

Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798) and a Different ‘Elegant Gathering’

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Yu-an Mei – in the view of many the greatest Chinese poet of the eighteenth century – was born in Hangzhou in 1716 and died in Nanjing in 1798.¹ Yuan’s long life was marked by prodigious genius, enormous energy, literary celebrity, and unconventional behavior. Skilled in essay writing by the age of ten, at nineteen he was invited to Beijing to sit for the preliminary level of the special Erudite Literatus Examinations – only rarely given to recruit students of outstanding literary talent – and by 23 he had passed the examinations for the Metropolitan Graduate degree in the fifth place and was awarded a position in the prestigious Hanlin Academy with permission to work in one of the agencies of the central government. Yuan Mei also studied the Manchu language but failed his Manchu exams and was, as punishment, demoted to the position of district magistrate, an unhappy fate for someone who had flourished in Beijing.

After holding a number of bureaucratic positions in the lower Yangzi River area and distinguishing himself as a conscientious and fair-minded official, Yuan Mei retired from official life in 1749, at the age of 34, and devoted himself fulltime to his writing. It is noteworthy that, while he initially had to struggle to survive, Yuan Mei eventually managed to support himself and a large family, even to live quite luxuriously, without inherited money and without a government salary. He did so by living off his literary talents. His poems, essays, and stories were in great demand, as were his textbooks on

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essay-writing and also samples of his calligraphy. A rich Yangzhou salt merchant paid him two thousand ounces of silver merely for inscribing the cover of a book. Finally, like many famous literary figures before him, Yuan Mei wrote epitaphs; unlike his predecessors, however, Yuan's tomb inscriptions were in such demand that they provided him with the principal source of his income.

Yuan Mei's retirement years were also marked by unconventional behaviour of such an extreme nature on two occasions (in 1769 and 1772) that it appeared he might be prosecuted by the Qing authorities. That he escaped official condemnation is testimony both to his extraordinary reputation as a poet and scholar and to government connections that included some of the most important Manchu officials in the Qing government.

Yuan Mei became wealthy enough that, in the autumn of 1748, he acquired Suiyuan 隨園, his garden villa located in what is now the centre of Nanjing. There he eventually housed his extraordinary collection of paintings, furniture, artifacts, and porcelains. So famous was the villa, it was painted by a number of artists. Copies of these paintings were made in the early nineteenth century and one survives in the collection of the Nanjing Museum. It or another painting was the inspiration for woodblock prints of the garden that circulated in the second half of the nineteenth century. (The villa was destroyed in the 1850s during the so-called Taiping Rebellion and no trace is left.)

On 'Elegant Gatherings'

In 1765, Yuan Mei staged at Suiyuan a gathering of his male literary friends conventionally referred to as an 'Elegant Gathering'. Such social occasions were extremely fashionable in the eighteenth century. We find their origin in the famous *Xiyuan yaji* 西園雅集 'Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden', an eleventh-century gathering supposedly attended by the Northern Song dynasty poet Su Shi, the artist Mi Fei, and other luminaries of the day.² At Yuan Mei's 1765 gathering, four of his male colleagues joined him in his garden villa to engage in reading, playing the zither, conversing, and fishing.³ Yuan Mei asked the Wuxi artist Wu Xingceng 吳省曾 to paint the scene and

was overjoyed with how the artist had brought the participants ‘to life’ in his painting.⁴ So pleased was he with the results that Yuan asked acquaintances to inscribe the painting.⁵ Among those he invited to record their reactions to it were the woman poet Luo Qilan 駱綺蘭 (1754–?) as well as the two sisters Sun Yunfeng 孫雲鳳 (1764–1814) and Sun Yunhe 孫雲. Yuan seems to have been especially pleased with what the Sun sisters wrote, for he composed a response to thank them, probably in 1790.

咏絮才原出謝家，雙雙珠玉鬥妍華。
披圖頃刻香風起，開到西湖姊妹花。
掃眉才子兩瓊枝，自署門生遠致辭。
不怕程門三尺雪，兒家情願立多時。
惹得袁絲喜欲驚，千秋佳話在門庭。
河汾講席公侯滿，可有天邊織女星。

I could intone at length on the talent that originates in the women’s quarters,
as two-by-two the pearls and jade compete for the beautiful flower.
The instant I unroll the painting a fragrant breeze rises –
the flower-lyrics of the two sisters of West Lake are fully open.
These two jade-like talented women
have signed their names as students and presented lyrics from afar:
‘We fear not even three feet of snow at the gate of Cheng Yi,
our sincere wish is to stand at your home for a very long time.’
Their words make White-haired Yuan’s pleasure turn to surprise –
‘a fine tale to be preserved in my home for a thousand autumns.
The lecture halls between the Yellow and Fen Rivers are filled with dukes and
marquises,
surely at the edge of Heaven there is a place for the Weaving-Girl Star.’⁷

Yuan Mei’s insistence on the talent of women poets was a recurrent theme in his later poetry and other writings. For example, in a supplement to his ‘Suiyuan Poetry Talks’, he notes: ‘Ignorant indeed is the vulgar claim that women ought not write poetry. Confucius himself observed that three poems that cap the canonical *Book of Songs* were done by women’.⁸ Yuan Mei is deeply moved by the women’s equating him with the Song dynasty ‘Neo-Confucian’ master Cheng Yi and by their profession of loyalty. Their sentiments cause Yuan Mei to muse ironically that in an academic world dominated by

men there must be some corner 'at the edge of Heaven' that women might occupy.

In 1789, Sun Yunfeng had written another poem asking Yuan Mei to permit her to become his disciple.⁹ Sun Yunfeng and her younger sister Yunhe were the daughters of Sun Jiale 孫嘉樂, who had recently retired from his official career, after holding powerful positions in Yunnan and Sichuan, and returned home to Hangzhou where he built his garden villa Baoshi shanzhuang 寶石山莊 on the shores of West Lake. Yuan Mei was on friendly terms with Sun Jiale and had exchanged poems, paintings, and other gifts with him.¹⁰ Sun Jiale wrote a letter to Yuan Mei requesting that he agree to teach his two daughters.¹¹ Though Yuan Mei initially declined the requests (on the grounds that he was unworthy to teach such talented pupils), eventually he agreed to become their teacher. This does not seem to have involved Yuan actually teaching the Sun sisters – or any of the other women identified as his 'disciples' – how to write poetry. It seems instead a sort of recognition of such students having adopted his literary ideas and principles for writing poetry, things that the women would have read about in Yuan's widely circulated writings.¹²

Taking female disciples was not in itself unprecedented and sponsoring women's literature was probably not regarded as excessively unconventional in the eighteenth century. But in 1790, Yuan Mei did something unprecedented: he organized the first of several 'Elegant Gatherings' for women poets. It was probably regarded as somewhat scandalous that Yuan Mei organized these occasions so late in his life and that they involved a relatively large number of young women from a variety of locales in the Lower Yangzi River area. His motivations are not completely clear. No doubt he genuinely wanted to help along the careers of women whose poetry he admired. But it is likely that he would not have done so had he believed that such arrangements would diminish his reputation and fame.

Some people, perhaps with good reason, suspected that Yuan Mei's motives in taking female disciples were less than pure. After Yuan Mei's death, his younger contemporary, the lamentably ultra-conservative Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738–1801), attacked with

excessive vitriol Yuan Mei and his relations with his female students.¹³ Yuan Mei's attitude and behavior toward women were complicated. He studied and observed them as sexual objects, paying special attention to the quality of a woman's skin, assessing it as one might the glaze on fine Ming dynasty porcelain.¹⁴ In the spring and autumn seasons, Yuan Mei opened the gates of Suiyuan to female visitors. He strategically placed mirrors throughout the grounds so he could observe women adjusting their clothes, make-up, and hair. Extremely popular among his female visitors was a giant European mirror given to Yuan Mei by the provincial governor of Zhejiang. In his memoirs, Yuan Mei's grandson Yuan Zuzhi 袁祖志 (1827–1898) reports that so many women clustered around the mirror that 'it took days for the lingering fragrance of their perfumes to dissipate'.¹⁵

Yuan Mei's writings expose another side of his view of women. In numerous tales of the supernatural that he gathered together in his *Zibuyu* 子不語 (*Things of Which Confucius Would Not Speak*), Yuan Mei dwells on the plight of women abused by callous men.¹⁶ He makes it clear that such women are unlikely to receive justice from the civil authorities of the Qing; their prayers will only be answered by a god who takes pity on them and avenges the wrongs they suffer. In Yuan Mei's stories, women unable to wait for such cosmic retribution take matters into their own hands. Claiming to be possessed by demonic spirits, they wreak havoc on their husbands and families until right is done by them. Tales such as these are what first attracted me to Yuan Mei and to the subject of his relations with women.

Some History

In the fourth month of 1790, when he was 74, Yuan Mei travelled to Hangzhou 'to sweep the graves' of his parents. He took the opportunity to visit Sun Jiale and his daughters at their garden villa. After spending a pleasant time living as Sun Jiale's guest, Yuan Mei made preparations to depart and return home to Suiyuan on the thirteenth day of the month. To give him a proper send-off, Sun Yunfeng invited thirteen women poets to present Yuan with their own paintings and poems. In a note that he perhaps composed at

the time, or shortly thereafter, Yuan Mei refers happily to this event, describes the two banquet tables he had prepared to welcome his thirteen guests, and singles out Xu Yuxing 徐裕馨, who presented a landscape painting and four accompanying poems.¹⁷

A 1792 journey to Mount Tiantai again brought Yuan Mei to Hangzhou where he was Sun Jiale's guest for a second time. As was the case two years earlier, on the thirteenth day of the fourth month, a 'Poetry Gathering' was organized so that, in the words of Sun Yunhe, Yuan Mei could 'transmit the classics'.¹⁸ This time Yuan Mei invited seven 'female disciples',¹⁹ apparently fewer than in 1790, though there are some conflicting accounts that taken together suggest that we cannot take too literally the reports of the numbers of female disciples who attended the poetry gatherings.²⁰

Apparently on his journey home to Suiyuan at the conclusion of the 1792 'Poetry Gathering', Yuan Mei stopped in Suzhou where he invited thirteen women poets from that area to meet with him at Tiger Hill. We learn this in Yuan Mei's epitaph for Jin Yi 金逸, one of the women he invited to the Suzhou gathering.²¹ In addition to what the epitaph tells us about the circumstances of the Suzhou gathering, it is also noteworthy for what it reveals about what Yuan Mei felt towards the female poets he admired:

I have observed the world carefully for a long time, and every woman with talent I have met has been unlucky. Those who are also beautiful are even more unlucky. Women possessed of both talent and beauty who have married men who match them (in talent and beauty) are the most unlucky.²² Xianxian [i.e., Jin Yi] had all three reasons to be unlucky. It would have been difficult to wish her to survive for a long time in the world of men. My three sisters were talented and all three of them died young. Among my female disciples, Sir Xu Wenmu's daughter Xu Yuxing 徐裕馨 was the most talented and she died the youngest. Of my other disciples, if they were not lonely then they were poor.²³

While clearly not oblivious to their beauty, what seems most to have drawn Yuan Mei toward the literary women he knew was that – *because* of their beauty and talent – their lives were destined to be even more tragic than the ordinary women whose misfortunes he chronicled in his *Zibuyu* tales.

A Painting

To commemorate the 'Poetry Gatherings' that had occurred in Hangzhou and Suzhou in 1790 and 1792, Yuan Mei commissioned two artists – You Shao 尤詔 and Wang Gong 汪恭 – to do a painting entitled 'The Thirteen Female Disciples of Suiyuan Request Instruction at Lake Tower' 隨園十三女弟子湖樓請業圖.²⁴ The 'Lake Tower' of the title refers to Sun Jiale's garden villa in Hangzhou. Following the title – written by Yuan Mei's friend, the famous calligrapher Wang Wenzhi – the first part of the scroll consists of illustrated scenes in the garden villa, the first of which show thirteen of Yuan Mei's female disciples engaged in various refined activities. The last scene is a portrait of Yuan Mei. The painted scenes are followed by a colophon by Yuan Mei, another painted scene that supplements the first, a second colophon by Yuan Mei and then a set of inscriptions written by thirty-one different authors.

In his first colophon, Yuan Mei identifies for the viewer each woman, provides information on her important male relatives, and briefly describes what she is doing in the scene.²⁵ Moving from right to left, one sees first the sisters Sun Yunfeng and Sun Yunhe strolling beneath willows on the shore of West Lake (see *Figure 1*). To the left is Xu Yuxing who sits and listens to Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 play the zither (see *Figure 2*). The woman grasping an orchid is Wang Zuanzu 汪纘祖. To their right one sees Wang Shen about to inscribe a banana leaf. The young woman standing behind her is Yan Ruizhu 嚴蕊珠. Liao Yunjin 廖雲錦 sits at the table holding a brush and, in Yuan Mei's opinion, she appears to be thinking about something (see *Figure 3*). Opposite is Zhang Yuzhen 張玉珍, whilst Qu Wanxian 屈宛仙 sits at the end of the table. Both of them face in the direction of Xi Peilan and appear to have their attention fixed upon her and her zither. Further to the left one sees Jiang Xinbao 蔣心寶 standing against bamboos and Jin Yi holding a round fan. Bao Zhihui 鮑之蕙, the thirteenth disciple, is shown fishing (see *Figure 4*). In this last and final section of the painting, one sees Yuan Mei himself, attended by his nephew's wife Dai Lanying 戴蘭英, shown with her small son.

The women seem for the most part to be interacting with one

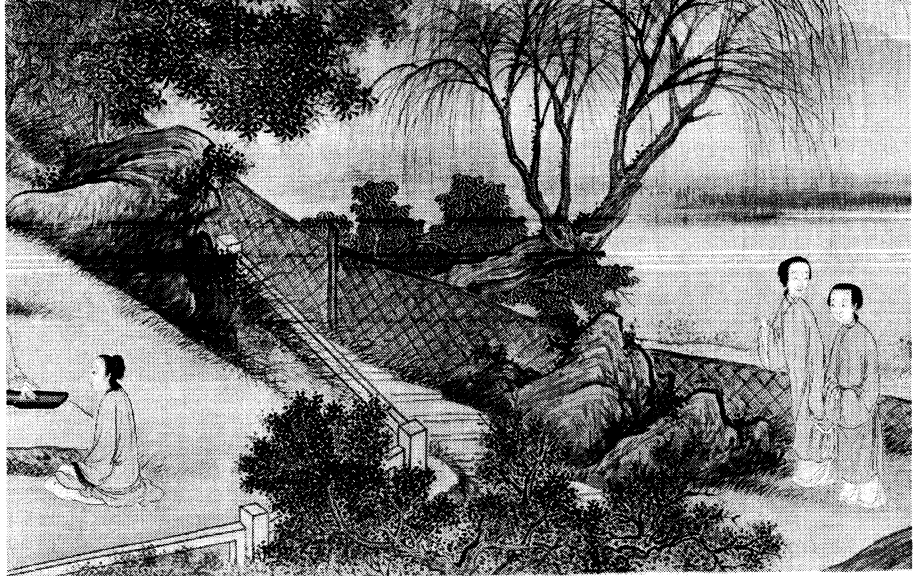


Figure 1: The sisters Sun Yunfeng and Sun Yunhe strolling beneath willows on the shore of the West Lake. Xu Yuxing sits listening to the zither.

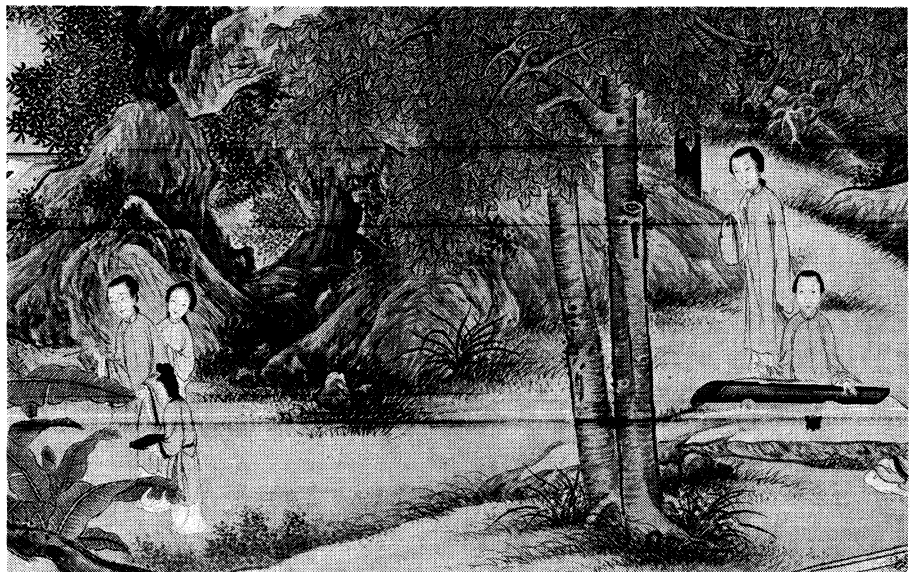


Figure 2: Xi Peilan playing the zither; behind her stands Wang Zuanzu. Wang Shen is about to inscribe a banana leaf, while Yan Ruizhu, behind her, looks on.



Figure 3: Liao Yunjin sits at a table holding a brush; Zhang Yuzhen and Qu Wanxian sit listening to the zither. Jiang Xinbao stands among the bamboos, and Jin Yi strolls across the bridge.

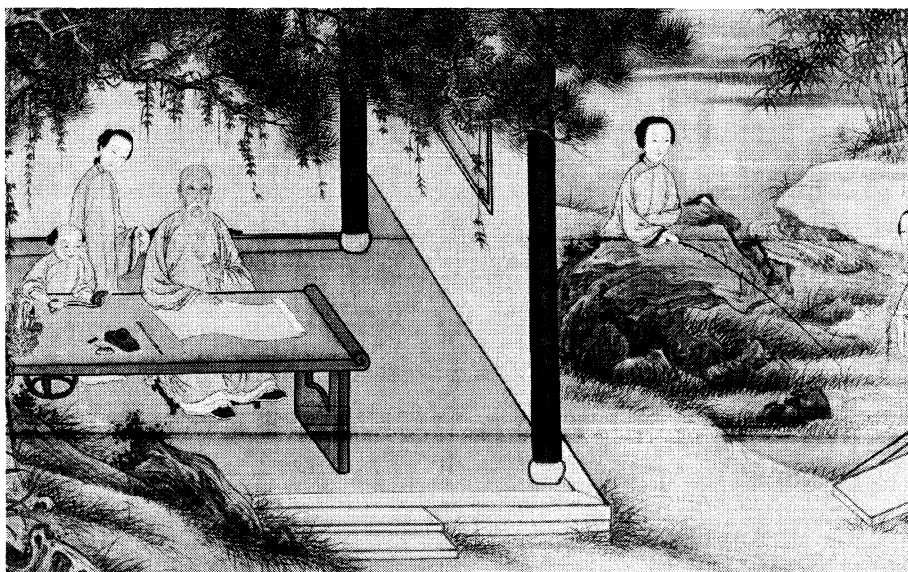


Figure 4: The thirteenth disciple, Bao Zhihui, is fishing; Yuan Mei himself sits at the table, attended by Dai Lanjing, his nephew's wife, with her small son.

another and discreetly avoid engaging with the gaze of the viewer. The exception is Xi Peilan, who stares directly at the viewer and for that reason seems a focal point of the painting. Yuan Mei is shown separated from his 'disciples' by a partition that may also be a concession to the proprieties that dictated distance between men and women. The separation may also suggest that he is observing from his vantage point the women practising the refined arts of their *Elegant Gathering*.

Following Yuan Mei's first colophon is an additional scene portraying three women, obviously painted by another hand. In the colophon that follows this additional scene, Yuan Mei explains:

In the spring of the year 1795 I again went to the Lake Tower for a second meeting on the composition of poetry. I would not have guessed that the two women Xu [Yuxing] and Jin [Yi] would have both already died. For a long time I mourned them. Fortunately three additional ladies came to ask for lessons. The previous painters were unable to help out and so I relied on my old friend, Sir Cui 崔公, to add a small addition at the end of the scroll. He succeeded in imitating the style of the earlier part.²⁶

Yuan Mei then identifies the three women in the added painting. Cao Ciqing is shown with a sprig of peach blossoms in her hand. Luo Qilan has an orchid dangling from her waist. The lady in red is Qian Lin, who 'looks as if she is about to engage Luo Qilan in conversation', according to Yuan Mei.

Following Yuan Mei's second colophon there are inscriptions by thirty-one other authors including Yuan Mei's friends as well as his male and female followers and students.²⁷ Yuan Mei evidently carried the painting with him, stuffed in his sleeve, and would take it out to show friends and invite a favoured few to inscribe it. Each obliged by writing seven-syllable lines of verse inspired by the scene that is illustrated, as well as by the greatness and longevity of Yuan Mei himself. My main project, to which the present paper is but an introduction, is a close reading of all these inscriptions.

Looking at the scroll in its entirety, it is clear that the illustrated section is only a fraction of the whole and that the greatest amount of space is devoted to hand-written text. Rather than view the scroll only as a painting with some poetical colophons, its overwhelmingly

textual nature suggests that we see it also in terms of China's long manuscript tradition. Because of the early introduction of printing, we sometimes lose sight of the importance of China's manuscript culture and its role in the creation, organization, and transmission of knowledge. Thanks to the discovery of the Dunhuang library in the early 1900s and the more recent archaeological discovery of a large corpus of manuscripts written on bamboo, wood, silk and paper, dating to the late first millennium BCE and the first millennium of this era, we are now in possession of a body of evidence that can tell us a great deal about the nature of that culture.²⁸

A preliminary consideration of Yuan Mei's scroll in terms of the manuscript culture that I suggest it represents might, for example, lead one to view the inscriptions not as mere colophons to a painting but as constituting a small anthology of verse on the theme of Yuan Mei and his female disciples. Seen in this light we might say that the painting serves to illustrate the poems as much as the poems comment upon the illustrated images. One might also want to ask questions about the overall theme of the scroll as evidenced by its inscriptions, the order of the inscriptions, the fact that some are written on separate pieces of paper pasted to the surface, the occasional use of two registers, and the possible significance of the variety of calligraphic styles employed by the authors. I pose these questions on the relationship between the form of the scroll and its contents without yet being able to answer them.

A large issue in the study of the scroll is that at least three versions were in circulation during the twentieth century and probably earlier. A nineteenth-century authority on Yuan Mei's villa claimed that two copies in the family's collection survived the pillaging and destruction of the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s.²⁹ Another nineteenth-century source refers to 'an original and a copy'.³⁰ In addition to the painting that is part of the Shanghai Museum collection, a photo-reproduction of a nearly identical painting was published in Shanghai in 1929.³¹ A third painting closely similar to the other two was sold at auction at Christie's, New York, in 1994.³² How the three versions came into existence and whether one should be given significant priority in terms of date over the other two are questions I cannot answer. I have

viewed first hand, so to speak, only the Shanghai Museum painting and have seen but reproductions of the other two. It is not surprising that more than one copy has been in circulation. The practice of making copies is well-established in the history of Chinese art. And, in a manuscript culture, making copies that are faithful to, and thus closely replicate the contents and form of, the original is essential to the full and accurate distribution of knowledge. Perhaps Yuan Mei himself commissioned the artists to make copies of a work that obviously meant a lot to him.

Quite apart from the existence of multiple copies, 'The Painting of the Thirteen Female Disciples of Suiyuan Request Instruction at Lake Tower' is something of a puzzle. First, it is evident that its various illustrated scenes constitute an idealized rendering of Yuan Mei's 'Poetry Gatherings' rather than an actual, and historically accurate, depiction of any one of them.³³ Xu Yuxing and Jin Yi were not part of the Hangzhou gatherings in 1790 and 1792. They were from Suzhou and may not have even met Yuan Mei before he convened a gathering there. Similarly, while Xi Peilan first met Yuan Mei in 1788, she only saw him three or four times in her life and so probably never attended any of the 'Poetry Gatherings', let alone play the zither at one. An explanation of these liberties may have to do with how much Yuan Mei favoured Jin Yi, Xu Yuxing and Xi Peilan. The epitaph quoted above makes clear that he deeply mourned Jin Yi's death and identifies Xu Yuxing as among 'the most talented' of his disciples. We know from elsewhere in his writings that Yuan Mei especially prized the images of Jin Yi and Xi Peilan. He refers to 'small portraits' of them that he kept and had inscribed.³⁴ This suggests that what Yuan Mei wanted his artists to portray was a gathering of his favourite female disciples rather than a gathering that actually occurred.

Also puzzling is Yuan's insistence that the painting portray 'thirteen disciples'. The number clearly had special significance. After all, in both 1790 and 1792, the *thirteenth* day of the fourth month was chosen for the 'Poetry Gatherings'. But there is insufficient evidence to determine whether any of the actual gatherings was in fact attended by exactly thirteen women. I have come to regard these many references to thirteen women as metaphorical rather than literal.

The complexities involved in understanding the painting appear to underlie the seven-syllable lines of verse that Xi Peilan composed to be inscribed upon the scroll. In this poem she plays with the idea of being portrayed as part of an event at which she was not present, partly unlocks the code in the use of the number 'thirteen', and contemplates the long-term importance of Yuan Mei's 'transmitting the classics' to women.

寶石山莊靠鏡湖。人閒清絕一方壺。
 十年枉作西冷夢。早已全身入圖畫。
 先生端坐彩毫揮。爭捧瑤箋問絳帷。
 中有彈琴人似我。數來剛好十三徽。
 選刻新詩昉玉臺。卷中人各手親裁。
 白家老嫗康成婢。未許窺覘入坐來。
 老壽翁須過百齡。果然位業是真靈。
 願同伏勝傳經例。一个門生授一經。
 後來居上亦何嫌。廿六人終取格嚴。
 恰比十三行玉版。誰家副本又新添。

Treasure-Stone Mountain Lodge on the shore of Mirror Lake –
 The clearest lake in the world of men, an island of immortals.
 For ten years I dreamt in vain of Hangzhou's Western Cold Bridge,
 Then before I knew it my whole body had entered the painting.
 There the Master sat erect, wielding his colored brush,
 While we competed to offer up our inscribed jade tablets and ask for
 the red banner of his teaching.
 Among them was one playing a zither who resembled me.
 Counting them we can see that on the zither there are exactly thirteen
 stops.
 Selected and printed, the New Songs illuminate the Jade Tower.
 Each person in the scroll tailored one with her own hands.
 The old lady of Bai [Juyi]'s family and Kangcheng's girl servant
 Were never permitted to enter and observe their masters teach.
 The long-lived old man has surpassed one hundred years,
 His rank in fact is that of the "Daoist Gods."
 I hope he will follow the example of Fu Sheng transmitting the classics
 So that each disciple will get one classic.
 What trouble is there if those who come later are superior?

This way twenty-six people will in the end obtain the proper model.
It is just like the “jade tablet in thirteen lines”:
The copies in everyone’s possession have new lines added.³⁵

Xi Peilan was perhaps the most famous of all of Yuan Mei’s female disciples, and she was certainly the one whose poetry Yuan Mei regarded with most approval. It is perhaps no coincidence that her portrayal in the painting appears to be one of its important focal points. The introduction Yuan Mei wrote for Xi Peilan’s volume of poetry expresses the high regard in which he held her work:

Every word from the heart; no echoing of the ancients; a jadelike sonority: these are the qualities that make Xi Peilan’s verse so unusual – and not only among her own sex, either. For with her, inspiration always comes first before the poem is written; and in this respect she puts to shame many of the so-called poets of our time.³⁶

My translation does not do justice to the qualities of Xi Peilan’s poetry singled out by Yuan Mei. Its ‘sonorities’ are plainly evident even when the piece is chanted in modern standard Chinese. Nevertheless let me provide an interpretive paraphrase of the piece. Xi Peilan takes us into a painting of a paradise scene. She and the other women in the scene, Xi Peilan tells us, are competing in a poetry contest vying for the favour of Yuan Mei and composing poems for inclusion in a book of ‘New Songs’. (It might not be off the mark to regard the scroll with its poems and illustrations as that book.) The rightness of the number ‘thirteen’ is explained in Xi’s poem by the fact that it is echoed by the ‘thirteen stops’ on the zither Xi herself plays in an imaginary scene, the ‘Thirteen Classics’ that masters transmit to their students, and the ‘thirteen columns’ of characters that make up the Jade Tablet written by the most famous of all calligraphers, Wang Xizhi. (We can add to Xi’s list the fact that her poem and those of other women favoured by Yuan Mei are distributed across thirteen pieces of coloured paper affixed to the scroll.)

Xi Peilan compares her situation and that of the other disciples with women like the old crone in Bai Juyi’s family or Zheng Xuan’s maid: though they showed great talent in poetry, they are not permitted a classical education as men are.³⁷ Xi Peilan praises Yuan

Mei – whose representation in the painting proves that he is a real Daoist God – and requests that he be a latter-day equal of the Han dynasty scholiast Fu Sheng and transmit the classics to his female disciples. What problem is there, Xi Peilan asks, if such latecomers to classical learning should surpass those of earlier times? For the model provided by Yuan will spread – by multiples of thirteen – among an ever increasing number of women. This is right and how learning is: it multiplies! All current copies made by students imitating Wang Xizhi's original thirteen-column classic model of good calligraphy have many more than thirteen columns!

As instructive and fascinating as Xi Peilan's reading of the painting is, in our attempt to imagine what meaning and significance it may have possessed for Yuan Mei, let us give him the last word. In his colophon following the first set of scenes, he claims that he provides the family and given names of his women disciples so that his painting might be 'the equal of the "Painting of the Ranks of the True Spirits" 真靈位業圖 of Tao Hongjing'. In the old Taoist talisman to which Yuan Mei alludes, Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (452–536) arranged in a hierarchy the spirits worshipped by all the major branches of the Daoist religion – placing in the upper register the gods revered by his own Shangqing 上清 or Highest Clarity sect.³⁸

I see Yuan Mei treasuring his talisman – carrying it in his sleeve and insisting that others praise it in verse – because it placed in the highest ranks and immortalized women he admired and adored, some of whom had died tragically early. Shown as eternally young, arranged on the shores of Hangzhou's paradisiacal West Lake, practising the refined arts of an Elegant Gathering, these thirteen talented and beautiful women were Yuan Mei's own private Shangqing gods. The appreciation and inscriptions of others with whom he shared it, as well as the verses written by some of the women portrayed in the painting, would have magnified several-fold the significance and talismanic powers of the scroll in Yuan Mei's eyes. Even if the painting would not ultimately prove effective in warding off the illnesses that increasingly plagued him or arresting any further advances in his already considerable old age, it is not difficult to understand why Yuan Mei might have wanted to have copies made of the painting

and inscriptions so that, like all talismans, its meaning and powers could be shared more widely and transmitted to later ages.

Notes

- 1 There are three comprehensive treatments of Yuan Mei's life: Arthur Waley, *Yuan Mei: Eighteenth Century Chinese Poet*, London, 1956; Wang Yingzhi 王英志, *Yuan Mei Pingchuan 袁枚評傳*, Nanjing, 2002; and J. D. Schmidt, *Harmony Garden: The Life, Literary Criticism, and Poetry of Yuan Mei*, London, 2003. For the details of Yuan Mei's youth and career, I have relied heavily on Schmidt's book. I am much indebted to Wang Yingzhi's treatment of Yuan Mei and women poets as well as to Gōyama Kiwamu 台山究, 'En Bai to onna deshi' 袁枚と女弟子たち, *Kyūshū Daigaku Kyōyōbu Bungaku Ronshū* 九州大学教養部文学論輯, No.13, p.137, and 'Hulou shi hui kao – Yuan Mei wannian zai Hangzhou shehui weixin shenzhan de yiyi' 湖楼詩会考一袁枚晚年在杭州社會威信伸展的意義, published in Chinese on the website <http://www.pkucn.com/archiver/?tid-119210.html> and in Japanese in the journal *Osaka shiritsu daigaku jinbun ronso* 大阪市立大学人文論叢 32 (2004): 35–54. I am grateful to James Cahill for his help and encouragement, and also to the fine students in my Berkeley seminar on Yuan Mei in the spring of 2006. I am also grateful to the staff of the painting department at the Shanghai Museum and to Dr Liu Yang, Curator of Chinese Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for their help in arranging to allow me to see the painting that is the main focus of this study.
- 2 On the historicity of the Northern Song meeting, see Ellen Johnston Laing, 'The Problem of the "Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden" in Chinese Historical and Art Historical Records', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88.3 (July-September, 1968): 419–35. Issues of whether or not the Northern Song meeting actually occurred aside, it had a great impact on post-Song literature and art, even extending beyond the borders of China. See Burglind Jungmann, 'Two Screens of the *Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden* in Western Collections', *Orientalia* 39.4 (May 2008): 58–67.
- 3 For the names of Yuan Mei's four guests at his 'Elegant Gathering', see Jiang Dunfu 蔣敦復, *Suiyuan yishi* 隨園軼事, pp.91–92, in Wang Yingzhi, ed., *Yuan Mei quanji* 袁枚全集 (hereafter YMQJ), Jiangsu, 1993, vol.8. In his *Xu tongren ji* 續同人記 – the collection of writings by his contemporaries which Yuan Mei included in his collected works – Yuan Mei includes an essay on an 'Elegant Gathering at Suiyuan at Qingming' by He Shiyong 何士顥 (1726–1787), one of Yuan Mei's male poetry disciples. I have not

- determined whether the gathering about which He wrote was the one that took place around 1765. For He's short essay, see *YMQJ*, vol.6, p.68.
- 4 Yuan provides notes on Wu's career and paintings at *Suiyuan shihua buyi* 隨園詩話補遺, ch.8, entry 56, p.758, *YMQJ*, vol.3. The painting is lost.
 - 5 Inscriptions by four scholars are preserved at *Xu tongren ji*, pp.165–72, *YMQJ*, vol.6.
 - 6 The text of Luo Qilan's inscription is found at *Suiyuan nü dizi shixuan* 隨園女弟子詩選, p.159, *YMQJ*, vol.7.
 - 7 Yuan Mei 袁枚, 'Thanking my Female Disciples Biwu and Lanyou for Inscribing "A Painting of an Elegant Gathering at Suiyuan"' 謝女弟子碧梧蘭友題《隨園雅集圖》, *YMQJ*, vol. 1, p.788.
 - 8 *YMQJ*, vol.3, pp.570–71, entry 62.
 - 9 *Suiyuan nü dizi shixuan*, ch.1, p.29, *YMQJ*, vol.7.
 - 10 See *Xiaocangshan fang shiji* 小倉山房詩集, *YMQJ*, vol.1, pp.793, 797, 798–99.
 - 11 Sun Jiale goes into great detail in describing his two daughters' talent for poetry. See *Xu tongren ji*, pp.364–66, *YMQJ*, vol.6.
 - 12 David Hawkes makes much the same point in his brief but important study, 'His P'ei-lan', *Asia Major* 7.1 (1959): 113–21.
 - 13 Zhang wrote an essay called *Fu xue* 婦學 'Women's Studies', one of five in which he attacked Yuan Mei and, in particular, Yuan's encouraging women to study poetry. Zhang thought that a 'girl's education should be chiefly concerned with decorum and the molding of character; he did not think she should be encouraged to write verse'. See David Nivison, *The Life and Thought of Chang Hsiieh-ch'eng*, Stanford, 1966, p.265. Nivison attempts to defend Zhang's views in a fashion more sympathetic than Zhang's own writings would seem to permit. Wang Yingzhi, p.166, also discusses Zhang's attack on Yuan and characterizes it as 'biased' and 'not worth reading'. Zhang Xuecheng was also dismayed by Yuan's homosexual liaisons. See Wang Yingzhi, p.92.
 - 14 In the preface to a poem he composed sometime around 1748, Yuan comments that he passed up the opportunity to buy an otherwise beautiful nineteen-year-old concubine because her skin was 'of a slightly inferior quality'. For this preface, and the poem that follows it, see Yuan's *Suiyuan shihua* 隨園詩話, ch.11, entry 29, p.372, *YMQJ*, vol.3. See also James Cahill's comments in his Getty Lectures: 'The Flower and the Mirror: Images of Women in Later Chinese Painting'.
 - 15 Wang Zuzhi, *Suiyuan suoji* 隨園瑣記, ch.xia, 4b, *Suiyuan quanji* 隨園全集, Shanghai, 1921.
 - 16 Yuan Mei published the *Zibuyu* in 1789. It and a supplement comprise vol.4 of the *YMQJ*.
 - 17 In *Suiyuan shihua buyi*, ch.1, entry 20, p.553, *YMQJ*, vol.3. Yuan Mei

singles out Xu Yuxing 徐裕馨, who presented a landscape painting and four accompanying poems (which Yuan quotes). In Yuan's note to his 'Gengxu chun mu yu Xihu Sunshi Baoshi shanzhuang, linxing fushi jishi' 庚戌春暮寓孫氏寶石山莊, 臨行賦詩紀事, in *Xiaocang shanfang shiji*, ch.32, p.793, *YMQJ*, vol.1, he names two others who honoured him on that spring evening in 1790: Zhang Bingyi 張秉彝 and Wang Shen 汪紳. Yuan Mei does not include the poetry of Zhang and Wang in the selected women's poems he published.

- 18 See Sun Yunhe's poem 'Suiyuan xiansheng zai you Tiantai gui, zhaoji Hulou songbie fen yun (de 'lin' zi)' 隨園先生再游天台歸, 招集湖樓送別分韻的臨字, *Suiyuan nü dizi shixuan*, ch.3, pp.82–83, *YMQJ*, vol.7.
- 19 See *Suiyuan shihua buyi*, ch.5, entry 44, pp.670–71, *YMQJ*, vol.3.
- 20 Sun Yunhe notes that the disciples were even more numerous than those who attended the earlier 'Poetry Gathering' and, to prove this point, she mentions the presence of 'two women scholars who were newly receiving instruction' from Yuan Mei: Qian Lin 錢琳 and Pan Suxin 潘素心. Our uncertainty over the number of women who attended the 1792 'Poetry Gathering' is complicated by a reference in a poem by Pan Suxin in which she claims that Yuan Mei had originally invited fifteen women, but only seven attended. See her note to 'Hulou jishi cheng Suiyuan fuzi' 湖樓即事呈隨園夫子 in *Xu tongren ji*, p.231, *YMQJ*, vol.6.
- 21 For the epitaph, see 'Jin Xianxian nüshi muzhiming' 金纖纖女士墓誌銘, *Xiao cangshanfang (xu) wenji* 小倉山房續文集, ch.32, pp.587–88, *YMQJ*, vol.2. Yuan Mei also mentions the Suzhou women poets Shen Sanhua 沈散花, Wang Yuzhen 汪玉軫 and Jiang Bizhu 江碧珠, and it is a safe conclusion that these three were also invited to the gathering.
- 22 Yuan Mei is alluding to the fact that Jin Yi was married to Wang Qing 王情, a talented poet and another of Yuan Mei's disciples. There were, as well, other married couples among his disciples.
- 23 See note 20 for the source of the epitaph.
- 24 I have been unable to learn anything further of the two artists. According to a private communication from James Cahill, dated November 13, 2001, You Shao painted the figures and Wang Gong did the background landscape.
- 25 The painting's two colophons – both by Yuan Mei – were copied by Chen Kangqi 陳康祺 (1840–1890) into his miscellany on Qing life, the *Lang qian ji wen* 郎潛紀聞, which was first published ca.1880. Chen says that one of his 'retainers' possessed the painting and after quoting the colophons he adds a few comments that make it clear that he did not hold Yuan Mei in very high esteem. On the other hand, the painting seems to have convinced him that the 'Poetry Gatherings' were respectable events. See *Lang qian ji wen*, Beijing, 1984, vol.2, pp.341–42.

- 26 As with the first colophon, Yuan Mei's second colophon was also published in the *Langqian jiwen* and the *Qingchao yeshi daguan* 清朝野史大觀, first published ca.1917. (See *Qingchao yeshi daguan*, Shanghai, 1990, ch.9, pp.150–53.) Aside from this colophon, the 1795 gathering in Hangzhou is not mentioned in any of the literature associated with Yuan Mei and his female disciples.
- 27 This fact is already mentioned in the description of the scroll found in the *Qingchao yeshi daguan*, ch.9, p.151.
- 28 Cave 17 at Dunhuang was sealed up early in the eleventh century with a large cache of manuscripts and printed documents. For a useful overview of the discovery and a sample of the treasures found in the cave, see Roderick Whitfield and Anne Farrer, *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas*, London: The British Museum, 1990. Chinese archaeologists have unearthed an enormous number of manuscripts. Donald Harper of the University of Chicago is currently engaged in a comprehensive study of China's manuscript culture from Warring States times through the Tang dynasty. Important recognition of the role of manuscript culture in the transmission and reception of literature is found in Xiaofei Tian, *Tao Yuanming & Manuscript Culture*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. A relevant study that treats Japanese calligraphy in terms of the manuscript culture that produced it is provided by John T. Carpenter, 'By Brush or Block-printing: Transmitting Cultural Heritage in Pre-modern Japan', *Orientalism* 38.8 (November/December 2007): 57–66.
- 29 Jiang Dunfu, *Suiyuan yishi*, p.93, *YMQJ*, vol.8, claims that while most of Yuan Mei's paintings were destroyed after the Taiping rebels occupied Suiyuan in 1853, two scrolls of the painting of the thirteen female disciples survived. One was obtained by a certain Gao Changshen 高長紳 of Mizhi 米脂 [county in Shaanxi?] and the other was bought after the Taiping Rebellion by Zhuang Kunxiu 莊坤修 of Anhui. In the notes on the painting preserved in the *Qingchao yeshi daguan* (see note 27), there is reference to both an original and a copy virtually identical to the original in every detail.
- 30 Chen's passage, with the critical comments on Yuan Mei deleted, was copied into the *Qingchao yeshi daguan*. The editors of that work appear to have had access to a copy of the painting. In any case they add details about seals and inscriptions that do not appear in Chen Kangqi's account. They also quote three poems composed in celebration of the painting and refer to the painting having been copied.
- 31 The book was published under the title 十三女弟子湖樓請業圖 by the Shenzhou guoguang 神州國光 publishing house. The painting reproduced within it has three colophons not found in the Shanghai Museum scroll.

- The third of these says that the painting was purchased by Yu Xijing 郁熙顯 (1840–1890) in 1855 at the Yunjian lizhai 雲間廬齋. Luo Yimin 羅以民, *Zicaizi: Yuan Mei zhuan* 子才子 – 袁枚傳 (Zhejiang renmin chubanshe 浙江人民出版社, 2007), pp.11–29, attacks the authenticity of the painting reproduced in the 1929 Shanghai publication. I find many of his arguments specious though the points he raises could be equally applied to the painting in the Shanghai Museum collection.
- 32 I am grateful to James Cahill for sharing with me his colour slides of the painting sold at the 1994 auction. I learned of the sale from a private communication from James Cahill dated November 13, 2001. In that communication, Cahill refers to stories that the painting had come out from the Shanghai Museum. Be that as it may, it is clear from Cahill's photographs that the painting sold at auction is different from the one held now in the Shanghai Museum collection and that both are different from the one published in Shanghai in 1929.
 - 33 We can probably regard all paintings of 'Elegant Gatherings' as more fanciful than factual. Wang Yingzhi, p.202, judges the painting done by Wu Xingceng of Yuan Mei's 1765 'Elegant Gathering' at Suiyuan to be a fanciful distortion of the actual event.
 - 34 See *Suiyuan shihua buyi*, pp.740–41, entry 11, on Xi Peilan, and p.745, entry 20, on Jin Yi, in *YMQJ*, vol.3.
 - 35 In addition to appearing among the painting's inscriptions, the poem is found in the *Qingchao yeshi daguan* account of the history of the painting.
 - 36 I am adopting this translation from David Hawkes, 'Hsi P'ei-lan', *Asia Major* 7.1 (1959): 113.
 - 37 According to a popular tale no earlier than the eleventh century, the famous Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi would recite each newly composed poem to an old lady in his household. If she said she understood it, he would write the poem down; but if she did not understand it, then he would revise it to make it more comprehensible. See Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i*, London, 1949, p.161. The reference to Kangcheng's (i.e., Zheng Xuan's) girl servant is probably an allusion to an anecdote in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 which makes clear that, while his female slaves were literate and able to quote the *Book of Songs* from memory, he nevertheless treated them very poorly. See Richard Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, Ann Arbor, 2002, p.99.
 - 38 For this work, see Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, eds, *The Taoist Canon: a historical companion to the Daozang*, Chicago, 2004, vol.1, pp.109–11.