
Lingnan Plum Blossoms as a Vehicle for Building Self-Image: A Study of Liang Peilan's (1630–1705) Poems on Plum Blossoms*

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Liang Peilan 梁佩蘭 (1630–1705) wrote over 20 poems about plum blossoms, mostly devoted to the Chinese plum found in the Lingnan area. This article examines the motif of Lingnan plum blossoms employed in its multiple forms in the work of the late Ming-early Qing poet, who draws on the practice of symbolism and allusions for which the Chinese poetry tradition is known. While praising the plum blossoms of Lingnan, Liang's poems revolve around three key themes, namely loftiness, seclusion, and one's service to the world. Illustrated by examples, this study analyses how the metaphor of the plum blossom reveals the poet's self-image: as a self-admirer, as a recluse, and as an aspirant for fame and an official career. In his poems about the fallen Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Liang develops the themes of mourning, abandonment, and rebirth by using various images on top of the Lingnan plum blossom.

Keywords: Late Ming dynasty, early Qing dynasty, Liang Peilan, plum blossoms, self-image

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1. Introduction

Liang Peilan 梁佩蘭 (1630–1705), one of the “Three Great Poetry Masters of Lingnan” (*Lingnan san dajia* 嶺南三大), had a special affection for the plum blossom. A perusal of Liang’s poems on the plum blossoms (*meihua* 梅花, flowers of *Prunus mume*, or commonly known as Chinese plum) in the Lingnan area (hereafter: “Lingnan plum blossoms”) reveals that this particular type of flower is chosen by the poet to represent him, and thus is deployed as a prosopopeia.

Starting from that observation, this article analyses how the motif of Lingnan plum blossom was employed in its multiple forms by Liang Peilan in his verse, how his poems on the theme had drawn upon a tradition being kept alive by literati over the centuries, and how they differed in their messages from those written by his contemporary Qu Dajun 屈大均 (1630–1696), also one of the “Three Great Poets of Lingnan.” Moreover, this article will explore how Liang Peilan’s Lingnan plum blossom reflected a tripartite image of the author himself, along with a discussion of those aspects as shown in the writings of earlier authors, and will find out the implications for the poet’s self-image building.

Liang Peilan, also known by his courtesy name Zhiwu 芝五, and by his literary names Yaoting 藥亭, Chaiweng 柴翁, and, in his late years, Yuzhou 鬱州, was a native of Nanhai county of Guangdong. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), he passed the provincial imperial examination in 1657, ranking first among the successful candidates, and later in 1688 he passed the national examination, hence awarded the title of *jinshi* 進士 and entitled to a post in the Hanlin Academy 翰林院 as *Shujishi* 庶吉士 (i.e. Hanlin bachelor)

As one of the “Three Great Poets of Lingnan” — alongside with Qu Dajun and Chen Gongyin 陳恭尹 (1631–1700), Liang once formed a poetry society together with Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (literary name Zhucha 竹垞, 1629–1709) and other poets. His writings are collected in the *Liuyingtang ji* 六瑩堂集 of 9 fascicles and its sequel *Liuyingtang er ji* 六瑩堂二集 of 8 fascicles, comprised of over 2,000 pieces of poetry and prose.¹

His poetry was highly regarded by major poet-critics of the early Qing period such as Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (literary name Ruanting 阮亭, 1634–1711), who noted,

1 For details, see Liang Peilan, *Liang Peilan ji jiaozhu* 梁佩蘭集校注, collated and annotated by Dung Chau Hung 董就雄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2019), 6 vols.

Now that having read Chaiweng's poetry in its entirety [···] in a flash, it seems that I see wondrous scenes everywhere around to cheer my eyes and heart. So it's true that the soul of the mountain does lend beauty [to poetry] and writings do convey the spirit of the scenery. This cannot be changed easily.

今盡讀柴翁詩……周環俯仰之間，目快心怡，觸處俱成異境。信乎山靈毓秀，文字傳神，未易易也。²

Zhu Yizun also commented,

Yaoting's poetry shows that his brush is like a roaming dragon, his composure perfectly poised, his talent unfettered, his erudition profound, and his spirit boundless. It's like a vast and deep sea teeming with giant and tiny creatures, each with a magical aura about it.

藥亭之詩，其筆若游龍，其養如木雞，其才肆，其學富，其氣磅礴。若滄海溟濛中，巨者細者無一不具靈異之氣。³

These views are suffice to illustrate the high esteem that Liang Peilan enjoyed within the poetic community in early Qing.

2. Plum Blossom in Poetry: A Literary Tradition

Imagery in Chinese poetry goes back to the earliest poems in the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of songs*). Hence, the use of “plum blossom” as a metaphor in poetry was not new when employed by Liang Peilian. The evolution of writings about the plum blossom from the pre-Qin period down to the Northern and Southern Song periods has been investigated by Lawrence Chi Hung Yim 嚴志雄 in his article “Objectivity, Memory, and Loyalist Condition: Qu

2 See Liang Peilan 梁佩蘭, *Liuyingtang er ji* 六瑩堂二集, rpt. in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), vol. 120 (reproduction of the woodblock print edition prepared in Qing Kangxi 44 [1705]), “Pingci” 評詞, 675.

3 Ibid.

Dajun's 1659 Poems on Plum Trees.”⁴ He cited the observation by Cheng Jie 程杰 in these words:

Under the influence of poets like Lin Bu 林逋 (ca. 967–1028) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), by the late years of the Northern Song dynasty [...] there had been broad consensus about the plum blossom showing such qualities as cool calmness, clean elegance, and noble refinery. When it came to how the plum blossom was portrayed [in poetry], I found that, starting from the time of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), a parallel was often drawn to “beauties” such as Goddess Chang-E 嫦娥 in the moon, the fairy in Yaochi 瑤池 “the celestial pool,” the goddesses on Mount Guye 姑射, an imperial concubine in a well-hidden palace, a beauty in the woods, or a beauty in a secluded valley.⁵

Yim then noted:

The parallel between the plum blossom and beautiful women or goddesses comes naturally from the association evoked by the flower's appearance, which is exceedingly pristine, elegant, and charming. [...] Then, in the mid-Southern Song, plum blossoms were often likened to refined scholars, the noble-minded, hermits, the unconventional, the incorruptible, and eremitic subjects of the former dynasty.⁶

Through these and other writings about the literary history involving the plum blossom, one can trace a tradition upon which Liang Peilan had drawn for his poems about that particular flower. Research into the symbolic value of the peony and plum flower in Chinese poetry, in particular the status of the plum blossom as national flower during the Song dynasty, was already conducted by Wang Ying 王瑩 in a paper titled “A National Flower's Symbolic Value During the Tang and Song Dynasties in China.” She concludes that, “Thanks to the

4 Yim Chi Hung, “Tiwu, jiyi yu yimin qingjing: Qu Dajun 1659 nian yongmei shi tanjiu” 體物、記憶與遺民情境——屈大均一六五九年詠梅詩探究, in *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 21 (2002):77, n115: “For the following passage on how literary writings on the plum blossom evolved from the pre-Qin period through the Northern and Southern Song dynasties, many references are made to Cheng Jie 程杰, *Songdai yongmei wenxue yanjiu* 宋代詠梅文學研究 (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 2002).”

5 Cheng Jie, *Songdai yongmei wenxue yanjiu*, 305, quoted in Yim Chi Hung, “Tiwu, jiyi yu yimin qingjing,” 78.

6 Yim Chi Hung, “Tiwu, jiyi yu yimin qingjing,” 78.

Song dynasty literati's energetic exploration, the plum blossom's symbolic value as a national flower was continuously enriched.”⁷ This remark sheds light on the importance of the plum blossom's symbolic value.

3. Lingnan Plum Blossom: A Triple Image of the Poet

Liang Peilan wrote over 20 poems about plum blossoms, mostly devoted to that particular flower found in Lingnan areas. His life experiences and feelings expressed in the poems show that the poet handled the theme so aptly it actually reflects how he perceived himself. The most typical example is a series of six poems entitled “Nanhai tanmei” 南海探梅, which he wrote in the winter of 1698.⁸ This series reads like an introduction to Liang's poems about Lingnan plum blossoms and contains a general description of his various personal images. They roughly translate as follow:

#1

廟門銅鼓動波間 Drumbeats from the temple gate stirred the sea waves;
黃木行來有幾灣 How many bays had I walked by, coming from Huangmu?
三十里中皆是雪 The thirty-*li* terrain around seemed all covered with snow,
不留一片認青山 Leaving not a single patch to signal the green mountains.

#2

四天垂下遍花峰 The firmament was surrounded by peaks of flowers,
一疊峰盤數百重 Each thronged with hundreds of blooming clusters.
便欲結茅峰裡住 So I wish to build a thatched house amidst those peaks,

7 Wang Ying, “A National Flower's Symbolic Value During the Tang and Song Dynasties in China,” *Space and Culture* 21, no. 1 (2018): 58.

8 In *juan* (fascicle) 8 of *Liuyingtang er ji*, the poem titled “Nanhai tan mei” 南海探梅 is preceded by three other titles, namely “Xu Hongting he yu shijiu qiu shi, fu zuo er jieju jianzeng, ciyun fengda” 徐虹亭和予十九秋詩，復作二截句見贈，次韻奉答, comprised of four poems, “Song Xu Hongting taishi gui songling” 送徐虹亭太史歸松陵, comprised of eight poems, and “Xiao chu houyuan ouzuo” 曉出後園偶作. The first two titles were written in the eighth and tenth lunar months of 1690, respectively. Since the “Nanhai tan mei” is placed right after the “Xiao chu houyuan ouzuo,” the two must have been written around the same time. The “Nanhai tan mei” #2 has a line saying “All day long, all winter, [I wish to] live as a flower-farmer there” 冬來長日作花農. This suggests that the “Nanhai tan mei” series was probably written in the winter of that year. For the above-mentioned poems, see Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang er ji*, 8.651–52.

冬來長日作花農 All day long, all winter, live as a flower-farmer there.

#3

乍來一見稱奇絕 Abruptly it sprang into sight, leaving me amazed
 直至前頭總不言 And speechless long after I'd come before it.
 任是美人難得比 No matter what kind of mortal beauties, they could
 hardly compare with it —
 有誰還憶苧蘿村 But who still remembers the one from Zhuluo Village?

#4

花時寒色倍精神 The chilly season made the flowers bloom in doubly
 high spirits;
 倒壓高崖氣盡新 Atop the lofty cliff, they exuded a refreshing air
 around;
 不是千年老松樹 Far from being a thousand-year-old pine,
 如何根榦滿龍鱗 How come the plum tree was draped with dragon's
 scales around its main trunk?

#5

如煙如霧總茫茫 As though in mist or in fog, they made a hazy scene,
 半炙霜紅半日黃 Some crimsoned by frost, some gilt by sunlight.
 五色照來無定轉 With its light in five colors, the sun cast varying hues
 也留人影在清光 Leaving behind shadows of people in the clear sheen.

#6

看到斜陽未忍回 Watching the sun went down, yet I hated to return,
 氈毼布席尚徘徊 But lingered on the fields carpeted with fallen petals.
 要令刺眼光凌亂 Willingly I endured the sunlight's fractured gleam,
 不避橫身玉倒頹 Not shunning stray branches that shed white jade on me.⁹

The place name “Nanhai” 南海 in the title refers to the South Sea God's Temple (*Nanhai shenmiao* 南海神廟), built during the Sui dynasty (581–618). It was situated in a village within present-day Guangzhou city, where emperors used to offer sacrifices to the sea god.

The author's sense of someone who has high self-esteem and self-confidence, here-after called: “self-admirer,” is reflected in the poems #1, #3, and #4 in the series. In ll. 1–2 of poem #1, “Huangmu” 黃木 refers to the

9 Idem, 8.652.

namesake bay, i.e. Huangmuwan 黃木灣 where the temple was situated.¹⁰ The bay was, and still is, on the north bank of Zhujiang River, where its tributaries — Dongjiang, Xijiang, and Beijiang — converge. Ll. 3–4 present a picture of a broad expanse of terrain covered with snow-white plum blossoms, leaving hardly a strip of green land to signal the green mountains beneath. The plum blossom's clean whiteness and proud loftiness against the vast background well serve to symbolize the personal integrity of the poet himself, who appears as a self-admirer. Ll. 1–2 of poem #3 aptly stress the extreme beauty of that plum tree in full bloom. “Zhuluo Village” 苧蘿村 in ll. 3–4 refers to the home village of Xishi 西施, the matchless beauty in the ancient state of Yue. The solitary plum tree, which defied comparison with any human beauty but must have reminded people of Xishi, is used to create the self-image of the poet. Describing the plum tree as pleased with its own fragrance in loftiness, the poet reveals a sense of self-admiration, seeing himself above the common folk. Poem #4 depicts that plum tree standing atop a high cliff, blooming even more cheerfully in the bitter cold. With the coarse bark of its trunk resembling that of an extremely old pine or like the scaly skin of the dragon, the old plum tree symbolizes a hale and hearty man, growing even stronger with age — again a self-portrait of the poet (ll. 3–4).

The second aspect of the poet's self-image is “recluse,” which can be found in poem #2. Ll. 1–2 highlight the numerous clusters of plum blossoms that resembled a ring of peaks surrounding the vault of the sky. The impressive scene aroused a desire in the poet to retreat into a secluded hut among those plum blossom peaks. He wished to live there as a gardener, whose job is to take care of the plum blossoms all day long through the winter season. The imaginary pastoral scene depicted here reflects the poet's willingness to lead a secluded life as a recluse.

The third aspect of the poet's self-image, namely that of an aspirant for fame and career success, can be found in poems #5 and #6. Ll. 1–2 of poem #5 depict the forest of plum trees in a foggy or misty scene, some of them appearing red, some golden in the sun. Ll. 3–4 merit special attention,

10 Huangmu was already in use during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In the “Nanhai shenmiaobei” 南海神廟碑, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) writes, “The old temple has been replaced with a new one at the same site, located south-east to today's seat of Guangzhou [i.e. Nanhai county], 80 li away on the sea-sailing-route; at the Mouth of Fuxu, in the Bay of Huangmu” 因其故廟，易而新之，在今廣州治之東南，海道八十里，扶胥之口，黃木之灣。See *Han Yu quanji jiaozhu* 韓愈全集校注, coll. and annot. Qu Shouyuan 屈守元, Chang Sichun 常思春 et al. (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1996), 2407–29, esp. 2407, 2414n9.

especially the literary allusion of “five colors [of sunlight]” famously employed by Tang-dynasty author Li Cheng 李程 (766–ca. 842) in a *fu* poem called “Riwuse fu” 日五色賦. The “five colors” was an allusion that first appeared in the *Han shu* 漢書 “Wuxing zhi” 五行志 (Monograph on the five phases),¹¹ and later detailed in the *Douweiyi* 斗威儀, a weft-text (*weishu* 緯書) of the Confucian canon of *Li* 禮 (Rites).¹²

As literary scholar Kwong Kin Hung 鄭健行 explains,

When the reigning sovereign is virtuous, the sun would emit light in five colors, among which yellow is the dominant color whereas red, black, white, and blue complement it.

君主有德，則日明五色。五色以黃為主，配合赤、黑、白、青。¹³

Considering that the allusion is related to the virtuous sovereign, ll. 3–4 seem to convey a hidden message from the poet. Just as the plum blossoms were bathed in the sunshine of five elemental colors, the poet would gladly stay in the clear and bright sheen bestowed by the flowers that appealed to him so much. It can be inferred that by wishing for warmth from the sunlight in five colors, the poet was actually expecting appreciation from the emperor.

Liang composed those six poems in 1698 while he was living a rural life in Lingnan, a decade after he passed the national examination in 1688. Yet in 1689, one year after becoming *jinshi*, he took a leave of absence and returned home. Given that in 1703 he sat the selection examination for a higher post in the Hanlin Academy, we may infer that he had been waiting all those years for an opportunity to serve the court. Here in the “Nanhai tanmei,” Liang shows frustration over the lack of recognition for his talent, along with a yearning for an advance in his official career.

Poem #6 in the series adds a sense of resolve on top of frustration. In particular, the “white jade,” meaning plum blossom petals, in the final line symbolized the fame and an official career for which the poet had been expecting. Liang Peilan earned the title of *jinshi* only at his seventh attempt at the age of 60. He composed the set of poems when he was 70, and then, at the age of 75, he travelled to the country’s capital to take a selection examination

11 *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 27C(2).1480.

12 Fragments of the *Douweiyi* can be found in the “Ri (A)” 日上, sub-section of the “Tian bu (3)” 天部三 of the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 3.15.

13 Kwong Kin Hung, “Li Cheng ‘Ri wuse fu’ zhushi” 李程〈日五色賦〉注譯 (unpublished manuscript, August 1, 2017).

for a higher post in the Hanlin Academy.

Keeping the goal in mind, the poet never gave up hope despite his old age (“till the sun’s setting”). Instead, he would tolerate jeers and taunts (“endured the light’s fractured gleam”) that he had been faced because of repeated setbacks (“not shunning stray branches”), just in expectation of higher fame and career at the royal court that would come his way (“shedding white jade on me”). Here again the poet revealed yet another aspect of his self-image.

In sum, the six poems bring out a triple image of the poet, presenting him as someone who had high self-esteem, as a recluse, or as an aspirant for fame and an official career, in various contexts.

3.1 Self-admirer

The triple image of Liang Peilan as a self-admirer, a recluse, or an aspirant for fame and an official career, as shown in the “Nanhai tanmei” series of poems, also appeared in his other verses on the theme of Lingnan plum blossoms. But his other poems often appear only in one aspect of his self-image while implicitly echoing the other aspects, with the result that these six poems read like a kind of preface to his poems about Lingnan plum blossoms. For instance, in the spring of 1698 he composed two poems, jointly titled “Huyu mei” 湖嶼梅：

#1

素簫晴初啟 鴻濛坼未均 若無淳樸處 愁絕寂寥人 雪入炎州氣 陽回凍臘仁 任教天地老 湖上一家春	White-clad twigs showed up as the skies cleared, And the shroud of fog has spread unevenly; It seems that there is no longer a simple place in this world, And that depresses me to no end in my loneliness. Yet, snows won’t stay long in this warmer climate, And the sun restores the benevolence of the cold months. However heavens and earth may age, In my lakeshore home, springtime’s here to stay.
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#2

玲瓏三五樹 高下影鱗鱗 白日無湖汜 孤情戀野人 柴門行復掃	The plum trees clustered in threes or fives; High and low, they cast shadows like scales. In bleaching sunlight, lakeshores paled out of sight; The solitude of it kept my lowly self tarrying there. I paced the gateway and swept the place clean,
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巾烏古時新 Wearing my scarf and shoes, archaic yet new.
 世界嚴寒裡 Within this world of bitter cold,
 吾寧對汝真 I'd rather join you in genuineness.

Judging from “my lakeshore home” in l. 8 of poem #1, the “Huyu” 湖嶼 or lake-islet in the title probably refers to a location on the shore of Xihu 西湖 (West Lake) in present-day Guangzhou city, the poet’s home at that time. This couple of poems must have been written soon after his new residence was built there.¹⁴

In poem #1, ll. 1–2 paint a picture of plum trees displaying their snow-draped twigs as the skies cleared up, with their flowers still hidden in the dispersing fog. In ll. 3–4, the poet shows his regret that the plum blossom’s unadorned simplicity was kept from his perception, which added sadness to his loneliness. Then, in ll. 5–6, he feels relieved that the warmer climate of the south would soon clear away the snow and the returning sun would warm his heart again. Finally, he expresses joy about the fact that spring’s warmth was to reign for long in his home, with some plum flowers blooming indoors (ll. 7–8). Versifying about the blossom with its simplicity in aloofness, the poet divulges his sense of loneliness to the reader.

Poem #2 continues in the same vein. Shadows of the clustered plum blossoms resembled fish scales (ll. 1–2) and the extremely strong sunlight paled the lakeshores out of sight, but that solitary scene still kept the poet lingering there (ll. 3–4). Wearing his scarf and shoes that were old-fashioned yet newly made, he swept fallen petals off the gateway from time to time (ll. 5–6). That special outfit did carry a message — the poet’s fondness of things of the past in preference to the modish or conventional. The concluding lines explain the reason behind: in a chilly and inhospitable world, the plum blossoms alone could give warmth to humans, keeping them company with all their genuineness and sincerity. So the poet would gladly choose a life of solitude, content with his loftiness and otherworldiness, just as the plum blossoms were.

In the eleventh lunar month of year 1700, guided by Chen Xianmeng 陳獻孟, Liang Peilan made a tour of Mount Luofu 羅浮山 in Guangdong. Later he wrote a poem titled “Yi Luofu meihua” 憶羅浮梅花:¹⁵

14 In *juan* 6 of *Liuyingtang er ji*, the “Pingmei” 瓶梅 is placed right after the “Huyumei” 湖嶼梅. Therefore they should have been written around the same time. See Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang er ji*, 6.609.

15 *Idem*, 7.633.

名山屢有梅花約	On the famous Mountain I had a plum tree rendezvous;
肯使花時與願違	How could I miss the right season of their blooming?
雙履不忘瑤室遠	My shoes forgot not the long trek to the Abode of Jade;
一筇先擬鐵橋飛	My walking staff aimed first to reach the Bridge of Iron.
朱明達曙冰含日	At dawn in Zhuming Cave, I saw icicles refracting sunlight;
玉女深宵月照衣	At night on Yunü Peak, moonlight shone on my gown.
最憶幾縈香雪裡	My best memory is that of the groves of “fragrant snows,”
綠毛玄鳳繞人歸	Whence a green-feathered phoenix flew around me back home.

The poet first explained the reason for his visit to that famous mountain was for the plum flowers there, and he wouldn't miss the time of their blooming for the world (ll. 1–2). Then he described how anxious he was to start the journey. The Abode of Jade and Bridge of Iron in ll. 3–4 refer to the legendary dwelling of immortals and to a rocky passage, both on the mountain. In ll. 5–6 he recounts two scenic spots he visited. In Zhuming Cave, famous in Taoist tradition, he witnessed the wondrous view of the rising sun shining through icicles; on Yunü Peak, one of the 432 peaks of Mount Luofu, he had the rare experience of being showered by the moonlight. All these, however, were a mere prelude to his best memory of the tour, namely his visit to the groves of plum blossoms that he affectionately named “fragrant snows,” and how from there a green-feathered bird flew around him all the way back home (ll. 7–8). Of course, it was the twigs of plum blossoms he had plucked that attracted the bird all the way to his home. Since that particular flower appealed to him so dearly, they are used in the poem to express the admiration for himself as well as for the plum blossom.

3.2 A Recluse

A second aspect of Liang Peilan's self-image is also found in his other poems about the plum blossom, in which he appears as a recluse. For instance, the poem “Huangcun tanmei” 黃村探梅, written in early spring around years

1660 and 1662, portrays this majestic scenery:¹⁶

梅花十里黃村路	Miles of plum blossoms lined the paths in Huangcun,
花候誰能更掩關	Who'd keep their doors shut to this seasonal scene?
滿地月明憐昨夜	The moon cast bright light on the fields last night,
一天寒色在前山	And filled the sky with coolness o'er the hills yonder.
冰融野壑崖前折	Thawing ice in the gully by the cliffs was cracking,
僧立溪橋影自閒	While a monk stood leisurely on the bridge,
	watching.
擬欲置身茅屋裡	I thought of dwelling in a thatched house there,
白頭相對不知還	Along with the flowers till my hair's white, no
	returning.

Huangcun 黃村 is an ancient village situated to the east of present-day Guangzhou city. Dating back to the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), it was known for the plum trees planted all around there, hence also known as “Meilin” 梅林, literally “forest of plum trees.” The poem highlights the plum trees blossoming all around the village, where people would leave their doors open for the scene (ll. 1–2). Then it describes an even more charming night view, with the plum blossoms under the chilly moonlight that shone all over the village and the hills beyond (ll. 3–4). The presence of a monk, who was leisurely standing on the bridge and watching the thawing ice crack in the gully, adds a human touch to the picture (ll. 5–6). The final couple of lines reveals a message from the poet. He wished to dwell in a simple abode amidst the forest of plum trees of the village, with the blossoms to keep him company even when his hair turned white. This is almost like a self-portrait of the poet as someone who retreats into a rural life.

Liang Peilan wrote this poem when he was still young (aged between 32 and 34), yet he was thinking of disengaging from the world. The reason

16 The poem that appears ahead of, and second nearest to, the poem “Huangcun tanmei” 黃村探梅 is called “Su lingzhoushan si tong Wei Hegong, He Buxie, Chen Yuanxiao, Tao Kuzi, and jia Qipu, yin ji Wang Shuozuo, Dongcun” 宿靈洲山寺同魏和公、何不偕、陳元孝、陶苦子、家器圃，因寄王說作、東村，which was written in the autumn of 1660. The poem that directly follows “Huangcun tanmei” 黃村探梅 is titled “Zhouci Foshan, guo Cheng Zhouliang jishan caotang liubie” 舟次佛山，過程周量葢山草堂留別，written in early winter of 1662. Therefore, “Huangcun tanmei” 黃村探梅 should have been written between 1660 and early spring of 1662. For the above-said poems, see Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang ji* 六瑩堂集, rpt. in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian*, vol. 120 (reproduction of the woodblock print edition prepared in Qing Kangxi 47 [1708]), 8.497.

lies in his thwarted efforts to pass the national examination. His first attempt in 1659 met with failure when he was 31 years old.¹⁷ This poem was written within three years after that, showing that he was so disheartened he thought of retiring as a recluse. As shown in his later writings, such a desire kept lingering in his mind till his final years when he suffered even more setbacks on his career path, feeling deep frustration that his talent was not recognized. The poem “Pingmei” 瓶梅 written in the spring of 1698,¹⁸ about the same time as he composed the “Huyumei,” as discussed above, is another example to prove this point:

一枝初注水	Soon after water was poured in for the twig,
冰已結銅瓶	The bronze vase iced o'er with the flower in it.
春氣臨書卷	The vernal air's come to my books and volumes,
予心正戶庭	Yet my heart was outside, right in the courtyard.
分明雙眼白	Clearly the flowers were staring with their “white eyes,”
依舊故山青	And keeping the “black pupils” for their native mountain.
留得孤情在	So long as the sense of loftiness remains as ever,
鴻濛不用扃	Let the fog fill the world, doors needn't be shut. ¹⁹

The weather was extremely cold, as evidenced by the quickly frozen water in the flower vase (ll. 1–2). The air of spring had arrived in the poet's study, yet he was concerned about the plum flowers out there in the courtyard (ll. 3–4). Then, the flower was personified as someone being able to stare at people with either “white eyes” or “black pupils” to show disdain or admiration. The plum blossoms were staring at the cold weather with “white eyes” while reserving their “black pupils” for their homeland (ll. 5–6). This is an allusion to the story of the poet Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) who was famous for his habit of showing “white eyeballs” to people he disdained according to his official biography in the *Jin shu* 晉書 (History of the Jin):

[Ruan Ji] was very filial towards his parents. Later, when his mother died

17 Lü Yongguang 呂永光 notes in a chronological biography of Liang Peilan under the year of 1659 that, “In the autumn, [Liang Peilan] failed in the national examination; [he] returned to the south” 秋，會試落第，南歸。See Lü Yongguang, “Liang Peilan nianpu jianbian” 梁佩蘭年譜簡編, in *Liuyingtang ji* 六瑩堂集, coll., punc., and supp. Lü Yongguang (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1992), 463.

18 See note 14 in the above.

19 Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang er ji*, 6.609.

[...] Ruan Ji could turn his eyeballs from black into white. If he saw vulgar people, he would face them with white eyes. Later, Ji Xi came to offer his condolences and Ruan Ji rolled his eyes to him. Ji Xi was displeased and left. When Ji Xi's younger brother Ji Kang heard that, he brought wine and a *qin* zither to visit Ruan Ji's home. Ruan Ji was very happy and faced him with black pupils.

(籍)性至孝，母終……。籍又能為青白眼。見禮俗之士，以白眼對之。及嵇喜來弔，籍作白眼，喜不懌而退。喜弟康聞之，乃齎酒挾琴造焉，籍大悅，乃見青眼。²⁰

Hence the allusion to Ruan Ji's habit of rolling his eyes, either with the eyeball showing more white (i.e. more sclera than usual) when meeting vulgar people, or with "black pupils" to those he admired.

The plum blossoms' longing for their native mountain is a metaphor of the poet's affection for an eremitic life. Then, with the sense of loftiness over the vase flowers, the poet wishes the fog would fill the world for both the flower and himself, highlighting his fondness of an eremitic life (ll. 7–8).

Judging from the two poems, Liang Peilan clearly identifies the eremitic life in his dream with the plum blossoms' native mountain. The two poems were written in 1689, a year after Liang Peilan passed the national examination and at the time he took a leave of absence to return home in the south. The desire to seek a retreat from worldly affairs was particularly strong after he met failures in the examination or setbacks on his path towards the post and rank that he was after.

3.3 An Aspirant for Fame and Official Career

The self-image of Liang Peilan as an aspirant for fame and an official career is also found in other poems about the plum blossom. One of them, titled "Zhiri" 至日, reflects that aspiration when the topic extends well beyond the flower.

陽氣初從子半回	The <i>yang</i> spirit's just returned from the midnight hour;
眼看殘臘又將來	In sight again is the year's last month coming to its end.
長貧只合青山老	Living long in poverty, I'm fit to age amidst the mountains;

²⁰ *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 49.1361.

多病徒驚白髮催 薊北風雲生羽翼 嶺南天地有蒿萊 幾年戀闕丹心破 愁見梅花五度開	Weak from illnesses, I'm shocked by my hoary hair. In the north, winds and clouds are whirling on the wing; In Lingnan, heavens and earth still have weeds in between. After years of longing for the palace, my heart's broken, Saddened to see the plum trees blossomed five times already. ²¹
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This poem was probably written after the poet's fifth failure in the national examination in 1682 on the winter solstice day (*zhiri*). With the air of warmth returned from its lowest at the previous midnight, the poet sensed that the winter solstice day was bringing the lunar year's end into sight again (ll. 1–2). Stumbling on the bumpy path towards earning the title of *jinshi*, he moaned about his old age (he was 54 that year) and poor health, seeing himself fit only to spend the rest of his years in a rural place back home (ll. 3–4). He understood that the situation in “the north,” to be precise, the country's capital, was changing fast and drastically like winds whirling and clouds flying, yet luckily Lingnan, his homeland, remained an ideal environment (“still have weeds”) for his eremitic life (ll. 5–6). In the end, the poet laments over his decade-long yet unfulfilled ambition to serve at the royal court (“the palace”), feeling bitterly sad (“my heart's broken” and “saddened”) to have seen plum blossoms bloom for five times without being appreciated. To him, the unappreciated plum blossoms symbolize his failed efforts to earn the *jinshi* title all these years with his talent remained unrecognized (ll. 7–8).

In 1683, Liang Peilan wrote a poem titled “Lingshansi zhemei” 靈山寺折梅, which again reveals his ambition:

山寺尋僧到 梅花折一枝 野情隨處得 香氣少人知 我欲貽芳草 誰從入《楚詞》	To visit the monk, I travelled to his temple on the mountain, Whence a twig of plum blossoms I plucked. In the mood for nature, one could find it anywhere, Yet the scent is only known to only a few. This I would offer like the fragrant grass of old, But through whom could my <i>Songs of Chu</i> be presented [to the court]?
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21 Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang er ji*, 7.633.

更憐寒鳥雀 Pitiful are the birds in such chilly weather —
 窺影入疏籬 They flew across the fence to peep at my blossoms.²²

The temple Lingshansi 靈山寺, better known as the Xiashansi 峽山寺, is located in present-day Zhaoqing county in Guangdong. He wrote the poem in the eleventh lunar month of 1683 on a tour of Duanzhou 端州, the ancient name of Zhaoqing.²³

The poem seems to express a sense of mutual pity between Liang Peilan and the plum blossom through a shared misfortune. The flower's fragrance and beauty were only appreciated by the birds, while the poet's talent received no recognition. He "would offer it like the fragrant grass of old" but then suffered setbacks repeatedly in his attempts to pass the national examination, not knowing "through whom" he could "present his *Songs of Chu*" to the emperor's court. The poem well reflects his burning desire to succeed at court, which somehow fits his state of mind following the fifth failure in the examination.

After Liang Peilan finally obtained the title of *jinshi* in 1688, he took leave and returned to Lingnan. Back in his hometown, he made a tour of Mount Luofu, in the eleventh lunar month of 1700, and wrote a poem about it called "Chongxuguan gumei xing" 冲虚觀古梅行 (Ballad of the ancient plum in the Chongxu Temple). Again, this piece expresses the poet's wish to have his talent recognized and have the career advancements he thinks he deserves.

22 Idem, 5.578.

23 Lū Yongguang notes that, in 1683, "On the 19th day of the 11th lunar month, Wu Qi, Wu Yuanqi, Cao Yanhuai, Chen Gongyin, Cai Hongda, Miao Qiqi, and Ke Chongpu wrote poems, each using a set of characters for rhyming, which he got by drawing lots, atop the Xingyan Crag in Zhaoqing. The next day, Liang Peilan, Qu Dajun, and Wu Shouqian arrived and joined the poem-writing" 十一月十九日, 吳綺、吳源起、曹燕懷、陳恭尹、蔡鴻達、繆其器、柯崇樸分韻賦詩於肇慶星巖之上。次日, 梁佩蘭、屈大均、吳壽潛繼至屬和。See Lū Yongguang, "Liang Peilan nianpu jianbian," 470. Also, Liang Peilan wrote a poem titled "Lingshansi ting quan" 靈山寺聽泉; see Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang er ji*, 5.577. Qu Dajun wrote a poem under the same title, see Wang Tsung-yen 汪宗衍: *Qu Wengshan xiansheng nianpu* 屈翁山先生年譜 (Macau, Yujin shuwu, 1970), 146; and see Chen Yongzheng 陳永正: *Qu Dajun shici biannian jianjiao*, 屈大均詩詞編年箋校 (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 2000), vol 1, 599. Both sources date that poem [by Qu Dajun] at some time in 1683. It is inferable that the poem titled "Lingshansi ting quan" [by Liang Peilan] was written during [his] visit to Duanzhou in the middle or last third of the 11th month of 1683. Then, in *Liuyingtang er ji*, 5.578, this poem is immediately followed by "Lingshansi zhemei." So, "Lingshansi zhemei" was doubtlessly written at the same time.

冲虛觀前有古梅	In front of Chongxu Temple stands a plum tree of antiquity,
傳是葛仙手所種	Hand-planted by Ge Hong the immortal, legend has it.
千年老榦積鐵黝	After a thousand years, with its trunk aged in iron black,
一樹繁花照人凍	The tree is teeming with flowers and emitting a cooling sheen.
石室斜窺入戶飛	It slants bloomed branches into the stone chamber's door;
玉晨上作焚香供	There, priests make offerings of them, with incense burnt.
當時葛仙自汲井	In those years, Ge Hong himself drew water from the well;
豈少弟子代提甕	His disciples, carrying earthen jars, helped water the tree.
灌溉年時接混茫	Across years and ages, the watering's linked up to Chaos,
支撐造化排瀕洞	Propping the Heaven and Earth with upwelling floods.
丹氣常存舊蘊隆	The elixir's aura still lingers, the scent strong as ever;
罡風不畏新搖動	Fearing no gusting winds, the tree has never swayed.
拚死層層大雪埋	Risking death, buried in snows layer upon layer,
為生日日高人共	It stays alive and keeps the hermit companion day after day.
世情閭巷誰解識	Among the common folk, who can grasp the world's secrets?
天骨巖崖自驚眾	Atop the rocky cliff, the celestial plant shocks the masses.
生長金庭格已高	Growing in the golden court, it shows a noble style;
結成瓊蕊蜂難闋	Bearing flowers of jade, it forbids the bees' swarming.
童子壇邊執苕帚	Boy servants use their brooms around the flowerbed;
瘦鶴階前啄磚縫	Slim cranes peck between floor-tiles before the steps.
分明天地剩寂寥	Clearly, nothing but solitude remains in the Universe;

納取玄黃養虛空	Drawing upon the whole Creation to nourish the Void.
名山孤兀不傍人	Standing lofty on the legendary mountain, leaning on none;
肯信仙材竟無用	How could that heavenly timber ever end up being useless?
欲去還遲玉女留	Leaving, yet I tarried awhile, attached to the jade fairy;
雲中么鳳來相送	From the clouds came a five-colored bird, seeing me off. ²⁴

The temple of Chongxu guan 沖虛觀, situated on the north foot of Mount Luofu, was first built during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) by Taoist master Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343). There are many Taoist terms in this poem, for example, *hunmang* 混茫 derives from Chapter 16 “Shanxing” 繕性 (Correcting the nature) of the Taoist classic *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (also known as the *Nanhua zhenjing* 南華真經): “Ancient people lived in the midst of *chaos*” 古之人在混茫之中.²⁵ Another example is *ji liao* 寂寥, it denotes emptiness, formlessness or, in more general terms, nothingness. According to Chapter 25 of the *Laozi* 老子 (also known as the *Daodejing* 道德經), “There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How *still* it was and *formless*, standing alone, and undergoing no change” 有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立不改。²⁶ He Shangong 河上公 commented that, “*Ji* 寂 means no sound, while *liao* 寥 means emptiness and formlessness.”²⁷

Finally, there is the term “xuan huang” 玄黃 which in Taoism refers to the mixture of melted mercury and lead in liquid form. This is the ingredient to make the elixir of immortality. According to the *Taiqing jinye shendan jing* 太

24 Liang Peilan, *Liuyintang er ji*, 4.564.

25 *Nanhua zhenjing zhushu* 南華真經注疏, comm. Guo Xiang 郭象, subcomm. Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, in *Xuxiu Sike quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995–2002), vol. 955 (a second generation reproduction of the *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏 recension originally printed in 1444–45), 18.311.

26 *Laozi jinzhū jinyi ji pingjie* 老子今註今譯及評介, annot. and trans. Chen Guu-ying 陳鼓應, 3rd rev. ed. (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 2000), 145. Translation quoted from James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism* (vol. 39 of *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Max Müller; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), pt. 1, *The Tào Teh King, or the Tào and Its Characteristics*, 67.

27 Quoted in *Laozi jinzhū jinyi ji pingjie*, 146n2.

清金液神丹經 (Scripture of the divine elixir of the golden liquor of the Great Purity), collected in *juan* 65 of the Taoist encyclopaedia *Yunqi qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven tablets in a cloudy satchel), “Take nine catties of mercury and one catty of lead, place them in a pot and boil over high fire from dawn till dusk. The essence of mercury and lead will flow out in a gold-like form, which is called *xuan huang*” 取水銀九斤，鉛一斤，置土釜中，猛其火，從旦至日下晡，水銀鉛精俱出如黃金，名曰玄黃。²⁸ By using Taoist vocabulary in his poems, the poet creates an atmosphere of immortal beings and turns the “plum tree of antiquity” into a “celestial plant,” and by doing so further enhances his own connection with it. The poem can be divided into four parts.

The first part (ll. 1–6) gives a detailed description of that antique plum tree growing in the temple. Believed to have been planted by Ge Hong himself, it was around one thousand years old with its trunk in the color of iron-black and its brilliant blossoms give a cool shine. Some branches with flowers had reached into a stone chamber by the door, and Taoist priests of the temple offered them to the deities along with incense burning.

The second part (ll. 7–14) recounts how the tree must have grown throughout the centuries. To water it, the immortal Ge Hong personally drew water from a well while his disciples carried earthen jars to help him. Being given such care over the ages, the tree was empowered with the spirit of Chaos from the remote antiquity, thus enabled to support the physical world with the force of the watering given to it. Then, having been energized by the elixir’s aura, it turned out so tough that it could withstand gusting winds and survive deep snows, until it lived to become a life-long companion to the hermit a millennium later.

The third part (ll. 15–22) goes on to list the qualities of the plum tree that made it so extraordinary. Growing in a location as prestigious as a legendary temple, it remained lofty with a noble air, far away from the lowly insects like bees. The image of boy servants attending the flowerbed and cranes pecking in it adds an air of elegance, while the association with the Universe and Creation produced a mystic atmosphere for that plum tree.

In the concluding lines (ll. 23–26), the poet makes his message clear. He felt certain that the plum tree, standing upright without relying on any support, would finally win it recognition someday. The most significant couple of lines are “Standing lofty on the legendary mountain, leaning on none; / How could that heavenly timber ever end up being useless,” considering that the subject

28 *Yunqi qiqian*, comp. Zhang Junfang 張君房, in *Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1985), 1060: 694.

here — the “heavenly timber” — symbolizes both the plum tree and the poet himself. At the time of writing, Liang Peilan was confident that, given his exceptional talent, he needed no help in obtaining a position at the imperial court.

The opportunity finally came in 1703 when the court summoned those *jinshi*-title awardees outside the capital to take a selection examination for senior positions in the Hanlin Academy. Much, to his dismay, Liang was told to await appointment as a county magistrate or a member of the grand secretariat mostly because he had no knowledge of the Manchurian language. He decided to return home in Lingnan instead.²⁹

Based on the above analyses, the “Nanhai tanmei” series written in the winter of 1698 can be taken as a key to read all other poems on the plum blossom by Liang Peilan. The six serial poems delineate three aspects of the poet’s self-image, presenting him as a self-admirer, a recluse, or an aspirant for fame and an official career, in various contexts. The first image of someone who has high self-esteem is depicted in poems #1, #3 and #4 in the series: the plum blossom is characterized by its pristine quality and proud loftiness, symbolizing the worthy qualities of a peerless beauty and a person growing ever stronger with age. The second image of a recluse can be found in the second poem: the floriculturist that took care of his plum flowers lived in hermetic seclusion. The third image is depicted in poem #5, in which the plum blossom personifies the poet himself: a portrait of the plum blossom enjoying the sunlight of five colors, symbolizing the poet’s longing for the emperor’s appreciation. Finally, in poem #6, he declares himself a lover of the plum blossom, and thus an aspirant for fame and an official career.

The triple image presented in the “Nanhai tanmei” series is also found in other literary pieces written by Liang Peilan on the same flower.

First, the two poems jointly titled “Huyumei” and the one titled “Yi Luofu meihua,” all written in his later years, illustrate the pure simplicity, proud loftiness, and clean-white integrity of the plum blossom. These are qualities that Liang Peilan attributed to himself, and for which he admired himself.

Then, the poem titled “Huangcun tanmei,” although written when Liang Peilan was still in his thirties, already reveals his intention to escape into a rural life, to live among plum blossoms as his companion. The “Village of Plum-Tree Forest” (Meilin) is idealized as a place where the recluse (read

29 For details, see the preface to the *Liuyingtang ji* by Zhang Shangyuan 張尚瑗, in Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang ji*, 437–38.

Liang Peilan himself) would dwell “in a thatched house” for good.

The same idea is expressed later in “Pingmei,” a poem written in his old age, but with a slightly different focus. By visualizing the vase flowers’ longing for their native mountain, the poet reveals a dream for an eremitic life. Thus the plum blossom and the poet seem to merge into an inseparable entity. Both the recluse who imagines himself living with plum blossoms as his life-long companion, and the very same flower that personifies as someone longing for home, are brought together in the verse to highlight the image of someone who dreamed of retreating into an eremitic life, an ideal that Liang Peilan projected for himself.

Lastly, the poem “Zhiri,” written in 1682 following the poet’s fifth failure in the national examination, employs the theme of plum blossom in yet another way. The poet highlights his five times of witnessing the plum flowers’ blossoming and withering as a metaphor for his thwarted efforts to earn the title of *jinshi*. Then, in the poem written in the following year, titled “Lingshansi zhemei,” he admires the delicate scent of plum blossoms that is known only to a few and doubts whether anyone would ever appreciate its value even if a flowered twig is offered as a gift. So, the poet sought to voice his frustration over his repeatedly failed attempts to gain recognition from the imperial court.

Each of the above poems about Lingnan plum blossoms describes one aspect of the self-image of Liang Peilan while echoing the three images of the general outline of the serial poems in “Nanhai tanmei” but they do not appear at the same time in other poems on Lingnan Plum blossoms. Only in the series of Nanhai tanmei are they included simultaneously. One can say that the “Nanhai tanmei” is a summary and essential representation of Liang’s personal image. It is the most important and most representative works among all his poems on the Lingnan plum blossom, and therefore demands special attention.

The three aspects of Liang Peilan’s self-image presented in his poems on Lingnan plum blossoms correlate to his psychological state in three different stages of his life: in the first stage, he sought to gain fame and an official career (for being someone who had tremendous self-esteem); in the second, he experienced failures in the process (and thus resorted to seclusion); and in the third he tried to keep his dream (earning everlasting fame as a court official) alive and expect it would be realized one day. Fame and official career remained the life-long goal for Liang Peilan, which he always kept striving for, despite the continuous setbacks.

4. Plum Blossom in Poetry: A Comparison with Qu Dajun

As noted earlier in this paper, by combing through writings on the Chinese literary history related to the plum blossom, one can trace a tradition upon which Liang Peilan had drawn for his poems about that particular flower. The personification of a flower for someone who has high self-esteem, as used by Liang in his poetry, can be traced to major poets like Lin Bu, Su Shi and their successors in later years of the Northern Song. The plum blossom as a literary image of the recluse can be traced to the mid-Southern Song when it was likened to refined scholars, noble-minded persons, or people living in eremitism. Finally, the flower's image of an aspirant for fame and an official career can be traced to a time-honored tradition of portraying the plum blossom as "'beauties' such as Goddess Chang-E in the moon, the fairy in Yaochi 'the celestial pool,' the goddesses on Mount Guye [...]," but with a considerable difference.

In his poetic works, Liang personifies the Lingnan plum blossom to illustrate his aspiration for fame and an official career in a number of variations, but the epitome of which is the "heavenly timber" awaits to be discovered and utilized. That image carried a "heavenly" touch since the tree was fostered in the sublime environment of Mount Luofu, not dissimilar to the aura that Chang-E, the Yaochi fairy, or the goddess on Mount Guye exudes. But the poet attributes one crucial element to the "heavenly timber," that is, an expectation for getting employed. This added dimension can be regarded as an innovation by Liang Peilan for the genre of poetry about the plum blossom.

The "plum trees of antiquity" (*gu mei* 古梅) in Qu Dajun's poems and the Lingnan plum blossom described in his anecdotal work *Guangdong xinyu* 廣東新語 (A new account of the tales of Guangdong) have some salient features. He and Liang Peilan, being close friends and two of the "Great Poetry Masters of Lingnan" with similar academic backgrounds (i.e. sharing the same local origin and social network in Lingnan), wrote many poems about the plum blossom. But there are two key differences between the two: first, unlike Qu, who wrote the *yongmei shi* 詠梅詩 (poems on the plum blossom) in one single year, as discussed in Yim's article, Liang Peilan wrote similar poems on the same flower throughout different stages of his life. Second, this group of poems by Liang, in general, represents three aspects of the image of plum flowers that are depicted with consistent sentiments, as shown in the previous sections of this paper. Therefore, the *yongmei shi* composed by Liang Peilan and the ones by Qu Dajun in 1659 form are an ideal pair for comparison and

mutual reference.

Yim Chi Hung made the following comment on the significance of Qu Dajun's poems on plum blossoms:

While versifying about plum blossoms, Qu Dajun tended to express his mourning for the former dynasty and sentiments about his own life experiences. The plum blossom in his poems thus embodies the fallen Ming dynasty and its remnant subjects. [···] This article argues that, while writing these poems, Qu Dajun was pondering over what roles the Ming loyalists could and should have played during the Ming-Qing transition according to the historical circumstances of the time. [···] His poems carried three interrelated motifs, namely loyalism, eremitism, and rebirth. Qu Dajun's main concerns were to keep a historical memory of the Ming-Qing transition and give a poetic presentation of the subjectivity of the Ming remnants, both of which were achieved through the embodiment of the plum trees as an object and versification about them.³⁰

Yim contends that the poems by Qu Dajun as a remnant subject of the Ming dynasty carry three interrelated motifs: loyalism, eremitism, and rebirth. Borrowing this observation from Yim, I think Liang's *yongmei* poems also have three interrelated motifs, albeit slightly different: proud loftiness, eremitism, and service to the world.

What I mean by “proud loftiness” (*gugao* 孤高) is how Liang felt superior to the common people based on his immaculate integrity, which characterizes the “self-admiring” attribute that the plum blossom is deemed to possess. Then, “eremitism” (*tuiyin* 退隱) refers to the desire to live a rural life amidst plum blossoms or the yearning for one's home in the countryside, as found in the mind of the recluse. Finally, “service to the world” (*jingshi* 經世) refers to the poet's longing for respectable official posts and ranks in the imperial court, as demonstrated by the “aspirant for fame and official career” dimension discussed above. The plum blossom in Liang's poems can be interpreted as a symbol of the poet himself, his success in gaining the title of *jinshi*, his political ambitions and statecraft.

The plum blossom (mainly the Lingnan plum blossom) has different meanings in Liang's poems, and some are contradictory. For example, the choice of seclusion (as a retired pastoralist) and the yearning for having one's talents discovered and utilized by the royal court (as an aspirant of fame) are

³⁰ Yim Chi Hung, “Tiwu, jiyi yu yimin qingjing,” 86.

going in opposite direction. So how should we interpret the multiple meanings of the Lingnan plum blossom in Liang's poems?

The answer can be found in the two lines "Standing lofty on the legendary mountain, leaning on none; / How could that heavenly timber ever end up being useless?" 名山孤兀不傍人，肯信仙材竟無用 in the poem "Ballad of the Ancient Plum in the Chongxu Temple." As mentioned above, the "heavenly timber" not only encapsulates the plum blossom but also embodies Liang himself: he is confident that his talents would be of use to the world like the "heavenly timber" was destined to be; despite living in a place as remote as Mount Luofu (where the Chongxu Temple is located), he does not believe there is a need to rely on others since he could achieve fame all by himself. In other words, he is convinced that one day he will serve the imperial court, and he has been waiting in the fairy mountain for an opportunity.

With the help of the "heavenly timber" metaphor, we can discern the multifold meanings of the Lingnan Plum blossom in Liang's poems, even contradictory ones like the desire to live in seclusion and the ambition to be somebody in the world. It symbolizes Liang himself. For example, ll. 3-4 in poem #3 of "Nanhai tanmei" said, "No matter what kind of mortal beauties, they could hardly compare with it — / But who still remembers the one from Zhuluo Village?" 任是美人難得比，有誰還憶苧蘿村. But the hidden message may be even legendary beauties such as Xishi cannot match the beauty of the "exotic" Lingnan plum blossom. At this moment in Liang's life, his focus was to highlight the loftiness of the "heavenly timber" and its need to be appreciated by others (awaiting a call from the palace and a position to put his administrative talents in use). The Lingnan plum blossom can also refer to Liang's political talents, the *jìnshì* imperial examination and political ideals. For example, the line "Watching the sun went down, I hated to return" in the poem "Nanhai tanmei." In this instance, when he watches the plum blossoms until the sun sets, he waits for political ideals until his old age, and he still "hated to return." This shows his aspiration for fame, his hope that his natural-born talent, his "heavenly timber," can be put to use and become the eye-catching plum blossom. In other words, the Lingnan plum blossom, which expresses the theme of loftiness, can be understood as "heavenly timber" that is yet to be discovered and utilized. The Lingnan plum blossom as the theme of seclusion can be regarded as "heavenly timber" not being recognized. Lingnan plum blossom as the theme of use and appreciation of his talents in court can be regarded as the utility of "heavenly timber."

This shows that the Lingnan plum blossom depicted by Liang Peilan has a particular significance. It does not work like *xing* 興 that is normally used

at the beginning of a Chinese poem to set the scene. He deliberately chooses the essential motifs of self-admirer, a recluse, and an aspirant for fame and an official career as the trinity of the images of plum blossoms. In general, while the plum blossom represents multiple meanings, they do not supersede the three images, nor do they transcend the motifs of loftiness, seclusion, and service to the world; everything can be linked together using the “heavenly timber.”

Liang Peilan would often describe the proud loftiness in himself as found in the plum blossom, but at other times he would seriously think of seclusion as a result of the continuous failures to pass the imperial examination and setbacks in gaining the desirable post and rank in officialdom, leading him to leave the capital and return home instead. Also, occasionally, when frustrated in his career, he would even think of withdrawing from society to live out his remaining life as a recluse among the plum blossoms.

Yet, at no point in his life would he forget about seeking fame and an official career and he would continue compose poems about it, despite disappointment with failures in the examination hall or when, already given the *jinshi* title, upset by not receiving the recognition. Such intense aspiration is well evidenced by the fact that Liang Peilan had spent 30 years endeavoring to pass the national examination, and succeeded only after a total of seven attempts.

Here I refer to the concluding comment by Yim on Qu Dajun’s poems about the plum trees. It appears that for Liang the purpose of writing poems on the plum blossom was to keep a record of his struggles in pursuit of fame and an official career through the examination, and to give a poetic presentation of the subjectivity of someone who retreated into seclusion in expectation of an opportunity of service to the world.

It can be said that there is a close relation between Lingnan plum blossoms and fame in Liang’s poems. It can even be said that the blossoms are a symbol of fame in Liang’s poems. From the perspectives of the Qing dynasty for example, if Liang’s poems about the Lingnan plum blossom are compared with those of Qu Dajun, there is a difference between the two in terms of the attention paying to the people who survived the Ming-Qing transition. The varying degree of attention given to the Ming *yimin* 遺民 is also the most significant difference between the two poets in general. However, from the perspectives of the Chinese tradition on writing plum blossoms, the “aspiring for fame” aspect in Liang’s poems is in a way continuing the tradition of using the image of “beauties” to personify plum blossoms since the Song dynasty. But what is unique and innovative is the poet’s employment of the plum

blossoms to represent his desire to serve the imperial court.

As a scholar who had gone through the Ming-Qing transition, Liang Peilan expresses Ming loyalist subjectivity in his poems about plum blossoms. Through his poems about the plum blossom, he expressed his feelings about the Ming restoration movement, e.g. in the “Xitai xun mei” 西臺訊梅 (Visiting plum blossoms in Xitai) written in 1703:

山木已脫盡	Trees on the hills have all shed their leaves,
巖中猶古柯	Except the antique plum trees amidst the rocks.
候春方氣斂	Expecting spring, they're holding their breath
迎臘向人何	To greet this year's final month — but for whom?
歷澗東西崦	Across the gullies, on hillsides east and west,
欹崖上下坡	Or leaning on the cliffs, up and down the slopes,
一枝先自見	One single branch has emerged, blooming first
消息較誰多	Signaling the news to vie with whom? ³¹

Xitai 西臺 is a terrace on Mount Fuchun 富春, situated in Tonglu county of Zhejiang today. It is the site at which Xie Ao 謝翱 (1249–1295) held a memorial ceremony for Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236–1283), who had died as a loyalist martyr for the Southern Song. Liang Peilan wrote this poem after a visit to that terrace to enjoy the sight of plum blossoms there.

The poem describes the woods on the hills in late winter. Leaves were torn from the trees, save some very old plum trees among the rocks (ll. 1–2). With their thin foliage, they ushered in the spring beyond the year's end, yet not knowing whom to wait for (ll. 3–4). They were seen standing on the east and west hillsides, or leaning on the cliffs on the slopes (ll. 5–6). Then, one single branch was spotted, which bore some flowers just blooming, as if to foretell spring's eventual arrival. And yet what was the motivation behind — “Signalling the news to vie with whom?” wondered the poet (ll. 7–8).

Depicting the plum trees viewed from the site suggestively named “Xitai” (Western Terrace), the poet indirectly voiced his mind about people's mourning for the fallen Ming, regarding that sentiment as out of touch with the times, like the antique plum trees standing in the cold, barely surviving but hardly having any admirer or follower. In real life, Liang did lament over the fate of the Ming rulers, but at the same time he saw no future for Ming's restoration. Instead, he had accepted the new Manchu regime, inclining towards the abandonment of the Ming restoration movement. Meanwhile, Liang also hoped that peace and

31 Liang Peilan, *Liuyingtang er ji*, 6.602.

tranquility once prevailed under the rich and strong Ming dynasty in its heyday would be restored by the reigning Qing court.³²

When comparing Liang's poems with those of Qu in the context of the Ming restoration, one can see that Qu's poems carry three interrelated motifs: loyalism, seclusion, and rebirth. Whereas, Liang's poems carry another trio of motifs, namely mourning, abandoning, and rebirth (that is, rebirth of the bygone peace and tranquility under the new Qing rule). One essential difference between the two, however, is that, unlike Qu who created the said motifs by versifying plum trees, Liang develops his themes by projecting various images onto the Lingnan plum blossom.³³

In sum, one can see different sets of motifs for Liang's poems. For his poems pertaining to the new Qing rule, the motifs of proud loftiness, eremitism, and service to the world were created by Lingnan plum blossom. For those pertaining to the fallen Ming, the themes of mourning, abandoning, and rebirth were brought out through the vehicle of various poetic objects.

5. Conclusion

Based on Liang Peilan's writings on the Lingnan plum blossom, this study has found that, firstly, the "Nanhai tanmei" group of six poems can serve as an entry point and general guide to the self-image of the poet. They are the most important and most representative ones among all his poems on the Lingnan plum blossom and stand out from the rest. His *yongmei* poems present the author as a self-admirer, a recluse, or an aspirant for fame and an official career under various contexts.

The first image of the poet is shown by the plum blossom depicted as clean and proudly lofty, likened to a peerless beauty or an old man growing even stronger with age. The second image is a farmer taking care of the plum flowers, who has retreated into seclusion, content with living in solitude. And the third image of the poet is seen both as someone who yearns for favor from the emperor — symbolized by the plum flowers bathed in the sunlight of all five elemental colors — and also as a lover of the plum blossoms, with the floral object standing in for fame and an official career that the poet actively

32 About Liang Peilan's attitude towards the Ming and Qing dynasties, and his prediction about the Ming restoration movement, see Dung Chau Hung: "Shilun Liang Peilan de gu Ming zhisi jiqi shi yu yin zhi xinlu licheng" 試論梁佩蘭的故明之思及其仕與隱之心路歷程, *Lingnan xue* 嶺南學, vol. 7 (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 2019): 10–33.

33 *Idem*, 26–32.

pursued.

Such a triple image as shown in the “Nanhai tanmei” series is also found in other *yongmei* pieces of Liang Peilan. For instance, the “heavenly timber” mentioned in the poem “Chongxuguan gumei xing” refers to one special plum tree on Mount Luofu and stands for the poet’s confidence that he would serve the royal court eventually even without any assistance.

The three aspects of the poet’s self-image serve to reflect his feelings and emotions in various stages of his life, namely when he was seeking fame and an official career through the national examination, meeting setbacks in the process, and clinging to his hope for a final success — all of which being expressed in his poems on the theme of the plum blossom. Under these three aspects, Lingnan plum blossom in his poems contains various meanings, which are even contradictory. However, these divergent meanings can be understood with the help of the key concept of “heavenly timber.” In a word, the Lingnan plum blossom can be understood as “heavenly timber” to be discovered and utilized when it expresses the theme of loftiness; it can be regarded as “heavenly timber” not being recognized when it expresses the theme of seclusion; it can be regarded as the utility of “heavenly timber” when it expressed the theme of use and appreciation of his talents in court.

Secondly, as to the literary tradition that Liang Peilan had drawn upon for his poems about the plum blossom, this study has found that, of the multiple aspects of the flower’s image, the image of someone who has high self-esteem can be traced to major poets like Lin Bu and Su Shi and their successors, who all admired the flower for its noble refinery.

Then, the study has found the flower’s image of a recluse to have come from the mid-Southern Song, when the plum blossom was likened to refined scholars, noble-minded persons, or people living in seclusion.

The flower’s image of an aspirant for fame and an official career can be traced as early as the recurring literary comparison of the plum blossom to immortal beauties such as Chang-E, the fairy in Yaochi, and the goddesses on Mount Guye, but with a considerable difference. In Liang’s poems, the plum blossoms or trees likened to an aspirant for fame and an official career are epitomized by the “heavenly timber” expecting to be discovered and utilized, rather than those mythical figures featuring loneliness and loftiness. That special imagery is a clear innovation by Liang Peilan for poetry about the plum blossom.

Thirdly, this study has found that, although Liang’s verses include poems expressing his perception of the fallen Ming, though limited in number, and their floral subjects are not the Lingnan plum blossom but plum flowers in

other places. Even those poems express no support for the Ming restoration movement, in my view, but a latent criticism of the restoration efforts as out of touch with the times. It is on this aspect that shows a drastic difference from the attitude of Qu Dajun.

Moreover, when versifying about Lingnan plum blossoms, Liang mostly expresses his views about his own talent and integrity, or his pursuit for fame and an official career. In other words, his poems about the plum blossom, according to this study, center around three interrelated motifs, i.e. proud loftiness, seclusion, and service to the world. On a personal level, the Lingnan plum blossom symbolizes his personality and reveals his hankerings after fame and an official career.

Two sets of motifs are found to be used by Liang Peilan in his poems about Ming and Qing dynasties respectively. For those pertaining to the new Qing rule, the motifs of proud loftiness, seclusion, and service to the world were carried by Lingnan plum blossom; for those pertaining to the fallen Ming, the motifs of mourning, abandoning, and rebirth were brought out through the vehicle of various poetic objects.

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試論梁佩蘭詩之嶺梅與其自我形象之建構

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梁佩蘭寫了二十餘首詠梅詩，大部分是寫嶺南的梅花。梁佩蘭嶺梅詩呈現「孤芳自賞者」、「歸隱田園者」和「渴望功名者」三種形象。三者都是接續宋代的詠梅傳統；其中第三種是繼承蘇軾、黃庭堅以來「美人」形象以擬喻梅花的傳統，卻多出期待用世的性質。其詠嶺梅時，圍繞着孤高、隱逸和用世三個母題，展現出對清朝的功名追求心跡。對於明朝，佩蘭詩則表達追思、捨棄和復生三個母題，並以嶺梅以外的各種歌詠對象為載體。

關鍵詞：明末 清初 梁佩蘭 詠梅詩 自我形象