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Illusion and Illumination: A New Poetics of Seeing in Liang Dynasty Court Literature

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PALACE Style poetry (*gongtishi* 宮體詩) of the Liang dynasty 梁 (502–557) is a name that was given to poetry written by the Crown Prince Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551) and his courtiers in the 530s and 540s. This poetry has long been misunderstood as dealing primarily or even exclusively with the topics of women and romantic passions (*yanqing* 艷情).¹ This paper proposes that we think of Palace Style poetry not only in terms of subject matter but also in terms of its formal aspects. Palace Style poetry covers all aspects of elite life, with poems on women and love being only a part of it; and in considering its formal characteristics, one ought to look at more than its exquisite parallelism or strict observation of tonal rules as then understood. At work in this poetry is something else, which

¹ When the term “Palace Style” was first coined, it was used to characterize the style (*wenti* 文體), not the content, of the poetry. See Yao Cha 姚察 (533–606) and Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557–637), comps., *Liang shu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 4.109, 30.447. *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠, a poetry anthology compiled by Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–581) for a female readership, is generally taken to be the representative anthology of Palace Style poetry; and yet, it is no more than a chance survival from the many anthologies compiled in this period. Many extant poems by major Palace Style poets that are not included in *Yutai xinyong* show that the subject matter of Palace Style poetry extends far beyond boudoir life. If the anthology had indeed been intended to be representative of Palace Style poetry, the omission of the originator of the style, Xu Chi 徐摛 (471–551), would be incomprehensible.

goes beyond parallelism, prosodic ingenuities, and linguistic ornamentation. The Liang court poets were without question profoundly indebted to the Yongming 永明 (483–493) poets, who had developed a set of tonal regulations for writing poetry, but they were writing an altogether different kind of poetry in the 530s and 540s. One way to account for the distinctive features of Liang court poetry is to examine how the poets looked at things. Chinese poetry in the Liang dynasty involved not prosody alone, but an entirely new perception of the phenomenal world—and this was a change of major significance.

This paper will consider a group of Liang court poems on candlelight and candlelit scenes. I chose this group of texts because Palace Style poetry, which was profoundly influenced by Buddhist teachings about illusion, illumination, meditative concentration, and visualization, concerns highly particular moments; these moments are best illustrated by the fleeting images of light and shadow created by candles and observed by the poets with fascination and intensity.² These texts about candlelight and the mysterious shadows it produces capture the spirit of this unusually innovative poetry, illustrating most clearly the new poetics of seeing.³

² In recent years, an increasing number of articles and book chapters have addressed the Buddhist influence on the Liang dynasty Palace Style poetry. See, for instance, Jiang Shuzhuo 蔣述卓, “Qi Liang fuyan wenfeng yu fojiao” 齊梁浮艷文風與佛教, *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao* 華東師範大學學報 (1988.1): 29–36; Wang Chunhong 汪春泓, “Lun fojiao yu Liangdai gongtishi de chansheng” 論佛教與梁代宮體詩的產生, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 (1991.5): 40–56; Zhang Bawei 張伯偉, *Chan yu shixue* 禪與詩學 (Taipei: Yangzhi wenhua, 1995), pp. 268–76; Xu Yunhe 許雲和, “Yuse yixiang yu Liangdai gongtishi” 欲色異相與梁代宮體詩, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 (1996.5): 153; and Pu Hui 普慧, *Nanchao fojiao yu wenxue* 南朝佛教與文學 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), p. 209. These works are, however, generally based on the problematic assumption that Palace Style poetry is about women and romantic passions, and they discuss the Buddhist influence in terms of Buddhist scriptures’ lavish descriptions of women, from their psychological states (such as jealousy and desire) to their physical forms.

³ Another luminous image that repeatedly appears in the literature of the Six Dynasties period is the firefly, but this image functions differently from images of candles and lamps, even though fireflies were reportedly used as a reading lamp by Ju Yin 車胤 (?–401?), who was too poor to buy lamp oil. Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648) et al., eds., *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 83.2177. The firefly does not have the same religious significance as the lamp, which is an important Buddhist symbol; and the firefly does not cast a shadow as candles and lamps do.

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CANDLES

The Liang court poets have been accused by scholars of a sensuous love of artifacts, although our own world, in which artifacts are inseparable from their use-value and commodity value, may envy a time when people could relate to things in a much more sensuous way. It would be useful, before we proceed, to trace the history of Chinese candles as physical artifacts up to the sixth century. The understanding of the material culture of a historical period should enable us to better imagine a candlelit world radically different from our own, the world that forms the backdrop of the court literature of the Liang.

When we see the term candle (*zhu* 燭), we usually think of wax candles (*lazhu* 蠟燭), but in ancient China, *zhu* was a torch made of animal fat and dried plants such as vitex, reed, and the stems of hemp plant.⁴ It would, of course, be impossible to talk about candles without mentioning lamps. Unlike early “torch” candles, lamps survive as artifacts. The earliest lamps excavated so far are all from the Warring States period. They were made of pottery, bronze, or, more rarely, jade.⁵ In fact, the first Chinese lamp might have been an instance of the “misuse” of *dou* 豆, a shallow and tall stem dish used as food container. Depending on the material of which it was made, such stem dishes had different names: a wooden one was called *dou*, a pottery one was a *deng* 登, and the metal version of this *deng* was written *deng* 鐙, which is the character for “lamp,” later commonly written with the fire radical.

Lamps usually used animal fat (*zhi* 脂 or *gao* 膏). Animal fat, however, had such a foul odor that people prepared it with oil extracted from fragrant plants to disguise its unpleasant smell. From the

⁴ The *Shanhai jing* 山海經 states: “Before the various plants are burnt into ashes, they are called candle (*zhu*).” *Shanghai jing jiaozhu* 山海經校註 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), p. 32. A torch thus made is also called *zheng* 蒸 or *zheng zhu* 蒸燭. Kong Yingda’s 孔穎達 (574–648) commentary on *Liji* 禮記 says: “In the ancient times there was no wax candle, so people called the torch a candle (*zhu*).” Sun Xidan 孫希旦, comp., *Liji jijie* 禮記集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), p. 40.

⁵ Gao Feng 高豐 and Sun Jianjun 孫建君, *Zhongguo dengju jianshi* 中國燈具簡史 (Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 1992), pp. 10–15. Kong Chen 孔晨 and Li Yan 李燕, *Gu dengshi jianshang yu shoucang* 古燈飾鑑賞與收藏 (Changchun: Jilin kexue jishu chubanshe, 1996), pp. 6–18.

Eastern Han on, lamp oil was often the extract of various plants. Excavations of late Eastern Han tombs in recent decades unearthed a number of candlesticks obviously made for thin, long candles, which have led some scholars to the conclusion that wax candles were already in use toward the end of the Eastern Han (second century).⁶

In written records, wax candles were first mentioned in Six Dynasties sources. The “Ladeng fu” 蠟燈賦 (“*Fu* on Wax-burning Lamp”) by Fan Jian 范堅 (fl. late third century to early fourth century) seems to be a description of some sort of a “wax cake” in a shallow dish rather than a thin, long, pillar-like wax candle. One of the earliest instances of the use of wax candles (*lazhu*) is mentioned in the early fifth-century work *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, which records that Shi Chong 石崇 (249–300) had used wax candles for firewood in an extravagant display of wealth.⁷ Shi Chong’s younger contemporary Zhou Song 周嵩 (?–324), who was upset with his brother Zhou Yi 周顛 (269–322), hurled a burning “wax candle” at him.⁸ That kind of temper tantrum was something only aristocratic families could afford, as wax candles were expensive and unavailable to common people. Beginning in the Jin and throughout the Northern and Southern dynasties, wax, along with other gifts such as money, cloth, and a court robe, was customarily granted by the emperor to the family of an important minister upon his death.⁹

⁶ Tang Xuazhi 唐玄之 and Liu Xinglin 劉興林, “Zhongguo gudai deng zhu yuanshi” 中國古代燈燭原始, *Zhongguo keji shiliao* 中國科技史料 19.12 (1998): 61.

⁷ Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843), ed., *Quan Jin wen* 全晉文, in his *Quan shanggu sandai Qin Han sanguo liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 124.2173. Yu Jiayi 余嘉錫, annotated, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 30.878. *Jin shu*, 33.1007.

⁸ *Jin shu*, 69.1851. Also see *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 6.363.

⁹ Upon his death, the grand statesman Xie An’s 謝安 (320–385) family was given “five hundred *jin* of wax” along with a court robe, a million cash, and other things. *Jin shu*, 79.2076. The minister Liu Shilong’s 柳世隆 (442–491) family, upon his death, was given “three hundred *jin* of wax” among other things. Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489–537), comp., *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 23.430. The custom persisted throughout the Liang dynasty and seems to have disappeared in the late sixth century. No such custom was recorded in the histories of Sui and Tang dynasties.

PRE-LIANG WRITINGS ON LAMPS AND CANDLES

The oldest extant *fu* on the lamp, which is most likely a fragment of its original, is by Liu Xin 劉歆 (?53 B.C.–23 A.D.). It describes a crane-shaped lamp:¹⁰

Oh this dark crane
is tall and beautiful, a true wonder.
Its body is cast into a slender shape,
its head and neck extended and curved.
Bearing up this bright candle,
harboring inside an icy pool,
it is dazzling and sheds light on all,
illuminating even the tiniest things.
As night succeeds day,
upon the lamp the brilliant one relies.

惟茲蒼鶴，修麗以奇。身體剡削，頭頸委蛇。
負斯明燭，躬含冰池。明無不見，照察纖微。
以夜繼晝，烈者所依。

“Harboring inside an icy pool” (line 6) refers to the body of the lamp, which is empty inside and contains water. It would appear that Liu Xin was describing a particular kind of lamp called *gang deng* 釘鏡. *Gang deng* usually has two parts: the lower part may be in the shape of a cauldron, while the upper part comprises a “plate” (for lamp oil and lamp wick) and a shade, or an enclosed container with an opening. One or two pipes connect the two parts, channeling the rising smoke into the cauldron, where the soot would dissolve into the water. This arrangement keeps the air in the room clean from excess smoke and soot. The famous Changxin Palace Lamp (Changxin gong deng 長信宮鏡), which was excavated in 1968 from the tomb of Dou Wan 竇綰, the wife of Prince Zhongshan 中山王 (r. 154–113 B.C.), and has hence appeared in many art books, is such a *gang deng*, with the pipe replaced by the empty sleeve of the palace lady whose right hand is holding the lamp. If we reconstruct the lamp in Liu Xin’s *fu* according to the depiction, it would seem that the neck of the crane functioned as a pipe, which turned

¹⁰ “Deng fu” 燈賦. Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Han wen* 全漢文, 40.346.

around to the lamp plate on the back of the crane and subsumed the smoke into the belly of the crane, which was a container of water. The “bright candle” mentioned in the fifth line was most likely made of animal fat.

The point of this fragment of Liu Xin’s *fu* is that nothing may hide from the lamp’s illumination. This ability to illuminate everything is, of course, the attribute of a monarch or a sage, who presides over his people like the sun and moon, allowing nothing to escape from his observation, while remaining impartial with his favor (as said in the *Liji*, “The sun and moon have no partial illumination” 日月無私照).¹¹ Only after we witness the particular shape of a bird-shaped *gang deng* from the Han, however, do we realize how precise the author was in depicting the object at hand.¹²

An accurate description of this particular kind of lamp is also provided by the “Gang deng fu” 缸燈賦 (“*Fu* on the *gang* Lamp”), composed by Xiahou Zhan 夏侯湛 (243–291):¹³

A bejeweled, precious vessel,
with amazing image and wondrous craftsmanship.
It gets light but hides the smoke,
wrought skillfully with gilded bronze.
Melted down and cast in a mold,
its shape is fashioned, its form set.
And then it is hidden with gilded plates,
and separated by a splendid shade.
Pure white oil dissolves in the movable plate;
crimson sparkle glistens on the window traceries.
It shines forth in the magnolia hall,
the brightness mounts up to the broad ceiling.

¹¹ *Liji jijie*, p. 1277.

¹² The phoenix lamp excavated from a late Western Han tomb gives us a good idea of the crane lamp Liu Xin described in his *fu*. See Kong Chen and Li Yan, *Gu dengshi jianshang yu shoucang*, pp. 27–28. Kang-i Sun Chang noticed the application of the same critical vocabulary, namely the “skill with words of verisimilitude in describing things,” to *fu* and poetry in the fifth and sixth centuries. See her “Description of Landscape in Early Six Dynasties Poetry,” in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T’ang*, ed. Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 109–10.

¹³ Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Jin wen* 全齊文, 68.1851.

Its flames gleam on the banquet mats,
and radiate brilliance over the patterned screen.

珠珍寶器，奇像妙工。取光藏煙，致巧金銅。
融冶甄流，陶形定容。爾乃隱以金翳，疏以華籠。
融素膏于回槃，發朱耀于綺窗。
宣耀蘭堂，騰明廣宇。焰煜燴于茵筵，煥炤晰乎屏組。

As shown by a bronze *gang* lamp excavated from the tomb of a Han princess at Changsha of Hunan, the “gilded plates” referred to in this *fu* are two small bronze plates acting as “sliding doors” to the lamp plate.¹⁴ The doors may be slid open or shut to increase or reduce the lamp light. The “splendid shade” is the cover over the lamp plate, which channels the rising smoke into the attached pipes. Both the lamp plate on this lamp and the one on the famous Changxin Palace lamp can be rotated.

Also taking a lamp as its subject is an inscription by Li You 李尤 (first to second century). The piece is rather plain and straightforward, with an emphasis on the moral function of the lamp—to assist “the worthy and wise” in their diligent labors:

Inscription on A Golden Ram Lamp¹⁵

The worthy and wise labor diligently;
for them daytime is not long enough.
The golden ram carries flames on its back,
producing light so that they may continue their work.

金羊燈銘

賢哲勉務，惟日不足。金羊載耀，作明以續。

Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278) wrote inscriptions for both a lamp and a candle. *Zhu ming* 燭銘 (“Inscription on a Candle”) is translated below:¹⁶

¹⁴ This lamp is now in the collection of the Department of History at Nanjing University. Kong Chen and Li Yan, *Gu dengshi de jianshang yu shoucang*, pp. 20–24.

¹⁵ Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan hou Han wen* 全後漢文, 50.752.

¹⁶ Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Jin wen*, 46.1725.

Splendid is the vermilion candle,
 set aflame it flashes light.
 Taking its cue from the Dragon's glow,
 it imitates the Fusang tree.¹⁷
 Shining forth upon the dark night,
 it is as bright as the morning sun.
 Burning its form, it watches over the world:
 there is nothing it does not illuminate.

煌煌丹燭，焰焰飛光。取到龍景，擬象扶桑。
 照彼玄夜，炳若朝陽。焚刑監世，無隱不彰。

Although called an “inscription,” this composition might be seen as a miniature *fu* on an object (*yongwu fu* 詠物賦), as it describes the physical attributes of a candle, traces it to mythical, larger-than-life origins (as many *yongwu fu* are wont to do in order to exalt the object being praised), and recounts its function: to illuminate the night and “watch over the world.”¹⁸

Fu Xuan's son Fu Xian 傅咸 (239–294) also wrote a *fu* on a candle. What is left of this *fu* differs remarkably from the other pieces in that the author focuses on the circumstances of lighting up the candle rather than on a detailed description of the object itself. If we had complete *fu* on candles, we might find that this was one of the usual phases of the exposition. The preface tells us about the occasion on which he composed the *fu*:

I came to Chang'an to investigate a case. In this faraway place I feel homesick and have night drinks with my fellow-travelers so as to forget sorrow. Seeing that can-

¹⁷ The Dragon refers to the mythical “Candle Dragon” in the *Shanhai jing*. It has a human face and a snake body. When it opens its eyes, it is day; when it closes its eyes, it is night. Some say it is a dragon holding a candle in its mouth. Fusang is a mythical tree in the east, from which ten suns used to rise and shone upon the world until the hero Yi 羿 shot nine suns down and ended the terrible drought. See *Shanhai jing jiaozhu*, 12.438, 4.260.

¹⁸ Wan Guangzhi 萬光治 states that the Han inscriptions should also be regarded as “small *yongwu fu*” and argues that there is no strict boundary between *ming* and *fu* in the Han times. Wan Guangzhi, “Handai song zan ming zhen yu futi yiyong” 漢代頌贊銘箴與同體異用, *Shehui kexue yanjiu* 社會科學研究 45 (1986.4): 101. Indeed, despite its title, Liu Xin's “*Fu* on a Lamp” cited earlier reads more like an inscription (*ming*). Li Shibiao 李士彪 also points out how loosely and generally applied the generic term *fu* was in Han times, in contrast with the much narrower range of the term in the Six Dynasties. See his *Wei Jin nanbeichao wenti* 魏晉南北朝文體學 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), pp. 8–14.

dles within the enclosure burn themselves out in order to serve people, I feel this is just like sacrificing one's life for the sake of accomplishing good.¹⁹

Fu Xian begins his *fu* with grand statements about sources of light for day and night, moves on to the poet's own sleeplessness and how he subsequently lights up a candle, and, finally, his sense of loneliness deepened by the shadow the candlelight has created, he summons his friends and starts a night banquet. That a candle burns itself out to fulfill its life's purpose echoes the more customary "*fu* on object" in its emphasis on the practical function (*yong* 用) of things; and the parallel between the author (who undertook a trip on official business to the faraway Chang'an during the cold wintertime) and the candle devoting its life to serve the human need is unmistakable.

In the last decades of the late third century, Yin Ju 殷巨 wrote a *fu* on a whale-shaped lamp, an exotic item from the distant Roman Empire (Daqin 大秦).²⁰ This piece sings praise of the exquisite craftsmanship of the lamp only to emphasize toward the end that the real interest lies in the lamp's "function" rather than its decoration. And yet, the *fu* seems to belie his stated purport: preceding his claim of the primacy of the lamp's function are many and elaborate lines describing the lamp's shape. Yin Ju is uncomfortably trapped between the utilitarian value and the aesthetic value of the object.

Fu on a Whale Lamp²¹

A fish spanning over the ocean
is given the name "the whale."
Of all the scaled species
none may compete with it.
The people of Daqin admired it so much
that they observed it carefully.
They delineated its shape,

¹⁹ "Sacrificing one's life for the sake of accomplishing good" comes from the *Analects* 15.9. Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, annotated, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 620.

²⁰ Yin Ju left behind two *fu*: one on the whale-shaped lamp, and one on asbestos or fire-proof cloth (*Qibu fu* 奇布賦), which also came from Daqin and which he had seen in the second year of the Taikang 太康 reign (281), according to his preface.

²¹ *Quan Jin wen*, 81.1928–29. Sun Hui 孫惠 (265–311) wrote a "Baizhi deng fu" 百枝燈賦, but only two sentences are extant. *Quan Jin wen*, 115.2119.

lodging it in a bronze lamp.
 Bulging up is its spine and showy its tail,
 its whiskers and scales extending and opening up.
 Lowering its head and looking down—
 how it coils in the splendid hall!
 In high spirits it stands tall and upright,
 as if ready to fly away, and yet lingers on.
 Harboring orchid oil within its breast,²²
 it illuminates the workers' careful measurements.
 Ah of all secret intricacies of craftsmanship,
 nothing could be more beautiful than this vessel.
 With its ornamental beauty, it achieves its use,
 as it is designed with clever skill, it does not exhaust itself.
 It is not that we prize the elaborate decoration,
 but rather value the benefit of its function.
 Ever a model for the future generations,
 spanning a thousand years, it shall never fail.

鯨魚燈賦

橫海之魚，厥號爲鯨。普彼鱗族，莫之與京。
 大秦美焉，乃觀乃詳。寫載其形，託于金燈。
 隆脊矜尾，鬣甲舒張。垂首俛視，蟠于華房。
 狀欣欣以竦峙，若將飛而未翔。懷蘭膏于胸臆，明制節之謹度。
 伊工巧之奇密，莫尚美于斯器。因綺麗以致用，設機變而罔匱。
 匪雕文之足瑋，差利事之爲貴。永作式于將來，跨千載而弗墜。

No *fu* on lamps or candles are extant from the period between Fan Jian and Jiang Yan 江淹 (444–505). Jiang Yan's *fu* on a lamp was deliberately modeled on *Feng fu* 風賦 (“*Fu* on Wind”), which is attributed to Song Yu 宋玉, but probably dates from the Western Han. In his *fu* Jiang Yan differentiates “the prince’s lamp” from “the commoner’s lamp” and ends with the prince’s appreciation of the minister composing the *fu*.²³ Also deserving mention is Xi Zuochi’s 習鑿齒 (?–382) fragmentary poem describing a lamp in the wind, which is included in the section on lamps in the early Tang

²² What I translate as “orchid” here is in fact thoroughwort (*Eupatorium japonicum*), a plant with sweet-smelling leaves found on riverbanks or in marshes.

²³ Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Liang wen* 全梁文, 34.3148.

encyclopedia *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (comp. 624). Xi Zuochi was a learned scholar who admired Buddhism and struck up a fast friendship with Dao An 道安 (312–385), one of the most influential Chinese monks in the Eastern Jin. The lamp in the wind is a primarily Buddhist metaphor for the fragility and brevity of human life and the physical world.²⁴ In the fragment by Xi Zuochi, as the wind blows, making the flames flutter, the light gives shape to the invisible wind:

Brilliant is the lamp during the quiet night;
 how splendidly it glows among the trees.
 The lamp flares up with the wind,
 the wind rises and falls with the lamp light.²⁵

煌煌閒夜燈，脩脩樹間亮。燈隨風焯燁，風與燈升降。

In the last decades of the fifth century, poetry on objects (*yongwu shi* 詠物詩) came into vogue. The first poems devoted exclusively to lamps or candles were written by Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–499), who dominated the Yongming literary scene and, along with Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), exerted the strongest influence on the Liang court poets. As Kang-i Sun Chang has pointed out, Xie Tiao's poems on objects belonged to social verse composed at banquets and parties in a salon setting.²⁶

²⁴ Candles or lamps in the wind is a favorite Buddhist metaphor for the inconstant and illusive nature of physical reality. According to *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (*Mahāprajñāparāmīṭī-sūtra*), a commentary on *Dapin boruo jing* 大品般若經 (*Mahāprajñāparāmīṭī-sūtra*), attributed to Nāgārjuna 龍樹 and translated by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344–413 or 350–409) from 402 to 405: “The transformation and destruction of the world is like a lamp in the wind.” *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (rpt., Taipei: Shihua yinshua qiye youxian gongsi, 1990) [hereafter *T.*], #1509, 23.229. But the Buddhist teachings were conveyed through oral preaching as often as through written texts, and so the metaphor of “lamp/candle in the wind” could have been familiar to Chinese audiences much earlier than the fourth century. The Wei poet Liu Zhen 劉楨 (?–217) used this metaphor in an untitled fragmentary poem. Lu Qinli 遼欽立, ed., *Quan Wei shi* 全魏詩, in his *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 3.373. A *yuefu* poem entitled “Yuan shi xing” 怨詩行 (date unknown), compares human life to “the candle in the wind” (*feng chui zhu* 風吹燭) and encourages people to make the most of it. In this respect, it recalls a *yuefu* poem “Ximen xing” 西門行 as well as “Gushi shijiu shou” 古詩十九首, #15. Lu Qinli, ed., *Quan Han shi* 全漢詩, 9.275, 9.269, 12.333.

²⁵ The poem has been given no title. See *Yiwen leiju* (Taipei: Zhengda yinshuguan, 1974), 80.1368. Lu Qinli, ed., *Quan Jin shi* 全晉詩, 14.922.

²⁶ *Six Dynasties Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 122.

On a Lamp²⁷

Emitting blue iridescence from the Slanting River,²⁸
 it harbors the treasure from the peak of Quarry Mountain.²⁹
 Its upright stalk resembles the stand of the bronze immortal,³⁰
 and it holds light within like the Candle Dragon.
 Fluttering moths circle it again and again,
 wispy blossoms four- or five-fold.
 Alone, facing the lovesick evening,
 in vain it shines forth on the stitches of her dancing clothes.³¹

詠燈

發翠斜漢裏，蓄寶宕山峰。抽莖類仙掌，銜光似燭龍。
 飛蛾再三繞，輕花四五重。孤對相思夕，空照舞衣縫。

This standard *yongwu* poem resembles a miniature *fu* in that it lists the characteristics of the described object in what Cynthia Chennault has aptly called a “succession of images.”³² Like a mock epic, it creates a hyperbolic effect: it first shows the extraordinary origin of the lamp, not “in the wild,” but rather in the celestial sphere or some transcendental realm, and then it likens the lamp to the mythical Candle Dragon or the bronze immortal. The third cou-

²⁷ Lu Qinli, ed., *Quan Qi shi* 全齊詩, 4.1452–53.

²⁸ Slanting Stream (*xiexi*) or Slanting River (*xiehan*) is the Milky Way.

²⁹ Quarry Mountain appears in *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳, attributed to Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 B.C.). It was said to produce a great quantity of cinnabar, which was often used in making elixirs. When the local magistrate sealed off the mountain to prevent people from getting it, the cinnabar poured forth “flying like fire.” *Liexian zhuan jiaojian* 列仙傳校箋, ed. Wang Shumin 王叔岷 (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1995), p. 114.

³⁰ Literally, “resembles the immortal’s palm,” which refers to a bronze statue built by Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 140–87 B.C.) standing on a tall column with outstretched palms to collect “sweet dew,” which was thought to help obtain longevity.

³¹ A variant version reads: “In vain it shines forth—there are no clothes to stitch” 空照無衣縫. Xu Jian 徐堅 (659–729), comp., *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 25.616.

³² Cynthia Chennault, “Odes on Objects and Patronage during the Southern Qi,” in *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History*, ed. Paul Kroll and David Knechtges (T’ang Studies Society, 2003), pp. 334. Kang-i Sun Chang has observed that “the concept of verisimilitude in *shih* is originally based upon the aesthetic principle of the descriptive *fu* in general.” *Six Dynasties Poetry*, p. 93. Liao Guodong 廖國棟 also discusses the influence produced by *yongwu fu* on *yongwu shi*. *Wei Jin yongwu fu yanjiu* 魏晉詠物賦研究 (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1990), pp. 544–48.

plet of the poem moves the rhetoric to a more mundane level, preparing the reader for the ending: a lonely evening of unsatisfied longing. With the ending the poem returns to familiar *yongwu* territory: the human element sets in, and the depicted object is endowed with some sort of human emotion, be it loneliness, desire, or the feeling of insecurity that with the passing of a season, the lamp's utilitarian value will be exhausted and the owner will replace it with something else.

Xie Tiao's poem on a candle ("Yong zhu" 詠燭) is another typical *yongwu shi*:³³

Beneath the apricot beams, guests have not yet dispersed,³⁴
the radiance of the Cinnamon Palace will sink into
darkness soon.³⁵

Its colors dimmed within the light curtain,
it lowers its light over an ornamented lute.
Back and forth, the silhouette of a cloud hairdo;
glimmering, gold on window tracery.
I feel resentful that on a night of autumn moon,
you should leave me in the dark shades of a secluded chamber.³⁶

杳梁賓未散，桂宮明欲沈。曖色輕幃裏，低光照寶琴。
徘徊雲髻影，灼爍綺疏金。恨君秋月夜，遣我洞房陰。

The poem opens with a late night banquet scene: although the moon is about to set, the guests have not yet left. The time is perfect for lighting candles. The next couplet, however, moves away

³³ *Quan Qi shi*, 4.1453.

³⁴ "Apricot beams" echoes a line from Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (179–117 B.C.) "Changmen fu" 長門賦 ("Fu on the Tall Gate Palace"): "Decorating the apricot wood for the beams" 飾文杏以爲梁. *Quan Han wen*, 22.245. By this period, "apricot beams" had become a common attribute of a luxurious building, as in Shen Yue's poem "Lamenting the Shedding Pawlonia Tree When Frost Descends" 霜來悲落桐: "The apricot wood can be made into beams" 文杏堪作梁. Lu Qinli, ed., *Quan Liang shi* 全梁詩, 7.1666.

³⁵ Cinnamon Palace was the name of a Han palace, constructed in 101 B.C., to the north of the Weiyang Palace (Weiyang gong 未央宮) at Chang'an. Emperor Cheng of Han 成帝 (r. 33–7 B.C.) lived there when he was the Crown Prince; later it was the residence of several imperial consorts, including Emperor Ai's 哀帝 (r. 7–1 B.C.) empress Fu 傅. Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), comp., *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 10.301, 12.347.

³⁶ Both Xie Tiao's poems have also been translated into English with annotations by Richard B. Mather. *The Age of Eternal Brilliance: Three Lyric Poets of the Yung-ming Era (483–493)* (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 2:44–45.

from the banquet to an intimate boudoir setting: here bright colors are toned down by faint candlelight, and the wavering shadow on the curtain exposes what is within, showing that the man is at the party while the woman is left alone. At first she plays the lute to amuse herself; then she gives up, and begins pacing listlessly to and fro. The concluding couplet unifies the images of the candle and the woman.

The dark shades (*yin*) is a proper site for the candle: after all, it is a candle's obligation to illuminate a dark chamber. Here, however, it seems to cringe at such a prospect, as if it foresees how, with no one attending to it, it is going to flicker out. Without flame and light, it would be reduced to a mere candle, a dead thing.

The poems and poetic expositions on candles and lamps that I have discussed so far share more or less the same basic structure: from the origin and characteristics of the object, they invariably come to its function of assisting the human world, its use-value. In this sense, the following quatrain by Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (Xiao Yan 蕭衍, r. 502–549) is not very different. Emperor Wu was once, along with Xie Tiao and Shen Yue, one of the “Eight Companions of the Prince Jingling” (Jingling bayou 竟陵八友).³⁷ Although he continued writing poetry until the 540s, his poetic style was more in line with the Yongming generation than with the literary community headed by his sons Xiao Gang and Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (508–554).

On a Candle³⁸

People wearing gauze and silk in the hall,
 dancers and singers on the mats:
 wait till I send forth rippling rays,
 and illuminate the nooks and crannies for you.

³⁷ The Prince of Jingling was Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460–494), the younger brother of the Crown Prince of Wenhui of Qi 文惠太子 (458–493). He was a lover of literature as well as a devout Buddhist. During the Yongming era, his Western Villa, situated in the Rooster Cage Mountain to the northwest of the capital city Jiankang, was a center of literary and religious activities. He gathered a group of men of letters, and the “Eight Companions” were the most prominent. They were Xiao Yan (464–549), Shen Yue, Fan Yun 范雲 (451–503), Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508), Xie Tiao, Wang Rong 王融 (467–493), Lu Chui 陸倕 (470–526), and Xiao Chen 蕭琛 (?–529).

³⁸ *Quan Liang shi*, 1.1536.

詠燭

堂中綺羅人，席上歌舞兒。待我光泛灩，爲君照參差。

This quatrain focuses on the candle's capacity to "illuminate" (*zhao* 照). The light of the candle turns the blur of a dim space into a complex space and brings out the irregular shapes of things. In an intensely Buddhist period, illumination could easily acquire a large significance both in an imperial and Buddhist context, for it is a manifestation of the particular attribute of a monarch and the wisdom achieved by a person in attaining Buddhist enlightenment.

SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE: THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT
OF ILLUMINATION

The way we see things is conditioned by our knowledge and beliefs. In *Deng zan* 燈贊 ("An Ode on a Lamp") by the Eastern Jin monk Zhi Tandi 支曇諦 (347-411), who originally came from Sogdiana (Kangqu 康居), the lamp is, for the first time in Chinese literary history, explicitly represented as an aid to achieving Buddhist enlightenment:³⁹

Shedding light upon distant principles,
it also glorifies close teachings.
A thousand lamps are a unified radiance;⁴⁰
a hundred branches equally glow.
Spreading smoke on a clear night,
it emanates light that illuminates all.
Seeing forms, delighting in its radiance,
one becomes enlightened and comprehends the subtle truth.

既明遠理，亦弘近教。千燈同輝，百枝並曜。
飛煙清夜，流光洞照。見形悅景，悟旨測妙。

³⁹ *Quan Jin wen*, 165.2425.

⁴⁰ "A thousand lamps" should have been a familiar image to Buddhists, because of the story about a king who decided to make an offering of a thousand lamps to Buddha by piercing a thousand holes in his own body. The story appears in *Da fangbian fo bao'en jing* 大方便佛報恩經, translated into Chinese in the second or third century, and later also in *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經, translated into Chinese in 445. See *T.* #156, 2.133-35, #202, 1.349-50. The stories are included in the Liang Buddhist encyclopedia *Jinglü yixiang* 經律異相. See *T.* #2121, 24.131-32, #2121, 25.136.

The lamp (Skt. *dīpa*) is one of the six offerings made to Buddha. According to Buddhist teachings, there are six means (that is, the Six Pāramitās 六波羅蜜) of crossing over (*du* 度) from this shore of births and deaths to the other shore, which is the Nirvana, and the sixth of these means is *prājñā*, or wisdom.⁴¹ Giving forth light and illuminating things, the lamp thus becomes the perfect symbol for *prājñā*, the ability to understand the myriad phenomena of the universe exactly as they are. In giving praise to the Buddha's image, Zhi Dun 支遁 (313?-366), the famous Eastern Jin monk and poet, compared Buddha's wisdom to a brilliantly lit torch that illuminated his life's path in darkness.⁴² Indeed, "the lamp of wisdom" (*hui ju* 慧炬 or *zhīhui deng* 智慧燈) was a common phrase in the Southern Dynasties.⁴³ In the fifth century, the famous Daoist Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406-477) laid down a set of rules for what is known as "the lamp rite" (*dengyi* 燈儀), a Daoist liturgical ritual usually held after sunset and involving the use of lamps. His *Randeng lizhu weiyi* 燃燈禮祝威儀 is lost, but three "Mingdeng zan" 明燈贊 ("Odes to a Bright Lamp") from this liturgical text have been preserved in *Wushang huanglu dazhai lichengyi* 無上黃籙大齋立成儀, transmitted by the Southern Song Daoist Liu Yongguang 留用光 (?-1225) and recorded by his disciple Jiang Shuyu 蔣叔輿 (1162-1223).⁴⁴ These odes in five-syllable lines liken "my body" to a burning lamp, which "forsakes [its] form and destroys the root of sufferings" 舍形滅苦根.

The lamp, most importantly, emits light, enabling one to see in the dark. But sight can be deceiving. According to the Buddhist teachings, the "eye-consciousness" itself is unreal, and the physical things being seen are no more than illusory appearances. They

⁴¹ The first five are charity, receiving precepts, patience, devotion, and meditation.

⁴² *Quan Jin wen*, 157.2369.

⁴³ For instance, Xiao Ziliang used the phrase *hui ju* in a letter. Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Qi wen* 全齊文, 7.2829. Hui Ju was the "dharma name" (*fa ming* 法名) of Wang Yun 王筠 (481-549), a prominent Liang court poet. *Quan Liang wen*, 65.3337. Emperor Wu of Liang used *zhīhui deng* in his "Mohe boruo chanwen" 摩訶般若懺文. *Quan Liang wen*, 6.2987. Xi Zuochi, in a letter to the monk Dao An dated 365, used the phrase "the lamp of bright wisdom" (*ming zhe zhi deng* 明哲之燈). *Quan Jin wen*, 134.2230.

⁴⁴ *Daozang* 道藏 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe; Shanghai: Shanghai shudian; Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1987), 9.584. Lu Xiujing's *Dongxuan lingbao zhai shuo guangzhu jiefa dengzhuyuanyi* 洞玄靈寶齋說光燭戒罰燈祝願儀 is still extant, in which he introduced the term "Candle of Law" (*fa zhu* 法燭) and set up the office of Lamp Attendant (Shideng 侍燈) in the ritual. *Daozang*, 9.822; 9.825.

belong to the realm of form (*se* 色; Skt. *rūpa*), the object of eye-consciousness, which depends on causes and conditions to exist, and whose very existence is empty because it is impermanent. In a series of lectures given on meditation, Zhi Yi 智顛 (538–597), the founder of the Tiantai Sect 天台宗, explicitly identifies wisdom with *vipāśyanā* (*guan* 觀), which means the particular kind of clear, penetrating, illuminating observation of the world as what it is: transient, relative, constantly changing, and thus unreal. But how does one achieve this illuminating observation? Using a remarkable metaphor, Zhi Yi compared meditation (*dhyāna*) to a closed room and *vipāśyanā* to a bright lamp, stating, “If one cultivates one’s concentration, then it would be like a lamp in a closed room, which is capable of illumining great darkness” 若能修定，如密室中燈，能破巨暗。⁴⁵

The word “ding” 定 is the same as *samatha* (*zhi* 止), a state of deep concentration, which is also called *samādhi*, a Sanskrit word often transliterated as *sanmei* 三昧. The cultivation of *samādhi* had had a long history in China by the time of the Southern Dynasties. An Shigao 安世高 (fl. second century), a Parthian monk and one of the earliest transmitters of Buddhism into China, translated *Da anban shouyi jing* 大安般守意經 (*Great Ānāpāna Sutra*), which teaches breathing techniques to help one concentrate during meditation. In the Eastern Jin, *samādhi* had acquired a new significance. Between the fourth and fifth centuries, the belief in the Pure Land (*Jingtu* 淨土) of Amitābha Buddha 阿彌陀佛 was advocated by the famous monk Hui Yuan 慧遠 (334–416) and attracted many elite followers.⁴⁶ Amitābha Buddha is the Buddha of Infinite Life and Infinite Light; he resides in the Western Paradise or the Pure Land (as opposed to the “impure land” of the mortal world), which is described in sumptuous terms in the so-called “Three Sutras of the Pure Land” (*Jingtu sanbu jing* 淨土三部經): *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 (Sutra of Infinite Life), *Guan wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經 (Sutra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life), and *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經 (Amitābha Sutra). The first of these was translated in the third century, and the last

⁴⁵ T. #1911, 5.57.

⁴⁶ Amitābha Buddha remains one of the most popular and best-known Buddhas in China. For the origin and propagation of the belief in the Pure Land of Amitābha during the Six Dynasties, see Wang Qing 王青, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao shiqi de fojiao xinyang yu shenhua* 魏晉南北朝時期的佛教信仰與神話 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), Chapter 3.

two in the fifth century. According to these sutras, meditating on Amitābha Buddha by calling out his name (*chengming nianfo* 稱名念佛) or visualizing his image (*guanxiang nianfo* 觀想念佛) would enable a person to be reborn into a life of boundless joy in the Pure Land.⁴⁷

On September 11, 402, Hui Yuan assembled 123 monks and laymen in front of an image of Amitābha Buddha at Mount Lu to make a vow to be reborn in the Pure Land; he also composed a preface to a group of poems he and other fellow-believers wrote on meditating on the Buddha and achieving *samādhi*.⁴⁸ The poems are no longer extant, save for four verses in four-syllable lines by a certain Wang Qizhi 王齊之; but the preface is preserved, in which Hui Yuan asserted that the writing of these poems was more than a literary exercise:

What is this concept called *samādhi*? It refers to the concentration of one's mind and quietude of one's thoughts. When the mind is concentrated, the will becomes one and undivided; when thoughts are quieted, energy becomes unoccupied and the spirit brightens. When vital energy is unimpeded, wisdom quiets its glow; when the spirit brightens, no darkness is not illuminated. These two things [i.e., energy and the spirit] are the mysterious manifestation of nature: they come together and function.

夫稱三昧者何？專思寂想之謂也。思專則志一不分，想寂則氣虛神朗。氣虛則智恬其照，神朗則無幽不徹。斯二者，自然之玄符，會一而致用也。

The opening section explains the concept of *samādhi* and its significance. The phrase describing the state achieved by the spirit in concentration—"no darkness is not illuminated"—is reminiscent of Liu Xin's *fu* ("it is dazzling and sheds light on all, / illuminating even the tiniest things") and Fu Xian's inscription ("there is nothing it does not illuminate").

⁴⁷ There is also the third form of meditating: by contemplating the true, unchanging nature of Buddha (*shixiang nianfo* 實相念佛). This is the most abstract of the three forms of meditating, and also the least popular. Name-chanting was the most widespread form of practicing meditation, so much so that *nianfo* (meditating on the Buddha) had become synonymous with "chanting the name of the Buddha" and remains so in the modern Chinese vocabulary.

⁴⁸ Hui Yuan, "Nianfo sanmei shiji xu" 念佛三昧詩集序. *Quan Jin wen*, 162.2402. For Hui Yuan's Amitābha belief and his method for achieving rebirth in the Pure Land, also see E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 219–23. Fang Litian 方立天, *Hui Yuan jiqi foxue* 慧遠及其佛學 (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin daxue chubanshe, 1984), pp. 108–43.

Hui Yuan went on to elucidate why, of different kinds of *samādhi*, meditation on the Buddha is the most commendable:

But then, there are many different kinds of *samādhi*, among which the most meritorious and yet the easiest to cultivate is to meditate on the Buddha. Why is this? He who exhausted the great mystery and reached nirvana, is respectfully named Thatāgata;⁴⁹ his substance and spirit go along with transformations, and his responses [to our call] do not come from one place. So he who enters this particular meditation will become oblivious [to the world around him] and forget knowledge. He will take the object of his meditation [Skt. *ālambana*] as a mirror; when the mirror is bright, his inner light shines forth, their rays joining, and myriad images are born, so that even without the help of ears and eyes, one can hear and see and act. Thereupon, he sees the true substance of the vacuous mirror in the profound absorption, and becomes enlightened to the fact that the form of the luminary is lucid and whole, clear, radiant, and natural; he deeply observes the mysterious voice echoing in his mind, and thus concerns of this dusty world disappear, and blocked feelings become harmonious and open. If not for the method of the extreme subtlety, who could have been able to participate in this?

又諸三昧其名甚眾，一功高易進，念佛爲先。何者？窮元極寂，尊號如來，體神合變，應不以方。故令入斯定者，昧然忘知。即所緣以成鑒，鑒明則內照交映，而萬像生焉；非耳目之所暨，而聞見行焉。於是睹夫淵凝虛鏡之體，而悟靈相湛一，清明自然；察夫玄音之叩心聽，則塵累每消，滯情融朗。非天下之至妙，孰能與於此哉？

This passage offers a detailed description of the experience of meditation. The method of meditation adopted by Hui Yuan is visualization, either of the Buddha himself or of the Pure Land. For the latter, the sutras have provided numerous striking images, such as “lotus flowers as large as a wheel” or “the four inches of fallen petals” that weave a soft, colorful, and fragrant carpet on the golden ground.⁵⁰ Hui Yuan states that since the image of the Buddha is not fixed, each person should “take the object of meditation as a mirror”—which refers to an image being visualized in deep meditation. Because this object in itself has no material substance (it is just an image) and because it reflects everything clearly, it functions as an empty mirror: the reflection is not of the mere appearances of things, but of things as they really are, a clarification and an

⁴⁹ Thatāgata, or “Thus Come” (如來), is the highest of a Buddha’s titles. It is a special reference to Amitābha thatāgata 阿彌陀.

⁵⁰ This is also evidenced by Wang Qizhi’s poems. *Quan Jin shi*, 14.939.

illumination. According to Hui Yuan, the light of the mirror (that is, the shining image being contemplated) will commingle with the light emanating from the meditating subject, and then “myriad images will be born” in the mind; one will then realize the “true substance of the vacuous mirror,” which is emptiness. In Hui Yuan’s description, the meditating subject and the object of his meditation seem to eventually become one and the same in the image of the bright mirror. For Hui Yuan, this is the most effective way of achieving nirvana.

In order for the object of meditation and eventually the meditative mind to become the all-illuminating mirror, one must cultivate concentration. The concept of *nian* 念 is of vital importance. The Chinese character *nian* means several things: chanting or reciting the Buddha’s name; concentrating the mind on one object (Skt. *smṛti*); an instant in time (Skt. *Kṣaṇa*; Ch. *cha’na* 刹那); chanting or vocalizing; and a thought. It is often understood as “a thought-instant,” that is, a momentary thought and the fleeting moment such a thought takes.

The multiplicity of meanings of *nian* proves fruitful in an essay written by Shen Yue, one of the most revered predecessors of the literary circle surrounding the Liang princes. This essay, entitled “Xing shen lun” 形神論 (A Discourse on Body and Spirit), has been rightly recognized by both Whalen Lai and Richard Mather as going beyond “the old body/spirit dichotomy.”⁵¹ Integrating Lao-Zhuang concepts and Buddhist discourse, the treatise is very much part of a prolonged early medieval Chinese debate on the relationship between body and spirit and whether the spirit is immortal and separable from the body. In retrospect, it also sheds light on a new way of seeing in the Liang court literature.

Most relevant to our argument is the first part of this treatise:⁵²

During a single instant of concentrated thought, an ordinary person no longer feels the existence of his body. While it is so for an ordinary person, the sage follows to

⁵¹ Richard B. Mather, *The Poet Shen Yüeh (441–513): The Reticent Marquis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 147. Also see Whalen Lai, “Beyond the Debate on ‘The Immortality of the Soul’: Recovering an Essay by Shen Yüeh,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* (1981): 138–57.

⁵² The essay has been preserved in the Tang monk Dao Xuan’s 道宣 (596–667) *Guang hong-ming ji* 廣弘明集. T., #2103, 22.253. *Quan Liang wen*, 29.3120.

the utmost every thought-instant. The sage has no self, and his body is as if empty in the first place. With a body that is as if empty, the sage encompasses myriad thought-instants that he would follow to the utmost.⁵³ This is how he differs from an ordinary person.

凡人一念之時，七尺不復關所念之地。凡人一念，聖人則無念不盡。聖人無己，七尺本自若空。以若空之七尺，總無不盡之萬念，故能與凡夫異也。

Shen Yue makes clear what differentiates the sage from an ordinary person: the ability not only to concentrate intensely and forget everything else (including the existence of his own body), but also to concentrate in a succession of thought-instants. In this way, the sage explores the limits of and exhausts the potentials offered by each and every thought-instant as well as the myriad thought-instants. In other words, his consciousness is ever in an alert, focused state.

In Buddhism, it is not only “the sage” (i.e., Buddha) who has no self, but also every human being. “Self” is an aggregate of the Four Great Elements—fire, water, earth, and wind—which are conditioned, impermanent, and so essentially empty. There is no such thing as an inherent “self.” That Shen Yue claims that the sage has no self (implying that an ordinary person does) shows clearly that he is using the term in Zhuangzi’s sense rather than in the Buddhist sense. In “Xiaoyao you” 逍遙遊 (Free Wandering) and other writings in *Zhuangzi*, that “the perfect man has no self” (*zhiren wu ji* 至人無己) is a recurring theme. In the Daoist context, it refers to transcending one’s ego as well as the limitations imposed by the physical body and other material conditions, thus achieving the ultimate freedom in being one with the spirit of the universe.

In the next section Shen Yue explains that an ordinary person may have moments of “having no self,” but while these moments are sporadic, the sage’s “no-self” is a constant state:

When an ordinary person during one thought-instant forgets his own body, then his eyes cease the function of seeing, and his feet cease the function of treading. When he thus forgets his eyes and his feet, what is the difference between this and

⁵³ Unlike Whalen Lai and Mather, I take *zong* here as the main verb (encompass), not *wu* (which Lai and Mather translated as “annihilate” or “terminate” respectively). The reason for this is that earlier in this passage we have *wu nian bu jin*: “[The sage has] no thought-instant [that he does] not exhaust or go to the end of.” See Lai, p. 152; Mather, *The Poet Shen Yueh*, p. 148.

having no eyes or feet? However, an ordinary person's temporary "not having" is actually grounded in "having," for hardly one moment of "not having" will have passed when "having" already succeeds it. When the thought-instant is disconnected with the body, one temporarily forgets [one's body/self]; when the thought-instant fades along with the mind, one again remembers it. When one concentrates one's thought on one part of the body, then all the other body parts are as if belonging to someone else, and this would be no different from the "non-self."

凡人一念，忘彼七尺之時，則目廢於視，足廢於踐。當其忘目忘足，與夫無目無足，亦何異哉？凡人之暫無，本實有，無未轉瞬，有已隨之。念與形乖則暫忘，念與心謝則復合。念在七尺之一處，則他處與異人同，則與非我不異。

Shen Yue considers the succession of thought-instants as the essential reason why the sage can maintain his state of "having no self." Ingeniously linking "non-self" (*fei wo* 非我), which is a Mahayāna Buddhist concept misused for the Lao-Zhuang term "having no self" (*wu ji* 無己), with "forgetting the self" (again a Zhuangzi term), Shen Yue postulates that "having no self" is the result of being able to *forget one's existence in a moment of intense concentration*.

But an ordinary person's non-being is only temporary, and the moment is fleeting; the sage's non-being lasts long, and indeed reaches very far.⁵⁴ An ordinary person and a sage originally share one common path. Forgetting temporarily in one thought-instant marks the rank of the ordinary; forgetting everything in myriad thought-instants—that is a great sage.⁵⁵ If we consider [the dichotomy of form and spirit] in such terms, then it borders on causing confusion.⁵⁶

但凡人之暫無，其無甚促；聖人長無，其無甚遠。凡之與聖，其路本同。一念而暫忘，則是凡品；萬念而都忘，則是大聖。以此爲言，則形神幾乎感人。

⁵⁴ Here I follow the *T.* edition. *T.*, #2103, 22.253. The *Sibu congkan* edition of *Guang hong-ming ji* (based on a Ming edition) has a different version: 但凡人之暫無其無，其無甚促；聖人長無其無，其無甚遠。22.303.

⁵⁵ Whalen Lai rendered the sentence as "When myriad *nien* are all forgotten, that is the way of the great sage" (Lai, p. 152). It is, however, *not* the myriad *nien* that the sage forgets; rather he forgets everything continuously, in myriad thought-instants (in contrast with an ordinary person, who forgets everything in only one thought-instant). Lai, p. 152.

⁵⁶ Here I follow the *Sibu congkan* edition, which takes the penultimate character, *huo*, as "confusing" (*huo* 惑) instead of "some" (*huo* 或). If we follow the *T.* edition, then the punctuation would be different: 以此爲言，則形神幾乎。或人疑因果相主，毫分不爽。Whalen Lai's translation is based on the *T.* version: "If we follow this discourse, then the matter of spirit and form [soul and body] is well-nigh [understood]. Now there may be people who suspect that cause and effect" (Lai, p. 152). Richard Mather's translation also follows the *T.* version: "If we talk in this manner the problem of body and spirit will be near to solution. Some persons doubt the principle that the mutual interaction between cause and fruition never varies by the tiniest degree." Mather, *The Poet Shen Yueh*, p. 148-49.

In these lines, Shen Yue reiterates the difference between an ordinary person and a sage. He argues that the debate about body and spirit is pointless because, in a constant state of intense concentration, the existence of body no longer matters and the sense of self is also abolished.

In “Shenbumie lun” 神不滅論 (A Discourse on the Spirit Being Immortal), Shen Yue gives a detailed elucidation of the workings of concentration, which he believes is the only means of achieving the “correct enlightenment”:

The sentient spirit is shallow and weak; worries and concerns confuse and distract [the mind]. If one thought can be all-encompassing, then worries and concerns have no way to reach the mind; but if it cannot be all-encompassing, then scattered thoughts will invade the mind. Before one thought is properly formed, many others will arise, and with the rising of a multitude of thoughts, it will be just like before. That a thought should fail to be all-encompassing is because of superficiality and confusion; shallowness and confusion are a sickness caused by a delusional obsession with Being. To be neither superficial nor confused proceeds from total forgetting; only with this total forgetting will one gain a total illumination. Thus one may begin as an ordinary person but can end with correct enlightenment.⁵⁷

情靈淺弱，心慮雜擾，一念而兼，無由可至。既不能兼，紛刈遞襲。一念未成，他端互起。互起眾端，復同前矣。不相兼之由，由於淺惑。惑淺為病，病於滯有。不淺不惑，出於兼忘。以此兼忘，得此兼照。始自凡夫，至於正覺。

This is Six Dynasties critical prose at its best: clear, precise, and incisive. Richard Mather is right in pointing out how “Zhuangzi-like” this passage is,⁵⁸ but the terseness and precision of its progressive argument remind one more of a Buddhist exposition than Zhuangzi’s effusive discourse, in which the speaker often gets carried away by his own wit and passion for rhetoric.

Shen Yue shows us that it is easy to be beset with all kinds of thoughts and concerns and unable to focus on anything with profound concentration. This lack of focus is due to superficiality—an inability to penetrate deeply to the heart of an issue and pursue it to the point of completely exhausting its possibilities. Superficiality and confusion are signs of a more serious disease: obsession with Being—the antithesis of nothingness (*wu* 無) or emptiness (*kong* 空).

⁵⁷ T. #2103, 22.253. *Quan Liang wen*, 29.3120.

⁵⁸ Mather, *The Poet Shen Yüeh*, p. 151.

The solution proposed by Shen Yue is “total forgetting” of the self, which he believes will lead to a “total illumination.”

Shen Yue’s theory should be seen against the background of a widely held belief in the power of concentration during the Southern Dynasties. In the three collections of stories about the efficacy of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva 觀世音菩薩 written from the early fourth century to the year 501, the authors often emphasized the intense absorption in chanting the Bodhisattva’s name, meditating on the Bodhisattva, or reciting the *Guanshiyin jing* 觀世音經 (Avalokiteśvara Sutra). A story from Lu Gao’s 陸杲 (459–532) collection, for instance, explicitly describes a devout layman’s meditation on the Bodhisattva as “without break for even a single thought-instant” (*niannian xiangxu* 念念相續).⁵⁹ The intense concentration caused the man’s shackles to fall off by themselves.

A POETRY OF ILLUMINATION

Shen Yue’s understanding of Buddhism may be a little clouded by his use of Lao-Zhuang concepts such as “having no self” (*wu ji*) and “total forgetting” (*jian wang* 兼忘). Yet, it was characteristic of the elite members of his age to freely mix the two doctrines into a hybrid theory of one’s own making, and his basic argument about concentration and illumination, clearly presented, harks back to Hui Yuan. Both Hui Yuan and Shen Yue believed that the power of concentration (*ding*) enables a person to achieve illumination (*zhao*). Shen Yue’s unique contribution lies in his creative exploitation of the term *nian*, thought-instant. He succeeds in breaking up the flow of time into myriad thought-instants (*wan nian* 萬念) and asks one to focus on each and every one of them. This idea is directly relevant to the Liang Palace Style poetry: instead of a poetry “about women and romantic love,” this poetry is about concentration, about a new, focused way of looking, and about the extraordinary, and yet often ignored, power of noticing.

This poetry is intensely visual, not so much in the sense that it presents “pictorial images,” but in the sense that it is about the act

⁵⁹ Dong Zhiqiao 董志翹, annotated and trans., *Guanshiyin yingyan ji sanzong yizhu* 觀世音應驗記三種譯注 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 121.

of seeing itself—what and how to see.⁶⁰ Wei-Jin poetry often describes things in generic and unspecific terms. Even the great poet Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433) sometimes lapses into a fragmentary description of nature in some of his landscape poems, with a mountain scene in one line and a water scene in the next, or vice versa. The desire in these poems is to express the totality of the landscape. Such poems evoke another literary genre, the *fu*, a kind of “poetic exposition” designed to encompass all aspects of an object, a place, or an experience. In contrast, Liang court poetry in the tradition of Xie Tiao, Shen Yue, and He Xun 何遜 (?–518?) works differently. This poetry puts the reader in a new relationship with things, which are seen on a temporally and spatially specific level. Instead of being a composite picture of disparate images, Liang court poetry has a center toward which everything in the poem gravitates. The poet’s gaze is extremely focused, so much so that one feels the effect of illumination. The poem is an act of uncovering and unconcealment: the glowing contour of things begins to emerge against a dark background, and such an emergence betrays a keenly observant eye and often an unexpected perspective. The “dark background” is more than just a figure of speech. On the one hand, it refers to the shadows in which things have remained hidden until being illuminated by the poet’s intense gaze, which enables one to see the powder a butterfly’s wings leave on flower petals, or notice the slower, heavier flight of birds in a fine drizzle. On the other hand, the “dark background” is the somber Buddhist background that constantly reminds both poet and reader that everything they see is impermanent and illusory, and hence has no separate reality apart from the background against which it has emerged.

⁶⁰ To emphasize the “visual” aspect of this poetry is not to downplay its auditory qualities, as one may clearly detect in this poetry the influence of the famous prosody theory, which was first explored by the poets of the Yongming generation, most notably Shen Yue and Wang Rong. Many scholars have argued that the attention to prosody in this period had to do with translating and chanting Buddhist scriptures. See, for instance, Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, “Sisheng san wen” 四聲三問, in *Chen Yinke xiansheng wen shi lunji* 陳寅恪先生文史論集 (Hong Kong: Wen Wen Publications, 1973), 1.205–18; Rao Zong-i 饒宗頤, “Wenxin diaolong ‘Shenglü pian’ yu Jiumoluoshi *Tongyun*—lun sisheng shuo yu Xitan zhi guanxi jian tan Wang Bin, Liu Shanjing, Shen Yue youguan wenti” 文心雕龍聲律篇與鳩摩羅什通韻論四聲說與悉曇之關係兼談王斌劉善經沈約有關問題, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 3 (1985): 215–36; Sun Changwu 孫昌武, *Wen tan fo ying* 文壇佛影 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), pp. 155–77.

The things being seen in these Liang court poems exist on a temporally specific level. In this connection I must address the claim that the Liang poems on objects are often “vapid still lifes.”⁶¹ This is a statement worth contesting, because by showing these poems are not “vapid still lifes,” one may gain a clearer picture of what they actually are.

In the genre of still-life painting, things are often truly *still* in the sense that they are wrested out of the stream of life. A still-life painting of fruits and lobsters tells us nothing about time and place: about the fruits and lobsters there is nothing specific; “representative” of their kind, they are objects existing out of real lived time. In contrast, the Liang court poems are, to put it simply, “thought-instants.” They attempt, often successfully, to present things as observed in living moments.⁶² These moments are literally *arrested* in words; and words, much more so than pictures, have a temporal, dynamic quality.

In the Liang court poems, there is often a fertile tension, which did not exist in earlier poetry, between the words of a line and between lines of a couplet. It is difficult to explain this tension away by merely attributing the effect to “a more exquisite parallelism,” although parallelism does play an important role in creating this tension. By “tension” I mean an interaction between words and lines, a movement that cuts across time. This kind of interaction is what differentiates the parallelism of Liang court poetry from that of the earlier poetry, which is usually more straightforward and simple. Consider, for example, this fragment of a poem by the masterful poet Xiao Gang, which is entitled “Qiu wan” 秋晚 (“Autumn Evening”):⁶³

⁶¹ Cynthia Chennault borrowed the term “still-life” from John Marney’s characterization of the Liang “poetry on object.” See her article, “Odes on Objects and Patronage during the Southern Qi,” in *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History*, p. 392.

⁶² As scholars have pointed out, poetry in the fifth and sixth centuries had a tendency to become increasingly “compact.” The reason why many surviving poems are “short” might simply be a function of the sources in which they are preserved—for example, Tang encyclopedias, which often included only excerpts of prose and poetry—and must be properly regarded as fragments. Still, shorter poems were undeniably becoming increasingly common in this period. Quatrains in particular enjoyed unprecedented popularity. Some scholars think this is due to the great influence of the Southern *yuefu* songs, which are usually five-syllable quatrains, and there is some truth to this claim. Nonetheless I believe we should also consider that it was because the elite loved the quatrain form that *yuefu* songs gained popularity in the court.

⁶³ *Quan Liang shi*, 21.1947.

Drifting clouds emerge from the eastern peaks,
 in the west the sun descends to the river.
 Hastening shadows stretch across and darken the walls;
 lengthened rays obliquely penetrate the window.
 Tangled clouds, glowing red, are made circular by the
 clear water;
 tiny leaves outlined by a lamp in the air.

浮雲出東嶺，落日下西江。促陰橫隱壁，長暉斜度窓。
 亂霞圓綠水，細葉影飛缸。

This is twilight time, a time of division and ambiguity, when the day has ceased to be day but the night has not quite begun. In the west the sun is setting; in the east we see no moon, only clouds pouring out from the mountains. Darkness is closing in all around. Shadows dominate. Xiao Gang is always fascinated with the play of shadow and light. Here shadows are darkening the walls, while the slanting rays of the setting sun penetrate the window: boundaries are being traversed.

The last two lines are hauntingly beautiful. Few poets before Xiao Gang had used the word “round” (*yuan* 圓) in the third position of a five-syllable line as a full verb, and in such a strange sense too. Because of the grammatical structure in the Chinese original, one might at first think the line means something like “tangled ruddy clouds make the clear water circular.” One then realizes that the pool is circular, and so the clouds reflected in the pool, although all tangled up, are confined and given a shape—a roundness that indicates perfection. (In Buddhism *yuan* is used to describe the perfect teachings or enlightenment.) Glowing with the sunset red, the clouds grant the pool a momentary splendor. This is the last light of nature. In the next line, the light in the water had already passed on and been transferred to something else. Lamps are being lit up (reminding one of Xi Zuochi’s poem about lanterns hanging from tree branches): a small, quiet indication of time’s passage and the growing darkness. The poet notices the silhouettes of the tree leaves outlined by the lamplight. In a world gradually sinking into shadows, where boundaries begin to break down, the poet traces out luminous patterns and forms and affirms an order created by human efforts.

The lines by Xiao Gang are only a fragment of a poem. We do not know how the poem will turn out, whether it will fall flat or go into another direction. Yet, these lines suffice to intimate a peculiar vision of the world—and a peculiar way in which poetry is made to work. Compare Xiao Gang's lines to such lines as: "Trees are blooming in spring splendor; / the clear pool stirs long currents" 樹木發春華，清池激長流，⁶⁴ or "Forests and ravines gather in the dusk colors, / clouds and vapors withdraw the sunset glow" 林壑斂暝色，雲霞收夕霏。⁶⁵ These lines, representative to a certain degree of earlier poetic couplets, are taken from poems written by former masters. I am certainly not suggesting that they are inferior to Xiao Gang's lines, but they clearly belong to a different order. They are more straightforward and linear in their movement. In Xiao Gang's poem, even the first couplet, which is the simplest of the three, requires that one read back to grasp the picture. One understands the significance of the clouds in the eastern sky only after learning that the sun has sunken to the river's level in the west—only then does one realize that all around is darkness. The two lines are not merely parallel, but interact with each other in a complex manner, creating a tension between the lines. The poem represents a moment when, at a time of decreasing visibility, vision is focused on even the smallest change in nature and, as a result, nature becomes illuminated, just as the lamplight delineates the dark shape of the tiny autumn leaves. The Liang court poems, in short, are not made from *sight* like a still life painting, but from *experience*.

Fortuitously, Xiao Gang's poem comes to an abrupt end with the image of a hanging lamp. Keeping in mind the Buddhist context, we begin to see why the topic of lamps and candles should have fascinated the Liang writers. Lamps and candles are perfect symbols of light and vision; they exemplify the power of illumination achieved through an intensely concentrated and yet all-encompassing vision, and demonstrate the play of light and shadows, which tricks human perception and creates mystery and illusion.

Partially because Liang court poetry resists allegorization, later

⁶⁴ This couplet is taken from Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192-232) poem "Zeng Wang Can" 贈王粲. *Quan Wei shi*, 7.451.

⁶⁵ This couplet is taken from Xie Lingyun's poem "Shibi jingshe huan huzhong zuo" 石壁精舍還湖中作. Lu Qinli, ed., *Quan Song shi* 全宋詩, 2.1165.

critics have always disliked it. If we can temporarily set aside the serious/frivolous dichotomy (and consider what constitutes “seriousness” and why), we will find that one of the greatest virtues of Palace Style poetry is its resistance to allegorization. If any allegory figures in this poetry, then it is a Buddhist one, concerning the essential unreality of all things, events, and human emotions. Buddhism also teaches that human perceptions are faulty and deluded, and that appearances and reality are not the same. In their prolonged, intense observation of the physical world, the Liang court poets offer a resigned, faintly sad illumination, which flickers like a candle in the wind.

FIRE, WIND, AND WATER: THE EXPERIENCE OF ILLUSION

The court poet Liu Xiaowei 劉孝威 (496?-549) has left two poems on candlelight. Here is the first one:

A Poem Harmonizing with “On a Candle behind the Curtains”⁶⁶

As the door opens, the shadow of the curtain comes out;
flickering back and forth, the flame in the wind is oblique.
Its drifting light shines on the brocade sash;
a congealed drop stains the hanging flowers.

和簾裏燭詩

開關簾影出，參差風焰斜。浮光燭綺帶，凝滴汗垂花。

The poem is not so much about an object as about one moment: when the door opens, a breeze slips in, the curtain is lifted up, and the candle flickers, casting wavering shadows, but also illuminating a presence. One may say many things about, if not the intended meaning, the *significance* of this little poem. One may, for instance, bring up the Buddhist metaphor of “a candle in the wind” or the Chinese *carpe diem* theme of lighting candles at night and seeking pleasure; or one may say, as a traditional Chinese critic would do, that it is a mere poetic exercise, a frivolous social verse (as testified by its title), and therefore emotionless, meaningless, and, by

⁶⁶ *Quan Liang shi*, 18.1884.

implication, immoral. The truth is that this little poem represents no more than a moment of “enlightenment,” but first of all, it is about paying attention to small details of life. It articulates a way of experiencing the physical world. What stands out in the poem is the texture of the textile: the embroidered sash, the flower patterns on the long train of loose gowns or on the drapery itself (whose materiality is accentuated by the wax stain)—all unconcealed, as it is, by the incidentally revealed candlelight. This is how a Liang court poet typically looks at the world: things become illuminated in one precious, if brief, instant; and this instant is in motion, moving from a local scene to a detail even more minute, in fact so minute that one can hardly tell whether it is real or imaginary—although this imaginary is, like the powder left on petals by a butterfly’s wings, grounded in the empirically true.

The revealing moment of a curtain being lifted up also figures in Xiao Yi’s poem on the candle, which shares many of the elements of Liu Xiaowei’s quatrain, but turns out in a slightly different way:

Candle: An Ancient Mood⁶⁷

Candle within a flower—
bright and blazing, the wind blowing the curtain.
No silhouette of anyone coming,
turning around its light, it faces the empty air.

古意詠燭詩

花中燭， 焰焰動簾風。 不見來人影， 迴光持向空。

To understand the enigmatic first line, “Candle within a flower,” requires some knowledge about the material culture of the period. During the Southern Dynasties, one of the most popular decorative motifs for porcelain vessels, including candlesticks, was the lotus pattern.⁶⁸ The Chinese syntax of the second line (literally, “bright and blazing, moving the curtain wind”) creates the illusion that it is the flames of the candle that are making the wind in the curtain flicker. As in Xi Zuochi’s poem fragment, flames are defining and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.2058.

⁶⁸ See Lin Shimin 林士民, *Qingci yu Yue yao* 青瓷與越窖 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), p. 39.

giving shape to the wind, but Xiao Yi is much more sophisticated than Xi Zuochi in articulating this.

Xiao Yi's poem is about loneliness and the illusion produced by loneliness. Mistaking the wind blowing on the curtain for someone coming, the person holding the candle quickly turns around, but of course nobody is there. The candlelight illuminates an empty, unoccupied space—here *kong* means sky or empty air, as well as nothingness (Skt. *śūnyatā*), which is perhaps the most important Buddhist concept. “Silhouette” in Chinese is the same as “shadow” (*ying*): it is present in the poem only as an absence, that is, there is *no* silhouette of anyone coming. The loneliness thus described in Xiao Yi's poem evokes a *yuefu* song:

The night is long, I cannot sleep,
the bright moon, how brightly it shines!
I think I hear my sweetheart call out to me,
and I answer back—all for nothing—into the empty air.⁶⁹

夜長不得眠，明月何灼灼。想聞歡喚聲，虛應空中諾。

Commenting on these lines, Xiao Difei 蕭滌非, an eminent *yuefu* scholar, exclaims, “No one who had not experienced it in person could have uttered this.”⁷⁰ However, anyone familiar with Buddhist texts should easily associate this “realistic” song, as well as Xiao Yi's poem, to one of the most famous Buddhist metaphors about a hallucination which is caused by an optical or aural disorder and is likened to the unenlightened one's vain attachment to the illusive physical world.

Xiao Gang wrote a response to his brother Xiao Yi's poem:

Candle: An Ancient Mood,
Harmonizing with the Prince of Xiangdong⁷¹

Candle within a flower—
as if it were sharing human feelings.
Tears of longing flow onto the lap,
the candle's flares fall into the flower.

⁶⁹ “Ziye ge” 子夜歌, #33. *Quan Jin shi*, 19.1042.

⁷⁰ *Xiao Difei shuo yuefu* 蕭滌非說樂府 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 62.

⁷¹ *Quan Liang shi*, 22.1977.

和湘東王古意詠燭詩

花中燭，似將人意同。憶啼流膝上，燭焰落花中。

This poem explicitly displaces human feelings onto the candle: it is weeping wax tears, as though it were sharing human feelings and sympathizing with the person facing the candle (the third line deliberately plays with the double references of “tears”—both the wax tears of a candle and human tears).⁷² The “sharing,” however, grows ominous in the last line: the sparks falling into the flower-shaped candlestick are themselves referred to as “flowers,” whose fall, as the candle is consuming itself, is illuminated by the burning flame and points to the approaching hour of darkness.

It is difficult for us who live in the era of brilliant, glaring electric lighting to imagine an old world of shades, dim corners, and the large, distorted shadows cast on walls and rising up to the beams: the very kind of world that provided the material background for Liang Palace Style poetry. The paradox of a candle is that it creates shadow as well as light. Playing on this paradoxical nature, one of Shen Yue’s quatrains on the old motif of longing for an absent lover achieves an unexpectedly novel effect:

Song: Every Night⁷³

The Dipper stretches across the sky,
every night the heart is suffering alone.
Moonbeams obliquely strike the pillow,
in lamplight half of the bed is in shadow.

夜夜曲

北斗闌干去，夜夜心獨傷。月輝橫射枕，燈光半隱牀。

⁷² This recalls the last couplet of a quatrain, “Zi jun zhi chu yi” 自君之出矣, by the last Chen emperor Chen Shubao 陳叔寶 (553–604): “My longing for you is like the night candle: / shedding tears till the rooster crows” 思君如夜燭，垂淚著鷄鳴。Lu Qinli, ed., *Quan Chen shi* 全陳詩, 4.2510. The image later returns in a famous quatrain, “Zeng bie” 贈別, by the Tang poet Du Mu 杜牧 (ca. 803–852), whose last two lines read: “The wax candle has a heart and pities that we must part, / shedding tears on our behalf till the dawn breaks” 蠟燭有心還惜別，替人垂淚到天明。The *xin* 心 (“heart”) puns with *xin* 芯 (“wick”). Feng Jiwu 馮集梧, ed. and annotated, *Fanchuan shi jizhu* 樊川詩集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), p. 311.

⁷³ *Quan Liang shi*, 6.1622.

The last line, translated literally, would be “Lamplight half hides the bed.” We assume that there is a woman because the image of the empty bed echoes the second of “Nineteen Old Poems,”⁷⁴ though we do not know on which side of the bed her body is. However, whether she is in the dark or in the light does not matter. What matters is the contrast between light and shadow, for it is this contrast that makes her feel more poignantly the emptiness of her bed.

For the Liang court poets, shadow was just as fascinating as illumination, for they knew that the latter depended on the former. Shadow is impermanent, conditional, and empty: contemplation on it leads to enlightenment. Shadow both is an illusion and produces illusions: we have all experienced how a familiar face or an ordinary object of daily life can be rendered mysterious, silent, and expressive to the point of being eloquent in semi-darkness. In Chinese history, the best-known instance of creating illusions with the help of lamps and candles is probably the story in which a wizard claimed to be able to summon the soul of Lady Li, Emperor Wu of Han’s favorite consort, who had died young. The wizard set up a curtained enclosure, where he hung up lamps and candles, and then he made the emperor sit in another curtained enclosure. “Gazing from the distance he [that is, the emperor] saw a lovely woman, whose appearance was like that of Lady Li, walking around the place set for her within the curtains. But he could not go to take a closer look. The Emperor then felt longing and sadness even more strongly, and wrote this poem:

Is it her
or is it not?
I stand and gaze at her,
yet she glides along, so slow
in her coming.⁷⁵

The historian Ban Gu was no Buddhist, but as a Confucian moralist, he nevertheless felt compelled to present the story of Lady Li as one about the illusory nature of romantic love: Emperor Wu’s

⁷⁴ *Quan Han shi*, 12.329.

⁷⁵ *Han shu*, 97.3952. *Quan Han shi*, 1.96. Stephen Owen’s translation. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), pp. 216–17.

passion for Lady Li was exposed as a pursuit of shadows.⁷⁶ In many of the Liang court poems on candlelit scenes of passion, we seem to hear the echoes of the story of Lady Li. When unfulfilled, passion, itself illusory, creates illusions, as can be seen in Xiao Yi's quatrain on a candle, or in the last four lines of Wang Sengru's 王僧孺 (465–522) poem entitled “Ye chou shi zhu bin” 夜愁示諸賓 (“Night Sorrow: To Be Shown to My Guests”):⁷⁷

The lonely curtains are all closed,
cold oil burned out, more added.
Who would understand that my heart and eyes are
in such confusion—
when I look at vermilion, it suddenly turns into emerald.

孤帳閉不開，寒膏盡復續。誰知心眼亂，看朱忽成碧。

But more often than not the story of Lady Li is turned around, as the poet succeeds in taking a closer look. What fascinates the poet is the moment when the woman's face emerges from the dark and is completely illuminated by candlelight: the moment of unconcealment, when emotions can no longer be suppressed. Shen Yue describes such a moment in his “Liren fu” 麗人賦 (“*Fu* on A Lovely Person”):⁷⁸

Her gauze clothes rustle, but she doesn't advance,
hidden in the shadow of the bright lamp, not yet
coming forward.
Midway upon the walkway she rests a while,
along the portico she turns around and goes back.
Lotus leaves overturned in the pond, opening up a surface
for her reflection;
a breeze stirs the bamboo grove, blowing on the clothes.
From the dusk I have been waiting,
but she does not arrive until midnight.

⁷⁶ See Stephen Owen, “Yi jian: Du Han shu ‘Li furen zhuan’” 一見：讀漢書李夫人傳, in *Tashan de shitouji: Yuwen Suoan zixuanji* 他山的石頭記：宇文所安自選集, trans. Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2003), pp. 105–19.

⁷⁷ *Quan Liang shi*, 12.1766. In *Yutai xinyong* the title is simply “Night Sorrow,” which would have seemed to create the impression that the speaker is a woman.

⁷⁸ *Quan Liang wen*, 25.3097.

Emerging from the darkness, stepping into light,
she bashfully conceals her charms.

響羅衣而不進，隱明燈而未前。
中步檐而一息，順長廊而迴歸。
池翻荷而納影，風動竹而吹衣。
薄暮延佇，宵分乃至。出闌入光，含羞隱媚。

The woman coming out from the shadows into the light also captures the poet's imagination in a quatrain by Liu Xiaowei's brother Liu Xiaochuo 劉孝綽 (481–539), one of the best-known court poets in the Liang:

On A Woman Unwilling to Come Forth⁷⁹

Where the curtain opens, I see hairpin's shadow;
when the hangings stir, I hear bracelets' sound.
She hesitates and will not come forth,
always shy of the candle's light.

詠姬人未肯出詩

帷開見釵影，簾動聞釧聲。徘徊定不出，常羞華燭明。

The woman's presence is conjured up like Lady Li's ghost. It is indicated by no more than a glimpse of shadow and some faint sound. And yet, as the poet is peeking, the woman behind the scene is also looking back at him. The poet is savoring the moment before revelation, and he knows it.

The following quatrain by Xiao Gang, focusing on the woman's face illuminated by the lamp, urges the eruption of passion—or does it?

Song of Roosting Crow⁸⁰

The folding screen of brocade, with silver hinges—
her red lips and jade face emerge in lamplight.
They gaze at each other, breathing hard, expecting love—
who can be so shy, as not to come forward?

⁷⁹ *Quan Liang shi*, 16.1843.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.1922.

烏棲曲

織成屏風銀屈膝，朱唇玉面燈前出。
相看氣息望君憐，誰能含羞不自前。

The woman in this poem has come forward from behind the screen and meets the man face to face. There is a pause, a mutual gaze (which is unusual in the Liang court poetry), and their breathing quickens as they are standing so close to each other. But the anticipated advancing and embracing are displaced into the poet's rhetorical question put to her and to himself: at such a moment, who can still hold back? The displacement, the reader realizes, is only temporary in real time but becomes permanent in poetic time: the poem comes to an eternal standstill, like the love-scene painted on Keats's Grecian urn, precariously positioned right on the verge of the headlong fall.

In his reading of this poem, Stephen Owen considers the woman as a painted figure on the screen.⁸¹ There is certainly an ambiguity in the poem that makes this reading possible. If one adopts such a reading, the poem is all of a sudden tinged with a rich irony: the image in the second line becomes even more forceful, as the flooding lamplight brings forth the painted woman from the dark as if she were real; the closing question turns out to be a self-mockery—the enlightened Buddhist layman looks at his secular self with a smile, as he comments on the foolishness of the viewer who, despite knowing better, still cannot help taking *sūnyatā* (*kong*) for *rūpa* (*se* 色, literally “colors”), illusory appearances for reality.⁸²

Apart from poems on lamps and candles, Xiao Gang composed a “Dui zhu fu” 對燭賦 (“*Fu* on Facing the Candle”),⁸³ which con-

⁸¹ *Mi-Lou: Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 210–11.

⁸² In another poem “Yong meiren kanhua” 詠美人看畫, Xiao Gang wrote about a palace lady looking at the portrait of a beautiful woman, suggesting that both were “painted” and thus unreal. *Quan Liang shi*, 22.1953. This recalls a Buddhist story about how the recognition of the unreality of paintings and statues leads to enlightenment regarding the empty nature of the physical world. The story is included in the Liang Buddhist encyclopedia *Jinglü yixiang*. T., #2121, 44.229.

⁸³ *Quan Liang wen*, 8.2997. Xiao Yi and Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581) both wrote a *fu* with the same title. These pieces might have been composed on the same occasion. *Quan Liang wen*, 15.3038; *Quan hou Zhou wen* 全後周文, 9.3925–926. They are both excellent compositions, which, due to the limitation of space, will not be discussed in this paper.

tains a few lines that are among the best in all Chinese writings on the candle. In the sensitive manner characteristic of Xiao Gang, they convey the near-hypnotized state, the sensory illusions, induced by looking long and hard at the dancing flames. The poet's attention is so intensely focused that any change in the phenomenal world—the passage of time, the passage of a breeze—is noticed only through the changes in the candle:

After a while one feels the rush of flowing beads,
 crimson flowers, stared at closely, multiply.
 Night grows deep—color is bright;
 flame flickers—a breeze has just passed.

漸覺流珠走，熟視絳花多。宵深色麗，焰動風過。

The “crimson flowers” are the sparks given off by the candle, but they could also be the spots of light in the eyes of the beholder gazing too intently at the flames. They remind one of the Buddhist phrase “sky flowers” (*kong hua*), which refers to illusory flowers seen in the sky as the result of an optical disorder and signifying the empty nature of the physical world.

The *fu* itself reads like a narrative poem, with alternating seven-, four-, six-, and five-syllable lines. The story is minimal and familiar: it is a chilly autumn night; a party that goes on too long finally comes to an end; man and woman retire to the bedchamber, sharing an intimate moment alone:

Behind mica windows is a space suitable for flowery rugs;
 within ailanhus curtains, a sumptuous banquet is set up.⁸⁴
 But let's not fetch those night-illuminating pearls,
 and there is no need for lighting the golden-ram lamp.
 At the third night watch, still no trace of the crescent moon;
 only a multitude of stars embracing the midnight sky.
 Thereupon, swaying bright candles sharing the same
 heart-wick,

⁸⁴ Ailanhus curtains are curtains embroidered with ailanhus, a plant that is supposed to ward off evil. The sixth century agricultural treatise *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術 by Jia Sixie 賈思勰 (fl. the first half of the sixth century) claims that “if one hangs the seeds of ailanhus in one's house, then ghosts do not dare to enter.” Miao Qiyu 繆啓愉, ed. and annotated, *Qimin yaoshu jiaoshi* 齊民要術校釋 (Beijing: Nongye chubanshe, 1982), p. 227.

we put out dishes inlaid with gold.
 Slumbering dragons coil on the side,
 paired phoenixes, reversed, at peace.
 Turning around the *bixie* candlestick, so it faces the right way,⁸⁵
 pushing open the window screen but worried the crack might
 be too wide.
 Emerald torches harboring kingfisher blue,
 vermilion wax contains scarlet;
 Leopard fat is suitable for flames,
 and ox fat good for enduring the cold.
 Bronze *zhi*-plants intertwine in a tight embrace and wrap
 around it,
 golden lotus roots tangle, yielding lotus flowers.
 Looking at the splendor of the oblique plumes of flame,
 we see the hesitation of beeswax tears.
 After a while one feels the rush of flowing beads,
 crimson flowers, stared at closely, multiply.
 Night grows deep—color is bright;
 flame flickers—a breeze has just passed.
 Only as the night draws on does one need to bother with tongs;
 weather being cold, have no fear of moths.
 When calamus wine is served, the banquet is coming
 to an end;⁸⁶
 after Green Jade finishes dancing, she feels the thinness of
 her gauze dress.⁸⁷
 A shadow crosses over, hovering over the long pillow;
 wisps of smoke arise, drifting toward the fruit plate.
 Turning, it sheds light behind the golden screen:
 a mutual gaze, with unspoken feelings.

雲母窗中合花氈，茱萸幔裏鋪錦筵。
 照夜明珠且莫取，金羊燈火不須然。

⁸⁵ *Bixie* is a mythical beast.

⁸⁶ Calamus was customarily immersed in wine and taken on the fifth day of the fifth month; see Zong Lin 宗櫟 (ca. 500–563), *Jing Chu suishi ji* 荆楚歲時記, reprinted in *Jing Chu suishi ji jiaozhu* 荆楚歲時記校注, ed. and annotated by Wang Yurong 王毓榮 (Taipei: Wenjin hubanshe, 1988), p. 158.

⁸⁷ “Green Jade” is supposed to have been the name of a singing girl in the Liu Song period. Her name became a *yuefu* song title.

下弦三更未有月，中夜繁星徒依天。
 於是搖同心之明燭，施雕金之麗盤。
 眠龍傍繞，倒鳳雙安。
 轉辟邪而取正，推欂窗而畏寬。
 綠炬懷翠，朱蠟含丹。豹脂宜火，牛膝耐寒。
 銅芝抱帶復纏柯，金藕相縈共吐荷。視橫芒之昭曜，見蜜淚之蹉跎。
 漸覺流珠走，熟視絳花多。宵深色麗，焰動風過。
 夜久惟煩缺，天寒不畏蛾。
 菖蒲傳酒座欲闌，碧玉舞罷羅衣單。
 影度臨長枕，煙生向果盤。迴照金屏裏，脈脈兩相看。

The *fu* once again abruptly stops at the point when the man and woman gaze at each other, and the tension in the holding back is deeply felt. What comes next will remain unspoken, which is only appropriate—it is irrelevant to the subject of our *fu*, for the candle is about to be extinguished.

The French painter George la Tour (1593–1652) was famous for painting candlelit images. In one of his most famous paintings, “Magdalene with Two Flames,” Magdalene sits half turning away from the viewer, one hand holding a skull. On the table there is a burning candle; in front of the candle, a mirror. The flame is reflected in the mirror; hence the title of the painting.

Magdalene, the reformed prostitute, is contemplating the vanity of the secular world and preparing herself for a religious life. The painter’s choice of a mirrored candle curiously corresponds to the Liang court poets’ fascination with candlelight reflected in water, perhaps because, as John Berger says, “when there is more than one figure, it is hard to be sure whether each is real or only the dream projection of the other. Every lit form proposes the possibility that it is no more than an apparition.”⁸⁸ “Reflected image” is, in fact, one of the ten Mahayāna metaphors of the essential emptiness of the phenomenal world: both Emperor Wu and Xiao Gang had composed poems on these metaphors.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 116.

⁸⁹ The ten metaphors are: conjured image (as in magic), flame, moon in water, empty air, echo, city of mirage, dream, shadow, mirrored image, and assumed forms (such as by a god). Of Xiao Yan’s “Shiyu shi” 十喻詩, five are still extant in *Quan Liang shi*, 1.1532–33. Six of Xiao Gang’s “Shikong shi” 十空詩 are extant in *Quan Liang shi*, 21.1937–938. Similar

As it is, reflected candlelight perfectly symbolizes the illusory nature of physical reality. Water, however, proves a much more unreliable mirror: it flows, undulates, quivers under the slightest wind, and causes distortions of reflected images. Candlelight shines on water but can never penetrate it. It remains a glittering surface, sparkling with burnished ripples.

The following example is a poem by Xiao Yi, “Yong chizhong zhuying” 詠池中燭影 (“On the Reflection of Candlelight in the Pond”):⁹⁰

Let the cinders go out in the fish-form lamp,
and the blaze of the crane lamp pause its radiance—
there is, all by itself, the candle-holding dragon⁹¹
whose blue flame enters the vermilion gate.
Reflecting upon water, it seems like the Three Shinings,⁹²
churned in the waves, it resembles the Nine Branch
Candelabra.

Entering the grove like the shadowy will-o'-the-wisp;
or crossing the islet, like fireflies.
The Milky Way hangs low, fan-moon descends;
fog rises, pearl stars scant.
At the Zhanghua Terrace, when the banquet ends,⁹³
flying canopies pursue one another.

魚燈且滅燼，鶴焰暫停輝。自有銜龍燭，青火入朱扉。
映水疑三燭，翻池類九微。入林如燐影，度渚若螢飛。
河低扇月落，霧上珠星稀。章華終宴所，飛蓋且相追。

metaphors with some variations also appear in the *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (*Vimalakīrti Sutra*), one of the best beloved Buddhist texts in the Six Dynasties, which by the Liang dynasty had been translated into Chinese at least six or seven times. Xie Lingyun wrote a group of odes or encomiums on these metaphors. Although treated as prose pieces by Yan Kejun, these odes are verses in rhymed five-syllable lines. Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, 33.2617.

⁹⁰ *Quan Liang shi*, 25.2047.

⁹¹ This line hints at the mythical “Candle Dragon,” but dragon and phoenix also are the most common pattern decorating the candlestick.

⁹² It is said that Emperor Wu of Han had seen a divine light (“shining three times during one night”) appearing on the altar after he made sacrifice to the Earth God. *Han shu*, 6.195.

⁹³ Zhanghua Terrace was built by King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 (r. 540–529 B.C.). In a *fu* on the Zhanghua Terrace, Bian Rang 邊讓 (fl. late second or early third century) described a great night banquet but ended with the king’s “returning to his senses” in the morning and a praise of his sober rule of the country. *Quan hou Han wen*, 84.929–30. In actuality, King Ling of Chu met with a tragic end.

The poem begins with a rhetoric device not unlike a *priamel* (i.e., listing three nice things but then mentioning the fourth as the best). Then it offers a series of similes: the divine light on the Earth God altar, an object of artifice (the nine branch candelabra), and things of nature (will-o'-the-wisp and fireflies). It also presents the movement of the party: entering the gate, lingering beside the pond, going into the grove, and then again crossing the islet. The couplet formed by lines 9 and 10 both marks the passage of time (the moon is descending, a late-night or early-morning fog is rising) and implies the increasing illusion of human perception (caused by the late hour and by the merry-making and drinking). The reflections in the waters seem to have transformed the pond into the Milky Way—the speaker marvels at how low it is!—and so the human realm is turned into the heavenly sphere: as the singers and dancers grow tired, the round fan, resembling the moon, is being laid down. The rise of the fog further confuses the senses: pearls worn by the palace ladies cannot be distinguished from the stars—both have become “scant.” As the poet stops using such words as “suspect,” “resemble,” or “like,” the rationality of the previous four lines deteriorates and the boundary between metaphor and reality becomes blurred.

Liu Xiaowei's quatrain in seven-syllable lines was written on the third day of the third month, a festival day celebrating the arrival of spring. The custom was to gather together by a winding stream (often man-made) and float wine cups on it; whenever the cup paused in front of someone, the person had to finish the wine, fill it with new wine, and let it drift on.

On the Reflection of Candlelight in the Winding Stream
at the Jiale Palace at a Drinking Party
on the Third Day of the Third Month⁹⁴

The fire-washed flower-heart has not yet grown long,⁹⁵
but fragrance already flows from the honeyed flames of
golden branches.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Quan Liang shi*, 18.1884.

⁹⁵ “Fire-washed” alludes to asbestos, “cloth washable in fire” or “fire-proof cloth” *huo huan bu* 火浣布. There is a record of asbestos being used as lamp wicks in Wang Jia's 王嘉 (ca. fourth century) *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 225. The “flower-heart” refers to the candlewick. If it is made of asbestos, it will not burn down but seem to get longer as the candle burns.

⁹⁶ Here *mi* 密 is a loan character for *mi* 蜜. The golden branches refer to a candelabra.

The lotus pond saturates the abiding reflection,⁹⁷
the peach-blossom waters lead the flowing light on and on.

襖飲嘉樂殿詠曲水中燭影詩

火浣花心猶未長，金枝密焰已流芳。芙蓉池畔涵停影，桃花水脈引行光。

The last couplet of the poem seems to balance the appearance of light in still water and in flowing water. In the tranquil “lotus pond” the reflection may be still; but the “peach blossom waters,” a term referring to spring floods (which arrive when the peach trees are blossoming), are more appropriate for a winding stream. As the water flows on, the candlelight it reflects seems to be flowing too, and the crimson shimmering of the water inevitably reminds one of Tao Qian’s 陶潛 (365?-427) “Peach Blossom Spring,” a stream that is covered with peach blossoms and leads the inquisitive fisherman to a marvelous utopian realm.

Another poem on the same topic and also in seven-syllable lines was composed by Yu Jianwu 庾肩吾 (ca. 487-551), a major court poet in Xiao Gang’s circle. Whether the two poems were written on the same occasion is unknown, but they are both concerned with illusion and inconstancy:

On the Reflection of Candlelight in the Winding Stream
at the Imperial Banquet on the Third Day of the Third Month⁹⁸

Manifold flames yield flowers like a fragrant tree,
wind blows, water stirs—both are hard to stay still.
Spring boughs caress the riverbank, brushing over the
reflections;
A returning wine cup flows around a guest, passing
through light.

三日侍宴詠曲水中燭影詩

重燄垂花比芳樹，風吹水動俱難住。春枝拂岸影上來，還杯繞客光中度。

The burning candle is compared to a flowering tree in spring, its

⁹⁷ Both Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226) and Cao Zhi wrote poems to the title “Furong chi” 芙蓉池. *Quan Wei shi*, 4.400, 7.462.

⁹⁸ *Quan Liang shi*, 23.2004.

glory most fleeting. The candle is blown by the wind, and its reflection disrupted by the ripples. The “golden boughs” of the chandelier in Liu Xiaowei’s poem are replaced by “spring boughs,” perhaps those of willows brushing the water in the wind and disrupting the reflection; but the branches may also be a reference to the stems of the candelabra, in which case it would be their shadow on the ground that caresses the bank. The wine cup floating on the stream, itself a sparkling speck, is moving through the currents of light. The poem itself is like a segment cut off from the stream of time: it does not stand still but is a fluid moment.

Xiao Gang’s poem on sending a palace lady back to her boat at night adds a peculiar touch to the “candlelight in water” motif:

Sending A Palace Lady Back by Night to the Rear Boat⁹⁹

Rows of brocade curtains shelter her barge,
magnolia oars float, brushing the waves.
Her departing candle still patterns the waves;
her lingering scent still fills my boat.

夜遣內人還後舟

錦幔扶船列，蘭橈拂浪浮。去燭猶文水，餘香尚滿舟。

The palace lady is departing in a barge well protected by the brocade curtains from the prying eye. Her absence is nonetheless very much present, filling up the entire space: her perfume permeates his boat, and her candle creates a shimmering pattern on the rippling water. Both effects—one of sight and the other of smell—are transitory (with the feeling of evanescence highlighted by the adverbs *you* and *shang*, “still”), but these fleeting signs of her absence insist on reminding us of her. The poem is an eloquent articulation of the unity of sensuous appearances (*se*) and emptiness (*kong*).

CODA: THE CHESSBOARD IN CANDLELIGHT

Liu Xiaochuo’s poem on candlelight, though hastily written to command on a social occasion, is nevertheless a good example of

⁹⁹ Ibid., 22.1969. The translation is Stephen Owen’s. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 327.

competent public performance, and in this sense it is representative of the average Southern Dynasties social verse. The poem, however, has a subject rich with associations and echoes, and it thus acquires a weight disproportionate to its origin when placed in its historical context. It is for this reason that I wish to end the paper with this poem:

A Poem Composed as Demanded on the Candle Shining Forth
on a Chessboard (Finished When the Candle
Was Burned Down by Half an Inch)¹⁰⁰

The string and woodwind instruments have stopped
at Nanpi;¹⁰¹
the host urges the guests to stay so as to finish the chess game.
As the sun goes down, the room darkens,
the beautiful lady is asked to bring in the sparkling candle.
Oblique light illuminates the entire chessboard;
the flame twirls, her body half in shadow.
She does not mind her slender hands growing tired—
only regretting that night will be getting toward morning.

賦得照棋燭詩刻五分成

南皮弦吹罷，終奕且留賓。日下房櫺闌，華燭命佳人。
側光全照局，回花半隱身。不辭纖手倦，羞令夜鄉晨。

The fine moment of this poem comes in the third couplet: the chessboard, which is the center of attention, is illuminated—the only space of light in the surrounding dark; the woman holding the candle watches on, and she is obviously standing, so only parts of her body are illuminated by the candlelight, but her face remains in the shadow. The intensity of the game is thus brought forth in the play of shadow and light. The woman is so fascinated by the game that she worries that it will soon be dawn and, candle rendered unnecessary, she will be dismissed.

How would Liu Xiaochuo's immediate circle react to this poem?

¹⁰⁰ *Quan Liang shi*, 16.1840.

¹⁰¹ Nanpi is the place where Cao Pi, when he was a young man, had parties with his literary friends. See his "Yu Wu Zhi shu" 與吳質書. Yan Kejun, ed., *Quan Sanguo wen* 全三國文, 7.1089.

We imagine that they would, first of all, applaud the speed with which the poem was composed. The part of the title recording the exact composition time indicates the pride the poet felt: the poem was, after all, an opportunity to show off his quick wit. It served the same purpose as coming up with swift, clever repartee, such as those admiringly recorded in the fifth-century compilation of anecdotes *Shishuo xinyu*.

The poet's contemporaries might also hear in Liu Xiaochuo's poem the echo of a southern *yuefu* song, and readers familiar with the literature of the period would likewise share such an association:

Today I parted with my sweetheart,
when will we ever meet again?
The bright lamp shines upon an empty chessboard—
it shall be faraway, for there is no date yet!¹⁰²

今日已歡別，合會在何時？明燈照空局，悠然未有期。

Both the “bright lamp” and the “empty chessboard” are key images not only because they create a scene of loneliness and absence, but also because they are pivotal to the word play: *you ran* (faraway) puns on “oil burns” (*you ran* 油燃); *qi* 期 (appointment, date) on *qi* 棋 (chess pieces)—thus “no chess piece on the board” would become “no date.” When it is empty, the chessboard, originally a space of battle for domination, is inscribed with an erotic meaning.

The last line of Liu Xiaochuo's poem would likely have occasioned another recognition by educated readers both of his own time and of a later age: “night getting towards morning” (*ye xiang chen* 夜鄉晨) is a phrase appearing in one of the *Shijing* poems, “Ting liao” 庭燎 (“Torch in the Courtyard”). As traditionally interpreted, this poem is supposed to be about a king who throughout the night constantly asked his attendant the time because he was anxious about being late for the morning court. Here is the last stanza of the *Shijing* poem:

How goes the night?
It is getting towards morning.

¹⁰² “Ziye ge,” No. 9. *Quan Jin shi*, 19.1040. “Duqu ge” 讀曲歌, #62 is almost verbatim except for the first two characters of the opening line. *Quan Song shi*, 11.1344.

The torch is smoking in the courtyard.
 My princely men are arriving;—
 I see their banners.¹⁰³

夜如何其？夜鄉晨。庭燎有輝，君子至止，言觀其旂。

The political reading of this poem is evidenced by the surviving fragment of a verse of the same title by Fu Xuan of the Western Jin. Fu Xuan's poem describes a grand morning court scene on New Year's Day, with lamps and torches all lit up and emissaries from various countries paying respects to the emperor.¹⁰⁴ It is certainly tempting to detect in Liu Xiaochuo's poem a "remonstrance" in the tradition of the *fu*, which was expected to counter the depiction of pleasure by concluding with a moral lesson. And yet one would be reading too much into this lighthearted social verse if one were to deduce that Liu Xiaochuo intended to warn the prince who had commanded the poem or his fellow-officials against wasting time on trivial games. Besides, the phrase *ye xiang chen* might have been simply assimilated into contemporary literary vocabulary without the author or the reader ever becoming conscious of its locus classicus.

In what light, then, may we now read Liu Xiaochuo's poem? In many ways, our reading is as much embedded in history as was the reading of Liu Xiaochuo's contemporaries. If hindsight offers us any advantage, then it has to be a retrospective viewpoint which Liu Xiaochuo's immediate circle of audience would not possibly have possessed: in other words, we recognize this poem as a survivor. It survived historical events of a magnitude that was yet unimaginable to its author: the destruction of the capital Jiankang in siege, famine, plague, and slaughter; the Hou Jing Rebellion that split the country not into half but into many fragments and eventually led to the dynasty's downfall; the burning to ashes of tens of thousands of books in the imperial library, twice, in Jiankang and then in Jiangling. When, to the admiration of his imperial patrons, his brothers, and his friends, Liu Xiaochuo dashed off the poem on

¹⁰³ *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義. In Ruan Yuan 阮元, comp., *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (rpt., Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), p. 665. The translation is James Legge's. *The Chinese Classics* (Taipei: Jinxue shuju, 1969), 4:295.

¹⁰⁴ *Quan Jin shi*, 1.571.

a candle lighting up the chessboard, he certainly did not anticipate how the match would end.

Of various forms of leisure activities, chess (sometimes translated as encirclement chess, or *go*) is perhaps most closely associated with martial accomplishments: moves in a chess game are paralleled with military maneuvers; defeat and victory seen as mirroring what happens on a real battlefield. As Zu-yan Chen says, chess is “intrinsically an antagonistic or warlike game, governed primarily by skills developed in handling strategic operations and tactical encounters.”¹⁰⁵ Testimony to this is found in a number of *fu* on chess (*Weiqi fu* 圍碁賦)—by Liu Xiang, Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166), Cai Hong 蔡洪 (fl. third century), Cao Shu 曹攄 (?–308), and Emperor Wu of Liang himself, a great chess aficionado.¹⁰⁶ The political history of the Six Dynasties, apart from its internal power struggles, had been a series of constant battles and diplomatic dealings with the Northern military threat: the shadow of Northern power, sometimes weakened, sometimes intensified, was nonetheless always present.

In the view of later generations, chess-playing was deeply ingrained in the image of the Six Dynasties, partially because of the political instability and military strife that characterized much of the Six Dynasties, partially because of the defining role played by chess in a historical battle that had decided the fate of the Southland. Xie An, the great minister of the Eastern Jin, was a chess lover. In the year 383, the Northern ruler Fu Jian 苻堅 stationed his army of reportedly a million soldiers on the Eastern Jin border, aiming to destroy the Jin and unify China. Against this background, Xie An played a game of chess with his nephew Xie Xuan 謝玄, who was then in charge of the defense army of no more than eighty thousand soldiers. They made a bet on Xie Xuan’s villa. Xie Xuan had always been a much better chess player than his uncle, but on that day, nervous like everybody else in the capital city, he had difficulty concentrating and lost both the game and his villa to an unruffled

¹⁰⁵ Zu-yan Chen, “The Art of Black and White: Wei-ch’i in Chinese Poetry,” *JAOS* 117.4 (Oct.-Dec., 1997): 643–53.

¹⁰⁶ *Quan Han wen*, 35.321, 18.566. *Quan Jin wen*, 81.1928, 107.2074–75. *Quan Liang wen*, 1.2951. Emperor Wu of Liang authored *Qi fa* 棋法 as well as *Weiqi pin* 圍碁品, neither of which is extant. The emperor’s chess skill had reportedly obtained “the superior level.” *Liang Shu*, 3.96.

Xie An. Turning to his maternal nephew Yang Tan 羊曇, Xie An said: “The villa now is all yours.” He then went to the villa and held a big party. Only after midnight did he return home to deal with all the military matters awaiting his decisions. When the news of a grand victory later reached Xie An, he was again playing chess with a guest. He read the letter, indifferently put it aside, and resumed the game. Pressed by the anxious guest, he answered coolly: “Oh, the kids have smashed the intruders.”¹⁰⁷

Of all the stories about the panache (*fengliu* 風流) of the Six Dynasties, this probably represents a crowning moment. Xie An’s cultivated coolness in the face of a powerful enemy is a favorite subject of later poetry. The best known is perhaps the late Tang poet Wen Tingyuan’s 溫庭筠 “Song of Lord Xie’s Villa” 謝公墅歌, which captures that famous moment in an elegantly drawn sketch of the chess-playing scene. The second part of the poem reads as follows:

None of the guests made the least noise, beech and bamboo
were hushed,
Lords of golden cicadas and scepters of jade, all rested their
chins on hands.
He faces the board, he knits his brows, he sees a
thousand miles,
and the capital has already seized the long serpent’s tail.
The Southland’s royal aura twines through his open lapels—
and he never let Fu Jian cross the river Huai.¹⁰⁸

四座無喧梧竹靜，金蟬玉柄俱持頤。
對局含嚙見千里，都城已得長蛇尾。
江南王氣繫疎襟，未許符堅過淮水。

Two important things, immediately relevant to our view of Liu Xiaochuo’s poem, stand out in the Xie An story. The first thing is the bet, which resulted in the changed ownership of the villa. Wen Tingyun grasped its significance, for it is cleverly reflected in the

¹⁰⁷ *Shishuo xinyu*, 6.373. Also see *Jin shu*, 79.2075.

¹⁰⁸ *Wen Feiqing shiji jianzhu* 溫飛卿詩集箋注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), pp. 33–34. The translation is Stephen Owen’s. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 332. Paul Rouzer gives an excellent analysis of the poem in *Writing Another’s Dream: The Poetry of Wen Tingyun* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 130–31.

title of his poem—"Lord Xie's Villa"—and the second line of the poem which states: "The *young Master Xie's eastern villa*" ("Xie lang dong shu" 謝郎東墅). The transition from one to the other is significant because, had Xie An not won the chess game, the panache with which he played the chess game would never have been recognized as such. Similarly, in the much larger "chess game," where the bet was the fate of the Eastern Jin empire, it was again the final victory of the battle that had served as the defining context for Xie An's flair. Without the victory, Xie An would have been seen as a fool.

How on earth did Xie An win? After all, he had far less skill in chess than his nephew, and the Eastern Jin army was not even one tenth of the size of its enemy's forces. This leads us to the second important point of this story: Xie An won because he was able to concentrate, while his opponent could not.

Again, Wen Tingyun grasped this point. In his portrayal of Xie An, both the knitted eyebrows and the opened lapels indicate Xie An's deep absorption in the chessboard in front of him. Not even Fu Jian's powerful army could distract him.

The royal aura of the Southland, however, could not be sustained. For nearly half a century, the peaceful and prosperous reign of Emperor Wu of Liang had lulled the kingdom into a sense of security, but it all came to an end during the Hou Jing Rebellion. Looking back now, we see Liu Xiaochuo's poem on a chess game in candlelight a little differently than his contemporaries might have perceived it. It, of course, can never compare with the chess game played with aplomb by Xie An during the Battle of the Fei River: it was just an inconsequential chess game at one of those evening parties in a prince's salon or perhaps even in the imperial court. Whereas Xie An's chess-playing had a triumphant context, Liu Xiaochuo's poem has for its backdrop a dynasty's downfall. Therefore, it was doomed never to obtain the kind of panache characterizing Xie An and his version of the Six Dynasties; instead it has acquired a lightness, a frivolity even, in the eyes of the later-born.

To play a chess game and win requires concentration. For the Liang court poets, the concentration of the myriad thought-instants had materialized into exquisitely crafted poems, each of which represented a moment of absorption in the sensuous appearances

and the ultimate emptiness of things. Is it really true, then, as an austere Tang historian or a Northern Song neo-Confucian philosopher would conclude, that the failure of the empire was all the consequence of a misdirected attention? This, I think, is a myth, created by moralists looking for “a lesson” in every historical event, particularly in the collapse of a state. The purpose is for the new dynasty they are serving to avoid the pitfalls and thus to last forever. Without a doubt, one can always find what one looks for, but the degree of earnestness with which one searches may compromise the finding.

Xie An’s lightness was made possible by the weight of a grand military victory;¹⁰⁹ in contrast, exactly because of the weight of history attached to it, Liu Xiaochuo’s poem remains light—both in the sense of being weightless and inconsequential, and in the sense of being luminous. Around its faint light, however, the room is darkened.

After all, literature represents a series of attempts on the part of humankind to resist what Italo Calvino has described as “the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world.”¹¹⁰ The lightness of Liu Xiaochuo’s poem, and all the little poems discussed in this chapter about lamps and candles written by the Liang court poets, to borrow the phrase of the thirteenth-century Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti, belongs to the lightness of “snow falling without wind.”¹¹¹ It is not the scattered, chaotic, directionless kind of lightness but a focused lightness, which is achieved by way of a penetrating gaze and a belief in the emptiness of all things as taught by the Buddhists. Because of the court poets’ intensely attentive way of seeing things, hitherto concealed patterns are unconcealed, and the world is illuminated.

¹⁰⁹ The veracity of the accounts of the battle has, however, been questioned by some modern historians. Michael Rogers, “The Myth of the Battle of the Fei River [A.D. 383],” *TP* 54.1/3 (1968): 50–72. But Charles Holcombe defends the view that an invasion took place. *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1994), p. 154. Perhaps the scale of the victory has been exaggerated.

¹¹⁰ *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 4.

¹¹¹ Cited from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, p. 14.