

---

2020

## *The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake* by Zhang Dai and Two Poems by Tan Yuanchun

Andrew Gudgel

*Independent Scholar*, [andrewgudgel@fastmail.com](mailto:andrewgudgel@fastmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference>



Part of the Chinese Studies Commons, Classics Commons, and the Poetry Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Gudgel, Andrew (2020) "*The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake* by Zhang Dai and Two Poems by Tan Yuanchun," *Transference*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol8/iss1/3>

Andrew Gudel

*The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake*

[excerpt]

Zhang Dai

西湖七月半 - 选段

[The night of] the Zhongyuan Festival at [Hangzhou's] West Lake, there's nothing to see, except those who have come to watch the festival. Of those who come to watch the festival, you can see five kinds of people.

One kind that can be seen are those with multi-decked ships full of flutes and drums, who wear their official hats and host grand banquets, have blazing lanterns, singing girls and servants. The sights and sounds dazzle, and they are famous for watching the moon—but never actually see it.

Another kind that can be seen also have ships with decks, famous beauties, illustrious daughters from good families, and equally handsome young boys. They laugh or cry out at random, sit in circles on the flat roof [of the boat] and glance left and right. Their bodies are under the moon but they don't really watch the moon.

Yet another kind that can be seen have ships, music and singing, famous courtesans and idle monks. They sip wine while humming tunes and there is soft music which mixes flutes and voice. They are also under the moon and watch the moon, but they want others to see them watching the moon.

One kind that can be seen have no boat or cart, no coat or hat. They're tipsy and full of food and shout together in herds and knots. They push their way into other groups of people, clamor and raise a din at Zhaoqing Temple and the Short Bridge. They pretend that they're really drunk and sing tuneless songs. They watch the moon, watch those watching the moon, watch those not watching the moon, but actually see nothing.

Finally, there can be seen those with small ships and light curtains, with clean tables and small stoves. Their tea warmers clank as they seethe and plain porcelain cups are quietly handed around. They bring good friends and beautiful women and invite the moon to sit together with them. They either hide under the shadows of trees [by the bank] or leave the hubbub of the lake altogether. They watch the moon and don't care if anyone sees them watching the moon, nor do they "watch the moon" on purpose.

*When I First See My Whiskers Have One*      Tan Yuanchun  
*Gray Hair, I Cry Out in Surprise*      始見鬚有一莖白嗟異之

So many gray hairs I didn't notice,  
Yet I'm surprised when I see this one.  
I begin to worry that I've passed my prime  
And at first, try to keep the old woman from knowing.  
When I glance in the mirror my spirit wavers a little;  
When I pluck it out, my reflection wavers a bit more.  
Suddenly, I have the urge to become a hermit—  
You won't be able to have fun for long.

*All the White Hairs Pulled from*      Tan Yuanchun  
*My Mustache Came Back*      前所拔白髭復生

Tweezing them out takes all my strength;  
Their growing back makes me change my mind.  
I don't wish I was younger—  
The snow and frost are already deep.  
My feelings begin to change at midnight:  
Decline comes from seeking old roads.  
I feel there's someone else in the mirror,  
Which day by day reflects the passage of time.

## Commentary

Zhang Dai (1597–after 1680) was born Shanyin (now Shaoxing) in China’s Zhejiang Province, and is considered one of the premier essayists of the late Ming/early Qing Dynasty. Though never an official himself, he was born into a family with a history of imperial service. Zhang lost his house, fortune, and possessions when the Ming Dynasty fell. He was fifty. He spent several decades hiding on a nearby mountain before returning to rent a portion of what had been his ancestral home. Zhang was a master of an essay style known as Xiaopinwen (小品文 lit. “little pieces”); short, vignette-like essays which, rather than stating a theme, often use images and word-play to evoke a mood in the reader. His most well-known work is *The Dream Recollections of Tao An*, a collection of essays about his life before the fall of the Ming, from which this translation is taken.

*The Zhongyuan Festival at West Lake* demonstrates Zhang Dai’s skill in using both the *Xiaopin* form and the Chinese language, which posed several challenges for the translator. One was that in order to be concise, Zhang assumes a lot of knowledge on the part of the reader. Hangzhou’s West Lake, with its islands, lakeside paths and bridges, would be a well-known location for scholar-officials all over China—even if they had never visited it. In a similar vein, Zhang assumes the reader knows that the Zhongyuan festival (held on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month) revolves around watching the full moon. As a result, I had to balance between parenthetical explanation and simply naming locations and events that might be unfamiliar to an audience half a world away and three-hundred-plus years later.

Perhaps the toughest challenge in translating this piece was Zhang Dai’s repeated use of the word kàn (看). It makes up approximately ten percent of the entire excerpt, and depending on the context is used to mean “see, watch, look at, observe.” Classical Chinese *does* have separate words which convey each of these meanings, yet Zhang has for the most part ignored them and instead hits the reader with the cumulative force of repeating one word. I did the best I could to re-create the effect in the translated text.

Zhang also appears to use subtle wordplay at one point to slip two meanings into a single word. The character (鑪) has two different pronunciations with two entirely different meanings. When pronounced “chēng” it means “wine/water warmer.” When pronounced “dāng” it means “to clank.” So the phrase 茶鑪旋煮 could be read as something akin to “tea (warmer/clanks) rolling boil.”

Tan Yuanchun (1586–1637) was born towards the end of the Ming Dynasty in Jingling (now Tianmen) in China’s Hubei Province. A scholar-official, he was one of the co-founders of the Jingling School, which rejected using the formal style, structure and diction of ancient writings as a model, and which instead emphasized creativity, emotion and expressing the writer’s personality. He died at the age of 51, as he traveled to Beijing to sit for the national-level examination.

When I first read these two poems, I was struck by the unique subject matter and the mixed tone of amusement and distress. In the first poem, even though Tan already has gray hairs (presumably on his head), the appearance of one white hair in his beard makes him feel past his prime. He then tries to hide both the hair and the “fact” of being past his prime from the “old woman.” The characters used here are (老母)—literally “old mother”—a term which could be used both for one’s mother and as an honorific to any older woman. It may be an ironic allusion to his wife. The use of “you” in the last line seems to be Tan reminding the reader that time and age will affect them as well.

The second poem acts as a sequel to the first. Time cannot be stopped or turned back, and plucked hairs always return. The poem is filled with images of midnight and winter and old roads. Tan says that he doesn’t want to be younger, yet he still feels the person in the mirror is someone else.

The last two lines of this poem were the most difficult to translate because of the multiple layers of meaning contained within the characters and phrases. The second-to-last line contains two words that I felt had been used in a doubled way similar to Zhang Dai’s “warmer/clank.” Mirrors in China used to be made of bronze, which in Chinese is 青銅, literally “green copper.” However, the word “green” can also mean “young.” As a result, I felt the line 感他青鏡裏 could be read simultaneously as “feel another in [the bronze] mirror” or “feel another young

[person] in mirror.” I decided to go with the first reading and omit the word implying bronze, since mirrors are now more commonly made of glass.

The last line was similarly difficult. Tan states “day by day” in a way which might be an allusion to the line “Make yourself anew each day” in the Confucian classic “The Great Learning.” In addition, the term translated as “passage of time” (光陰) can mean “life” as well as time. Finally, the characters themselves literally mean “light and shadow”—something that could indeed be reflected in a mirror.

Source texts:

Zhang, Dai 張岱. *Taoan Mengyi* 陶庵夢憶 [*The Dream Recollections of Tao An*]. Yangzhou: Guangling Shushe, 2009.11, p. 61.

Tan, Yuanchun 譚元春. *Tan Yuanchun Ji* 譚元春集 [The Collected Works of Tan Yuanchun]. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1998, p. 214.