

Contrasted is the Daoistic example of the "broad-minded man" (*dazhe* 達者),[20] who appreciates everything equally and does not rely on conventional images to express his personal emotions. His state of mind is described in mystical terms, coming to a crescendo at "A song, a cup . . . One thousand years meet in one evening." The rapid alternation of opposites like "words and silence" and "mountains and marshes," repetition of [jeʔ] 一 and [i] 以, and the staccato

[19] "Fu" 賦, *Xu Wenchang yigao* 9, *XWJ*, 87–77.

[20] Reminiscent of the *Zhuangzi*'s "Qiwu lun" 齊物論 (Theories on all things being equal), in which the "boundless-natured man" (達者) is described as one who "treats all things as ordinary" (寓諸庸) and thereby "[attains] comprehensive judgment and gains [what he seeks]" (通也者，得也). Zhuangzi cites examples like not distinguishing between a tiny husk and a huge pillar or a hideous person and a Xi Shi (great beauty) to illustrate this mindset.

"entering tone" rhyme of characters like [mɛʔ] 默, [tsɛʔ] 澤, and [sjɛʔ] 夕 accentuate this climax, in which contradictions are reconciled, and time stands still.[21]

But the ecstatic vision is not allowed to continue. Instead, the ending serves to "wake" the reader from this dream with a stern reprimand: only an immature mind "relies on scenes to draw forth intent," borrowing hackneyed images in hopes of evoking an internal world. Here is where a characteristic irony of fu—its use for both laudatory commemoration and biting critique—comes into play; Xu Wei marries logic and lyricism to make an aesthetic statement.

The tradition of appending critique or remonstrance (*feng* 諷 or *jian* 諫) to panegyric commemoration goes back at least as far as Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE) celebrated "Zixu fu" 子虛賦 (Rhapsody on Sir Vacuous) and "Shanglin fu" 上林賦 (Rhapsody on the imperial park), both of which describe royal landholdings in gorgeous, encyclopedic detail, only to end with didactic warnings about the dangers of excess.[22] Both of these threads continue throughout fu history, though more often separate than together. More than one piece in the present collection focuses on fu as political satire or critique, and this, in fact, had become

[21] These particular opposites reference the *Book of Changes* and its commentaries. "Mountains and marshes" represent the sun 損 hexagram: because dredging a surrounding marsh or lake will make a mountain appear taller, it references conflicting interests, which may, ideally, be transcended. The first half of the *Xici* 繫辭 (Attached statements) commentary further states: 君子之道，或出或處，或默或語，二人同心，其利斷金。同心之言，其臭如蘭。(The way of the gentleman: some go out [into the world] and others retire, some speak while others remain silent, but if the two are of one heart, their sharpness can cut through metal. The words of one heart, their fragrance is like an orchid). The pronunciations are an IPA rendering of the pronunciation of the late-Ming koiné, based on the works of Trigault and Francisco Varo. The determination of rhyme, however, is based on traditional rime manuals, such as the *Guangyun* 廣韻. See Varo, Vols. 1 and 2, and Coblin, "Notes on the Sound System of Late Ming Guanhua."

[22] For full translations of the two pieces, see Knechtges, *Wen xuan,* 2:53–114.

more popular in Xu Wei's time, with major figures like Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590) composing veiled political parodies and poignant protests in the form of fu.[23]

At the same time, it was not uncommon to continue to use fu for the purposes of commemoration, especially of households and friendships, albeit generally at a smaller scale than "Shanglin fu." "Zuiyue xunhua fu" and the "Four Flower" fu referenced are examples of these. Xu positions his persona in the role of the loyal "minister" offering frank remonstrance, but instead of remonstrating on the public, political realm, he remonstrates on the personal realm of taste. Though use of fu for aesthetic critique goes back at least as far as Lu Ji's 陸機 (261–303) celebrated "Wen fu" 文賦 (Essay on literature), Xu here describes not a generalized creative process, but an individualized view of personal expression and aesthetic consumption: the poem is ultimately not about flowers or the moon, but rather about poetry itself, and its power to transcend contradictions like logic and lyricism.

The commemorative, lyrical aspect of this fu is the ecstatic vision; the logical critique is the harsh denouement, which wakes the reader from the dream. Wai-yee Li has described a theme running through much of Chinese literature, from the early "Gaotang fu" 高唐賦 (Rhapsody on Gaotang) of Song Yu 宋玉 (3rd century BCE), to *The Story of the Stone*, which is use of moral education as a justification for the gorgeous, and overwhelming beauty as a paradoxical means of seeing past the illusions of the senses.[24] This theme is the same as

[23] Wang's "Laofu fu" 老婦賦 (Rhapsody on the old lady), for example, is widely understood to be a veiled reference to Grand Secretary Yan Song 嚴嵩, whom Wang blamed for his father's death. See Ma Jigao, *Fu shi*, 528–30 and ibid. 518–19 for a general overview of trends in late-Ming fu.
[24] See Wai-Yee Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*.

described in “Shanglin fu” above, and became especially popular in the late imperial period, when the dramatic works of Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616), for example, thematized the idea of using falsehood, dreams, and illusions as “expedient means” (*fangbian* 方便, originally a Buddhist concept, *upāya*) to help a character give up their “wrongful clinging”—that is, disenchantment by means of enchantment.

When we consider the “aesthetic remonstrance” described in “Zuiyue xunhua fu,” it becomes clear that it follows the same pattern: Xu first describes the impossibility of the theme, then proceeds to describe it in effusive detail anyway; finally, he returns to a critical tone for the denouement, as the patron/reader “wakes up” from the illusion. This combines the form of “Shanglin fu” and the aesthetic orientation of “Wen fu,” all within the new context of the late imperial market for art commission.

This and, with a few variations, each of the three fu considered at length in this essay, belong to a category called *lüfu* 律賦, or “regulated rhapsody,” associated largely with the Tang and Song dynasties. An outgrowth of the older “parallel rhapsody” (*pianfu* 駢賦 or *paifu* 排賦[25]) popular in the Six Dynasties period, and making heavy use of the “four-six prose” (*siliu wen* 四

[25] There are a few different, sometimes overlapping methods scholars and critics use to categorize fu, some focused on form and some on the era of a form’s popularity. Ma Jigao, for example, divides fu into four broad categories: *dafu* 大賦 (“grand fu”—such as “Shanglin fu,” and associated especially with the Han), *pianfu* 駢賦/*paifu* 排賦 (“parallel fu”—such as Lu Ji’s “Wen fu” and associated especially with the Six Dynasties), *lüfu* 律賦 (“regulated fu”—associated especially with the Tang and Song examination system), and *xin wenfu* 新文賦 (“new prose fu,” such as Su Shi’s “Chibi fu” 赤壁賦 (Rhapsodies on Red Cliff)—associated especially with the Song). Others focus more on the historical genres a fu’s rhymed passages most resemble (such as *Saoti fu* 騷體賦 (*Sao*-style fu), and so on), see Ma, 8–10.

六文) pattern, this style developed a negative reputation by the Ming due to its use in Tang and Song-dynasty civil service examinations.[26] "Former Master" Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1472–1529) famously stated that "the Tang has no fu," (*Tang wu fu* 唐無賦[27]), by which he meant that the *lüfu* of the Tang were not proper fu. And, indeed, Li, himself one of the most prolific fu authors of the Ming, composed no *lüfu*.[28]

Despite his reputation as a proponent of "original form" (see note 10), Xu eschewed what might be termed the archaists' "generic essentialism" and composed several *lüfu* that manifest the marriage of rhyme and rhetoric typical of that style once used for examination essays. Formally, he draws on both the epideixis of older works like "Shanglin fu" and the parallelism and prosody of Tang examination poems. Instead of offering arguments on policy or philosophy, however, Xu here critiques artistic self-expression and the refined mode of consumption. He uses euphonic, parallel prosody and the theme of the best of both worlds to "enchant" the reader or patron, but finally dispels the illusion with a reprimand on the need to look beyond conventional metaphors and objects of appreciation like "spring flowers" and "autumn moon."

This section described the traditional form of fu and the way Xu adapted some of its features, like epideixis and remonstration, to a critique of poetic taste. The next section describes a more direct rhetorical denunciation of conventional allusions and stock metaphors, the avoidance of which was key, on Xu's view, to achieving authentic self-expression.

---

[26] Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909) remarked 律賦之有唐，猶時文之有明也 (As the regulated fu was to the Tang, so the examination essay was to the Ming). Zhang, *Youxuan yu*, Part 2.
[27] Li Mengyang, *Kongtong ji*, vol. 48.
[28] See Zhu Yiqing, *Li Mengyang cifu yanjiu*, 116.

The Garden of Metaphors: Xu Wei's "Rhapsody on (Poems about) Peonies"

The first and longest of Xu's previously mentioned "Four Flower Rhapsodies," the "Mudan fu" 牡丹賦 (Rhapsody on peonies) employs a "disenchantment through enchantment" strategy similar to that described above, but with a different mechanism. The poetic voice piles up a vast web of traditional allusions and metaphors for peonies only to rebuke the reader for the stale mental habits that cause him to expect them. Though not until the Tang dynasty, as the voice points out, the peony has been the subject of many fu. But this fu is ultimately not a poem about peonies, but a poetic exegesis *on* poems about peonies:

> *My older colleague, / Teng Zhongjing,*
> *Used to plant peonies / In his garden plot.*
> *Due to the beautiful spring sunshine,*[29] */ The flowers possessed a bright freshness.*
> *Of all the people who stopped by to view them. I could not even keep count.*
> *After a few days, they began to wither and fall,*
> *And only then did the stream of visitors cease.*
>
> Bothered by this, Teng stopped by to ask me:
> *"I had heard that the peony / Represented wealth and nobility.*
> Is it not because of the gorgeousness and profusion of its blossoms that people enjoy it?
> *They bloom for several days, / And then all fall off one morning.*
> *Quick was the arrival of the sightseers, / And equally quick was their dispersal.*
>
> …This is why those accomplished and cultivated men of old
> *Carried orchids and picked chrysanthemums, / Tasted iris and collected herbs.*[30]
> *Since in times past people cared not for the lush and the gorgeous,*
> *They also took no heed of the cold when it came.*
> *Mild and at ease, / They lived long in harmony with Heaven,*
> Unlike these fickle flower friends of mine. What do you think about this?"
>
> I responded to him by saying: "If we were to accept your idea,
> Should we then cast aside everything that is intense in favor of the bland and the plain?

---

[29] *Chunyang* 春陽 (spring sun) is also a metaphor for a ruler's generosity. This could be a subtle reference to what is to come: the friends will stop coming when the flowers stop blooming/the largesse stops flowing.

[30] 芝 here is likely equivalent to 芷, as in the common phrase 如入芝蘭之室 (becoming virtuous oneself by surrounding oneself with the virtuous).

Should people really view intense and plain as equivalent to turbid and pure? After all,

The wealthy and the valuable are not all impure,
Nor the poor and the mean pure . . .

Teng responded: "What an interesting line of reasoning. I wonder if you could capture it for me in a rhapsody?"

I responded: "Certainly, certainly."

Which flower is it that they say, / Blossoms of Luoyang are without peer . . .[31]
Once lonely there, among the mountains,
And found in the hometown of Empress Wu.
That empress, oh, called for flowers transplanted,
To line the trees within her palace.[32]
How could she care about noble or mean?
Or see service and dismissal or practice and reclusion?[33]
Not making a name among past generations,
Its true glory not till the Empire of the Tang . . .[34]

Her powder sparkling in the sun, / With rain and mist blowing from her lips,
The throng of stems like legs walking, / Crisscross their branches like a barricade,
The dawn adds its rouge.
But she speaks not [her heart] to the guest before her.[35]
The lord of Wei presenting his lady behind a curtain,
E Jun on his boat covered in a green quilt . . .[36]

---

[31] Luoyang was famous for peonies and site of the Jingu yuan 金谷園 of Shi Chong 石崇 (249–300), an early private garden celebrated for the gathering of twenty-eight friends. There is also an apocryphal tale of Empress Wu "demoting" the peony to Luoyang after they refused to bloom on command.

[32] Likely a reference to the introduction to Shu Yuanyu's 舒元輿 (791–835) "Mudan fu": 天后之鄉西河也，有眾香精舍，下有牡丹，其花特異。天后歎上苑之有闕，因命移植焉。.....近代文士，為歌詩以詠其形容，未有能賦之者。 (Wu Zetian's hometown was Xihe, where was located the "Villa of Many Fragrances." Below there were peonies, and their flowers extraordinary. Empress Wu sighed that her imperial garden lacked these, and so ordered them transplanted . . . Of scholars of recent times, many have used poetry to memorialize its features, but none have yet rhapsodized on it.).

[33] Reference to the "Shu er" 述而 section of *The Analects*: 用之則行，舍之則藏，唯我與爾有是夫！(To take up duties when called upon, and to retire when not needed, only you [Yan Yuan] and I are capable of this!).

[34] There are no fu on the peony prior to the Tang. See note 32.

[35] Reference to a couplet from a heptasyllabic regulated verse poem by Han Yu on the topic of the peony: 陵晨併作新妝面，對客偏含不語情。 (The dawn adds fresh makeup to her face, / Facing the guest demurely, she speaks not her heart.).

[36] Reference to a couplet from a heptasyllabic regulated verse poem by Li Shangyin: 錦幃初卷衛夫人，繡被猶堆越鄂君。 (The brocade curtain first reveals Lady Wei, / The embroidered quilts heaped on Yue's E Jun).

Lining up by twos and threes, / Each beauty all the more fresh.
As "Flying Swallow" brought her sister to Distant Gaze Hall,
That lady [Yang] carries the three "royals" to face the sun . . .[37]

Empress Chen done her crying at Long Gate.[38]
Adding the delicate to the grand, / Concubine Shen carelessly seated askance,[39]
Purple-clad warriors and golden attendants,
Consort Ban rejects the honor of riding with the Emperor.[40]

Some brace themselves while others look up,
At Concubine Feng blocking a bear in high hall,[41]
Some stand tall and some look afar,
A maiden spies Song Yu from over the east wall . . .[42]

Why, these several ladies I've just cited,
We could compare and discuss them endlessly.

But I've heard also of the *Tathāgata* demonstrating the law in his deer park.

The bodhisattvas, strong and stern, / Twelve-hundred fifty strong, their number.
Precious coils and ethereal hair, / Beads of pearls and strings of jade,
That glorious Buddha visage, / Reflecting a golden blue-ish glow.
The congregation of a dignified air, / 80,000 now strong.

I've heard also of

Mts. Kunlun and Langfeng, / A city of jade and a palace of jasper,

---

The image, both here and in Xu's poem, is of green leaves surrounding the lasciviously gorgeous inner flower of the peony.

[37] Three female relatives of Precious Consort Yang: Lady of Guoguo, Lady of Qinguo, and Lady of Hanguo, collectively known as the "three royals" (*sanguo*).

[38] Empress Chen had been neglected in the Long Gate palace until she commissioned a fu of Sima Xiangru, titled "Changmen fu" 長門賦 to express her sadness and longing to the emperor. Emperor Han took her back and Long Gate became a byword for sentiments of neglected palace ladies. See Knechtges, "Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's 'Tall Gate Palace Rhapsody'" and Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, Vol. 3, 159–65.

[39] Though known for his frugality, Emperor Wen of the Han allowed his favored consort, surnamed Shen, certain privileges, such as being seated alongside the empress. A minister remonstrated with him about this and Lady Shen was no longer allowed to do so.

[40] Emperor Cheng of the Han offered to build a large carriage for Ban Jieyu 班婕妤 to ride alongside him, but she rejected the honor, noting that only the corrupt rulers of old are depicted riding alongside palace beauties, while virtuous rulers surround themselves with ministers and advisors. This contrasts with the also-cited example of "Flying Swallow" Zhao 趙飛燕, who rode alongside the Emperor.

[41] Reference to a Concubine Feng standing in front of a bear which threatened to attack Emperor Yuan of the Han. 馮媛擋熊 is an idiom meaning a loving wife/consort.

[42] In his "Deng Tuzi haose fu" 登徒子好色賦 (Rhapsody on Deng Tuzi's lust), Song Yu responds to an accusation of lasciviousness by pointing out that whereas he has resisted the temptation of a peerless beauty peeping at him over a wall for three years, Deng Tuzi has fathered several children with his ugly wife.

The celestial beings flying, / Elegant and crystal clear,
Bright like snow and massed like clouds, / Truly inexhaustible,
Oh, out of the mind, / Thoughts arise through habit,
And scenes then emerge from those thoughts.

A peony is but one among many, and many say its flowers are a like a beautiful lady. That is why I cited a long list of beautiful palace ladies and concubines. To illuminate the obscure for you to see—to send your doubts and your mockery far away—that was why I cited the many examples of saints and immortals . . .

Aren't these all not the thing, but because of oneself?[43]
Spitting out the ugly and swallowing the beautiful,
To admire selectively/ Is to be no different from the common ilk.
As my thoughts add nothing, / Neither can my appreciation be vulgar.
I will view the flowers as the flowers view me—
Simply call them peonies and be done with it!

Shifting my gaze suddenly to other gardens,
I forget all about their supple grace,
Borrowing their bright mass of confusion.
What, then, could I not make of them?

同學先**輩**　滕子中敬
嘗植牡丹　於庭之**阯**，
春陽既**麗**，花亦嬌鮮，
過客賞者　不知其**幾**，
數日搖落，客始罷**止**。

滕子心疑而過問渭曰：
吾聞牡丹，花稱富**貴**，

今吾植之於庭，毋乃紛華盛麗之是悅乎？
數日而繁，一朝而**落**，
儵兮游觀，忽兮離**索**.....

[43] That is, of one's own mental habits of associating certain poetic objects with certain images. Likely a reference to a famous line from Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹's "Yueyang lou ji" 岳陽樓記 (Story of Yueyang Tower): 不以物喜，不以己悲 (Not pleased by [external] objects, not saddened by one's own [circumstances]), the conclusion being that one must take a broad view, and take joy in the joy of all the world, and sadness in the sadness of all the world. This draws on older Daoist notions, such as the aforementioned *Qiwu lun*.

佩蘭采菊，茹芝挈**芳**，
始既無有乎穠艷，終亦不見其寒**涼**，
恬淡容與，與天久**長**，
不若茲種之溷吾黨也。吾子以為何如？

渭應之曰：若吾子所云，
將盡遺萬物之濃而取其淡樸乎？
將人亦倚物之濃淡以為清濁乎？且
富貴非濁，貧賤非**清**……

滕子顧予曰：『有是哉，子盍為我賦之？』

渭曰：唯唯。
何明花之盛美，稱洛陽為無**雙**……
始山間之幽寂，處天后之帝**鄉**，
后始命移以入內兮，備宮樹之列**行**。
亦何心於貴賤，視用舍而行**藏**，
茲上代之無聞，始絕盛乎皇**唐**……

爾則粉承日華，朱含霧**雨**，
群蒂如翔，交柯如**拒**，
凌晨併妝，對客不**語**，
衛尉出婢子於羅幃，鄂君擁翠被於江**渚**……

二三作隊，嬌嬌愈**鮮**，
飛燕進女弟於遠條，夫人挾三國而朝**天**……

楚姝舞歇於章臺，陳后泣罷於長**門**。
亦有細加巨上，慎妃橫逼座之勢，
紫侍黃側，班姬抗同輦之**尊**。

或勁而卬，婕妤當逸熊於上**殿**，

或翹而望，處子窺宋玉於東**垣**.....

奚援引之數姝，可罄比而殫**論**。

然渭嘗聞如來演法，在彼鹿園，
菩薩莊嚴，眾二十**五**，
寶髻鬟鬘，珠璣瑛**組**，
佛之勝相，紫金光**聚**，
大眾威儀，具八萬**數**。

又聞
崑崙閬**風**，玉城瑤**宮**，
神人飛行，綽約玲**瓏**，
雲態雪光，不可殫**窮**。

夫人之心，想由習**生**，景與想**成**。

一牡丹耳，世人多謂花如美婦則前所援引諸姬群小之所象是也。
使玄釋之子觀之，遠嫌避譏則後所援引大眾群仙之所象是也.....

此皆不以物而以**己**，吐其醜而茹其**美**，
畔援歆羨，與世人之想成者等**耳**。
若渭則想亦不加，賞亦不**鄙**，
我之視花，如花視我，知曰牡丹而**已**。

忽移矚於他園，都不記其婀**娜**，
籍紛紛以紜紜，其何施而不**可**。

Like “Zuiyue xunhua fu,” this piece begins with a dialogue between poet and patron/friend. The crux of the matter is that the friend, Teng, has come to believe that perhaps peonies are not suitable for the garden of a man of taste, given that they seem to attract the wrong sort of visitor, and bloom only for a short while. This is a question of taste in association: how to distinguish

refined from vulgar, "fair weather" friends? The choice of flowers for a garden here, and in the "Rhapsody on Chrysanthemums"[44] which follows, is compared to social discernment. If one may know a refined man by the aesthetic objects he consumes and the company he keeps, Teng proposes that perhaps evergreens and herbs (and the men of subdued taste who enjoy them) might be better, as their virtues are subtler and yet more lasting.

Xu, who would one day make his living painting peonies and other ephemeral flowers (as well as pines, bamboos, rocks, and other, more permanent fixtures),[45] rejects this line of reasoning on the grounds that, as in "Zuiyue xunhua fu," "flowering and withering are one." This is followed by a very long list of historical allusions to famous beauties, mostly female, and some male, both virtuous and lascivious, along with several quotations from poems and stories associated with the peony. Whether one looks and sees a virtuous lady or a lascivious one, or even, indeed, a man or a woman, is a matter of one's own mindset—a venerable defense of everything from the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of songs) to *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅.[46] Applied to the realm of aesthetics, it is not by *what* a man consumes that one may know him, but by *how*. And extended to the realm of poetry, the key distinction is not *what* a man chooses to write about, but rather how he chooses to represent his topic, and, by extension, his inner self.

---

[44] "Ju fu" 鞠賦, "Fu" 賦, *Xu Wenchang sanji* 1, *XWJ*, 38–40.

[45] This poem was probably written in Xu's 20s or early 30s, whereas he did not become well known for painting until middle-age. That said, it is clear that his opinions on such topics were already reasonably well formed, and that he was already creating poetic and calligraphic works for compensation, though perhaps of a more indirect nature. He had already become acquainted with painters Xie Shichen 謝時臣 (1487–1567) and Shen Shi 沈仕 (1488–1565) by age 31. See Ye and Li "Writing Time" and "Sishu hui xu" 四書繪序 (Preface to the illustrated *Four Books*), "Xu" 序 (Prefaces), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 19, *XWJ*, 521.

[46] The late-Ming erotic novel, *Plum in the Golden Vase*, whose annotator, Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡, famously commented, would only succeed in arousing those of questionable character, who focus only on erotic passages. See Xiao Xiao sheng, *Zhang Zhupo piping diyi qishu Jin Ping Mei*.

Yet the irony is palpable: the same poetic persona that complains vociferously about conventional associations here piles up a nearly exhaustive list of traditional metaphors for the flower. This is in keeping with the traditional "epideictic" or cataloguing function of fu, but so, too, is the breaking of that spell: Xu follows up the long list of beautiful ladies with descriptions of Buddhist and Daoist saints "to illuminate the obscure." Xu himself had studied both Daoism and Buddhism, in addition to Yangming neo-Confucianism, and this syncretic view of the "three teachings" was part of the "Heart/Mind" school of thought.[47] Buddhist and Daoist images, however, are not usually used to represent the peony, more often compared to a beautiful woman. After exhaustively listing all the usual metaphors, Xu's persona offers several unconventional ones to send "doubts and mockery far away."

After casting aside the long web of traditional allusions he has just woven, the persona then moves to an even stronger conclusion in favor of radical non-discrimination, criticizing those who "admire selectively," and claiming to see the flowers as they "see" him (with dispassion and non-differentiation). The notion of "not the thing, but oneself," itself redolent with Daoist connotations, not only dispels the idea of a refined/vulgar dichotomy, which, in any case, exists only in the mind, it shifts the focus to the individual: whether choosing flowers, metaphors, or friends, the individual can only achieve authentic expression by freeing himself from others' representations and engaging with objects or persons directly.

The sixteenth century having seen an explosion in the quantity and variety of luxury goods available to the urbanite of means, the fu, once used to commemorate the landholdings of kings, was, in some ways, the perfect genre to catalogue that new material largesse. At the same time, this largesse enabled greater selectivity and individual expression through consumption and

[47] See note 6.

rhetorical choices. Though with exotic imports and printed encyclopedias it might be possible to include every flower in one's garden or every metaphor in one's poem, that does not mean one *should* do so. "Mudan fu" showcases the full panoply of choices and then urges the connoisseur to make his own decisions.

The next section shows how Xu developed this focus on the self to an even higher level by prompting the reader to identify with both the poetic object and poetic persona, such that a reader "experiences" that object along with the persona, and, in some sense, inhabits and enjoys the persona itself as the true focus of the poem—the opposite side of the traditional gift-remonstrance/empathy-critique coin—a truly personal poetry befitting a forerunner of the *xiaopin* perspective.

Evoking the Self as Aesthetic Object: Evolution of the *Yongwu* Mode

Xu, like many literati of his time and earlier, was not entirely comfortable with the idea of creating work for commission or explicit sale on the art market. One typical and traditional way of circumventing this—well predating the Ming—was to figure artistic offerings in terms of gift giving to friends and colleagues. Those here described as "patrons," for example, Xu himself usually described as *tongxue* or *qianbei* 前輩—literally, ones who had "studied" with or before him. As the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wore on and the number of underemployed examination candidates continued to grow, however, the pretense was increasingly dropped, especially in the realm of vernacular literature. The self-publishing enterprises of Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1645) and Li Yu are prominent examples. Yet Xu never reached that level of comfort with explicit market exchange. Some of his "gifts" are more obviously a direct

repayment for a particular offering, as when an acquaintance invited Xu over for fish and Xu repaid with a poem on fish, but others are part of a more complex, long-term relationship.[48]

One work of the latter variety is a pentasyllabic *yongwu shi* 詠物詩 (poetic ode on an object) Xu composed on a white pheasant (*baixian* 白鷳) his military patron and employer, Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1512–1565), had given him as a gift: 片雪簇寒衣，玄絲繡一圍，都緣惜文采，長得侍光輝。提賜朱籠窄，羈棲碧漢違，短檐側目處，天際看鴻飛。[49] (All clad in a snowy white overcoat, / With a circle of dark-threaded silk, / Because of beautiful markings,[50] / Can serve long in glorious splendor. / The offered cage of crimson is narrow, / The small perch against the azure sky, / Living under the eaves of another, / And watching great geese to the heavens fly.) Though the topic of the poem seems obvious after reading the title, the bird itself is nowhere mentioned in the poem. Li Deren argues that the white-clad creature is a metaphor for Xu himself, the white-clad local graduate (*baiyi xiucai* 白衣秀才—i.e., one who had attained only the lower-level, local degree).[51]

---

[48] See, for example, "Chen Yuping yi wayao tou yinyu zai xiang, suo fu changlü" 陳玉屏以瓦窯頭銀魚再餉，索賦長律 (Chen Yuping again treated me to oven-baked whitebait; I repaid him with this long-form regulated verse), "Wuyan pailü" 五言排律 (Pentasyllabic long-form regulated verse), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 8, *XWJ*, 317. For an in-depth look at the culture of gift giving in the Ming, see Clunas, *Elegant Debts*.

[49] See "Wuyan lüshi" 五言律詩 (Pentasyllabic regulated verse), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 6, *XWJ*, 179 and Kathleen Ryor, "Regulating the Qi and the Xin." Hu Zongxian was more explicitly Xu's patron in the sense of having been both his employer and having offered him large gifts, including, at one point, a house, which Xu named Chouzi tang 酬字堂 (Rewarding Words Hall). See "Chouzi tang ji" 酬字堂記 (The story of Rewarding Words Hall), "Ji" 記 (Records), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 23, *XWJ*, 612.

[50] A play on the double meaning of *wen* 文 as markings on an animal and words.

[51] See Li Deren, *Xu Wei*, 252.

In other words, the omission of explicit reference to the bird leaves "space" for the implicit insertion of the Xu Wei persona. The first two couplets double as physical description of the bird and of its owner, while the last two evoke the emotional state of both the bird and the poet figure, who feels "trapped in a golden cage"—grateful for the patronage, but chafing at the inability to ascend independently. That is, in response to a gift from a patron, Xu has offered a gift of his own—a poem supposedly memorializing the original gift, but which is, in fact, as much a covert description of the recipient's state of mind as of the gift itself. Whether this is meant as a subtle complaint, or else as praise for the patron's unique understanding, it seems that no matter what sort of gift one offered to Xu Wei, Xu Wei, often as not, offered a kind of self-portrait in return.

Yongwu poetry is a cross-generic mode with origins in the fu that grew to include works in such genres as *shi* and *ci* 詞 (lyrics).[52] Early courtiers, who discovered that *yongwu* could be used to enhance enjoyment of the quotidian, also discovered that *yongwu* could be used to play a kind of poetic game of "taboo," in which the poet endeavored to evoke the object, which could well be a theme given at a party, without using the word itself.[53] Assuming the identity of the object has not already been revealed, readers or listeners may display their own talent for recognition of poetic imagery and allusion by guessing the theme. Moreover, by avoiding the one word that could pin down the "center" of the poetic theme, a virtually infinite poetic dance along the surface of that theme is enabled.[54]

---

[52] On the Six Dynasties development of the "*yongwu* mode," see Meow Hui Goh, *Sound and Sight*, 40–41. See also Shuen-fu Lin, *The Transformation of the Chinese Lyrical Tradition* on Song-dynasty *ci* poetry's shift toward a focus on the object.

[53] In fact, the use of fu as a kind of riddle greatly antedates *yongwu* poetry as such. See Knechtges, "Riddles as Poetry."

[54] For analysis of the resonant power of "surface" in late imperial decorative art, see Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*.

For the purposes of *yongwu*, the *wu* (object) was not limited to inanimate objects, but frequently, and from ancient times, included plants and animals. As is clear from his *Sisheng yuan* 四聲猿 (Gibbon of four cries) dramas,[55] as well as such works as the "White Pheasant" poem considered above, and the "Shibai fu" 十白賦 (Rhapsodies on ten white [things]) he composed to mourn his old patron,[56] Xu had a predilection for animals as metaphors for himself and other, often pitiable, humans. The following regulated[57] *yongwu fu*, like "Mudan fu," touches on questions of personal taste and artistic representation, but here, the primary question is not how to choose friends and metaphors to best reflect one's taste, but rather, how to represent one's artistic persona *as* an object of taste:

"Huahe fu" 畫鶴賦 (On [the act of] painting a crane)

> *A crimson crown and a sheer white cloak, / Black lines trimming on all four sides.*
> *Iron neck and hips raised high, / Golden eyes in a narrow head.*
> *A long beak suited to water's edge, / A throaty call resonates through the heavens.*
> . . . And that

[55] Besides the title, there are several comparisons of people to animals in *Sisheng yuan*, especially the first in the series, *Kuang gushi* 狂鼓史 (The mad drummer). Describing the victimization of Emperor Xian at the hands of Cao Cao, the protagonist, Mi Heng, states, "Even a sheep would bite a man" (羊也咬人家). *Sisheng yuan* 四聲猿 (Gibbon of four cries), *XWJ*, 1180.

[56] Xu composed this series of very short fu, which mix comedy and tragedy, in memory of Hu Zongxian, comparing himself and his former employer to rare animals they had offered to the Jiajing Emperor. See "Fu," *Xu Wenchang sanji* 1, *XWJ*, 47–49.

[57] Li Tiaoyuan 李調元 (1734–1802), editor of one of the most important early modern collections of fu, singled out Xu's "Huahe fu" for its excellent parallelism, which "quite approximated Tang authors" (頗近唐人); Li, *Fu hua*, vol. 6, 45.

Grave tablet at Jiaoshan,[58] */ [The saint of] Guiyang avoiding the shot,*[59]
As Daolin lets go for return,[60] */ Flight to Yangzhou, full-funded.*[61]
Seated on the carriage box of the Duke of Wei,
For naught
The armored ones' words related.[62]
Hearing that piercing cry at Huating,
Who will
Share that Wu language lament?[63] . . .

Then,
I moisten my brush and mix my lead,
Call together my talents and marshal my cleverness,
Sit with legs wide and loosen my clothes,
Focus my clarity and begin my first draft.
I think of immortal wings and seem to fly through azure fields,
I unfasten my brush and hope for insight into the great mystery.

And
Flying, like my hand across the paper . . .

---

[58] Reference to the Yihe ming 瘞鶴銘, a stone tablet first carved during the Liang dynasty with the intent of memorializing a pet crane. Many calligraphers of later generations took rubbings, copied the style, and, in some cases, added their own work.

[59] Reference to the story of Su Dan 蘇耽, recorded by Ge Hong 葛洪 and included in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive records of the Taiping era): Su, a native of Guiyang, became an immortal and bestowed gifts upon his mother, and, later, his hometown. His mother lost the benefit of a magical chest he had given her, however, when she opened it up to see how it worked. Many years later, a crane appeared on a tower in the area and someone tried to shoot it; the crane scratched out a couplet with its claws indicating that he was Su Dan returned and asking why he had been attacked. The metaphor is one of humans losing faith and gratitude over time, what is described as 物是人非 (The world stays the same, but people change).

[60] Reference to Zhi Daolin 支道林, who, according to the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A new account of the tales of the world), clipped his pet cranes' wings only to realize the sadness of preventing cranes from flying, as was their nature; he allowed the cranes' wings to grow back and then for them to fly way. See Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu*, vol. 26, "Qingdi pian" 輕詆篇 (On condescension and calumny).

[61] Reference to an anecdote in which a traveler wishes for all three of his companions' wishes in one: becoming a magistrate of Yangzhou, a wealthy man, or riding on a crane's back to heaven combine to become "riding on a crane's back to Yangzhou with a full complement of travel funds." A metaphor for political, financial, and spiritual success combined.

[62] Reference to anecdote from the *Zuo Commentary*: the Duke of Wei was fond of cranes, and even allowed them to ride on his carriage. When his kingdom was attacked by foreigners, his soldiers demanded that the cranes should fight, given that they held the best positions; the Duke bestowed gifts and titles upon his commanders in response, but to no avail.

[63] Reference to the reported dying words of Lu Ji: 華亭鶴唳，豈可復聞乎？ (Will I never again hear the cries of the cranes at Huating?).

The price of Yellow Tower's wine, / Is high, all thanks to a bit of orange juice,[64]
I return in my dreams to Red Cliff, / And recall those wheeling wings . . .[65]

Slowly spreading feathers in the scattered snow,
A litchi crown bobbing up and down,
Only then shakes off [the snow] and begins its flight,
Calling and singing at the top of its lungs.[66]

To take a forgery for the real, / Like butterflies call to mind flowers,
And only after a long time realizing, / That flies have gathered at a [painted] screen.
Yet, material things find souls in painting and are convenient for our enjoyment.
Why, then,
Should we ensnare those two wings in the blue sky?

朱冠縞衣，四池玄**緣**，

鐵脛昂尻，金眸夾**顛**，

長喙易渚，圓吭聞**天**.....

爾其

焦山瘞銘，桂陽避彈，道林縱歸，揚州負**纏**，

乘軒衛國，

徒傳

甲者之**言**，

聞**唳華亭**，

誰共

吳儂之歎.....

爾其

舔筆和鉛，徵精召**巧**，或磅礴而解衣，亦凝澄而命**草**，

---

[64] Reference to a story from the Tang collection, *Yinguo baoying lu* 因果報應錄 (Record of karmic cause and effect), in which a Daoist uses a bit of orange peel juice to paint a yellow crane on the wall of a wine store. The magic crane would dance to a beat, attracting many customers. One day the Daoist returned and flew off on the crane.

[65] Reference to Su Shi's "Latter Rhapsody on Red Cliff," in which the poetic voice encounters an immortal transformed into a crane with "wings like cart wheels."

[66] After his death, if not well before, Xu was known for a personal affinity with cranes, and was even said to have enjoyed calling or whistling to them in such a way as they would respond. See Fu Weilin, *Ming shu*, "Xu Wei zhuan" 徐渭傳 (The story of Xu Wei).

想仙羽而彷彿於青田，揮束穎而希冀其玄**妙**。

則有

翩然以臨.....
黃樓酒價，全憑橘瀋而高，
赤壁夢回，徒憶車輪之**翅**.....

灑孤雪兮毯毸，頂殷荔而氐**昂**，
方拂瀾而振翔，亦將嘯而引**吭**。
贋以為真，儼致花之粉蝶，
久而始覺，誤集障之蒼蠅。
然則物固有神於繪而便於玩者矣，又何必
網兩翼於蒼**蒼**？[67]

Though this poem does not provide an explicit context of composition in the manner of "Zuiyue xunhua fu" or the above-cited poem on a white pheasant, and though there are no extant paintings on which it is inscribed, it seems likely this poem, too, was written to accompany a painting for a patron. The theme, of course, is a crane, and hardly a line passes without one of many conventional allusions to the bird, but, as "Mudan fu" is really a poem about poems on peonies, so "Huahe fu" is a poem not about cranes, but about artistic representations of cranes, and the body and mind of an artist who fashions them.

As Wai-yee Li comments on one of Yuan Hongdao's writings on drinking, "the connoisseurly enjoyment of things extends to the enjoyment of being oneself perceived as an aesthetic image."[68] And this focus is revealed not only in the framing—of the bodily empathy[69] a

[67] "Fu," *Xu Wenchang sanji* 1, *XWJ*, 45.
[68] Wai-yee Li, "The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility," 278.
[69] Drawing on the work of psychologists and philosophers like Edward Titchener, Theodor Lipps, and David Morgan, dance critics have recently extended the notion of "aesthetic empathy" to include "kinesthetic empathy" with others' movements. These early modern Chinese critics describe a similar mechanism: vibrating the vocal apparatus as the ancients once did opens the possibility of feeling as they felt. See, for

reader feels with the artist and his movements as he prepares and begins his composition—but also in the denouement: another mildly didactic commentary, this time on the issue of representation and reality. As "Zuiyue xunhua fu" attempts a bridge between dream inspiration and waking clarity, "Huahe fu" includes images bridging the gaps between object and simulacrum—a painted crane coming to life through Daoist magic, or flies gathering around a painted image of fruit. Here, the conventional way of depicting a crane—against a blue sky—is compared to a "snare": something that will prevent the fictive crane from "coming to life," just as Xu Wei's "golden cage" of military patronage is thought to prevent him breaking free to "fly" on his own. It is not just a crane that comes to life in this unorthodox poem; it is the artist in the act of creation, which the reader experiences vicariously, along with a lesson in its appreciation: the true connoisseur must become the poet becoming the crane.

In contrast to "Zuiyue xunhua fu," in which the poet seems to enter a dream-like, quiescent, meditative state before, or even during, the composition, this poem gives the impression of Xu executing a work all at once, as if in a trance or frenzy. The image of the artist loosening his clothing, adjusting his posture, and holding still to create a mental image and await the arrival of the muse (or insight into the *xuan* 玄 ("profound"; "dark"; obscure")—also the color of the crane's body) before he can "unleash his brush" adds to this impression.[70] Again

example, Reynolds and Reason, eds., *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* and Chen and Varsano, "Guwen (Ancient-Style Prose), Sound, and the History of Chinese Poetics."

[70] Fifth-century critic Liu Xie 劉勰 similarly described the act of poetic composition, and, indeed, the art of evoking poetic "objects," in terms of a meditative exercise: 文之思也，其神遠矣。故寂然凝慮，思接千載；悄焉動容，視通萬里.....故思理為妙，神與物游。 (The spirit of the thought which gives birth to writing is remote. Therefore, [one must] concentrate the mind in isolation, connecting with the millennia, quieting the bearing, and allowing the vision to penetrate for ten-thousand miles . . . Thus, when the thought and the reason achieve marvelous subtlety, then the spirit may roam free with the object."). See Liu Xie, Vol. 6, Article 26, "Shensi" 神思 (Spiritual thought). See, also, the aforementioned "Wen fu" of Lu Ji.

there is mention of a dream, this time of "Red Cliff"—a reference to the following image in Su Shi's "Latter Rhapsody on Red Cliff": 時夜將半，四顧寂寥。適有孤鶴，橫江東來。翅如車輪，玄裳縞衣，戛然長鳴，掠予舟而西也。[71] (The night half past, / Empty and silent all around. / Just then, a single crane, / Coming across the river from the east. / Wings like a cart wheel, / Dark pants and a white coat, / Let out a long cry, / Brushed past my boat and went west.), one of many references to other famous works and stories featuring cranes.

Xu's poem shares with Su's the vibrant physicality of the crane's motion, the dream-like quality, and the sense of pacing, but unlike in Su's poem, where the crane is a transformed Daoist, in Xu's poem, the image of painter, poet, and object of poetry and painting—that is, the crane, all merge into one. Vital to the achievement of this effect is the fact that, though nearly every line features an historical, literary, or imagistic reference to cranes, at no point does the character for "crane" (*he* 鶴) itself appear in the body of the poem. The characters *yiming* 瘞銘, for example, would immediately remind a calligraphy connoisseur of the famous *Yihe ming* 瘞鶴 calligraphy, but the character *he* is here omitted. By being repeatedly primed to expect the word for "crane" even as we are treated instead to descriptions of the persona's own body and mind, a reader may mentally merge the ever-present image of the poet with that of the significantly absent crane. The commemorative "gift" here (whether to a now-unknown patron, or simply to the reader) is not just a painting of a crane, nor a calligraphic-poetic inscription on a painting of a crane, but a vision of the mindset of the artist himself in the act of creating those gifts.[72] As

[71] Su Shi, *Su Shi shi ci wen xuan ping*, 115.
[72] For another example of Xu "performing" and commemorating the act of artistic creation in exchange for gifts, see "You tu hui ying Shi sheng zhi suo" 又圖卉應史甥之索 (Painting buds again in response to Nephew

Shiamin Kwa notes with reference to Xu's "Four Cries of the Gibbon" plays,"[for Xu,] the only way to know why the gibbon cries as it does is to become a gibbon oneself."[73]

But there is an irony inherent in attempting to express one's individual self through poetic allusion: a truly unique, individual self is the one thing for which there can be no allusion. Even a portrait had its limitations, as Xu himself noted:

> 吾生而肥，弱冠而羸不勝衣，既立而復漸以肥，乃至於若斯圖之痴痴也。蓋年以歷於知非。然則今日之癡癡，安知不復羸羸，以庶幾於山澤之癯耶？而人又安得執斯圖以刻舟而守株？噫，龍耶？豬耶？鶴耶？鳧耶？蝶栩栩耶？周蘧蘧耶？疇知其初耶？[74]
>
> I was born fat. At twenty, I was so thin I could barely hold up my clothes. After thirty, I gradually got fat again. Now I am plump and dull looking in this portrait. I've already passed into an age for knowing right from wrong. Still, with this plump foolishness, who knows that I will not become skinny again, to the point of the [skinny in the middle] hexagram for mountains and marshes? But how could people nail me down if they cling to this portrait the way the stupid man marked the boat [when he dropped a sword into the river] or waited by the stump [when a single rabbit crashed into it once]? Am I a dragon or a pig? A crane or a duck? A happy butterfly or a content Zhuangzi? How can anyone know his origins?[75]

Shi's request), "Qiyan gushi," *Xu Wenchang sanji* 5, *XWJ*, 154–55: 陳家豆酒名天下，朱家之酒亦其亞。史甥親挈八升來，如椽大卷令吾畫。小白連浮三十杯，指尖浩氣響成雷。驚花蟄草開愁晚，何用三郎羯鼓催。羯鼓催，筆兔瘦，蟹螯百雙，羊肉一肘。陳家之酒更二斗。吟伊吾，迸厥口，爲儂更作獅子吼。(The Chen family's bean wine's fame's spread far and wide, / Even the [imperial] Zhu family's wine is second-best. / Nephew Shi brought eight whole pints on his own, / And a scroll as big as a rafter beam, asking me to paint. / Little Bai floats thirty cups, one after the other, / The vigor of his finger snapping as loud as thunderclaps, / Enough to wake up sleeping flowers which lament their late blooming. / Who needs Xuanzong's tapping on the drum? / Tapping on the drum, makes the running brush rabbit thin, / [But with] one hundred crab claws. / A leg of lamb, / And two liters of Chen family wine. / It makes him hum, / But as it gushes forth from the lip, / I'll make that rabbit roar for you.)

[73] Kwa, *Strange Eventful Histories*, 4.

[74] "Zan" 贊 (Encomia), *Xu Wenchang sanji* 21, *XWJ*, 585.

[75] Translation credit, Tina Lu, with minor modification.

Here, the artist notes his own surface-level changeability, comparing himself to a constantly moving river or rabbit, and again implying Daoistic equivalence between his human body, Zhuangzi's butterfly, and many other creatures of all shapes and sizes besides.[76]

Xu further explores the topic of aging in his "Shejiang fu" 涉江賦 (River fording rhapsody), in which he evokes a "true self" (*zhenwo* 真我), not subject to distortion:

> *There is a thing, / Without hindrance or obstruction. / No matter how small, it forms not thread, / No matter how big, it will not clump. / You don't know it's arrived. / And don't notice when it leaves. / Those possessing it succeed, / Those who lack it always lose. / Though you gain it you cannot carry, / Though you lose it you cannot escape. / Within the space of a finger's width, / All the heavens therein contained.*
>
> 爰有一物，無罣無礙，在小匪細，在大匪泥，來不知始，往不知馳，得之者成，失之者敗，得亦無攜，失亦不脫，在方寸間，周天地所。[77]

Here, the phrase "There is a thing . . ." (爰有一物) signals the start of the "guessing game," but in this case, the "object," is the ineffable, immutable "true self" of the poetic voice. Traditionally, poets might compare their ambition to something grand, like the Yangtze River, or the corrupt in society to a louse or mosquito.[78]

But every struggling literatus thinks his ambition is like the Yangtze River and his virtue like an evergreen pine. It is difficult for a poet to express an individual, private personality through such conventional metaphors, and therefore also difficult to signal authenticity. Like the object of a *yongwu* poem, the private self cannot be named directly. To evoke it, the poet must

---

[76] Xu's two-part "Poxie fu" 破械賦 (Rhapsodies on breaking the cangue), written soon after his sentence was commuted, adopting also a *yongwu* format, explores the notion of prison as a kind of transformative space. The "new" Xu Wei who emerges is compared to Zhuangzi's butterfly. See "Fu," *Xu Wenchang sanji* 1, *XWJ*, 44.
[77] Ibid., 36.
[78] See Ma Jigao on late-Ming satirical fu, *Fu shi*, 542–51.

rather dance across its surface, describing its accoutrements and deviations from the norm. Every literatus may hope to thrive in adversity like the plum blossom in winter, but not every literatus can claim to prefer the trees with few blooms, the spring moon to the autumn moon, a comparison of peonies to bodhisattvas, or to have had a conversation with a lotus pod.[79] The fu, while not one of the most popular genres of the Ming, was uniquely suited both to the purpose of exhaustive, lyrical enumeration of aesthetic choices and to statements on expression of an individual self through selective appropriation of the same. Moreover, by recontextualizing and tweaking stock images and allusions, Xu not only brings his persona to life for the reader, he added new life to by-then tired tropes.

Influence

As mentioned, poet, essayist, and key figure of the "Gong'an School" Yuan Hongdao played a pivotal role in posthumously providing Xu Wei with a national reputation, not only as a great artist, but as a great eccentric in the mold of Mi Fu or the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove."[80] As Duncan Campbell notes, in 1599, Yuan completed both his famous biography of Xu Wei and his connoisseurship treatise, the "History of the Vase" (*Pingshi* 瓶史).[81] This treatise deploys rhetoric of reclusion and Confucian virtue alongside frank advice for the scholar of limited means:

---

[79] See "He fu" 荷賦 (Rhapsody on a lotus) and "Mei fu" 梅賦 (Rhapsody on plum blossoms), "Fu," *Xu Wenchang sanji* 1, *XWJ*, 40–42. For a full translation of the former, see "Rhapsody on the Lotus," *Metamorphoses* (2018). See also note 9 on Xu's preference for what others ignore.

[80] A group of third century poets and artists like Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) and Xi Kang 嵇康 (223–262) who provided early models of the unorthodox style of self-presentation a growing number of early modern literati chose to embrace. See also note 1.

[81] See Duncan Campbell, "Yuan Hongdao's 'A History of the Vase,'" 79. Translation based on, ibid. 82, 85.

> So bitterly cold is the climate of Yanjing that most of the famous flowers of the south cannot survive here; those few that do grow are inevitably in the possession either of powerful eunuchs or large estate holders. Having no reason even to lift the curtain of such personages, the poor Confucian scholar can but pick up that which is close at hand and easily obtainable. In this respect, selecting flowers is akin to choosing friends. Although I may well desire to befriend those extraordinary and untrammeled scholars of the mountains and the forests . . . I have had no opportunity to encounter them . . .
>
> What may be termed orderly in the case of flowers is in fact a matter of irregularity and asymmetry, of a naturalness of manner, somewhat akin to the willfully disjunctive flow of the prose of Zizhan [Su Shi], or the poems of the "Blue Lotus Recluse" [Li Bai] in their resistance to the rules of prosody [parallelism]. This constitutes true orderliness!
>
> 燕京天氣嚴寒，南中名花多不至。即有至者，率為巨璫大畹所有，儒生寒士，無因得發其幕，不得不取其近而易致者。夫取花如取友，山林奇逸之士.....吾雖欲友之而不可得.....
>
> 夫花之所謂整齊者，正以參差不倫，意態天然，如子瞻之文，隨意斷續，青蓮之詩，不拘對偶，此真整齊也。[82]

Yuan here makes explicit the comparison between discernment in flowers, friends, and poetry. Though he might wish to meet the most rare and extraordinary individuals, or display exotic, unseasonal flowers, they are both beyond his reach. He therefore aims instead to express himself through clever choice and arrangement of more ordinary options. As the places where he defies prosodic convention are often the most interesting points in Li Bai's poetry, so Yuan aims to distinguish his decor with carefully chosen irregularities and asymmetries. Where flowers had been a metaphor for poetic choices, here poetry becomes a metaphor for literal arrangement of the physical accoutrements that constitute private, individualized literati taste.

In the realm of poetry, though it would be difficult to prove to what extent Xu Wei himself inspired it, there is a quantifiable relative upswing in fu composition in the Qing dynasty,

[82] *Yuan Hongdao ji*, 819, 822.

especially of the regulated variety the "Seven Masters" avoided.[83] Moreover, there is a marked growth in poets' use of fu to explore personal taste and emotion, as well as the blurring of poetic voice and vehicle as a means to do so. Chen Zilong's 陳子龍 (1608–47) early style, for example, bears a stronger resemblance to that of the archaists, while his mature work includes several fu, and shows the marks of engagement with poets like Xu Wei and Yuan Hongdao.[84] As Kang-I Sun Chang notes, for example, Chen's fu on "Picking Lotuses" (Cailian fu 采蓮賦), written in response to a fu his lover, Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–1664), had written for him, brought the "River Goddess" theme of Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192–232), which had inspired it, to an even more individual, private level:

> Under the pretense of composing a conventional fu on love (written from the male perspective), Ch'en has in fact devised some important aesthetic strategies that allow him to give the reader access to his secret self. In the poem we have observed a crucial interplay between the traditional rhetoric of love and a new poetics of personal allusion . . . reading about this deeply impassioned lotus, one is inevitably reminded of Ts'ao's goddess . . . But despite such similarities to Ts'ao Chih's fu, Ch'en Tzu-lung's poem exhibits not only a different mixture of rhetoric and realism, but also a different predilection for the private symbology of personal allusions . . . Ch'en turns actual

[83] Though the figure is skewed somewhat by the historical profusion of genres and the late imperial growth of vernacular literature, the number of fu composed relative to other literary works (and in total) peaked during the Han, gradually declined but remained steady through the Six Dynasties, Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song, and then dropped off fairly precipitously in the Yuan and early Ming. The fu, and especially the regulated fu, however experienced something of a resurgence during the Qing. See Chen Shouxi, "Qingdai gufu zhengdian," 51–52.

[84] In fact, Chen's later work arguably represents a synthesis of several late Ming poetic trends and contradictions, mixing the ancient-style diction and allusive quality of the archaists with the individualist emphasis of the Gong'an School. See Tao Zizhen, *Ming dai cixuan yanjiu*, 14–17. Chen's own view of poetic evolution seems to follow just such an almost Hegelian path: 或謂詩衰於齊梁。而唐振之。衰於宋元。而明振之。夫齊梁之衰。霧縠也。唐黼黻之。猶同類也。宋元之衰沙礫也。明英瑤之。(Some say that poetry declined during the Qi and Liang, and the Tang revived it; that poetry declined during the Song, and the Ming revived it. The decline of the Qi and the Liang was like mist and gossamer. The Tang embroidered it. It was the same. The decline of the Song and the Yuan was like rough pebbles. The Ming polished them to a shine.) See Chen, *Huangming shi xuan*, Preface.

> personal names and place-names into symbolic images, thus establishing a magical connection between life and art.[85]

Though Chen claims they are insufficient to encapsulate his feelings, comparison to Jiang Yan's 江淹 (444–505) "Lianhua fu" 蓮花賦 and Wang Bo's 王勃 (650–76) "Cailian fu," which he mentions in his introduction, are similarly instructive. On early Tang poet Wang Bo's fu, Ding Xiang Warner notes that it evokes Jiang Yan's fu on parting ("Bie fu" 別賦), but here the object (the lotus) and its myriad associations (compared to lotus threads) are foregrounded: "Thus, although it is the same lotus in which we immerse ourselves, / The joys and sorrows that it fuels are tied to myriad threads" 故游泳一致，悲欣萬緒.[86] In other words, Wang Bo, inspired by Jiang Yan's treatment of human sentiment in one fu, and the lotus as poetic object in another, composed a poem on how objects can, depending on the individual viewer/consumer, evoke myriad associations, including all the human emotions cited in "Bie fu." Chen Zilong, in his turn, took this process a step further by using the lotus and other natural images not just as metaphors for generic emotions of generic lovers, but of the private, individual emotions of himself and his lover. Whether or not he drew direct inspiration from Xu Wei, Chen Zilong was writing at a time when such a "private symbology" had recently gained a great deal of aesthetic currency, thanks, in part, to Xu Wei's experimentation with similar techniques.

Conclusion

---

[85] Kang-I Sun Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-lung*, 27, 31, 33; for a full translation of Liu and Chen's fu, see ibid. 25–31.
[86] Ding Xiang Warner, "An Offering to the Prince: Wang Bo's Apology for Poetry," in *Reading Medieval Chinese Poetry*, 101.

Though Xu Wei the person—the technical master of refined arts who also murdered his wife, perhaps by bludgeoning her with a candlestick[87]—remains strange and elusive, it is precisely his unconventional aesthetic choices that define him as an individual worth pondering, rather than simply "failed examination candidate and murderer, Xu Wei." Thus could we dryly summarize Xu Wei the person for the purposes of public life. Yet painter, poet, calligrapher, and dramatist Tian Shui Yue[88] continues to intrigue. One reason why is because Xu's art invites readers to share in his private thoughts and sensations—to "be there," in effect, as he holds his brush and prepares to write, and to experience his movements as he experienced the imaginary movements, sentiments, and textures of the plants, animals, and objects he sought to evoke.

Though the fu was a relatively antiquarian genre by the Ming, it was, in some ways, uniquely suited to the spirit of the age—one of overflowing material largesse and concomitant unease with the same—a time when people began to define themselves, increasingly, not by who they were, but by what and, more importantly, *how* they consumed. From ancient times the fu had been used to catalogue and evoke objects and peoples' relationships to them; feelings were the realm of the *shi*. Yet, over time, and especially through the development of the *yongwu* mode, poets began to imbue objects with feeling—describing their reactions to and myriad associations with objects, and tending, ever more, toward the quotidian and the personal. Fu on

[87] Early details about the murder offered by Xu and those who knew him in life are scant. Feng Menglong seems to be the first to have named a murder weapon: a lampstand or candlestick (燈檠). Because Feng's details were added later, however, many of them may not be reliable. See Feng, *Qingshi leilüe*, vol. 13, "Qinghan lei" 情憾類 (Stories of love and regret), "Xu Wenchang" 徐文長, 398.

[88] Among Xu's sobriquets, used especially on his painting and calligraphy, was Tian Shui Yue 田水月, a breakdown of the character for his given name (渭). Yuan Hongdao famously claims to have "reassembled" "Mister Tian Shui Yue," in that, upon first encountering his poetry, painting, calligraphy, and drama, he did not realize they were all the work of one person. See "Xu Wenchang zhuan," *XWJ*, 1344.

imperial landholdings gave way to fu on the act of picking lotuses as a metaphor for longing, to fu on flowers as symbols of one's specific lover, rather than a generic lover figure.

For the traditional Confucian, emotion belonged especially to the *shi*, logical argumentation to prose, and object evocation to the fu. From the late Tang through the Ming, *ci* and *sanqu* 散曲 (art song) lyrics increasingly provided a space for evocation of private feelings, moving also, as Shuen-fu Lin has argued, toward focus on objects as loci of private meaning.[89] Yet "private" does not necessarily imply "personal": though many poets certainly did imbue *ci* and *sanqu* with their authentic, personal feelings, those feelings are still, in many cases, indistinguishable from those of a generic underemployed literatus, lonely lover, and so on. The problem with conventional allusions is that, while they provide a historical point of reference and reservoir of associations to draw upon, they also run the risk of causing individual sentiments to become generic. Though Xu himself certainly did not eschew historical allusions, he was also aware of this pitfall, as expressed in, for example, "Zuiyue xunhua fu" and "Huahe fu's" criticism of stock images, and "Mudan fu's" worrisome heap of references, all of which the poetic voice ultimately casts aside in favor of a kind of "direct knowing."

In the fu, then, Xu found a unique answer to the problems of material overabundance and authentic self-expression and representation through poetry: by adapting the fu's traditional cataloguing, commemorating, and reprimanding functions to the realm of taste, he offers the literatus of limited means the chance to define himself not by what he owns, but *how* he owns, and, more importantly, how he appreciates and represents it. While others enjoy plum blossom trees with many flowers, Xu likes the craggy old ones. While others enjoy the autumn moon and

[89] See Lin, *The Transformation of the Chinese Lyrical Tradition*.

the spring flowers, Xu enjoys the spring moon and the autumn flowers. While others compare the peony to a beautiful woman, Xu compares it to a bodhisattva or fairy.

Moreover, Xu takes this a step further, in a way that may have inspired later poets like Chen Zilong: he literalizes the notion that a connoisseur is what (and how) he consumes by blurring the line between himself, his poetic objects, and his intended recipients. He does not just invite the reader to see the crane he evokes, nor simply to see him evoking the crane; he invites a reader to *become* his persona becoming the crane he evokes. As Xu's poetry aims to merge logical argumentation with lyricism and the traditional fu functions of catalogue and critique, so he merges himself with his poetic objects and intended audiences, thereby laying the groundwork for the "enjoyment of being oneself perceived as an aesthetic image" and "private symbology" of artists like Yuan Hongdao and Chen Zilong.

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were times of rapid change; the images, metaphors, and allusions of millennia past were becoming insufficient for expressing the individual, lived experiences of early modern subjects, at least when deployed in the traditional manner. Though archaists aimed to bring poetry back to one or more golden ages, this effort finally proved untenable until attempted in modified form by poets like Chen Zilong, who synthesized the differing approaches of poets like Li Mengyang, Xu Wei, and Yuan Hongdao. By adapting the traditional catalogue and critique techniques of the ancient fu genre to speak to the concerns of contemporary artists and consumers, and especially to the question of authentic self-expression through individual taste in a world of overflowing literary and material choices, Xu Wei not only breathed life into that genre, but into the literary tradition more generally.