ABSTRACT

Poetess Yu Xuanji ( 鱼玄机) of the late Tang dynasty, (晚唐 836 - 905 A.D.) had been neglected by generations of scholars and literature critics, partly due to the lack of material about her life, and partly due to the prejudices people had against this outstanding poetess who was widely believed to be a prostitute turned priestess.

When we come to review the poems of Yu Xuanji, I can only make use of what is available: the poems themselves and the comments others had on them and the author.

I shall deal first with her life, her love relation with Li Yi ( 李亿), the reason behind her exile, the life in Xian Yi Guan ( 咸宜观), the reason of her execution, and the years of her birth and death.

Secondly, I will discuss the various aspects of her selections - Yu Xuanji Ji ( 鱼玄机集), and finally the critics' comments and the comparisons of "Yu Xuanji Ji" to poems of similar themes by other poetesses of that time.

After in-depth studies, I come to the conclusion that Yu Xuanji had never been a prostitute as most people thought, and her love for Li Yi had been both faithfully and constant throughout her life, even after she became a priestess. Her death, on the other hand, was mainly the result of the inhuman law of the Tang dynasty against priests and priestesses.

From the poems by Yu Xuanji, based on the selections compiled during the Northern and Southern Song dynasties ( 北宋与南宋 960 - 1279 A.D.), I cannot help but find that they are indeed excellent works in their own right, full of sentiments, vivid in description and probing into the heart of woman, with writing skills comparable to or even better than those of her contemporaries. In addition, her ill fame may have been the result of the prejudices against her.