SMOKE AND MIRRORS: BUDDHIST CONCEPTIONS OF MIND AND EMPTINESS IN XIAO GANG'S "POEMS ON THINGS"

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The Liang dynasty poet Xiao Gang's "poems on things" (*yongwu shi*) have traditionally been read as shallow, overwrought descriptions of palace life devoid of the allegorical dimensions that were thought to ennoble the genre. This thesis argues that the figurative dimensions of these supposedly non-figurative poems must be understood in the context of the profound influence Buddhism and Buddhist thought had on Xiao Gang's conceptions of literary practice. Through close readings of six "poems on things," I demonstrate that Xiao Gang's use of descriptive language doubles as an exploration of Buddhist concepts of sensuous reality, emptiness, and dependent co-arising. By exploring Xiao Gang's thematization of abstract Buddhist philosophical concepts in the traditionally Confucian genre of the *yongwu shi*, I suggest that the impact of Buddhist ideas on Chinese figurative modes of poetic meaning was more profound than scholars of this period have previously suggested.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> On the other hand, whatever the techniques employed, commentary's only role is to say *finally*, what has silently been articulated *deep down*. It must—and the paradox is ever-changing yet inescapable—say, for the first time, what has already been said, and repeat tirelessly what was, nevertheless, never said.
> Michel Foucault[1]

> "A little formalism turns one away from History, but…a lot brings one back to it."
> Roland Barthes[2]

I suspect that most scholars of premodern Chinese literature have, at some point, spent the better part of a day five commentaries deep in some obscure text only to emerge with the conviction, stronger than ever, that there is nothing left to say, except, of course, about what has already been said *about* what has already been said and so on in a kind of Borgesian infinite regression back to an unreachable source. It hardly needs pointing out that we read classical Chinese poems through the commentarial traditions that transmitted them down through the ages and rendered them legible to readers in a constantly receding series of present moments. In the same way that someone seeing through glasses learns to look past the apparatus that enables their sight, we also run the risk of looking past the layers of once present and now past readings that bring the texts we read into focus in the printed and bound editions we use today. This is precisely why the best and most relevant questions are those that can be posed through the commentarial and editorial tradition;

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[1] Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 221.

[2] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 112.

that is to say, in the language of and with respect to the ideas, insights, questions, gaps, silences, and problems that arise in one or more layers of commentary, using all of this to bring the texts under consideration into focus. But there are exceptions to this rule, places in the tradition where the lens is, as it were, warped, preventing access. For example: the rare period, poet, style, or genre the commentarial tradition has remained silent about or actively dismissed as unworthy of the readers' consideration. This thesis takes up one of those genres, the so-called "poems on things" (*yongwu shi* 詠物詩), written in one of those styles, namely the *gongti* 宮體 or "Palace Style" popular in the mid-Sixth century, and one of those poets, the Jianwen Emperor 簡文帝 of the Liang 梁 Dynasty (502-557 CE), Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503-551).

Were we to seek out an invitation to revisit Palace Style poetry, and by extension the poetry of its principal avatar Xiao Gang, in the traditional Chinese commentaries on the subject, we would come away empty-handed. The period extending from roughly 531 to 548 during which Palace Style poetry was in vogue has been treated as a kind of literary dead zone, a patch of bad reception on the map of Chinese literary history on either side of which contact with the mainline tradition of Chinese poetry and its governing assumptions about the role of poetry in the public life of a scholarly gentleman is more easily established. According to the late Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907) poet Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (ca. 834-883): "After the Jian'an period, the ministers on the left bank of the Yangtze River vied to surpass one another in gaudiness and superficiality, and as a result the [influence of the] Six Principles was weak" 建安以後, 江左群臣, 競以浮艷勝, 然詩

之六義微矣.[3] This period has also been treated as kind of literary danger zone. Beginning in the Sui 隋 (581-618) and early Tang dynasty, the stylistic features of Palace Style poems were interpreted as a symptom of dynastic decline. Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) writes of Xiao Gang and his younger brother Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (508-555) that "…their poetic conception was shallow and excessively elaborate, their writing style introverted and flashy, their diction superficial and provocative, and the feelings they express, mostly those of passionate longing" 其意淺而繁, 其文匿而彩, 詞尚輕險, 情多哀思.[4] Thus, he asserts, one could hear in them "the sound of a fallen kingdom" 亡國之音.[5] Purely aesthetic assessments tended to be equally unforgiving. In his *Shijing zonglun* 詩鏡總論 the Ming dynasty critic Lu Shiyong 陸時雍 complained that, "Most of Jianwen's (Xiao Gang's) poems are choked with sensuality and over-rich emotion, such that reading them one feels half-drunk and light-headed, restless and fatigued" 簡文詩多滯色膩情，讀之半醉憨情，懨懨欲倦.[6] Scholars in the twentieth century have largely echoed these pronouncements. The contemporary scholar Mu Kehong 穆克宏 writes, "The majority of

[3] Quoted in Wang Chunhong 汪春泓, "Lun fojiao yu Liangdai gongti shi de chansheng" 論佛教與梁代宮體詩的產生, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 no. 5 (1991): 40.

[4] Wei Zheng, "Wenxue zhuan lun" 文學傳論 in *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1973), 76.1730. For a discussion of this and many other negative assessments of Palace Style Poetry (including those quoted below) as well as the impact of Buddhist thought on Xiao Gang's conception of literary practice see Lin Boqian 林伯謙, "Liang Jianwen di lishen, lunwen yu Weimojie jing guanxi kao" 梁簡文帝立身，論文與《維摩詰經》關係考, Zhongguo Fojiao Wenshi Tanwei 中國佛教文史探微 (Taipei: Xiuwei chubanshe, 2005), 163-215. Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.

[5] Wei Zheng, *Sui shu*, 76.1730.

[6] Lu Shiyong, "Shijing zonglun," in *Lidai shihua xubian* 歷代詩話續編, ed. by Ding Fubao 丁福保 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshu guan, 1983), 1689. Quoted in Lin Boqian, "Liang Jianwen," 164.

Liang dynasty Palace Style poems are a reflection of the shameless debauchery of palace life at the time; they use gorgeous forms to hide their unrestrained interiors; this truly was the degeneration of poetry."[7]

In the picture of Palace Style poetry that has come down to us—and it is a kind of picture, a *caricature* even—it is the literary manifestation of the reckless dilettantism of Xiao Gang and his literary coterie; it is the product of an unhealthy obsession with beautiful women, beautiful objects, and beautiful words that eventually brought the Liang dynasty to ruin. In trying to determine whether there might be more to Xiao Gang's Palace Style poetry than meets the eye in this picture, our task will not be to decide whether these judgments are correct or fair on their own terms, since it is precisely the terms of engagement that are problematic. Our task, in preparation for reading these poems in a new light, is first to determine how these scholars and critics have constructed their object—in this case Palace Style poetry—and to see in relation to what other discursive phenomena its characteristics have been enumerated. Finally we must decide whether there might be other methods of Palace Style poetry that would provide a new, if not also a more complete, picture of the world in which these poems were produced.

First, we should note that in nearly all of the criticisms listed above the poem is assumed to be a kind of unmediated record of the real historical experiences of the author. Indeed the veracity of the poetic encounter with the world is a kind of "given" in premodern Chinese literary criticism. Thus, a poem about the mirror a courtesan holds as she puts on makeup at her toilette is a reflection, to use Mu Kehong's word, both of the real experience of a man about to enjoy a night of lovemaking with his concubine and of

[7] Mu Kehong, "Xiaoshi fuzi yu Liangdai wenxue" 蕭氏父子與梁代文學, *Yinshan Xuekan* 陰山學刊 no. 4 (1992): 24. Quoted in Lin Boqian, "Liang Jianwen,"166.

his moral character, at least insofar as he was debased enough to consider such a topic worthy of recording in a poem. The very possibility of artifice, of the deliberate and meticulous construction of an imagined scene, is rigorously foreclosed, despite the fact that there were periods in the Six Dynasties during which artifice was thought of as a necessary complement to spontaneity and even surpassed spontaneity as a literary value in the eyes of none other than Xiao Gang himself.

Second, many of these commentators assume that Xiao Gang's poetry conforms to retroactively "universal" norms within which poetry is understood to be the tissue of a real experience of or encounter with a world that is provisionally within but ultimately outside of history. This entails that the discursive frame of the individual text already includes all of the relevant information about the non-discursive world it describes. The result is a kind of textual formalism in which the historically particular life-world of the poet is bracketed and reduced to a discursive feature of the text. This is done in an effort to make it comparable to other texts and the experiences they record, both texts that predate the poem under consideration and texts written centuries later.[8] Thus the world that breathed life into Xiao Gang's poetry no longer exists as a discrete multiplicity with its own unique non-discursive content—its historical difference from all other worlds has been neutralized. We might say that in the *wenlin* 文林 or "forest of texts," a term for a collection of writings, there are only *other texts*. Texts exist suspended in a virtual time

[8] A colleague of mine, Clay Chou, has compared the spatial and temporal features of the Chinese poetic tradition, as it was conceived of in the premodern period, to cloud storage. Although poems bear the stamp of the time and place in which they were composed, once they are "uploaded" they no longer occupy a definite spatial or temporal position in relation to other poems. From the perspective of the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions they contain they are in some sense equidistant from all other poems in the tradition.

that is enveloped by and assimilated to the time in which they are read and thus one moves between them in a unified space much as one might move between trees in a forest.[9] We might say then that Lu Shiyong's woozy vision of life in the Eastern Palace (the historical "palace" of Palace Style poetry) is a combination of a literal reading of a small fraction of Xiao Gang's poetry and his own assumptions about what palace life in the years leading up to the collapse of a dynasty *must* have been like. These assumptions were undoubtedly layered with images of decline in other texts as well as his own anxieties as a member of the court of the *last* Ming emperor, Chongzhen 崇禎 (r. 1627-1644). Thus, in a version of what Robert Ashmore has called the "transport of reading," Xiao Gang's palace is made to play host to the extravagant parties of the late Ming court.[10]

If traditional commentators have stuck to examining what we might think of as the "horizontal" discursive relations among select groups of texts and we, in the envelope of time in which we read, find this limiting, it seems reasonable to ask what might be gained by incorporating a wider set of discursive configurations into our analysis—one that links poetry with other kinds of writing—as well as "vertical" non-discursive configurations that would include practices, events, and elements of material culture that impact texts but do not appear in them as such. How, for example, would our sense of the cultural moment in which Xiao Gang's literary salon was most active change if we considered that it coincides with a period during which Buddhism enjoyed unparalleled

[9] In criticizing this dimension of traditional Chinese commentary it is important to note its potentially utopian potential. Reading takes place in a kind of no-place, a u-topia, in which the present of the act of reading and the past of the text are fused.

[10] Robert Ashmore, *The Transport of Reading: Text and Understanding in the World of Tao Qian (365-427)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

popularity and exercised tremendous influence over nearly every aspect of court life through the person of Xiao Gang's father, Emperor Wu 武帝, the "Bodhisattva Emperor," and later through Xiao Gang himself? How do we reconcile the portrait so many of the later commentaries paint of Xiao Gang as a kind of libertine (*langzi* 浪子) with the fact that he was, by all *contemporaneous* accounts, an unusually devout Buddhist?[11] How would our sense of the environment in which Palace Style poetry was written change if we recall that just prior to taking up residence at the Eastern Palace, Xiao Gang received the Bodhisattva precepts (*pusa jie* 菩薩戒) which would have stipulated simpler clothing at court, a mostly vegetarian diet, and a leading role, presumably throughout the 530s, in the *Baguanzhai* 八關齋 or "Eight Precepts Fast," which included fasting, meditation, and lectures on the sutras six times a month?[12] And how would our sense of his position with respect to the canon of Chinese literature change if we paused to consider the fact that he was perhaps the first emperor in Chinese history to have learned to recite the sutras alongside the Confucian and Daoist classics from a very young age, probably with a weak sense of the boundaries or hierarchical relations between these texts then would come to be the case in later periods; or that, as John Marney points out, had his complete works survived he would be remembered

[11] Lin Boqian, "Liang Jianwen," 203.

[12] See Francois Martin, "Literary Games and Religious Practice at the End of the Six Dynasties: The Baguanzhai Poems by Xiao Gang and His Followers," in *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties*, ed. Zong-qi Cai (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 225. For an extensive discussion of the bodhisattva ordination ritual see Andreas Janousch, "The Emperor as Bodhisattva: the bodhisattva ordination and ritual assemblies of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty," in *State and Court Ritual in China*, ed. Joseph McDermott (Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 112-215.

"above all as a Buddhic writer," or finally that, during the early years of his residence in the Eastern Palace, he was engaged in editing what would have been the largest encyclopedia of Buddhist texts in the early medieval period?[13] And lastly, how might our understanding of the literary pedigree of Palace Style poetry be altered if we take up Wang Chunhong's 汪春泓 suggestion that the very sutras Xiao Gang recited and gave lectures on can be seen to contain "anticipations of Palace Style poetry"?[14] In other words, how might our assumptions about the content of these poems change if we read their sensuous materiality on analogy with the extraordinarily detailed descriptions of jeweled towers, otherworldly palaces, gemstone-encrusted landscapes, golden thrones and even, in rare cases, seductresses whose temptations must be resisted?[15] If we recall that these powerfully vivid descriptions in the sutras were intended to push the practitioner through the emptiness of sensuous reality (*se* 色) into a state in which emptiness and sensuous reality are not opposed, is it possible that Xiao Gang wrote poetry with a similar intention in mind?

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[13] John Marney, *Liang Chien-wen Ti* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 123. According to the *Nan shi* 南史 Xiao Gang's encyclopedia of Buddhist texts, the *Fabao lianbi* 法寶連壁, numbered 300 *juan*. See *Nan shi* 南史, Comp. Li Yanshuo 李延壽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 8:233.

[14] Wang Chunhong, "Lun fojiao," 55.

[15] Although the sutras rarely touch upon the erotic directly where we do find stories of seduction they are often told in remarkably graphic detail. See for example the *Fo ben xing jing* 佛本行經 in *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (hereafter *Taishō*), comp. Junjirō Takakusu 高楠順次郎 Kaigyoku Watanabe 渡邊海旭 et al. 100 vols. (Taibei: Shihua yinshua qiye, 1990), 4:193. Mentioned in Ou Lijuan 歐麗娟, "Gongti shi zhuanti" 宮體詩專題 (lecture presented in the class "Zhongguo wenxue shi" 中國文學史 at National Taiwan University in Taipei, Taiwan. *National Taiwan University Open Courseware*, accessed June 6. 2015). http://ocw.aca.ntu.edu.tw/ntu-ocw/index.php/ocw/cou/102S104/34

These questions arise outside of and in opposition to much of the existing commentary on Xiao Gang's Palace Style poetry and yet I believe if we subscribe to the traditional view of Chinese poetry which holds that no matter what part artifice may have played in poetic composition, premodern Chinese poems must nevertheless be understood as the record of the poet's quasi-spontaneous response to his immediate environment, then we *must* ask these questions, precisely insofar as they pertain to that environment. Put another way, if we consider that Xiao Gang spent his most productive years completely immersed in Buddhist texts, ideas, rituals, and images, it would be far more surprising to find that these elements somehow did not shape his poetic vision than it would be to discover that they did. Still, traditional Chinese scholars have preferred, for a variety of reasons, to mourn the *absence* of the conventions they felt sustained and justified poetry as an art form rather than analyze the *presence* of new conventions, shaped by new forces coming from outside poetry proper, that transformed it, however momentarily, into something else.

Perhaps for the earliest readers of Xiao Gang's poetry, those who read it almost literally by the light of the fire that consumed the fallen capital of Jiankang 建康 (now Nanjing) in 549, and knew little of the southern culture that burned therein, this baffled, incredulous, staunchly moralistic stance was the only one available to them; they were faced with explaining how the richest and most populous kingdom in the Central States region (and the world, in fact) at the time could be reduced to ashes in a matter of weeks.[16] They looked to the writings of the puppet Emperor Xiao Gang and his ministers,

[16] Shufen Liu, "Jiankang and the Commercial Empire of the Southern Dynasties: Change and Continuity in Medieval Chinese Economic History," in *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm*, 200-600, ed. Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press), 35.

were shocked by what they perceived to be a decadent poetic style that had dangerously severed its connections with statecraft, saw this as one of the principle reasons the dynasty fell, and blacklisted it for centuries. We are under no obligation to make the same connections, and indeed no such *direct* connection between the literary activities of Xiao Gang and his ministers and the fall of the Liang dynasty exists to be made. Literature is first and foremost an *activity* and as such it takes place among other activities. All too often we mistake the results for the multi-dimensional activity that produced them. The texts we read are surrounded by an artificial silence. It is the goal of commentary first, to add in the noise of the other texts, discourses, events, and activities that surrounded the text and then to detect harmonies, patterns of resonance and sonority, that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Xiaofei Tian was one of the first, if not *the* first, scholar to demand that we return to Liang dynasty poetry and read it against the grain of its reception. In chapters five and six of *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557)*, she offers one of the first extended accounts of the presence of Buddhist ideas in Liang dynasty literature and their influence on Xiao Gang's Palace Style poetry in particular.[17] In a brilliant analysis of poems on candles and candlelight, Tian uses the Buddhist concepts of *guan* 觀 (Skt. *vispasyana*), which she defines as "clear penetrating observation of the world as…transient, relative, constantly changing, and unreal," *nian* 念, both "concentration on a single object" (Sk. *smrti*) and an "instant in time" (Skt. *ksana*) and finally *se* 色 (Skt. *rupa*) or "form" to illuminate what she calls the "Buddhist

[17] Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: the Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

mise-en-scene" of these poems.[18] She goes on to argue that Palace Style poetry, "…instead of being about women and romantic love… is about concentration, about a new focused way of looking, and about the extraordinary, and yet often ignored, power of noticing."[19] In the present work, I seek to use this thesis as a kind of template for a much more restricted, but in some ways also more focused, analysis of Xiao Gang's "poems on things" in which, I will argue, he is exploring Buddhist ideas about the nature of mind and emptiness at a level of what we might now call "philosophical" depth that is unique both for this period and within Chinese poetry as a whole.

In this thesis I will perform close readings of six of Xiao Gang's "poems on things" (hereafter simply "*yongwu* poems") in which, I will argue, that the very act of perceiving and describing the object functions at a figurative level to indicate the fundamental emptiness of the sensuous forms the poem depicts. Of course for Xiao Gang—and this is very much in keeping with Buddhist ideas about the nature of reality in circulation at the time—it is only through a sustained engagement with perceptual experience that we can come to this realization and begin to act on it. Further, I will claim that the *yongwu* genre, which positions the poet in a kind of contemplative relationship to a thing in the world, provided Xiao Gang with an ideal vehicle for exploring Buddhist conceptions of mind and emptiness. By using the *yongwu* genre in this radically new way he opened up a path for a use of figurative language in poetry that would not be taken again until the late Tang.

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[18] Ibid., 211-259.

[19] Ibid., 233.

In making these claims, I am pushing back against a number of conventional assumptions about poetry in this period. One of the reasons the *yongwu* genre has rarely been studied is that it is often assumed to be a static genre used either for pure entertainment at parties or for the purposes of demonstrating one's literary talents in the hopes of receiving a promotion. Moreover *yongwu* poems are often assumed to contain either a Confucian allegory of the overlooked scholar-gentleman pining for recognition from a potential benefactor or no allegorical or figurative content at all. By exploring Xiao Gang's thematization of abstract Buddhist philosophical concepts in his *yongwu* poems, I hope to suggest that a much broader range of figurative modes of poetic meaning was available to poets in this period than is often assumed to be the case.

Second, I am offering a counterargument to the anachronistic but nevertheless widespread claim that Xiao Gang's Palace Style poetry represents a kind of "art for art's sake." At the conclusion of this paper I will argue that the poems I analyze in this paper must be read as demanding more of the reader than mere momentary aesthetic enjoyment. These poems invite reflection and contemplation, which is not, of course, to say that they were not intended to be enjoyed; they certainly were, but it is the *mode* of enjoyment that has changed. I hope to show that it is precisely the clarity with which the complex ideas in these poems are expressed in *poetic*, rather than purely philosophical language, that is the intended source of aesthetic enjoyment, not merely the beautiful content of the poems themselves.

Finally, I aim to contest the hard and fast distinction, more visible in the editorial practices that have shaped the tradition than anywhere else, between "religious" or "devotional" poetry, which is supposed to have had a purely ritual function and "secular,"

serious poetry, which dealt with worldly affairs and supposedly shunned religious themes.[20] My claim is that this distinction between religious and secular modes of expression is a thoroughly modern one. It will be clear in what follows that Xiao Gang explored ideas and utilized motifs we would now call "religious" in a genre of poetry we now think of as thoroughly "secular," insofar as it is assumed to deal with the matter of fact realities of this world rather than the world of the beyond. For Xiao Gang, however, it seems no such rigid distinction between bodies of thematic material seems to have existed, or if it did exist it did not have the status of an absolute, and therefore uncross-able, border between kinds of utterance. If we have largely failed to recognize the Buddhist elements in these poems it is at least in part due to the fact that we view Buddhist poetry through the lens of the simple, direct, lucid verse of later "recreational" Buddhist poets such as Wang Wei 王維 (701-761) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846). Buddhist imagery in the Liang period was baroque by comparison with the minimalism of the Tang.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the Buddhist concept of emptiness as Xiao Gang might have understood it. Emptiness (*kong* 空 or *sunyata* in Sanskrit) is a complex philosophical concept with a complicated history and we must resist the impulse to

[20] Stephen Owen has argued, for example, with respect to Wang Wei's 王維 poetry that, "… the poetic tradition and the concept of poetry it presumed excluded the possibility of a truly religious or devotional poetry. Not until the early ninth century did the scope of poetry broaden enough to admit a discursive and meditative treatment of religious values; this can be found in some of the poems of Po Chu-yi. But for a body of poetry whose primary orientation was religious, one must go outside the secular poetic tradition to the collections of Han-shan and Wang Fan-chih." *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 44. Although I doubt Owen would hold onto this distinction between the religious and the secular for the entire Chinese poetic tradition were he called upon to defend it today—he wrote this in 1981—this is the kind of distinction I intend to trouble in tracking the use of Buddhist images, themes, motifs, and modes of seeing in Xiao Gang's poetry.

understand it merely intuitively, as is, unfortunately, so often done in treatments of Buddhist ideas in studies of Chinese poetry. In the poems I analyze in this thesis, Xiao Gang is approaching emptiness through the Buddhist concepts of "non-duality" (*wuer* 無二) and "dependent co-arising" (*yuanqi* 緣起 Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*).

The doctrine of non-duality is perhaps best understood through its deployment in the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra*. Xiao Gang would have been familiar with the text (most likely in Kumarajiva's 鳩摩羅什 (334-413) translation as the *Weimojie Suoshuo Jing* 維摩詰所說經)—it was extremely popular, so popular in fact that the *Liang shu* 梁書 (The history of Liang dynasty) tells us that Xiao Gang's mother, who probably would have played a central role in educating him as a child, was apparently an expert on this text.[21] Put simply, the doctrine of non-duality states that an excessive attachment to either component of a naive binary opposition between emptiness and sensuous reality is, after all, still a form of attachment and must, on that basis, be relinquished in the pursuit of enlightenment. In the sutra Vimalakirti lectures on the importance of utilizing aspects of sensuous reality to teach a non-sensuous truth. The form of the sutra itself is a kind of object lesson on the movement through sensuous images called forth in the imagination

[21] *Liang shu* 梁書, Comp. Yao Cha 姚察 and Yao Silian 姚思廉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 7.157. Quoted in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 191. The *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* enjoyed huge popularity during the Southern Dynasties period, due at least in part to its literary qualities. Étienne Lamotte has called it the "crowning jewel of the literature of the Great Vehicle." See Étienne Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti* (Vimalakirtinirdeśa), trans. by Sara Boin (London: Pali Text Society, 1976). Erik Zürcher has suggested two factors that made it particularly attractive in the Chinese context: 1) the "dramatized exposition of one simple theme on a great variety of doctrinal issues" and 2) the often highly entertaining dialogue between Vimalakirti and his guests that "must have been strangely reminiscent of their own rhetorical meetings devoted to the discussion of more or less philosophical themes." See Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 131-2.

towards a truth that transcends them. It begins with Vimalakirti in his tiny house visited by thousands of gods, bodhisattvas, spiritual beings perched on immeasurably tall thrones all of which the reader is to imagine fitting into the space around Vimalakirti's body.[22] The room is then gradually transformed into an infinitely expansive earthy terrain with its own rivers, mountains, ecosystems in which heavenly flowers rain down on the heads of the worshipers, and beings change genders instantaneously. Finally Vimalakirti enters into *samadhi*, or meditation, and gains access to a world in which the "Buddha of Accumulated Fragrances" 香積佛 teaches by means of fragrances.[23] The sensory forms of knowledge are gradually reduced until finally Vimalakirti falls silent, because to speak would be to fall into dualism.

A second, related approach to the concept of emptiness I am arguing Xiao Gang explores in his poetry is that of "dependent co-arising" (*yuanqi* 緣起). The most well-known treatment of this concept occurs in Nagarjuna's 龍樹 (c. 150-c. 250) *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Fundamental verses on the middle way) another of the works translated (along with other related texts and commentaries) by Kumarajiva's group as the *Zhong lun* 中論 (Treatise on the middle way) in 409.[24] Nargarjuna's concept of "dependent co-arising" reconfigures an older iteration of this same idea, which held that suffering arises within the eternally efficacious network of causal relationships between

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[22] John R. McRae trans. "Translator's Introduction," in *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, in *BDK English Tripitaka* 26-1 (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 68.

[23] Ibid.

[24] For Kumarajiva's translation see *Taishō*, 30.1564. For an English translation of the Tibetan text as well as a commentary that covers key aspects of Nagarjuna's philosophy see Jay L. Garfield trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

past, present, and future lives known as karma.[25] He argues instead that we should understand suffering as rooted in the mutually constitutive causal relations which both *give rise to* the difference between perceiver and perceived, self and world, and *mask* their interrelatedness—it is precisely at the this level that karma can be said to operate. [26] On this reading, emptiness does not refer to the non-existence of the real world but to the absence of an eternal and unchanging, self-identical substance (*zixing* 自性 Skt. *svabhava*) underlying the seemingly stable world we experience with our senses.[27] Emptiness is the underlying condition of change and transformation. Because change and transformation are only intelligible in relation to emptiness through an appeal to sensuous forms, for Nagarjuna, as for Vimalakirti in the sutra above, the forms of the sensuous world must be used as a kind of prop for the teaching of the dharma.

It is only through an engagement with these approaches to the concept of emptiness that we can understand how poems full of sensuous forms and vivid images can be about emptiness. For Xiao Gang, as a lay practitioner of Chinese Buddhism, or what was known as a *jushi* 居士 (Skt. *upasaka*), such as Xiao Gang, during the Liang dynasty, the use of poetry, even of erotic poetry, to explore these themes was perfectly consistent with the Buddhist idea of "expedient means" (*fangbian* 方便) as it was understood in the Southern Dynasties. The doctrine of "expedient means" is a central component of both the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* and the *Zhong lun*. This was the idea

[25] Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 238.

[26] Ibid., 237-238.

[27] David Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1987), 120.

that the dharma had to be expressed *in* language and *through* images in order to be understood and put into practice, even if those images appealed to the senses. The association of Buddhist teachings with evocative images caused Buddhism to be known in China as the "way of images" (*xiangjiao* 像教) throughout the early medieval period.[28] The best example of this doctrine for our purposes comes from the eleventh chapter of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra*:

> There are Buddha lands where the illumination of the Buddha performs the Buddha's work, or where the bodhisattvas perform the Buddha's work, or where conjured persons created by the Buddha perform the Buddha's work, or where the bodhi tree performs the Buddha's work…or where groves and pavilions perform the Buddha's work, or where the thirty-two characteristics and the eighty subsidiary marks perform the Buddha's work, or where the Buddha's body performs the Buddha's work, or where empty space performs the Buddha's work. Sentient beings respond to these conditions and are able to enter into the Vinaya. There are [other Buddha lands] where dreams, phantasms, shadows, echoes, images in mirrors, the moon reflected in water, mirages during times of heat, and other metaphors perform the Buddha's work; or where sounds, words, and letters perform the Buddha's work…[29]
>
> 或有佛土以佛光明而作佛事, 有以諸菩薩而作佛事, 有以佛所化人而作佛事, 有以菩提樹而作佛事,…有以園林臺觀而作佛事, 有以三十二相, 八十隨形好而作佛事, 有以佛身而作佛事, 有以虛空而作佛; 眾生應以此緣得入律行. 有以夢, 幻, 影, 響, 鏡中像, 水中月, 熱時炎, 如是等喻而作佛事. 有以音聲, 語言, 文字而作佛事.[30]

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[28] Xiaofei Tian, *Visionary Journeys: Travel Writings from Early Medieval and Nineteenth-Century China* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 78) (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 51.

[29] John R. McRae trans. *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, BDK English Tripitaka 26-1 (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 177.

[30] *Taisho* 14:475.553c.

This notion that even music, poems, and images that double as metaphors, many of which will show up in some form in Xiao Gang's *yongwu* poems, could be used to do the work of the Buddha was widespread in the 5th Century. Xu Yunhe 許云和 has documented the Liang dynasty practice of transforming the "erotic folk songs" (*yange* 豔歌) that were popular at the time into religious songs that would be performed as a kind of offering, or rather given as sustenance (*gongyang* 供養), to the Buddha.[31]

My approach to Buddhist ideas in Xiao Gang's poetry will differ from Xiaofei Tian's approach in *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star* in at least two ways. First, Tian's work is a survey of Liang dynasty literary culture as a whole and as such she is primarily concerned with, to use her own word, "mapping" networks of texts. Indeed, the work touches on nearly everything and everyone in the period at some point often moving in the space of a few pages through a dizzying number of texts and anecdotes. Needless to say then, she must sacrifice in depth what she gains in breadth and scope. The core of this thesis, by contrast, is a series of close readings, each of which aims to open the poem up onto the Buddhist philosophical ideas it both contains and pulls in from other discursive and non-discursive contexts. Second, instead of looking at Buddhist motifs in Xiao Gang's poetry *in general* I will be focusing specifically on his "poems on things," because, as will hopefully become clear in what follows, this genre of poetry was primed for the exploration of Buddhist ideas of perception and emptiness. This is so precisely because of the way in which it invites the poet to visualize and thus to contemplate an object or a thing outside of him.

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[31] Xu Yunhe 許云和, "Fojiao yu liuchao wenxue kaolun," 佛教與六朝文學考論 in *Han Wei liu chao wenxue kaolun* 漢魏六朝文學考論 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), 129-52.

Finally I would like to clarify briefly what I mean by metaphor and/or figurative language. For the purposes of this paper, the term metaphor will refer to any unit of language, whether a turn of phrase or an entire poem, in which terms from one semantic domain are made to share certain features of terms in a different semantic domain.[32] Each term retains, at some basic level, the significance it had in the semantic domain of its origin while simultaneously acquiring other meanings through the action of its being made to signify in the semantic domain of the other term. The relationship between the terms can be one of direct equivalence, substitution, or juxtaposition—what is important is that both signifiers share certain aspects of a signified they do not share when they are used in isolation.

Now, this is all very abstract. Let us take one of the most metaphorically over-determined images in the Chinese poetic tradition— leaves falling from trees in late autumn—as an example. If the poet uses falling leaves as a metaphor for the passage of time (usually of the poet into old age), it is understood that the poet himself is not losing his leaves nor are the trees experiencing or bemoaning the passage of time along with the poet. Rather the ageing process in the body of the poet captures some aspects of the trees' response to the seasonal change from autumn to winter, just as the moment when the trees lose their leaves is made to capture and resemble a moment in the ageing process of the human body coinciding with the loss of hair, teeth, the withering and shrinking and cooling of the body, the replacement of bright *yang* energy with dark *yin* energy, etc. As

[32] This definition is a slightly modified version of the definition J. David Sapir offers in his discussion of the relationships between metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche in "The Anatomy of Metaphor" in *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric* ed. J. David Sapir and Christopher Crocker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

Philip Wheelwright has pointed out, the power of a metaphor derives from the "semantic tension" between the vehicle, in our example falling leaves, and the tenor, here, the passage of time and all of the feelings associated with it as experienced by the poet.[33] The tension results from the fact that the poet and the trees are *not* equivalent entities, nor is the aging process of the trees equivalent to the ageing process of the poet. Indeed, the difference is *essential*: the trees will live again but the poet will not. The terms of this metaphor must be similarly different or, vice versa, differently similar in order for a properly poetic thought to develop in the first place.

I will be arguing that in Xiao Gang's poetry the way in which the thing is described serves as a kind of metaphor for some deeper truth about the object that only reveals itself to the poet in his attempt to grasp the object with language. In some cases the very nature of the object being observed and described, for example in poems on smoke, clouds, and reflections, acts as the vehicle for a more abstract tenor in which this nature is universalized i.e., said to be true of all sensuous reality. In other cases, the object is observed so closely that it breaks down and allows the poet to catch a glimpse of some transcendent realm. The language of these poems points not to the object being described, nor to a tenor hardwired, as it were, into its vehicle, but to the purposive activity of the poet's mind as he attempts to mediate that activity with an awareness of the illusory nature of all things. In order to understand Xiao Gang's use of metaphor in the *yongwu* genre as properly innovative we must first understand how metaphor was used in conventional *yongwu* poems.

[33] Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1962), 51.

CHAPTER II

"POEMS ON THINGS": FROM EMBLEMS TO EXPERIENCES

There are a number of different ways we might translate *yongwu shi* 詠物詩—poems on things, poems singing of objects, poems intoning things, poetic descriptions—all of them just misleading enough in their entailments to justify retaining the first two terms *yong* and *wu* in the original Chinese. The term *yong* 詠 means, fairly straightforwardly, "to sing of or about something," although it is unclear whether these poems "singing of" things were in fact sung, chanted, or simply recited. The sticking point is the term *wu*, for which there is no translation into English that does not end up evoking something more singular and more concrete than *wu* does in classical Chinese. *Wu* can refer to an armrest, a bird, a boil, a needle, a tornado, fog, wind, a flock of birds or the morning sun. In trying to understand the scope of the term it will be helpful then to look at its etymology. We should keep in mind Gadamer's reminder in *Truth and Method* that etymologies are "abstractions achieved not by language but by linguistic science, and can never be wholly verified by language itself: that is, by actual usage."[34] Thus he claims, "…even when etymologies are right, they are not proofs but achievements preparatory to conceptual analysis, and only in such analysis do they obtain a firm foundation."[35]

Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) concludes from an examination of early oracle bone inscriptions that *wu* 物 originally referred to a cow with a kind of speckled,

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[34] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 103.

[35] Ibid.

variegated coat and later to a kind of colorful silk handkerchief.[36] He suggests that, "on the basis of *wu*'s having referred to a variegated cow, it was used to name multi-colored silk, and it was for this reason that it came to refer to the ten-thousand sundry things of the world" 由雜色牛之名，因之以名雜帛，更因以名萬有不齊之庶物.[37] Thus, for Wang, the confetti-like patterning of the cow's hide evoked something of the manifold diversity of the ten thousand things (*wanwu* 萬物). Following a similar line of reasoning, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1868-1936) hypothesizes that it was through the action of differentiating a single kind of animal, probably livestock, with differently colored or patterned fur, that *wu* took on the abstract meaning of "category" or "kind" of thing.[38] We can see this usage in the *Zhou li* 周禮 (Rituals of Zhou): "[The stable master] differentiates between the six different kinds of horses by kind: there is the stud-horse kind, the war-horse kind, the plain-horse kind, the courier-horse kind… " 辨六馬之屬，種馬一物，戎馬一物，齊馬一物，道馬一物…; Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200) glosses *yiwu* 一物 as *yilei* 一類 or "one kind."[39] As this meaning became more generalized it came to refer to a kind of standard form or role for an object in a set. In the *Zuo zhuan* 左

[36] Wang Guowei, 王國維. *Guantang jilin* 觀堂集林 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 287.

[37] Ibid., 288.

[38] Zhang Taiyan 章太炎. *Zhang Taiyan quanji* 章太炎全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985) 40-41.

[39] *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤, vol. 4, *Zhou li zhushu* 周礼注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999) 859. Quoted in Wang Hui 汪晖, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* 現代中國思想的興起, vol. 1, *Li yu wu* 理与物(Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008) 261. Translation modified from Xiang Wan, "The Horse in Pre-Imperial China" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 115. http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1878&context=edissertations

傳 we have, for example, "The ministers and officials, like *wu*, spring into motion" 百官象物而动; Du Yu's 杜預 (222-285) gloss reads, "*Wu* means "kind"… the ministers and officials, according to the category [of their office], spring into action: they do not move haphazardly" 物猶類也… 百官皆象其物類而动, 無妄动也.[40] *Wu*, in this formulation, has the same normative status as a musical note in a scale. The identity of A-sharp has both a material component in the tension of the wire and a relational component in the restricted field of possible notes it harmonizes with. The "ten thousand things" is, in some sense, the set of all possible harmonic relations of this type. The *Zhongyong* 中庸 section of the *Li ji* 禮記 states, "Sincerity is the be all and end all of things" 誠者物之終始; Zheng Xuan glosses *wu* here as the "ten thousand things" 萬物.[41] It is crucial to remember that the Chinese cosmos is a unitary system: there is only *one* order of things. The cosmos and the system of rites and music do not and cannot act independently of one another; they always act simultaneously, the one *with* the other—hence the obsession in early texts with "timing" (*shi* 時). The *wu* are the "things" that make up this system; they are relational entities, neither facts, nor discrete, self-contained, atomic beings alienated from their place in the whole. Natural objects are not strictly distinguished from artificial objects, nor do humans stand outside of this system. The patterning of the dynamic relationship between humans (*renwu* 人物) and other *wu* produces *qing* 情, a kind of

[40] *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤, vol. 7, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999). Quoted Wang Hui, *Xiandai*, 261-2.

[41] *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤, vol. 6, *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 1450. Quoted in Wang Hui, *Xiandai*, 262. Brook Ziporyn translates *cheng* 誠 as "Unseen Coherence." See Brook Ziporyn, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thoughts; Prolegomena to the Study of Li* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 222.

reality effect, often translated "feelings" or "sentiments." *Qing*, in many early texts, is where poetry and music come from. The *Yue ji* 樂記 (Record of music) section of the *Li ji* contains the following oft-quoted explanation of the origin of music. "Music arises from tones. It has its basis in the human heart-mind's being stirred by things" 樂者，音之所由生也. 其本在人心之感於物也.[42]

The first mention of the practice of using an object to express what is on one's mind occurs in the "Discourses of Chu" 楚語 section of the Warring States text *Guo Yu* 國語 (The discourses of the states): "If from this they do not comply… write a "singing of an object" in order to do it" 若是而不從…則文詠物以行之.[43] Many of the poems in the *Classic of Poetry* take up a similar strategy of indirect, almost allegorical, communication. Interestingly, a favorite candidate for the first *yongwu* poem of any kind is the "Ode to an Orange Tree" 橘頌 attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原 (c. 343 BC-c. 278 BC). There the allegorical significance of the orange tree, which stays resolutely planted in the soil of its native land, is made clear in nearly every line.[44] The orange tree serves as an emblem for a particular kind of human action; it is what we might think of as an organic signifier insofar as its physical form—its beauty, its rootedness in the ground, its ability to produce delicious fruit, even its preference for southern climates—*is* its meaning. During the Western Han 西漢 (206 BC-24 AD) dynasty, court poets were commissioned

[42] *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤, vol. 6, *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 1075.

[43] Quoted in Zhong Zhiqiang 鍾志強, "Liu Chao yongwu shi yijie xinlun" 六朝詠物詩義界新論, *Wenxue yu Wenhua* 文學與文化 no. 4 (2013): 57.

[44] Gu Tinglong 顧廷龍 ed. *Chuci zhushi* 楚辭注釋 (Hubei: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1985), 398-399.

to write *yongwu fu* 詠物賦 or "rhapsodies on objects," often about objects in the palace, legendary animals, or gifts the emperor received from guests in the capital. These poems usually contain a detailed description of the object followed by a proclamation of its fitness for a man of great virtue i.e., the emperor. Their metaphorical content is minimal. This begins to change in the Eastern Han 東漢 (25-220). The *yongwu fu* of the Eastern Han poet Ban Zhao 班昭 (45-c.115) are some of the first that suggest a turn away from the standard court poem and toward the more contemplative mode of the *yongwu shi*. Her "Fu on the Cicada" 蟬賦 and her "Fu on Needle and Thread" 針線賦 both use particular characteristics of these rather ordinary objects (for example the "straightness" (*zheng* 正) of the needle) in order to hint at a moral "meaning" that goes beyond the mere description of the object.[45]

The first *yongwu* poems (in contrast to rhapsodies) appear in the Six Dynasties period. These poems put into practice the ancient principle of "taking up a thing to indirectly convey one's intent" 託物寓旨 already apparent in the poetry of the Eastern Han literati.[46] The format for these early *yongwu* poems dictated that the poet take up an object already sufficiently layered with classical meaning, such as the *wutong* 梧桐 tree, describe its features in such a way that the object takes on some of the emotional coloring of the poet's perception of it, and then conclude with some thought or question that more directly clarifies the poet's state of mind. Interestingly the genre of the *yongwu shi* might

[45] David Knechtges, "From the Eastern Han through the Western Jin (AD 25-317)," in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: Volume 1 To 1375,* ed. Stephen Owen and Kang-I Sun Chang (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 129.

[46] Qian Zhongshu, "Imagery in the Changes and Songs," in *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*, trans. Ronald Egan (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998), 134.

be thought of as an outgrowth of an early gloss of the character *shi* 詩 "poetry" as *chi* 持 "holding," "grasping," or "holding forth" in the apocryphal commentary on the *Classic of Poetry* entitled *Han Shen Wu* 含神霧 (Containing spirit mist) mentioned in the "Illuminating Poetry" 明詩 chapter of Liu Xie's 劉勰 (465-520) *Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龍.[47] The "hand" radical on the character *chi* 持 suggests both the tactile grasping of a thing and a "holding out" or "perduring" in time. The court poets and crown princes of the Southern Qi 南齊 (479-502) and Liang dynasties both widen the range of intoned objects while at the same time increasing their capacities for figurative meaning. In this period there are poems intoning dilapidated bridges, fireflies, mirrors, smoke, moss, parasitic vines, and even dust on wooden rafters.

Despite the interest among Liang dynasty literati in grouping written works into distinct categories, there is little evidence to suggest that the *yongwu* genre was well defined enough to constitute a category of its own. Xiao Tong's colossal *Wen xuan* 文選 anthology, for example, does not contain a separate section for *yongwu* poetry although it includes plenty of poems we would now consider to be exemplary of this genre. Zhao Hongju 赵红菊 has also pointed out that it was not until the Qing dynasty that *youngwu* poems were anthologized as an independent genre of poetry.[48] In addition, the *yong* prefix, which would later come to signal the genre, was applied inconsistently throughout the Southern Dynasties period. One of Xiao Gang's most famous *yongwu* poems "On a Beauty Looking at A Painting" 詠美人看畫 is listed as simply "A Beauty Looking at a

[47] Liu Xie 刘勰, *Wenxin Diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注, ed. Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1975), 65.

[48] Zhao Hongju 趙紅菊, *Nanchao yongwushi yanjiu* 南朝詠物詩研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), 5-8.

Painting" 美人看畫 in the Chen 陳 dynasty (557-589) anthology *New Songs of the Jade Terrace* 玉臺新詠 compiled by Xu Ling 徐陵 (507-83).[49] It would be unwise then to rely exclusively on titles to decide which poems are *yongwu* poems and which are not. We must look instead at structural characteristics of the poems themselves that signal that the poet is working in the *yongwu* mode, regardless of whether or not he (or the manuscript copyist!) bothered to include *yong* in the title. It will be on the basis of these genre signals that I will treat "Tower Reflected in Water" 水中樓影 as a *yongwu* poem, despite the fact that its title does not include a genre marker.

Beginning in the Yongming 永明 period (483-493) there are roughly two kinds *yongwu* poems. The first, which we might term "conventional," contains a generalized description of an object that is easily overlooked and then moves to call out a specific feature or hidden capacity of the object that, if noticed, would allow the object to come into its own i.e., transform it into something useful. These *yongwu* poems are transparently allegorical: the object stands for the poet who hopes his talents will be recognized by the emperor or some other high-ranking official. Cynthia Chennault has linked the rise of *yongwu* poetry to the unseating of the aristocratic clans (*shizu* 世族) by the so-called "cold gates" (*hanmen* 寒門) or commoner clans during the Southern Dynasties period and the corresponding need to create a system of patronage that would select candidates for office on the basis of talent rather than birthright.[50] As Ping Wang

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[49] 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), 1953.

[50] For a detailed analysis of the transformation of the *yongwu shi* during the Southern Dynasties see Cynthia Chennault, "Odes on Objects and Patronage during the Southern Qi," *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History* ed. Paul Kroll and David R. Knechtges (Provo, UT: T'ang Studies Society, 2003), 331-98.

points out, “the art of writing poetry thus reemerged as an important site of competition for cultural prestige after a respite during the fourth century.”[51] The second kind—more rare or perhaps less often preserved in anthologies, it is impossible to tell—contains a rhapsodic or *fu*-like description of all the minutely perceived details of a beautiful object and serves only to remark on its beauty. Often this type of purely descriptive *yongwu* poem is associated with Palace Style poetry but it is in fact fully present in the poetry of the Southern Qi court—Shen Yue’s pair of *yongwu* poems “On the Embroidery on the Side of her Collar” 詠領邊繡 and “On the Sandals Beneath Her Feet” 詠腳下履 are both good examples.[52] We can now look at Shen Yue’s 沈約 (441-513) “On Green Moss” 詠青苔, which, I will argue, contains all of the genre signals of a conventional *yongwu* poem.

詠青苔　　On Green Moss

綠階已漠漠　It has already climbed and covered the steps.
汎水復綿綿　And floating on the water it spreads and spreads.
微根如欲斷　Just as its tiny roots look to be on the verge of snapping,
輕絲似更聯　The light filaments appear to link up once again.
長風隱細草　From the long winds it hides in fine grasses.
深堂沒綺錢　In the innermost hall it disappears beneath the coin-patterned drapes.
縈鬱無人贈　Complex traceries with no one to be given to.
葳蕤徒可憐　Luxuriant growth, it's loveliness in vain.[53]

[51] Ping Wang, “The Art of Writing Poetry: Liu Xiaochuo’s ‘Becoming the Number-One-Person for the Number-One Position,’” in *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook* ed. Wendy Swartz et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 246.

[52] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1652.

[53] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1652. Translation modified from Richard B. Mather trans., “Singing of Azure Moss,” in vol. 1 of *The Age of Eternal Brilliance: Three Lyric Poets of the Yung-ming Era (483-493)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 119.

In an eight-line *yongwu* poem, the first couplet typically describes some aspect of the object indirectly either by describing a part of the object without naming it or through an allusion that signals the object being described without referring directly to it. In Shen Yue's "On Green Moss," the moss (or possibly some kind of algae) is signaled by its presence in two conventional locations: growing on stone steps and floating on the surface of a pond. Some of the emblematic nature of the object is still retained here in the semantic double-ness of the subject. Richard Mather points out that Shen Yue seems to be describing both the kind of moss that grows on flat surfaces in cool humid environments and the kind of moss or algae that grew in water and was cooked and eaten as a delicacy; hence, the reference to the moss being given (*zeng* 贈) as a gift in the final line.[54] Even if it was some particular moss in the world that occasioned the poem, the moss of the poem is not tied down to a particular place or a particular time.

The second couplet, usually the first of the two parallel couplets around which the poem pivots, focuses the description, adding color, texture, motion, or some other minute perception. Judging from his existing works, a favorite device of Xiao Gang's seems to have been the simile comparing the object to something else. Shen Yue also tends to use similes in this position as he does in this poem. Interestingly *ru* 如 and *si* 似 are used here to endow the moss with an imaginary motion, first of breaking then of coming back together. Ideally the second couplet should be suspended between the descriptive and the figurative. Here the description of the "tiny roots" and "light filaments" is both accurate and bespeaks of the resilience of the plant. The third couplet, also parallel, can perform a number of functions. Often it serves to widen the frame adding a dimension of generality

[54] Richard B. Mather, "Singing of Azure Moss," 119n.

to offset the specificity of the second couplet, while at the same time reinforcing and extending whatever allegorical dimensions have already begun to emerge.

In the third couplet of this poem Shen Yue seems to be speaking not of a particular patch of moss but of moss in general, lighting on its propensity to stay hidden from view. This level of generality is the door through which the allegorical level of meaning to be unpacked in the final couplet will enter. The final couplet in most standard poems on things involves what we might call an "inward" turn, that is, a statement or a question that brings to the surface the submerged elements of the description, clarifying the poet's intention. This often takes the form of a metaphor that operates on two levels simultaneously. Shen Yue pities the moss, and thus also himself, commenting that it cannot be put to use (i.e. eaten) and thus that its loveliness cannot be fully appreciated. The metaphor in which the scholar gentleman is "used" or "consumed" can be traced back to the ancient metaphor in which the talent of an individual or even a region is referred to as "timber" (*cai* 材) to be delivered to and used by the emperor in the same way that wood might be used to give warmth construct a palace.

As we will see in the next chapter Xiao Gang's Palace Style poetry disrupts the smooth transition from the description of the object to the allegorical framework in which it is endowed with value and significance. Xiao Gang and the other poets in the Palace Style group tarried with the experience of beholding the object, extending the process of poetic description in such a way the act of description itself took on a significance of its own. The technical mastery with which the poet was able to capture or contain the uncontainable experience of beholding not just any object but an object that was overwhelming in its beauty within a highly regulated form of poetic language served as a

kind of allegory for the mastery of the experience itself. It was through this dialectic of the tenuous, transitory, uncontainable, and un-masterable experience of the beautiful object and the mastery of poetic language within which this experience could be given a more permanent form that we can speculate the connection between the framework of the *yongwu* poem and Buddhist ideas about the nature of reality occurred to Xiao Gang.

CHAPTER III

XIAO GANG AND PALACE STYLE POETRY

The dynastic histories provide two "origins" for Palace Style poetry. The *Liang shu*, compiled by Yao Cha 姚察 (533-606) and Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557-637), both contemporaries of Xiao Gang, attribute the style to Xiao Gang's tutor and lifelong advisor Xu Chi 徐摛 (474-551) recording that he "liked newness in writing and was unconstrained by old styles…" and that "…since his style was so unique, everyone in the Spring Residence [the Crown Prince's residence] started to imitate it; the term "Palace Style" arose from this" 屬文好為新變, 不拘舊體…摛文體既別, 春坊盡學之, 宮體之號, 自斯而起.[55] The *Nan shi* 南史 (Southern history), compiled nearly a century later under the direction of Li Yanshou 李延壽 (dates unknown), attributes the designation to Xiao Gang: "[Xiao Gang] was fond of writing rhapsodies and poems, in the preface to his collected works he says, 'Already at the age of seven I developed an obsession with poetry, now that I am older it has not flagged.' Thus his writings suffered from being light and ornate" 雅好賦詩, 其自序云, "七歲有詩癡, 長而不倦."然帝文傷于輕靡, 時號"宮體."[56] It is interesting to note that, although we do see hints of the negative assessment of Palace Style poetry that would become the standard "take" on the style in the *Southern History*, both characterize Palace Style Poetry as precisely that, a *style* of poetry invented by Xu Chi and Xiao Gang and practiced by the literary coterie that formed around them during their time at the Spring Residence, which of course coincided

[55] *Liang shu* 30.446-447. Quoted in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 175.

[56] *Nan shi*, 8: 233.

with Xiao Gang's appointment in the Eastern Palace. There is no mention of palace ladies or romantic themes.

The assumption that the "Palace" of Palace Style Poetry names the *content* of the poems undoubtedly comes from the mistaken and anachronistic conflation of the genre with the love poems by Xiao Gang and his clique that were included in the Chen 陳(557-589) dynasty anthology *New Songs of the Jade Terrace* 玉臺新詠. These poems were taken to be representative of Palace Style Poetry despite the fact that, as Hu Nianyi 胡念貽 has astutely pointed out, love poetry makes up only one third of Xiao Gang's extant collection of poems, one-fourth of Xiao Yi's collection, and one-tenth of Yu Jianwu's 庾肩吾 (487-551) existing works.[57] Hu's observation, made in 1964, was almost completely ignored by later critics. Cao Daoheng 曹道衡 and Shen Yucheng 沈玉成 claim that Palace Style Poetry has three main characteristics. First, Palace Style poems are characterized by the strict observance of rules for meter and parallelism, more strict observance, it is implied, than can be found in poems from the Yongming period. [58] Second, Palace Style poetry progressed from a light and delicate to a more ornate and decorous style.[59] And third, Palace Style poetry takes erotic feelings and boudoir objects. as its primary theme.[60]

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[57] Hu Nianyi 胡念貽, "Lun gongti shi de wenti" 論宮體詩的問題. *Xin jianshe* 新建設, nos. 5-6 (1964): 168. Quoted Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 211.

[58] Cao Daoheng 曹道衡 and Shen Yucheng 沈玉成, *Nanbeichao wenxue shi* 南北朝文學史 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 247. Quoted in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 182n.

[59] Cao and Shen, *Nanbeichao*, 247. Quoted in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 182n.

[60] Ibid.

Scholars outside of China, with the exception of Xiaofei Tian, have not strayed far from the notion that Palace Style poetry has something inherently to do with romance and eroticism. In her book length study of Palace Style Poetry, *Games Poets Play: Readings in Medieval Poetry*, Anne Birrell focuses on this poetry's "single, amatory theme" analyzing and criticizing the way in which these poems turn women into objects of the male gaze.[61] In his chapter on Xiao Gang, Wu Fusheng offers a more historically nuanced definition of Palace Style Poetry in terms of what he takes to be its "project." According to Wu, Palace Style Poetry is "a deliberate attempt to undermine the canonical concept of poetry by carefully separating the aesthetic quality and concerns of poetry from its social and political obligations."[62] For Wu, however, the primary way in which Xiao Gang "undermines the canonical concept of poetry" is by writing poems with erotic rather than political themes.[63] Again the analysis turns on content rather than form. Ronald Miao offers a definition that goes further toward taking into account this wider context, claiming that:

> 'palace style poetry is a thematic designation for Chinese verse centered on the life of the imperial residence, and may include such varied but related subject matters as court functions and ceremonies, objects of palace art and architecture, landscape, as well as that most glamorous of fixtures with the harem or 'forbidden interior,' the palace lady.[64]

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[61] Anne Birrell, *Games Poets Play: Readings in Medieval Chinese Poetry* (Cambridge, Eng.: McGuinness China Monographs, 2004), 5.

[62] Wu Fusheng, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 4.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ronald Miao, "Palace-Style Poetry: The Courtly Treatment of Glamour and Love," in *Studies in Chinese Poetry and Poetics* (San Francisco: China Materials Center, 1978), 1.

Miao correctly calls attention to the fact that "palace" names the historical place that served as a focal point for a thematically unified kind of poetry with a diverse content but his discussion lacks a detailed account of style.

Zhang Shuxiang 張淑香 has argued that Palace Style poetry differs from the court poetry of the Yongming period by focusing not so much on the mere description of thing perceived but on the evocation of the experience of beholding the object.[65]

> As for the principal objective of Palace Style poetry, the emphasis was in fact placed on "giving expressive form to the thing" and not on "depicting" it. Put another way, it was concerned with presenting the "aesthetic experience"—the "thoughts and feelings" themselves — not the "particular object"—the "thing" itself. Therefore, in its presentation of images [of things], it was not a kind of realistic description [that the Palace Style poets were concerned with], but the modeling of an aesthetic experience, a kind of objectification of feelings, sensations and emotional states.
>
> 宮體詩本身的旨趣, 重點實在是在於"體"物, 而非在於 "寫"物. 換言之,是在於呈現"美感經驗"—"感覺"—的本身, 而不是"具體對象"—"事物"—的本身. 因此,其中物象的呈露, 就非僅是一種寫實的狀態, 而是一種美感的造型, 一種感覺情趣的具象化.[66]

According to Zhang Shuxiang, the focus shifts from merely meticulously describing the thing itself (寫物) to recreating the sensation or aesthetic experience of beholding the thing (體物). This entails a change in the *kind* of details the poet records. To put it simply we move from descriptions which present the object as a series of linked images which add up to a description of the object to descriptions which present the object through a series of minute perceptions which reproduce the experience of

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[65] Zhang Shuxiang 張淑香, "San mian 'xiawa'—Han Wei Liuchao shi zhong shong nüxing mei de suxiang," 三面夏娃—漢魏六朝詩中女性美的塑像, in *Shuqing chuantong de xingsi yu tansuo* 抒情傳統的省思與探索 (Taipei: Da An chubanshe, 1992) 150-152. See Ou Lijuan, "Gongti shi zhuanti."

[66] Zhang Shuxiang, "San mian 'xiawa,'" 150.

beholding the object without giving a full account of the object itself. Palace Style poetry introduces a degree of abstraction into the poetic description of an object: the sensation of perceiving the object is described rather than the object itself. This degree of abstraction is not a product of distance. Rather it is a product of extreme proximity. Objects are described in such sensuously rich, but nevertheless fragmentary detail that they break apart into intensities. The poet's eye in these poems is used as a tactile organ, hence the felt proximity of some Palace Style poetry to pornography. We can see this haptic use of poetic language in one of the most commonly cited Palace Style poems "On A Wife's Afternoon Nap" 詠內人晝眠.

北窗聊就枕　By the north window she leans against her pillow.
南簷日未斜　Over the southern eaves the sun has not begun to slant.
攀鈎落綺障　Pulling out the hook, she lets down the silken curtain.
捵捩舉琵琶　Inserts the plectrum and raises the pi'pa.
夢笑開嬌靨　Dreaming, she smiles, showing her dimples.
眠鬟壓落花　Sleeping, her hair presses the fallen petals.
簟文生玉腕　The pattern of bamboo mat shows up on her jade wrist.
香汗浸紅紗　Sweet-smelling sweat soaks through the red tulle.
夫壻恆相伴　Her husband is ever at her side.
莫誤是倡家　Do not mistake her for a courtesan.[67]

Although this poem is undeniably aimed at seducing the reader, it does so without ever giving us a unified picture of the woman we are watching sleep in the extremely intimate setting of her bedroom. We see her almost exclusively through the things she touches or that touch her and this seeing itself becomes a kind of touching. We see the pillow she leans against, the curtain she lowers, the *pipa* she raises, the dimples—as though pressed into her face—that appear when she smiles, the petals pressed down by

[67] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1941.

her hair, the pattern the bamboo has pressed into her arm, the fabric, pressed against her body, as it is made damp by her perspiration. She is, in some sense, caressed into existence as a series of intense but momentary perceptions, without even being seen in her totality. We have details, minute perceptions, which, through their intensity, create, without ever adding up to, the experience of seeing this woman asleep in her chamber. The final lines have often been read as Xiao Gang's attempt to clarify his relationship to this woman he has described in such a sexually provocative manner, but I read it as a playful moment in which the fictional or artificial frame of the poem in which the reader or hearer vicariously observes a courtesan (one possible reading of *neiren* 內人 in this period) sleeping in her private chamber" is jarringly identified with the actual frame of the poem, namely, that of the husband "always by her side" writing a poem about watching his wife sleep. The last lines reveal that we are effectively seeing the husband seeing, or rather seeing through his eyes unawares. In other words his presence frames the presence of the reader in this very private space of the innermost chamber. In many of Xiao Gang's "boudoir poems," the beauty of the scene is offset by this sudden doubling of the frame through which some other reality or perspective intrudes.

The other element of pleasure to be had here lies in the appreciation of technical mastery. The diction, the parallelism, the prosody all works together to produce a series of images that wash over the reader, drawing him in. Both of these processes—the description of sensations rather than objects and the attention to craft, rhyme, meter, parallelism etc.—push the poet to take up a more abstract, introspective relationship to the object. We can sense that Xiao Gang has very carefully crafted this series of lines, zeroing in on a very specific set of details while omitting others, and this is precisely what later readers found intolerable.

Xiao Gang's own appreciation of the poetry of his contemporaries seems to have been tied more to the technical aspects of writing than to the status of the writer's lofty intentions (*zhi* 志). We happen to have a letter addressed to his cousin Xiao Ying 蕭暎 the Marquis of Xinyu 新渝侯 in which he thanks the Marquis for sending him a series of poems, presumably about a beautiful woman weeping in a tower, and praises what he sees to be their literary strengths. We should keep in mind that this is a letter written in the ornamental, often hyperbolic style that would have been standard even for letters exchanged between cousins and close friends, and thus we should not mistake it for a definition of Palace Style poetry or some kind of final statement of Xiao Gang's aesthetic tastes. The letter is in fact more revealing for what it does not praise than it is for what it does.

> Of these three poems you sent down to me: wind and clouds pour out from between the lines! Pearls and jade spring up out of each character! Bounding over Cao [Zhi] and Zuo [Si], they surpass Pan [Yue] and Lu [Ji]. Her temples face the light, her beauty and grace absolute; the flowers and pins in her hair shake as she walks in the way of the ancients. In the high tower she curses her fate, knitting her eyebrows, it shows in her face. At Changmen palace she weeps, washing away her makeup, leaving streaks. There are also those thin-waisted ladies in the images/reflections that make you think they are real; pretty faces in mirrors that equivalent to those in paintings. These [poems] display extraordinary sentiments and are extraordinary for their novelty.
>
> 垂示三首, 風雲吐於行間，珠玉生於字裏，跨躡曹左，會超潘陸。雙鬢向，風流已絕；九梁插花，步搖爲古。高樓懷怨，結眉表色；長門下泣，破粉成痕。復有影裏細腰，令與真類；鏡中好面，還將畫等。此皆性情桌絕，新致英奇…[68]

[68] Yan Kejun 嚴可均, comp., *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 11: 3011. I follow the punctuation given in Cao Minggang 曹明綱 ed. *Liuchao wenjie yizhu* 六朝文絜譯注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 234-8.

Although the images in the opening lines of "wind and clouds pour out from between the lines" and "pearls and jade springing up out of the characters" may have been a standard way of praising good poetry within the Palace Style group, the image is still arresting. What's being praised throughout this description is a kind of illusory quality, the potential of poetic images to leap out of the poem and not merely reflect the real but reproduce it in "high definition." No mention is made of the poet or his message. Xiao Gang's praise is directed in its entirety towards the technical brilliance with which the images in the poem have been put into words. Xiao Ying has recreated a sensory experience that is so flawlessly executed it elicits a comparison with the real world and this is enough to win Xiao Gang's praise.

A poem that lulls one into a hypnotic state of seeing while keeping one aware of the artifice of the scene is a kind of anti-poem: it opens the very circuit poetry seeks to close: between human and nature, between the integrity or virtue of the self and its manifestation in words in the form of a true record. Xiao Gang practiced a poetry that arose in a space between writing and the self. Xiao Gang's rids the action of poetic description of its *telos* in the communication of a hidden intent, but not to the end of having no purpose at all.

As I mentioned earlier, many of the themes and thresholds for figurative language that can be found in Xiao Gang's poetry arise out of his participation in the discussions of Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices begun by his father, Emperor Wu, after his conversion to Buddhism in 504. Members of the Liang court practiced a highly syncretic form of Mahayana Buddhism fused at the level of nearly all of its key philosophical terms and principals with neo-Daoism and one that included elements of a more demotic

strand of Pure Land Buddhism, such as the belief in the immortality of the soul.[69] Poets and officials in Xiao Gang's generation were highly influenced by the *Chengshi* 成實 school of Buddhist scholasticism and its "Doctrine of Two Truths." This doctrine stated that believers must strive to hold two contradictory positions on the nature of reality: 1) all things are illusory and thus nothing that has form (*se* 色) is what it is independent of the conditions under which it is formed and perceived by other things and 2) what is real is the illusory nature of all things. Some subscribed to a third truth, holding that even the attachment to the truth of the illusory nature of all things had to be abandoned in the end.[70] This is a more philosophically worked out version of Nagarjuna's identification of emptiness and dependent co-arising in his *Treatise on the Middle Way*. For Nagarjuna, and for most of Xiao Gang's contemporaries, humans were living in a kind of purgatorial moment between eras in which a real Buddha walked among men. As Meow Hui Goh explains in her book *Sound and Sight: Poetry and Courtier Culture in the Yongming Er*a, this process of realization had three stages: "extinguishing the *jiaming xin* 假名心 ('mind of provisional reality'), and then the *faxin* 法心 ('dharma mind'), and finally the *kongxin* 空心 ('mind of emptiness')."[71] Unlike some other schools of Buddhism this process of emptying the mind did not involve getting rid of perceptions and thoughts. Rather as Goh has observed, "At a certain level, the *Chengshi* school maintained that all perceptions were real and could not become empty until they were completely broken down through

[69] Kenneth Chen, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 123-31.

[70] Whalen Lai "Further Developments of the Two Truths Theory in China: The Ch'eng shih Tradition and Chou Yung's San-tsung-lun." *Philosophy East and West* 30.2 (1980): 139-61.

[71] Meow Hui Goh, *Sound and Sight: Poetry and Courtier Culture in the Yongming Er*a (483-493) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 19.

repeated analysis."[72] As Shen Yue explained in his *Shen bu mie yi* 神不滅議 (Discussion of the immortality of the soul) the practitioner had to develop his powers of concentration (*ding* 定) to the point where his perceptions would appear as a remote "succession of thought-instants" (*nian* 念).[73] By becoming acutely aware of the temporal, and thus temporary, nature of sensuous reality as it presented itself to the mind, one could pierce through the appearances and dwell in the emptiness of the phenomenal world without growing attached to things. Xiaofei Tian suggests that the reading and recitation of sutras, particularly the "Three Sutras of the Pure Land" (*jingtu sanbu jing* 淨土三部經), aided with these exercises.[74] Meditation usually entailed reciting the Amitabha Buddha's 阿彌陀佛 name (*chengming nianfo* 稱名念佛) or visualizing his image in the pure land (*guanxiang nianfo* 觀想念佛).[75] For Xiao Gang, an intuitive link between the format of the *yongwu* poem, in which the poet visualizes an object in language, and Buddhist visualization exercises in which the practitioner visualizes either the body of the Buddha or some natural phenomenon such as bubbles, clouds, or reflections, which were intended to provide a template for meditating on transience. Indeed we might suggest that Xiao Gang's *yongwu* poems challenge the gloss of "poetry" discussed earlier as a kind of tactile "holding forth" (*chi* 持) insofar as the very practice of concentration (ding 定) that seems to be a prerequisite of the kind of description and figuration these poems require the poet to perform, is finally aimed not at grasping the object but at demonstrating the emptiness and futility of this very gesture.

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid., 226.

[75] Ibid.

In each of the six *yongwu* poems I analyze in the next chapter, this grasping with words is designed to show itself as having nothing finally in its grasp besides the words. But the poem is necessary to get to that point. The more completely the likeness of the experience of perceiving the object is captured in the language of the poem the more easily its fundamental unreality can be shown and thus transcended.

CHAPTER IV

THE POEMS

"On Smoke"

詠煙	"On Smoke"
浮空覆雜影	Floating through the void, mingling shadows below.
含露密花藤	Dew laden, it darkly caresses the wisteria vine.
乍如洛霞發	Suddenly pouring forth like the sun-red mists of the Luo;
頗似巫雲登	Now, rising like the rain clouds over Mt. Wu.
映光飛百仞	Reflected beams of light fly up eight hundred feet.
從風散九層	Born aloft on the wind, it scatters nine layers high.
欲持翡翠色	Anxious to retain its kingfisher blue color,
時吐鯨魚燈	From time to time, it must puff itself out of the whale fish lamp.[76]

The first thing to note is that we do not begin with the smoke emitted from the whale lamp in the final lines but with a mountain top mist (also *yan* 煙) that "floats through the void" as though over a landscape. This is remarkable. I know of no other *yongwu* poem from this period in which the object being described is revealed to be something else in the final couplet. The typical structure of the *yongwu* poem discussed in Chapter Two has been inverted: the description moves toward the object rather away from it. This language of the first couplet evokes a scene much larger than that of the presumably domestic space lit by the lamp in which the poem was composed. The mist hangs suspended like a cloud over the shadows it casts on the ground, causing them to mingle as it moves through the air. It is difficult to tell whether this shadowing effect is what causes the wisteria to darken—one possible reading of *mi* 密-- or whether this cloudlike mist is settling amongst or caressing these vines.

[76] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1274-8. Translation modified from John Marney, trans. "On Smoke," in *Beyond the Mulberries: An Anthology of Palace Style Poetry* (San Francisco: China Materials Center, 1982), 158.

In the next couplet the specificity of the smoke is again withheld through two similes. We will see in what follows that the use of paired similes in the second couplet is a kind of trademark of Xiao Gang's *youngwu* poems. To anticipate a Buddhist reading of the structure of this poem, we see through likenesses, similarities, and correspondences *before* we can see what is really there. The mist is described as being *like* the mist that rises off the surface of a river lit red by the sun and rain clouds rising over Mt. Wu. This line alludes to the "Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine" 高唐賦 attributed to Song Yu 宋玉 (ca. 319-298 BC) in which the poet recounts the story of a former king of Chu 楚 who stayed overnight at the shrine, located near the summit of Mt Wu, and dreamt that he was visited in his bed by a Daoist immortal.[77] Before departing she tells him, "in the morning I am the dawn clouds, in the evening I am the pouring rain" 旦爲朝雲，暮爲行雨. Xiao Gang's smoke even resembles the vapors (*yunqi* 雲氣) Song Yu and King Xiang of Chu observe hanging over the shrine in the opening section of the poem.[78] The mists are described there as, "abruptly rising straight up, suddenly changing appearance, in the space of a single instant, going through countless transformations" 崒兮直上, 忽兮改容, 須臾之間, 變化無窮.[79] This allusion adds a sensual, bewitching dimension to the smoke. Its allure, the spell it puts on the poet's senses, seems to be what draws forth the fantastic images in the next lines.

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[77] Xiao Tong 蕭統 comp. *Wen xuan* 文選 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1960), 393-397.

[78] Ibid., 394.

[79] Translation modified from David R. Knechtges trans., "Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine," in *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3:325.

The vision of clouds over mountains summoned by comparison in the second couplet becomes a real element of the scene being described in the third couplet. The scale is now massive. The beams of light the lamp sends up through the smoke are rendered as rays of sunlight sent hundreds of feet into the air, and the mist or cloud layer is scattered into the highest reaches of the atmosphere. The smoke can only be grasped indirectly, through the effect it has on other objects--such as the shadows or the vines—or through its likeness to other mists and clouds in an imaginary landscape. The poet can only grasp the constantly changing appearance of the smoke through this series of images and analogies. These become increasingly exaggerated as the visions stray further and further from the smoke hanging over the lamp. It is not until the final couplet that we see what the poet really sees. There the smoke is traced back to its source. The spacious vistas of the first six lines collapse and we are left with a humble little whale shaped lamp, puffing out smoke.

The poem moves from perceptions and conceptions through a kind of skein of fantastic images and allusions back to their cause in the burning oil of the lamp. Interestingly, the lamp is personified in the final couplet: it desires (*yu* 欲) to retain its beautiful color, which is not the blue of blue smoke but the blue of the kingfisher's feathers and in order to do this it must be emitted or equally emit itself from the whale shaped lamp. The lamp's desire is to sustain both itself and, by extension, the imaginary world it gives rise to in the mind of the poet. What has been perceived is transformed into a figure or metaphor for the action of seeing itself. The lamp smoke occasions a kind narrative reconstruction or working out of the Buddhist characterization of perception as a kind of projection. Interestingly the poem ends up by reversing the process it describes, following the images back toward their material cause in the lamp.

Xiao Gang is reworking the image of the mind as a lamp by focusing not on the light it gives off but on the smoke. According to the sutras the mind, like a lamp, sends light out into the void and in the process produces the contours of the visible world. Perception is understood on an analogy with illumination, projection outwards rather than inward reception, as we are accustomed to think. Just as a lamp only illuminates the surfaces it touches, the mind causes the world to take a form that meets the criteria of intelligibility not reality. At the same time the contours of what is illuminated also determine the shape of the visible world in a way that the lantern, no matter how bright, is unable to change. Moreover, the lamp cannot be relied on because it flickers, thus causing the contours of the visible to change constantly. The process this analogy describes is what Nargarjuna called "dependent co-origination." Here, however, it is the poem and the smoke that are in a causal relationship to one another. This humble little lamp, which must puff out smoke periodically in order to maintain its extraordinary appearance, mimics the action of the poet's mind as he generates fantastic likenesses for the smoke. The poem moves from these images, the outward appearance of the smoke described here as the *se* 色 of the lamp, back toward its cause, namely desire, to end paradoxically at a point that is in some sense prior to the poem even though it is located at the end. One is reminded of the man in the fairytale who walks through the snow with his shoes on backwards so that he ends his journey precisely where his tracks indicate he began it.

"Tower Reflected in Water"

Although this four-line "*jueju*" 絕句 ("broken off line" or quatrain) poem is missing the *yong* designation, the poem focuses on a single, spatially-bounded subject in

exactly the same way. This is the first of three poems we will look at that deal with reflections (*ying* 影) in water. We saw earlier in the lines quoted from the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* mentions the way in which metaphors such as "a moon reflected in water" and "shadows" (another meaning of *ying* 影) can do the Buddha's work. The *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* is, after all a teaching or instructional sutra, and Buddhists found shadows, silhouettes, and reflections to be particularly apt metaphors for the dual nature of reality. A shadow (and likewise a reflection) is produced by an object as its unreal counterpart, unreal in the sense that its status as real is secondary and conditional with respect to the object that produces it. According to the doctrine of non-duality, however, it is as much a mistake to take the shadow or reflection as real as it is to attempt to imagine conditions under which no shadows or reflections would be possible. The purpose of the metaphor is to teach that things and their shadows arise in a relationship of co- or inter-dependence. To recognize this through meditation and analysis and finally to accept it is a crucial step on the path to enlightenment. In this short poem Xiao Gang explores the relationship of an object and its reflection as it arises in perception.

水中樓影	"Tower Reflected in Water"
水底罘罳出	From the depths of the pond a tower emerges.
萍間反宇浮	Vaulted eaves float amongst the duckweed.
風生色不壞	A wind kicks up but the colors do not decay.
浪去影恒留	The wave passes on and the image remains.[80]

Just as in the poem "On Smoke," Xiao Gang does not begin with a direct description of the tower and the pool, placed in a logical spatial relationship to one

[80] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin,* 1976. Translation modified from Xiao Tian, *Beacon Fires*, 202.

another, as would be the case in a conventional *yongwu* poem. Instead he describes the reflection as though it is the primary scene, and even rationalizes the spatial arrangement of the object in the reflection. The result is almost surreal. The tower protrudes out of, or rises up from, the bottom of the pool. Of course we know its extension is in fact across the flat surface of the water but the spatial environment "within" the reflection is the one being described here. The vaulted eaves of the reflected tower are seen to float amongst the duckweed, causing the reflected world of the tower and the real world of the pond to interact. The brilliance of these images lies in the fact that the language of reflection is absent—the reflected scene is treated as real. The reader is expected to use the title to provide the context for this image. Interestingly then the poem describes what seems to be there and this in turn demands that the reader, in seeing *this*, sees instead what is *really there* not in the poem but in his mind's eye.

In the second couplet a wind kicks up disturbing the surface of the water, breaking up the reflected image of the tower but without decaying or distorting (*huai* 壞) its colors. The term for colors here is *se* 色 and given that it is placed in a parallel position over another Buddhist term, *ying* 影, we must also read it in its Buddhist context as "outward form" or "sensuous appearance." Thus the wind disturbs the surface of the water, "decaying" or "ruining" the image, but, because it only affects one half of the co-arising relation, it does not fundamentally change the appearance of the tower either in reality or in its reflected image. As the waves or ripples caused by the wind subside, the reflection remains. The wind here plays a similar role to the one it plays in the familiar description of the mind as a "lamp in the wind" (*fengdeng* 風燈), blown about by winds that cause it to flicker and finally go out. Here, however, it is precisely the wind that confirms for us the difference between the tower and the image, awakening us to the true

nature of the relationship. Xiao Gang is perhaps anticipating a dimension of the reflection in water metaphor that did not appear, to my knowledge, until much later in the tradition, namely, the notion that the enlightened mind is like the moon reflected in water: the water is undisturbed and the moon does not get wet.

The structure of the poem is remarkable. It takes us through the unreal world of reflections, what the Buddhist scriptures call the world of shadow matters (*yingshi* 影事), bringing us through the realization of its unreality to a position from which this unreality is precisely what is real. The tower, both moved and untouched, captures the semantic associations of the lightness of the reflection, which sits on the water, touching it without getting wet, and contrasts it with the heavy tug of the depths from which the tower is seen to rise. The poem can thus be read as a kind of contemplative exploration of the nature of reality, something that had never been attempted in the form of a *yongwu* poem prior to this moment.

"On Cape Jasmine"

詠梔子花	On Cape Jasmine
素花偏可憙	White blossoms, their plainness most appealing,
的的半臨池	Hang clear and bright, half-overlooking the pool.
疑爲霜裹葉	One would almost take them for frost-covered leaves,
復類雪封枝	Indeed they are like branches encased in snow.
日斜光隱見	The sun slants, light casts shadows and makes things appear.
風還影合離	The wind returns and the images coincide and differ.[81]

[81] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1965. Translation modified from John Marney, trans. "On Smoke," in *Beyond the Mulberries: An Anthology of Palace Style Poetry* (San Francisco: China Materials Center, 1982), 179.

Xiao Gang's subject in this poem is the cape jasmine (*Gardenia jasminoides*), also known as the gardenia. Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464-499) wrote a *yongwu* poem on the cape jasmine, but in his poem the flowering plant stands in for the poet, who, like the plant, has been removed to a cooler climate just beyond the reach of his benefactors at court, there figured as the warm rays of the setting sun.[82] Xiao Gang's poem contains no such allegory. In fact, it seems on the surface to be a kind of "pure" poetic description of the object devoid of allegorical content. We must be careful not to construct a binary opposition between the literal and the allegorical, such that the absence of one kind of figurative language through which "something else" might be communicated beyond the description of the object is equated with the absence of *any* figurative dimension whatsoever. Like the poems on smoke and the reflection of the tower in the pool, this poem is a description not of the cape jasmine itself but a kind of record of the different registers in which it is perceived.

We should first note that the poem consists of six lines rather than the customary eight. The absence of a fourth couplet does not necessarily indicate that the poem is a fragment. The encyclopedias through which many of the poems from this period were transmitted preserve fragments alongside complete poems and differentiating between the two is often left up to the reader. We possess *yongwu* poems in six lines, for example, which we can be reasonably sure are complete. Shen Yue's "Singing of the New Lotus Blossoms By Imperial Command" 詠新荷應詔 and "On the Zither" 詠箏 are examples of poems that conclude with a recognizably “final” third couplet.[83] We also have poems,

[82] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1437.

[83] Ibid., 1655.

such as Xiao Gang's "On the Rose (By Assignment)" 賦得薔薇 which seem to trail off.[84] I will be treating "On Cape Jasmine" as a fragment. The third couplet introduces a tension that needs to be resolved by some final turn ever so slightly back toward the flowers or away from the scene at hand. Indeed, the comment on the "loveliness" of the flowers in the first line almost demands that the poet return to them in the final couplet. In all three of Xiao Gang's *yongwu* poems we have looked at thus far, this turn away from the scene at hand is a kind of philosophically inflected meditation in which what has been seen is transformed into a figure of the act of seeing itself. The image of the reflection (*ying* 影) on the surface of the water in the third couplet strongly suggests that Xiao Gang would have taken a similar turn here, although we can never be sure.

The first couplet echoes lines from Qu Yuan's "Ode to the Orange Tree" mentioned earlier as a kind of the proto-*yongwu* poem: "Your leaves are green and your petals white, their profusion delightful to behold" 綠葉素荣, 紛其可喜兮.[85] It is the charming plainness of the flowers, the absence of bright colors, which sharpens the perception of their form. The *didi* 的的 of the second line, which I have translated "clear and bright," is an adjective that denotes clarity of outline, or the way something pops out against a background. This perception leads to paired similes, a signature of Xiao Gang's *yongwu* poetry. The poet compares the flower petals to "frost-covered leaves" and the branches they cover to "branches encased in snow." Since we know from the first line that these branches hang out over a pool, it is unclear whether the description refers to the flowers themselves or to their "image" (*ying* 影) in the water, mentioned in the next line.

[84] Ibid., 1972-3.

[85] Gu Tinglong, *Chuci zhushi*, 398.

There at least two ways of reading the image in the third couplet. The setting of the sun causes the difference between shaded areas and areas lit by the sun to become more apparent. The "light" (*guang* 光) in the third position in the fifth line, makes it very tempting to read the *ying* 影 in the parallel position in the sixth line as "shadow" instead of "image" (referring both to the branch and its reflection in the water) as I have translated it above. If it is in fact the "shadows" that are "meeting" or "coming together" (*he* 合) and "separating" or "departing" (*li* 離), what phenomenon are we to imagine the poet is describing here? And how are we to imagine the wind producing it? Does the wind move the branch and cause the shadows it casts to draw close to and then move away from the branch itself? The problem with this reading is that *he* and *li* are deictic verbs. *He* indicates a "coming together" or a "coinciding" or an "alignment" of two entities which were separated and are now united or joined. *Li* indicates separation or division. It describes the movement or change of one entity in relation to another that produces this separation or division or difference. A shadow, however, remains at all times connected to the object that produces it and moves with it in tandem. As any child who has ever chased one knows, it is not possible to move spatially towards or away from a shadow. Thus it is difficult to imagine how or why Xiao Gang would have described the movement of shadows with the verbs *he* and *li*.

The key to understanding the third couplet lies in the second line of the poem which describes the flower-covered branches "half-overhanging a pool" 半臨池. The scene being described here includes both the branch and its reflection (*ying* 影) in the pool. Thus when the wind returns it disturbs the reflected image of the flowers in the water, just as it disturbed the image of the tower's reflection in the previous poem. As the wind comes and goes, ruffling the surface of the water and returning it to mirror-like

flatness, the reflection of the flowering branches "coincides with" or "matches" (*he* 合) and then "differs from" or "departs from" (*li* 離) the branches themselves. We have already seen in our analysis of the previous poem that Xiao Gang is attuned to this phenomenon of wind disturbing the relationship between an object and its reflection so it is not a stretch to imagine that he is meditating on the same phenomenon here. This image of the branch and its reflected image suggest a new reading of the two images of the flowering branches in preceding lines. Indeed, the first couplet contains a description of the color of the flowers and the second a kind of reflection of this image in mind of the poet in the form of a simile. This spring flower is reflected across the calendar year into winter where it is covered in frost and snow. Perhaps it is also these two images—the image of the flower and the image of the flower's likeness—also meet up and draw away as the poet's mind is blown about by the winds of his fancy. Here again the vision of the poet is written directly into the scene itself. The reflection in the poem shows the poem to be nothing more than a reflection.

"On a Lone Duck"

It not surprising that Xiao Gang often chose to explore Buddhist themes in the four-line *jueju* or "quatrain" verse form. Of the poetic forms available to him it was the one best suited to deep but concise, almost *koan*-like meditations. In the poem "On a Lone Duck" Xiao Gang again takes up the theme of the reflection.

詠單鳧	"On a Lone Duck"
銜苔入淺水	It dives in the shallows for beakfuls of moss,
刷羽向沙洲	Heads to the shoals to preen its feathers.

孤飛本欲去　　Ready to fly off all by itself,
得影更淹留　　It finds its reflection and lingers on.[86]

As I said earlier, in order to detect the originality of the use of figurative language in Xiao Gang's verse we must look at both the history of the tropes it employs and the lexical and semantic structure of the poem itself. The history of poems about ducks, or rather in which ducks appear as figures for something else the poet intends to describe, goes all the way back to the *Classic of Poetry*. There, ducks always appear in pairs and seem to represent ideal forms of companionship, although not yet that of husband and wife, a romantic iteration of this trope that comes about much later. In his poem "Nine Pieces on Longing" 九思 the Eastern Han poet Wang Yi 王逸 (89-158) used the image of paired ducks to lament the suicide of the poet Qu Yuan, whose collected works Wang Yi was editing and commenting on at the time.[87] There, Qu Yuan is figured as an ideal companion with whom the poet desires to be paired. Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232) used the image of a lone duck calling for its mate in his poem "To Wang Can"贈王粲 to suggest again the desire for the companionship of a close friend.[88]

Nearer to Xiao Gang's time, the Liu Song 劉宋 dynasty (420-479) poet Bao Zhao's 鮑照 (416-466) poem "Variations on The Weary Road" 擬行路難 brings the happy image of a pair of ducks into contrast with the loneliness of the love-sick poet. Finally the Liang dynasty poet Xie Tiao, a near contemporary of Xiao Gang, wrote in his poem "On the Tufted Ducks" 詠鸂鶒 of these birds "Mingled in the shadows of wild

[86] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1973. Translation modified from Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 205.

[87] Wang Yi 王逸. *Chuci Zhangju* 楚辭章句, ed. Yang Jialuo 陽家駱 (Taipei: Shijie Shuju Yinhang, 1962), 196.

[88] Ibid., 451-2.

swans and simurghs" 得廁鴻鸞影 awaiting dawn so that they might fly off and join these legendary birds, or perhaps even be transformed into them, in some mythical, transcendent realm.[89] Here, as in so many of Xie Tiao's *yongwu* poems, the ducks represent the noble courtier whose value has not been recognized. He is incapable of transforming and showing his true worth because he is not in the *place* where he belongs and his *time* has not yet come.

Already we can see a shift in the use of ducks as figures for various aspects of human life, from paired ducks as metaphors for companionship, to lone ducks as metaphors for the *desire* for companionship, to ducks being the larval stage of a more beautiful, mythical bird, a bird that is itself a metaphor for the courtier whose value has finally been recognized. But Xiao Gang's lone duck is different. It is paradoxically both paired and alone. Thus the trope of paired ducks is repeated with a crucial and philosophically interesting difference. As Xiaofei Tian points out, "the discovery of its reflection prompts the duck to stay, and yet it is its staying that provides its reflection."[90] Xiao Gang's poem can be thought of as an illustration of the Buddhist term "shadow matters" (*yingshi* 影事), or the idea that all things are shadows of some more fundamental but unseen and un-see-able reality.[91] The Chinese word for shadow or silhouette (*ying* 影) can of course also mean reflection, as it does in this poem. Xiao Gang is commenting on the nature of attachment, of attachment as the condition of possibility for perception. It is the having (*de* 得) of perceptions that gives rise to the desire to

[89] Richard B. Mather, "Singing about the Tufted Ducks," in vol. 2 of *The Age of Eternal Brilliance: Three Lyric Poets of the Yung-ming Era (483-493)* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 41.

[90] Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 283.

[91] Ibid., 202.

"linger on" (*liu* 留) in the phenomenal world. The duck's "desire" (*yu* 欲) to leave (*qu* 去) perched in the last two positions of the third line is joined to the "attaining" (*de* 得) which immediately follows it. And yet if we look more closely at the language of poem, this image of the lone duck takes on an even deeper philosophical meaning.

The title of the poem "On a Lone Duck" is sly in at least two ways. First, as we discover in the final line, the duck believes it "has" (*de* 得) a companion, even if its having one is an illusion, and second, the poet is also present and his presence is written all over the language of the poem. We should notice first of all that the two verbs that mark the actions of the duck in the first couplet are highly purposive, goal-oriented action verbs. The duck enters (*ru* 入) the shallows with the intention of coming up with beakfuls of moss. It then moves toward the sandy islet where it preens its feathers. The duck is pictured not as a static object to be described by the poet but as an entity capable of performing tasks, and as one capable therefore of desiring to complete them. And yet it is the poet who observes this. Thus the ducks' actions are only purpose-driven in relation to him as the purposeful observer of the scene.

We can see this in the use of more deictic verbs in the second couplet. The duck is prepared and even "desires" (*yu* 欲) to "leave" (*qu* 去). The verb *qu* is deictic: it is always a leaving of some place or some person. Here, with no one else present, the poet is the one the bird will leave behind. In the final line of the poem the duck "gets" or "attains" (*de* 得) its reflection (*ying* 影) and "lingers on" (*liu* 留). The verb *liu* is also deictic. To *liu* is always to remain in a place or with a person. Here again the duck will linger alongside its illusory companion and the poet. Moreover the poet imagines that the bird *chooses* to linger on. Thus the duck is not the only one who has attained an illusory

companion—the poet has also captured the image of the duck, endowed it with all of the desires of his own mind, and made a record of his attachment to it in the poem in which the duck will linger on forever. Just as the duck perceives its own reflection so does the poet perceive himself in the actions and desires of the duck.

But the subtle difference between the duck, who does not understand that what it perceives is an illusion, and the poet, who does, is crucial. The poet has become conscious of this difference through the actions of observation, recording, and recitation, in other words, through a kind of contemplation of dependent co-arasing, analogous on some level with the meditation practices discussed earlier. His awareness of the impermanent, illusory nature of reality endows the ephemeral nature of what he has perceived with the kind of permanence that is unique to art. To return to our definition of a metaphor earlier in the paper, the domain of the duck's actions is made to signify in the domain of the purposive actions of the poet's perceiving mind just as the nature of the poet's consciousness does not manifest itself directly but is signified in the domain of the actions and perceptions of a lone duck.

"On Wind"

In some cases it is not the actual act of perceiving that carries the figural content of the poem but the nature of the object being described. In the following poem, wind is envisioned as an agent of change both in the world and in the poet who is figuratively "blown away" by the changes the wind brings about to a position outside of this change.

詠風　　“On Wind”

飄颻散芳勢　Wifting and wafting, it spreads a heavy fragrance
泛漾下蓬萊　Drifting and flowing it descends from the heights of Penglai
傳涼入鏤檻　Delivering cool, it enters the crenulated door of the tower chamber.
發氣滿瑤臺　Breathing forth its breath, it fills the Jasper Terrace.
委禾周邦偃　The wilting wheat stalks of Zhou are flattened.
飛鶾宋都迴　Eagles in flight are blown back over the Song capital.
亟搖故葉落　Violently shaken, the leaves fall to the ground.
屢蕩新花開　Swinging back and forth, new flowers bloom.
暫舞驚鳧去　Dancing momentarily, it startles away the wild ducks.
時送蕤香來　And from time to time brings back the sweet fragrance of flowers.
已拂巫山雨　Having already brushed away the Mt. Wu rains,
何用卷寒灰　What use is there in sweeping up the cold ashes?[92]

Startled ducks, dancing, scented robes, rain, and wind were by this time well established motifs of Daoist transcendence. The clear prototype of this and other *yongwu* poems on wind is the "Rhapsody on the Wind" 風賦 attributed to Song Yu which describes the wind as having a cool, fragrant, healing, male aspect, which only blows on kings and a dirty, foul, destructive, female aspect which only blows on the poor and destitute.[93] Although Xiao Gang is describing a very different kind of wind in his poem, he is clearly rewriting the scene Song Yu describes in his rhapsody. This powerful male wind is described as "dancing beneath the pine and cypress trees" 舞於松柏之下 until it eventually spreads out:

則飄舉升降，　Blowing and swelling upward and downward.
乘凌高城，　It scales and crosses high walls,
入於深宮，　and enters the innermost palace,
邸華葉而振氣　buffeting flowers and leaves and scattering their fragrances.
...　…
然後徜徉中庭，　then it rambles into the inner courtyard,

[92] Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin*, 1945.

[93] Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan*, 265-7.

北上玉堂，　　and northward ascends the jade hall
躋於罗幃，　　climbs the gauzy curtains,
經於洞房…　　and enters the inner chamber...[94]

The association of wind with transcendence probably originates with the *Zhuangzi* passage on the singing wind that plays through the pipes and openings on the surface of the earth. The interest in the phenomena of resonance and whistling among thinkers in the *xuanxue* or "abstruse learning" commentarial traditions that came to prominence during Wei and Jin dynasties surely strengthened this connection. Daoist immortals are often depicted as though standing in a windstorm, their streaming robes billowing out around them.

In the first couplet, a wind carries the heavy fragrance of flowers down from Penglai, the mythical disappearing island inhabited by immortals. This richly perfumed wind recalls the fragrant winds (*fangfeng* 芳風) of the Buddhist sutras; these were the clouds of incense that are described as inspiring worshipers and helping them to attain enlightenment. The reference to ashes in the final line strengthens this connection. This wind is then described as a breath that passes through an exquisitely carved doorway and fills the space of a private chamber, here metonymically associated with the Jasper Terraces that surround Xiwangmu's 西王母 palaces on Mt. Kunlun 崑崙. These references to the realm of the immortals contain a subtle reversal of the standard tropes associated with wind: normally the wind blows things from the mundane world to the realm of the immortals, here it is blowing from an otherworldly place towards the chamber in which the speaker—who should not be confused with the poet—is located, albeit only in the most general way. Just when we expect the wind to whisk the poet off

[94] Translation modified from David R. Knechtges trans. "Rhapsody on the Wind," *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3: 9-11.

to a transcendental dimension beyond time, in which he will be protected from the crush of daily affairs, the poem rather abruptly makes reference to two very different kinds of transformative winds.

The first is the windstorm which, according to the *Shang shu* 尚書, destroyed the autumn harvest in response to the self-imposed exile of the Duke of Zhou 周公. After King Wu 周武王 dies, the Duke's brothers begin spreading rumors that the Duke is a threat to the infant king. He responded by resigning.

> He then went to reside in the East for two years, and the wrongdoers were apprehended. After this he composed a poem for the King called "The Owl," and so the King no longer blamed the Duke. In the autumn the grain grew in abundance but just before it could be harvested, the heavens erupted with thunder and lightning, the grain was flattened, and tall trees were torn up out of the ground. The people of Zhou were terribly frightened.
>
> 周公居東二年，則罪人斯得. 于後公乃爲詩以貽王，名之曰鴟鴞，王亦未敢誚公. 秋大熟，未穫，天大雷電以風，禾盡偃，大木斯拔，邦人大恐.[95]

The second refers to the wind recorded in the *Zuozhuan* that blew six seahawks over the Song 宋 capital so that they appeared to be flying backwards.[96] When Lord Xiang 襄 of Song asked the Zhou scribe whether this was an auspicious sign he replied that it signaled turmoil in the surrounding kingdoms of Lu 魯 and Qi 齊 and thus that although the King would experience brief prosperity it would not last.[97] In the version of this story as it's told in the *Zuozhuan*, the scribe then remarks that the King should know

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[95] *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤, vol. 2, *Shang shu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 337.

[96] *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤, vol. 7, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 385-7.

[97] Ibid.

that natural disasters are manifestations of the relationship of *yin* and *yang* and that auspicious and inauspicious are categories that apply only to the actions of men.[98]

These examples in which destructive or ominous winds are the result of human actions, and act in the stories of forces of karmic redemption, are reversed in the next couplet where wind becomes the agent of both death and rebirth, shaking the leaves loose from the trees and causing flowers to bloom. These actions seem to happen simultaneously as though the seasonal time in which they would be separated by many months has been sped up. The winds "dancing" startles the ducks away and this action of departing is paired with the arrival of the fragrance. The verbs *qu* 去 and *lai* 来, placed in parallel positions at the ends of each line are a kind of anagram for *rulai* 如来 (Skt. *Tathagata*) or the name the Buddha often uses to refer to himself in the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* and elsewhere in the Pali canon. The name might be translated "the one who has thus gone and who in going has thus returned" and it is meant to suggest that the Buddha is the one who had transcended the distinction between coming and going and thus has transcended subjective measures of time. In the eleventh chapter the Buddha asks Vimalakirti, "When you wish to see the Tathagata, in what ways do you view the Tathagata?" He replies, "As if contemplating the real characteristics of my own body--so do I contemplate the Buddha. When I view the Tathagata, he does not come from the past, does not go in the future, and does not abide in the present."[99]

The final couplet is spoken from a position outside of this change, outside of this coming and going. Having already blown away the rain clouds on Mt. Wu, there is no use

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[98] Ibid.

[99] John R. McRae, *Vimalakirti Sutra*, 185.

in sweeping up the cold ashes: carried away by this wind, they will eventually be given new life. Significantly the wind sweeps away the "Mt. Wu rain" a reference to Song Yu's "Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine" mentioned earlier. The clouds have been cleared away and the mind cleansed of the effects and memories of a night of sensuous pleasure. In the same way the cold ashes, the dusty residue of the material body, will be swept clean.

At this point we might be tempted to ask why this poem cannot simply be read as a Daoist poem. What are we to make of the references to Penglai and the Jasper Terrace? Here it is important to remember that this distinction between mutually exclusive bodies of thematic material matters to us in a way that it almost certainly did not matter to poets writing in the Liang. Often poets in this period seem to be drawing on images from the classics with an eye to the efficacy and power of the associations they are capable of producing rather than to the school of thought they are affiliated with. Jinhua Chen has noted that, for example, in Lu Yungong's 陸雲公 account of the Dharma Assembly held over a 23 day period in 547, the miracles that supposedly accompanied Emperor Wu's lectures included a syncretic mixture what we might call, from our perspective, Buddhist-themed miracles, such as an extraordinary fragrance filling the air and being spread over the capital by the wind, as well as many "Daoist-themed" miracles, such as three-legged birds and five-colored clouds.[100] Commenting on the Buddhist image of the twin, Chen argues that intertwining *sala* trees (under which the is supposed to have Buddha died) gradually absorb the indigenous symbol of the *wutong* 梧桐 tree to the point where the two symbols could function simultaneously. She describes this as a "paradoxical

[100] Jinhua Chen, "Pancavarsika Assemblies," 88.

bidirectional process of "'Buddhafying' a Chinese idea with Buddhist ideas on the one hand and simultaneously sinifying a Chinese motif with a Buddhist image on the other."[101] Something similar is going on here with the wind that both blows from Penglai and enlightens, lifting one out of the cycle of death and rebirth. Xiao Gang uses this image of a perfumed wind as a kind of harbinger of the cycle of death and rebirth in a stele inscription he wrote for the Xiangguan 相官 temple. It reads:

> The silver gate-bolts gleam brilliantly, the alabaster pillars shine forth gold. The parapet is curled like a sylph's fist, the tower is like a soaring phoenix. The Buddha pearl is born of moonlight, the temple bell rings in the autumn frosts. Birds bring in the morning dew. Streamers hang from the apricot-wood rafters. Through the window wafts the flower-fragrance of thought, into the room cross the aromas of the mind. The sounds of the heavenly zither drift down in the night, the azure horse ascends at dawn. Life and death can be crossed over, far from bitterness and suffering one can attain the everlasting.
>
> 銀鋪曜色，玉碍金光. 塔如仙掌，樓疑鳳凰. 珠生月魄，鐘應秋霜. 鳥依交露，幡承杏梁. 窗舒意蕊，室度心香. 天琴夜下，紺馬朝翔. 生滅可度，離苦獲常. 相續有盡，歸乎道場.[102]

We should notice first of all that it is the dazzling visual aspects of the temple which make it fit for doing the Buddha's work. The "flower-fragrances of thought" and the "aromas of the mind" that waft in through the window recall the "Buddha of Accumulated Fragrances" 香積佛 from the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa* Sutra who teaches with fragrances alone. The fragrances which are blown in across the threshold of the tower have a similar "instructive" effect on the poetic persona.

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[101] Ibid.

[102] "Xiangguan si bei" 相官寺碑 in Cao Minggang 曹明綱 ed. *Liuchao wenjie yizhu* 六朝文絜譯注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 234-8.

Xiao Gang's poetic description utilizes these familiar generic signals to create an atmosphere of transcendence. The kind of transcendence he describes in the final lines however is not that of the sage who has been whisked away by the wind to a mythical realm outside of time but that of one who, like the Buddha, has transcended time without ceasing to exist in a temporal realm. From this perspective he can view this wind of transformation as the agent of a cycle that includes both destruction and rebirth. This evocation of cyclical time in this and two other poems on things is evidence that Xiao Gang was perhaps more keen than his contemporaries on exploring Buddhist images and themes in his poetry. It is important to remember that in Xiao Gang's moment the Daoist notion of transcendence and the Buddhist notion of transcendence were fused elements of one continuous network of concepts.

"On Clouds"

In another *jueju* poem, "On Clouds," Xiao Gang uses the description of the colors of a cloud to peak from a landscape in this world into an imagined landscape in the next, touching on the Buddhist theme of impermanence in the process.

詠雲　　"On Clouds"

浮雲舒五色，	Drifting clouds unfold in five colors,
瑪瑙映霜天。	Carnelian reflects the frosty sky.
玉葉散秋影，	Jade leaves scatter autumn shadows,
金風飄紫煙。	A metal wind sets the purple mist adrift.[103]

[103] Lu Qinli*, Xian Qin,*1972. Translation modified from Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fires*, 297.

Xiao Gang was the only poet to have written a *yongwu shi* on clouds. Xiaofei Tian has pointed out the similarities between the "five colors" of the first line and the descriptions of clouds in Lu Ji's 陸機 (261-303) "Fu on the Floating Clouds" 浮雲賦 in which he "compared the clouds of 'five colors' to lotus flower, rose-of-sharon, agate, and carnelian."[104] Tian goes on to add that, "[Lu Ji] also described the clouds as 'leaves of jade' being blown off 'golden boughs.'"[105] The image of "drifting clouds" in Lu Ji's poem, and in all other Chinese poems of the period, comes from the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra*, where it is one of the "Ten Mahayana Metaphors" for the impermanence of all things.[106] If we read the nouns in the first two positions of each line, the poem would appear to be a kind of acrostic of Lu Ji's "Fu on the Floating Clouds," repeating exactly his description of the "five-colored" cloud. If we read it in the context of Liang dynasty Buddhism, the difference between the poems will become clear. As Tian Xiaofei explains,

> The Buddhist paradise known as the Pure Land is described as a diamond realm and decorated lavishly with the Seven Jewels, which include agate, carnelian, jade, and gold (also *jin* in Chinese). In this land even the trees are made of precious gems, such as beryl, crystal, and pearl… Their only difference from trees of the mortal world is that they do not decay: hence, they are beyond life and death.[107]

With this Buddhist landscape in mind it appears that Xiao Gang is using clouds as an occasion to paint over the "real" world of his sensory experience a more permanent

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[104] Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fires*, 297.

[105] Ibid., 297.

[106] Ibid., 248.

[107] Ibid., 298.

world in which there is no possibility of decay, namely the Pure Land. The ephemeral nature of the cloud becomes a figure for impermanence and this impermanence is then layered with the materials of a more permanent reality. A closer look at the language reveals that the poem contains another level of figurative language.

The first line of the poem has the drifting clouds "unfold" (*shu* 舒) in "five colors" (*wuse* 五色). This seems straight-forward enough but when we recall that *se* in the Buddhist lexicon means "form" the line seems not only to describe the colors but the forms of all ephemeral things (*fuyun* 浮雲). What follows pertains less to clouds than it does to the world the poet perceives around him: the sun, the trees, the purple smoke rising, perhaps, from an incense stand. The materials Xiao Gang has chosen to represent the forms of worldly things all come from what Roman Jakobson would have called the same "semantic field." These hard materials—carnelian, jade, and metal/gold—replace generally soft materials such as leaves and the wind.[108] They also contrast with materials drawn from the opposite semantic field of soft materials: shadows, and smoke. Thus the unified world the poet observes has been divided categorically in two: the landscape as he sees it and the landscape as he is imagining it in his mind. This poem comes as close to being a record of a meditative visualization exercise as any in Xiao Gang's repertoire. The action of the poem seems to involve the almost deliberate replacement of the materials of perception with the harder, more durable material of enlightened knowing. This fits very well with what we know about meditation practices in the *Chengshi* school of Buddhism. All of the verbs suggest that the ephemeral world is being cleared out and

[108] Roman Jakobson, "Two Types of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1995), 115-133.

replaced by more substantial materials. The carnelian passively "reflects" (*ying* 映) a hard and frosty sky, the jade leaves fall ridding the tree of its shadows (*ying* 影) but also its appearance (*ying* 影), and the unperceivable metal wind blows away (*piao* 飄) the purple smoke. And yet the poet's contemplation of permanence must contain within it a contemplation of impermanence. Thus the entire scene can also be read from the perspective of impermanence. The carnelian reflects the sky only as long as there is light to be reflected. The jade leaves fall and the tree loses its shadows. And finally the purple smoke is blown away. Holding this duality of permanence and impermanence in one's mind was the purpose of meditation. To return to our definition of metaphor, the domain of the world the poet sees is crossed with the domain of the world he imagines. Moreover, the world he imagines is located beyond this world if not in the afterlife of the enlightened, then at least in the mind of the poet.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Xiao Gang was perhaps the first poet in the Chinese tradition towrite in this particular way in this particular genre. The question remains, however, of precisely what Xiao Gang had in mind in writing these comparatively deep reflections on the nature of experience into a genre of poetry that was primarily occasional, both in the sense that it was almost certainly composed and read in the company of other poets and in the sense that it was meant to occupy a moment in time. Although I have pointed to the analogy between Buddhist practices of meditative visualization and the lingering over the constantly changing surfaces of the visual world in Xiao Gang's *yongwu* poems I do not want to suggest that these poems were intended to be used as tools for self-examination. Perhaps it was against the background of the occasional, fleeting, temporary nature of the gatherings they were meant to commemorate that the theme of transience emerged. In that case Xiao Gang turned to Buddhist ideas about the nature of reality both for artistic inspiration and for solace in a moment which was itself fleeting and destined to come to an end. His definition of poetry bears this out. In his commentary on the poem "Tomb Gate" (*Mu men* 墓門) from the *Classic of Poetry* Xiao Gang writes, "Poetry is thinking. It is also words." 詩者，思也，辭也.[109] As Xiaofei Tian has observed, no mention is made here of "feelings" (*qing* 情), and there is no talk of the traditional idea of "intentions" (*zhi* 志).[110] *Si* 思, moreover, implies a certain level of reflexivity: it is a thinking directed towards what is not present at hand. On this definition of poetry the

[109] Quoted in Xiaofei Tian*, Beacon Fires*, 308.

[110] Ibid., 308.

poet takes up a more abstract, distanced relation to the subject of the poem he writes, choosing some words and rejecting others in order to give a definite form to his experience.

We can thus conclude from the foregoing analysis that *yongwu* poetry in the Liang is not the static, "paint by numbers" genre of court poetry scholars have often treated it as but functioned for Xiao Gang as a venue for experimentation with new uses of poetic language. It should be clear, even from this small sampling of poems, that the figurative dimensions of *yongwu* poetry were not *strictly* limited to Confucian allegories. I have sought to suggest, through Xiao Gang's example, that a much broader range of figurative modes of poetic meaning was available to poets in this period than is often assumed to be the case; an analysis of figurative modes of description in the other Palace Style poets, as well as Xiao Gang's younger brother Xiao Yi would help to flesh this out. In Xiao Gang's case, at the very least, I have argued that these modes arise out of an engagement with Buddhist texts and practices. Further it is my hope that we can lay to rest the claim that Xiao Gang was an early advocate of "art for art's sake." The poems I have analyzed in this paper demonstrate that reflection and contemplation could be elicited alongside aesthetic enjoyment. Finally, my readings of Xiao Gang's *yongwu* poems suggest that the hard and fast distinction between devotional or religious poetry and serious, secular, worldly poetry is out of place in the analysis of Liang dynasty literature. Xiao Gang's poems demonstrate that the boundaries between these two "uses" of poetry were fluid rather than fixed. We would perhaps do well to adopt a similar fluidity and openness to other kinds of texts and textual practices in our readings of poetry from this period.

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