

Woman in the Tower: “Nineteen Old Poems” and the Poetics of Un/concealment

XIAOFEI TIAN

Harvard University, USA

This paper examines a group of anonymous poems thought to date from the second century AD. Ostensibly straightforward and transparent, the poems tantalize the reader with a protean quality, for it is often difficult to determine who is speaking what to whom. This impression is confirmed by the diverse and often conflicting interpretations made by late imperial Chinese commentators. How do the poems do this? What are the possible consequences for the later development of classical Chinese poetry? These are the questions I address in this paper, with particular attention to the poems’ ambiguous personae and incomplete narratives.

KEYWORDS Nineteen Old Poems, suppression, performativity, lyricism (*shuqing*), narration (*xushi*)

In this paper I propose to examine a group of anonymous poems, commonly dated to the second century and known as “Nineteen Old Poems” (Gushi shijiushou 古詩十九首) because of their grouping as such in the sixth century anthology *Wen xuan*.¹ Although *The Classic of Poetry* and the *Songs of Chu* are regarded as the fountain-head of Chinese literature, the “Nineteen Old Poems” are often considered to constitute the true origin of classical Chinese poetry.² Apparently straightforward and transparent, these poems tantalize the reader with a protean quality, as it is often difficult to determine who is speaking what to whom. This impression is confirmed by late

¹ Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), comp., *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), 1343–50.

² Such a view, whether justified or not, is widely held by scholars and critics from past to present. Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590), for instance, calls these poems “the forebears of poetry in five-syllable lines” (*wuyan zhi zu* 千古五言之祖). *Yiyuan zhiyan* 藝苑卮言, in Ding Fubao 丁福保, ed., *Lidai shihua xubian* 歷代詩話續編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 978. The modern scholar Lü Zhenghui 呂正惠 refers to the poems as “the true source” (*zhenzheng yuantou* 真正源頭) of Chinese lyric poetry. *Shuqing chuantong yu shehui xianshi* 抒情傳統與政治現實 (Taipei: Da’an chubanshe, 1989), 21.

imperial Chinese critics' diverse and often conflicting interpretations of these deceptively simple poems. Many signs seem to point to a narrative fullness lurking just underneath the linguistic surface; and yet, just as we think we have deciphered the covert messages, other, sometimes exactly opposite, hermeneutic possibilities emerge. In the end, it turns out that the gesture of ellipsis in "Nineteen Old Poems" points to nothing but the principle of hiddenness itself. How do the poems do this, and why? What are the possible consequences for the later development of classical Chinese poetry? These are the questions I attempt to deal with in this paper by examining both the poems themselves and their critical reception in the pre-modern Chinese tradition.

The darkness of the "Nineteen Old Poems"

As stated above, that this group of poems occupies a uniquely important place in the development of Chinese poetry can be clearly seen in the remarks of many pre-modern critics and modern scholars. In a phrase that summarizes the case, Lu Shiyong 陸時雍 (fl. seventeenth century) makes the intriguing claim that these poems "may be called the remnant of the 'Airs' as well as the mother of all poetry" (謂之風餘, 謂之詩母 *wei zhi Feng yu, wei zhi shi mu*).³

No other definition seems to capture the nature and status of "Nineteen Old Poems" more precisely than this double-metaphor. As the "remnant" of the venerable "Airs," "Nineteen Old Poems" seem to be compared to the offspring of *The Classic of Poetry* (which certainly befits the temporal scheme, as *The Classic of Poetry* precedes the Nineteen Poems by many centuries); but then, in an incestuous rhetorical move, the Nineteen Poems as "mother of all poetry" are elevated to the position of the spouse of the "Airs," which now must be identified as the unspoken "father of all poetry." The elevation of "Nineteen Old Poems" is undercut by the remark on its being a "remnant" – something extra, superfluous, a leftover; and yet, the simultaneous praise and disparagement are nothing but an accurate reflection of the status of the feminine in a patriarchal culture. What deserves note is that the femininity of the Nineteen Poems is configured as that of Mother: indeed, nothing could bespeak the profoundly authoritative – hence threatening – and profoundly marginalized – hence reassuring – position of this group of poems better than the Mother figure.

Ironically, the origin of "Nineteen Old Poems" itself is a murky one. All we know for certain about these poems is that they were singled out from a larger corpus of anonymous poems in five-syllable lines circulating in the early sixth century, and included in the influential *Wen xuan* compiled by Crown Prince Xiao Tong under the collective title "Nineteen Old Poems." There are debates about the dating of

³ From *Gu shi jing* 古詩鏡, cited by Sui Shusen 隋樹森, ed., *Gushi shijiushou jishi* 古詩十九首集釋 [hereafter *GSJ*], in *Gushi jishi deng sizhong* 古詩集釋等四種 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1969), 4.5. "Airs" refers to the first section of *The Classic of Poetry*, "Airs of the Domains" 國風.

individual poems, but they are usually dated to the Eastern Han (although this does not mean the poems were actually written down as fixed texts in the Eastern Han); and it is most likely that they were not composed by a single author.

For a literary tradition that prizes “knowing what kind of persons the authors were and considering the age in which they lived” (知人論世 *zhiren lunshi*) and spends significant efforts digging out biographical information about an author, it is a surprise that critics and scholars throughout the history of reception have been largely content to let the poems remain anonymous.⁴ In fact, “Nineteen Old Poems” are the only anonymous poems after *The Classic of Poetry* to be granted such a prominent status in the traditional literary discourse. *The Classic of Poetry* has at least a putative editor/author, namely Confucius himself; and as a matter of fact, even *The Classic of Poetry* had acquired contextualizing prefaces to individual poems as early as in the Han, which would provide a hermeneutic footing for later readers to either agree with or reject. In contrast, “Nineteen Old Poems” are not only more or less left alone, but their very anonymity is turned into a positive value by pre-modern Chinese critics. Why is this? Stephen Owen argues that anonymity could become positive only in a story of origin; that is, anonymity is seen as a sign of “oldness” (i.e. predating a work by a known author), which helps make “Nineteen Old Poems” a foundational text in Chinese literary history.⁵ This is certainly true. In this paper, however, I want to discuss the other aspect of this issue; that is, how anonymity functions as a decisive factor in the perceived generality of these poems. This perceived generality is as important in appreciating “Nineteen Old Poems” as in understanding traditional Chinese poetics and the uses of poetry in imperial China.

Anonymity is only one of the dark qualities of “Nineteen Old Poems” (“dark” here being used in the sense of “mysterious”). Closely associated with anonymity is another level of darkness enshrouding these lyrics: namely, their resistance to definitive meaning. This may come as another surprise, since “Nineteen Old Poems” are well known for their linguistic simplicity and lucidity. Liu Xie, the early medieval critic who lived about three centuries after the poems were composed, described them as “direct” (*zhi* 直).⁶ More than a millennium later, Xie Zhen 謝榛 (1495–1575) pointed out that the poems “do not prize difficult diction” (不尚難字 *bu shang nanzi*) and sound as though “a scholar is chatting informally with a friend” (秀才對朋友說家常話

⁴ “Zhiren lunshi” is a set phrase and a reformulation of Mencius’ remarks. See *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏 10b.188, in *Sbisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, comp. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955). Although several names, most notably that of Mei Sheng 枚乘 (d. 140 BC?), were attached to some of the “Nineteen Old Poems” as early as the fifth and sixth century, such attributions are not treated seriously by scholars, nor have they inspired any frenzy in the conducting of “evidentiary scholarship.” The attribution to Mei Sheng occurs in the pre-Tang poetic anthology *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠, compiled by Xu Ling 徐陵. See *Yutai xinyong jianzhu* 玉臺新詠箋注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 17–21. Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 460s–520s) also mentions this as a contemporary “theory” in *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍. See Zhan Ying 詹鏞, annota., *Wenxin diaolong yizheng* 文心雕龍義證 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1989), 189.

⁵ Stephen Owen, *The Making of Early Classical Chinese Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center Press, 2006), 40–41.

⁶ *Wenxin diaolong yizheng*, 193.

xiucaidui pengyou shuo jiachanghua).⁷ Two metaphors, both stressing the transparency of “Nineteen Old Poems,” are particularly worth mentioning. In the first case, the Tang monk Jiaoran 皎然 (fl. eighth century) stated that “[the poems’] meaning is bright” (義炳 *yi bing*).⁸ In the second case, Chen Yizeng 陳繹曾 (fl. fourteenth century) said of the poems: “As they achieve the greatest transparency of meaning, they manage to express the poet’s utmost feelings” (澄至清，發至情 *cheng zhi qing, fa zhi qing*).⁹ “Cheng zhi qing” 澄至清 literally refers to the purification of water, and the play on the words “zhi qing,” meaning “supreme clarity” (至清) but also “utmost feelings” (至情), is obvious.

Bright fire and limpid water, two figures of the transparency of “Nineteen Old Poems,” ostensibly dispel any hermeneutic opacity. And yet, these comments on the verbal clarity of “Nineteen Old Poems” form a curious contrast with pre-modern and modern critics’ extremely diverse and often conflicting interpretations of individual poems, stanzas, and lines. Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602) expressed the dual nature of the poems in a wonderfully paradoxical passage: “The more shallow their sense is, the more profound it becomes; the closer the words, the further away they are” (意愈淺愈深，詞愈近愈遠 *yi yu qian yu shen, ci yu jin yu yuan*).¹⁰ Indeed, though apparently straightforward and transparent, these poems, when read closely, leave us wondering who is speaking what to whom. Elliptical words and phrases seem to serve as indices of hidden stories; and yet, just as we think we have grasped the half-concealed narratives, other hermeneutic possibilities come up and confound the coherence of meaning.

Gift-giving, blockage, disconnectedness

Poem VI offers a good example of the ambiguity of these lyrics.

涉江采芙蓉	I cross the River to pluck lotus flowers,
蘭澤多芳草	in the orchid marsh there are many fragrant plants.
采之欲遺誰	To whom do I want to give the flowers?
所思在遠道	The one I long for is on a distant path.
還顧望舊鄉	Turning around and gazing at former home:
長路漫浩浩	the long road is vast and endless.
同心而離居	We are of the same heart, but live apart –
憂傷以終老	filled with sorrows, we thus end our days.

There is no doubt that the “Nineteen Old Poems” are “a poetry of dislocation,”¹¹ or in the words of the Qing critic Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673–1769): “The Nineteen Poems by and large voice the feelings of exiled subjects, abandoned wives, and

⁷ From *Siming shihua*, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 4.3.

⁸ From *Shi shi*, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 4.1.

⁹ From *Shi pu* 詩譜, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 4.2.

¹⁰ From *Shi sou* 詩薈, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 4.4.

¹¹ Stephen Owen, ed. and trans., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 250.

separated friends; feelings about parting in life and parting by death, or about old and new relationships.”¹² The theme of disconnectedness nevertheless finds expression in attempts to establish connection across spatial and temporal distance. These attempts at communication and exchange include gift-giving and letter-writing; they sometimes prevail, but more often than not fail. When they fail, there is discontinuity, and as in the poem cited above, discontinuity as a poetic theme is strangely mirrored in the blockage of meaning, for while everyone agrees that this is a poem about longing, there are widely divergent explications of what exactly the poem says and even who is speaking.

Classical Chinese poetry rarely uses pronouns, and there is no distinction between plural and singular forms. My translation above supplies the first-person pronoun “I” out of necessity, but it does not help us to decide who is this “I.” Is the speaker a woman, or a man? While the act of “plucking lotus flowers” is often associated with women in the later tradition, it has no specific gendered connotation in the early period. Indeed, since the poem is full of echoes of the *Chuci* 楚辭 (“Crossing the River” 涉江 being the very title of one of the *Chuci* poems), the speaker of “Li sao” 離騷 who decorates himself with fragrant plants easily comes to mind. If the speaker in the “Old Poem” is a man, is the man traveling away from his home, or is he the one left behind by a dear friend?

The Yuan commentator Liu Lü 劉履 (1317–1379) believes that it is the former: “A traveler lives afar, missing his kith and kin but unable to see them. Though he wants to pluck flowers to send to them, the road home is too long for him to do that, so he can only grow old in sadness.”¹³ Zhu Yun 朱筠 (1729–1781) likewise states that “the one who travels wants to send flowers to the one who stays” (行者欲寄居者 *xingzhe yuji juzhe*).¹⁴ This reading is challenged by Jiang Renxiu 姜任修 (*jinsi* in 1721): “[The speaker] plucks the flower to send to the one far away, because the one who is ‘on the distant path’ is also gazing back toward hometown and sharing the same feelings with the speaker.”¹⁵ Zhang Yugu 張玉穀 (1721–1780) takes the same position: “This is a poem about longing. The first four lines [. . .] point out that one’s beloved is far away; the couplet beginning with ‘turning around’ is [her] speculation about his feelings, as she posits that he must also be gazing at his hometown and lamenting the long road home.”¹⁶ The debate continues well into the twentieth century. For instance, Ma Maoyuan 馬茂元 reads the poem as uttered by a male traveler,¹⁷ whereas Pan Xiaolong 潘嘯龍 identifies the speaker as a lotus-picking girl, a common image in later poetic tradition.¹⁸

¹² Shen Deqian, *Gushi yuan jianzhu* 古詩源箋注 (Taipei: Huazheng shuju, 1986), 117. See *GSJ* 4.7.

¹³ From *Xuanshi buzhu* 選詩補注, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.3.

¹⁴ *GSJ* 3.50.

¹⁵ From “Gushi shijiushou yi” 古詩十九首譯, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.40.

¹⁶ From *Gushi shangxi* 古詩賞析, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.60.

¹⁷ *Gushi shijiushou tansuo* 古詩十九首探索 (Hong Kong: Wenhan chubanshe, 1969), 85.

¹⁸ *Han Wei liuchao shi jianshang cidian* 漢魏六朝詩鑒賞辭典 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1992), 140–42. Pan’s reading is directly challenged in recent years by two authors who propose yet another new reading of the poem. See Wang Jian 王健 and Wang Zequn 王澤群, “Qian shei ‘Shejiang cai furong’” 倩誰涉江採芙蓉, *Xiandai yuwen* 現代語文 3 (2006): 30.

While the gender identity of the speaker is ambiguous, the exact relationship between the gift-giver and the potential recipient is yet another source of uncertainty. Some take the recipient as the speaker's "kith and kin"; some are more specific and identify the recipient as the spouse or a very close friend. Rao Xuebin 饒學斌 (d. 1841), in his attempt to read "Nineteen Old Poems" as an interconnected political narrative, assigns the role of a slandered minister to the speaker of the series, and takes the potential recipient in No. 6 as the speaker's "fellow sufferer," in other words, as a fellow member of his faction who has likewise been slandered and sent into exile in the South (while the speaker himself is supposedly exiled to the North).¹⁹ Wu Qi 吳淇 (fl. seventeenth century), on the other hand, believes the poem concerns the relationship between a slandered minister and his estranged ruler ("the one I long for").²⁰ Zhang Geng 張庚 (1685–1760) develops Wu Qi's idea but refines it, construing the speaker as a minister pining hopelessly after the ruler (the one "on a distant path") and finding it impossible to turn back and go home ("the long road is vast and endless").²¹

The greatest enigma eventually comes from within the poetic text itself, as the poem ends with the following couplet:

同心而離居	We are of the same heart, but live apart –
憂傷以終老	filled with sorrows, we thus end our days.

Wu Qi, a keen critic of poetry, calls our attention to the oddness of the first line: "Now that they are 'of the same heart,' why should they 'live apart?'" He concludes, in the vein of constructing a political allegory, that "there must be a small-minded person who has come in between them."²² The last line is, however, no less shocking than the preceding line, as we suddenly realize that this is no temporary parting but a separation that the speaker anticipates will last all their lives. The length of time matters. Even a ten-year or twenty-year severance would one day become a mere memory mixing pleasure with pain, and the hope of reunion, however remote and flimsy, would brighten the vast space of despair. A lifelong separation is something else, for it will never become the past, but is simultaneously one's present and future: a temporal vastness that matches beautifully, darkly, the spatial distance separating the speaker and the object of his/her desire.

We naturally ask, as Wu Qi does: What indeed causes two people "of the same heart" to live apart? Thanks to the wonderfully suggestive power of 而 *er* – and/but – which connects *tongxin* and *liju*, the couplet is phrased in such a way that this question is made inevitable, and there is an unmistakable hint that this separation is imposed on the two people by someone or something beyond their control. The externality of the reason, as opposed to a change of heart and betrayal, whispers loudly of a story, but the story is suppressed. We are shown the tip of an iceberg only to be prohibited from seeing the grand majesty submerged underneath the water.

¹⁹ From *Yuewu lou gushi shijiushou xiangjie* 月午樓古詩十九首詳解, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.82–83.

²⁰ From *Liuchao xuanshi dinglun* 六朝選詩定論, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.14–15.

²¹ From *Gushi shijiushou jie* 古詩十九首解, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.28–29.

²² From *Liuchao xuanshi dinglun* 六朝選詩定論, cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.15.

Herein lies the whole point of this lyric, for every reader may now claim the untold story as her or his own. In other words, we are given the outline of a story so that we may freely fill in our own experiences or imagination. The story, hinted at but remaining vague, is loosened from the framework of an individual life full of particularities and specifics: it thus becomes every man and woman's story. We are denied narrative opulence because this is the only way we can fully participate in this poetry.

Rampant plant metaphors, variants, articulation by suppression

The “Nineteen Old Poems” offer a special mode of story-telling: articulation by suppression. Suppression is deployed as a way of uttering rather than silencing, and there is constant tension between what the poem says and what the poem *shows the reader* it does not say. A great example is the opening couplet of Poem XI:

迴車駕言邁	I turn back my wagon and venture on,
悠悠涉長道	embarking on a long journey, my destination far-flung.

The very first word is disorienting: “turn back” from where? What has prompted the poet's change of mind and change of direction? The poet then uses four characters within the space of ten characters – 邁 (*mai*), 悠悠 (*you you*), and 長 (*chang*) – to emphasize the length of his return journey (which of course also tells us how far he has come): such descriptive extravagance forms a sharp contrast with his narrative terseness, as we are never told exactly where the traveler is heading now and where he was going before. The rest of the poem laments the brevity of human life, and ends abruptly with praising “honor and fame,” the only road to immortality. Yet the gloomy view of the transience of human life expressed in the first part of the poem casts a shadow over the ostensible endorsement of the pursuit of worldly glory.

Compared with the *Wen xuan* version cited above, the early Tang encyclopedia *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (comp. 624) provides an interesting variant for the first line of the couplet:

驅車遠行役	<i>I drive my wagon and go faraway in service</i> [emphasis mine] ²³
悠悠涉長道	embarking on a long journey, my destination far-flung.

The same first line appears also in Ruan Ji's 阮籍 (210–263) “Songs of My Cares” (Yonghuai 詠懷), no. 39, in which *yi* (service) refers specifically to a military campaign.²⁴ The early Song encyclopedia *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 adopts “drive my wagon” rather than “turn back my wagon,” though the rest of the line in *Taiping yulan* remains the same as in the *Wen xuan* version.²⁵ Of course, almost every text would have multiple versions in a manuscript culture; it is nevertheless of interest to note that textual variants always, if not exclusively, occur in places fraught with

²³ Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 et al., comp., *Yiwen leiju* (Taipei: Wenguang chubanshe, 1974), 484.

²⁴ Lu Qinli 逯欽立, ed., *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 504.

²⁵ Li Fang 李昉 et al., comp., *Taiping yulan* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1975), 1071.

semantic difficulties, and that for an obscure line there is often an easy or lucid version, which conveniently solves all hermeneutic problems.

Indeed, how one understands the phrase “turn back my wagon” may set the tone for the entire poem. Zhang Geng associates the image with Confucius’ decision to “go home” after an unsuccessful three-year stay at the Domain of Chen; he further makes a distinction between the hypothesized failure in the speaker’s public career and his determination to establish fame by pursuing a private enterprise.²⁶ Similarly, Zhu Yun believes that the poem focuses on the “post-enlightenment” stage, and reads the phrase “turning back my wagon” as an expression of disillusionment with the world; he then explains away the last line of the poem, “honor and fame are to be treasured,” as a halfhearted, not-so-earnest compromise that the speaker reached in dealing with mortality.²⁷ Ma Maoyuan reinforces this reading by citing the “Li sao” lines: “I turn my coach around along the same path, / it was not yet too far I had strayed in my going” 迴朕車以復路兮，及行迷之未遠。²⁸ But Zhu Yun’s clumsy attempt at reconciling an image of disillusionment with the final resolution of “treasuring honor and fame” illuminates a deep ambiguity of the gesture of “turning back.” It is, however, both impossible and unnecessary to decode this gesture in any definitive manner: it is meant to be a bridge connecting the past and present, the invisible history beyond the text and the visible moment within. It points to, but never reveals, a story of which we are made aware but forbidden to look at closely.

Poem VIII gives us a more discernible outline of a story, with more signposts along the road, but in many ways the story is even less clear than in the poem cited above:

冉冉孤生竹	Swaying is the bamboo growing in solitude,
結根泰山阿	forming its roots at the bend of a great mountain.
與君為新婚	To form a marriage alliance with you:
兔絲附女蘿	the dodder plant attaches itself to the creeping vine.
兔絲生有時	There is a time for the dodder plant to grow,
夫婦會有宜	and there is a time for husband and wife to come together.
千里遠結婚	Traveling across a thousand miles to marry,
悠悠隔山陂	far-off, separated by the slopes of the hill.
思君令人老	Longing for you makes me old;
軒車來何遲	how late in coming is the curtained carriage.
傷彼蕙蘭花	I feel wounded by flowers of orchid and basil,
含英揚光輝	holding its blossoming within, ready to shine forth.
過時而不采	Now if one does not pluck it in its prime,
將隨秋草萎	it will wither with autumn plants.
君亮執高節	If you truly hold on to noble principles,
賤妾亦何為	what, after all, could this humble concubine do?

²⁶ GSJ 3.32–33.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.53.

²⁸ Ma Maoyuan, 100. *Chu ci buzhu* 楚辭補注, annotated by Hong Xingzu 洪興祖 (Taipei: Tiangong shuju, 1989), 16. Translation by Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, 166.

The translator faces an impossible task here, as the Chinese language has no tense marker. The third line of the poem, for instance, could be understood as a past action: “I have recently married you”; or as anticipation of the future: “I shall become your new wife”; or as a statement of a fact: “Being recently married to you [is like the dodder plant attaching to the creeping vine]”; or a hypothetical “If you and I become newly-weds, then we shall be like . . .” Much is at stake in which version we choose, as commentators have debated vehemently whether this poem expresses resentment about belated wedding or about parting soon after wedding. The “slopes of the hill” in line 8 could either separate the girl’s native home from her married home or be the insurmountable barrier between herself and her husband, who embarks on a journey soon after she married him; similarly, the curtained carriage in line 10 could be either the coach sent to fetch her for the wedding or *his* coach returning home after a long period of absence.

The plant metaphors in this poem are fraught with uncertainty like the poem itself. The lone bamboo “forming its roots” at the bend of a great mountain is a striking image, for bamboo usually grows in clusters, not in isolation. It may be taken as a figure of the woman speaker and her relationship with her husband (or alternately, with her natal family), but the next plant analogy effectively subverts the opening couplet for, unlike the pliant but essentially firm bamboo, both the dodder and creeping vine are soft and fragile; they are plants that must attach themselves to other things to grow. While the great mountain provides protection for the lone bamboo, the creeping vine can offer no such solid support to the dodder plant.

The shift from the firm, solitary bamboo to fragile and spreading vines is taken one step further in the second half of the poem, as the female speaker sees her fate in the sweet-smelling orchid and basil: if one does not pluck the flower of her youth and beauty in time, it will fade with all other plants. The line describing the orchid embodies the very ambiguity of her identity:

含英揚光輝 holding its blossoming within, ready to shine forth.

The phrase 含英 (*han ying*) means to contain the blossoming within the bud, while the verb 揚 (*yang*) designates the motion of sending forth, thus an opening up, a spreading out. Once again, this translator has to make the line sound sensible in English by differentiating the two stages – present and future – and add “ready to [shine forth],” but in the original Chinese text the two phrases, *han ying* and *yang guanghui*, appear side by side, two contradictory terms bound to each other in one line and seemingly on the same temporal plane. The tension created by this pairing provides a perfect linguistic mirror of the profound indeterminacy of the woman herself. Is she a maiden waiting for her fiancé to take her away from her parents’ home? Or is she a bride whose husband leaves her soon after their wedding night? Both interpretations have been heartily defended from the pre-modern to modern period. There is no resolution, nor, perhaps, is there need for one.

What we know for sure is that the woman wants to be “plucked” (采 *cai*); she predicts that she will otherwise “wither” with autumn plants. Even here we face a

hermeneutic difficulty. Since orchid and basil are well-known *Li sao* plants, another interpretive possibility, much more sinister than simply fading away, is concealed right underneath the surface of these resonant images. Below is one of the places where orchid and basil are mentioned together in the *Li sao*:

蘭芷變而不芳兮	Orchid and angelica change, and are sweet no more;
荃蕙化而為茅	iris and basil are transformed into straw.
何昔日之芳草兮	How come these fragrant plants of old days
今直為此蕭艾也	have now turned into stinking weeds? ²⁹

Loss of fragrance (i.e., youth and beauty) is external change which does not affect one's true nature; but turning into straw and stinking weeds indicates a much more disturbing change, one that bespeaks a fundamental difference from what one once was. We already witness in this Old Poem the metaphorical transference of the bamboo into dodder plant into orchid/basil, each being more fragile than the other (orchid and basil being more fragile than dodder plant because they have more to lose – i.e., their sweet-smelling blossoms). It would not be far-fetched to imagine a further, more troubling, metamorphosis from fragrant plant to stinking weed, hinted at through the textual echo of the well-known *Li sao* lines.

To detect this subtext in Poem VIII is not a fanciful reading unjustified by the text itself. The final couplet caps the ambiguity that plagues the entire poem:

君亮執高節	If you truly hold on to noble principles,
賤妾亦何為	what, after all, could this humble concubine do?

Some commentators take “noble principles” to mean that he keeps faith with her, but this is not clear. The expression could just as easily mean that he maintains his integrity in public life, in his service to the community, and so forth. Once again, there are many narrative possibilities. As for the last line, virtually all commentators understand it as an expression of her acquiescent acceptance of the situation and a vow of fidelity; but then again, all those commentators were male, and it is certainly self-serving to read a declaration of faithfulness into the last line that is formulated as a question. “Nineteen Old Poems” are not prudish, as testified by the well-known Poem II, “Green, green is the grass by the river,” in which a beautiful woman, all made-up in powder and rouge during her husband's absence, climbs a tower to look afar. Extending her hand from the window, she declares, “An empty bed is hard to keep alone.” The point is that one could easily hear very different insinuations in the last couplet if one were not bound by self-serving and self-fulfilling traditional commentaries, which have become the mainstream reading.

The last line has a textual variant, cited in Li Shan's 李善 (fl. 630–689) commentary to the *Wen xuan*. Instead of “what, after all, could this humble concubine do,” the line reads:

賤妾擬何為	what does this humble concubine plan to do? ³⁰
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²⁹ *Chu ci buzhu*, 40.

³⁰ *Wen xuan*, 1220.

In the third position we have *ni* 擬 rather than *yi* 亦. This is an apparently minor variation, but whereas *yi* is an essentially “empty” particle that enhances the helpless tone of “after all, what else could I do,” *ni* seems to make the statement less a rhetorical question than a real question. The suppressed reading, potentially troubling, finds expression in a textual variant that is not adopted in most versions of “Nineteen Old Poems.”

Covered by Brocade bedding (一牀錦被遮蓋 *yichuang jinbei zhegai*)

The last example to be considered in this paper is Poem XVI, a poem that meshes dream and reality. Just as a love-longing dream is the focus of the poetic narrative, a dreamlike ambiguity prevails throughout the poem. Once again, we have difficulty determining the speaker’s gender. Once again, we are given an outline of a story whose details keep eluding us. We also have difficulty deciphering an enigmatic line involving a brocade coverlet which, in this case, serves nicely as a figurative cover-up.

凜凜歲云暮	With shivering chills, the year is coming to an end,
螻蛄夕鳴悲	crickets cry sadly in the evening.
涼風率已厲	The cool wind has become austere everywhere;
遊子寒無衣	the traveler suffers from cold, having no clothes.
錦衾遺洛浦	Brocade bedding is left by the Luo River;
同袍與我違	the one sharing my greatcoat is not with me.
獨宿累長夜	Sleeping alone on many a long night,
夢想見容輝	in a dream I see the shining countenance of my love.
良人惟古歡	The husband has his former sweetheart on his mind,
枉駕惠前綏	turning aside his carriage, he offers the mounting strap of old.
願得常巧笑	I wish this sweet smile would stay forever;
攜手同車歸	holding hands, we would return in the same coach.
既不須臾	My love is here for only an instant,
又不處重闈	and does not linger in the deep chambers.
亮無晨風翼	In truth I have no wings of a dawn-wind hawk,
焉能凌風飛	how could I fly away, riding the wind?
眴眴以適意	Looking askance to ease my feelings;
引領遙相睇	craning my neck to gaze afar;
徙倚懷感傷	pacing to and fro, I feel sadness within;
垂涕霑雙扉	tears fall and soak the double-gate.

The season is autumn; the weather is chilly; the lovers are separated from each other, as they always are in “Nineteen Old Poems.” That much we know about the waking reality in the poem; the rest is all blurry. The confusion begins to set in with the fourth line: “The traveler suffers from cold, having no clothes.” Is the speaker male, talking about himself? Or is the speaker female, thinking of her man traveling far away from home?

The imagery of cold and covering continues into the next couplet, which is so obscure that it completely defies comprehensibility:

錦衾遺洛浦	Brocade bedding is left by the Luo River;
同袍與我違	the one sharing my greatcoat is not with me.

On a purely verbal level, “the one sharing my greatcoat” (同袍 *tongpao*) seems to have been directly inspired by the previous mention in the poem of “having no clothes” (無衣 *wu yi*). Both phrases appear together in the first stanza of one of the “Airs” entitled “No Clothes” (無衣 *Wu yi*). Below I give emphasis to the overlapping expressions:

豈曰無衣	How can you say, “I have no clothes?”
與子同袍	I will share my greatcoat with you.
王于興師	The king is raising his army,
脩我戈矛	we will make ready pike and spear,
與子同仇	and I will share all foes with you. ³¹

It needs to be stressed that the references to “having no clothes” and “sharing greatcoat” are not a case of using an “allusion” (典故 *diangu*), but a case in which we hear a “textual echo,” an echo that surely would have been heard by a contemporary reader of “Nineteen Old Poems,” as *The Classic of Poetry* constituted one’s basic education in pre-modern China. In discussing the commemorative verse on a stele inscription from the second century AD, Owen observes that the stele verse is “filled with references to the *Shijing*,” but instead of taking a reference to be “an allusion of sorts,” he recommends that one should think of it as “a ‘tag,’ that is, a freely floating line, detached from its original context, that can be applied to any appropriate occasion.”³² The use of “having no clothes,” followed immediately by “sharing greatcoat,” in Poem XVI certainly may qualify as the application of a “tag”; but unlike the line cited by Owen from *The Classic of Poetry* (“the road is blocked and long”), the poem “No Clothes” has an explicitly gendered voice: the poem is about comradeship between fellow soldiers, the speaker is clearly male, and male bonding is attested by the sharing of clothes and of enemies. The softness of the fabric, embodying the comfort and warmth of friendship, is contrasted with the sharpness and coldness of pike and spear, the weaponry of violence and death.

Yet many critics assume that Poem XVI has a female speaker and that “the one sharing my greatcoat” indicates her husband, as in the “Five Ministers” commentary to the *Wen xuan* (presented to the throne in 718), which glosses “sharing my greatcoat” as a reference to “[the relations between] husband and wife.”³³ *Tongpao* 同袍, however, is used, then and now, primarily for a male relationship, so much so that the only example given in *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 to illustrate the meaning

³¹ *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 244. Translation by Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, 52.

³² Owen, *The Making of Early Classical Chinese Poetry*, 74.

³³ *Liuchen zhu Wen xuan* 六臣注文選 (SBQS edition), 12a.

of *tongpao* as “husband and wife” is the line from Poem XVI. It is, of course, not impossible that a wife would borrow the term to refer to her husband but in such a context, the textual echoes of “No Clothes” at best add to the gender ambiguity of the Old Poem; and, indeed, this is partially why Poem XVI has been interpreted by some critics as being about male friendship rather than love between a man and woman.³⁴

To adopt the mainstream “female speaker” reading does not solve the hermeneutic problems beleaguering this couplet. The verb in the second line of the couplet, *wei* 違, is another point of doubt because of its multiple connotations: does it simply mean “separate,” or does it imply a betrayal (as in “go against”)? This, in a way, depends on how we construe the preceding line:

錦衾遺洛浦 Brocade bedding [is left] by the Luo River

Yi 遺, to leave behind, is also pronounced *wei*, to present something as a gift. The Luo River is resonant with the lore of the Goddess of the Luo River, the bewitching but flirtatious Fufei 宓妃 with whom the speaker of “Li sao” hesitates to form an alliance. A romantic involvement is implied in this line, but the nature of such an involvement remains undisclosed. Does the female speaker suspect her husband of an adulterous dalliance during his trip? Might the “goddess” even be the reason of his prolonged absence? Is this simply an innocent way of saying that “that poor man, he does not have winter clothes or proper cold-weather bedcovers in his luggage, for he has left behind his brocade bedding here with me”? Or a bitter statement, “Of course he suffers from the cold, because he has given/left behind his brocade bedding on the bank of the Luo River!” Or, if we consider the ambiguity of classical Chinese poetic grammar and the multiple meanings of the verb, we could understand the line as saying “A brocade bedding was presented to him by the Luo River”; in other words, her worries about his having no winter clothes are interrupted by speculations that in fact he is being well taken care of – by some other woman.

In a reading that takes the speaker to be male, we could interpret the couplet as stating that he has left his brocade bedding with his wife at home, and that he now has neither winter clothes nor warm coverlet, being separated from the one “sharing my greatcoat.” It could also easily be a case of the man lamenting the faithlessness of the Goddess of the Luo River (just as the “Li sao” speaker does). In a word, we are faced with numerous narrative possibilities. As the modern scholar Ma Maoyuan says with some exasperation, “The past interpretations of this couplet are extremely messy.”³⁵

³⁴ Zhang Geng asserts: “This poem is about a luckless traveler longing for help from his old friend” (客游無賴而思故人拯之), cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.36. Zhang Qi 張琦 (1764–1833) states, “These are the words of missing one’s friend” (此思友之辭), cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 2.25.

³⁵ Ma, 167. Other notable interpretations include Wu Qi’s and Fang Dongshu’s 方東樹 (1772–1851) comments. Wu Qi regards the “brocade bedding” as a rhetorical device, not an “actual” incident. Cited by Sui Shusen, *GSJ* 3.22. Fang Dongshu regards the Goddess of the Luo River as a figure for the female speaker herself, arguing this is a “flashback” to the time when she was first involved with the traveler. *GSJ* 3.71.

Leaving this couplet for the moment, let us look at the rest of the poem, which centers on the dream:

獨宿累長夜	Sleeping alone on many a long night,
夢想見容輝	in a dream I see the shining countenance of my love.
良人惟古歡	The husband has his former sweetheart on his mind,
枉駕惠前綏	turning aside his carriage, he offers the mounting strap of old.
願得常巧笑	I wish this sweet smile would stay forever;
攜手同車歸	holding hands, we would return in the same coach.

The mention of “husband” (良人 *liangren*) seems strongly to indicate a female speaker, who dreams of *her husband*, but then again, “a sweet smile” (巧笑 *qiaoxiao*) is famously used in one of the *Airs* to describe a woman,³⁶ and it would seem a little odd to have the woman say this either of her husband or of herself. Handing over the mounting strap is what a bridegroom does for his bride but of course this could simply be a gesture of helping her into the carriage to share the ride together. “Former sweetheart” and “mounting strap of old” fuse the past with the present in the dream but the dream world is shattered as soon as the dreamer wishes to prolong the dream state. Time, or rather an awareness of time, breaks the spell:

既來不須臾	My love is here for only an instant,
又不處重闈	and does not linger in the deep chambers.
亮無晨風翼	In truth I have no wings of a dawn-wind hawk,
焉能凌風飛	how could I fly away, riding the wind?
眇眇以適意	Looking askance to ease my feelings;
引領遙相睇	craning my neck to gaze afar.
徙倚懷感傷	Pacing to and fro, I feel sadness within;
垂涕霑雙扉	tears fall and soak the double-gate.

“Dawn-wind hawk” is a “poetic bird,” so to speak, which appears frequently in the *Airs*, but semantically it works particularly well here, as the word “dawn” denotes the end of night, dream, and fantasy (the line’s first word, 亮 *liang*, “in truth,” also means “bright” and serves a double purpose here). The following couplet (beginning with “I look askance”) is missing in Li Shan’s *Wen xuan*, perhaps because it does not make easy sense: two modes of looking, one at close range and one distant, are given side by side. It might, however, very well describe the waking of the speaker: looking sideways for the beloved, only to see the emptiness of the bed, s/he gets up from bed and gazes afar, as if trying to catch a glimpse of the departed dream lover. The tears in the last line are the aftereffect of the dream experience: a displaced wetness.

As the modern scholar Wu Xiaoru 吳小如 observes, Poem XVI is the archetypal text for numerous dream texts in the later tradition.³⁷ As is only appropriate for a

³⁶ In the poem entitled “The Well-built Person” (碩人 Shiren) from the “Airs of Wei” 衛風. *Maoshi zhengyi*, 129.

³⁷ *Han Wei liuchao shi jianshang cidian*, 161.

dream poem, the focus of attention turns out to be the brocade bedding that covers and conceals. This brings us back to the premise posed at the beginning of this paper: when a text sketches a mere outline of a narrative that points to multiple plots and sub-plots, it offers an open invitation to fully realize the narrative.

Performativity and the meaning of lyric

The seventeenth-century critic Chen Zuoming 陳祚明 gives an admirably cogent elucidation of the significance of “Nineteen Old Poems,” which straddles the boundary between poetics and hermeneutics:

The reason why the Nineteen Poems are the ultimate writings of all times is because they manage to articulate the feelings shared by all people. It is human nature to want to succeed in the world, and yet, how many people could achieve success? [. . .] Success cannot be achieved, and time passes by like flowing water – how could one not feel strongly about it? It is human nature to want to stay with one’s beloved all one’s life, but who has not experienced separation? [. . .] The Nineteen Poems revolve around nothing but these two themes over and over again; but upon reading them, every reader feels the pain as if it were his/her own. This is precisely because poetry is something born of human nature and human emotions. And if feelings are shared by all people and everyone possesses them, then *everyone has poetry in himself or herself* [italics mine]. Nevertheless, one may have feelings but not be able to articulate them, and even if one may articulate them, one may not be able to exhaust them with words – this is why we must credit the Nineteen Poems as the ultimate poetic expression.

十九首所以成為千古至文者，以能言人人同有之情也。人情莫不思得志，而得志者有幾?... 志不可得而年命如流，誰不感慨？人情於所愛者莫不欲終身相守，然誰不有離別?... 故十九首唯此二意，而低徊反復，人人讀之，皆若傷我心者，此詩所以為性情之物。而同有之情，人人各具，則人人本自有詩也。但人有情而不能言，即能言而不能盡，故特推十九首以為至極。

The above passage, though specifically speaking of the “Nineteen Old Poems,” underscores an important tenet in traditional Chinese poetics: poetry is a mode of individual *and* collective expression. Ideally, and theoretically, it belongs to *everyone*. Of course Chen Zuoming immediately has to grapple with the “evil twin” of this theory, for, after all, not everyone is a poet, and Chen Zuoming must account for a poet’s special ability to articulate feelings commonly shared with all humanity and to articulate them well – i.e., as poetry. Chen solves the problem imperfectly by arguing that “human emotions are naturally tortuous” (人情本曲 *renqing ben qu*) and so the tortuousness of these poems is only following the contours of human emotions. Nevertheless, he concedes that “Nineteen Old Poems” are works that “do not make emotions something straightforward and direct, but instead choose to depict the indirect and tortuous side of human emotions” (惟是不使情為徑直之物，而必取其宛曲者以寫之 *Wei shi bu shi qing wei jingzhi zhi wu, er bi qu qi wanqu zhe yi xie zhi*), and by doing so admits, though not in so many words, the representational nature of

the poems as opposed to many other critics' insistence on their utter "naturalness and spontaneity." He concludes:

The later-born do not understand this, and all just say that the Nineteen Poems prize naturalness – none of them could discover the painstaking craftsmanship behind the Poems.

後人不知，但謂十九首以自然為貴，乃其經營慘淡，則莫能尋之矣。³⁸

Chen Zuoming thus reconciles the idea of poetry as nature and that of poetry as artifice by arguing that the "tortuousness" of "Nineteen Old Poems" is both the result of "conscious and painstaking efforts" and a faithful, natural reflection of feelings shared by all humanity.

Chen's contemporary Jin Shengtian 金聖嘆 (1608–1661), the quirky and brilliant commentator, voices a similar definition of poetry. Discussing Tang dynasty regulated verse with a friend, he says: "Poetry is not something extraordinary; it is but a truthful utterance" (詩非異物，只是一句真話 *Shi fei yiwu, zhishi yiju zhenhua*).³⁹ In another letter he writes:

Poetry is but a sudden cry from a person's heart. No matter whether it comes from a woman or a child, whether it is at dawn or in the middle of night, it could come from anyone and at any time.

詩者，人之心頭忽然之一聲耳。不問婦人孺子，晨朝夜半，莫不有之。

Jin Shengtian's observation about poetry being "a cry from the mouth of any person and every person" (人人口中之一聲 *renren kouzhong zhi yisheng*) is particularly relevant in the case of "Nineteen Old Poems," some of the earliest poems in five-syllable lines produced at a time when poetry in five-syllable lines was considered a "low" form (poetry in four-syllable lines, *fu*, and other prose genres then occupied the literary high ground).⁴⁰ There was, moreover, no clear-cut dividing line in this period between "old poems" (古詩 *gushi*), including "Nineteen Old Poems," and "songs" (樂府 *yuefu*), as lines of an "old poem" frequently appear in a *yuefu* song or are cited in a later source as a *yuefu* fragment, and vice versa. Many scholars have discussed the possibility that "Nineteen Old Poems" or at least some of the "Nineteen Old Poems" are part of the *yuefu* tradition.⁴¹ If some of the Old Poems were indeed performed as songs, they would be performed many times by different singers and

³⁸ *GSJ* 4.5–6.

³⁹ *Jin Shengtian quanji* 金聖嘆全集, Vol. 4 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1985), 39.

⁴⁰ Although there is much debate about the dating of the "Nineteen Old Poems," we may rest assured that they were in circulation by the time when Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) composed his imitations (*ni* 擬) of the poems in the late third century.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Zhu Jiazhi 朱嘉微, *Shiji guangxu* 詩集廣序, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1590, 3.3a–10b; Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, *Zhongguo yinyue wenxueshi* 中國音樂文學史 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), 152; Daniel Hsieh, "The Origin and Nature of the 'Nineteen Old Poems,'" *Sino-Platonic Papers* no. 77 (1998); Liu Xuqing 劉旭青, "Gushi shijiushou wei 'ge shi' bian" 古詩十九首為"歌詩"辨, *Zhongguo yunwen xuekan* 中國韻文學刊 19.4 (2003): 10–13.

to different audiences, and ambiguity would augment the generality of these poems and maximize the possibilities of participation by singers of both sexes as well as by audience. If, as Stephen Owen argues, “old poems,” *yuefu* ballads, and Jian’an poetry by known authors were “one poetry,” with shared topics, themes, lines, and segments, then ambiguity could also very well be the consequence of composition by piecing together lines and segments on an appropriate occasion.⁴²

Performativity is the keyword in understanding “Nineteen Old Poems.” By performativity I refer not only to the possible performance of the “old poems” or of segments of the “old poems” by singers of both sexes in front of an audience but also to the act of meaning-production by members of the audience and eventually, in a textual tradition, by readers. In other words, singers, members of an audience, and readers help realize this poetry’s narrative fullness. The word “narrative” is crucial here, for although they are considered the origin of Chinese “lyric poetry,”⁴³ “Nineteen Old Poems” almost always represent a dramatic situation and hint at a hidden but more complete narrative, and the very power of this poetry comes from the singer/listener/reader fully entering the virtual narrative and playing the leading role in it.⁴⁴

Here we must also take a moment to reconsider the meaning of the term, 抒情 *shuqing*. The term was used often in traditional discourse, but simply as a verb-object construction – to voice one’s feelings – without ever becoming a set phrase and a conceptual category as it has in the twentieth century. The modern investment of value and significance into the term *shuqing* stemmed from the need and desire to translate into the Chinese context the term “lyric,” a word of Greek origin which initially signified a song accompanied by a lyre. “Lyric poetry” is used in a binary scheme to contrast with “epic poetry,” which is one of the major forms of Indo-European narrative literature. Just like *shuqing*, 叙事 *xushi* (literally, “to narrate an event”) was a term elevated from a simple verb-object construction to the prominent status of a conceptual category in Chinese literary discourse. Completely converted to the division of “lyric poetry / epic poetry” as if it were a *natural* binary construction, modern Chinese men of letters – writers, scholars, critics – have long been troubled by the “lack” of epic poetry in Chinese literary tradition, which leads to the attempt of making *more* out of “Chinese lyric poetry” to fill up the acutely-felt “absence” of the epic.

⁴² Owen, *The Making of Early Classical Chinese Poetry*, 73.

⁴³ For instance, Kao Yu-kung claims that the transition from *yuefu* to “old poems” marks the transition from “performance art” to “lyrical art.” Kao, “Zhongguo yuyan wenzi dui shige de yingxiang” 中國語言文字對詩歌的影響, in his *Zhongguo meidian yu wenxue yanjiu lunji* 中國美典與文學研究論集 (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue chuban zhongxin, 2004), 183–84.

⁴⁴ It should be pointed out that “Nineteen Old Poems” are not to be confused with “dramatic monologues” in the Western poetic tradition, a poetic form that presumes a located speaker usually speaking to and interacting with an audience who is present to the speaker in the poem and whose actions and responses are revealed to us only through the speaker’s discourse. For an argument that “Nineteen Old Poems” are “lyric dramatic monologues,” see Xiao Chi 蕭馳, “‘Shuxie shengyin’ zhong de qun yu wo, qing yu gan: Gushi shijiushou shixue zhixing yu shishi diwei de zai jiantao” “書寫聲音”中的群與我、情與感：古詩十九首詩學質性與詩史地位的再檢討, *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 30 (2007): 45–52.

In the Chinese context the creation of these two modes of *shuqing* and *xushi* as inherently opposite/complementary and so mutually dependent categories is, however, misled as well as misleading. The feelings expressed in classical Chinese poetry are always contextualized by narrative circumstances: these circumstances are constructed on the basis of contextualizing the poet as a historical person – the larger narrative context of the poem; they are also frequently substantiated by a situation presented within the poetic text (often indicated by the occasional title from the fifth century on). Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365?–427) is a good example: his autobiographical poetry, often marked by dates given in long and chatty titles (something new in literary history), demands to be read within the narrative context of his life. Even though we regard impassioned attempts to provide a more specific context for Tao Yuanming’s poetry as flawed, we must at the same time recognize that this sort of contextualizing impulse is intertwined with traditional Chinese critical discourse. Simply put, the binary scheme *shuqing/xushi* represents a modern effort to understand and articulate Chinese literary tradition; the neat split, however, remains alien and inadequate to the Chinese context.

In the case of “Nineteen Old Poems,” “expression of feelings” (*shuqing*) is tightly interwoven with a special mode of narration. The anonymous “Nineteen Old Poems” cannot claim any historical contextualization by reconstructing the circumstances of its author or authors, but there are always stories being told in the poems, which constitute a narrative context for the poems. The “expression of feeling” in “Nineteen Old Poems” is inseparable from the narrative situation presented in the text itself, such as parting from one’s beloved, sending gifts, an outsider coming to the big city and seeking his fortune, and so forth. These narrative contexts, in turn, depend on the “performers” of the texts – singers, audience, readers – to be fully realized. This distinguishes the “Nineteen Old Poems” from other kinds of “obscure” poetry famous for generating multiple interpretations, such as the well-known “Autumn Stirrings” (Qiu xing 秋興) series by Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), or the “Yan Terrace” (Yantai 燕臺) series by Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 813–858), primarily in two aspects: one, “Autumn Stirrings” and “Yantai” have known authors; two, the ambiguity of “Nineteen Old Poems” is that of the “plot” of the internal narrative, which invites the singer/listener/reader to inhabit, elucidate and enrich.

Once again, a passage taken from “Nineteen Old Poems” themselves provides us with the perfect allegory of how this poetry works. In Poem V, the speaker stands outside of a high tower and listens, enraptured, to the singing of a woman in the tower:

上有絃歌聲	From above comes a song accompanied by a harp;
音響一何悲	the sounds are sad as they could be.
誰能為此曲	Who can sing a song like this?
無乃杞梁妻	Surely it is someone like Qiliang’s wife.

Qiliang’s wife cried so bitterly over her husband’s death that even the city walls crumbled at her lamentation. Noticeably, upon hearing the sad song of a woman, the listener attempts to reconstruct the circumstances of the singer by giving her an

identity and a story behind the song. In other words, he contextualizes her song by placing her in a dramatic situation: she is not simply a woman living in solitude – she is a widow whose husband has died in battle, a woman with a tragic history, as opposed to a maiden, a fiancée, or a spinster. This is the narrative that he pieces together from her song, but this also becomes the narrative that enables him to understand her song and, by extension, understand *her*, a woman of a past hidden away in the high tower and behind the music. He is the “one who understands the sound” (知音 *zhiyin*), who brings into realization the narrative fullness which is fragmented and suppressed in her song. The song is at once the woman’s self-expression and the man’s, coming alive through her performance and his. The song of the woman parallels and mirrors the poem uttered by the male speaker to the tee, as feeling expressed in the song is understood by way of a story, just as the feeling expressed in Poem V is understood, and can only be understood, by way of a story. What happens in these lines is therefore symbolic of the dynamics of the performance and reception of “Nineteen Old Poems,” which in turn furnish us with a basic model of how traditional Chinese poetry works.

The woman singer, anonymous, concealed, and widowed, is ultimately the perfect figure not only for the composers of “Nineteen Old Poems” but also for the poems themselves. She is “the Mother of all poetry” – who is the giver of life and, as a widowed mother, holds a terrible power over her children, and yet who always occupies the secondary place to the Father, and whose name remains unknown and has indeed been left unknown with contentment by her descendants. In a patriarchal culture, only the Father is the true, uncompromised, unconditioned parent, for if we recall the seventeenth-century critic’s claim, He is also the begetter of the Mother.

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Notes on Contributor

Xiaofei Tian is Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University. She is the author of *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of a Dusty Table* (University of Washington Press, 2005), *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Harvard, 2007), and a number of books in Chinese, including a collection of essays on Chinese literature and culture (2009), a book on Moorish Spain (2006), a book on Sappho (2004), a book on the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (2003), and several works of translation. She is currently working on a book about traveling and seeing the world in early medieval and late imperial China.

Correspondence to: stian@fas.harvard.edu