A Recluse of the Inner Quarters:
The Poet Ji Xian (1614–1683)

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In this essay, I examine the poems of reclusion by the female poet Ji Xian 季嫻. By Ji Xian’s time, reclusion was a theme long saturated by male social and literary values. I will first provide a brief biographical background to situate Ji Xian’s poetic output in the specific circumstances of her life; then I will consider the issue of gender as it relates to the figure of the recluse in the Chinese literary tradition before interpreting examples of her poems. My discussion will underline how Ji Xian articulates and makes legible her desire in a male-dominated literary discourse/regime.

Ji Xian came from an elite scholar-official family in Taixing 泰興 county in present-day Jiangsu province in southeast China. Several male members of her family obtained the highest Metropolitan (jinshi 進士) degree in the extremely competitive civil service examination system in the late Ming and early Qing (seventeenth century) that tested knowledge of the Confucian canon.¹ Ji Xian herself received a good literary education in her natal family and achieved considerable fame as a woman poet in her own lifetime.² Her poetry was published in three separate editions, two of which—Selected Poems of the Rain Fountain Shrine (Yuquankan shixuan 雨泉龕詩選, ca. 1653) and Combined Printing of the Rain Fountain Shrine (Yuquankan heke 雨泉龕合刻, ca. 1659)—are still extant.³ Her own poetry was selected for inclusion in contemporary anthologies of poetry, particularly of women’s poetry. She was included by her contemporary Zou Siyi 鄒斯漪 in Selections from Eight Famous Women Poets (Shiyuan ba mingjia xuan 詩媛八名家選, preface dated 1655).⁴ Ji Xian herself also compiled a small critical anthology of women’s poetry, Anthology of Talents
of the Women’s Quarters (Guixiu ji 閨秀集, preface dated 1652), which contains her own concise critical remarks, ostensibly for the purpose of teaching her daughter.\(^5\)

In Combined Printing of the Rain Fountain Shrine, Ji Xian also included a collection of her prose essays, most of them Buddhist in theme and content. The first piece is an autobiographical essay entitled “Record of Past Karma” (Qianyin ji前因紀). Written in her mid-forties, it records how her parents refused to allow her youthful desire for a celibate religious life in Buddhist practice and how she had to resign herself to the fate of a compulsory marriage arranged by her parents when she was a child. In her adolescence, she was married to the somewhat self-indulgent young son of an affluent family of high officials. Although she continued to practice Buddhism as a laywoman, the tension she experienced between trying to fulfill her roles as dutiful daughter-in-law, wife, and mother and her yearning for solitude, transcendence, and a reclusive life resulted in a chronic illness.\(^6\)

The contrasting thematic categories of Ji Xian’s poetry mirror the split between the Confucian desire to perform her social roles in exemplary fashion and the Buddhist desire to lead a life of contemplation. Thus, in the poem “Parental Instruction,” Ji Xian, her own inclinations to the contrary, represents herself as a model young mother addressing her little son and daughter, inculcating proper, gender-differentiated Confucian values and conduct in them:

庭訓 Parental Instruction

衣破猶可補 When clothes are ripped, they can still be mended.
德虧補何有 When virtue is impaired, how can it be mended?
撫玆小兒女 I bring up this boy and girl,
未辨苗與莠 Not yet able to tell sprouts from weeds.
胎教古所稱 Fetal education has been praised since antiquity,
庭訓常恐後 So I always fear that teaching by parents comes too late.
呼兒爾來前 I call to my son, “You come forward,
燕惰慎勿狃 Casual in manner but you must take care not to be naughty.
既讀聖賢書 Since you have read the books of the sages and worthies,
Never forget the guidance of your father and teacher. When young be cautious about failing in right conduct, take care to be sincere, filial, and brotherly. Build up knowledge to attain great fame, aspire to assist great ministers like Yi Yin and the Duke of Zhou. Devote your loyalty to the sovereign to bring glory to your parents, do not merely hanker after tassels on an official cap.” Earnestly I tap on my son’s shoulder, then turn to take my daughter’s hand: “You stay for a while by your mother’s side, when you go you will carry basket and broom.” Go to bed after everyone but always be the first to rise; calmness and concentration you should especially maintain.

In former times there were women whose good reputations have become immortal. You will do well to look at the writings of the past and hope to be the equal of those famous women. When a family is noble it’s easy to be too proud; instead, plant virtues to last forever. Passing down our fame like the families Wang and Xie, we’ll let everyone know about our house.”

The son is to study the classics, learn the cardinal virtues for correct conduct, aspire to be a great and worthy official, and bring fame to his parents. In spite of her own unhappy experience, Ji Xian attempted to instill proper feminine virtues in her daughter in preparation for her wifely role in marriage. However, although her instructions to her daughter followed the conventional injunctions for the social reproduction of a hard-working, virtuous, and capable wife, being a literary woman herself, Ji Xian also emphasized the importance of literacy and scholarship, instructing her daughter to emulate the learned women of the past. She wanted her children to succeed in their life paths and bring glory to the family, so
that it might rival the rich and famous literary clans Wang and Xie of the Western Jin period (317–420) mentioned in the penultimate line. Much to her joy and sense of fulfillment, Ji Xian's son Li Weilin 李為霖, unlike his father, succeeded in passing the examinations and obtained the prestigious Metropolitan Graduate degree followed by an official appointment. Her daughter Li Yan 李妍 married when she grew up, as most gentry women did. And evidence suggests that, following in her mother's footsteps, she too practiced writing poetry and acquired some recognition as a poet. Her name appears alongside her mother's as one of four “Women with Literary Talent” (cai yuan 才媛) in a local gazetteer of Ji Xian's native district Taixing.\(^\text{10}\) and her poems are also selected, along with her mother's, for inclusion in the large 1689 anthology of poetry, Shiguan 詩觀.\(^\text{11}\)  

While there are many poems that exemplify Ji Xian’s “worldly” involvement and emotional attachment throughout her life—most obviously poems of encouragement and moral instruction addressed to her son, and poems thinking of her son and her husband while they were away, of her daughter after her marriage, and others celebrating her son’s successes—there is also a large repertory of poems of reclusion interspersed throughout Combined Printing of the Rain Fountain Shrine.\(^\text{12}\) In the next section, I examine the literary tradition of recluse poetry within and against which Ji Xian was writing.  

The recluse is a well-established literary figure in Chinese literature, and reclusion a time-honored poetic theme since the beginning of Chinese history. The recluse, the man of solitude, detachment, and superior character, represents a recognized alternative to the man of political and social engagement, but, as the scholar Li Chi pointed out, they are really “two aspects of one man, the Chinese intellectual in his two roles in life.”\(^\text{13}\) Because of the perennial ubiquity of the discourse and practice of reclusion throughout Chinese history, it is well inscribed in poetry and other genres of writing. The abundance of textual materials on the subject and evidence of social practice make it a fruitful site of investigation for scholars such as Li Chi, Frederick Mote, and Alan Berkowitz. Their respective studies have detailed “changing patterns of reclusion,” “patterns of disengagement,” and “Confucian eremitism” in different historical periods.\(^\text{14}\) A litany of legendary and historical men swelled the ranks of scholar-officials turned recluse
as a result of exile, retirement, banishment from office, or simply their own choice.

The untrammeled hermit living at ease in nature was valorized in literati culture; the figure became a frequent subject of (self-)representation in poetry and painting. In poetic representation, the recluse figure can be a mere fashionable pose, a signifier of cultural value, or it may be intended to embody a genuine personal desire and search for transcendence. In whichever register of signification, the recluse offers a conventional subject position that a man can step into and occupy comfortably in his textual, if not actual social life.

In the poetic realm, the iconic Tao Qian (372–427) towers over every poet and critic since the Tang dynasty (618–907) as the father of reclusion, and he produced countless progeny, both genuine and counterfeit. Dissatisfied with service in the bureaucracy after a brief stint during a turbulent period in Chinese history, Tao Qian rejected the only career path available to an educated Chinese man and took up farming in a rural village, “returning to his true nature.” His poetry is a distilled record of his life as a farmer recluse, someone who worked hard and drank hard in close communion with nature. Male poets wrote in imitation of Tao Qian and alluded to him endlessly. His stature as the premier poet recluse is also reflected by the large number of monograph studies and translations devoted to him. Simply put, the language, imagery, and theme of the recluse have been continually appropriated for rearticulation by male literati throughout Chinese history. Thus, unremarkably, both theme and figure are indelibly gendered male—socially, culturally, and textually. And, in spite of the frequent gesture to the emblematic fisherman and woodcutter (clichés for the recluse living in nature), the self-representing hermit poet is a member of the educated elite. As such, the context of reclusion rests on the tension between a public career in office and a private life of withdrawal and contemplative freedom.

Does this male context of the poetry of reclusion render the “female recluse” an oxymoron? An impossibility? A few women in the early period were known as the supportive and sagacious wives or daughters of renowned male recluses, the most famous being Meng Guang, wife of Liang Hong of the Later Han (25–220 CE). These women were...
not themselves regarded as recluses in their own right. Except for Buddhist and Daoist nuns, there was thus a distinct lack of models and contexts for female reclusion. In the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, some writing women did aspire to a similar subjective space and self-representation. Given that women were categorically denied the opportunity for a public life that was the sine qua non of its obverse—reclusion—how could they engage in reclusion? Ideologically, they were to be secluded, and not permitted reclusion. How should we translate, in a broad sense, the underlying male context when reading poetry of reclusion by women? How do specific female contexts affect women’s poetry of reclusion, and how do they intersect with the dominant tradition? How did women with reclusive tendencies who aspired to a life of solitude (but did not or could not become nuns) articulate such desires and subjectivity when their “careers,” or life trajectories, were restricted to the family roles of daughters, wives, and mothers? As most women were brought up to accept and follow the normative life course within the inner sphere, it would seem that the issue of reclusion did not pose a serious problem in their lives, or at least not one that they articulated in writing. Many women did produce poems broadly related to the theme of placid reclusion at all stages of their life phases. These poems capture moments of immersion in nature or contemplative solitude at night, fleeting instants marked off from the demands of women’s work, such as embroidery and household management, the production and raising of children, and duties that involve service to other members of the family—parents or parents-in-law, husbands, and children. But most often, women who reached the life phase of retirement, which ideally meant having a successful scholar-official son, as in the case of Ji Xian, or after a husband’s death, might have the freedom and choice to pursue and write about the lifestyle of a comfortable recluse, if they so desired.

Ji Xian, then, might be called a female Tao Qian. In her writing, she also projects a strong sense of tension and conflict between two life choices. Unlike Tao, however, she could not avoid or leave her designated “career” as wife and had to seek “solitude” and “reclusion” within a polygynous household, with a husband whom she represents as a philanderer in her “Record of Past Karma.”

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In some of her poems, Ji Xian assumes a tone of complete contentment in a simple rustic life. In particular, a number of poems entitled “Dwelling in the Mountain” 山居 and “Dwelling in the Village” 村居 draw on conventional images of nature and the rural environment to construct a picture of simple harmony and a subjectivity not different from an archetypal male recluse, a composite of Tao Qian and the two renowned recluse poets of the Tang period, Wang Wei 王維 (701–761) and Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689–740):

山居 Dwelling in the Mountain

寄居南山下 Lodging at the foot of the southern mountain,
相依不記年 Relying on each other we don’t remember the years.
锄田种新穀 Hoeing the fields we plant a new crop,
帶月聼流泉 Girdled in moonlight, we listen to the flowing spring.
細露成珠滴 Fine dew turns into pearly drops,
蒼松鎖夕煙 Green pines locked in evening mist.
野鶴簷前舞 The wild crane dances in front of the eaves,\(^{17}\)
村鷄草際眠 Village chickens sleep by the edge of the grass.
不作浮名想 Not hankering after an empty name,
煩憂安足牽 Why would worries ensnare one?
人生能幾何 How long can human life be?
貴得返其天 Be thankful that we can return to our true nature.\(^{18}\)

Except for the expression “relying on each other” (xiangyi), which perhaps calls attention to her gender (a husband would not express such “dependence”) and the “pearly drops,” which has a feminine touch, the other elements—living beneath the southern mountain, planting the fields, being in tune with nature in a rural setting, and pursuing the philosophical attitude of detachment rather than fame—are all recycled tropes from the masculine tradition, and some are extremely unlikely for a gentry woman (hoeing the fields and desiring fame, although she did make a name for herself through her poetry). The “southern mountain” in line one appears in several of Tao Qian’s poems, in lines such as “I planted beans beneath the southern mountain” and in his most famous couplet “Picking chrysant-
themums by the eastern hedge / Leisurely I see the southern mountain.”

So do the tropes of planting and hoeing the fields. While it is believed that Tao Qian actually pursued the activities of a farmer, later male literati who used these tropes most often did not. In imitating or emulating Tao Qian, they comfortably assumed his figures and rhetoric. Ji Xian appropriates the language and tropes of male reclusion and enters into this world by assuming a male-inflected subjectivity.

Similarly, the poems “Dwelling in the Village” and “On a Cold Night: Dwelling in the Mountain” are constructed with familiar images, activities, and expressions derived from the established tradition of reclusion. Ji Xian locates herself on a quiet mountain far away from the clamors of society; at peace with herself, she composes poems about nature. Characteristically, the poem ends with a couplet reflecting on the freedom and fulfillment of reclusion:

村居 Dwelling in the Village

幽境無人到 No one reaches the secluded realm:
山深孰與隣 In the deep mountain, who would be my neighbors?
檻泉清曉幕 A spring by the railing, clear dawn through the screen.
堤柳識前津 From the willows on the dike, I know there’s a ford ahead.
榻冷家園夢 Chill on the couch seeps into dreams of the garden at home,
詩吟草木春 While poems sing of the grass and trees in spring.
翛然塵世外 Free and unbound, beyond the dusty world,
此地好棲真 This place is good for lodging the true self.

Similarly, in the next poem, she paints a calm night scene. Her simple abode—a “thatched hut”—is nestled in the hills, surrounded by trees. Nature’s creatures are at rest. Even the waterfall appears frozen in space, “hanging on the cliff.” The only sounds are those of the wind blowing through the pine trees and the water boiling in her tea kettle. To articulate the fulfillment of her desire, Ji Xian adopts the voice of the recluse in the closing couplet:
寒夜山居  On a Cold Night: Dwelling in the Mountain

連峰高聳環茅屋  Linked peaks jutting high surround the thatched hut,
綠煙滅盡鴉羣宿  Green mists block out the crows’ night roost.
山空樹凍夜無聲  Hills empty, trees cold, a soundless night,
獨有懸崖飛素瀑  Only a tumbling white cascade hanging on the cliff.
烹泉和月煮鐺中  Spring water with the moon brewing in the kettle,
茶濤相伴松風謦  Tea waves keep me company, while the pine wind sighs.
可知此地有性情  So I know this place has native sensibility—
居之足以酬予夙  Dwelling here can fulfill my long cherished wish.²¹

So it is against and within the context of the poetry of male reclusion that Ji Xian inserts the subjectivity of the female hermit into some of her poems. “Thinking of Mountains” communicates how difficult, or perhaps impossible, it was for a woman to realize her love for open nature or her desire for the reclusion and freedom of movement available to a male poet such as Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (referred to by his courtesy name Kangle 康樂, 385–433), who gave free rein to his obsession with climbing mountains. For a woman, this could only be an imaginary achievement through a lofty state of mind, conveyed through the image of white clouds:

懷山  Thinking of Mountains

豈懷康樂癖  Could I actually have Kangle’s obsession?
幽賞在高山  My deep appreciation is for high mountains.
遐情空有夢  Lofty feelings—in vain there are dreams.
常寄白雲間  I always lodge them amongst the white clouds.²²

If the freedom to roam in the mountains is out of her reach, in the first two couplets of “Composed at Random,” Ji Xian constructs a simple reclusive
life enriched paradoxically by poverty and the practice of poetry only to show that it is an inaccessible ideal for a married woman:

偶成 Composed at Random

硯石常為伴 The inkstone, a constant companion,
詩篇足慰貧 Poems more than comfort poverty.
衲衣除俗累 A patched robe gets rid of vulgar burdens,
竹榻靜囂塵 The bamboo couch stills the dusty clamour.
欲效鹿門隱 I desire to imitate the recluse at Deer Gate,
其如荆布身 But being a wife, what can I do about it?
還思山水樂 Turning again to contemplate the delights of hills and streams,
寤寐久相親 Awake or asleep I've long been close to them.

In this poem, the gender-inflected social context rudely intrudes into the poet's dream in lines 5–6: “I desire to imitate the recluse at Deer Gate / But being a wife, what can I do about it?” Deer Gate, the mountain in Xiangyang which Pang Degong 嶺德功 of the Later Han ascended with his wife to pick herbs and from which he did not return, also has strong associations with Meng Haoran; it is a conventional term for the place where a hermit lives. The statement and rhetorical question reinscribe the inkstone and bamboo couch at the beginning of the poem as the accoutrements of the confined life of a married woman rather than the liberating tools of the recluse. Again, the poet valiantly changes her state of mind in the final couplet to content herself with thoughts of hills and streams rather than actualizing a reclusive life in the mountains.

In spite of the self-conscious articulation in the third line (she's aware that she's not aware of time), the poem “Evening Meditation” comes closest to achieving the expression of a reclusive state of mind in the inner quarters through Buddhist meditation:

晚禪 Evening Meditation

黃梅細雨落花天 Season of yellow plum blossoms, fine rain falls
from the sky.
燕子呢喃繡幙前 Swallows twitter in front of embroidered curtains.
禪定不知朝與暮 Fixed in meditation I’m not aware of dawn or dusk,
石牀明月草芊芊 The stone bed in bright moonlight, the grass so lush.

The poised transcendence reached in the third line is framed by the very feminine aesthetics and imagery in the opening couplet of delicate rain and plum blossoms. The feminine presence is intimated by the image of the embroidered curtains. Ji Xian projects peace and contentment within the space of the boudoir garden. In this poem, she turns away from the male conventions of reclusion to speak in a feminine language, marking the delicate seasonal environment of spring in which is located a new feminine subjectivity.

The quatrain “Evening Meditation” captures a tranquil moment of transcendence, but outside such textualized moments, the ideal of harmony remains an elusive reality in everyday life. Ji Xian’s poetry collection is not arranged chronologically but by genre. It is not easy to link individual poems systematically and teleologically to different stages of her life. While the several poems entitled “Dwelling in the Mountain” and “Dwelling in the Village” are highly conventional pieces that at the same time suggest an actual sojourn in a rural mountain area, the persona in “Parental Instruction” is explicitly constructed as a young conscientious mother, and that in “Composed at Random” as a wife desiring the life of a mountain recluse living in nature beyond the inner quarters. Faced with a husband who kept on acquiring concubines and mistresses, Ji Xian finally demanded her own space. As she put it toward the end of her autobiographical essay, “Record of Past Karma”:

I thought that since I am often ill, and Weizhang is often deluded by feelings, why should I thus be deluded with him? So I asked a favor of our relatives to discuss with Weizhang about setting up two residences to allow me to practice Buddhism in a pure and tranquil manner.

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In this way, Ji Xian became a recluse of the inner quarters. Men dissatisfied with their times withdrew from office. Ji Xian, unhappy with her lot as a woman and with her philandering husband, broke the normative gender arrangement to the degree it was possible for her to do, and fulfilled the wish she had had since childhood to follow the Buddhist path. Context is important for reading her poetry of reclusion, and that context is at once literary, social, and auto/biographical.

Notes

1. See Benjamin Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
3. A single copy of each is held in the rare books collection of the National Library in Beijing.
5. I discuss this anthology in Chapter 4, “Gender and Reading: Form, Rhetoric, and Community in Women’s Poetic Criticism,” in Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, in press).
7. Models from the early Shang (1766–1045 BCE) and early Zhou (1045–256 BCE) dynasties.
8. “Basket and broom” is a standard metonymy for being a wife. They represent the female labor of food preparation and housekeeping.
11. In Shiguan, Third Collection, Guixiu biejuan: 3b–4a (Siku jinhuishu congkan series). The compiler Deng Hanyi 鄧漢儀 (1617–89) mentions Li Yan’s poetry collection, Poems Kept at Random by the Green Window (Lüchuan oucun 綠窗偶存). But the collection does not appear to be extant.
12. Ji Xian’s poetry collection is arranged according to poetic forms.


16. She refers to the conflict she had with her husband when he acquired two concubines and kept a mistress surnamed Fan. See Fong, “Ji Xian’s ‘Record of Past Karma,’” 144. Her husband’s family genealogy only records one concubine surnamed Cheng who bore a son. See Xinghua Lishi jiapu 興化李氏家譜, an 1893 hand-copied manuscript of the 1761 revised edition with no pagination (copy in Shanghai Library). Concubines are not included in family genealogies unless they have produced male offspring for the patriline.

17. The crane is a conventional sign of the recluse. It is often represented in landscape paintings of literati hermitage as a pet of the recluse.


25. See n. 16.