

## RETROSPECTION AND ANTICIPATION: AN ANALYSIS OF SHŌTETSU'S YŪGEN

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At the heart of the poetic vision of Shōtetsu (1381-1459), one of Muromachi Japan's most significant literary figures, lies the expression of *yūgen* (conventionally translated as 'mystery and depth').<sup>1</sup> The evocation of *yūgen* is of paramount significance as an aesthetic ideal in Shōtetsu's poetic, as evidenced by his frequent discussion of the term and provision of exemplary poems in his major poetic treatise *Shōtetsu monogatari* (c. 1448).<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably some interrogation of the meaning of *yūgen* in Shōtetsu's aesthetic has figured in scholarship on his work. It is the purpose of this article to add another voice to the debate, firstly assessing the conventional view that Shōtetsu's *yūgen* was heavily influenced by the poetry of his self-avowed idol Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241),<sup>3</sup> and that it could be more accurately described as a form of *yojō yōen* (a style of richly nuanced ethereal loveliness). I will use as my sample Shōtetsu's poetic treatise *Shōtetsu monogatari*, a two-volume amalgam of poetry (almost entirely *waka*) and prose.<sup>4</sup> The interpretation that Shōtetsu's *yūgen* is closely affined to Teika's is supported by mainstream Japanese commentaries on *Shōtetsu monogatari*, namely Hisamatsu

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1 I have left the term untranslated in this paper to leave open its possible interpretations.

2 Part 1: 25, 41, 42, 69, 82, 90; Part 2: 7, 77, 100. The poem in Part 1:19 may also be included as a sub-category of *yūgen*.

3 Teika was an illustrious and outstanding poet of the early Kamakura period. Chief compiler of the *Shinkokinshū* (completed 1206) and compiler of the *Shinchokusenshū* in 1235, he also wrote works on poetic theory, such as *Kindai shūka*, *Eika taigai*, *Maigetsushō* and left a diary *Meigetsuki* (Hisamatsu Sen'ichi. *Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Literature*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1976, pp. 115-116). Several spurious works were also accredited to him (Robert Brower and Steven Carter. *Conversations with Shōtetsu*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1992, p. 53). He was the 'ultimate source of all subsequent authority in poetic matters' (Robert Brower and Earl Miner. *Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961, p. 271).

4 The version which I have used as my primary source is Hisamatsu Sen'ichi and Nishio Minoru. *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* v. 65: *Karonshū nōgakuronshū*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1961.

Sen'ichi and Nishio Minoru's *Karonshū nōgakuronshū*<sup>5</sup> and Fukuda Hideichi's 'Shōtetsu monogatari' in *Chūsei hyōronshū*<sup>6</sup> as well as the seminal English language study by Brower and Carter *Conversations with Shōtetsu* whose introduction devotes nine pages to Shōtetsu's aesthetics,<sup>7</sup> with a particular focus on his interpretation of *yūgen*.

Secondly it is the purpose of this article, while acknowledging Teika's undeniable legacy, to emphasise the co-existence in Shōtetsu's *yūgen* of a more complex, syncretic and even contradictory character. Not infrequently his diction and phraseology echo the famous aesthetic articulations of Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216) and Yoshida Kenkō (1283-1350). There are instances when Shōtetsu's expression of *yūgen* takes a transcendent and contemplative form, showing the trace of Teika's father Shunzei (1114-1204).<sup>8</sup> The transcendental facet of his poetic can also be traced directly to Shōtetsu's own religious avocation. Shōtetsu was an ordained Zen priest; although he left the monastic institution quite early in his career, ample documentary evidence exists of the subtle and profound force which his religious training earlier in his life continued to exert in his art.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, although Carter draws attention to the major influence Zen Buddhism plays in Shōtetsu's work<sup>10</sup> he does not go so far as to link Shōtetsu's *yūgen* with the poet's religious background.

Shōtetsu's interpretation of *yūgen* in *Shōtetsu monogatari* also bears a very different imprint, anticipatory of the future of Japanese culture: the mark of common, rural culture which had started to intrude into the urban culture of Kyoto and dislodge its aristocratic roots. The conduit for this change was the warrior class, whose background was essentially regional and rural, despite claims to aristocratic lineage. Shōtetsu himself was living evidence of this process—a commoner poet of relatively low-

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5 *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* v. 65. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1961.

6 *Kanshō Nihon koten bungaku* v.24. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1976. It states 'His *yūgen* denotes *yojō yōen*' (p. 165).

7 Pp. 50-58.

8 Fujiwara no Shunzei's dissertation on poetics *Korai fūtei shō* written at the age of eighty-three cites *yūgen* as the 'highest contemporary ideal of beauty and the ideal for the *waka*' (Hisamatsu, *Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Literature*, p.107). Shōtetsu was an enthusiastic admirer of Shunzei's poetry, and quotes or alludes to four of his poems in *Shōtetsu monogatari* in Part 2:17, 36 and 44.

9 Expressions and references relating to Buddhist thought can be found in *Shōtetsu monogatari* in the following passages: Part 1:1, 25, 58,105; Part 2: 24, 45, 103.

10 See Steven Carter (ed. and trans.). *Unforgotten Dreams: Poems by the Zen Monk Shōtetsu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

ranking provincial warrior background<sup>11</sup> who became the heir to the aristocratic Reizei tradition of poetry after the death of family head Reizei Tamemasa (1361-1417).<sup>12</sup>

Firstly let us review the main evaluations of Shōtetsu's *yūgen* published in English-language sources. It should be pointed out that these are very limited in both number and scope, with Brower and Carter's *Conversations with Shōtetsu* providing the most comprehensive analysis to date.<sup>13</sup> *Conversations with Shōtetsu* stresses the influence of Teika's poetic style of *yojō yōen*: '[F]or Shōtetsu, the term *yūgen* meant something close to what his great mentor [Teika] had called *yōen*.'<sup>14</sup> Identified too is the role, at least in part, of substituted theories of *yūgen* in apocryphal Teika treatises which were circulating, particularly *Guhishō*. Mention is also made of influences traceable to Kamo no Chōmei's writings in *Mumyōshō* (1211?) and, nearer Shōtetsu's time, Yoshida Kenkō in *Tsurezuregusa* (c.1329). More will be said about the apocryphal Teika treatises, Chōmei and Kenkō below.

Other English-language scholars' input on Shōtetsu's *yūgen* diverge markedly from Brower and Carter's. Donald Keene argues in *Seeds in the Heart* that:

Shōtetsu's *yūgen* was closer to that of Shunzei than of Teika, for whom the word seems to have meant surpassing charm above all. It differed also ... from the *yūgen* of Zeami ... where the primary meaning seems to have been elegance. Shōtetsu meant a kind of symbolism, achieved by using ambiguous but suggestive language, affording the reader the possibility of an experience that transcends words ... In this respect Shōtetsu may be said to have enunciated one of the most important ideals of the medieval aesthetic.<sup>15</sup>

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- 11 Some uncertainty surrounds his lineage but most scholars agree that he was born as a second son into the family of the lord of Kōdoyama Castle in Odanoshō (the Oda manor), Bitchū province, either the second son, or the younger brother, of Komatsu Yasukiyo (died 1400), the second lord of Kōdoyama castle. Yasukiyo's father Hidekiyo had been the first generation of his family to inhabit Bitchū province as lord of Kōdoyama. He had received an appointment as *jitō* (estate steward) from the Ashikaga shogun, and had taken up residence in Oda in 1368, governing four villages (Inada Toshinori. *Shōtetsu no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Kazama Shoin, 1978, pp.22-23).
  - 12 The experimental and innovative Reizei school had produced two imperial anthologies, the *Gyokuyōshū* (1313 or 1314) and the *Fūgashū* (1344-6). It favoured detailed imagery with a very intense, narrow focus, accurate and precise observation of phenomena caught at one specific moment and fresh, often startling imagery, especially in the way images interacted with one another. They were also masters in synaesthetic techniques (Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, pp. 383-385).
  - 13 In fact this is the only work in English discussing Shōtetsu's *yūgen* at any length, to the best of my investigations to date.
  - 14 Carter, *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, p. 53. Carter's comment is based in Fukuda Hideichi's view as stated in *Kanshō Nihon koten bungaku v. 24: Chūsei hyōronshū*. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1976, pp. 107-108.
  - 15 Donald Keene. *Seeds in the Heart*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993, p. 735.

In Andrew Tsubaki's overview of the history of *yūgen* in the Nō drama he observes:

The poet who was the last to cherish the mystic inclination of *yūgen* was Shōtetsu ... His *yūgen* was conceived as an infinitely rich feeling of implied subtle nuance of grace in ethereal beauty ... Zeami's *yūgen* in Nō is close to what Shōtetsu considers *yūgen* ... Zeami seems to esteem highly Nō which contains the quality of Shōtetsu's *yūgen* ... what Shōtetsu really calls *yūgen* is not an exposed, easily detected, and realistic beauty, but one hidden behind something. His ideal of *yūgen* is the graceful beauty which is implied by the nuance of a subtle yet profound expression. In this sense Shōtetsu is the successor of that mystical inclination of *yūgen*, but his use of a colourful simile indicates his knowledge of a new concept of *yūgen* as well. This contradictory aspect of Shōtetsu may explain that the conventional stand he takes is by and large on the verge of being buried under a more human idea of *yūgen* which was gaining increasing strength.<sup>16</sup>

As these thumbnail analyses show, Shōtetsu's *yūgen* cannot easily be pinned down to one type or style. The above comments converge only in their failure to agree. But this is the key, I would argue, to understanding the essence of Shōtetsu's *yūgen*: it is all of the above. As Shōtetsu himself suggests, 'We may ask where the quality of *yūgen* ... lies, and the answer is within the hearts of each of us individually.' Tsubaki's interpretation of Shōtetsu's *yūgen* is probably the closest to the mark, in my view, in that it accepts the concept's composite, syncretic and transitional character: retrospective but simultaneously anticipatory of the new directions in which *yūgen* was evolving, in *renga* then eventually *haiku*, and in the aesthetics of the Nō drama. It is pertinent to recall that Shōtetsu was a contemporary of the Nō dramatist and theorist Zeami (1364-1444) as well as the teacher of the great *renga* poet Shinkei (1406-1475). There is no clear evidence of contact between Shōtetsu and Zeami, but they moved in remarkably similar circles and without doubt were susceptible to the same social and cultural forces.

At this point, to provide a sound platform for what follows, let us briefly review the genesis and evolution of the term—'whose very name is enough to confound one,' according to Chōmei.<sup>17</sup>

Like most abstract, philosophical terms in Japanese usage, the compound *yūgen* 幽玄 originated in China. Both terms *yū* 幽 and *gen* 玄 initially emerged in terminology of the art of dyeing, and referred to a black colour.<sup>18</sup> To be more precise, in their original sense *yū* may suggest a bluish-black or greenish-black hue while *gen*

16 Andrew T. Tsubaki. 'Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30: 1, Autumn, 1971, pp. 59-60.

17 In *Mumyōshō*, quoted in Brower and Miner. *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 269.

18 Jin'ichi Konishi quoted in Tsubaki, 'Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics', p. 58.

is black with ochre in it.<sup>19</sup> Secondary meanings attached to the character *yū* are ‘faint, dim, vague, indistinct, deep, profound, abstruse, recondite, coming from a great depth’; *gen* indicates a ‘state existing in the depth of all things which is not easily understood, subtle and mysterious’.<sup>20</sup> By extension the compound came to denote ‘darkness, and then profoundness’.<sup>21</sup>

The primary definition in *Nihon kokugo daijiten* reads:

Being deeply moving in effect, but intellectually unfathomable; deep, recondite and unknowable. In ancient China it indicated the realm of the shades.<sup>22</sup> Latterly it was used by Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu<sup>23</sup> to express the abstruseness and subtlety of the state of Buddhist and metaphysical enlightenment.<sup>24</sup>

Konishi Jin’ichi further elaborates on the early metaphysical and initially Taoist connotations of *yūgen*:

‘*Yūgen*’ (Ch. *yu-hsüan*) was originally used to describe Lao Tzu’s and Chuang Tzu’s perception of the profundity of the Tao. Both components of the word, ‘*yu*’ and ‘*hsüan*,’ signify ‘reddish-black.’ The association with concepts of darkness and obscurity led to the words acquiring a more abstract sense: they came to mean ‘uncertain,’ ‘unclear,’ ‘difficult to understand.’ Eventually ‘*yu*’ and ‘*hsüan*’ were used in reference to philosophical depth. During the Six Dynasties period, San-lun Buddhism [J. Sanron ...] used Taoist terms to explain the doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *sūnyatā*); ‘*yu-hsüan*’ was used as a compound from this point. In the Sui dynasty T’ien-t’ai [J. Tendai] Buddhism, also centered on the emptiness doctrine, frequently used ‘*yu-hsüan*.’ In later centuries, Ch’an [J. Zen] employed the term to express the profundity within non-being (Ch. *wu*, J. *mu* ...).<sup>25</sup>

This interrelationship between Tendai, Zen, *yūgen* and *mu* is important, and we shall return to it presently.

19 Personal communication with Dr Rosemary Haddon, Massey University, New Zealand.

20 *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, v.19, p.636.

21 Jin’ichi Konishi, quoted in Tsubaki, ‘Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics’, p. 58.

22 *Yūmei no kuni* (the ‘realm of the shades, the after-life’).

23 Founders of Taoism in the sixth century B.C.

24 *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, v.19, p. 636. All translations in this paper are my own unless otherwise stated.

25 Jin’ichi Konishi. *A History of Japanese Literature v. 3: The High Middle Ages*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 185-186.

From being a general expression meaning ‘difficult to perceive’ or ‘not obvious’, *yūgen* became a technical term used in the composition of Chinese poems.<sup>26</sup> When the term *yūgen* was transmitted to Japan the meaning of ‘profoundness’ remained its fundamental meaning,<sup>27</sup> and still appears in this sense in its oldest occurrence in Japanese texts, in the Buddhist work *Isshin kongō kaitaiketsu* by Kūkai (767-822).<sup>28</sup> It was first appropriated by Japanese poetics in the Chinese preface of the *Kokinshū* (commissioned 905).<sup>29</sup> Here its usage remains close to the Buddhist and refers to the spell of poetry partaking of the mysterious (*kyō nyū yūgen*).<sup>30</sup> It first appears with an aesthetic application in Mibu no Tadamine’s (fl. c. 910) work *Tadamine jittei*.<sup>31</sup> It was also used by Fujiwara no Munetada (1062-1141) in his diary *Chūyūki* to describe the magical effect of music.<sup>32</sup>

As a concept in literary theory and poetics *Nihon kokugo daijiten* gives *yūgen* the following treatment:

The sense of *yūgen* meaning recondite and unfathomable was appropriated and the term used to express an aesthetic idea sought after in poetic expression in early medieval times. It was a development of the principle of *mononoaware* [the beauty and pathos of perishability]. At first it was considered to be one form of *yōjō* [the rich and complex overtones of a poem] in poetry, both Chinese and Japanese. It seems to have meant a hushed and tranquil beauty intended to hint at and subtly evoke a sense of mysterious profundity aloof from the trivialities of the ordinary world. Thereafter the term gave rise to a variety of interpretations, both as an artistic principle and as jargon used in *waka* criticism. It was used to signify beauty with a symbolic sort of artistic impact based upon an underlying tone of

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26 Konishi, *A History of Japanese Literature v. 3: The High Middle Ages*, pp. 185-6. It referred to a type of *shih* (Chinese poem), verse-topic *shih*, where a topic was implied rather than directly integrated in the poem’s diction.

27 Jin’ichi Konishi quoted in Tsubaki, ‘Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics’, p. 58.

28 Tsubaki, ‘Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics’, p. 58.

29 Kazamaki Keijirō. ‘Shōtetsu no yūgen’, in *Kazamaki Keijirō zenshū v.7: Chūsei waka no sekai*. Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1970, p. 357. The *Kokinshū* had both a Chinese and a Japanese preface.

30 Edwin Cranston. ‘“Mystery and Depth” in Japanese Court Poetry’, in Thomas Hare, Robert Borgen and Sharalyn Orbaugh, eds. *The Distant Isle: Studies and Translations of Japanese Literature in Honor of Robert H. Brower*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1996, p. 70.

31 Tsubaki, ‘Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics’, p. 58.

32 Edwin Cranston, ‘“Mystery and Depth” in Japanese Court Poetry’, p. 70.

*yūen* [refined charm] or was thought to refer to a beauty which harmonised various other kinds of beauty such as *en* [a sublime, romantic dreamlike beauty], *yūbi* [elegance], and *aware* [the beauty and pathos of perishability]. Also some contended it took *en* a step further and indicated a tranquil beauty of refined simplicity. This evolved via the Nō drama into Bashō's ideal of *sabi* in the Edo period.<sup>33</sup>

For the source of its early interpretation in English-language sources we must refer to the 1961 publication *Japanese Court Poetry*. Here *yūgen* is rendered as 'mystery and depth' and defined thus:

The mid-classical ideal of tonal complexity conveyed by the overtones, or *yojō*, of poems typically in the mode of descriptive symbolism ... normally characterised by sadness, imagery of a veiled, monochromatic nature, and an atmosphere of rich, mysterious beauty.<sup>34</sup>

Despite ... historical, critical, and semantic vicissitudes, the core of *yūgen* remained the ideal of an artistic effect both mysterious and ineffable, of a subtle, complex tone achieved by emphasizing the unspoken connotations of words and the implications of a poetic situation ... The principal vehicle for *yūgen* ... was descriptive poetry ... its typical imagery was calm, quiet, and muted ... and its characteristic tone was one of sadness or wistful melancholy.<sup>35</sup>

As the above definitions reveal, *yūgen* is assigned an ineffable, unfathomable quality which defies specific description. Kazamaki Keijirō claims, on the same track as Keene above, no word in modern language succeeds in expressing the effects of *yūgen* better than the term 'symbolism', which he glosses as 'the meaning beyond the meaning of the words, a hovering shadow'.<sup>36</sup> This surely is close to Shōtetsu's attempt to grasp the special effect of Teika's poetry: 'There hovers an intangible presence (*kage soite*) beyond the words of Teika's poems, and when I read them, I feel somehow immensely moved.'<sup>37</sup> Both styles of *yūgen* and symbolism constitute, it can be argued, an invitation to the reader or audience to explore the depths of their imagination and subconscious.

33 *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, v. 19, p. 637. It is pertinent to note that among the array of original textual examples of *yūgen* which follow the above definition in this dictionary, one of Shōtetsu's own definitions of *yūgen* from *Shōtetsu monogatari* is included (from *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2:77). Thus Shōtetsu's contribution to the evolution of *yūgen* is formally recognised by this authoritative dictionary.

34 Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p.514.

35 Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, pp.265-6.

36 Kazamaki, 'Shōtetsu no *yūgen*', pp.364-365.

37 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2: 68.

Shunzei probably had a similar aesthetic aim, as William LaFleur has written:

It is clear that Shunzei's view of poetry included what has recently been called 'the indeterminacy of meaning' ... For him, the 'dimension of depth' in poetry had nothing to do with a determinate 'meaning' that had been coded into a poem by the poet to then be decoded by the sensitive hearer or listener ... The openendedness of both phenomena and interpretation are very important for understanding Shunzei ... in Shunzei's view the depth of poetry is not a place but a process ... It is not a determinate point at which the interpreter arrives after doing a certain amount of linguistic homework to solve conundrums built into the poem by its author. It is much closer to what George Steiner calls the 'rich undecidability' aimed at by a poet.<sup>38</sup>

Poetry in the *yūgen* style thus entice the reader to enter the zone of 'rich undecidability' triggered by the imagery and substance of the poem and limited only by the imagination of the reader. The poem therefore can be said to point to an indefinable and infinite depth beyond itself: the plenitude of symbolic potential.

The above comments lead us to ponder a little more deeply the relationship between *yūgen* and *mu*, where *mu* denotes 'Nothingness' or 'the Void' in the Buddhist sense,<sup>39</sup> that is, not the absence of existence, but the 'plenitude of being':

[T]he world of multiplicity with its infinitely divergent things and events is seen to be ultimately reduced to the state of unity, in which things lose their ontological differences and become submerged in an absolute undifferentiation. This state of undifferentiation is technically designated by the term 'Nothing' or 'Nothingness'. It will be obvious that the Nothing thus understood is the *plenitude of being* [italics mine], for it is the urgrund of all existential forms ... Every single thing, while being a limited, particular thing, can be and is any of the rest of the things: indeed it is all other things.<sup>40</sup>

If the aesthetic experience of *yūgen* entails a journey into the infinite and limitless, could a parallel perhaps also logically be drawn linking the experience of *yūgen* and the experience of *mu*?

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38 LaFleur. 'Symbol and *Yūgen*: Shunzei's Use of Tendai Buddhism', in James Sanford, William LaFleur and Masatoshi Nagatomi, eds. *Flowing Traces: Buddhism in the Literary and Visual Arts of Japan*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 32-33.

39 For further discussion of the difference in perception of Nothingness between the West and the East refer to Abe Masao. 'Non-Being and Mu: the Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and West', *Religious Studies*, 11, June 1975.

40 Toshihiko Izutsu. *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977, pp.127-128.



Parenthetically, a link between *yūgen* and *mu* is by no means an outrageous proposal, given that Shunzei, in the vanguard of *yūgen* theorisation, was profoundly interested in Tendai doctrines and sought to compose poetry which mirrored the Tendai contemplative process.<sup>41</sup> In Tendai doctrine this was called *juke-nikkū* (従仮入空) and *jukū-nikke* (従空入仮)<sup>42</sup> or ‘leaving the provisional and entering into the empty’ and ‘leaving the empty and entering into the provisional’.<sup>43</sup> Shunzei suggested that a successful poem should have a similar effect. It will firstly release the reader into ‘the beyond’, into a dimension of infinite depth and possibility. However, ultimately the reader will be brought back to the phenomenal world and the immediate scene described. In the end the provisional phenomenon prevails, as the key to the infinite realm of associations and reverberations and at the end of the process, the ultimate destination.

A full and brilliantly argued discussion of the religio-philosophical function of medieval *waka* and *renga* and ‘the presence of Buddhist ways of understanding in the very structure and aesthetics of classical Japanese poetry’ can be also found in Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen’s *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*.<sup>44</sup> Significantly Ramirez-Christensen gives her definition of *yūgen* as ‘a totality of mutually interrelated factors whose limits are wholly open, immeasurably deep and remote’.<sup>45</sup>

Within this context of definitions and interpretations, let us now consider what *yūgen* may have signified to Shōtetsu, on the basis of his comments in *Shōtetsu monogatari* and the exemplary poems he quotes.<sup>46</sup> Shōtetsu’s *yūgen* appears to have emerged from pre-existent interpretations of *yūgen*, including some spurious sources, to be discussed below, which he encountered over his lengthy literary career. As stated

41 In this discussion I am indebted to LaFleur’s paper ‘Symbol and *Yūgen*: Shunzei’s Use of Tendai Buddhism’, in James Sanford, William LaFleur and Masatoshi Nagatomi, eds. *Flowing Traces: Buddhism in the Literary and Visual Arts of Japan*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992. Readers are referred to LaFleur’s ‘Symbol and *Yūgen*: Shunzei’s Use of Tendai Buddhism’ for a detailed study of the impact of Tendai doctrine on Shunzei’s poetics.

42 Various transliterations exist; this is the transliteration used by Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen in her work *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008.

43 LaFleur, ‘Symbol and *Yūgen*’, pp.30-31.

44 Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008.

45 Ramirez-Christensen, *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*, p. 102

46 Shōtetsu includes seven poems by other poets: two fragments by Princess Shikishi (d. 1201), one by Shunzei’s daughter (ca. 1175-1250), two by Murasaki Shikibu (978-1016) in *The Tale of Genji* and two by Teika.

earlier, his *yūgen* is conventionally bracketed with Teika's. This is hardly surprising in view of Shōtetsu's ardent and defensive admiration for Teika, encapsulated in his famous opening line of *Shōtetsu monogatari*: 'In this Way, any persons who might belittle Teika should be denied divine protection and burn in Hell.'<sup>47</sup>

*Yūgen* in Teika's poetic signified a complex band of qualities and techniques, where overtones, the use of allusion to earlier poetry and literary masterpieces, and an atmosphere of romantic, gentle and mysterious beauty all intermingled.<sup>48</sup> It appears to have been almost interchangeable with *yojō yōen*, a style of richly-nuanced, ethereal loveliness especially favoured by Teika in his younger years, 'poems of depth and resonance in the manner of *yūgen* and with the sorts of subtle overtones prized by Shunzei but presented in a dreamy atmosphere and with ... greater rhetorical ingenuity'.<sup>49</sup> *Yojō* refers to an aesthetic quality of deep resonance and reverberation evoking a sense of a presence beyond the immediate situation of the poem. *Yōen* signifies an ethereal beauty evoking 'a romantic other worldly beauty like that of "a heavenly maiden descending to the earth on a hazy moonlit night in spring"'.<sup>50</sup> Teika's regard for the *yojō yōen* style is made explicit in his treatise *Kindai shūka*: he criticises Ki no Tsurayuki's (ca. 868-945) poetry for its lack of qualities of *yojō yōen* and praises the poetry of the previous generation, especially the poetry of Ariwara no Narihira (825-880) and Ono no Komachi (early Heian period, precise dates uncertain).<sup>51</sup>

Shōtetsu likewise can be seen as identifying *yojō yōen* with *yūgen*: indeed a revealing moment occurs in *Shōtetsu monogatari*, where he misquotes from Teika's *Kindai shūka*. Teika had written words to the effect that the poet Tsurayuki wrote poems of great power but not in the style of *yojō yōen*. Shōtetsu imperfectly recalls his idol's words as 'Lord Teika wrote, "the poet Tsurayuki wrote poems of great power but nothing showing outstanding qualities of *yūgen*"'.<sup>52</sup> The term *yūgen* has replaced *yojō yōen*; the two concepts were clearly, at that moment at least, interchangeable in Shōtetsu's mind. Commentators brandish this slip as evidence that Shōtetsu's *yūgen* is in fact *yojō yōen*.<sup>53</sup>

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47 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:1.

48 Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 268.

49 Brower and Carter, *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, p.55.

50 Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p.513. They do not identify the source from which they quote.

51 Hisamatsu and Nishio, *Karonshū nōgakuronshū*, pp.100-103, and p.255, nn.2 and 6. Shōtetsu is likewise a fan of Narihira, and has occasion to quote one of Narihira's most famous poems in *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 20.

52 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:82.

53 Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, and Nishio Minoru. *Karonshū nōgakuronshū*, p. 190, n. 1.

The likelihood of a close association in Shōtetsu's mind between *yojō yōen* and *yūgen* is given further credibility by the poems he selects to quote in *Shōtetsu Monogatari* as exemplary works by other poets in the *yūgen* style. For example Shōtetsu describes the following poem by Shunzei's Daughter (ca.1175-1250) as 'as extremely fine example of *yūgen*',<sup>54</sup> but in fact it also has distinct characteristics of the *yojō yōen* style in its romanticism, suppressed passion, delicacy and the fusion of dream and reality and the courtly atmosphere of the situation, profoundly evocative of the mood of *The Tale of Genji*:

The bittersweet endpoint  
of unflagging love -  
who can decide  
if our meeting that night  
was but a dream?<sup>55</sup>

(*Aware naru / kokoro nagasa no / yukue to mo / mishi yo no yume o / tare ka sadamen*)

Shōtetsu's identification of the *yojō yōen* style with the *yūgen* style is further demonstrated his choice from his own compositions to illustrate the *yūgen* style.<sup>56</sup>

Take for example the hazy, dream-like qualities and deep romanticism of his poem on 'Spring Love':

In the gathering dusk  
a glimpse – I thought – of your face  
its haziness is  
your keepsake  
the moon in the dawn sky<sup>57</sup>

(*Yūmagure / sore ka to mieshi / omokage no / kasumu zo katami / ariake no tsuki*)

Further evidence of his conflation of *yūgen* with *yojō yōen* reappears in his most lengthy commentary on *yūgen*:

How could we describe the *yūgen* style? It is but clearly sensed in the diction and meaning of a poem, but cannot be stated in words. Since 'drifting clouds and whirling snow' [*kōun kaisetsu*] are said to be the style of *yūgen*, can we perhaps call the clouds trailing in the sky or the effect of snow drifting on the wind the *yūgen* style? Teika wrote—in, I think, *Guhishō*—: 'If I

54 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 42.

55 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:42.

56 In *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:19, 1:69 and 2:77. Shōtetsu proffers three of his compositions as exemplars of the *yūgen* style or sub-style.

57 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 69. Also *Sōkonshū* 4443.

were to provide a concrete analogy for the *yūgen* style, in China there was a certain King Hsiang. On one occasion when he decided to take a nap, a goddess descended from the heavens, and made love to him, impossible though it was to tell if it was dream or reality. The king was loath to let her go, so deeply did he love her, so the goddess said, "I am a celestial maiden from heaven. I came here now and made love to you because of a vow from a previous life, but I cannot stay on the earth." When she was about to fly away, the king, unable to contain his deep love for her, said, "At least then leave me a keepsake of yourself." The goddess replied, "As my keepsake, there is a mountain near the court, Mt Wu. Gaze at the clouds trailing over Mt Wu in the morning and the rains which fall at dusk," and at this she vanished. Thereafter King Hsiang, filled with deep yearning for the goddess, gazed at the clouds trailing in the morning over Mt Wu, and the rains falling at dusk as a keepsake of her. We could call the style suggestive of gazing at the clouds in the morning and the rains at dusk the *yūgen* style.' Thus wrote Teika. We may ask where the quality of *yūgen* in this lies, and the answer is within the hearts of each of us individually. It is definitely not something we can express in words, or discern clearly in our minds, or so I think. Could we simply call the style of subtle vagueness [*hyōhaku to shite aru tei*] the *yūgen* style? Could we call the *yūgen* style the charming effect of four or five court ladies clad in silk trousers gazing at the profusion of blossoms in full bloom at the southern palace? But if you were to ask, well then, where specifically is the *yūgen* in this, it would not be possible to say, 'The *yūgen* is here.'<sup>58</sup>

Again the imagery of 'drifting clouds and whirling snow', the other-worldly, romantic, dreamlike atmosphere of unfulfilled love in the legend of Mt Wu, and the nostalgic courtly ambience of the metaphor closing his commentary could also fall within the style of *yojō yōen*.

Quite apart from the profound influence of Teika's own poetic style, it is not difficult to understand how Shōtetsu came to identify *yūgen* with *yojō yōen*. One only has to realise the influence of apocryphal treatises purportedly written by Teika circulating at the time which explicitly define *yūgen* in terms of *yojō yōen*.<sup>59</sup> Two apocryphal treatises *Guhishō* and *Sangoki* ascribe to *yūgen* a sub-style of 'drifting clouds' (*kōun*)

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58 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2: 100.

59 For example, *Guhishō* (Secrets of a Fool), *Sangoki* (Record of Thrice Five Nights), *Gukenshō* (Notes on My Foolish Views), *Kirihioko* (The Paulownia Brazier) and *Miraiki* (Record of the Future) (Brower and Carter, *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, p. 53). It is claimed that the innovative Reizei school with which Shōtetsu was associated played a role in the preparation of the apocryphal manuscripts (Haga. 'The *Wabi* Aesthetic', Paul Varley and Kumakura Isao, eds. *Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989, p. 212). Moreover, and this may help us have some sympathy for Shōtetsu, it is believed that even these forgeries had some element of authentic Teika input. Of one forgery, the *Sangoki* (Record of Thrice Five Nights), it was said that there were 'still many of the master's words in the book'. Thus commented Tō no Tsuneyori in his *Tōyashū kikigaki*, quoted Brower and Carter, *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, p. 53.

and ‘whirling snow’ (*kaisetsu*). *Guhishō* elaborates that the sub-style of ‘drifting clouds’ is found in poems which are ‘soft and elegant, refined, evocative of wisps of cloud lightly trailing the moon’. The sub-style of ‘whirling snow’ is to be found in poems ‘elegant and graceful, and delicate, as in a scene of snowflakes whirling and fluttering in a light wind’. *Guhishō* depicts both styles as essentially feminine and charming in effect, exhibiting qualities which Teika would have described as *yōen*. The treatise defines a poem in the *yūgen* style as one which ‘evokes a feeling as if you are seeing a gentle, elegant, and incomparably beautiful female figure’; *Sangoki* expresses the same idea, and additionally adds the element of love, the recurrent theme of all the poems it cites.<sup>60</sup>

The first lines of the long passage quoted above are clearly directed indebted to apocryphal texts, while elsewhere in *Shōtetsu monogatari* Shōtetsu praises the ‘charm and mysterious allure’ of ‘the style of snow whirled in flurries by the wind, or mist trailing over the blossoms’<sup>61</sup> after providing his own exemplary poem in this style, on the topic ‘Dusk, Mountains and Snow’:

Hesitant to cross  
the clouds too still linger  
in the evening  
no tracks lie in the snow  
on the ladder-bridge to the peak<sup>62</sup>

(*Watarikane/ kumo mo yūbe o/ nao tadoru/ ato naki yuki no/ mine no  
kakehashi*)

Despite the strong textual influence of these questionable sources, their role should not be overstated: ample evidence exists in *Shōtetsu monogatari* and our knowledge of Shōtetsu’s scholarly activity to reassure us that his understanding of *yūgen* was rich and eclectic. There is no doubt that he was well-acquainted with reputable, earlier explorations of the *yūgen* aesthetic engaged in especially by Shunzei, Chōmei and Kenkō. As proof of his familiarity with Kenkō, Shōtetsu undertook two transcriptions of *Tsurezuregusa*,<sup>63</sup> both still extant. Shōtetsu’s passage:

...Nowhere in the words of the poem or their meaning is to be found the charming effect of wisps of cloud veiling the moon, or mist on the cherry blossoms, but it is there all the same, creating the *yūgen* and gentle beauty of the poem. It is an evocation which lies beyond language.<sup>64</sup>

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60 Hisamatsu and Nishio, *Karonshū nōgakuronshū*, p.172, n.6 and *Guhishō*, quoted by Kazamaki, ‘Shōtetsu no yūgen’, p. 367.

61 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:19.

62 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:19 and *Sōkonshū* 3986.

63 Inada, *Shōtetsu no kenkyū*, pp.113-114.

64 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:69

resonates with Shunzei's words in *Jichin Oshō jikaawase*:

If it is a good poem, it will possess a kind of atmosphere that is distinct from its words and their configuration and yet accompanies them. The atmosphere hovers over the poem, as it were, like the haze that trails over the cherry blossoms in spring ...<sup>65</sup>

Shōtetsu's simile for *yūgen*

A poem with qualities of mistiness [*hyōhaku*] and elusiveness will be an excellent poem. This sort of poem can be likened to a beautiful court lady, who is plunged deep in anxious thoughts, but speaks nothing. She says nothing and yet it is clear she is anxious.<sup>66</sup>

vividly recalls Chōmei's words:

[*Yūgen*] ... is like the situation of a beautiful woman who, although she has cause for resentment, does not give vent to her feelings in words, but is only faintly discerned—at night perhaps—to be in a profoundly distressed condition. The effect of such a discovery is far more painful than if she had exhausted her vocabulary with jealous accusations or made a point of wringing out her tear-drenched sleeves to one's face ... How can such things be easily learned or expressed in words?<sup>67</sup>

Shōtetsu's meditation on *yūgen*:

*Yūgen* is something grasped by the heart but inexpressible in language. It lies in wisps of cloud veiling the moon, or the charming effect of the autumn mist on the scarlet autumn leaves in the mountains. If one were to ask where is the *yūgen* in this, it would be difficult to reply. People who lack an appreciation of *yūgen* would naturally say 'the moon is most beautiful shining in the clear expanse of the heavens'.<sup>68</sup>

resonates with Kenkō's sensibilities:

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65 From *Jichin Oshō jikaawase* in *Nihon kagaku taikei* v.2, p.358, quoted in Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 266. Jichin (1155-1225), also known as Jien, was head of the Tendai sect of Buddhism four times, and was also a prominent poet in the same circles frequented by Shunzei and Teika. He has ninety-two *waka* in the *Shinkokinshū* (Hisamatsu, *Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Literature*, pp.126-127).

66 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1:19.

67 Quoted in Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p.269.

68 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2:77.

Are we to look at cherry blossoms in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of spring—these are even more deeply moving Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration ... the moon that appears close to dawn after we have long waited for it moves us more profoundly than the full moon shining cloudless over a thousand leagues.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, even in Chōmei and Kenkō's exploration of *yūgen* there exists an ethereality, somehow luminous and scintillating, which may have provided Shōtetsu with a source for *yōen* ('ethereal beauty') quite independent of Teika and the apocryphal texts. In *Eigyokushū*<sup>70</sup> Chōmei explains how 'poetry which takes its form from *yūgen* [is] an uncertainty of heart and words like looking upon a mirage of shimmering heat waves in an azure sky'.<sup>71</sup> Kenkō continues the famous passage above with what approaches a figuration of *yōen*:

And how incomparably lovely is the moon, almost greenish in its light, when seen through the tops of cedars deep in the mountains, or when it hides for a moment behind clustering clouds during a sudden shower! The sparkle on hickory or white-oak leaves seemingly wet with moonlight strikes one to the heart ...<sup>72</sup>

The discussion of Shōtetsu's *yūgen* to this point has centred on the influence of certain aesthetic and rhetorical styles, and their exponents. Here I will now attempt to identify how a transcendental interpretation of Shōtetsu's poetry can be made, in alignment with the paradigm proposed by Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen in her work *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics* with its grasp of 'the medieval view of poetry as a revelation, a disclosure of the Real from one discerning mind to another through the mediation of a figure'.<sup>73</sup>

Shōtetsu's exemplary poem

They flower only to scatter  
as I dream at night

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69 Translated by Donald Keene. *Essays in Idleness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967, pp.115-118.

70 This work, a treatise on music, was completed between 1177 and 1181, when Chōmei would have been in his twenties. Chōmei was a talented musician.

71 *Eigyokushū* in *Nihon kagaku taikai*, v. 3, p. 312. Quoted and translated by Haga, 'The *Wabi* Aesthetic', p. 204.

72 Translated by Keene, *Essays in Idleness*, pp. 115-118.

73 Ramirez-Christensen, *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*, p. 101.

of cherry blossoms  
 a vision now at one with  
 white clouds trailing the peaks<sup>74</sup>

(*Sakeba chiru / yo no ma no hana no / yume no uchi ni / yagate magirenu /  
 mine no shirakumo*)

evokes a world of ‘Being they are not. Not being, they are’<sup>75</sup> teetering on the very borderline of the real and the imagined, the Is and the Was, the present and the past, existence and non-existence. Shōtetsu’s special *yūgen*, despite its delicate Teika-esque ethereality, was perhaps in the end, depending on one’s individual perspective, not so far removed from the original metaphysical meaning of *yūgen*, in the Taoist-Tendai-Zen sense of the ‘profundity within non-being’. If on the surface this poem provides a fine example of the role played by Teika’s *yōen* in Shōtetsu’s *yūgen* aesthetic, it also reveals the persistent influence of the older *yūgen* style practised by Shunzei. The poem shows that *yūgen* in Shōtetsu’s craft has still retained something of its original mysticism, linking the aesthetic and metaphysical planes of experience.

A close correspondence can be perceived between the process into which the reader is drawn by the poem above and the *santai* (‘three stages’) practice in Tendai doctrine discussed earlier, understanding of the void (*kū*) and the provisional (*ke*) and the middle (*chū*), which was espoused by Shunzei and inherited by Zen followers: affirmation (of the initial physical existence of the cherry blossoms); denial and vacuum (the cherry blossoms scatter and they may have been merely a dream in any case); finally reaffirmation: the previous phenomenon of blossoms has disappeared, only to be replaced by a new phenomenon from the emptiness, namely the clouds which Shōtetsu is able to admire in their ‘suchness’ for their own intrinsic beauty. If the process is successful, enlightenment or *satori* into the true nature of reality should ensue. Is it excessive to suggest that Shōtetsu’s intention in the figuration of this poem was to ‘disclose’ to the ‘discerning’ reader, as Ramirez-Christensen worded it, the mystery and profundity which lies beyond our normal existence?

It is germane to this argument to note that Shōtetsu was immersed in the religious life for two periods in his life: from about the age of fourteen, he was sent to the monastery, Kōfuku-ji,<sup>76</sup> in Nara for five years to become an acolyte, while at the age of thirty-four in the third month of 1414 he took the tonsure and the Buddhist name

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74 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2: 77 and *Sōkonshū* 3098.

75 Quoted from Haga, ‘The *Wabi* Aesthetic’, p. 204.

76 The headquarters of the Hossō Sect, like the Sanron Sect, one of the six ‘Nara sects’. The Nara sects can all be considered to be variations on one theme: that of Void. (Dale Saunders. *Buddhism in Japan*. Tokyo: Tuttle, 1972, p. 105). It had entered Japan from China in 653. Its Buddhism was intellectual in focus, and popular among the highest elite, distinguishing them from the lower nobility who could not cope with its intellectualism (Mikael Adolphson. *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000, p.417).



Shōtetsu, and entered the Rinzai Zen temple Tōfuku-ji in Kyoto where he worked as a scribe for some years before eventually leaving. He thus had ample opportunity to absorb the teachings of both Hossō and Rinzai sects of Buddhism. However by 1424 he had ‘twice abandoned the world’, and was no longer at Tōfuku-ji but dwelling in a ‘grass hut’ at Rokkaku in Kyoto. It is true he was self-critical and paints a comical self-portrait of himself as a ‘lapsed’ cleric in his travel diary *Nagusamegusa* (1418):

Stacks of poetry booklets sit on the desk where the sutras should be venerated; I sprawl out on the platform hugging a pillow where I should be sitting on a mat in meditation. So unbearable is the heat is that I have dispensed with wearing my clerical *kesa* and every day I behave just as I please indulging in sake and meat. And this is not all, as I shamelessly and wantonly commit one offense after another day and night.<sup>77</sup>

But it cannot be denied that Zen thought in particular and Buddhist sentiments in general profoundly informed his world view, as Carter points out:

No one ... can help but be struck by the frequency with which Zen conceptions appear as themes or subthemes in Shōtetsu’s poems ... [O]ne finds an attitude that rejoices in the quotidian, a tendency to problematize fundamental cognitive categories such as time and consciousness, and an awareness of not just the mutability but also the transmutability of all things.<sup>78</sup>

Evidence of a transcendental interpretation of *yūgen* can be detected in the extended exemplification of *yūgen* in terms of the ‘dream of Wu-Shan’ legend where he defers to Teika’s words (albeit from a forged source):

Teika wrote — in, I think, *Guhishō* —: ‘If I were to provide an analogy for the *yūgen* style, in China there was a certain King Hsiang. On one occasion when he decided to take a nap, a goddess descended from the heavens, and made love to him, though it was impossible to tell if it was dream or reality. The king was loath to let her go, so deeply did he love her, so the goddess said, “I am a celestial maiden from heaven. I came here now and made love to you because of a vow from a previous life, but I cannot stay on the earth.” When she was about to fly away, the king, unable to contain his deep love for her, said, “At least then leave me a keepsake of yourself.” The goddess replied, “As my keepsake, there is a mountain near the court, Mt Wu. Gaze at the clouds trailing over Mt Wu in the morning and the rains which fall at dusk,” and at this she vanished. Thereafter King Hsiang, filled with deep yearning for

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77 *Nagusamegusa* in K. Nagasaki et al., eds. *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* v. 48: *Chūsei nikki kikōshū*. Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1994, p. 441.

78 Steven Carter. *Unforgotten Dreams: Poems by the Zen Monk Shōtetsu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. xxiv.

the goddess, gazed at the clouds trailing in the morning over Mt Wu, and the rains falling at dusk as a keepsake of her. We could call the style suggestive of gazing at these clouds in the morning and the rains at dusk the *yūgen* style.’<sup>79</sup>

Ramirez-Christensen analyses the profound metaphysical texture of this tale: ‘Its abiding appeal doubtless lay in the ethereality of the meeting, the essential mystery of love, which is as fleeting and empty as clouds and rain, yet has the power to hold the mind in thrall. In sum it belongs ineluctably to the medieval aesthetics of presence and absence, and of emptiness.’<sup>80</sup> The ‘dream of Wu-Shan’ legend would appear to exemplify what Ramirez-Christensen describes as

modes of aesthetic-philosophical responses to the tension between desire (for the security of presence, permanence, substantiality) and knowledge of its groundlessness, They spring from that middle ground (*chūdō*) between the is (*ke*) and the is-not (*kū*) that establishes and undercuts both in the same stroke and constitutes, according to Tendai philosophy, the true ‘ground’ of being.<sup>81</sup>

To this point the discussion has emphasised the intertextuality of Shōtetsu’s *yūgen* and its retention of ‘conservative’ qualities inspired by Teika, Shunzei, Chōmei and Kenkō. It has attempted to provide evidence of a philosophical and metaphysical dimension which harks back to the early doctrinal meanings of the term in China. However in my introductory discussion I also alluded to anticipatory elements of Shōtetsu’s *yūgen* in its transitional role in the evolution of the *yūgen* aesthetic, and the argument that, however neo-classically conservative Shōtetsu may have been in his vision of *yūgen*, elements were surfacing quite spontaneously in his poetic which anticipated future directions and transmutations of *yūgen* in other cultural forms. One powerful force at work in creating a ‘new’ *yūgen* was the existence of a changed audience. Poetry writing in particular and the trappings of ‘culture’ in general were no longer the preserve of the aristocracy. Notably, the final four ‘imperial’ anthologies, *Shinsenzaishū* (1359), *Shinshūishū* (1364), *Shingoshūishū* (1384) and *Shinshokukokinshū* (1439), were commissioned by the Emperor at the request of the shogun.<sup>82</sup> A synthesis of aristocratic and warrior/commoner culture was in train and as part of this cultural transformation emerged ‘a more human idea of *yūgen* which was gaining increasing strength.’<sup>83</sup> In illustration of the process Tsubaki provides Shōtetsu’s striking simile for *yūgen* from *Shōtetsu monogatari*:

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79 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2: 100..

80 Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen. *Heart’s Flower: The Life and Poetry of Shinkei*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 334.

81 Ramirez-Christensen. *Heart’s Flower: The Life and Poetry of Shinkei*, p. 259.

82 Brower, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 486.

83 Tsubaki. ‘Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics’, pp. 59-60.

Could we call the *yūgen* style the charming effect of four or five court ladies clad in silk trousers gazing at the profusion of blossoms in full bloom at the southern palace? But if you were to ask, well then, where specifically is the *yūgen* in this, it would not be possible to say, 'The *yūgen* is here.'<sup>84</sup>

Our attention is therefore drawn to the co-existence in Shōtetsu's expression of *yūgen* of two different and contradictory aesthetics: on the one hand an effect redolent of courtly elegance, nostalgia, delicacy and understatement. This is the 'old' Teika-esque *yūgen*. But simultaneously we are struck by the 'colorful simile' created by Shōtetsu.<sup>85</sup> It is as if he is responding to a need to appeal to popular culture, to make his preferred aesthetic zone, that is courtly culture, more tangible, approachable and attractive to those outside aristocratic circles. We are witness to the transition of 'the object of *yūgen* from the supernatural to the earthly and from the mystic to the human'.<sup>86</sup>

The transitioning aesthetic reflected a popular usage of the term *yūgen* which started to occur from toward the end of the Heian period, simultaneously with the application of the term in a technical sense in poetic criticism:

[T]he term became popular in the daily life of the general public. It was originally employed as a term of praise of something beautiful, elegant, and tasteful. Reflecting the taste of the common people at the time, however, the application of the term was confined to the expression of beauty of gentle elegance and magnificence. The appearance of Shunzei in the world of *waka* resulted in attributing a special meaning to the idea of *yūgen*. Despite this evolution the meaning of the term in the common usage did not change at all from the closing period of Heian through the Kamakura to the Muromachi (1333- 1568). The deviation of the *yūgen* concept, as was observed in *Guhishō* and *Sangoki*, from that of Shunzei might be caused by the popularized concept of *yūgen*.<sup>87</sup>

It is pertinent to observe that it was the popular, resplendent, more accessible form of *yūgen* which Zeami embraced in the Nō drama, at least in the earlier part of his career, in his aesthetic of elegance, richness and graceful beauty. In *Fūshikaden* (1400), Zeami advises, 'the principal actor should be vivid (*hanayaka*). This constitutes *yūgen*.' He gives the following examples of *yūgen*: 'the fine bearing of a nobleman or woman' and 'the elegant manner of speech of a nobleman or religious dignitary.' According to

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84 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 2:100.

85 Tsubaki, 'Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics', p. 60.

86 Tsubaki, 'Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics', p. 59.

87 Tsubaki, 'Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of *Yūgen*: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics', p. 59.

Zeami, ‘a simple softening of form is the essence of *yūgen*’.<sup>88</sup> In *Nō Sakusho* (1423), Zeami mentions fitting subjects for the characterization of *yūgen*: Ariwara no Narihira and Hikaru Genji among men and Ono no Komachi, Giō, Gijō, Shizuka Gozen and Hyakuman among women.<sup>89</sup> ‘All these personages—both historical and fictional—convey a beauty tinged with a lingering emotion, an aristocratic, feminine beauty derived from the emotional aesthetic tastes of Heian court literature, a vivid, gentle, elegant beauty.’<sup>90</sup>

Shōtetsu’s exemplary poems in the *yūgen* style, both his own and those by other poets, as well as his prose articulations, can be seen to display, alongside a range of other impressions, a similar ‘humanised’ expression of *yūgen*, and indeed ‘performances’ by the same cast of characters as Zeami from the great legends and romances. Shōtetsu’s composition below, surely modeled on the popular ‘dream of Wu-Shan’ legend, or perhaps its metamorphosis in *The Tale of Genji* or *Tales of Ise*,<sup>91</sup> is like a filmic ‘take’ in a romantic drama:

In the gathering dusk  
a glimpse—I thought—of your face  
its haziness is  
your keepsake  
the moon in the dawn sky<sup>92</sup>

(*Yūmagure / sore ka to mieshi / omokage no / kasumu zo katami / ariake no tsuki*)

The same could be said for the poem which he quotes from *The Tale of Genji*, Genji’s poem to his stepmother and lover Fujitsubo:

Though we have met tonight  
rare will be the nights we can meet again  
would that my wretched self

88 Quoted in Haga, ‘The *Wabi* Aesthetic’, pp. 208-209.

89 Ariwara no Narihira and Genji were the epitomes of the ideal Heian nobleman and lover. Ono no Komachi was an important early Heian *waka* poet renowned for her beauty. Giō and Gijō were two *shirabyōshi* dancers/courtesans who gained the favour of Taira no Kiyomori (1118-81) at the height of his power, but later became Buddhist nuns. Shizuka was the courageous mistress of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-89). Hyakuman was a popular fourteenth century dancer. All figure in the Nō drama repertoire (J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu. *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 271-274).

90 Quoted in Haga, ‘The *Wabi* Aesthetic’, p. 208-209.

91 Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen points out the allusions to this legend in *The Tale of Genji*’s ‘Aoi’ chapter, and the possibility it provided the inspiration for Narihira’s dreamlike affair with the Ise priestess (*Heart’s Flower: The Life and Poetry of Shinkei*, p. 334).

92 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 69 and *Sōkonshū* 4443.

could vanish just as it is  
into this dream<sup>93</sup>

(*Mite mo mata/ au yo mare naru/ yume no uchi ni/ yagate magiruru/ ukimi to mogana*)

Both poems, significantly, are as if in the format of lines of ‘dialogue’, and in the case of the second, Fujitsubo’s response is also provided.

Further examples of this humanised, dramatised and enacted *yūgen* can be found in the following:

You slipped out  
never to return  
like the moonbeams  
though I wait  
tears soaking my sleeves<sup>94</sup>

(*Yasurai ni/ idenishi mama no/ tsuki no kage/ waga namida nomi/ sode ni matedomo*)

You have forgotten  
how many days and months have passed  
alone I am aware  
wracked by sighs  
this dusk<sup>95</sup>

(*Wasurete wa / uchinagekaruru / yūbe kana/ ware nomi shirite/ suguru tsukihi o*)

Shōtetsu’s prose discussion of *yūgen* in its sub-styles of ‘drifting clouds’ and ‘whirling snow’ likewise draws on a vivid human metaphor:

This sort of poem can be likened to a beautiful court lady, who is plunged deep in anxious thoughts, but speaks nothing. She says nothing and yet it is clear she is anxious. Or it is like a little child of two or three years old, who addresses you with something in her hand, saying, ‘This, this ...’ Although she wants you to do something for him, she is not explicit about what she wants. And so there is great merit in poems which leave something unsaid.<sup>96</sup>

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93 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 77. From ‘Young Lavender’ in *The Tale of Genji*.

94 By Teika, quoted in *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 90.

95 By Princess Shikishi (d. 1201), *SKKS* 1035. This poem is included in a group of ‘Poems of Endurance’. Quoted in *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 41 (as a fragment only).

96 *Shōtetsu monogatari* 1: 19.

As already stated, we have no evidence of contact or communication between Shōtetsu and Zeami. However Shōtetsu above ‘dramatisation’ of a humanly-enacted *yūgen* suggests this as an area which may reward future research.

In conclusion, the Muromachi era, Shōtetsu’s backdrop, was one of the headiest and most dynamic eras in Japan’s culture, society and economy. The shogunate returned to Kyoto allowing warriors and aristocrats to mingle in reception rooms in a range of recreational and cultural activities. In the process of the close aristocrat and warrior/commoner association pre-existent aesthetic values were challenged and re-calibrated. The diverse, multi-faceted expressions of Shōtetsu’s *yūgen* which I have attempted to capture in this paper—neo-classical, transcendental, evocative of the gentle rich grace of Zeami’s players on the Nō stage and a very human enactment of the sublime — can perhaps be understood best in this context.

### Biographical note

Penelope Shino lectures in Japanese language, culture, film and literature at Massey University, Palmerston North. Her main research platform is the literature and culture of Muromachi Japan (1333-1573) and the uptake of aristocratic culture by the warrior class. Her work to date has focused on the role of Zen monk-poet Shōtetsu in this process, as documented in his poetic treatise *Shōtetsu monogatari* and travelogue *Nagusamegusa*.