

Writing Gender

*in Early Modern
Chinese Women's Tanci Fiction*



Li Guo

Writing Gender

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Li Guo

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TO MY FAMILY:

*My grandparents Guo Juncai and Jia Qiulan,
and my parents, Guo Xianxian and Xu Shengze*

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NOTE ON STYLE AND EXCERPTS

IN-TEXT CITATIONS FOR verse from the original *tanci* texts are listed in the following sequences: *juan* (scroll or volume): *hui* (chapter), *ye* (page number); thus (1:10, 234–55).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Chinese texts into English are by the author.

Written texts of *tanci* often contain blended verse and prose, and sometimes represent speech and singing in the characters' soliloquies or conversations with one other. Below is a sample of an excerpt and its translation from *Linked Rings of Jade*, as discussed in chapter 1.

想奴家啊，[唱] 自幼身拘官署中，閨帷深鎖似雕籠。幼年時學堂苦被先生束，到如今老母朝朝又課繡工。好教我春日不知花爛漫，到秋來隔簾偷望月玲瓏。匣中又少有奇書閱，[白] 欲待作句詩兒，莫說爹爹母親見責，就是 [唱] 旁邊乳母也不相容。說什麼，女孩兒莫學聯詩句，又道是筆墨研心要損玉容。[白] 那知這里嫂嫂姊姊們，那個不吟詩句？那個不閱傳奇？[唱] 何曾損了紅顏貌，又那見他一吟一咏就喪閨風？(5:39, 13).

In reflection of my life, [Sing] Since my childhood I was confined at my father's official mansion, and locked up in the inner chambers, as if living in an embellished cage. Today, my aged mother presses me on practicing embroidery day by day, making me unaware of the beauty of the blossoming spring flowers. When autumn comes, I could only steal glimpses of the fine moon across the curtain. My drawers lack

stimulating books for reading. [Spoken parts] If I ever want to compose a line of poetry, not only would I be scolded by my parents, [Sing] even the nanny would not allow it. She would say, a girl should not learn to write poetry, and that, brush and ink grind on one's heart and damage one's fine looks. [Spoken parts] How could they know that my female siblings and sisters-in-law all chant poems and read *chuanqi* stories? [Sing] They did not lose their beautiful looks at all, nor have I ever seen them trespass women's propriety by merely reading and reciting lines.

Introduction

TOWARD A SPATIALIZED UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S LITERARY *TANCI*

WOMEN'S *TANCI* 彈詞, or literally “plucking rhymes,” are chantefable narratives written by educated women from seventeenth-century to early twentieth-century China. Growing out of the oral traditions of performed *tanci* songs of the South Yangtzi regions, *tanci* was appropriated by late imperial women as a distinctive genre for self-expression. Having maintained the orality and musicality of their origins, these works are written in rhymed, seven-character lines and include dramatic dialogue, fictional narration, and poetic insertions. Often the chapters have titles in rhymed couplets summarizing plots and major events. The chapters' openings frequently contain female-voiced authorial commentaries or insertions about the seasons, family backgrounds, personal moods, or circumstances of the writing. Published *tanci* include prefaces by the author and the author's relatives and friends, or poems about the author or the characters. The stories depict adventurous women who adopt male disguises to explore life as men's equals and who outperform their male peers in their intellectual achievements and military expertise. Addressed to audiences in the inner chambers, *tanci* was circulated among women in a hand-copied format. In the nineteenth century, the flourishing book industry allowed *tanci* to be extensively printed and circulated among women. During this period, Hou Zhi (侯芝, 1760–1829) completed her editing of 玉釧緣 (*Yuchuan yuan*, Jade Bracelets, late Ming) and published her own *tanci*, 錦上花 (*Jinshanghua*, Brocade Flowers) and 金閨傑 (*Jinguijie*, Heroines in the Golden Chambers). *Tanci* provides a unique category of fictional narratives and enriches studies on the rise of the novel in non-Western vernacular traditions.

Tanci by women articulate innovative imaginations of women's private yearnings, histrionic disguises, and non-normative gendered relations. These fantastic tales arranged for their heroines to cross-dress and explore new societal roles, while delaying the act of doffing their disguises. *Tanci*'s depictions of diverse positions of women as objects of desire, narcissistic viewers of themselves, or desiring subjects of other women unsettle the heterosexual gender norm. Yet, feminine desires for autonomy and individual agency in *tanci* are not antithetical to Confucian orthodoxies of virtue. Rather, *tanci* authors' depictions of women's fantasies of freedom have been carefully rationalized to leave the ethical characters of their heroines unharmed; loyalty, patriotism, filial piety, and uprightness are recast as sources of emotional empowerment for women. A heroine could decline an imposed marriage by prioritizing filial duties to her maternal parents over her obedience to her future husband. A married woman could manage to justify her religious practices. A cross-dressed heroine could ease the pressure of marriage through mock marriage with another woman, where she could perform the conventional duties of a loving husband and filial son-in-law. Chastity and filial love are evoked to justify the disguised protagonists' unconventional lives. Traditional moral tenets such as loyalty and patriotism are transformed through celebrations of women's intellectual and political wisdom.

This book offers a timely study on early modern Chinese women's representations of gender, nation, and political activism in their works before and after the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), as well as their depictions of warfare and social unrest. The five discussed texts span China's polemical nineteenth century, when the nation's civil war led to new imaginaries of heroism, martyrdom, loyalty, and subjectivity. The Taiping Rebellion nearly overthrew the Qing government and profoundly impacted the cities of south China, the birthplace of performed *tanci* traditions and home to many reputed women *tanci* authors, causing these writers to have tragic experiences of personal loss and political exile. In 1861, when the rebels broke into Hangzhou city in Zhejiang province, the reputed author Zheng Danruo (鄭澹若, 1811–1860), whose husband was the head official of Hangzhou, committed suicide to protect her chastity. Jin Fangquan (金芳荃, 1833–after 1890), author of *奇貞傳* (*Qizhenzhuan*, *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*, 1861), and Wang Oushang (汪藕裳, 1832–1903), author of *子虛記* (*Zixuji*, *A Tale of Vacuity*, 1883), both suffered extensive exile in southern cities during the Taiping Rebellion. These women authors' experiences as wartime refugees allowed them the means of acquiring nascent identities beyond the inner chambers through personal writings about warfare, exile, and nostalgia. This innovative turn toward wartime realism transforms the feminine utopian ideal toward immortality or imagined autonomy in traditional *tanci*. This book considers how warfare and disorder inspire women's reconfiguration of orthodox values such as chastity and filial passions, political loyalty, and female martyrdom.

Tze-lan Sang observes that “talented women of the scholar gentry class” in late imperial China, though granted a greater access to writing and publishing, could “refer to their own lives in public writing using only highly formulaic poetic language and very limited scripts of female sentiment and virtue. Any woman who overstepped these marks was very much in the minority” (Sang, “Romancing Rhetoricity and Historicity” 202). Under restrictive social conditions and pressures of censorship and self-censorship, fictionality could be an alternative for a marginalized subject to voice the real self. In comparison with wartime poems written by late imperial women authors on wartime exile, trauma, suffering, and nostalgia, *tanci* authors’ fictional narratives accommodate authorial self-distancing in inscribing social realities onto the narrative tableau of *tanci*. At times of social disorder and political turmoil, fictionality empowers the feminine subject in a socially disadvantaged position to speak about social tragedy and personal sufferings through stylized verses, historically framed narratives, character focalization, or transformed supernatural beings to voice “truth.” Narrative elements and modes of depiction such as supernaturalism, dramatic coincidences, fictional characterization, or tragicomic separation and reunion could serve as vehicles of disseminating and enunciating fictional realism through a distanced and ironized viewpoint. For early modern women, fictional realism allowed possibilities of negotiating with the dominant cultural and political ideologies and systems of value in the Confucian society and of finding new means and venues of self-articulation. Whereas the ostensible discrepancies between truth and fictionality, between authenticity and artist expressions, have been well examined in modern and contemporary discourses on realism in reportage literature, visual art, cinema, and theater, *tanci* works by Jin Fangquan, Zheng Danruo, and Wang Oushang suggest a rich and manifold repertoire of wartime narratives that allowed women’s creative endeavors to respond to social and political realities within the boundaries of prevailing cultural codes.

Also, my research expands studies of women’s *tanci* by considering depictions of women’s domestic authority in this fictional genre. The chapters of the book explore how women’s *tanci* fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in addition to offering portrayals of alternative visions through fantastic narratives or feminine utopian ideals, establish a realistic tenor in affirming feminine domestic authority and negotiations of the marriage paradigm. In quite a few women-authored *tanci*, the cross-dressed heroines undergo refeminization by marrying their fiancés and, rather than entirely losing their agency, gain access to much domestic authority in a polygamous family. Other *tanci* texts reconfigure the polygamous family structure by illustrating mock unions between the female cross-dresser and “his” understanding wife. Sometimes, female same-sex relationships could displace the sexual contract underlying the marriage contract. The texts stage a rivalry between women’s homoerotic bonds and heterosexual marriage, which problematizes the sexual contract underlying the

social contract of the polygamy. The plot emphasis shifts from the refeminization of the cross-dresser to opener closures beyond marriage.

Anne E. McLaren suggests in *Chinese Popular Culture* that chantefables, along with oral literature and drama, might have important connections with the rise of the early Chinese novel. Some critics argue that “the rise of the Chinese novel in the fourteenth century developed from the profession of storytelling” that was a form of popular entertainment dating back to as early as the Song dynasty (Ye Yang 19). *Tanci* narratives include the orally delivered *tanci* and written *tanci*, which are two inter-related but distinctive narrative repertoires that do not overlap one-to-one. Written *tanci* can be traced to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). In the late Ming, a small number of *tanci* works by men provided accounts of historical events or famous figures; they were called 講史類彈詞 (*jiangshilei tanci*, or *tanci* that orally tell historical accounts). Since the seventeenth century, talented women authors have appropriated *tanci* as a feminine fictional genre. Possibly one of the earliest *tanci* works authored by women is the voluminous late Ming work *Jade Bracelets*, which consists of 224 回 (*hui*, chapters) and 1.36 million words. Written *tanci* vary from 200,000 words to 2 million words in length. The longest *tanci* is 榴花夢 (*Liuhuameng*, *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, 1841) by the late Qing author Li Guiyu 李桂玉, which consists of 360 *juan* (volumes) and 4.83 million words in rhymed seven-character lines. Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, in their 2004 book *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, include excerpts of translations from seminal *tanci* works. A bibliography by Sheng Zhimei records 538 surviving novel-length *tanci* texts. The majority of these texts were published under artistic names or with anonymous authorship (263–485). Another bibliography by Bao Zhenpei, highlights 38 texts written by women from the seventeenth century to the early twenty-first century (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 301–2). Mark Bender calls these works “chantefable narratives” (Bender 153). The term “chantefable” is a fitting translation for written *tanci* to illustrate the genre’s importance in late imperial vernacular traditions.

During the Qing, *tanci* works enjoyed rising popularity, and the genre reached its pinnacle of development from the late eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century. Such popularity could be attributed to *tanci*’s origin as a kind of “leisure narrative” (Sheng 7). Literary *tanci*, thanks to its roots in storytelling, encompasses the features of oral performance, such as deploying thrilling and elaborated plots to attract audiences and embedding everyday life experiences in its accounts (8). The flourishing of such a genre of leisure narratives was much dependent on a prosperous socioeconomic environment. Only in such an environment could audiences afford to leisurely enjoy *tanci* storytelling in tea houses, or could women enjoy the pleasure of passing time by reading *tanci* stories. The rise and decline of *tanci* bear close correlation with the social, economic, and political situations of the Qing. In the first half

of the nineteenth century, the publication of new *tanci* and the reprinting of existent texts flourished. To attract more readers, publishers competed in enhancing the illustrations and appearances of printed *tanci*. In 1842, there were as many as eight editions of *Jade Bracelets* published, indicating the immense demand for *tanci* in the market (78).

The contested implications of gender identities related to performed *tanci* narratives and written *tanci* for reading could be observed in the diversified usages of the term “女彈詞” (*nü tanci*, women’s *tanci*). Zhou Liang observes that the term *nü tanci*, which in a modern setting often designates performed *tanci*, was initially used in a broader sense and referred to *tanci* works composed by cultivated authors for reading. These textualized works imitated the style and content of the performed *tanci* narratives and were often composed by women authors. However, occasionally there were male authors who made similar attempts. These textualized *tanci* works were all called *nü tanci*. Because of their imitation of the stylistic features of performed *tanci*, they are alternatively referred to as 擬彈詞 (*nǐ tanci*, imitative *tanci*; Zhou Liang 264). In this earlier usage of the term, *nü tanci* is not necessarily gender-bound in terms of authorship, nor does it refer to performed *tanci* narratives as in many contemporary settings. Zhao Jingshen observes that *tanci* includes 文詞 (*wenci*, *tanci* for reading) and 唱詞 (*changci*, *tanci* for singing) based on their stylistic differences (Zhao 5). Zhao refers to these *wenci* texts as written *tanci* works “of the woman, by the woman and for the woman,” which are similar to the female-authored kind of textualized *nü tanci*, as delineated by Zhou Liang.

Fang Cao, in an important essay “女彈詞考” (“*Nü tanci kao*,” “On Women’s *Tanci*”), observes that the term *nü tanci* includes three different aspects (Fang Cao 50). First, as Zhou Liang observes, *nü tanci* could refer to textualized *tanci* works composed by female authors and some male authors that imitate performed *tanci* tales. Second, *nü tanci* could refer to female *tanci* singers instead of to any particular feminine styles of *tanci* performance. Contemporary *tanci* performance is not defined by the gender binary and does not fall into masculine or feminine styles of performance. Third, in the history of Suzhou *tanci* performances, some female performers of *tanci* gradually transitioned to the profession of courtesans, and in this transitory process the style, content, and audience of their performances underwent significant changes and shifted to an increased focus on singing over storytelling. In order to please their male audiences they performed traditional *tanci* as well as other operatic genres, including 崑曲 (*kunqu*, a southern classical opera), 京腔 (*jingqiang*, capital melodies), 梆子 (*bangzi*, rhythmic wooden-block opera), and 小調 (*xiaodiao*, short tunes or song-based melodies). Some female singers gradually merged with professional courtesans at the time. They were referred to as *nü tanci*, which was an abbreviation of 妓女彈詞 (*jinü tanci*, courtesan *tanci* performers). In the late nineteenth century, traditional *tanci* performance gradually went out of vogue for male audiences. A Ying, in a historical review of performed

nü tanci, observes that professional female *tanci* singers later had to shift to sing 皮簧 (*pihuang*), the northern musical melodies at the base of Peking opera (A Ying 413).

Earlier records of female *tanci* singers who performed for male and female audiences could be found in numerous archival records since late Ming, as Zhou Wei observes (“A Study of ‘Women’s *Tanci*’” 104). Tian Rucheng 田汝成 (1503–1557) records that in Hangzhou blind performers, male or female, took to learning *pipa* and singing of novels and 平話 (*pinghua*, plain tales) storytelling to earn a living (20:18). Zhou Wei notes that before the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1796), *nü tanci* largely referred to blind women *tanci* performers who had the mobility to perform at private gatherings for affluent families. Since the nineteenth century, *nü tanci* performers included female singers who were not blind. On May 26, 1872, Chiping sou 持平叟 published an article on *nü tanci* in 申報 (*Shenbao*, Shanghai News), which records anecdotes of famous female *tanci* performers since the reign of Emperor Jiaqing and endorses quite a few of them as *cainü*, or talented women (Chiping sou, “*Nü tanci* xiaozhi” 2). In a sequel to this article published on May 28, Chiping sou observes that *nü tanci* or female *tanci* singers in Shanghai at the time were also addressed as 女先生 (*nü xian-sheng*, female scholars) who performed at the so-called 書場 (*shuchang*, story houses; Chiping sou, “*Jie nü tanci* xiaozhi” 2; see also Xu Ke 459–64). In comparison with female prostitutes who would take seats at the table of their patrons and attend them in smoking, female *tanci* performers would be seated at a distance from the patrons. Many of them would insist on “selling their songs but not their bodies” (Chiping sou, “*Jie nü tanci* xiaozhi” 2). Zhou Wei observes that this group of female *tanci* performers in Shanghai enjoyed higher social status than prostitutes and could be addressed as 書寓女彈詞 (*shuyu nü tanci*, story hall female *tanci* performers; Zhou Wei, “A Study of ‘Women’s *Tanci*’” 105).

As a vernacular genre, *tanci* was and still remains an indispensable part of people’s cultural lives in the lower Yangtze region, an important cultural and economic center of China. Zheng Zhenduo points out that southern readers, particularly women and less educated men, might not have been familiar with seminal historical figures and poets, but all knew eminent characters in *tanci* stories by heart (Zheng Zhenduo 124). The popularity of *tanci* attracted late imperial women to utilize the genre to educate their readers and transform social customs. Tao Zhenhuai (陶貞懷, seventeenth century), the alleged author of 天雨花 (*Tianyuhua*, Heaven Rains Flowers), commented that she resorted to *tanci* because it was a more popular means of dissemination than rituals, music, and the play texts and could attract more audiences (Tao Zhenhuai 30). Similar observations about deploying the genre’s popularity among the cultured and common readers for educational purposes were articulated by later authors Zheng Danruo and Qiu Xinru (邱心如, 1805–1873). In late Qing, intellectuals found *tanci* to be an instrumental medium for educating women, resonant with

the contention by the reformist Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929): “If one intends to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction” (qtd. in Denton 74). The broad cultural base of *tanci* rendered it an ideal vernacular medium for disseminating educational incentives to the masses at the turn of the twentieth century.

Written *tanci* by women authors expand the conventional notion of a feminist *bildungsroman*, in that the female characters’ journeys of self-discovery are made possible by temporarily making women appropriate masculine social roles. In *tanci*, the oscillation of narrative closure, between the cross-dressed heroine’s marriage or her death upon the revelation of her true identity, often reflects the texts’ analogous negotiation between social conformity and individual development. Some authors resort to magic and alchemy to project an imagined ending by portraying the heroines as reincarnated immortals who return to the heavenly realm and are rewarded with autonomy because of their virtuous deeds. Some make tactical conciliations by making the heroine return to marriage with her betrothed fiancé. Yet, more than a few texts are open-ended and leave the heroines’ destinies undetermined when their true sexuality is exposed. Prominent examples include the unfinished 再生緣 (*Zaishengyuan*, *Destiny of Rebirth*) by Chen Duansheng (陳端生, 1751–1796), in which the exposed Meng Lijun refuses to become the emperor’s concubine and falls fatally ill. Likewise, in Zheng Danru’s 夢影緣 (*Mengyingyuan*, *Dream, Image and Destiny*), the twelve heroines who are reincarnated flower goddesses all perish due to illness, misfortune, or suicide to resist against imposed marriage. The texts’ deliberations about the heroines’ negotiations of freedom against an intransigent social order reflect the very enigma of a modern female selfhood. Literary *tanci* celebrate women’s solidarity and foreshadow modern and contemporary feminist writings about female subjectivity, gender performances, and unconventional imaginings of desire and sexuality. These tales explore women’s self-discovery and search for freedom and provide rich illustrations of the authors’ interior yearning for identity and selfhood, or highlight female creative power through depictions of exceptional and adventurous heroines. *Tanci* serves as a vehicle for expressing women’s reconfiguration of the orthodox values of virtue and chastity by rendering the disguised heroines as active agents who implement changes in the social and political systems. Such negotiation between obedience and resistance could be a cross-cultural experience that women in the West and in China shared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the early twentieth century, some writers adapted this genre to disseminate tales of Western or traditional heroic women and to appeal to patriotic interpretations. The female revolutionary Qiu Jin (秋瑾, 1875–1907) composed an autobiographical *tanci* 精衛石 (*Jingweishi*, *Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird*, 1905). The story depicts a group of late Qing young women who travel to Japan to study and to seek new paths to national salvation. The author prays that her readers will shatter their “slavish confines and arise

as heroines and female gallants on the stage of liberty, following in the footsteps of Madam Roland, Anita, Sophia Perofskaya, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Joan of Arc” (“Excerpts” 44). In Qiu Jin’s view, eminent modern Western women could serve as exemplars for her female compatriots and encourage them to act as conscious agents of national salvation. Qiu Jin’s renovation transformed the genre into a medium of “women’s feminist-nationalist activism” (Dooling and Torgeson 4). Some male writers wrote in shorter *tanci* tales about heroic women as models of patriotic passions. Such examples include 法國女英雄彈詞 (*Faguo nüyingxiong tanci*, *Tale of a French Woman Hero*, 1904) by Yu Chenglai (俞承萊, 1881–1937), 胭脂血 (*Yanzhixue*, *Rouge Blood*, 1908) by Zhou Shoujuan (周瘦鵑, 1895–1968), 二十世紀女界文明燈彈詞 (*Ersbi shiji nüjie wenmingdeng tanci*, *Twentieth-Century Tanci: Light of Civilization in the Women’s World*, 1911) by Zhong Xinqing 鐘心青, and 同心樞 (*Tongxinzhi*, *Heartlocked Cape Jasmine*, 1911) by Cheng Zhanlu (程瞻蘆, 1879–1943). These *tanci* project the endeavors of elite intellectuals to herald women’s sociopolitical awakening by reinventing images of Western heroines and martyrs as sources of transnational identification.

Among book-length studies on *tanci* in English, Mark Bender’s 2003 groundbreaking monograph offers research on the origins and aesthetic features of performed *tanci* storytelling. Wilt Idema and Beata Grant (2004) provide a chapter-long discussion on the history and stylistic features of *tanci*, or “plucking rhymes,” and they include excerpts of translations from seminal *tanci* works. Toyoko Yoshida Chen’s doctoral dissertation, *Women in Confucian Society: A Study of Three T’an-Tz’u Narratives*, examines three seminal texts, *Heaven Rains Flowers*, *Destiny of Rebirth*, and 筆生花 (*Bishenghua*, *Blossoms from the Brush*), as early examples of “literary achievement of women in the history of Chinese fiction” (ii). Nancy J. Hodes’s doctoral dissertation, *Strumming and Singing the “Three Smiles Romance”: A Study of the Tanci Text*, analyzes performance-related *tanci* through an examination of two versions of the *tanci* text 三笑姻緣 (*Sanxiao yinyuan*, *Three Smiles Romance*) and their respective degree of literariness and suggests a collaborative and interdisciplinary study of performance-related *tanci* texts. Marina Hsiu-wen Sung offers a nuanced study on how the narrative aesthetics of Chen Duansheng’s *tanci* *Destiny of Rebirth* contributes to a feminist vision within a traditional Confucian social system (Sung, *Narrative Art*; Sung, “Chen Duansheng” 16–18). Sung’s visionary research takes a narratological approach to the study of *tanci* narratives by exploring the storyteller-narrator’s manipulation of narrative points of view and character focalization and the role of narrative agents (supernatural and human), as well as the text’s complex plot arrangements. Hu Siao-chen’s doctoral dissertation, *Literary Tanci: A Woman’s Tradition of Narrative in Verse*, proposes women’s written *tanci* as a “feminine” form of poetic expression and argues that literary *tanci* should be envisioned as a form of *écriture féminine*. Hu’s dissertation was

later substantially expanded and published as an influential monograph in Chinese (2003). Building on these pioneering scholars' works, Li Guo considered written *tanci* as a female-oriented narrative form that offers women "an organic structure that allows their voices and ethical concerns to be passed along to their targeted readers with efficacy and candor" (Guo 15). In *Interfamily Tanci Writing in Nineteenth-Century China*, Yu Zhang discusses depictions of gender, interfamily relations, and modernity in three *tanci* texts. Among recent scholarship published in Chinese on women's written *tanci* works, Zhou Wei offers a much needed clarification on the aforementioned term *nü tanci*, and discusses the practices of women's *tanci* performed in Jiangnan regions since the late Ming (*Singing and the String* 48–69). Expanding current studies of literary *tanci*, Zheng Zhenwei contributes a groundbreaking study on Jin Fangquan's *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* (154–93). Wei Shuyun contributes a historicized study on gendered consciousness in *tanci*, with an emphasis on *tanci* heroines' political participation, women's economic power and strategies in reinforcing female domestic authority, militant women, and women's expanded societal roles (67–144). Tong Lijun published articles in Chinese on several understudied late imperial and Republican *tanci* works.

This book fills a gap in the studies of women's written *tanci* by discussing five understudied or never discussed works collected from archival trips and funded research projects. Among the selected texts, *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* and *A Tale of Vacuity* have never before received scholarly attention in the English-speaking world. 玉連環 (*Yulianhuan*, *Linked Rings of Jade*), 榴花夢 (*Liuhuameng*, *Dream of Pomegranate Flowers*), and 金魚緣 (*Jinyuyuan*, *Affinity of the Golden Fish*) were each analyzed only once in individual chapters for edited volumes but have not received methodical studies in any monographs on *tanci*, women's literature, or late imperial literature. This study provides a much-needed discussion of the heritage of women's *tanci* and its value in studies of gender, authorship, and global women's writing traditions. My study aims to engage early modern Chinese women's *tanci* fiction in dialogue with comparative literary studies of self-representations, subjectivity, and modernity in women's fictional writing for a global audience. The book hopes to make women's *tanci* fiction accessible to the English-speaking world and envisions a broad spectrum of audiences in gender and women studies, vernacular narratives, folk stories, comparative literature, and cultural studies.

This book's research on the construction of gender in women's *tanci* fiction provides a method of understanding the early modern feminine in historical epochs of sociopolitical crisis. Nancy Armstrong, in her 1982 essay "The Rise of Feminine Authority in the Novel," observes that domestic fiction about courtship and marriage focusing on a feminine personae's emotions and moral choices provides a medium for presenting and reflecting on conflicts and contradictions in the socioeconomic sphere when maintaining a certain distance from it. "To this special connotative power of the feminine

voice and subjective matter, we can probably attribute the development of a distinctively feminine mode of literature” (Armstrong, “The Rise of Feminine Authority” 133). Despite male writers’ and critics’ efforts to relegate the novel to established masculine traditions, the novel early on, Armstrong observes, “assumed many of the distinctive features of a specialized language for women” (133). In reviewing the power structures and dynamics between the sexes in early modern British novels, Armstrong rightly observes that “the sex code both authorized women writers and governed the form and content of their fiction” (134). In Jane Austen’s novels, marriage, a means to resolve conflicts of social interests and facilitate the heroines’ “upward mobility to within a social frame of reference” is often illustrated as a rewarding ending and gratifies the middle-class readers “with a fable for their own emergence” (139, 141). However, in nineteenth-century British women’s novels, the symbolic mechanism of marriage does not always achieve a balance in distributing power, and the social gaps between male and female increase. Armstrong observes that the stories themselves often display discontinuities and more complex dynamics of exchange because of the changed sociopolitical investment of sexual roles.

One of the major takeaways from Armstrong’s essay is her observation that efforts of “defining femininity in rigid opposition to masculinity necessarily fail” because “sexuality ultimately proves to be nothing less than a language” (145). *Tanci* fiction’s illustrations for exemplarity, syncretism, and vernacular gender ideals are constitutive of women authors’ narrative strategies to empower women’s voices and visions in a historical era when orthodox social systems excluded the feminine subject from a publicly endorsed discursive position. Rather than conceptualizing women’s *tanci* through the spectrum of an early modern feminist or female-centered discourse, this book considers early modern Chinese women writers’ strategies and competences in transforming the binary distinctions between masculine and feminine discourses on identity and selfhood and in reinventing a feminine subject of enunciation. Besides, the tales of marriage and courtship in *tanci* share much similarity with early modern British novels in their rich exposition and illustrations of the emotional imperative underlying the heroines’ individual choices and insistences on autonomy. Both corpuses of texts highlight the heroines’ upward mobility to ascend in the social order and frequently end with the heroines’ return to the domestic spheres, suggesting a solution of political, economic, or ideological conflicts through companionate conjugal relations.

Significant differences pertain in comparisons of these two culturally specific repertoires of writings. The cross-dressed protagonist in *tanci* is characterized by an upward *and* outward social mobility. Such a heroine is often forced to denounce or relinquish her bonds to her gentry kinfolk because of war or family calamities and undertakes an adventurous travel from one social milieu to another. Her ascending movement in the social hierarchy, often attributed to the character’s exceptional talent, is usually achieved

well before her marriage and in the earlier part of the novel, when she gains an eminent position at the court as an elite scholar-official or martial general as a “man.” In *media res*, prearranged or predestined marriage comprises and cuts off the heroine’s social and economic prosperity, rather than reinforcing these realistic prospects for her. Refeminization and marriage indicate helplessness, reconciliation with reality, or temporary obligation to complete one’s course of worldly travail before the celestially born heroine completes her mandated suffering and acquires immortality. Instead of achieving the momentous equilibrium of the individual’s emotional and socioeconomic imperatives, or a balanced exchange between the two, marriage for the star-crossed lovers in *tanci* functions as a vehicle of completing their moral self-redemptions in exchange for their final return/ascendance to the heavenly realm. Notably, the mythical narrative frame underlying almost all women-authored *tanci* works discovered to this date entails the complex questions of women, mobility, and space. The prospect of ascending or returning to the mythical space, for the mobile heroine, provides an important alternative of achieving individual autonomy and allows her to transcend male expectations in the worldly realm. Initially goddesses sent down to pay for their moral misconduct, the *tanci* heroines are entrusted with superior mobilities as to be able to transcend normatively prescribed gender roles.

Tanci novels’ prolonged and serialized narrative format, complexly embedded plot structures, enormous cast of leading and minor characters, and authorial maneuverings of pace, rhythm, and plot progression all indicate the continuum of orality in the narrative as a powerful strategy of storytelling. Constellation of oral traditions in *tanci*, be it theatrical role types, melodies, little tunes, verse games, or jokes and spontaneous storytelling, grant the southern women authors a linguistic and localized mobility to reconfigure stylistic forms of higher-prestige and codified classical expressions. In comparison with the feminine modes of literature that Armstrong identifies above, women’s *tanci* fiction is uniquely important because these works explicitly undertake reconstruction of a feminine voice on the side of the vernacular through stylistic assimilation and reciprocally display the myriad possibilities of appropriating the feminine voice in the vernacular contexts.

For contemporary readers, Ming Qing women’s *tanci* fiction remains a challenging corpus of texts because of these works’ voluminous lengths, complex stylistic features, and lack of any complete translations into English, not to mention the limited reprints and significant difficulties in gaining access to hand-copied texts and remaining sole copies. Beyond these difficulties on the surface, the theoretical question of how to critically read women’s written *tanci* remains a meaningful and challenging one. Susan Stanford Friedman develops Julia Kristeva’s notion of spatialization and Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of narrative chronotopes into a synthesized understanding of spatialization as a strategy for reading the narrative. Kristeva’s spatial tropes

identify the intersections of the text's three dimensions, including the writing subject, the addressee, and exterior texts. The horizontal axis is "a line drawn from writing subject across to the addressee" (Friedman 13). This horizontal axis "represents the text as a transaction between writer and reader. The vertical axis is a line starting with the text and moving down to the exterior texts, or contexts, of the text in question" (13). For Kristeva, a reading of narratives is a translinguistic practice in that it engages dialogue along horizontal and vertical axes with its writer, readers, and context (Kristeva 69). Friedman expands Kristeva's model by adapting Bakhtin's two chronotopes, suggesting that the horizontal narrative axis "involves the linear movement of the characters through the coordinates of textual space and time" (Friedman 14). The vertical narrative axis "involves the space and time the writer and reader occupy as they inscribe and interpret what Kristeva calls the 'subject-in-process' constituted through the 'signifying practice' of the text and its dialogues with literary, social, and historical intertexts" (Friedman 14). Both axes signify "a movement through space and time" (Friedman 14). The horizontal axis indicates the characters' mobility in the story; the vertical axis represents the "motions" of the author and the reader in their connections with each other and with the novel's intertexts. Friedman holds that the relations between these axes are symbiotic and mutually constitutive. A strategic distinction between the two axes does not so much isolate them from each other, but rather helps to elucidate spatialization as a method of productive reading. Spatialization provides the readers the critical method or analytical tool to access the text as a verbal surface, and a site where "space and time, synchrony and diachrony, function as coordinates for textual activity" (Friedman 12).

Spatialization as a method of reading narratives can be instrumental in the current studies of women's *tanci* narratives, particularly in helping readers envision the dynamism and interrelations between the authorial narrator and her implied readership, between textual vivacity and intertextual visions. The horizontal axis entails the characters' mobility in the fictional realm, be it leaving home for a new societal life under male disguise; embarking upon adventures of defending the nation as women generals, soldiers, and military strategists; becoming a Confucian scholar-minister at the court; taking imaginary voyages to the mythical realms of heaven; or traveling to the underworld to inquire about loved ones' mandated outcomes. As illustrated above, despite their predicament of marriage, the adventurous heroines are usually ingenuous in achieving an upward social mobility because of their literary talent, political intelligence, or martial skills, which are traits that manifest their individual autonomy rather than their eligibility for a companionate marriage. In addition to physical and social mobility, some heroines are even adroit in commanding moral mobilities as they progress in their individual pursuits. That is to say, these exceptional characters are resourceful in negotiating new modes of moral subjectivities to justify their commitment to

their extraordinary voyages. For Jiang Dehua 姜德華 in *Blossoms from the Brush* and Pei Zixiang 裴子湘 in *A Tale of Vacuity*, Daoist learnings and self-cultivation provide the justification for their delay of or resistance against forming conjugal relations. The virtuous Yang Xianzhen 楊仙貞 in *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* takes on the commitment of three years of chastity even after marriage in the name of extending the shortened lifespan of her morally delinquent brother. Orthodox virtues including filial piety, sibling love, or virginal chastity, rather than undermining the heroine's mobility, provide incentives for her negotiations and reinventions of a nascent moral selfhood literally and figuratively as a subject-in-process.

The vertical axis in the spatiality model includes the important relation and exchanges between the writer and the reader. This associative connection between the writer and the addressee, be it a character or an implied readership, invites a spatialized understanding of textuality beyond the written word—that is, textuality as a product of the shifting bond between the author and her envisioned audience. In many *tanci* works by women, the foregrounding of the feminine authorial narrator facilitated the creation of a feminine authorial persona who strategically evokes readerly support and sympathy, and intervenes in the narration with personal illustrations, reflections of everyday realities, and self-affirmations of learning and writing competency. Maram Epstein observes that writings by the emerging acculturated women authors in late imperial China may not “present a voice of radical alterity”—that is, readers might not expect that elite women authors “would critique the system that privileged and empowered them” (Epstein, “Bound by Convention” 102–3). As writings in diverse genres by women became available, there was a definitive imperative to “reconstruct a more nuanced and detailed picture of the intertextual call and response as women responded specifically to the voices and yearnings of the emergent women’s literary culture” of the time (102).

Whereas Epstein’s discussion focuses on the feminine voice in eighteenth-century Chinese literature, similar “intertextual calls and responses” of women authors to their historical readership persisted and could be identified in the author-reader “motions” in women’s *tanci* from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. This vertical axis enables the dialectical interaction between the text and context, the writer and the reader. Identifying this dimension of the vertical axis in women’s *tanci* endows the readers with a mobility in interpretation and appraisal of the story’s social and moral relevance. Spatialization through these two narrative axes “fosters relational readings, discourages ‘definitive’ and bounded interpretations, and encourages a notion of the text as a multiplicitous and dynamic site of repression and return” (Friedman 20). Notably, the recurrent returns of the authorial insertions in written *tanci*, aside from being a feature reminiscent of the storyteller’s performative intervention in oral literature, suggests an authorial interchange with her implied readership as a precondition for the story to progress. The vertical and the horizontal axes are intertwined; the story

is thus constituted of “a sequence of relational readings that at every point in the horizontal narrative examines its vertical component” (Friedman 20). The self-reflexive and confessional authorial self-confessions in these recurring statements at the beginning or ending of the individual chapters could indicate an additional psychic dimension of the vertical axis, embodying a repetitive compulsion of narration that ultimately and inevitably gestures toward a broader realm of gendered consciousness that at once fuels the authorial desire of narration and awaits more effectual articulation.

Although archival records for Ming Qing women *tanci* authors are often limited, autobiographical descriptions in their texts invite a critical evaluation. Probing into the psychic dimension of the vertical axis, Friedman suggests that the analogy between analytic and novelistic transference is especially important in autobiographical narratives, “in which the split subject of the writing ‘I now’ and the written about ‘I then’ perform the different roles of analyst and analysis in a kind of ‘writing cure’” (Friedman 19). Women’s written *tanci* with an authorial narrating framework illustrates evolution of the writing subject over time, highlights the interplay between scenes of writing at various life stages, and amplifies the important interplay between living memories and imaginations of the past. The authorial subject both fashions such fleeting remembrances and experiences and is herself constituted by these spatialized experiences of living the presence of the past. A well-known example is the eighteenth-century author Chen Duansheng’s reflection on the associative relations between her life as a writer and the possibilities of narrative closures in volume 17 of *Destiny of Rebirth*. Recalling her life before marriage, her husband’s banishment, and her experiences of loss and separation, the author laments, “Once a string on a zither has snapped, it is broken forever; / The half of a broken mirror can never be made round again: / Could it possibly have been an omen of our fate today, / That long ago I called this work *Destiny of Rebirth*?” (17:65, 1085). Relating Chen’s insertions and ponderings on personal tales of loss and hardship to the characters’ mandated encounters in the story world suggests that both the embedded authorial narrative and the story constitute a superbly embedded text, which akin to a dreamwork unravels the psychic dimension of the vertical narrative (of the writerly world) as an indispensable part of the reading experience.

Women’s *tanci* works encompassing such a manifest authorial narrative framework (such as Qiu Xinru’s *Blossoms from the Brush* and Jin Fangquan’s *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*) initiate intersections and interactions between the vertical and horizontal axes, with authorial insertions indicating multiple entrances and exits into the plot development. Plot development is interrupted or distracted; readers are constantly called to consider narrative uncertainties of the text in process, to ponder probabilities of plot beyond the story’s chronology. In terms of women’s *tanci*, the text’s psychic dimension punctuates narration and spatializes readerly interpretations. The psychic dimension of the *tanci* text implies the narrative’s power in producing a feminine consciousness

and the impact of the characters' tales in shaping the authorial subject's own interiority. Spatialization as a method and strategy helps acute readers of *tanci* works identify the associative textual, intertextual, and contextual resonances and understand the complex dialogic mechanism of these texts in initiating tales of themselves.

In his groundbreaking study of narrative meaning in Chinese vernacular story, Patrick Hanan proposes three levels of narrative meaning, which share many resonances with Friedman's theoretical proposition of spatialization. Hanan suggests that in prose fiction, the three levels of narrative meaning are (1) serial meaning, or the "string of meaning in the text, without major configuration"; (2) configurative meaning, "the level on which plot and character are built up and questions and hypotheses provoked in the reader's mind"; and (3) interpretative meaning, "on which the reader understands and interprets the whole in general and perhaps symbolic terms." Besides, Hanan proposes seven principal levels of analysis: "narratorial, focal, modal, stylistic, phonic, graphic, and the level of meaning" (Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story* 19). Despite the differences between Hanan's and Friedman's theoretical focuses and methods, one may still consider the serial meaning and configurative meaning as akin to what Friedman has described as the horizontal axis, whereas the interpretative meaning is close to Friedman's vertical axis that comprises readers' engagement, interpretation, and possible exchanges with the writers.

Hanan's investigation of the model of Chinese vernacular fiction, when engaged with Friedman's model of spatialization, could shed light on the current reading of written *tanci*. Reading *tanci* fiction through the prism of spatialization invites consideration of the oral model underlying the narrative context of vernacular fiction. As Hanan observes, in vernacular fiction, the oral model is broadly manifested in the references to the story being told, the simulated questions for or dialogues with audiences, and stylistic uniformity in diverse works (Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story* 20). In *tanci*, the resonant examples include the frequent usage of prologues and description, the narrator's anticipatory observations, poems or rhymed couplets as narrative foreshadowing, and epilogue or concluding comments. On the horizontal level, in *tanci*, narrative tableau, or what Hanan identifies as *descriptio*, is a constituent of a feminine aesthetic model that boasts the writer's talent in literary portrayal (21). *Descriptio* is, akin to reflexive comment, a common feature in various kinds of oral literature. The elaboration of description in *tanci*, such as the ramification of the feminine authorial voice in the prologues and conclusive comments in the individual chapters, signifies learned women's enhancement of the oral model in writing experiments. On the vertical dimension, Hanan rightly observes that "for virtually all vernacular authors, the actual model was earlier vernacular, not oral, fiction," with the oral model as only one of the influences on the vernacular narrative (22). In the context of written *tanci* fiction, in alignment with Hanan's observation, the texts often carry strong intertextual

ties to late imperial vernacular fiction and drama, rather than making parodies or adaptations of orally performed *tanci* tales. Over the last few centuries, written *tanci* outgrew its oral traditions through frequent genre-crossing plays and reinventions.

The above discussion further highlights the important connection between identity and narration in the study of early modern Chinese women's written *tanci*. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur argues that identity is the product of a narrative process, which through the process of fictionalization, fixes the development of the self through time and its permanency as a subject. In this view, *tanci* stories are tales about the evolution of a feminine self through a discursive process, through detailed narrative portrayals of early modern women's life experiences. Women's written *tanci*, in particular, could be considered as stories about what Tani E. Barlow, in her commentary on the 2020 AAS panel "Rearticulating Gender and Class in Postsocialist China," called "womanly becoming." As Barlow proposes, womanly becoming carries a transitory sense in affirming the courses and actions that women authors actively devoted themselves to in the past, and the vigorous dedication to the interpretation and critical appraisal of women's writing traditions by contemporary audiences and researchers. The notion of becoming is important because it does not exclude the possibilities for early modern women's agency in making a social impact through their act of writing, despite the Confucian patriarchal social and familial paradigms that conditioned and confined women's sphere of activity. Womanly becoming evokes a female-centered reading strategy that emphasizes understandings of femininity as a transitory and fluid embodiment. JaHyun Kim Haboush suggests that in her study of patriarchy and polygamy in early modern Korea, the public-private distinction corresponding to "spheres of activity, signifier of morality, and social spaces" carries a theoretical flexibility and allows women to negotiate with dominant authorities and forces (Ko et al. 7; also see Haboush, "Versions and Subversions" 279–304). The notion of becoming entails the horizontal dimension of early modern women's transitory processes of self-development and formation of communal bonds, their efforts of negotiating with the mainstream literary culture. Becoming also invites a critical reflection on the productive historical continuity between traditional and modern imaginings of the feminine, which, rather than being a natural occurrence, is an achievement of generations of women's intellectual innovations and social undertakings.

Current studies on early modern Chinese women's literary activities offer rich and resonant discussions on the theme of womanly becoming. Grace S. Fong, in her study of Qing women poets, argues that "poetry as a discursive field has become a multifaceted process through which some women could imagine themselves and each other as belonging to a group defined by their ability to write" (Fong, "Alternative Modernities" 58). What Fong has incisively identified as a process of Qing female poets' personal and collective investment in constructing their authorial identities is a prominent example

of womanly becoming through the act of the writing. Susan Mann, in her study of nineteenth-century women's poems on the political crisis of the turbulent era they lived in, suggests that these poems, in times of trouble, "anticipate the writings of 'new women,' with whom they shared a common political awareness" (Mann, "The Lady and the State" 283). These early modern women writers, Mann suggests, could be considered as precursors for twentieth-century politically activist women writers such as Qiu Jin (1875–1907) and Ding Ling (丁玲, 1904–1986). Mann's notion of "anticipation" not only emphasizes a historical continuity between late imperial women authors' illustrations of social and political matters, but also highlights a diachronic dimension of cultural memory as a molding factor for women authors' lives and writing experiences in later generations—that is, a shaping force for womanly becoming in an ongoing sense. A similar process of womanly becoming underlying the transitional phase from tradition to modernity is identified by Joan Judge in her study on Chinese and Western exemplary women at the turn of the twentieth century. During this historical era, Western women's biographies, Judge observes, contributed rich and influential insights into "the complex process of accommodating foreign ideas" in progressive intellectuals' construction of the images of a modern Chinese female citizen aligned with the social and political objectives of modern Chinese nationalism (Judge, "Blended Wish Images" 104). Judge's elucidation illustrates the process of womanly becoming in fin-de-siècle China as an inherently blended one: biographies of foreign heroines and images of Western women become sources of inspiration for native accounts of the new Chinese woman. Womanly becoming, as Judge's study reveals, engages a horizontal dimension of cultural exchange, appropriation, and canonization of Western images of women in China's nationalist rhetoric. As Walter Benjamin observes, "the term origin does not mean the process of becoming of that which has emerged, but much more, that which emerges out of the process of becoming and disappearing" (cited in Buck-Morss 8; also see Xueping Zhong 167). The process of becoming always initiates a dialectic return to the origin, and the productive historical linkages between past and present.

Written *tanci* provides presentations of the process of womanly becoming both horizontally through the characters' travel, travail, and social growth in the fictional realm and vertically through the diachronic development of gender consciousness as articulated in an ongoing and distinctive narrative tradition. Women's written *tanci* bears social and cultural significance beyond the textual dimension or stylistic means because it marks early modern women writers' endeavors to mark a space of feminine becoming, a discursive arena of feminine appropriation, reinvention, and boundary-crossings. In this theoretical light, women's *tanci* not only portrays gendered mobility through depictions of a heroine's physical voyages or social ascent in the diegetic space, but entails a dynamic, forward-moving historical progression toward a more autonomous and vested model of feminine subjectivity. Countless textual scenarios in *tanci* depict

heroines who articulate their yearning to achieve immortality by establishing a lasting reputation because of their talent or virtue. These illustrations correspond to and indicate the historical dimension of womanly mobility to wield power in and beyond the historical epoch in which they lived. The *tanci* texts by Qing women authors examined in this book bear a social and political tenor because of their illustrations of the voices and lived experiences of women in times of war and disruption, exile and dislocation. The literary autonomy represented in Ming and Qing women's *tanci* surpasses stylistic innovation, or imaginative negotiations between prescription and reality, but is deeply intertwined in a historical process of becoming when early modern women embraced expanded social and political encounters and were impelled to take the act of writing as a means of self-transformation. The term "womanly becoming" can be instrumental in a revisionist understanding of early modern femininity by dismantling the boundaries between tradition and modernity and reconsidering the possibilities for change and transformation within the orthodox paradigms of womanhood.

The chapters in this book suggest that women *tanci* authors' redefinition of female exemplarity within the Confucian orthodox discourses of virtue and talent, chastity, and political integrity could be burgeoning expressions of female exceptionalism in a collective sense and could have foreshadowed later women authors' protofeminist ideals of female heroism and justified the reinvention of women's social and political subjectivities in the name of preserving orthodox moral values. Yun Zhu observes that models of female exemplarity as endorsed by Confucian scholars encourage female literacy and women's learning as a means to restore gender propriety and reinforce prescribed gender roles (Yun Zhu 46). Fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century authors of *tanci*, such as Qiu Jin, Peng Jingjuan 彭靚娟 and Jiang Yingqing 姜映清, undertook *tanci* to express the rich and divergent evolution and transformation of traditional womanhood in a modern era. In the short *tanci* work *Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird* (1905), written by Qiu Jin, female exemplarity is reconfigured through a nationalist-feminist spectrum to call for the heroines' self-awakening and self-liberation and mobilizes women's collective political activism. Jiang Yingqing's 風流罪人 (*Fengliu zuiren*, *The Valiant and the Culprit*, 1926), by contrast, offers an ironized observation of the peril of traditional female exemplarity, as her antiheroines strive to meet the tide of modernity and materialism.

These writers' undertakings indicate women's ability to negotiate, reinterpret, and emendate ideals of feminine exemplarity in nascent roles beyond the repositories of Confucian discursive traditions. Rather, *tanci* tales discussed in this book present female exemplarity as an empowering prism for women authors' interventions and innovations of a feminine literary tradition. As discussed above, *tanci* authors' redefinition of feminine exemplarity could be seen as a case in which women writers grapple with the relation of the female subject and the "power, meaning and the dominant ideology

in which her gender is inscribed,” as Lydia H. Liu puts it, a predicament for early modern to contemporary women writers alike (Lydia Liu 56). Rather than conceptualizing such works as part of a female tradition in contrast with the male-centered literary conventions, it will be more productive to consider *tanci* narratives by women authors as significant endeavors of “history making”—that is, efforts of women contesting and expanding discursive boundaries in epitomizing and expressing women’s subjectivity.

Female exemplarity as a Confucian discursive construct, as this book suggests, has been transformed through narratives of and about exceptionally cultured heroines who boast moral purity, literary learning, outstanding beauty, or martial prowess. Literati depictions of exemplary female talent in dynastic fiction exhibited inconsistent ideological stances of endorsement and constraint, affirmation and confinement. In *世說新語* (*Shishuo xinyu*, *A New Account of the Tales of the World*), authored by Liu Yiqing (劉義慶 403–444), the chapter on 賢媛 (*xianyuan*, virtuous and talented ladies) illustrated historical heroines’ wit and self-assertation as part of female exemplarity, as Wai-ye Li observes. However, as Wai-ye Li points out, exemplary beauties in anecdotal literature frequently “combine chaste resolve with witty self-assertation” and turn down persisting suitors to express loyalty to their spouses (Wai-ye Li, “Figures” 464). In *影梅庵憶語* (*Yingmei an yiyu*, *Reminiscences of the Plum Shadows Convent*) by the literatus Mao Xiang (冒襄, 1611–1693), the talented courtesan Dong Bai (董白), as Wai-ye Li observes, is at once “connoisseur and object of connoisseurship.” Her achievement as a connoisseur paradoxically “turns her into aesthetic spectacle” (Wai-ye Li, “Early Qing to 1723” 194). Rather than celebrating Dong’s intellect and talent as traits of her exceptionality, Mao’s tribute to Dong instead focuses on “how romantic-aesthetic values are redeemed by moral exemplarity” (194). The courtesan’s aesthetic and literary accomplishments, rather than being endorsed outspokenly, still have to seek affirmation through the male narrator’s overshadowing voice of justification. Likewise, as Li points out, another fictional work, *隋唐演義* (*Sui Tang yanyi*, *Historical Romance of Sui and Tang*, preface dated 1695) by Chu Renhuo (褚人穫, 1630–1705), enforces the story’s moral scheme through tales of moral exemplarity and forewarnings against excess and depicts talented and beautiful heroines through the lens of romance and marriage, much reminiscent of the contemporary trend of scholar-beauty romances. Women-authored *tanci* fiction resolutely departs from the literati invention of learned women by introducing women themselves as the writing subjects. The texts embody “the ‘writerly’ character” of the texts and its voices, to borrow Maureen Robertson’s term (Robertson, “Literary Authorship” 379). In other words, instead of replicating female figures vivified and yet contained in literati imagination, women authors as participants of the literary traditions of *tanci* fiction are at a vantage point to appropriate and reshape archetypal paradigms of femininity and reinvent conventional character models of femininity to express their own inventiveness.

Marie-Louise Coolahan, in her study of women's writings in early modern Ireland, observes early modern women's "rhetorical resourcefulness and inventiveness" when they engage in literary creations (Coolahan 259). Their self-positioning "is attuned to social norms and to the power of their transgression." Currently, the reinvention of female exemplarity, "facilitated by the adaptation of a conversion paradigm through which to interpret the life, often functions as a mechanism through which worldly claims can be camouflaged" (259). For early modern Chinese women *tanci* authors, writing, as a means of producing new narratives of female exemplarity, allows them to envision and bolster their positions strategically in relation to and beyond orthodox culture. In *Linked Rings of Jade*, authored by Zhu Suxian 朱素仙, Confucian wifely virtue, an indication of moral exemplarity comprising fidelity to the husband and capacity of maintaining propriety in the household, justifies the heroine Liang Hongzhi's undertakings in reclaiming domestic authority through moral transformation of the dysfunctional male lead of the family. Notably, moral exemplarity entails "an exceptional—rather than a partial—form of moral virtuousness" (Croce 386). Zhu's *tanci* unfolds the potential of reinterpreting narratives of female exemplarity as new tales of female exceptionalism in which the heroine, as the virtuous agent, gains access to establish herself as an exceptional woman, not only by upholding rituals and propriety but also by appropriating the rituals to justify her highly moral pursuit of self-fulfillment and self-realization. Yuan Lijun observes that in the early modern context, unlike elite women, women of lower-class families would not enjoy the same opportunities to transform themselves in their specific social situations (Yuan Lijun 16). In a largely male-dominated culture, a woman's endeavors of self-cultivation could only be realized with the support of the male members of her family, such as her father, brother, husband, or son. A considerable proportion of exceptional heroines in *tanci* are marked by their ability to gain consent and support through consulting their male family members to facilitate their pursuit of learning, to justify their delay of marriage, or to execute their management of household matters. Rather than depicting a disguised protagonist who reaches self-realization in the Confucian world as a man's equal, Zhu's text indicates that learned heroines with outstanding talents and economic advantages could achieve self-transformation and self-realization because of their knowledge and ingenuity regarding domestic governance.

Female exemplarity in Ming Qing women's *tanci* works is frequently articulated through a syncretistic imagination of the female subjectivity via authorial negotiations of orthodox discursive frames of feminine virtue, talent, beauty, and destiny. The text's syncretistic presentation of gendered subjectivity indicates that ideals of feminine exemplarity came into being in an ongoing historical process in which women's aspirations are in reciprocal and mutually transforming interactions with established gender norms, roles, and relations. Women authors' syncretistic illuminations of gendered

subjectivity in *tanci* fiction, in other words, do not project a unified endorsement of exemplar femininity. Nor does the current study endeavor to read this corpus of female narratives as exemplary texts *per se*, counter to literati records or accounts of morally or intellectually prototypical heroines. Rather, authorial manifestations of syncretism in these *tanci* works indicate female exemplarity as a textual, cultural, and discursive construct and a shifting signifier subjected to women's constant self-conscious modification and enactment of personhood in history. The rhetoric of exemplarity in early modern *tanci* narratives, instead of extrapolating a counter-discourse of the feminine, provides a method to reconceive gender norm diffusions, similitude, and syncretism, which activate complex dynamism and possibilities for heroines' intervention in the operation of ideological norms, both in the private and domestic spheres as well as in the living spaces of the public and social realms.

The rhetoric of exemplar femininity in women's *tanci* tales not only serves as an elemental *raison d'être* in tales of cross-dressing, but also can be appropriated by traditional heroines to justify and reinforce feminine domestic authority. Although a large number of *tanci* works by women share the plotline of a heroine embarking on an adventurous journey in male disguise, most *tanci* works encompass ample portrayals of the feminine domestic space as a sphere for women's self-reclamation and self-cultivation. Rather than only forcing the heroines out of the inner chambers, the story often casts the inner chambers as both a place of departure and a site of return for a disguised roaming heroine. Representations of women's domestic authority and self-empowerment in *tanci* works, in this light, provide rich materials for critical exploration. Quite a few heroines in *tanci* fiction display talent and resourcefulness in managing family properties and maintaining economic control of the household. As Bret Hinsch observes, following the Confucian command that "while his parents are alive, a son should not dare to consider his wealth as his own," elder women and widowed mothers could have the authority to act as caretakers of household goods and property. Also, elite women were able to "exercise considerable control over their personal finances" (Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* 63). Such access to power and significant familial authority is defined by class. In the late imperial period governing-class women "had more opportunities to make decisions concerning personal and property matters than their poorer counterparts" (63). Under extraordinary situations, an ordinary woman might be granted the control of family finances if her husband could not act in this role because of travel, illness, or unscrupulous behaviors such as gambling or habitual squandering of wealth or inheritance. In the *tanci* tale *Linked Rings of Jade*, the well-born heroine Liang Hongzhi 梁紅芝 finds out that her dissolute husband nearly gambles away all their family property and a significant part of her dowry, and even proposes to sell her to pay off his gambling debt. To protect her own property and the benefits of her infant son, Hongzhi has to arrange for a disguised maid to

act as a buyer of their house and land. Thanks to this ingenious arrangement, Hongzhi shields her own chastity and protects her personal and family property ownership. By taking in her destitute husband as a servant working to earn his living in his own house, Hongzhi teaches him a lesson and helps him to return to scholarly study and the pursuit of officialdom.

In women-authored *tanci* fiction, Wei Shuyun observes, the female characters' management of family properties includes the right to manage their dowry, which is prepared by their parents before marriage, and managing family inheritance by taking in a son-in-law living in their own house (Wei 99). Quite a few *tanci* novels depict sons-in-law living with the wife's maternal family, who are subjected to the family rules of the in-laws. In *Linked Rings of Jade*, Hongzhi's mother, Madam Wang, takes in her frivolous son-in-law Sun Lingyun 孫凌雲 for two months after their marriage so that Lingyun could advance his learning with the assistance of Hongzhi's industrious elder brother. In *Blossoms from the Brush*, the heroine Jiang Dehua's father plans to take in a live-in son-in-law who can assist in managing the family properties. This request is accepted by the family of the hero, Wen Shaoxia 文少霞. Dehua and Shaoxia are engaged. After the adventurous Dehua returns to femininity, Dehua's father again asks Shaoxia to accept the arrangement as a live-in son-in-law, and in addition to agree to act in the role of a son of the Jiang family. Dehua and Shaoxia's son even carries the maternal family surname of Jiang. From the perspective of Jiang Dehua, the arrangement of a live-in husband protects her financial interests as well as the properties of her maternal family. As Wei Shuyun incisively observes, similar plotlines of taking in a live-in son-in-law can be found in other *tanci* works, such as *Heaven Rains Flowers*, *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, and *A Tale of Vacuity*. Wei argues that these textual illustrations indicate a marriage model that is more favorable to women's domestic authority and autonomy thanks to the support and influence of the wives' affluent maternal families (Wei 103). In women's *tanci*, often plot arrangements indicate that the domestic space, rather than a mere sphere of confinement and repression, could be reterritorialized as a site of feminine self-empowerment or even dominance. The adventurous cross-dressers' refeminization and return to marriage, even a polygamous marriage, may not necessarily indicate a loss of power, but can suggest a shifted terrain for women's exercise of their moral, economic, and intellectual agency.

Does the plot arrangement of a cross-dresser's refeminization in women's *tanci* foreclose narrative probabilities of feminine freedom or autonomy, or does refeminization suggest the necessity to reenvision the domestic sphere, or the gendered space that women have been traditionally prescribed to, as a space under true feminine governance and power? Is a heroine's refeminization and retreat from the social terrain a narrative passé and unavoidable reconciliation, or could refeminization be another path toward women's self-empowerment through enclosure, moral self-reclamation,

religious abstinence, or domestic decision-making? As the chapters in this book display, the disguised heroines illustrated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's *tanci* works could choose refeminization out of a wide range of incentives. A heterosexual, "companionate" marriage is by no means the epitome of the heroine's romance. Chloë F. Starr observes that 才子佳人 (*caizi jiaren*, scholar and beauty) works emphasize the central role of the marriage plot and the narrative closure of a consummated marriage between the scholar and beauty (Starr 41). In women's *tanci* tales, if female cross-dressing is the narrative motor that drives the plot forward, the marriage plot, which is frequently a subplot inferior to the storyline about the heroine's adventure, often obstructs the exceptional heroine's upward social mobility, and often thwarts the plot in its forward-moving development, for the extraordinary heroine's ambition is the very fuel of the narrative in such tales. Chen Duansheng's *Destiny of Rebirth* comes to a non-closure when Meng Lijun 孟麗君, shocked by the exposure of her femininity and the dire prospect of returning to her fiancé in a polygamous marriage, spits blood and almost loses her life. In *A Tale of Vacuity*, the heroine Pei Zixiang, upon disclosure of her identity, refuses to take food for three days and shortly passes away. In these works, the narrative is driven by a female-oriented desire for individual autonomy and self-realization beyond the marriage paradigm; the return to marriage annuls the possibility of this feminine desire and thus brings the heroine's life (and the story itself) to an end. Lijun's condition of an imminent death and Zixiang's final moment of lingering life indicate such fictional moments of improbability, when the cross-dresser, at the exposure of her identity, suffers "a death-within-life" or strives for a "life-within-death." In some stories, such as *Dream, Image and Destiny* or *Affinity of a Golden Fish*, the assurance of immortality in the plot provides a temporary solution to this narrative dilemma, which ultimately indicates ideological constraints of women's prospects for individual achievements.

In this narrative milieu, the cross-dresser's refeminization bears more importance and complication than a mere gesture of reconciliation under social and familial influences. In Li Guiyu's *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, the amorous Mei Meixian 梅媚仙 discloses the concealed femininity of her beloved sworn sister, Gui Hengkui 桂恆魁, to the emperor, hoping that Hengkui could marry her original fiancé, Heng Binyu 恆斌玉, who has taken in Meixian as a wife. Meixian has been secretly hoping to maintain her intimate relationship with Hengkui under the disguise of a polygamous marriage. Hengkui's refeminization for Meixian ensures the realization and continuance of female same-sex love. In *Blossoms from the Brush*, as discussed above, Dehua's refeminization allows her to reconstruct a matricentric family, with her husband as a live-in son-in-law at her maternal family's house, and her son taking her surname and inheriting her royal title. In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, Qin Meng'e 秦夢娥, after returning to her feminine identity and becoming part of a polygamous

family, continues to exercise authority in governing domestic matters, promoting familial harmony and order, resolving conflicts between rivaling wives and concubines, and advising her impulsive husband, Qian Jingchun 錢景春, on conduct and behavior. In these examples, the heroines' refeminization creates new points of departure in the story and uncovers alternative possibilities in gender and power relations as the heroines reposition their lives and pursuits in the domestic realm. In some *tanci* tales, refeminization is even embraced by the disguised characters. In Zhu Suxian's *Linked Rings of Jade*, both the gentry heroine, Wang Xianxia 王仙霞, and the disguised concubine, Zhao Yuege 趙月哥, abandon their disguises and return to their feminine lives in polygamous marriages without any resistance. Despite their differences in social standing, both initially take to cross-dressing due to exigent circumstances rather than as a means of seeking individual freedom. Refeminization thus is a natural and voluntary choice rather than an act of reluctant conciliation under social pressure.

As discussed above, current studies on women's *tanci* fiction provide in-depth discussions on cross-dressing, heroines' imaginary voyages to immortality, and the predicaments of marriage and refeminization. Also, Ming Qing *tanci* works present rich and significant delineations of women's political passions and engagement. Building on these works, mainland Chinese author Wei Shuyun further suggests that women's political participation in *tanci* novels could be considered in two categories: characters who disguise themselves as men and participate in statecraft, and heroines who participate in political affairs while maintaining their feminine identity. The archetypal heroine in *tanci* novels is one who disguises herself as a man and acquires social privilege and political leadership by enacting a masculine identity. This constructed "masculinity" allows the heroine to gain access to the patrilineal familial and social system and obtain titles and officialdom that are traditionally only inherited by the male lineage. Well-known cross-dressed heroines who occupy positions of political eminence in *tanci* include Song Yu 宋玉 (Feng Xianzhu 馮仙珠), Li Junyu 酈君玉 (Meng Lijun), Gui Hengkui (Gui Bifang 桂碧芳), Gui Hengchao 桂恆超 (Mei Meixian), Zhu Yunping 竺雲屏 (Qian Shurong 錢淑容), Pei Zixiang (Zhao Huanxiang 趙浣香), and many others. These disguised heroines are often endorsed by the texts for their talent, valor, and loyalty in overseeing selections of scholars for officialdom, running the bureaucracy, advising the emperor, or even putting down rebellions and rescuing the emperor from political calamity. In exchange for declining or postponing their refeminization and marriage, these heroines only enjoy momentary, and limited, political agency within a confining male-dominated social environment.

The disguised heroine's femininity is often portrayed as a haunting predicament in the plot that poses constant challenges for the character as she combats pressure from her parents, siblings, or fiancé for her return to femininity, or elaborated schemes from the emperor to find out about her sexuality and make her a concubine. Such

tales, often suffering the inadvertent impossibility of women unifying personal ideals with grim social realities, may end with the heroine's compromise with her surroundings by refeminization and returning to a polygamous marriage, as in *Jade Bracelets* and *Blossoms from the Brush*. The challenge of refeminization for the disguised heroines includes the inevitable loss of certain political powers and authority, and acceptance of traditional confining feminine roles. Some stories choose to counteract this narrative impasse by arranging the heroine's death by suicide or illness upon the revelation of her true identity, as in the case of Li Junyu in Chen Duansheng's *Destiny of Rebirth*, and Pei Zixiang in Wang Oushang's *A Tale of Vacuity*.

Tanci tales depict women who participate in political affairs while maintaining their feminine identity. Among these heroines who are granted political influence, quite a few are previously cross-dressed characters who return to femininity, and, thanks to their achievements in defending the state and governing civil affairs, are exempt from punishment for deceiving the emperor, and even receive political privilege and eminence. In *Blossoms from the Brush*, after Jiang Dehua returns to her femininity and marries her fiancé, Wen Shaoxia, the emperor not only maintains her previous official rank but also awards her the title 靖國夫人 (Jingguo Furen, The Lady Who Pacifies the Nation) and the name 忠孝英烈女侯 (Zhongxiao Yinglie Nühou, Duchess of Loyalty, Filiality, Valor and Chastity), and recommends that her husband, Wen Shaoxia, who is appointed Prime Minister, seek the counsel of his wife. Even after her marriage, Dehua rescues the emperor from an uprising and is authorized by the emperor to manage governmental documents at her house. Another example is Gui Hengkui in *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, who is made a sovereign of the South Chu kingdom before she returns to femininity. After she marries her fiancé, Heng Bingyu, he is enthroned as the king of South Chu. However, Hengkui continues to govern the kingdom's political affairs.

Likewise, in *Phoenixes Flying Together*, the two cross-dressed heroines, Zhang Feixiang 張飛香 and He Danyan 何淡煙, display military and political talents in governing the Island of Three Immortals, making it a land as well-governed as the central kingdom. Aside from these exceptional heroines who directly participated in political matters, Wei Shuyun notes that some heroines in *tanci* play indirect yet crucial roles in the practice of statecraft (Wei 83). Wei discusses two prominent examples in this category. One is Zuo Yizhen 左儀貞 in *Heaven Rains Flowers*, who at thirteen starts to draft writings for her father and kept his letters and documents. Later she displays her valor and political passion in a planned assassination of the usurper Zheng Guotai 鄭國泰. Another example is Huangfu Feilong 皇甫飛龍, the daughter of Meng Lijun, in Hou Zhi's *Heroines in the Golden Chambers*. Unlike the chaste and loyal Zuo Yizhen, Feilong is an antiheroine who, after becoming a queen of the emperor, deploys her political ambition and resourcefulness to manipulate the court and

endanger the nation. After Feilong's death, a contrasting heroine in the book, Xiong Peiyu, another queen of the emperor, takes on the role of providing political advice to the emperor without surpassing her feminine role and is depicted in an affirmative light. Wei argues that Feilong's character displays the author's anxiety about the risks of women's political endeavors, although Hou Zhi does not directly oppose the heroines' participation in political affairs.

Wei's study on women's political participation in *tanci* fiction can be expanded by considering characters such as militant heroines in *tanci*, particularly female generals, soldiers, and strategists. Nicole Elizabeth Barnes argues that the story of Hua Mulan "possessed a specific expression to describe 'women who fulfilled their obligations to their ruler or kin with remarkable deeds in warfare': 巾幗英雄 (*jinguo yingxiong*, 'hero in a head kerchief')" (Barnes 146). Whereas the interpretation of the kin through the image of the nation as members of 國家 (*guojia*, nation-family) is rather modern, as Barnes correctly observes, early modern *tanci* fiction depicts a foreshadowing and richly historical narrative tradition of 家國 (*jiaguo*, family-nation), a political system guided by ethics and rites, and extends Confucian family values in its governmental operations. This early modern political imagery of the family-nation, as depicted in *tanci* fiction, allowed orthodox heroines to find extensions of their authority from the inner chambers to the social and political sphere by reinforcing or passionately expressing the cardinal virtues of filial piety or chastity.

Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee argues, "The convergence of three cultural imperatives—the familial virtue of filial piety, ancestor worship, and the continuity of the family line—work as a theoretical, ethical ground to justify and sustain social practices" (Rosenlee 152–53). Women's roles are largely relegated to filial daughters, chaste wives, and benevolent mothers, roles that "are for the sole purpose of perpetuating the patrilineal line." As a result, women are "deprived of the access to the *wai* realm of 文 (*wen*, culture) and 政 (*zheng*, governance), where one's literary talent has an explicit ethical, public use and where one's good name is passed on and remembered beyond the immediate familial realm" (153). However, Rosenlee argues that Confucian feminism allows "a practical ethic," which permits complementarity and reciprocity of 陰陽 (*yin-yang*) and 內外 (*nei-wai*), and opens some space for reconfiguration of the power dynamics in particular human relations (157). Whereas the hierarchical relation between a ruler and a minister is contractual, Rosenlee points out that the bond between a husband and a wife is personal and intimate, and is supposed to last for a lifetime. Once a woman gains full access to the social realm of a man, "the gender-based hierarchy in the husband-wife relation will lose its justification" (158). In other words, "once the gender-based division of labor is eradicated, women will no longer be confined to the limited realm of *nei*, and hence would also be able to achieve the highest cultural ideal of the *junzi*, who are not only ritually proper at home but also are fully

cultured, leading the masses by their virtuous example” (159). For Rosenlee, this dynamic nature in Confucianism could allow the endorsement and practice of women’s social and political ideals.

Rosenlee’s discussion of women’s status in the Confucian familial, kinship, and social relationships and their possibilities of negotiating for reciprocal agency and autonomy sheds new light on the current study of *tanci*. The plot of a female cross-dresser living life as a man offers an imaginary alternative to allow the fictional heroine to surpass the inner and outer divide and gain access to social and political power by enacting a disguised masculine identity. This temporary escape from the marriage regime, however, is often succeeded by an analogous and sometimes convoluted predicament: the hierarchical relationship between the ruler and minister. The disguised heroine, now having achieved a social esteem as a high official, often finds herself a victim of court politics, or even the prey of a possessive emperor who finds out about the disguised protagonist’s femininity. In *Destiny of Rebirth* and *A Tale of Vacuity*, at the revelation of the heroine’s true identity, the husband-wife relation and the ruler-minister hierarchy convolute, bringing fatal hazards to the protagonist’s situation. Meng Lijun is confronted with the dire fate of becoming the emperor’s concubine; Pei Zixiang is coerced by the emperor to become his secret mistress in exchange for continued officialdom under disguise. The narrative crisis and the afflicting status of uncertainty in the plot often cannot find a compromise between progressive anticipations and conservative social reality. The difficulty of reaching a narrative closure or finding a gratifying one in women’s *tanci* is illuminative of the ideological function of the novel itself. Michael McKeon argues that “the ideological function of the novel genre . . . lies in its capacity to not so much to ‘solve’ these problems as to demonstrate their analogous co-implications” (McKeon 357). Such irresolute themes reflecting the novel’s ideological conflicts also contain the question of virtue. In *tanci*, the cross-dresser’s moral challenge to observe her filial duties and maintain marital chastity collides with her personal ideals when living a life in disguise. This collision could alternatively lead to myriad plot alterations, such as substitute brides, mock unions between women, adoption of children to consolidate the cross-dresser’s fatherly role, direct denials of identity to the cross-dresser’s parents and fiancé, or secret compromises by finding surrogate wives and concubines for the fiancé, or foster daughters to complete the filial care for parents in place of the disguised and absent heroine.

Women’s participation in statecraft has traditionally been viewed as the origin of social chaos and political disorder. In 尚書 (*Shangshu, The Classic of History*), King Wu of Zhou accused King Zhou of Shang of following a woman’s advice, and said, “The ancients have said, ‘The hen does not announce the morning. The crowing of a hen in the morning (indicates) the subversion of the family.’ Now Shou, the king of Shang, follows only the words of his wife” (Trans. Legge, *Sacred Books Part I* 132).

Bret Hinsch notes that this passage associates the fall of the Zhou kingdom to influence by women in general, and thus “gave later writers grounds for alleging that a woman had a hand in the dynasty’s collapse” (Hinsch, *Women in Ancient China* 106). In 詩經 (*Shijing, Book of Odes*), King You of Zhou loses the kingdom, for “[Disorder] does not come down from heaven; It is produced by the woman” (Trans. Legge, *Chinese Classics* 169). The 國語 (*Guoyu, Discourses of the States*, fifth century BCE) insists that the fall of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties was all attributed to the malevolent influences of predating beauties. The female predator, Victoria B. Cass observes, is one of the extreme archetypes, “one of the regular dramatis personae in the accounts of empires. . . . She is the predictable cause of fin de siècle chaos, suitable for all dynasties. . . . The Dynastic Histories, the official compilations of Chinese history since the Han dynasty, stockpiled this stock character, labeling her with an unofficial yet official epithet: ‘state toppler’ (*qing guo*) or ‘city toppler’ (*qing cheng*)” (Cass 88). Such views of women as origins of 禍 (*huo*, disaster) for the state persisted into the Spring and Autumn Period. Chao Geng (2011) notes that in the Spring and Autumn Period, noble women were perceived as a threatening political power, partially because the existing political system of 家國同構 (*jiaguo tonggou*, family and state sharing the same structure) allowed aristocratic women’s political intervention, which inevitably disturbed the existing power hierarchies inside a political regime or family clan. In marriages forged as political and diplomatic alliances between states, elite women could become the force of disturbance and rupture in defending the political benefits of their maternal state, and thus cause conflicts with the masculine authority represented by the husband. However, in the ensuing Warring States period, the historical transition into the feudal system did not grant space for elite women’s political influence through their ruler-husbands. The prohibition of women’s participation in political affairs was thus reinforced.

Women’s *tanci* fiction provides an imagined realm in which the exceptional heroines could participate in the governance of state affairs and bring out social and political changes. Li Guiyu, author of *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, in exchanging thoughts with a female friend, commented on drawing inspirations from the national crisis of the mid and late Tang dynasty. “The inner court fell into chaos under the domination of depraved concubines; outside, laments and grievances were pervasive among the people. The state affairs almost ceased to function. Were it not for the rise of the South Chu kingdom, it would have been impossible to redress and support the decisions of policies, or find the ways to chase and arrest the infiltrators” (Chen Chousong 9). The storyline of Li’s *tanci* was grounded in this historical past and expresses the author’s strong anxiety and indignation about the endangered situation of the nation. The disguised heroine, Gui Hengkui, is endowed with the talent to redress political injustice and defend the nation, and she is also made a regional prince

of the South Chu State with the political authority to govern a state within a state. Bao Zhenpei observes that the plot arrangement of making Gui Hengkui a regional prince contradicts the ancient practice of forbidding women access to noble titles and allows the heroine limited autonomy to achieve political ideals and ambitions. The *Book of Rites* says, “Husband and wife ate, together of the same victim, thus declaring that they were of the same rank. Hence while the wife had (herself) no rank, she was held to be of the rank of her husband, and she took her seat according to the position belonging to him” (Trans. Legge, *Sacred Books Part IV* 441). The story, however, still confines her with the principal political virtue of loyalty to the central government. Bao Zhenpei insightfully notes that the heroine’s endeavors to govern the regional state enacts a Confucian political model of benevolent governance and elitist political practices (Bao, “Not the Quiet Woman” 41–48). The South Chu State under Gui’s governance is by no means a progressive political utopia, but rather a specimen of a feudal state striving toward the social ideal of modest prosperity and moderate affluence. Li Guiyu, in light of her heroines, who bravely pursue life as men’s social equals, describes them as “abandoning power and rouge at the dressing desk, picking up official robes and hats from the court” (Li Guiyu, “Self-Preface” 11). The heroine’s voyage from the inner chamber to the palace disrupts the ideological boundaries between gendered spheres and epitomizes a journey toward women’s social participation, or even political empowerment.

鳳雙飛 (*Fengshuangfei*, Phoenix Flying Together), another *tanci* work completed after the Taiping Rebellion in the late nineteenth century, illustrates the crisis of the late Qing empire through the political mayhem of the mid Ming. Bao observes that in contrast with the geopolitical descriptions of 番邦 (*fanbang*, barbarian states) and 中原 (*zhongyuan*, Central China) in earlier *tanci* works, such as *Jade Bracelets* and *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, this work deploys terms such as 外邦 (*wai bang*, foreign states) and 中華 (*zhonghua*, Chinese nation), evoking correlation with the historical era in which the author lives. The text’s depiction of the Tufan State’s rebellion in Guizhou, Bao holds, also could be related to the context of the Miao Uprising (1854–1873). Bao observes that the author makes a satirical comment on the impotent and servile late Qing government through the voice of a female Tufan general: “How laughable! In such a great Chinese empire, all of the civil officials and military generals lower their heads and hush their voices. No one dares to stand up to recover the lost states and towns. These people are the so-called men and women of China! They are no more than laughing-stocks for heroines and warriors from foreign lands” (Cheng Huiying 572; Bao, “Not the Quiet Woman” 45). This fin-de-siècle *tanci* convolutes the question of nation with its portrayal of a form of sexual politics through its depictions of male homosexuality, and displays a relentless position in exposing the collapse of the late Qing Confucian patriarchy and the model of the nation it strives to maintain.

Other nineteenth-century *tanci* authors articulated their yearning for gender equality. Sun Deying (孫德英, nineteenth century), the author of *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, eloquently voices her angst over prejudice against women: “. . . men and women are born the same, and should not be treated with differences. So strange that many in the world worry about having daughters, and only hope for giving birth to sons. It should be known that such thoughts are ignorant and unenlightened, for familial principles and grace should not be damaged” (1:1). These late-nineteenth-century *tanci* foreshadowed women’s gendered and political consciousness in response to social crises of their time. One of the most compelling examples of women’s representations of the nation-state in *tanci* is Qiu Jin’s *Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird*, which was composed on the eve of the Revolution of 1911. Qiu’s unfinished *tanci* depicts five adventurous and talented heroines who travel to Japan to receive a modern education. The leading heroine is Huang Jurui, who expresses her political ideal of rejuvenating a new nation-state. As Amy Dooling insightfully argues, Qiu’s *tanci* and other works of fiction during this time “undertake a far more complex negotiation of the problems of national and gender transformation than the prevailing hypothesis of feminism’s subordination to nationalist politics in the late Qing period” (Dooling 41). In these fin-de-siècle works, “the symbolic relocation of the heroine(s) from domestic spaces into the public realm is precipitated not by the national emergency but, crucially, by a crisis in the patriarchal family itself. The heroine’s transgression of conventional feminine roles is represented, accordingly, not as a temporary foray into forbidden male territory nor as an expanded enactment of feminine virtue, but as a result of dissatisfaction with the limits and liabilities of such roles (e.g., domestic confinement, arranged marriage, lifelong dependency on men) on the one hand, and desires for a wider range of opportunities for self-fulfillment (access to higher education, economic autonomy, unfettered public mobility, and romantic choice, for instance) on the other” (41).

In Qiu Jin’s *tanci*, Huang Jurui 黃鞠瑞 articulates progressive women’s strategic alliance with the patriotic passions in their pursuit of personal and political freedom through the voice of Queen Mother of the West, whose palace is illustrated as a utopian residence for historically acclaimed women and male national heroes. She dispatches male loyalists and female talents to the earth to rescue the nation from political calamity and “brighten a new world.”

I dispatch you all only
 To restore the order of our old homeland.
 Clear away the barbarian influence and stabilize the state;
 From the start, men and women should have equal rights.

(*QJ*, 130–31. Trans. by Lingzhen Wang, 57)

The protagonist Huang Jurui, who organizes other heroines together and helps them release their bound feet, enunciates her political passions as follows: “Stepping out of the confines, how heroic are women’s ambitions! / Travelling along a thousand *li* of the war frontier, riding the wind across ten thousand *li*. / People all look up to them; their learning from civilized nations must be successful. / In the future they shall return to support their homeland, and themselves act as the bell for freedom!” Echoing the patriotic heroine, the narrator laments women’s grievous lack of freedom in marriage and their sufferings in the patrilineal society and calls out for women’s self-strengthening and self-independence: “I wish that all my sisters seek self-reliance, and do not rely on men as backing powers.” Lingzhen Wang incisively points out that Huang Jurui is “a reincarnated, vindicated revolutionary heroine” created based on Qiu Jin’s personal adventures as she followed a political and social course. A “product of Qiu’s self-creation,” Huang “is spared the material/physical, emotional/psychological, and historical negotiations of self and identity, the negotiations that Qiu and other Chinese women of the time had to undergo” (Lingzhen Wang 59). The narrative framework of the *tanci* foreshadows the five heroines’ growth to become nationalist revolutionaries under Queen Mother of the West’s mandate, integrating the themes of women’s emancipation and the national rejuvenation through a traditional mythical narrative setting. The political vision of the story, as Lingzhen Wang puts it, is to depict “men and women finally fighting together against the Manchu government, and it ends with the successful restoration of the Han and the establishment of a republic” (Lingzhen Wang 58). This arrangement displays both a stylistic continuity with traditional *tanci* fiction and a reconfiguration to reinterpret the rebellious heroines’ destiny as vehicles of achieving greater social and political purposes beyond the inner chambers. Bao Zhenpei proposes that fin-de-siècle *tanci* joined the discourses of family-nation with progressive social trends that emphasize women’s independence. Their works present a historical continuity with Qing 女史 (*nǚshī*, that is, lady-scholar) traditions that endorse learned women’s power to wield impact and inscribe personal identity against a social and historical backdrop of chaos, trauma, and rupture. Bao’s interpretation, in short, emphasizes women’s protofeminist ideals within an extended Confucian political model of the family-nation.

Qiu Jin’s depiction of this group of adventurous heroines mirrors the first group of Chinese female overseas students in Japan, including Qiu Jin herself, who were socially and politically active when China’s national rejuvenation “became a national obsession,” as Joan Judge puts it. Nationalism was “the most powerful mobilizing idea at this historical juncture” but had not become “overdetermined by an imposing state ideology” (Judge, “Talent, Virtue, and the Nation” 766). This unique historical condition of fin-de-siècle China allowed Western-educated women activists a space to participate in the process of remaking nationhood as well as redefining the “Chinese national subject”

by including a new gendered dimension in the national ideals. Joan Judge observes that the centuries-long debate about female talent and virtue in dynastic China was also re-configured by the nationalist discourse in the early twentieth century. Judge argues that “while female talent and virtue were now both understood in relation to the nation, it was the publicness or privateness of this relation that generated the most controversy” (769). Among conservative and radical nationalist debates about how to position female talent in the private and public spheres, it was a “consensus that new female talents had to be cultivated in the age of nationalism” (769). For Qiu Jin and overseas female students, a woman’s private virtue could only gain relevance to the ideal of the nation through public display and expression. It is in this context that *tanci*, as a traditional vernacular genre widely enjoyed by female readers, became an ideal medium to disseminate new social, cultural, and political ideals and to play an instructive role in modernizing women’s learning. Qiu Jin’s transformation of traditional *tanci* fiction to facilitate new feminist ideals and to call for women’s political action was not a sole experiment of such commitments in early twentieth-century China.

Chapter 1, “Vernacular Literacy, Cross-Dressing, and Feminine Authority in Zhu Suxian’s *Yulianhuan* (*Linked Rings of Jade*),” explores *Linked Rings of Jade* (earliest edition prefaced 1805), which returns to the performed *tanci* tradition in its stylistic experiment and reclaims the importance of vernacular literacy in its implied readership. With dramatic archetypal role types, singing, spoken parts, and dialogues embedded in the text, Zhu’s work departs from other women’s *tanci* written for reading, highlights the crucial function of vernacular literacy, which is related to the genre’s root in oral traditions, and serves as inspiration for new aesthetic experiences of writing, performing, envisioning, and appreciating *tanci* tales. Zhu’s text refashions the Confucian family relations by illustrating the talented and resourceful heroines’ reclamation and reinforcement of female domestic authority. The novel reconfigures the shrew-taming plot by depicting a heroine’s delinquent husband as the male shrew, and the talented wife as a moral agent and the authority in redeeming family order and harmony. Also, the subplot of a cross-dressed concubine acting as an assisting agent in the heroine’s plan to tame her husband transforms the narrative tradition of cross-dressing. In other *tanci* works, cross-dressing is often a means for women to leave home and acquire temporary social agency in male disguise. In this text, instead, cross-dressing buttresses female authority in the inner chambers. Rather than rigidly casting the characters in archetypal roles, the text transfigures the polygamous marriage paradigm by illustrating multiple forms of desire and gender identifications, indicating that shifting positions of male and female could take place in characters’ interrelations without cross-dressing. The dialectic interaction between theatrical expression and fictional imagination signals stylistic experimentation and presents the author’s frequent negotiation with orthodox gender ideologies and strategic moral self-reinforcement.

Chapter 2, “Among Women: Feminine Homoeroticism in Li Guiyu’s *Liuhuameng* (*Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*),” studies female homoeroticism in *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* (1841). Earlier *tanci* novels feature the multivalent identities of a heroine disguised as a man and stage homoerotic sensibilities between the cross-dresser and unsuspecting women who mistake the heroine for a man. *Pomegranate Flowers* transforms this convention by portraying heroines who are aware of each other’s identity, and yet are engaged in homoerotic interactions, focusing on the love between two heroines who disguise themselves as men and address each other as brothers. Women’s friendship, mobilized by a storyline of male chivalry, renders same-sex dynamics in more socially acceptable forms. Specifically, feminine homoeroticism allows readers access to early modern women’s emotional worlds in the following aspects: (1) the dialectics between spiritual love and sexual desire; (2) the triangulated desire between women themselves and their husbands; and (3) in the case of multiple women who disguise themselves as men and address each other as brothers, the reconfiguration of brotherhood as a vehicle for women’s homosocial love. Also, women’s homoeroticism contributes to the early modern discourses of *qing* (情, love) and *se* (色, lust) by activating a dialogical imagination between the two and redefining both as women-oriented notions that at once transcend and reinforce the heteroerotic norm. By justifying chastity, filial piety, and polygamy, female same-sex desires are endorsed and gain status as normative sentiments. Whereas women’s homoeroticism could have existed in the heterosexual structures, this interstitiality projects an aesthetic of the in-between that is infused by negotiations between the private and the public and displays women’s transformations of the polygamous marriage institution through reconfiguration, deviation, or even provisional resistance.

Chapter 3, “Gender, Syncretism, and Female Exemplarity: Jin Fangquan’s *Qizhenzhuàn* (*A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*),” explores an 1861 text by E’Hu Yishi (鵝湖逸史, Leisurely Scholar by the Goose Lake), the artistic name of female writer Jin Fangquan. The sole copy of this *tanci* is a version hand-copied by multiple people and is preserved at Shanghai City Library. Jin’s work makes important contributions to the study of early modern women authors’ self-representations of female exemplarity because of its articulation of a syncretistic early modern femininity through the conceptual apparatus of Confucian familial and social discourses. Written at a time of turmoil, disorder, and exile, this work manifested contested ideals of femininity by reflecting and renovating orthodox discourses on women’s chastity, talent, and beauty, as well as moral and political integrity. Jin’s reflections on her identity as a war migrant, marked by a distinctive feminine perspective, provide a woman’s situated observations of social realities at a time of disturbance and political crisis, and this distinguishes her work from *tanci* writings before the Taiping Rebellion. Chastity, or particularly the cult of the faithful maiden, is represented as a supreme moral value that legitimizes the heroine’s

choice of an autonomous life beyond marriage and also allows the facilitation and reinforcement of orthodox passions such as filial piety, sibling love, and even political loyalty. The text's endorsement of feminine chastity and celibacy does not disclaim or undermine the legitimacy of *qing*, or emotions, in the novel's depiction of its heroine. The heroine is constantly engaged in a deliberation between earthly love and immortal pursuits, between marriage and Daoist pursuits. Lastly, the text's illustration of an early modern ideal of womanhood displays a syncretism of moral parameters underlying competing discourses of gender and femininity in a disquieting historical era.

Chapter 4, "Beyond Rouge and Powder': Rewriting Female Talent in Sun Deying's *Jinyuyuan* (Affinity of the Golden Fish)," studies Sun Deying's *Affinity of the Golden Fish* (*Jinyuyuan*, published in 1871), based on the study of a kerchief-box edition of the text at the Shanghai City Library. *Affinity of the Golden Fish* was published in an era of chaos and disorder shortly after the Taiping Rebellion. Against this social and historical milieu, the text takes a progressive stance in articulating women's gendered consciousness and their yearning for equality, education, and self-enlightenment. Sun Deying's text illustrates a group of learned women who, reminiscent of gentry women writers of this era, strategically align with and refashion a literati ideal of selfhood. The heroine Zhu Yunping's disguise as a talented Confucian scholar allows a kind of literary transvestism and gains her wide social approval. Ironically, in the story, Yunping's talent becomes the most effectual disguise that dispels others' suspicions of her femininity, because of the normative associations of literati learning and Confucian masculine identity. Also, Sun's text makes a revisionist presentation of the discursive paradigms of talent and virtue by illustrating filial and virtuous heroines who enhance their moral self-efficacy or even a degree of social power by putting their literary and artistic talent into practice. The text depicts a princess who composes a blood-written plea to the emperor to rescind a death sentence on her father. Such a passionate act of filial piety, reminiscent of Buddhist traditions of writing blood scriptures, expresses the heroine's spirit of self-sacrifice and filial piety. Simultaneously, the text transcends the established imagination of early modern learned women and female authorship and depicts within the story a wide array of minor heroines with exceptional talents in poetry, painting, language, music, theater, chess, divination, games, and even performed *tanci* storytelling. The *tanci*'s refashioning of women's talent indicates a vernacular ideal of feminine subjectivity that departs from the literati-feminine norm.

Chapter 5, "A New Romance of the Nation-State: On Wang Oushang's *Zixuji* (*A Tale of Vacuity*)," offers the first scholarly study in English on a seminal *tanci* novel (1883), recently discovered in mainland China and reprinted. In her authorial insertions, the author Wang Oushang depicts her experiences of witnessing the decline of the imperial regime under the threat of invading foreign powers, of her personal loss of family, and of exile at a time of social unrest during the Taiping Rebellion. To

address this historical context, the text reconfigures the legend of General Yue Fei (岳飛, 1103–1142) and his loyalty to the nation in an innovative tale about women's social and political activism. Aside from celebrating women as self-identified loyal citizens of the nation, the work strongly enacts the military romance convention in vernacular traditions by depicting the political mishap of the hero, who is dispatched to fight at the frontier and then suffers blasphemy and persecution from lascivious ministers. The author's adaptation of Yue Fei's story compares the aggrieved hero to the mistreated General Yue and opens up possibilities of reading embedded writings by the character as disrupting narratives about the nation-state. Also, the text illustrates a group of female soldiers and military officers who joined the battle against tyrannous court ministers to avenge their persecuted families and defend the nation. The story's emphasis on women's loyalty and passion for nationhood even outshines its plot of cross-dressing and disguise. Surpassing earlier *tanci* writings, which rely on extravagant depictions of magic and alchemy to rationalize women's exceptional power in the battlefields, *A Tale of Vacuity* encompasses a panorama of women collectively participating in warfare, governance, and statecraft, suggesting a fresh political imagination of women's agency at a time of national emergency.

Chapter One

VERNACULAR LITERACY, CROSS-DRESSING, AND FEMININE AUTHORITY IN ZHU SUXIAN'S *YULIANHUAN* (LINKED RINGS OF JADE)

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES Zhu Suxian's *Linked Rings of Jade* (earliest edition prefaced 1805), which takes an unconventional approach to the marriage plot by depicting cross-dressing as a means of restoring women's domestic power. Unlike other *tanci* written for reading, this text was composed to be performed and projects a readership characterized by their vernacular literacy. The author's targeted audiences are anticipated to be able to identify theatrical conventions and to formulate their reading experiences by connecting the text with its vernacular contexts. Zhu's return to the performed *tanci* tradition can be understood in an epochal context when publishers in cities of the lower Yangtze River Delta made efforts to appeal to non-elite readers through oral traditions. To start, the text invites a reconsideration of the Confucian family paradigm because of its depictions of women as agents of power in governing and restoring the paternal family system. Not only are young men's marriage choices subjected to their mothers' verdicts, but the wives hold domestic authority in managing property, selecting concubines, or admonishing the men of the house

when they deviate from the virtuous path. This work can lead to new interpretations in light of what Nancy Armstrong called the “feminine authority”—that is, to expand feminine authority, women had to “feminize whatever social role they successfully occupied” (Armstrong, “Postface” 402). The novel reconfigures the shrew-taming plot by depicting the heroine’s delinquent husband as the male shrew and the talented wife as the one exercising the power of a paternal authority. Third, the arrangement of the return of a cross-dressed heroine to play a masculine role in the household transforms the tradition of cross-dressing as a means of women acquiring temporary social agency in male disguise, as depicted in earlier *tanci*. In this text, women’s cross-dressing bolsters and fortifies the heroine’s authority in the inner chambers.

The synopsis of the story is as follows. The hero, Liang Qi 梁琪, is born into an official’s family in Suzhou city in south China. He is raised to be a scholar by a widowed mother and has a younger sister, Liang Hongzhi 梁紅芝. On the way to the capital city to attend the civil service exam, Liang Qi is summoned by his mentor, Xie Qingdao 謝清道, who is profoundly ill and asks Liang Qi to take his daughter Xie Huixin 謝蕙心 as a younger sister and take care of her. At home, a neighbor of the Liang family, Sun Lingyun 孫凌雲, who is the son of a prime minister, has repeatedly asked Hongzhi to marry him. Hongzhi’s mother, Madam Wang, has declined Lingyun’s proposal because of his lack of morals and learning. Seeing that Lingyun is frustrated by the Liang family’s rejection, Lingyun’s mother arranges for him to visit his aunt and court his beautiful and learned cousin Wang Wencai 王文彩 instead. Wang Wencai, whose alternative name is Xianxia 仙霞, is the daughter of Wang Tingzuo 王廷佐, who is on an official post at the provincial capital, away from his family. As the area is haunted by rebels and mobsters, Lingyun takes Wencai and his aunt to Suzhou, but unwittingly loses Wencai on the way. Meanwhile, Liang Qi is successful in his initial exam and gains a scholar’s title. He has previously been a student of Wang Tingzuo. A marriage has been arranged between Liang Qi and Xianxia, and Liang Qi has given Xianxia’s family a pair of linked rings of jade as a betrothal gift. On his way back after taking the exam, he passes by his mentor’s family and finds that Xie has passed away and his daughter Huixin has been abducted. Liang Qi rescues Huixin and takes her to rest at an ancient temple.

It happens that Wencai, who is lost from her family, is cross-dressing as a man and is hiding at the temple to rest. Wencai and Liang Qi become sworn brothers. Attracted by Wencai’s handsome looks and genteel manners, Liang Qi arranges for “him” to marry his adopted sister, Xie Huixin. The three return to Suzhou. Wencai visits her uncle Sun Chun’s family to reunite with her mother, returns to feminine attire, and tells her family of her encounters with Liang Qi and her “marriage” with Huixin. However, Sun Chun, concerned about propriety, insists that Wencai is now a girl and should not freely go to see Liang Qi and her “wife,” Huixin, anymore. Having waited for Wencai to

return in vain, Liang Qi visits the neighboring Sun family and learns of Wencai's true identity. Enchanted by her beautiful looks, he asks to marry Wencai. The Sun family, on the other hand, insists that Liang Qi's sister, Hongzhi, should be married to their son Lingyun first, as a precondition. Liang's mother, helpless, has to concede and accept Lingyun as a live-in son-in-law. Huixin discovers Wencai's true identity and is persuaded by Wencai to marry Liang Qi as a second wife.

The most striking part of the story is the family drama between the couple Hongzhi and Lingyun. After marrying to Lingyun, Hongzhi soon gives birth to a son. However, she is repeatedly frustrated in her efforts to persuade her indolent husband to study. Ignoring Hongzhi's plea, Lingyun frequents brothels and falls into the habit of gambling. Hongzhi finds a beautiful maiden, Zhao Yuege, as a concubine for Lingyun, hoping to draw him back to family. However, Lingyun has squandered a large portion of his inherited wealth and wants to sell off the land passed down in Hongzhi's family. Seeing that there is no way to persuade her husband to give up the plan, Hongzhi asks Yuege to dress up as a man with the name of Zhao Xuzhai, entrusts her own dowry and jewelry to her, and asks Yuege to pretend to be a buyer to purchase the land. The unsuspecting Lingyun obtains a sizeable fortune but soon spends it all, and even goes to the extent of attempting to sell his wife. Enraged by her husband's hopelessness, Hongzhi pretends to marry the disguised Zhao Xuzhai. Just as before, Lingyun quickly spends all the money gained from selling his wife and can no longer find any place to live. Zhao Xuzhai takes him in as a house servant and renames him 悔初 (Huichu, meaning "regret the past"). When Huichu at first still attempts to gamble, Xuzhai punishes him with the house rules and flogs him. Later, Lingyun transforms in character and learns to focus on reading. He gains a scholar's title, obtains Hongzhi's forgiveness, and takes in Yuege as a concubine.

This *tanci* story, in comparison with earlier *tanci* novels, takes an unconventional approach to the understandings of marriage customs and transforms cross-dressing conventions as a means of restoring domestic order. The melodramatic depictions of Liang Hongzhi setting up plans to educate and reform her delinquent husband, Sun Lingyun, endorses the heroine's status as the actual agent of educating and reforming the husband. The text goes into great detailed depictions of minor characters. The housemaid Zhang Pingping 張瓶瓶, for example, serves as an indispensable agent in helping the enamored Liang Qi gain the hand of her abstinent lady, Wang Wencai. A daughter of two servants at the Liang's home, Pingping is herself an elevated character, displaying female chastity when later she becomes a concubine of Liang Qi's and is offended by the reckless flirtations of Lingyun. These plot arrangements imply that in the domestic sphere, a certain degree of freedom and space of agency are given to female minor characters. In her study of this *tanci* work, Hu Siao-chen considers a minor character an alcoholic Madam Liang, who relies on drunkenness to relieve herself

of worries as well as to “provide a good excuse for her shrewish behavior and playful attitude” (Hu, “Unorthodox Female Figures” 316). This alcoholic mother could serve not only as comic relief in the plot, but also as proof that matriarchs of the family are given more personal freedom. Such characters, Hu Siao-chen argues, highlight the necessity to evaluate *Linked Rings* “for its exceptionally ‘untamed’ nature, so seldom seen in writings by traditional women” (318). In comparison with the rich and diversified depictions of many female characters, the fathers of the main characters are often notably absent. First, the hero Liang Qi’s father is deceased, leaving the marriage arrangements for Liang Qi and his sister Liang Hongzhi as the sole decision of their mother. Similarly, the father of the heroine Xiahou Shuxiu 夏侯淑秀, though a powerful official, is absent from home when Shuxiu’s mother, Madam Liang, goes ahead and makes the arrangements of marrying their daughter to the poor scholar Liang Ziwen 梁子文, illustrating strong evidence of matriarchal power in the absence of paternal power. Likewise, Ziwen’s stepmother, an antiheroine, is given a great deal of authority in arranging Ziwen’s marriage when the hero’s father travels away from home to an official post. The absence of the paternal figure is further reinforced when Liang Hongzhi pretends to marry the disguised Zhao Xuzhai 趙勛齋 and takes in her former husband as a house servant. Xuzhai, a woman herself, becomes the substitute “father” of Hongzhi’s son, whereas the repentant Lingyun could not openly display his fatherly bond with his own son because of his degraded status. In these circumstances, women could be participatory and even play decisive roles in domestic matters, displaying the potential for domestic drama as the dominant scenes in which traditional women could negotiate for familial authority and governance.

TEXTUALIZED *TANCI* FOR FEMALE PERFORMANCE

Little is known about the author Zhu Suxian, who carries an artistic name of Yunjian nüshi (雲間女史, Lady from Yunjian), and was allegedly from Songjiang (松江), which is part of today’s Shanghai city. The author lists sixteen plot elements of popular fiction that she tried to avoid. They include men dressing up as women; secret vows of marriage; premarital sex; elopement of adulterous women; widows losing their chastity; robbery and murder; imprisonment; murder for political motives; secret conspiracy with foreign countries; obsequious flattery of the powerful; instruction in the methods of the immortals; evil depravity of ghosts and monsters; plots hatched by monks and priests; prognostic dreams; burglary and theft; and abduction and forced marriage (Hu, “Unorthodox Female Figures” 1). *Linked Rings*, also known as 鍾情傳 (*Zhongqing zhuan*, A Tale of Concentrated Love), has a preface by Yuting Zhuren

雨亭主人, dated 1805. Yuting Zhuren observes that after the death of Zhu, “How could it be that for more than ten years, there was only I myself who could enjoy the pleasure of appreciating this work, with no one else to share it with?” (Yuting Zhuren, “Preface” 1a). Given that the preface was dated 1805, Tan Zhengbi proposes the hypothesis that the death of Zhu should be near the end of Emperor Qianlong’s reign, around 1795. As the preface described Zhu’s time of composing the novel at an elderly age, Zhu should have had a relatively long life and could have been born in the earlier years during Emperor Qianlong’s reign (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 256). Sheng Zhimei alludes to a preface to 繪真記 (*Huizhenji*, Illustration of an Immortal), allegedly composed by Zhu Suxian, which indicated that Zhu composed her *tanci* at a younger age and gained wide readership. If this preface was indeed composed by Zhu herself, she would have been born at a much earlier period (Sheng 64). However, Bao Zhenpei, argues that such a hypothesis is not convincing, because the authorship of Zhu Suxian for *Huizhenji* remains largely controversial (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 260). *Huizhenji* was published under the artistic name of Yaoyuelou Zhuren 邀月樓主人 in 1812. The end of the aforementioned preface that was attributed to Zhu Suxian states, “prefaced with a toast at Yaoyue Lou.” According to Yuting Zhuren, Zhu Suxian could have been deceased for more than ten years by now, and could not have composed this preface at the invitation of Yaoyuelou Zhuren at such a later time. Not to mention that the assumption that Zhu achieved early fame as an author contradicts the preface by Yuting Zhuren. A description of Lady Zhu is included in Yuting Zhuren’s preface:

Lady Zhu from Yunjian was born to a poor family and was widowed when still young. She had a virtuous character and was addicted to study; exceptionally erudite, she annotated the *Changes* and excelled in the writing of poems and rhapsodies. In her later years, she became fond of the plucking rhymes of blind performers, and would regularly invite sister Xiang Jin from Taicang to strum and sing all kinds of tales. She would say to people: “When you listen to their notes, their lovely sounds are enough to stop the floating of the clouds, but when you consider their words, they are not sufficient to correct and rectify lascivious evil. These tales can only amuse the ears of worldly folks; they are incapable of pleasing those with more perceptive vision.” She then composed *Linked Rings*, which is also titled *A Tale of Concentrated Love*, and taught Xiang to sing it. . . . Some years later, Lady Zhu and Xiang Jin died one after the other, and the sounds and rhymes of *Linked Rings* disappeared together with them. Alas! Why did *Linked Rings* have to suffer such a fate? Fortunately, one of her relatives, Mr. Wu, took the manuscript and gave it to me. I was fond of it when I saw it, and therefore copied it and often chanted the text while I lay on a pillow in the depth of green shade. Before finishing three stanzas, I

felt that the emotions of sorrow and happiness, as well as the appearance of attractiveness and beauty, were completely presented to me between my eyebrows and eyelashes. . . . It so happened that my friend Jin Buyun visited me from Puweng village to the north of Hengshan, and I showed him my transcribed copy of *A Tale of Concentrated Love*. We sat down, read together, appreciating and complimenting it until we nearly missed bedtime and forgot to take meals. Others all laughed at us and called us eccentric. . . . Therefore, I put it to print, desiring to share it with those in the world who can understand. I desire to share it with those in the world who can understand! I did this so that *Linked Rings* will not be wronged, and it will enjoy the luck of having fans from later generations of the world. (Yuting Zhuren, "Preface," 1a–2b; trans. Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush* 730; also see Hu Siao-chen, "Unorthodox Female Figures" 312–13)

Yuting Zhuren's preface, in addition to providing biographical information about Zhu Suxian, invites an engaged study of the interrelations between women audiences, folk singing and music, and literary *tanci*'s roots in vernacular performances. Earlier reputed *tanci* authors such as Qiu Xinru and Zheng Danruo considered performed *tanci* or 盲詞 (*mangci*, plucking rhymes by blind performers) as a less refined genre for audiences of lower social class and little learning. The preface author articulates a similar opinion by allegedly quoting from Zhu Suxian that such songs "can only amuse the ears of worldly folks, they are incapable of pleasing those with more perceptive vision" (Yuting Zhuren 1a–2b; trans. Idema and Grant 730). However, the preface puts a stronger emphasis on the aesthetic value of performed *tanci* that produces "lovely sounds [that] are enough to stop the floating of the clouds" (Yuting Zhuren 1a–2b; trans. Idema and Grant 730). Melodies of *tanci* mediate and embody the friendship between Sister Xiang Jin and Zhu Suxian. In comparison with the common understanding that literary *tanci* came into being through evolvement from performed *tanci* tales, this preface calls attention to the intricate and multidirectional adaptations of performance and textualization.

First, women's performed *tanci*, as described in the case of Sister Xiang Jin 項金, is an important and common folk practice of vernacularizing historical legends and stories for less educated audiences. Second, after completing *Linked Rings*, Zhu Suxian deploys the textualized *tanci* to teach Xiang Jin to sing the story, and was both audience and critic of Xiang Jin's singing. This scenario is a significant case of women artist's adaptation of textualized *tanci* for performance. In such a light, Zhu's rigorous and consistent adaptation of the dramatic modes bespeaks an experiment of writing for performance, and particularly, for women's *tanci* performance. This adaptation of *Linked Rings* in female singing performance invites ruminations about the correlation between female friendship and artistic coauthorship. Such performance of the tale took place in the

inner chambers for a selected women audience. Zhu and Xiang Jin were family relatives. However, the performed *Linked Rings*, its splendor richly illustrated in Yuting Zhuren's depictions, is forever lost after the death of Zhu Suxian and Xiang Jin. The current text that is put into print went through Yuting Zhuren's handcopying based on a manuscript of *Zhongqing Zhuan* passed to him by a relative of Zhu's Mr. Wu. It was read and appreciated by Yuting Zhuren and his friend Jin Buyun 金步雲, and Yuting's publication of the text allowed broader readership of the tale. It was unclear whether Yuting Zhuren transcribed the text based on his hearing of the performance of the tale by Sister Xiang Jin herself, or by anyone else. However, based on the circumstances described in the preface, the tunes of the performed tale *Linked Rings* were lost after the death of Xiang Jin and Zhu Suxian, indicating no other venues in which the tune was sung.

Hu Siao-chen's chapter "Unorthodox Female Figures in Zhu Suxian's *Linked Rings of Jade*" opens up spaces for further explorations. The dramatic stylistic features, which are much removed or absent in other textualized *tanci* fiction, have been kept throughout in this work, creating a hybrid and dynamic reading experience. Hu points out that *Linked Rings* surpasses other *tanci* works because of its deployment of a kind of narration that frequently alternates with dramatic mode. Hu observes that the text marks out role types such as 正生 (*zhengsheng*, male lead), 小生 (*xiaosheng*, young male), 正旦 (*zhengdan*, female lead), 作旦 (*zuodan*, young and boyish female), 花旦 (*huadan*, young female), and 小旦 (*xiaodan*, secondary young female), in addition to tune titles such as 箭腔 (*Jianqiang*), 江兒水 (*Jiang'ershui*), 園林好 (*Yuanlinhao*), and 點絳脣 (*Dianjiangchun*) (Hu 314). Hu argues that such "formulaic characteristics" display the author's conscious exploration of a vernacular style in writing *tanci* that departs from elite *tanci* works. Moreover, thanks to the work's uniquely theatrical form, the minor characters in this *tanci* are given a broad hybridity encompassing the traditional dramatic roles such as those of *huadan*, 老旦 (*laodan*, old lady), 醜 (*chou*, clown), and others. Besides conventional dramatic tunes, the text resorts to popular vernacular tunes such as 小調 (*xiaodiao*, little tune). In *juan* 4, the hero Liang Qi is attacked by a woman leading a group of mountain rebels. Seeing the handsome Liang, the antiheroine attempts to seduce him into surrender. The conversation between the two is rendered through the comical *xiaodiao* to indicate the heroine's low level of literacy, as follows.

Woman: [Small tune]

My son, with your blushing cheeks you are as beautiful as a lotus flower;
 Your mother me is fragile like a swaying willow tree in wind.
 What a good-looking pair. Aiyo! What a good-looking pair!
 Today let your mother take you to the mountains,
 You will earn a better living as a bandit than a scholar.
 Quick, come along.

[Speaking] In my tower there are yellow gold, white silver, glittering houses, and beautiful lassies.

[Tune] Delicious and flavorsome wine in giant bowls, rare flowers in the garden for you to pluck as you like. Jolly, jolly you shall be, you slow-minded scholar. (4.27:5–6)

This above example, with a mixture of spoken parts and singing parts in folk tunes, illustrates the character of a bandit matriarch with humor and liveliness, whose singing tunes contrast with the elevated literati tunes of the leading hero and heroines, and credits the values of folk melodies.

Besides achieving the effect of oral performance through reading, dramatic modes transform fictional conventions of characterization. Characters in this work know theatrical conventions by heart, and in several episodes, enact theatrical performance and impersonation as a leisure activity. There are rich theatrical allusions in the characters' conversations to display their vernacular literacy. Sun Lingyun has a distant male relative Yao Er 姚二 who is a skillful opera performer and appears in the role of "clown" in the story (5:37). Hoping to tease the bookish scholar Liang Ziwen 梁子文, Lingyun prods Yao Er into making Ziwen rehearse 串戲文 (*chuan xiwen*, singing a role in opera for fun).

[Hero] Which play do you want me to play?

[Clown] En, can you play Zhou Ruilong in the *chuanqi Searching for a Parent* [sing] who is insulted at school and loses his bag.

[Hero speaking] I have long been a grown-up and do not have the child-like look of this character.

[Clown] Well then, could you play Liu Mengmei in *The Peony Pavilion* [Sing] who picks up a painting and calls for Liniang by his desk?

[Hero speaking] I do not have a lover, and how could I make up such a voice?

[Clown] Well then, could you (play the amorous Lu Bu) [Sing] who throws away his spear and teases Diao Chan in *The Phoenix Pavilion*?

[Hero speaking] I am a scholar, and how could I assume the air of a general?

[Clown] Well then, could you play [Sing] the scholar Pan Bizheng who steals poems to know the beautiful Chen Miaochang?

[Hero speaking] I am an honest gentleman, and how could I have such an enamored attitude?

[Clown] Well then, Second Brother, you can sing [Sing] the upright and loving *Tale of the West Pagoda*, and act as the infatuated Yu Shuye visiting the singsong girl Mu Suhui.

[Hero speaking] I am a poor scholar; how could I have gold and silver to please a courtesan? (5.37:6–7)

Plays that were alluded to here include 尋親記 (*Xunqin ji*, Searching for a Parent), 牡丹亭 (*Mudan ting*, *The Peony Pavilion*), 鳳儀亭 (*Fengyi ting*, The Phoenix Pavilion), 玉簪記 (*Yuzan ji*, Tale of Jade Hairpin), and 西樓記 (*Xilou ji*, The West Pagoda). Other than Zhou Ruilong 周瑞隆, who is a filial son searching for his father in North Song, the other characters are all theatrical examples of love companions, including the amorous South Song scholar Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅 and the reincarnated heroine Du Liniang 杜麗娘, the impulsive general Lu Bu (呂布, 161–199) and the legendary beauty Diao Chan 貂蟬, the Ming scholar Pan Bizheng 潘必正 and a talented nun Chen Miaochang 陳妙常. This comical scene, teamed with these theatrical allusions, gradually leads to the tale of a Ming literatus Yu Shuye 于叔夜 and the courtesan Mu Suhui 穆素徽. Feeling amused and absurd, Liang Ziwen finally is made to agree to act the role of Yu Shuye, with the “clown” Yao Er impersonating the role of Suhui. However, this theatrical cross-dressing fails to create homoerotic attraction, rather leading to a farcical effect: Yao Er, who is hoping to seduce the handsome Liang Ziwen and take him to the brothels, is ridiculed for his unattractive looks by Ziwen. In the end Ziwen returns to his studio, whereas the frivolous Lingyun is hooked and follows Yao Er secretly to visit a brothel house. Importantly, this conversation between the “clown” Yao Er and the scholar Liang Ziwen alludes to main theatrical conventions that were influential for the development of late imperial *caizi jiarren* fiction. In comparison with the “clown” whose speech is blended with frolicsome singing, the scholar Ziwen always answers in spoken parts to reject the clown’s cheeky suggestions. Intriguingly, despite this stern posture, Ziwen possesses capacious knowledge of the suggested plays. This example suggests the popularity of vernacular theatre in the literati community.

The author’s endorsement of theatrical traditions provides an intriguing case in which vernacular literacy is given much respect and esteem, rather than being considered as inferior to the understanding of literacy as conventionally related to literati life and cultures. Paul S. Ropp observes that “given the difficulties of romantic love and companionate marriages in Ming-Qing society, and the easily disappointed hopes for high family status and security that female literacy might foster, it is not surprising that some authors expressed ambivalence toward the value of literacy itself for women” (Ropp, “Love, Literacy, and Laments” 122). Stylistically, *Linked Rings*, though containing ample narratives written in polished poetic lines, emphasizes vernacular literacy through panoramic characterization of secular civilians, minor characters, and lower-class people. In comparison with *Jade Bracelets* and *Destiny of Rebirth*, the story does not illustrate female literacy as a means for a cross-dressed heroine to pass the civil service exam and gain social and political roles equal to a man’s. Instead, the leading heroine Liang Hongzhi employs her intelligence to guide her husband Lingyun in learning, and later to reform him after a moral calamity. Whereas male characters Liang

Qi, Liang Ziwen, and the reformed Sun Lingyun all gain social rank and official posts as literati scholars and governmental ministers, women's literacy does not serve as an unconventional instrument for them to leave the inner chambers, but demonstrates their competence and aptitude to govern the domestic sphere as wives.

In contrast to this conservative stance to women's literacy, the novel offers an affirmative view on vernacular literacy through the depiction of a range of minor characters, both men and women, who are well-versed in folk narrative and performance traditions. The female bandit leader and the "clown" Yao Er are compelling examples. The prevalent adaptation of the dramatic modes in this text projects a readership characterized by their vernacular literacy, that is, the author's targeted readers are able to identify such theatrical roles, conventions, allusions, and plot arrangements, and formulate their reading experiences by connecting the text with its vernacular contexts.

Cynthia Brokaw, in "Publishing and Popular Literature in Imperial China," insightfully argues, "A great boom in commercial publishing, begun in the mid-16th century, marks the second great age of print in pre-modern China. It spurred the publication of ever-greater numbers of texts—in an ever-greater number of genres—and the distribution of texts to ever broader audiences, both geographically and socially" (Brokaw, "Publishing and Popular Literature"). The publication books in the late imperial period, besides leading to rising literacy from the late Ming to the high Qing, promoted greater diversification in audience and significant growth in the production of popular literature. In Brokaw's view, such diversification in readership is presented in the book production activities of these centuries when publishers made efforts in popularizing literature and catered to audiences of limited literacy through crafting various editions of fictional and dramatic texts. Zhu Suxian's return to the performed *tanci* tradition in stylistic experiment with *tanci* could be understood in this epochal milieu when publishers in cities of the lower Yangtze Delta took efforts to appeal to non-elite readers, very often through regional oral traditions and popular literature.

Bao Zhenpei proposes that *Linked Rings* departs from the mainstream *tanci* works written in the form of prosimetrical fiction, but returns to the original form of performed *tanci* songs as their main narrative modes. Zhu's novel, consisting of seventy-six chapters, uses "二言目" (*Eryan mu*), the dramatic form two-character chapter titles, in its chapter layout. The narration includes spoken and singing parts, as well as specified dramatic roles, in addition to heterodiegetic narration by a fictional "storyteller," very much akin to a storyteller's performance script. Bao calls the form of this kind of *tanci* fiction "彈詞原始體" (*tanci yuanshi ti*), that is, the original style of performed *tanci* (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 257). Zhu Suxian's artistic choice in composing this unconventional *tanci* novel might be attributed to her initial encounter with performed *tanci* songs, as Wilt Idema and Beata Grant insightfully point out (Idema and Grant 729–30). Hu Siao-chen suggests that Zhu's *Linked Rings* was composed at around the

same time as the famous *tanci* author Chen Duansheng was writing *Destiny of Rebirth* (Hu, “Unorthodox Female Figures” 313). Most well-known *tanci* novels were published and circulated after 1820. In this light, Hu suggests that it is very unlikely for Zhu to have read any of the *tanci* novels, or to have been influenced by them. Instead, Hu suggests, *Linked Rings of Jade* represents an earlier and relatively rare form of *tanci* novel, which did not continue to develop as a branch in the *tanci* genre.

The above discussion invites a reconsideration of vernacular literacy as presented in written *tanci* works. Anne Elizabeth McLaren notes that traditionally “only literacy in the classical language was regarded as true literacy and the proper object of reading was the Confucian canon, the books which ‘do not penetrate.’ ‘True’ literacy (*dushu*) meant the ability to master an archaic syntax remote from the spoken word and to meditate on the profound truths encapsulated in the classics of antiquity. By contrast, the ability to comprehend metrical vernacular texts was simply regarded as a skill in recitation based on auditory memory of past performances” (McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture* 76). McLaren rightly suggests that this common perception by literati scholars neglected chantefable narratives that carried rich references to “the rituals, stock material and culture lore of oral transmission; to an entire oral frame of reference with its own ‘truths’ and uncanonical interpretations of Confucian values” (76). Building on McLaren’s study, I argue that chantefable narratives represent a vital vehicle and embodiment of early modern vernacular literacy. A major difference between early chantefables and later vernacular fiction is “the absence in reference of a narrator or storyteller (*shuobuadi*)” (265). As McLaren argues, “chantefable rhetoric is consistent with that of texts where the reader is the ‘storyteller,’ another indication that the reader is meant to vocalize the text. As well, the rhetoric of the chantefables, unlike that of the vernacular stories, does not include any audience response. In chantefables, but not vernacular fiction, audience response is necessarily outside the text” (265).

Zhu Suxian’s *Linked Rings of Jade*, in sum, provides an important case for the study of early modern Chinese vernacular literacy. As Robert Hegel states, “highly literate members of the social elite who acknowledged their role in the production of vernacular fiction were usually writing specifically for their peers. . . . Literati novels are generally distinguishable by certain obtrusive literary conventions and by the relative complexity of motivations they attribute to their characters” (Hegel 126). From mid Qing to late Qing, written *tanci* texts by gentry women authors gradually departed from the oral traditions of performed *tanci* storytelling and catered to communities of literary readers. Zhu’s specific text, in contrast, accommodates a blended readership that consists of diverse social grounds and audiences of different levels of literacy. By recouping the importance of vernacular literacy in its readership, Zhu’s work offers an innovative take in the development of *tanci* fiction. As McLaren states, “the use of the orally derived material, with its characteristic repetition and formulicity, ‘conditioned

reading' by continually referring the reader/reciter and the audience to the familiar performance speech of the oral milieu" (McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture* 70). Dramatic stylistic conventions embedded in the text indicate an implied audience's community that include the cultural elite and the literate non-elite, an imagined audience characterized by a vernacular cultural literacy and familiarity with theatrical verses and generic conventions.

In the context of early modern English and French literature, Margaret W. Ferguson observes that literacy could be considered as "a site of social contest, of complex negotiations (including deceptive ones) among those who produce signs, those who receive them, and/or those who attempt to govern or limit the boundaries of what may be produced, interpreted, or even thought" (Ferguson 73). The rise of vernacular literacy in literary production, Ferguson suggests, could have signaled a "transition from medieval to early modern social formations" (73). In the Ming and Qing Chinese context in which education and literacy were shaped by the official ideologies of Confucianism, the rise of vernacular literacy in chantefable texts and performance-based narratives allowed readers of low levels of learning and humble social status to access literature and enjoy reading. During the mid to late Qing, the proliferations of performed narratives such as drum ballads, *tanci*, *baojuan* (precious rolls), and the Manchurian 子弟書 (*zidishu*, bannerman tales) affirm the increasing importance of vernacular literacy, and the blended popular audiences it signifies beyond the community of gentry-scholar readers.

REVISIONING THE "TALENTED BEAUTY" CONVENTION

Similar to other female *tanci* authors who address their literary talent in authorial insertions, Zhu occasionally offers glimpses of self-reflection in her work. She was born in a rather poor family, was orphaned at a very young age, and was later widowed. Hu Siao-chen suggests that such a humble social rank perhaps might have allowed Zhu to have more interactions with female *tanci* singers (Hu, "Unorthodox Female Figures" 313). According to Yuting Zhuren's preface, Zhu "was addicted to study; extremely erudite, she annotated the *Changes* and excelled in the writing of poems and rhapsodies" (Yuting Zhuren, "Preface" 1a; trans. Idema and Grant, *Red Brush* 730). At the end of the last chapter, Zhu composes a poem with a self-image, which goes as follows: "The author was born in a peasant's family, / her unrefined words and untrimmed diction carry many small flaws. / If there are yet unconventional events, / she shall resume this tale at the leisure times aside from farming" (8:18, 47). This short poem provides an image of the author as a female peasant, who is very different from the images of

gentry women authors of later *tanci* novels. Despite this humble family background, this female author has a similar pleasure and confidence in her literary authorship like other women writers. At the beginning of chapter 46, she composes a short *ci* poem to deliver such sentiments: “Leisurely in heart, / devoted in feelings, / aimlessly I completed *Linked Rings of Jade*, / even the white clouds find it difficult to answer my song in the same tune” (8:46, 1).

The heroines’ literary activities, though often constrained to the inner chambers, are abundant and offer precious glimpses into late imperial women’s reading and writing endeavors before and after marriage. After being married to Sun Lingyun, Liang Hongzhi acts as a teacher to her indolent husband who loathes learning. She takes Lingyun to her childhood studio, hoping to persuade him into taking up reading, in the name of making him accompany her in study.

[Young and boyish female] Now I have my husband you as my companion in study,
it is as if
[Sing] The Princess Nongyu in the Qin palace accompanied by her husband Xiao Shi,
The couple playing *sheng* and *xiao* in a joint tune
You shall take to literature; I shall read history. (3:25, 60)

The erudite Hongzhi, depicted as a mentor of her husband and as illustrated in the chapter title, utilizes her knowledge to “規夫” (*guifu*, reform the husband). This scene foreshadows a later part of the story when she takes a stricter measure to instruct her husband in moral behavior and pursuit of official posts.

Another heroine Huixin has been married to the disguised Wang Wencai by Liang Qi. When Liang Qi discovers that Wencai is actually a woman, he attempts to persuade Huixin to give up waiting for her “husband” Wencai. However, Huixin refuses to believe him and is determined to stay chaste and await her “husband’s” return. The cross-dressed Wencai, to persuade “his” infatuated “wife” Xie Huixin to accept the fact that “he” is a woman, writes her a solemn and formal letter to awaken Huixin from her fascinations. Unlike most of the text’s narrative in seven-character rhymed lines, this letter is written in classic prose:

When I received your letter just now, it was as if I have seen and heard you in person. I deeply understand that my sister you are melancholy in your embroidered room, and ill in bed. Knowing this, each inch of my heart splits in pain. I was planning to come to you and take care of you in person, to comfort your feelings after our separation. Yet with a bed-ridden parent, I had to serve my mother meals and medicine, and could not even stop and leave for a moment. Hence the only thing I

could do is to shed tears and think of you. The matter of cross-dressing is far from whimsical. It was done purely to avoid chaos when travelling. As to our marriage arrangement, I also did not treat it as a joke, but agreed to it because I had no other options. How could I have expected that you have taken the disguised as the real, and are determined to stay chaste for your “husband” and achieve your own aspiration. Unable to change the fake husband with a real one, I shall not become your beloved companion. This is indeed a true regret. *The Book of Rites* says, “when a daughter is born, what is desired for her is that she may have a husband.” How would one take a feigned situation as real, and allow a youthful and beautiful maiden to hold onto her chastity and remain at her maternal house, and live the rest of her life alone in the name of shielding her chastity? Is this your intention after all? How could I fathom my own guilt in ensuing this outcome? Bright and genteel, you may become a leading gentry lady. Mr. Liang is good-looking and talented. If he indeed becomes a first scholar in the Civil Service exam, I wish to become the Goddess of Yinyun and make the beauty a match to a gifted scholar. In this way you two shall be an exceptional couple of all times, and tie a knot of marriage on top of kinship. Do you see this arrangement as agreeable? If you could be so benevolent as to accept this marriage, Wencai is truly fortunate, and so is Huixin. To my dear sister Lady Xie, Xianxia Wang Wencai gives a solemn and respectful bow. (3:18, 22–23)

The Goddess of 氤氲 (*Yinyun*) is said to be the deity who is in charge of marriage. Scholar Tao Gu (陶穀, 903–970) observes, “The marriage of *yin* and *yang* of the people in the world, is all under the governance of the Qianquan si Unit, led by the Envoy of Yinyun” (Tao 1:32). Throughout the work, this passage is the only writing by Wang Wencai. It was composed in very polished formal prose in an evidently feminine tone, to decline the affection of the amorous Huixin and reclaim her own decision to return to a female identity. The speaker meticulously moderates the emotional distance between her and the passionate Huixin, first by using her mother’s illness and her own filial duties as a reason for not visiting Huixin in person, and then by explaining that her true reason for cross-dressing is to protect her chastity when traveling at a time of disorder and turmoil. Afterward, alluding to *Mencius*, the didactic speaker reifies the orthodox male and female gender roles and affirms the authority of the marriage institution. Through the voice of this character, the text indicates a departure from the cross-dressing convention in traditional *tanci* in which a cross-dressed heroine decides to take the risk living as a man’s social equal; and a woman married to the cross-dresser in a mock union stays chaste and resists marriage to a man. This letter describes such choices as unrealistic and morally imperfect for a virtuous woman. For Wencai, she, a cross-dressed “husband,” could not be the true “鍾情” (*zhongqing*) or “concentrated love” for Huixin. To divert Huixin’s attention, Wang ventures to take the role of a

go-between person and tries to persuade Huixin to marry her own fiancé Liang Qi. In this way, both women could be happily married. The letter in its style and voice speaks for an orthodox image of a lady in the boudoir, with whom Wencai chooses to identify.

A second reading of these last few lines, however, indicates that only by both women marrying Liang Qi could the two sisters find a shared happiness and reunite with each other. The context for this suggestion is as follows. When the lovesick Huixin pleads for Wencai to visit her, Wencai, who resumes her female identity, finds it impossible to revisit Huixin, who lives at the house of Wencai's fiancé Liang Qi as Liang's sister. Formerly a "husband" of Huixin's and a brother of Liang's, she finds both of her roles unreasoned and against propriety. Liang's mother, seeing that Huixin is losing her life over lovesickness, hastens to invite Wencai and explains that if Wencai marries Liang Qi as arranged, and Huixin is taken in as a concubine, both women will find a solution to their predicament. Such plot development resonates with earlier *tanci* such as *Jade Bracelets*, with the cross-dressed heroine, her "wife," and several other heroines marrying the hero in a polygamous marriage. Another dimension of understanding the characters' relationship is to envision Liang Qi's love bonds with Wencai and Huixin akin to the image of "linked rings," which emblematically suggests a polygamous relationship between the three (3:19, 26). Liang's mother, who proposes for the two to marry Liang together, likens Wang and Xie to Empresses E'Huang 娥皇 and Nüying 女英, the daughters of Emperor Yao who were married to Emperor Shun and were depicted as exemplary virtuous women.

The exchange of these two letters between Xie Huixin and Wang Wencai uncovers complex dynamics in the early modern female epistolary world. Ill in bed, Huixin asks her erudite sister Liang Hongzhi to compose a letter inviting Wencai to visit the family. To make sure that this letter, expressing Xie's longing to see her "husband," is not stolen and read by an unintended audience, Liang Qi is summoned to deliver the letter personally to Wencai. As aforementioned, Huixin had been taken in by Liang Qi as a young adopted sister, after her father passed away in illness. Liang's mother planned on having both Wencai and Huixin marry Liang Qi, to replace the relationships of the three with a polygamous marriage. Huixin's relationship with Liang Qi, at this point in the story, is between that of a young sister and a possible future wife. Hence it will be fitting for Liang Qi's considerate sister Hongzhi to compose the letter on behalf of Huixin, so that Huixin's confessions of affection for a former "husband" Wencai are not directly in contact with her future husband Liang Qi. Amused by Huixin's love for a woman, Liang Qi jokes, "How laughable, the heart of the Goddess in the legendary Mount Wu falls for a female King Qingxiang of Chu. Silly is that Lady Wang, who could not appear in the dream of Gaotang, and goes so far as to make Liu Chen replace Ruan Zhao" (3:49). This passage alludes to King of Chu's erotic dream encounter with a mountain goddess at Gaotang

高唐, where a shrine was built to commemorate the king's romance with the divine woman. Later when King Qingxiang of Chu (楚頃襄王, 293–263 BCE) visited the site with his favored poet Song Yu (ca. 298–222 BCE), Song composes the famous 高唐賦 (*Gaotang fu*, *Rhapsody of Gaotang*) to depict this romantic legend. Thanks to Song Yu's beautifully composed prose, King Qingxiang also dreamed of having a romantic encounter with the female deity himself (Fan Jeremy Zhang, 115–51). Paul F. Rouzer offers a nuanced reading of *Rhapsody* and observes that the image of the female deity, as described in the prose, is mediated through the poem's author who at times invites the readers to the same position of the “voyeuristic but impotent royalty” (Rouzer 65). Rouzer argues that the woman's image is ultimately indescribable and suggests women as elusive subjects “outside literary language and its role in the dynamics of power” (69). Here, comparing the amorous Huixin to the mountain goddess who visits King of Chu in a romantic dream, Liang refers to the disguised Wencai as a female King Qingxiang of Chu, who could not accept such tender solicitation, because she is a woman after all. The last line addresses his own relationship with Wang. The allusion to the encounter of Liu Chen 劉晨 and Ruan Zhao 阮肇 with the female immortals at Mount Tiantai 天台 is evoked, with Liu Lang 劉郎 referring to a male lover, and Ruan Lang 阮郎 referring to a man who has tied the knot with a beauty in marriage. Liang is comparing himself to Liu Lang (as Wang Wencai's own fiancé), summoned to replace the cross-dressed Wang Wencai, or Ruan Lang, who is formerly married to Huixin, and hopes to take in Huixin as a wife.

Regarding women's literacy, another heroine Xiahou Shuxiu articulates women's desire for learning and reading despite strict family constraint of women's literary activities. In Juan 5, chapter 39, Xiahou Shuhua joins her young female relatives in the Liang family on a family visit. She first describes the Liang house as a poetic scene, “Indeed the house is like scenery in the poems of Han Yu, and people are akin to those in the paintings by Wang Wei” (5:39, 14). Her female cousins and in-laws are not only exceptional in beauty and manner, but also “outstanding at painting and poetry, their tunes surpass all others among their female peers” (5:39, 15). Not only are the ladies well versed, even Zhang Pingping, a former housemaid, now a concubine of Liang Qi's, excels in music and plays the musical instrument 簫 (*xiao*) beautifully. In comparison, Shuhua laments the lack of tolerance for women's learning at her home. The text is characterized by a blended style with rhymed seven-character and ten-character rhymed lines, and interspersed spoken parts and singing lines.

想奴家啊，[唱]自幼身拘官署中，閨帷深鎖似雕籠。幼年時學堂苦被先生束，到如今老母朝朝又課繡工。好教我春日不知花爛漫，到秋來隔簾偷望月玲瓏。匣中又少有奇書閱，[白]欲待作句詩兒，莫說爹爹母親見責，就是[唱]旁邊乳母也不相容。說什麼，女孩兒莫學聯詩句，又道

是筆墨研心要損玉容。[白]那知這里嫂嫂姊姊們，那個不吟詩句？那個不閱傳奇？[唱]何曾損了紅顏貌，又那見他一吟一咏就喪閨風？(5:39, 13)

In reflection of my life, [Sing] Since my childhood I was confined at my father's official mansion, and locked up in the inner chambers, as if living in an embellished cage. Today, my aged mother presses me on practicing embroidery day by day, making me unaware of the beauty of the blossoming spring flowers. When autumn comes, I could only steal glimpses of the fine moon across the curtain. My drawers lack stimulating books for reading. [Spoken parts] If I ever want to compose a line of poetry, not only would I be scolded by my parents, [Sing] even the nanny would not allow it. She would say, a girl should not learn to write poetry, and that, brush and ink grind on one's heart and damage one's fine looks. [Spoken parts] How could they know that my female siblings and sisters-in-law all chant poems and read chuanqi stories, [Sing] They did not lose their beautiful looks at all, nor have I ever seen them trespass women's propriety by merely reading and reciting lines.

The better tolerance for women's literacy at the Liang's house is perhaps due to the early death of Liang Qi's father. Liang's mother is in sole governance of a large and well-off household, and she even succeeds in taking in Sun Lingyun, the son of a prime minister, as an in-house son-in-law, which was rather uncommon. The central theme in this passage is the paradox of women's beauty and talent. As critics have observed, women poets "benefited from the power of example: women of later dynasties could look back to predecessor poets whose fame hinged largely on them being women," such as Ban jiejiao (班婕妤, 48–6 BCE), Cai Yan (蔡琰, second to third century), and Xie Daoyun (謝道韞, active in late fourth century) (Chang et al. 5). "Palace and court life, as well as the protocols of the entertainment quarters, created opportunities for the composition of poetry and rewarded women for learning and wit" (4). Such development of women's verbal art leads to the birth of a new poetic mode, that is, song lyrics or *ci* poetry. Subsequently, following *shi* and *ci* poetry, women's writing tradition unraveled when the following requisites came into being: "a well-marked social function, a group of stylistic and personal models (providing opportunities for creative historical or ethical role-playing), and contexts in which the display of talent was permissible and might eventually become truly public" (Chang et al. 5). Whereas some Ming Qing women wrote out of isolation, others received support of brothers, family relatives, female friends and mentors, or even male mentors. In *Linked Rings*, the presence of many educated heroines, such as Liang Hongzhi, Wang Wencai, Xie Huixin, and Xiahou Shuhua, indicates greater tolerance for women's literary activities in families with sympathetic parents and siblings. Women's literary talent, as in the case of Wang Wencai and Liang Hongzhi, is deemed by their future family-in-law as a virtuous asset as significant as their physical beauty.

Zhu Suxian endorses women's education as one of the feminine virtues to assist them in governing the domestic sphere. Her text elevates the importance of women's family education, and disagrees with the ostensible paradox between talent and feminine virtue.

RECONFIGURING THE CONFUCIAN FAMILY ORDER

The emblematic title *Linked Rings of Jade* foreshadows intriguing reconfigurations of the Confucian familial order in the characters' relations in the story. As Patricia Sieber insightfully observes, Confucian families are "not simply a collective of normative dyads (father/son, elder brother/younger brother, husband/wife, ruler/minister, friend/friend), but are depicted as force fields of circulation, enclavement, and diversion that cut across heteroerotic and homoerotic commitments and involve intrafamilial and extrafamilial networks" (Sieber, "Commentary on Queer Renditions"). In light of women's written *tanci* as a whole, the shared narrative convention among many works of heroines who cross-dress to flee from family calamity project the imaginary of the early modern woman being freed from her family and joining one of higher social standing. Often such reconfiguration of the Confucian polygamous family in *tanci* fiction consists of women's mock unions between the female cross-dresser and "his" understanding wife, who is often a sworn sister or understanding friend, and who also finds the private agreement of a female-female marriage conducive to her purposes of sustaining celibacy or pursuing religious practices. In such cases, female same-sex relationships could displace the sexual contract underlying the marriage contract. In *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* and *Blossoms from the Brush*, the husbands are envious of the bonds between the cross-dresser and her companion. The texts stage a rivalry between women's homoerotic bonds and heterosexual marriage, which intervenes and problematizes the sexual contract underlying the social contract of the polygamy. Rich depictions of female homoeroticism in works about multiple heroines who dress themselves as men also expand on the female-centered homoerotic reinscription of male homosociability, as heroines, under their male disguise, enact and perform a form of "brotherhood" in the social sphere. Also, in quite a few nineteenth-century *tanci* works, the plot emphasis shifts from the refeminization of the cross-dresser and her turn to the polygamous family structure to more open and transcendental closures beyond marriage.

The text's endeavors to reconfigure the Confucian familial relations could be understood in the following aspects. First, the plot stages women characters as the main agents of power in governing, restoring, and consolidating the Confucian family system. Not only are young men's marriage choices subjected to their mothers' decisions, the wives in the stories hold such authority in managing family property, drawing

support from affluent maternal families, selecting concubines for their husbands, or even admonishing the man of the house when he transgresses moral boundaries or deviates from the virtuous path. The story could be considered in light of what Nancy Armstrong called the “feminine authority,” (Armstrong, “Postface” 402). She argues, “Although concerned mainly with the vicissitudes of courtship and marriage, and fictional courtship and marriage at that, fiction that represented gender from this gendered viewpoint exerted a form of political authority” (Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* 30). In Victorian novels, sometimes the intensive competition between masculine and feminine authority seems so strong that “the traditional exchange between the sexes seems to exhaust the male and render him passive” (Armstrong, “The Rise of Feminine Authority” 143). In some other cases, “the dynamics of sexual relations are such that the female gains power only by redeeming the male, not by directly pursuing her own salvation” (144). Resonant to Armstrong’s observation, Martin W. Huang, regarding 痴婆子傳 (*Chipozi zhuan*, Biography of a Foolish Woman, sixteenth century) and 燈草和尚 (*Dengcao heshang*, The Candlewick Monk, early Qing), argues that “feminine authority” is reflected in these two erotic texts as they represent women not as “objects of desire” but as “desiring subjects” (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 135). Women-authored *tanci* reverberate with nineteenth-century British women’s fiction in reconfiguring power within the paternal familial system, recentring social authority to grant women temporary degrees of freedom, or envisioning a new social order “on a personal and emotional scale” through stories of love and marriage.

The text depicts feminine domestic power through a tale of Liang Hongzhi transforming the husband by feigning a marriage with the disguised woman Zhao Yuege, who, ironically, has been picked by Hongzhi as her husband’s concubine. The feigned marriage between Hongzhi and the cross-dressed Yuege allows a temporary reversal of gender roles, granting the heroines the authority of instructing or even punishing the husband in the name of moral transformation. For another example, in a subplot a scholar named Liang Ziwen, a cousin of Liang Qi, has suffered his stepmother’s dominance and abuse in livelihood and marriage choices, while his father serves on an official post in a remote province. He is betrothed to Xiahou Shuxiu, the daughter of a provincial governor. Shuxiu’s father disapproves of the poor scholar Liang Ziwen, and he forces the couple to separate. It is with the assistance of Shuxiu’s mother that the two are finally able to tie the marriage knot. Shuxiu’s father attempts to force his daughter to marry a minister’s son. Shuxiu falls seriously ill. To protect Shuxiu’s engagement with Liang Ziwen, Shuxiu’s mother first plots to feign her daughter’s death, and when her plan is exposed, she sends Shuxiu to a Daoist convent to recover from her illness and wait for Liang Ziwen’s return from his trip to take the civil exam. Liang Ziwen eventually gains a title of a Juren in the civil service exam, and finds Shuxiu in the convent by chance. The two are happily reunited.

Second, the battle between female and male authority in the household transforms the gender and power interplay in a female-oriented shrew-taming narrative convention. Among male authors, depictions of the female shrew could be considered in two aspects: one is 妒婦 (*dufu*) or jealous wives, and the other is fierce and dominating women, 悍婦 (*hanfu*). Scholars have noted the large number of depictions of violent or aggressive women in Ming Qing literature, largely caused by the unequally distributed power in the polygamous marriage (Chen Yongchao 109–15). Keith McMahon observes that in the Ming and Qing dynasties, numerous plays and quite a few novels and vernacular stories are devoted to the shrew, particularly 潑婦 (*po fu*) or *hanfu* (McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists* 58). Yenna Wu writes in “The Inversion of Marital Hierarchy” that it is in the seventeenth century that the shrew turns from being a subject of joke and anecdote to being that of extensive comedy and satire in the form of fiction and drama. Male depictions of female shrew characterize what Elaine Showalter calls the misogyny of literary practice, that is, “the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from history” (Showalter 5). Chen Yongchao argues that the image of the virulent women bears the following characteristics. First, she is unable to give birth to children, or a family heir. Second, she would be the source of disorder and chaos in the principal familial relationships, by acting disrespectfully and transgressively to the parents-in-law, as well as the husband’s siblings and friends.

Chen incisively argues that images of the female shrew in fourteenth- to seventeenth-century European literature, as portrayed in works by Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Shakespeare, embody the social and historical transition toward an early modern Europe. Images of the early modern female shrew bespeak the epochal transition from the old to the new, and the disruption and reiteration of reigning social and ideological boundaries. The rise of the image of the female shrew in early modern Europe, Chen argues, could be compared to the proliferation of similar images of female shrews with the rise of vernacular narratives in Yuan and Ming dynasties in the Chinese context. However, Chen argues that depictions of early modern female shrews in the European contexts in the aforementioned authors’ works displayed the impact and creation of the humanist elite writers and expressed optimistic outlooks of social transitions. Similar depictions of female shrews in vernacular Chinese literatures, however, articulate an assiduous anxiety about negotiating for personal autonomy in the presence of orthodox insistence on role conformity in light of filial piety, family order, chastity, and virtue.

Chen argues that the taming of the female shrew, or particularly “fierce women,” comprises several approaches: (1) moral transformation through persistent persuasion and benevolent action, such as in the tale 療妒緣 (*Liaodu yuan*, *The Cure for*

Jealousy); (2) forceful oppression and punishment, such as in the case of Xue Sujie 薛素姐 in *醒世姻緣傳* (*Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, *Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World*); (3) punishment by resorting to supernatural forces such as fox immortals, ghosts, or Buddhist karma and reincarnation, such as in 馬介甫 (*Ma Jiefu*) and 江城 (*Jiang Cheng*). These examples invariably depict the cruelty and misdemeanors of tempestuous women to an excessive extent, and foreground a male-oriented voyeuristic pleasure in pejorative depictions of abject femininity. Whereas the husbands in such domestic dramas are often timid, weak, or impotent in comparison with their domineering wives, the texts often counterbalance the offset gender and power relationship by utilizing some orthodox or exemplary feminine characters as vehicles of instruction, persuasion, or transformation, reinforcing the didactic impulse of the narrative.

Keith McMahon insightfully argues in *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists* that “In the shrew story, the woman’s goal is to wrest power back from the man and make him monogamous”; however, “the shrew stories never portray a reversed world female supremacy” (McMahon 65). He continues, “The power of the woman’s threat survives to the extent that men feel the need to maintain an air of propriety and keep secret their sexual interest in women, not to mention any hint of their own sexual inadequacy. As the logic of the shrew story implies, while the man may use the treatise or other means to increase the ‘quantity’ of women with whom he has intercourse, the ‘qualitative’ advantage belongs to the woman—just as the arts erotica implies in terms of the woman’s advantage in pleasure” (65). The shrew-taming narrative convention could be traced in women-authored *tanci* works in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as *Affinity of the Golden Fish* and *Blossoms from the Brush*, as well as *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*. In these texts, a heroine, often a cross-dresser who is refeminized and returns to a polygamous marriage, would exercise her wisdom and power in governing the domestic sphere, mediate between conflicting or rivaling concubines, or educate the rapacious and disobedient concubines. In such battles of wits and wills, often the morally superior heroines triumph. These women-authored *tanci* novels transform the literati shrew-taming depictions by making women the agents and means in regulating and domesticating the shrew, thus endorsing feminine virtue through the actions of the heroines. *Linked Rings of Jade* offers a rather rare plotline by depicting the delinquent husband Sun Lingyun as the male shrew, and the talented and virtuous wife Liang Hongzhi as the one exercising the power of a paternal authority. The text affirms Hongzhi’s moral righteousness and allows her to articulate her own moral ambitions:

I, Liang Hongzhi, [Sing] am an exceptional woman and uphold rituals and propriety; nothing can move my steadfast heart. Not to mention that I am not really in a dire situation; even when I am confronted with supreme danger, I would not change

my chastity. [Speaking] He went so far as to ask me to marry another man! How agonizing, [Sing] a thousand kinds of anger rise to my eyebrows, I would rather end my life with a three-foot silk cloth. [Speak] *Ya cui!* How heedless I am! How could one live a life of anonymity and ordinariness? I shall make achievements as to upturn heaven and earth, and make my name known to many. Only then can I die without regret. [Sing] I shall cherish myself first. Why should I waste efforts and wage anger on a senseless man? If I let him go on by his will, what is false might risk becoming real. [Speak] Why don't I meet his plot with another plot, and tell him that I shall marry Mr. Zhang. Once he obtains the money, what would he care about my outcome? [Sing] By that time, I and my sister shall command this house, [Speak] which would be a place of pureness and tranquility when rid of him. [Sing] Let him go to the extent of having not a roof over his head, and being driven to the very end of his means. Only then he might return to the righteous path, and repay my feelings and affections for him in the last three years. (7:63, 40–41)

The novel's revisionist approach to the shrew narrative, which is more than a simple exchange of the male and female gender roles, could be considered in the following aspects. To begin with, the heroine Liang Hongzhi differs from the jealous and virulent wives in suppressing concubines and maintaining a monogamous relationship with the husband. Rather, she is the one selecting Zhao Yuege as a concubine for the husband, as a means of reining in her husband's amoral conduct. Female jealousy is absent. Instead, the heroine appropriates and builds on the institution of the polygamous marriage to harness a misbehaving and drifting husband and reinforce her domestic authority. Second, a gentry woman and born into an affluent family, Hongzhi is in charge of a large dowry that not only makes her economically superior, but also in full charge of the family land property. As her husband squanders away their belongings in gambling houses and brothels, she quickly makes arrangements to protect family land by asking Yuege to be a potential buyer of the fields and of herself when Sun Lingyun goes to the extreme extent of selling all the family properties and even his own wife. Not only does she foresee the calamity of being sold by Lingyun to another man, but she utilizes Yuege to maneuver the negotiations between the two about the sale of the wife and land. In this case, Hongzhi's authority within the household is supported by her natal family's influence, her own economic power, as well as her own wisdom in managing and protecting property ownership. By so doing Hongzhi's taming of the husband not only vindicates her own rights as a neglected and betrayed wife, but also represents a reconfigured gendered economy of virtue. This gendered economy of virtue underlying Hongzhi's stratagem of disciplining the husband is morally, financially, and emotionally justified, rewarding, and self-empowering. When the desperate Lingyun, with no means of supporting himself, ultimately sells himself back

to Hongzhi as a servant in his former house, he becomes keenly jealous of Hongzhi's new husband (the disguised Yuege), and he is grief-stricken when he realizes that he is no longer the father to his own son. As a house servant, he is flogged for engaging in petty gambling, and thoroughly disciplined in behavior under the supervision of Hongzhi's "husband." Because the new "husband" is a cross-dressed woman who eventually will be married to the house as a concubine, Hongzhi's scheme also protects her own chastity, and is ultimately justified in light of endorsing and consolidating a polygamous marriage structure.

Although Yuege's access to paternal authority is temporary, the narrative's arrangement for the return of the cross-dressed heroine to play a masculine role in the house innovates the plot in *tanci* fiction featuring female cross-dressing as a means of enacting masculine roles outside the inner chambers. In this text, women's cross-dressing, rather than merely substituting femininity with gendered performance in male disguise, is appropriated to bolster and fortify the heroine's status *in* the inner chambers. Yuege, who takes on the name of Zhao Xuzhai, forges a sisterhood with Liang Hongzhi, and is entrusted by Hongzhi to take on full control of family property. To prevent Lingyun from habitual gambling, when Lingyun comes to "him" to secretly sell family property, Xuzhai would give Lingyun rice and firewood in exchange, instead of money. Xuzhai endorses Hongzhi's virtue as follows:

[Introduction: the young *dan*] I left the inner chambers, not because I receive too much fondness; without affinity in love, I have to desert the boudoir. [Speaking] My name is Zhao Yuege, pseudo name Xuzhai. Since I was married into the Sun family, I haven't even met my husband even once. Thanks to the benevolent care of Mrs. Sun, who called me as her sister, I was entrusted with her full family fortune. Since I took up this task, I have committed my whole heart to it. How pitiful that Mrs. Sun and her son had to take shelter in this humble abode, and suffer from lonesomeness and wretchedness. [Singing] I often ponder on myself, how virtuous she is, being willing to live a life of thornwood hairpins and hemp skirt, like Liang Hong's humble wife. Declining a life of comfort for one of bitterness, she lodges in a thatched hut, and willingly endures cold rain and piercing wind. She wishes that the husband could change his character and become an upright person; for three years her whole heart has been devoted to this purpose. [Speaking] For long I have been married into the family, but have never heard [Sing] the husband and wife spend a moment together. [Speaking] I resent the delinquent man, [Sing] for his sheer ineptness in love, sagacity, and intellect. [Speaking] Were he the husband for myself Zhao Xuzhai, it would be better that I never meet him for the rest of my life. If there is a time of meeting him, I shall first [Sing] give him thirty beatings for his lack of affection, [Speaking] then ask him, [Sing] whether he should cast aside his wife who has shared his hard lot with him. (7:62, 35)

In this example, Yuege's soliloquy is presented in blended speech (unrhymed, short spoken parts) and singing (consisting of rhymed seven-character lines). As Yuege affirms, Hongzhi's act of instructing the husband through the assistance of the disguised concubine presents a case of gendered economy of virtue. Maram Epstein points out, "Women's domestic power, rather than subvert the family, helps maintain a stable hierarchical order with clear lines of authority" ("Turning the Authorial Table" 179). By gendered economy of virtue, this study considers the role of women as moralizing agents in the domestic realm in *tanci* fiction. Hongzhi's virtuous feminine disposition as well as her emphasis on *qing* (feelings) and conjugal love justifies her command over the husband. Conversely, by instructing and morally converting the husband, Hongzhi saves herself from the destitute situation of becoming an abandoned and divorced wife, who might become vulnerable to the exterior accusation of moral insufficiency, or fall victim to sexual exploitation, or coercive treatment in transaction. Rather, by maneuvering the very process of wife-selling, Hongzhi accomplishes self-endorsement of her virtue, and by marrying a female "husband" and reestablishing a household of her own, temporarily removes Lingyun's paternal authority in the name of redeeming the husband's moral integrity. In this staged "transaction," Hongzhi succeeds in gaining back her dowry and family land, regaining her husband's love and dedication, and protecting her chastity and virtue. Feminine virtue becomes self-rewarding by endorsing the heroine's domestic authority, but also proves to be a key cause to redeem the delinquent Lingyun's virtue and transform him into an industrious Confucian scholar who, after passing the civil exam and obtaining an official post, can make steady provisions for the family.

Third, Zhu's *tanci* portrays a wide array of minor heroines with complexity and depth, rendering them important roles in interacting with and facilitating familial bonds and domestic power relations. Zhang Pingping, a daughter of Liang Qi's house servant Zhang Neng, is given consistent illustration throughout the story and plays instrumental roles in helping Liang Qi tie the knot with his fiancée, Wang Wencai. When Wang Wencai initially returns to her uncle's house and is not allowed to visit the Liang family's house, she and her mother happen to rent a cottage owned by the Liang family. Liang Qi secretly sends Pingping as maid for Wencai and her mother. Very much akin to the role of the compassionate and clever 紅娘 (Hongniang, Red Maid) in 西廂記 (*Xixiangji, Story of the Western Chamber*), Pingping helps to create opportunity for the betrothed couple to meet. In chapter 23, before Liang Qi departs to attend the civil service exam, he hopes to meet his fiancée and confess his affections for her. Yet Wencai is determined to avoid any opportunity of seeing Liang before a formal marriage. Although Liang has taken the oath of being "his" brother when she is disguised, he is after all her future husband. The exasperated Liang Qi follows Wencai's maid Pingping and sneaks into the inner boudoir, in order to meet with his beloved (3:23, 50). Just as she is marvelous at creating the opportunity for the couple to meet,

the astute Pingping, in a timely interruption, recalls Liang Qi and halts his romantic deliberations when he is on the verge of giving in to his passion. In this scene, Liang Qi's soliloquy, expressing his amorous ruse, are in rhymed verse. Pingping's speech, by contrast, is short and unrhymed.

[Sing] I turn my eyes, and gaze at the beauty. Her cheeks blushing, her eyes darting charm. How could I control my passion? If these private words are uttered in low voice, it is only because the studio is exceedingly quiet. The square bed is solitary and lonesome, cherished indeed is my darling. I was about to say . . .

[Ping speaks] My lord, Madam Liang's banquet just ends.

[Scholar] Ya! [Sing] Unfinished is my confession of love, and now this urge to leave my beloved. (3:23, 50)

In the earlier part, Pingping's function as an observant and ingenuous maid is crucial in maintaining the bonds of affection between Liang and Wang, and yet also in artfully moderating such *qing* within the boundaries of propriety. Thanks to her ingenuity in maintaining such boundaries underlying the domestic order of the Liang family's household, and yet facilitating communications of the lovebirds with adroitness, she receives the moral reward and is elevated from a chambermaid to the status of a concubine. Hsieh Bao Hua rightly argues that a maid turned concubine "was always inferior to her mistress, and in many cases had qualms about stripping off her former servile identity" (Hsieh 102). Some maids turned concubine remained subordinate in attitude; others displayed shrewdness in search for conflicts. However, in the case of Pingping, she is depicted with much sympathy and mercy, though direct illustrations of her are scant. The text foreshadows her exceptional aptitude by endorsing her talent in music. When Wencai could not visit Liang Qi because of her mother's illness, the hero is suffering from lovesickness. His housemaid Pingping quietly comforts him by playing the flute.

Suddenly someone is heard playing flute, the wind carrying over melodies to the melancholy scholar. Liang Qi once again opens the door of his studio and looks out. [Speaking] It turns out that Pingping did not go to bed. [Sing] Playing with her flute, she leans by the rails and appreciates the moonlit night. Liang Qi stands by the door and does not speak. The maid looks back at her master. He lowers his eyes and gazes at the poems on his fan, while listening to the flute. She with her slender fingers, opens her mouth and displays her fine talents. Across a window, another maid calls in a hushed voice.

[Wei speaks] Sister Zhang, how wonderful your flute sounds!

[Sing] Pingping smiles and halts the flute. The scholar then closes the door, removes his robe and goes to rest. (3:17, 14)

This scene depicts subtle and intriguing interactions between Liang Qi and his maid Pingping. Whereas the maid is not to intercede and probe into Liang Qi's preoccupations, she resorts to her skill of playing flute to comfort the master. Attracted by the melody, Liang Qi walks out of the studio to a sight of the maid playing flute in moonlight, with Pingping leaning on the rail. In this scene Pingping appears almost as a gentry woman in Liang's gaze, making him lower head and shift his eyes to the poems on his fan, while listening to the flute all the more attentively. The young and unashamed maid even looks back, while displaying her art in playing the flute. The tranquil and expressive dynamic between the two is suddenly disrupted by another maid by a window, who in a hushed voice compliments Pingping for the beautiful sound of the flute. This disturbance leads to a chuckle from Pingping; the bemused scholar closes the door and goes back to bed. Intriguingly, this episode displays an embedded visual and auditory framework. Just like the nonchalant scholar, the readers are lured by the melodies to a scene of the refined maid playing flute in moonlight. The text takes a reverse look along with Pingping's gaze, presenting Liang Qi avoiding meeting her gazes while enchanted by her tune. The harmony is disrupted by another maid's unwitting compliment, suggesting the two are under the gaze of another behind a window curtain. The free-spirited Pingping dispels the awkwardness with a chuckle, whereas the reticent Liang Qi retreats to his studio. The chambermaids find the exterior space in the household a relatively freer sphere in which to express themselves, whereas the scholar appears to be confined to the studio and by the boundaries between master and servant in his interaction with the maids. The interaction between Pingping and Liang Qi indicates affections between the two and suggests Pingping's destiny of being taken in as one of Liang's mistresses. Later in the story, Liang Qi becomes a first scholar in the civil service exam, and is appointed to the positions of a high military general and a minister of the state. He marries Wencai and Huixin, and is persuaded by them into taking the maid Zhang Pingping as a concubine. While visiting Liang Qi and his family, Lingyun is attracted by Pingping's beauty and harasses her, forcing her into attempting suicide by drowning herself in a lake in the family garden. Pingping's attempted suicide also is a strong demonstration of her chastity, which is affirmed by Liang's wife Wencai, and fortifies her status as a devoted concubine in the Liang household. This textual scenario gives much highlight to her character in the story.

To conclude, *Linked Rings of Jade* provides a fresh and innovative case for reconceptualizing women's domestic authority, and their success in restructuring the paternal familial system and thereby recentring personal and social relations of power. The female-oriented shrew-taming plot redresses the misogynist impulse in previous tales of taming and conforming rebellious women, but illustrates the exceptional and ingenious heroines as virtuous agents who, by disciplining the erroneous

male lead of the household, protect familial properties and redeem household harmony. Maidens and minor heroines in the stories also are endowed with notable agency in ensuring main characters' observance of rituals and propriety while enabling the necessary exchanges of messages between heroes and heroines who are divided physically and emotionally. Maria Franca Sibau, in a study of marginal characters in early Qing drama and fiction, argues that marginal characters whose identities are "reduced to a few stock traits and conventional attributes in the discourse" are staged in textual situations characterized by "a disturbance of the traditional order as a dynamic process" (Sibau, "Maids, Fishermen, and Storytellers" 2). Disruptions on "rigid characterization" are "fraught with tensions that travel through multiple levels, referential, discursive, and ideological, at once" (2). Pingping plays the double role of maintaining domestic order and harmony by safeguarding her unmarried mistress from the intruding amorous Liang Qi, but also allowing the future male head of the house brief moments of confessing his affections to her lady. Talented enough to please the ears of Liang Qi through her beautiful flute at a moonlit night, she immediately ends the music when noticing unwanted attention from another maid. Her prudence brings the moral reward of being advanced on the social ladder and becoming Liang's concubine. Reading the exceptional heroines in the text as a spectrum reveals the shifting dynamism of gender, virtue, and exchange of power. When the paternal authority is not yet established or is in increasing crisis, it is the women characters who maintain inheritances, regulate finances, conserve morals, and orchestrate household harmony.

SISTERHOOD, "BROTHERHOOD," AND GENDER VALENCES BEYOND CROSS-DRESSING

The title *Yulianhuan* (*Linked Rings of Jade*) carries implications of a polygamous marriage, corresponding to the relationship between Liang Qi, Wang Wencai, and his younger foster sister Xie Huixin, whom he unwittingly arranges to marry to the disguised Wang Wencai before finding out that the groom is none other than his own fiancée. As Wencai's mother, Madam Sun, instructs her, "Your marriage is pre-arranged on a linked bond. You and the daughter of the Xie household are inseparable as linked rings of jade. In future, both of you sisters shall marry Liang Qi, a true pair of jade rings, matching the premise of the linked rings of jade" (3:23, 48). This ideal union of the three in polygamy, however, has met resistance from all three. First, the disguised Wencai, because of her identity as a 雌婿 (*cixu*, female son-in-law), evokes strong rivalry between the infatuated Liang Qi and the devoted

Huixin. The gullible and impulsive Huixin, averse to accepting Wencai's femininity, treats the "false wedlock as a real one" and takes an oath to preserve her chastity before her beloved "husband's" return. Madam Sun cannot help but lament Huixin's silliness: "Since ancient times, only gentlemen seek the love of ladies; who has seen a rouged girl preserving her chastity for another woman?" (3:23, 48). And yet Huixin's insistence on her "marriage" with Wencai is more than childishness or what Liang Ziwen dismisses as 歪姻緣 (*wai yinyuan*, misfit love), but rather displays a faithfulness to 生死交 (*shengsi jiao*, a life and death oath) with her disguised fiancé. Her exorbitant insistence on chastity to her "husband" allows her to temporarily rebel against her foster brother Liang Qi's proposal of remarriage, despite her obligation of following the brother's command as the Confucian principle of women's Three Obediences and Four Virtues.

For the disguised Wencai, her androgynous subjectivity opens up a possibility of choice, however whimsical it may appear. The headstrong Huixin questions, "Wang Lang, what is your plan now? Are you going to be Huixin's husband, or Liang Ziyu's wife?" (3:20, 32). When asked by Ziyu what kind of husband she wants her to be, Huixin replies, "My loved one! I just wish to see your gallant looks every day, and share the same chamber every night. / If you agree I shall stay chaste and loyal to you all my life." In response, Wencai promises loyalty, "Guarding my promise I shall be the same to you all my life. / I shall compose linked verses with you on beautiful scenery and auspicious moments, I shall sit by the window with you and compare our needlework. / If I pluck the seven-stringed *qin*, you may pluck *se* in answer; in harmony we shall play *sheng* and *xiao* under the light of moon" (3:20, 33). The bond between the two heroines is depicted as harmless to feminine virtue and purely spiritual, and invites much jeering from Liang Qi: "How laughable, out of a whim you take in a female husband; how could two rouged ones replicate the ways of a true couple? (As you grow old,) your melancholy will not be carried away by the East Wind; how could a female husband dispel your lonesomeness?" (3:21, 35). Yet Liang's hint about the lack of sexual intimacy does not dissuade the ardent Huixin. The two break out in argument: "Brother, are you certain that Wang Lang will marry you? / Sister Xie, do you think Wang Lang would really be your husband?" (3:21, 35). For Liang Qi, without sexual intimacy, Huixin's chastity is ludicrous: "her chaste heart has taken to the idea in a blind way" (3:21, 35). This comical scene of argument between the foster brother and sister is reported to Wang Xianxia by her handmaid:

[Young female] *Ya*, why are they arguing?

[Minor female] They are fighting for you.

[Sing] One said you were his wife, the other said you were her husband. The brother blamed the sister, the sister faulted the brother. In future, one pulls you here, another

thither, what could Scholar Wang do? Perhaps you shall split yourself into two halves, to give to your husband and your wife as a comfort. (3:21, 37)

The lighthearted scene bespeaks sibling rivalry and the competition between heterosexual and same-sex relations, and the bi-gender valence of the cross-dressed Xianxia. The bi-gender valence of the cross-dressed Xianxia, at the foci of the narrative, creates disturbance to the Confucian family order. Because of her intimate relationship with Huixin, the husband has to “spend the time in the deserted chamber alone,” “having a family, but no one in the house” (有家無室 *youjia wushi*) (3:21, 34). In this particular case, because of Xianxia’s eventual refeminization, the pledge of the linked rings of jade is fulfilled.

In the case of another disguised heroine Zhao Yuege, the bi-gender valence of the heroine conveniences her in performing a feminine-masculine role in punishing the male shrew and overturning the gender relations between the husband and the concubine. Yuege’s role in Liang Hongzhi’s vindicated stratagem to transform her delinquent husband grants some space for the two gifted heroines to enact a “marriage” in disguise based on sympathy and mutual understanding over an extended time. Lamenting the arduous process of changing her husband’s degenerate character, Hongzhi thanks Yuege for her “loyalty and candidness” in assisting her plan; in return Yuege thanks Hongzhi for being “free of jealousy, truly generous and humble” (7:62, 38). The couple’s bond, transcending that of sisterhood, embodies a friendship based on shared moral ambitions and ethical ideals:

[Young and boyish female] Younger sister, I revere you (sing) as a true heroine wearing head kerchief;

[Secondary young female] Elder sister, I revere you (sing) for your benevolence and graciousness like a gentleman;

[Young and boyish female] Younger sister, who would say that there are not honorable ones among women?

[Secondary young female] Elder sister, who would say that there are not heroic ones in the inner chambers?

[Young and boyish female] Younger sister, among the capable ministers there are women,

[Secondary young female] Elder sister, Goddess Nüwa is exceptional in her talent of mending heaven. (7:62, 38)

Even though Hongzhi is depicted as a talented woman, her role in the script is one of *zuodan*, that is, a young and boyish female. This arrangement could indicate Hongzhi’s domestic authority equivalent to or exceeding that of the husband, as shown by the

plot. Yuege, the disguised concubine, takes on the role of *xiaodan*, or secondary young female, resonant with her status as a concubine in the Sun household, as well as her ultimate refeminization to marry Sun Lingyun. In this dialogue, the two heroines envision each other with a gendered identity transcending that of simple reversed roles. Hongzhi validates Yuege for her courage as a female hero, whereas Yuege admires and appreciates Hongzhi for her benevolence and virtue as that of a Confucian gentleman. The gender valences of the characters are much more convoluted, involving Yuege, the disguised concubine, playing the role of a husband and male household head, and Hongzhi, the ingenious wife, playing the authoritative role of disciplining her spouse and restoring family harmony and order. The dramatic roles, dialogues, and nuances for performances in the text pose intriguing possibilities of reading deeper into the narrative text, and create rich ramifications of gendered insinuations and valences.

The “marriage” between Yuege and Hongzhi, though a camouflage, reinforces a model of a family under full feminine governance. Though devised as an intrigue to counteract against Sun Lingyun’s ruthless sale of his wife, the text depicts how the false couple and true sisters succeed in retaining family property and managing household finances. There are careful divisions of duties and labor between the “husband” and the “wife.” As Hongzhi instructs Yuege, “As to cooking and household matters, I will manage them; for outside errands and formal matters of the house, you will take charge of them” (7:64, 46); “Together the two sisters devote themselves fully and work in harmony; frugal and diligent, they manage the household. / Cutting off luxurious expenses, they expand income; their land and savings increase day by day” (7:64, 46). In contrast, Sun Lingyun squanders his residual money, and soon find himself homeless and without family, in extreme poverty, and finally has to sell himself back to his former home as a house servant. On top of this, Hongzhi finds herself pregnant with a second child by Lingyun before she is “sold” to Yuege. The plot indicates the possibility for Yuege and Hongzhi to continue a married life under disguise, if they choose to claim the second child as Yuege’s child with Hongzhi. To an extent, Yuege and Hongzhi’s brief but successful union illustrates a prospect of marriage between two women that Huixin and Xianxia could have enjoyed, had they both been able to do away with family pressure to marry Liang Qi.

On top of these subtle gender dynamics, sworn brotherhood and male friendship between disguised heroines and beguileable male characters contribute to multifaceted patterns of desire underlying the polygamous marriage structure, in two above cases of triangulated relations. In the case of Liang Qi, Wang Xianxia, and Xie Huixin, Liang Qi’s sworn brotherhood with the then cross-dressed Xianxia on the surface carries implications of “male” homoerotic attractions. Whereas Liang Qi confesses his prearranged marriage with Xianxia, his disguised fiancée, now under the name of Wang Wencai, nervously conceals her identity and resists intimate interaction with the earnest Liang

Qi. Despite her initial agitations and caution, Wencai soon becomes used to her male identity. As sworn brothers, Liang Qi and Wang Wencai often enjoy wine and conversations together. Liang Qi proposes, “My dear brother, we could not fully express our thoughts at the dinner, shall we converse to our heart’s content by sharing the bed at night?” Wencai, not displaying her real identity, answers, “Brother, isn’t it wonderful to share a bed with a true friend? It is much more pleasant than a new bride passing sorrowful time facing the lamp” (2:10, 22). Liang Qi enjoys these moments of intimacy so much and even coaxes Wencai into drinking a 成雙杯 (*chengshuang bei*, double cup of wine) with him, not knowing that the “brother” is none other than his bride-to-be. Such amusing moments of irony prioritize the readers’ access to truth and mock the naive hero. Later Wencai agrees to take Huixin as “his” wife, following Liang’s arrangement. After the wedding, the following morning Liang Qi teases Wencai for “lingering long in the tenderness and warmth of the mandarin duck quilt, and barely wearing your scholarly cap properly.” When he attempts to adjust Wencai’s cap for “him” but is pushed away, Liang goes on to tease Wencai for “his” fine complexion: “Some of her fine powder is left on your cheeks, her rouge is lingering on you and the fragrance is overwhelming” (2:11, 27). The blushing Wencai has to claim that the fragrance is in-born and “his” fine complexion is completely natural. Liang Qi enjoys these moments of closeness with Wencai so much that he later expresses regret about Xianxia’s distanced attitude when she returns to femininity, and minimizes interaction with him before marriage in the name of observing the principles of the inner chambers.

These mirthful moments of “homoeroticism” tease with the hints of “male” same-sex attractions, but actually entertain the knowing readers with the marriage prospect of a predestined couple. The dramatic mode of expression underlying narration intensifies the ironic distance between the audience’s point of view and the characters’ perception, by constantly marking Wencai’s part as that of *xiaodan* (young female) and Liang Qi’s part as one of *xiaosheng* (young male), indicating the heterosexual relations underlying the scenes of brotherly intimacy. Theatrical expressions intersperse in the narration of the *tanci*, and reconfigure the norm of readership for textualized *tanci* as a new epistemological subjective position equivalent to audiences of vernacular drama. The *tanci* text’s ability to appropriate and recuperate a mode of theatricality allows it a means to illustrate or present truth to the audience through dramatic expressions. This mode of theatricality could be considered as a form of mediation, a “facilitator of the truth-claims” from a heterodiegetic audience’s perspective.

Similar gender dynamism under the disguise of brotherhood could be found in the relationship between Yuege and Sun Lingyun. The relation between the disguised concubine and the disconsolate male head of the family initially represents rather radical reversals of ritual norms and propriety. With Yuege posing as the new master of the house, “he” disciplines Lingyun, now a house servant, with rules and forbiddances, and

punishes him relentlessly when Lingyun is enticed into petty gambling. However, later when the reformed Lingyun takes to learning and gains initial success in the civil service exam, Yuege voluntarily raises Lingyun's status by becoming his sworn brother. With the camouflage of brotherhood, Yuege ponders her prospects of marrying Lingyun, whereas Lingyun, not knowing Yuege is a concubine of his, suffers jealousy for the love between Yuege and his former wife Hongzhi. To celebrate their brotherhood, the duo exchange toasts and compose linked verse with each other, as follows:

Male lead: [poem] Raising a toast to the flower, and lavish on praising lines;
Swirling and swaying, walks resemble that of the ancient beauty Xi Shi.
[spoken] Younger brother, please.

Secondary young female: Ay, I have a line now,
[poem] Lightly and blithely, looks mistaken as that of a fine gentleman.
The reflections of water mirror a loving pair,
[spoken] Elder brother, please.

Male lead: [poem] My eyes perusing among the beautiful ones for that one.
When would I retrieve the root of the lotus flower,
[spoken] Younger brother, please.

Secondary young female: [poem] The amorous one loses no time to pluck the twin lotus flowers. (8:69, 14)

The practice of composing linked verse, or 聯詠 (*lianyong*), was a popular and important part of literati social life. Bret Hinsch observes that sometimes an entire group of gentlemen might write a poem jointly by playing linked verse. Besides being a means for elegant fun and passing time in leisure, the sophisticated game of linked verse “strengthened bonds between the members of the group” and “brought educated men closer together” (*The Rise of Tea Culture* 129). Whereas this game among male peers was practiced to enact a literati ideal of subjectivity, in the above passage, the appearance of brotherhood carries underlying implications of heterosexuality and the prospect of a polygamous marriage, as Yuege indicates in the image of 並頭蓮 (*bingtou lian*, twin lotus flowers). The ideal of 悌 (*ti*, brotherhood), one of the fundamental principles of Confucian family relations, here allows the minor heroine Yuege to pass along her affections akin to sibling love, but with suggestions of her private desire to return to marriage.

Whereas the story does end with the polygamous marriage of both Hongzhi, Yuege, and the reformed Sun Lingyun, the course in which the characters form their relations, as displayed above, is embedded with intricate, subtle, and often convoluted gender dynamics. The ironic rupture of the characters' performed roles in their dramatized interaction with each other, and their textual subjectivities as insinuated to the readers

through the plot, invite a consideration of the theatricality of this *tanci* text written for performance. Roland Barthes argues in *Critical Essays* that theatricality depends on the language of theatre, which consists of all the elements used on stage as theatre signs. He considers theatricality as “theatre-minus-text, . . . a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice—gesture, tone, distance, substance, light—which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language” (Barthes 26). Barthes’ proposition renders the experience of appreciating a dramatic text as one of “a reading actualized” in a situated manner, allowing the audience to gain access to a spacialized textuality through the embedded theatrical signs and motifs, and more importantly, allowing the characters as “performers” a degree of agency in their individual subjective representation. The duplicity of the actor/performer’s body in the theatrical space, for Barthes, allows a degree of agency, that is, theatricality “constitutes the theater as the site of an ultraincarnation, in which the body is double, at once a living body deriving from a trivial nature, and an emphatic, formal body, frozen by its function as an artificial object” (Barthes 27–28).

The duplicity of the character/performer’s body in *Linked Rings* could be seen in the cross-dressed heroines’ performed gender roles as men to other unsuspecting characters, versus the rather consistent theatrical signifiers of their gendered identity marked by the normative role types. The traditional Chinese role types of drama, rather than representing personalities, are “meant to represent moral and social kinds” (Nienhauser et al. 22). In the late Ming, when the literati incorporated their social and political visions into drama, role types signified “a tendency toward character as symbol” and served as vehicles of moral or even political satire and allegory (22). The proliferation of the dramatic role types into later subdivisions, as is pointed out, is largely based on “the moral quality” of the characters. Gestures and songs also became more “stereotyped and symbolic,” bespeaking the persisting impact of theatrical conventions. For the *tanci*’s audience, the divide between the theatrical and the fictional worlds yields the possibility of a spacialized textuality. Terry Eagleton notes, the “readers” or those in the audience, understand the performance text’s meaning as “irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single center, essence or meaning” (Eagleton 120). On the other hand, the author’s return to the theatrical conventions of indexing the characters’ role types, in addition to facilitating an imagined theatrical representation of the story, might also foreshadow or reinforce a form of moral self-realization on the part of the author, by aligning a writerly position with theatre’s capacity to allegorize and represent moral norms. Hence even though the disguised concubine enjoys such fictive liberty as to punish her future husband and male head of the house with heavy beatings for attempting to gamble, and though the cross-dressed Wencai suffers the risk of sharing the same bedchamber with her fiancé-to-be Liang Qi, the audiences always have the reassurance

that decorum shall be observed by the characters despite their temporary mischief or transgression. Theatrical role types, as invocations of decorum, facilitate the readers' moral judgement and function as self-justifications for the characters and the author.

Transformations of gender roles become more nuanced and display more complex articulations than disguise of appearances or heroines' mimetic enactment of masculine identities. Instead, the interactions between the cross-dressed heroines and their betrothed ones, though taking on the appearance of "brotherhood" or male friendship, are never complete gender reversals, but are constantly restrained with caution to protect the heroines' moral position and guarantee the possibilities for their refeminization and marriage. In contrast, some heteronormative relations carry implications of unconventional dynamics between male and female characters, or even radical alterations of power relations. Although Hongzhi is the embodiment of a traditional, virtuous wife and loving mother, her own marriage with Lingyun positions her as the actual head of the household, as the delinquent Lingyun has to agree to be a live-in son-in-law and receive Hongzhi's instruction upon the request of Hongzhi's mother. This situation of 招贅 (*zhaozhu*, a live-in son-in-law who becomes part of the wife's family) is reenacted when Hongzhi pretends to marry the disguised Yuege, with Yuege having "purchased" Hongzhi's house and land (as an entrusted secret representative of Hongzhi herself) and moving into the house that actually belongs to Hongzhi. When she confesses the truth to the repentant Lingyun, she justifies her stratagem by claiming that "the lands are family properties passed down by our ancestors. How can I bear to abandon them and let others claim them?" (8:72, 28). Hongzhi's tests on her husband's character and strategies to transform him, and eventually triumph. Lingyun comments, "My wise wife! Moved by you, and thank you, you indeed have peerless virtue and competence! Owing you so much, I do not know how to repay you. I wish in our next lives, I shall be your wife, you my lord" (8:72, 28). Hongzhi has achieved such great authority, both in governing family finance and property and in harnessing and taming her reckless spouse, that her domestic status has superseded that of her husband. With Lingyun acquiring success through the civil service exam, Hongzhi finds an extension of her authority and power by being an acknowledged assistant for her husband's accomplishment in learning. The narrator applauds the two heroines: "If women could learn this stratagem of blending tenderness in steel-like disciplining, they would surely be able to make the unruliest wild horse bow down and obey their orders" (8:72, 30). The text indicates that orthodox heroines may also find a way of self-realization in the domestic space thanks to their learning, resourcefulness, managerial skills, and provision of their natal families.

In sum, *Linked Rings of Jade* reconfigures the idealized polygamous marriage plot often seen in Ming Qing vernacular narratives by introducing complex interpersonal relationships of sworn brotherhood, sisterhood, and gendered valences beyond cross-dressing. Polygamous harmony, rather than being presented as an ideal solution

to wifely jealousy and rivalry of power in family, here is established when women characters gain full authority through relentless and prolonged disciplining of a treacherous and incompetent husband. Female characters disguised as men, as in the case of Wang Wencai and Zhao Yuege, transform the inner chambers as a site of women's self-affirmation and reclamation of power, rather than a mere confining space to flee from in order to achieve autonomy and self-realization. The two examples of polygamous marriages enrich and complicate the model of a polygamous household. The ill-fated heroines Huixin and Hongzhi find that their "husbands" in the feigned marriages are providers of timely solace and support, or even act as trusted agents to execute their plans to exercise power without breaking the structure of the paternal family. By acting as the "paternal" figure in the household, or finding a female substitute for it, Hongzhi is able to reconfigure the ritually and economically defined hierarchy in the household. As Keith McMahan incisively argues, "Gender derives central meaning from the kinship structure. The laws of kinship define the symbolic order, which is primarily structured by the paternal family" (McMahan, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists* 5). Whereas Wencai's refeminization illustrates a conformity within the patriarchal system, Yuege's cross-dressing conveniently achieves a double purpose: one of strengthening Hongzhi's conformity to her roles as a virtuous and chaste wife, and another of subverting the paternal system from inside by becoming a new male head of the house.

Interrelations between the characters expand the narrative convention of cross-dressing by inscribing gender complexities beyond heteronormative identifications. First, shifting of gendered positions could take place without resorting to the act of cross-dressing. Despite her disguise in a man's robe, for the affirming Hongzhi, Yuege is perceived rather as a heroic woman who rescues her from the danger of losing family property and her chastity. To the humble Yuege, the beautiful Hongzhi, aside from being a virtuous wife and attending mother, displays a bravery equivalent to that of a man in taking the risk of self-sacrifice to reestablish family order. Women's entrance to explore gendered positions transcend the inner and outer divide, and could be realized without physically passing themselves as men and leaving the boudoir. Second, the text provides a maternal family model under full governance of women. Whereas women's mock unions are prevalent in earlier *tanci* works, *Linked Rings of Jade* goes to much greater lengths in its portrayal of the two heroines' managerial talents and skills in family governance, suggesting that such marriages between women, rather than mere fantasies or strategic disguises by sworn sisters, could be a familial structure, allowing women's full autonomy in the household. Third, gender dynamism between the disguised heroines and other characters evoke jolly and enjoyable moments of male or female "homoeroticism"; yet these "homoerotic" sensibilities never displace or rewrite the heteronormative relationships between the characters. When the sworn "brothers" enjoy wine or exchange lines of poetry, the audience's pleasure rests in perceiving

an unmarried girl's desperation in keeping gender propriety, a concubine's unfulfilled desires, and a naive hero's inability in sensing love in his concubine's poem. In other words, the pleasure of reading remains conditioned by identifications with orthodox gender relations and the assurance of the realization of such relations at the end of the story. The ostensible divide between the consistent and invariable theatrical modes of role types and fiction's comparatively imaginative take on characterization ultimately reaches a compromise with all characters returning to their respective roles as virtuous wives, obedient concubines, and industrious scholar-husbands in a paternal family.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, *Linked Rings of Jade* distinguishes itself from other written *tanci* works because of its extensive adaptation of dramatic roles and conventions. First, the text's unusual turn from textualized *tanci* to the genre's roots in oral performance traditions calls attention to the crucial role of vernacular literacy in late imperial fictional traditions. Zhu's *tanci* text invites musings about the innovative acoustic aesthetics that the work might evoke when performed through singing with stringed music as folk *tanci* songs, and further challenges the written and vernacular split underlying the treatment of early modern Chinese fictional narratives. Whereas talented women authors including Chen Duansheng, Hou Zhi, and Zheng Danruo articulated their take on *tanci* as a genre written for readers in the inner chambers, Zhu Suxian's *tanci* indicates that the vernacular tradition is embraced by early modern women authors for artistic experimentation. Notably, women *tanci* singers' performances could be found in multiple textualized Qing dynasty *tanci* works, such as Zheng Danruo's *Dream, Image, Destiny* and Sun Deying's *Affinities of the Golden Fish*. These fictional depictions of women's *tanci* performances suggest the ongoing influences of vernacular performances on women's development of the written *tanci* genre. Second, Zhu Suxian's *tanci* illustrates rich possibilities about achieving and reinforcing women's domestic authority within the paternal familial structure, by reconfiguring the gender relations in the shrew-taming plot, and by entrusting minor heroines the autonomy to maintain propriety and facilitate the beloved characters' communications while observing domestic hierarchy and order. Third, the characters' relations depicted in the two examples of polygamous marriages consist of complex gender dynamics. The duplicity of the characters'/performers' roles brings out the dialectic tensions and interactions between the more rigid theatrical conventions of role types, and the more pliable and subtle forms of gender identifications in the text's fictional imagination. The model of a polygamous marriage is transfigured through multiple forms of desires and gendered self-representations; female cross-dressing, rather than being an imaginative approach

for women to seek freedom outside the inner chambers, becomes a means of women's empowerment inside the domestic space. Orthodox heroines, on the other hand, could also reassert their authority with a bravery and courage equivalent to that of male heads of the households, without having to resort to a borrowed masculine identity. As the plot reveals, the private household, the domestic space traditionally defined by paternal authority, could also be remade into a gendered location of familial power by talented and resourceful heroines.

Chapter Two

AMONG WOMEN: FEMININE HOMOEROTICISM IN LI GUIYU'S *LIUHUAMENG* (DREAM OF THE POMEGRANATE FLOWERS)

IN HER EXAMINATION of early modern lesbian literature, Susan S. Lanser points out that “the sapphic became an even more explicit vehicle for considering the ‘bedfellows,’ both literal and figural, that might shape the state. Female homoeroticism could accomplish this cultural project . . . because in unmooring the sign ‘woman’ from the sign ‘man,’ the sapphic evades the most basic of all hierarchies that thus poses an epistemic challenge to hierarchy itself” (Lanser, “‘Bedfellows in Royaltie’” 103). This chapter studies female homoeroticism in the nineteenth-century *tanci* *Liuhuameng* (*Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, below *Pomegranate Flowers*) by Li Guiyu. Earlier prosimetric novels *Jade Bracelets* and *Destiny of Rebirth* each feature the multivalent identity of a heroine disguised as a man, and stage homoerotic sensibilities between the cross-dresser and unsuspecting women who mistake the heroine for a man. *Pomegranate Flowers* transforms this convention by portraying heroines who are aware of each other’s identity, and yet are engaged in homoerotic interactions,

focusing on the love between two heroines who disguise themselves as men and address each other as “brothers.” Male friendship is evoked as a transformed form of sisterhood and reconfigures women’s same-sex love through discourses of male chivalric friendship. In traditional *tanci*, women’s same-sex bonds through female alliance or mock unions are akin to kinship and conjugal love, and are deemed as premarital social bonds that are supporting rather than subverting family and marriage. In this story women’s friendship, mobilized by a storyline of “male” chivalry, presents compelling queer erotics and renders such same-sex dynamics in disguised and socially more acceptable forms. In comparison with late imperial literati depictions of women’s same-sex love through a male voyeuristic perspective, women’s *tanci* narratives stage feminine homoerotic pleasure at the focal point, and by reclaiming the visual agency of women, make reading of *tanci* an empowering experience for readers in the inner chambers.

Feminine homoeroticism, a productive concept, allows readers access to early modern women’s emotional world, in the following aspects: (1) the dialectics between spiritual love and sexual desire; (2) the triangulated desire between women themselves and their husbands; (3) in the case of multiple women who disguise themselves as men and address each other as brothers, the reconfiguration of “brotherhood” as a vehicle for women’s homosocial love. Women’s homoeroticism richly contributes to the early modern discourses of *qing* (love) and *se* (lust), by activating a dialogical imagination between the two and redefining both as women-oriented notions that at once transcend and reinforce the heteroerotic norm. By justifying chastity, filial piety, and polygamy, female same-sex desires are endorsed and gain equivalent status as normative sentiments. Whereas women’s homoeroticism could have emerged from or existed in the heterosexual structures, this interstitiality projects an aesthetics of the in-between that is infused by negotiations between the private and the public, and displays women’s hidden mobility to occupy and transform the normative institution of the polygamous marriage through strategic reconfiguration, deviation, or even provisional resistance. Tales of cross-dressed heroines in women’s written *tanci* project the imaginary of early modern women being freed from one’s family and joining one of higher social standing. Rivalry between women’s homoerotic bonds and heterosexual (often polygamous) marriage arrangements in *tanci* problematizes the sexual contract underlying the social contract of the polygamous marriage. Aside from fictional depictions of feminine same-sex desire, authorial comments, women readers, relatives, and friends’ frequent endorsements of female-authored *tanci* fiction in the prefaces and paratextual materials indicate a feminine homosocial component of the historical readership of *tanci* fiction, and shed light on the interlinkages between women’s literary endeavors, female friendship, and early modern women’s homosocial community.

ENVISAGING LATE IMPERIAL WOMEN'S HOMOEROTICISM

One of the earliest dynastic records about feminine same-sex relations could be found in *Hanwu gushi* (Precedents of Emperor Wu of the Han). Empress Chen, after losing favor from the emperor, commanded a female shaman to dress as a man and share a bed with her as if they were a real couple. Enraged by this illicit affair, the emperor executed the shaman and removed the empress's title. Aside from royal women, female same-sex relations also included some from humble backgrounds. Bret Hisch notes that court women of the Han would form couples, who were known as 對食 (*dui shi*, "paired eating"), a term that "may have connoted cunnilingus" (*Passions of the Cut Sleeve* 174). 漢書 (*Hanshu, Records of the Han*) records the love of two slave women Cao Gong 曹宮 and Dao Fang 道房, depicting their relation as "paired eating" (Ban Gu 97: 79). The Tang courtesan Yu Xuanji composed poems to express lesbian eroticism and commemorate same-sex companionship between women (Cahill, "Material Culture and the Dao" 120; also see Mori Ōgai, "Yu Xuanji"). In the late Ming, the poem "與某夫人書" ("Yu mou furen shu," "A Farewell Letter to A Certain Madame") by poetess Feng Xiaoqing 馮小青 manifested homoerotic sentiments (Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 92). Likewise, the lyric "洞仙歌" ("Dongxiange," "Song of the Cave Immortals") by poet and playwright Wu Zao (吳藻, 1799–1862) manifested female homoerotic desires (Idema and Grant 693).

Similar depictions of female homoerotic love could be found in 梨花夢 (*Lihuameng, The Dream of Pear Blossoms*) by the nineteenth-century playwright He Peizhu 何佩珠. In 明齋小識 (*Mingzhai xiaoshi, Short Notes from a Bright Studio*, printed 1811) by Zhu Huixiang 諸晦香, there is a story "二女同死" ("Ernü tongsi," "Two Women Committing Suicide"), which described two passionate heroines embracing each other and drowning themselves in the river. Well-researched examples in scholarship include Li Yu's play 憐香伴 (*Lianxiangban, The Fragrant Companion*), the anonymously authored novel 林蘭香 (*Lin Lanxiang*), and the story "封三娘" ("Feng Sanniang") in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling (蒲松齡 1640–1715). Female homoeroticism could be found in 續金瓶梅 *Xu Jinpingmei (Sequel to the Jinpingmei)*, authored by Ding Yaokang (丁耀亢, 1599–1669), and Cao Xueqin's *Hongloumeng (Dream of the Red Chamber)*. In *tanci*, Tze-Lan Sang notes a plot of affectionate heroines committing suicide for endorsing sisterhood in 五女緣 (*Wunü yuan, Affinity of Five Heroines*) (Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian* 59; Tan Zhengbi and Tan Xun 64–65). Liu Wenjia studies female same-sex desire in the nineteenth-century *tanci Fengshuangfei* (Phoenixes Flying Together) by Cheng Huiying 程蕙英.

In a large number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *tanci* works, including *Destiny of Rebirth, Blossoms from the Brush, A Tale of Vacuity, Linked Rings of Jade*, and

Affinity of the Golden Fish, women's homoeroticism is illustrated through intimate emotional bonds and comical interactions between the disguised heroines and their "wives" in the mock unions. The "wives" are frequently made aware of the protagonists' secrets of cross-dressing, and for the sake of protecting chastity or pursuing religious practices, are willing to act in the role of loving companions in their "marriages." In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, the couple in the mock union write poetry jointly as husband and wife, exchanging poetry and sharing the same rhymes. Such exchanges of verses epitomize a feature of a companionate marriage, and also carry rich homoerotic implications to the readers who know the heroines' true identities. Women's homoeroticism in mock unions could even be a rival of heterosexual love. By postponing and even substituting marriage, women's mock unions make it possible for true companionship for the adventurous heroines and protect their chastity when forced into hapless marriage arrangements. In *Pomegranate Flowers*, feminine homoeroticism is facilitated through brotherhood. The intimate relationship of the two cross-dressers triggers their fiancé Binyu's jealousy, and evokes rumors among Hengkui's uninformed subordinate generals and soldiers that the two are committed to male homosexual love. Here women's homoeroticism undergoes an unconventional masquerade through male homosexual love.

Pomegranate Flowers reconfigured homoerotic love by depicting the *qing*/emotional bonds between female characters disguised as men. Li Guiyu composed the first 357 *juan* of *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* before 1841. The remaining three *juan* of the novel were composed in 1939 by Huanmei nüshi 浣梅女史, the joint artistic name of two later female authors Weng Qiqian 翁起前 and her relative Yang Meijun 楊美君. According to a preface to Li's *tanci* by Peixiang nüshi 佩香女史 Chen Chousong 陳儔松 dated 1841, Li Guiyu, whose artistic name is Hengxian, was born in Gansu, and after marriage, relocated to south Hunan province. Bao Zhenpei proposes that Li's father probably was on an official post in Gansu, where Li was born (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 272). While composing *Pomegranate Flowers*, Li moved to Fuzhou in Fujian province, and according to some critics, in the later years of her life, Li earned a living by teaching at a school of a local Li family (Wei 24–25; Xue Can 6). Li's *tanci* is the longest *tanci* novel up to date, consisting of 360 *juan*, and total 4.83 million words. The work was not published in late Qing and had only been circulated through hand-copied versions. It was observed that well before its completion, the novel was circulated and hand-copied by local gentry women in Fujian province. However, many hand-copied versions were incomplete due to the voluminous length of the novel. Only three complete hand-copied versions were discovered. As a custom of Fujian during the Qing goes, local women took to hand-copying books before marriage and brought these books as part of their dowries to the husbands' families. The current study is based the 1998 edition of *Pomegranate Flowers* published by Zhongguo wenxian chuban gongsi. As Chen Chousong describes Li the author,

[She is] genteel and benevolent in nature, and is deeply engaged in literature and classics. She is particularly fond of writing. Whenever she has time after caring for the elders, she would amass complete historical writings. Her hands would not stop turning the pages. Her remarks and observations never fail to impart wisdom and talent. . . . When she comments on the rise and fall of the past dynasties, she would lament on the history of the Tang in particular. For after the reign of Zhenguan, the nation began to suffer from disorder in law and administration. . . . When reading histories as such, how could one refrain from closing the pages and let out recurrent sighs? Hence she authored *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* for others to read. (Chen Chousong 9)

The story, situated during the reign of Emperor Daizong of the Tang (726–779), goes as follows. The protagonist Gui Bifang is born to a minister's family and has exceptional martial art skills. When the house of the Gui is haunted by a vicious ghost, Bifang ventures to exorcise the ghost with her sword, but finds out that the ghost is only a heavenly agent sent to deliver a magical military book written in tadpole scripts that only she could decipher, for she was predestined to become a general and later a regional prince. Zhang Tingbao 張廷保, the son of a vicious minister, falls in love with Bifang and wants to take her as a wife. Tingbao is rejected, because Bifang is betrothed to the talented and handsome Heng Binyu, the son of a minister. The Zhang family is enraged by the rejection of the proposal, and summons bandits to ambush Bifang's family when they are traveling by boat to the capital. Bifang commits suicide by drowning herself in the river. She is rescued by a fairy and sent to the house of female martial artist Long Yayu who leads a brigand of soldiers. The two become sworn sisters. Following Yayu's suggestion, Bifang disguises herself as a man named Gui Hengkui. Meanwhile, Mei Meixian, daughter of a high official, has participated in the imperial women's exam presided over by the empress; she wins the First Female Scholar award and is appointed as a *xundao* (instructor) in the palace. At this time, Bifang is considered to have died of suicide. Hence Meixian is betrothed to the "widowed" Heng Binyu. Zhang Fang, the eldest son of the empress's brother, fails to take Meixian as his concubine. In revenge, he proposes to marry Meixian to the prince of the Eastern Liao in exchange for a peace pact. Meixian is forced to agree, and on her excursion to the frontier, she manages to escape by jumping off a cliff. Once again a fairy rescues Meixian and sends her to the cross-dressed Hengkui. With the assistance of Hengkui, Meixian cross-dresses as a man named Gui Hengchao. The two are now sworn brothers, with Hengkui as the elder one. A significant part of the story depicts the "brotherhood" and love of these two, and their deliberations about obtaining eminent political careers or returning to marriage as women. Both attend the civil service exam. Hengkui becomes the First Scholar through the literature exam. Hengchao becomes the Martial First Scholar. Together they are appointed top generals and are sent to the frontier to battle against the invading Liao.

The brotherhood between Hengkui and Hengchao serves dissimilar purposes for the disguised heroines. Hengchao hopes to seek revenge against Minister Zhang and the invading Liao, and invites Hengkui to join “him” as a military general. For Hengkui, enacting “brotherhood” transforms women’s friendship as a homosocial bond (21:412). When Hengkui takes Hengchao to see her parents and privately confesses to them their secrets of cross-dressing, Hengkui insists that a fairy entrusts “him” to protect Hengchao and cannot revert to the life of a woman. Rather, the two should “seek fame and fortune together, so that they would get revenge for the calamities afflicted upon them” (21:413). The relationship between Hengchao and Hengkui as brothers provides an excuse for them to postpone their marriage to Heng Binyu. When Binyu learns from Meixian’s mother that Hengchao is none other than his betrothed Mei Meixian, he presses Hengchao to return to her feminine attire and marry him. Hengkui, however, declines the proposal by insisting that “he” has yet to repay the grace and care of “his” sworn brother Hengkui for rescuing “him” from death. Unwilling to change her identity, Hengchao insists on addressing Binyu as “elder brother” and refers to herself as “your younger brother.” Although both Hengkui and Hengchao were engaged to Binyu, the marriage arrangements between them are replaced by male kinship, allowing the heroines temporary freedom to enact masculine social and familial roles.

In the second half of the story, the disguised Gui Hengkui is honored as a sovereign of the South Chu kingdom. Her ardent sworn sister Meixian, who now returns to femininity and marries Binyu, is worried about losing her beloved Hengkui when she leaves the capital city to the south. She schemes with the empress and forces Hengkui to confess the truth her femininity, hoping that Hengkui would marry Binyu and thus eternally live with her in a polygamous family. The emperor exempts Hengkui’s deception after knowing that she is a woman, and ordains that she marry Binyu and that the couple shall reign the kingdom of South Chu together. The story continues to depict dozens of outstanding heroines who, selected through civil and martial exams, take charge of the administering and governance the state affairs of the prospering Chu, thwarting the invidious Tang Emperor’s repetitive attempts to subside and even eradicate the Chu regime. Against this backdrop of war and rebellion, conspiracy and outmaneuvering, the plot continues to develop feminine homoerotic bonds between the younger generation of heroines. Mirroring the leading heroine Gui Hengkui, the text depicts Meixian’s daughter Qihui 琦徽 who, in resistance against a forced marriage to a flirtatious cousin Luo Chuanbi 羅傳璧, cross-dresses as a man under the name of Luo Yufeng 羅毓峰 and lives a life under disguise. Later Yufeng, thanks to her valiant achievements on the battlefield, becomes an eminent general, and even takes in four wives. Yufeng, feigning that she needs to observe celibacy for a deceased fiancé for three years, conceals her true identity from her unaware “wives,” and yet often finds her fine companions jealous of each other in rivalry for the “husband’s” affection. Intriguingly,

the plot displaces a male polygamous marriage with one that consists only of women performing the roles of the husband and the wives, and generates intensely comical gender dynamics in their emotional exchanges. This all-female polygamous marriage, in which the man is absent, profoundly rewrites the aforementioned triangular love relationship among the male husband, the female cross-dresser, and her same-sex companion. The text recreates several loving duos of female characters, like the prominent heroines Hengyu and Hengkui. The disguised Luo Yufeng, for example, is infatuated with “his” wife, the beautiful Pan Mingxian 潘茗仙.

EXPANDING *QING* THROUGH FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM

Homoerotic sentiments in male-male relationships, as Wu Cuncun insightfully states, were present in the practices of “contract brothers” in the late Ming period. Some of the “brothers” would maintain their relationships beyond the age of thirty when they reverted to conventional marriages and took brides. Wu traced the literary depictions of such “brothers” in the Ming anthology of jokes 笑林廣記 (*Xiaolin guangji*, Extensive Gleanings from the Forests of Laughter) and Li Yu’s famous short story 男孟母教合三遷 (*Nan Mengmu jiaoheshanqian*, *A Male Mencius’s Mother Educates His Son and Moves House Three Times*). Wu points out that an episode in *Jinpingmei* illustrates an effeminate young man who is identified by a group of workmen as a catamite, suggesting the homoerotic connotation of “兄弟” (*xiongdi*, brotherhood) existed in the Ming. In *Pomegranate Flowers*, the enactment of “brotherhood” between Hengkui and Hengchao reconfigures this convention to a form of female homoeroticism in disguise. The two share the same bed every night when at the frontier, and are depicted as infatuated with each other. When Heng Binyu presses Hengchao into telling him the secret of Hengkui’s true identity as the missing Gui Bifang, Binyu resorts to a range of attempts to make Hengkui compromise and marry him. The emotional bond between Hengkui and Hengchao is, however, unshakable and evokes Binyu’s strong jealousy. Likewise when Binyu seeks to detain Hengchao for wine and entertainment, Hengkui becomes flustered in anger and undisguised envy. The brotherhood of the three is ridden with a dramatic rivalry between heterosexual love and feminine homoeroticism. A passage below, written in rhymed seven-character lines, stages homoerotic gazes of Hengkui toward Hengchao:

Hengkui saw her “brother” in a sound sleep, tipsy eyes, rosy complexion, and a face even more fair. Reclining on her side in brocade quilts, deeply amorous eyes even surpassing those of fairies. A merry Hengkui exited the bed-curtain and put down

the red candle, unwrapping her robe, releasing her belt, she let down the golden curtain hook. Extending the silk quilt, pulling over the beloved brother, she rested side by side with her, sharing a mandarin duck pillow. In a lowered voice, she whispered to the brother into her ear, "How do you feel after being drunk?" The Martial Scholar could barely open her drunken eyes, and answered, "my brother, do not call on me. Heart agitated, mind giddy, I could barely hold myself, That fragrant drink surely does much damage." The First Scholar, hearing this, beamed a smile, calling on Hengchao, but she fell deeply asleep again. Affable and gentle as a piece of jade, moving and pitiable, making one's adoration endless. Playfully Hengkui stroked Hengchao's fragrant cheeks, her fair complexion moist with morning dew. "Even a lotus flower emerging from water cannot rival your exquisiteness. Your fiancé Binyu does not yet have a chance to approach your body, he cannot be a contender with me Hengkui in taking the first chance." Stroking her hands, warm and tender, Hengkui could not help letting out a sigh, her eyebrows deeply locked. "My heart bears an ambition as high as heaven, I pledge to ascend the court and become a lord. Wearing gold belt and python jade, I shall take Twelve Golden Hairpins as concubines. How resentful that heaven did not abide my desire, and made me suffer as a woman. Rouge and powder are not my cravings; even though I take a man's robe, how could such a life be long-lasting?" (28:543)

Feminine homoerotic gazes in *tanci* novels may take place between women audiences or characters who are attracted by the ravishing beauty of the disguised scholars without knowing their identities. In *Destiny of Rebirth*, the scene in which the royal maidens wait on the drunken minister Li Junyu begins with them feasting on the minister's extraordinary looks and evolves to a scene of the maids gazing at the disguised heroines' two tiny bound feet, an evident symbol of femininity beauty. In *Linked Rings of Jade* and *A Tale of Vacuity*, women's homoeroticism involves characters' infatuation with the disguised scholar's beauty. In these examples women's same-sex desire between characters was channeled through apparently "heterosexual" relationships between the cross-dresser and the women who are enchanted by the "scholar" in the diegesis. Women readers of such *tanci* have access to the emotional realm of this feminine homoeroticism, since they were given preknowledge about the characters' act of cross-dressing. On the surface, the depictions of the couple as intimate brothers sharing their pillows and a bed evoke an impression of male homoeroticism. Yet to the readers in the inner chambers, such scenes reinforce women's same-sex intimacy and invite the readers (many of whom were women) to a female homosocial sphere. The following passage in rhymed lines provides an even more compelling depiction of the physical attraction between Hengkui and Hengchao:

“Were I, Hengkui, an exceptional man, I would certainly compete against Heng Lang for Meixian’s love. My fiancée Jiangzhi is famous for beauty, yet her exquisiteness is inferior to that of sister Hengchao. My sister Heng Zhuqing is supremely gorgeous, yet her attitude is reticent and she distances herself from others. Neither of them is like Sister Hengchao, who is gentle, amorous, and adorable. No wonder she stirs up rivalries among foreign suitors, and her beauty charms and even intoxicates Binyu. Heaven has made me a woman; facing such a beauty, how could I fall asleep?” Hengkui laughs at these thoughts, and relaxes her eyebrows. Without a trace, the morning breeze has come from the east. The Martial Scholar has awakened from the wine, and opened her eyes. She asks, “Why didn’t my brother go to sleep?” The smiling Hengkui replies, “This is all because of you, sister. Seeing your gorgeous face, no one could fall into sleep. Like Mount Wu concealed by twelve auspicious clouds, you are enchanting my heart and taking away my soul.” (28:543)

Previously in the story, Meixian has disguised herself as a man with the name Gui Hengchao, using the same surname Gui as Hengkui. In the above passage, the descriptions of these two “brothers” invite a reinterpretation of *qing* and same-sex love in dynastic China. Dorothy Ko argues that *qing*, rather than focusing on romantic love between men and women, has much broader implication to a seventeenth-century reader, and could encompass friendship between people of the same sex (Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 111). Martin Huang, in a study of *Bian er chai* and *Lin Lanxiang*, argues that the stories emphasize *qing* as reciprocal appreciation and as loyalty or chastity (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* 179). Sophie Volpp, regarding *The Anatomy of Passion*, argues that the text “casts male love as a deviant variant that helps legitimate hetererotic passion (*qing*) as a norm” (Volpp 102). The text stages the dialectics between love (*qing*) and lust (*se*), with *qing* defined against *se*, and illustrates that *se* could also emerge from *qing*. Volpp argues that in the late Ming, *qing* was rendered more akin to love, as an internalized and idealized quality. *Se*, more akin to lust, is more sensual and sexual.

The above passages from *Pomegranate Flowers* stage a women-oriented visual pleasure under the disguise of male homoeroticism, for both Hengkui and Hengchao are in male attire at this moment in the story. Their bond as “brothers” under the same surname Gui guarantees the disguised duo the liberty of sharing the same bed every night and acting intimately toward each other. Their manifest affections for each other even evoke rumors of male homosexual love among the soldiers and other generals (38:750). When enraged by this gossip, the exasperated Hengchao claims that “his” with Hengkui is a tie between *jinlan xiongdi* (golden orchid brothers), rather than any form of clandestine *siqing* (private love).

The term “jinlan xiongdi” could be read as an ironic double entendre in the story. The allusion to *jinlan* or golden orchid, though more popularly appropriated for description of sworn sisterhood, initially comprises implications of both brotherhood and sisterhood. The allusion appears in a passage in 繫辭傳 (*Xici zhuan*, Commentary on the Appended Judgements) in *Zhou yi* 周易, “But when two people are at one in their inmost hearts, / They shatter even the strength of iron or of bronze. / And when two people understand each other in their inmost hearts, / Their words are sweet and strong, like the fragrance of orchid” (Wilhelm and Baynes 59). Likewise the chapter “賢媛” (“Xianyuan,” “Virtuous and Talented Ladies”) in Liu Yiqing’s *A New Account of the Tales of the World* describes the friendship between literati scholars Shan Tao (山濤, 205–283), Ji Kang (嵇康, 224–263), and Ruan Ji (阮籍, 210–263) as “契若金蘭” (“qiruo jinlan,” having a bond as that of gold and orchid, Liu Yiqing 54). In the above example, Hengchao’s application of this allusion is fitting in endorsing the integrity and purity of the disguised brothers’ friendship, but also carries an implication of the gender fluidity of the term *jinlan* in representing same-sex amity, including the concealed sisterhood of the two heroines.

To comfort Hengchao, Hengkui says, “As a man why should you be so particular about courtesy? Why should we be ashamed to be fond of each other in the army? My heart cherishes you my brother as pearls and jade. I vow to be a life-long companion of yours” (38:750). The text recurrently accentuates the *qing*, or pure love between Hengchao and Hengkui, who would both be willing to sacrifice their lives for each other. At the same time, the narrative does not refrain from illustrations of homoerotic sentiments, and lavishly depicts the female cross-dresser Hengchao’s sensual appeal and even sexual charm, eliciting evident admiration from Hengkui, as well as from the targeted female readers. The text bestows the notion of *se* or sexual appeal with a homoerotic dimension, and empowers women (in the diegesis and readers in the inner chambers) with an imaginary agency in appreciating visual pleasures of female same-sex attraction. This women-oriented visual structure differs from the male-centered voyeuristic pleasure in Ming *Qing* depictions of female same-sex intimacies by literati authors (Wang Wenxian). For Hengkui, this “disguise” through brotherhood allows her to explore her female same-sex bond with Hengchao and take this homosocial relationship outside the inner chambers. By substituting brotherhood for her agreement with the hero, she replaces their heterosexual love with a male homosocial relationship, effectively postponing her time to revert to her prearranged marriage.

Li’s *tanci* foregrounds the perspective of Hengkui the cross-dressed libertine, and elicits a dialogical imagination of female homoeroticism comprising *qing* and *se*, with both redefined as women-oriented notions beyond the heteroerotic norm. Martin W. Huang argues that in *Xu Jinpingmei*, lesbian affairs (even involving explicit sexual activities) are only ways to compensate for the absence of man: “Whereas lesbian

qing is celebrated, lesbian *yu* is categorically denounced” (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 196). Huang argues that the appropriation of *qing* serves a dual function. First, “the appeal to *qing* creates a space within which certain deviations from the norm, such as homosexuality, can be tolerated or even celebrated” (198). Also, this tolerance or celebration is “based on the argument that this seemingly deviant behavior, when motivated by genuine *qing*, vindicates the norms, such as chastity, filiality, and polygamy better than the normal behavior can” (199). Same-sex love could become “more normative than the norms if it is motivated by proper *qing*” (199). Huang and Tze-lan Sang apply the term “lesbianism” to describe women’s same-sex sentiments. Wilt Idema and Beata Grant argue that although lesbianism existed in premodern Chinese literature, male and female same-sex relationships are largely “homoerotic” because they were not necessarily exclusive, nor were they considered to be the primary basis for the definition of one’s identity (Idema and Grant 685). This study considers women’s homoeroticism as a more encompassing term for considering female same-sex desires (spiritual and sexual) in the early modern Chinese context. Homoeroticism is an advantageous theoretical concept that allows modern readers access to premodern women’s emotional world, in the following aspects: (1) the dialectics between spiritual love and sexual desire; (2) the triangulated desire between women themselves and their husbands; (3) the reconfiguration of brotherhood or kinship as a vehicle for endorsing women’s homosocial love.

Most late imperial *tanci* fiction emphasizes the spiritual bonds between sworn sisters; the *qing* between women in these texts rarely involves physical intimacy. A well-known example is the disguised Meng Lijun and her sworn sister Su Yingxue 蘇映雪 who ventures to substitute Lijun in an imposed marriage. Some cross-dressed heroines believe that a true companionate marriage can only be achieved through sisterhood or women’s close friendship in the mock unions (Guo 147). *Pomegranate Flowers* inherits this convention by illustrating female same-sex love as a form of love superior to heterosexual love. In contrast with the unbreakable *qing* between Hengchao and Hengkui, male protagonists are prone to be consumed by *se* or lust, that is, sexual desire and external temptations. Hengkui’s fiancé Heng Binyu is obsessed with the thought of taking Hengkui as his bride. A fox spirit, summoned to serve the Liao kingdom on the battlefield, disguises herself as Hengkui and seduces Binyu. Were it not for Hengkui’s intervention, Binyu would have died of sexual indulgence. Another character Luo Jinkui is a liberal and reckless young general who pursues three heroines and takes them all as his wives. By contrast, the text sheds much more light on the love of Hengkui and Hengchao, their sacrifices and mutual support for achieving victories on the battlefield, and in their undertakings in their political careers. The substitution of female same-sex desire through staged scenes of “male” homoerotic love renders the text potentially transgressive. The consummation of the hero’s love for

the disguised heroines is recurrently thwarted; Binyu's role as the future "husband" for Hengkui and Hengchao is reduced to that of a sibling, relieving the heroines from the pressure of marriage.

A prominent example illustrating *qing* between the camouflaged "brothers" is as follows. At the frontier, Hengchao once pardoned a rebel Wang Wei. Later Wang gathered his troops and raised a commotion at the northern border, forcing the emperor to dispatch Binyu to the skirmish. Hengchao was stricken by a stabbing sense of guilt for having pardoned Wang and engaged Binyu in prodigious danger. Burdened with remorse and anxieties, Hengchao fell seriously ill and was approaching death (26:520). Facing death, instead of summoning her blood brother, she gave her last words to Hengkui:

Grateful that brother has rescued me on the way to the frontier, grateful that you have cared for me more than a blood sibling. I hoped to accompany you for the rest of my life, and repay your kindness in the future years. Who could expect that heaven would take away my life, and this illness would separate me from you? Elder brother, please take good care of your health; my brother, please do not lament for my sake. In the other world, my heart shall not wish for anything else; every inch of my soul shall pray for my brother's well-being. (26:521)

Seeing that Hengchao's life is in fatal danger, Hengkui is truly heartbroken. She ponders Hengchao's tender character and laments Hengchao's short-lived life:

We haven't become a couple like the legendary Nongyu 弄玉 and Xiaoshi 箫史, how could I bear the thought of your spirit departing for the immortal realm? When my brother you leave, your face and voice shall grow distant from me, leaving me in anguish in the studio. In the moonlight, by the flowers, you would no longer be there. Though I have thousands of misgivings and regrets, to whom shall I confess? On the path to the Nine Springs please do not forget me, take Hengkui with you and let's travel together. (27:523)

The "brothers" vow that they would wage their lives to save each other from illness or supreme danger. Later Hengkui risks her life three times to protect Hengchao from death. Reciprocally, when Hengkui nearly loses her life on the battlefields, Hengchao attempts suicide to follow "him." Paola Zamperini argues that in dynastic fiction there are heroines who use suicide as a vehicle to convey to eternity the strength of their passions. Death could be an act of passion or assertion of chastity. The above passage implies Hengkui's fidelity toward Hengchao as a lifelong companion. In a despairing attempt to save Hengchao's life, Hengkui cuts off a piece of flesh from her wrist as medicine for Hengchao, as was often practiced between loving couples or by filial

children to save their ill parents. This act cures Hengchao and consolidates their love. When Hengchao recovers, Hengkui teases “him” by suggesting Hengchao marrying “himself.” Thanking Hengchao for his “profuse affections” (*duoqing*), Hengkui proposes, “How about returning to your feminine attire and marry me instead? I shall offer you golden chambers and jade houses, holding you in my mouth and caring for you in my heart. I shall not lose to Heng Binyu in tenderness, and will endow you with the noble title of a lady of honor” (27:535). Such amorous scenes of homoerotic flirtations are plentiful, creating an intense reading pleasure for the audience. Through the homoerotic tensions, the text reconfigures the gaze of the (women) readers, and activates the circulation of desire in and out of the diegesis.

The rivalry between heterosexual love (i.e., Binyu’s love for Hengchao and Hengkui) and women’s homoeroticism ends with Hengkui’s refeminization and marriage with Binyu. The love between the two “brothers,” however, persists as a most important relationship among the characters. The narrative portrays comical scenes of the jealousy of the two heroines when they feel uncertainties about the other’s fidelity. Earlier, the emperor ordains Hengkui to marry a minister’s daughter Zhang Jiangzhi 張絳枝, to whom “he” confesses the secret of cross-dressing. Jiangzhi expresses understanding for Hengkui. Seeing Hengkui’s attachment to the “wife” Jiangzhi, the younger “brother” Hengchao becomes poignantly jealous and falls quite ill. Hengkui finds out about her illness and is to punish Hengchao’s servants for neglecting their duties. Hengchao retorts, “The minor illness of mine does not have any relation with them, it is truly unreasonable to punish them. Everyone says that my brother pities and loves me, yet when I am sick, would you bother to visit were it not for the urge of my parents?” (26:515). Like the lovesick Hengchao, the elder Hengkui is prone to possessiveness. When Hengchao is detained drinking with a female general Zhuqing and returns to Hengkui late, “he” finds “his” elder brother in smothered anger, “How many cups of wine did Zhuqing offer you? Why would you bother to return without drinking to your heart’s content? Why do you care about the affairs in the army at all, you should have stayed at her place and not returned” (33:651). In contrast with the heterosexual relationships when fictional women become invidious competing for men’s affections, the heroines’ jealousy in this example is caused by desire for each other’s companionship. Such jealousy and squabbles suggest Hengkui and Hengchao are as a couple in an impassioned marriage. Whereas atrocious women often represent abject femininity caused by a rivalry for male love, the jealousy of the two “brothers” springs from a women-oriented love, rendered all the more desirable because of emotional contention.

Tze-lan Sang argues, “late imperial Chinese women’s literary creations of same-sex relations cross-gender adventures were constrained by their understanding of the male-female hierarchy and the necessity not to cause a permanent breach of gender norms” (Sang 63). In *Pomegranate Flowers*, the younger brother Hengchao undergoes

refeminization and is married to her fiancé Binyu. The elder Hengkui, determined to never change back to feminine attire, pleads with the new emperor to allow her to guard a province in southeast China and is promoted to become a regional prince. Unwilling to separate from Hengkui, the disheartened Hengchao schemes with Binyu and steals Hengkui's 鐵券丹書 (*tiequan danshu*, iron writ of immunity and cinnabar scripts) to prevent "him" from leaving, and discloses Hengkui's secret of cross-dressing to the emperor. As a consequence, Hengkui is forced into revealing herself as the missing Gui Bifang, and is married to Binyu in a polygamous marriage. Hengchao's "betrayal" of Hengkui's secret is motivated by a desire to maintain their unusual romance through a polygamous marriage. Reminiscent of Li Yu's play *Lianxiangban*, two women in love with each other "can stay together all their lives by serving the same man," with female same-sex desire as a "lubricant for the operation of a male-headed, polygamous family" (Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian* 49). Similar plot could be found in the story "Lianxiang" in Pu Songling's *Strange Tales of a Chinese Studio*, in which a fox lady and a female ghost vie against each other for a scholar's love, yet find each other pitiable and attractive. Eventually both the ghost and the fox spirit are reincarnated as human beings and join the scholar in a polygamous marriage.

Susan S. Lanser insightfully notes in her study of early modern writings on female same-sex relations that these works by male or female authors undertake two ways of imagining the social order. A dominant trend of writings took to what Lanser calls "metamorphic practices that flirt with homonormativity by introducing the possibility of female erotic intimacy but that ultimately reinstate a sex-differentiated and hierarchical status quo" (Lanser, "Bedfellowes in Royaltie" 95). A less common representational strand deploys what Lanser calls "horizontal or leveling practices that emphasize a logic of sameness, promoting the viability or even the superiority of female same-sex bonds" (95). Further, the more conventional metamorphic representations may also bear "a resistant homonormative residue," which challenges "their own attempts to restore a patriarchal order" (95). Lanser's discussion of these trends of representing sapphic companions in early modern English literature strikes a resonant tone in the current discussion of early modern literary depictions of female same-sex desire. Representations of female same-sex love or women's friendship often reinforces the heteronormative relations. Chen Peng observes that the narrative convention of 雙美一夫 (*shuangmei yifu*, two beauties serving one husband), as showcased in 琵琶記 (*Pipa ji*, *The Story of the Lute*) and 兒女英雄傳 (*Ernü yingxiongzhuan*, *The Story of Sons and Daughters as Heroes*), is a discursive construct that, rather than illustrating women as autonomous subjects, reinforces literati scholars' own subjectivities through an imagined affective utopia based on heteronormative relations.

Hu Siao-chen incisively notes that Li's *tanci* carries stronger homoerotic implications among women (Hu, "War, Violence, and the Metaphor of Blood" 278–79). The

metaphor of blood in this *tanci*, Hu argues, simulates the metaphor of tears in *Dream of a Red Chamber* (272). Whereas the sentimental Lin Daiyu is predestined to repay the favor of Jia Baoyu by shedding tears until her life ends, Hengchao's indebtedness to Hengkui for rescuing her life is to be repaid through the return of her blood. The metaphor of blood in *tanci* usually indicates the heroine's desperate response to an utmost emotional crisis or life-threatening danger. At the end of *Destiny of Rebirth*, Meng Lijun's true identity is exposed. She is confronted with the emperor's pressure to become a royal concubine, or to become a wife of Huangfu Shaohua in a polygamous family. Facing the dilemma, she spits blood and falls seriously ill. Here blood represents emotions akin to "grief and righteous anger" and could trigger extreme actions (Bailey 25). In *Pomegranate Flowers*, however, the metaphor of blood is a symbol of feminine homoeroticism as an excessive emotion. When Hengkui is fatally wounded by arrows from a battle and almost loses her life, Hengchao is so grief-stricken that she vomits blood excessively and nearly dies. She laments, "Alas I have only been blessed with my brother's great benevolence and grace, and yet could not die for his sake under the arrows. Brother, do not travel far on the way to the netherworld, take your Hengchao with you as a companion" (31:603). Hengchao feels that "her heart has been cut open by flying knives, blood gushes out from her mouth like waves without stop" (31:603). The compelling scenes of Hengchao spitting blood or suffering fainting spells occur mostly when her relationship with Hengkui is challenged by separations, illness, or anxieties about a rivaling party. Their love is consolidated when Hengkui takes an oath to always accompany Hengchao. She stabs her left wrist, drips her blood into a bowl, and asks Hengchao to drink as a vow for her faithfulness (68:1344). This plot could be considered as an adaptation of the ritual of blood-oath brotherhood into a testament of the emotional fidelity of a female same-sex couple. Another example is the aforementioned passage in which Hengkui cut off a piece of flesh as medicine for the seriously ill Hengchao, with blood dribbling down all over her own body. In these cases, female homoerotic love is endorsed as a morally elevated *qing*; its function to endorse fidelity endows this "aberrant" sentiment with a status equivalent to the norm.

The elastic form of *tanci* in seven-character rhymed lines effectively accommodates such excessive expressions of *qing* between the brothers through elaborated dialogues and rich psychological depictions. When Hengkui is alarmed by a palace revolt and has to leave Hengchao to rescue the emperor, the "brothers" exchange extensive confessions by answering each other's melancholic songs, sharing the same ten 套 (*tao*, suites) and ten 聲 (*sheng*, tunes) of 七弦琴 (*qixian qin*, seven-string zither). Hengkui initiates the song by chanting out "his" feelings to the younger brother, whereas Hengchao responds in the same suites and tunes. The allusion of playing the zither for an appreciative audience, an indicator of male friendship or even a strong male homosocial bond, is appropriated as a token of the "brothers'" private yearnings for each other (also see

discussions about zither and male homosocial bond in Blanchard 40). The melody of the zither provides an occasion of emotional exchange; by singing or harmonizing with their beloved, Hengkui and Hengchao identify each other as companions who can accord internally with themselves. This performative scenario evokes a “queering” aural and reading experience to the private ears of the female audience. Ling Hon Lam argues that the media for realizing literature (be it oral performance or silent reading) affect the way *qing* is interiorized (Lam, “The Matriarch’s Private Ear” 358). Whereas *Pomegranate Flowers* represents a peak moment in the development of women’s written *tanci*, the text’s elasticity transforms the circulation of female homoerotic sentiments into an intermedial experience for audiences in the inner chambers.

Qing, as a leading theme of the novel, embodies a plot device mobilizing the heroine Hengkui’s sojourns between life and death, between the secular world and immortal realm. The conjugal sexual love between husband and wife turns out to be a rather destructive force of *qing* for the heroine Hengkui. In the second half of the novel, after marrying her fiancé Heng Binyu, Hengkui commits herself to Daoist practice and declines intimacy with her husband for nine years. Eventually, the infatuated Binyu could no longer hold his craving, and after making his wife drunk, obtains sexual consummation. Binyu’s transgression almost spoils Hengkui’s attainment through practice and deepens her resentment for 情魔 (*qingmo*, the snare of *qing*). Begrudging Binyu for his lust and frivolousness, Hengkui ponders, “Indeed the love of a married couple is thin as paper, nor do my loving children have more affection. Even though my sister Meixian has profuse love, it is difficult to reveal my secret practice to her. . . . From now on, I shall cut off tens of thousands of threads of *qing*, and speed up my return to the immortal mountains without delay” (332:6539). Having now accomplished her worldly quests and determined to end her life, Hengkui feigns a disease and ceases to take food. As she languishes and approaches death, her daughter-in-law Li Yunzhen, who is adept in alchemy, attempts to make a magic pellet 种情湛露丹 (*Zhongqing zhanlu dan*, “Ingraining *qing* and heavy dew pellet”), hoping to evoke her mother-in-law’s affection for her beloved and her desire for life. Unwilling to succumb to worldly emotions and divert from her path to immortality, Hengkui secretly dispatches her servingmaiden to destroy the pellet when it is still being made. Knowing this, her affectionate companion Mei Meixian blames Hengkui for 薄情 (*boqing*, having shallow *qing*) or 寡情 (*guaqing*, lacking in *qing*), and willfully allows herself to pass away in illness (338:6644). To the reincarnated heroine, *qing*, whether relating to secular desires, conjugal love, or familial bonds, obstructs her pursuit of immortality.

Unlike heterosexual love, which is often associated with male characters’ sexual lust and possessive desire, female same-sex love receives much commendation and admiration in the story, and at times could restore the deceased to life. In comparison with the

cogent and resolute Hengkui, Meixian's character bespeaks *qing* as a vital bond with the mortal and earthly realm. As Hengkui reveals to her, as Hengchao's 情根 (*qing-gen*, the root of emotions) is not eliminated, her recurrent efforts of taking her own life could not take her to the immortal realm. Hengchao's *qing* for Hengkui counters Hengkui's desire for immortality and delays her planned parting from the ethereal world. At Hengkui's death bed, Hengchao confesses, "Since we forged the bond you are my only companion. Wish you enjoy a life of thousands of years. Even if you yearn to become a recluse, you must await my death first" (339:6664). When Hengkui indicates the wish to make Meixian the queen as a successor of herself, Hengchao responds, "Every day that my sister lives is akin to a day of bliss for me. Before the day you depart for heaven, you shall consider me a companion on your path of return. Whether myself a ghost or a fairy, I shall obey your command, and will not let go unless I know your whereabouts. . . . If you intend to conceal your time of passing from me, in the netherworld I shall not let go begrudge against you" (339:6665). Shortly after Hengkui's death, Hengchao first attempts to take her own life by using a sword to slit open her throat, but is rescued. After six months, Hengchao, overridden with grief about losing Hengkui, commits suicide by jumping off a pagoda. Before her death, she composes a letter to the king, explaining her suicide because of her affection (*qing*) for her sworn sister, and expressing her wish to be buried beside Hengkui's tomb. Enclosed with the letter is a poem of hers:

Azure sky, forceful gale, agitated wild geese,
 Across thousands of years, one's *qing* cannot to be dispelled.
 Having entrusted my heart to a knowing companion,
 I might as well pour out hot blood from the jade pagoda. (350:6882)

The narrator laments Hengchao's death as the penultimate manifestation of *qing*, "An unrivaled beauty and one with profuse *qing*, now a soul that grieves the moon and bids weeping cries of cranes. Burning blood gushing down right, her name is long-standing for her exceptional *qing*" (350:6883). This homoerotic bond between the amorous duo is also equated to a love between a couple. At Hengchao's funeral, the narrator takes on the perspective of the grieving sisters of the heroine and illustrates the scene as follows: "Covering the gilded coffin and sealing up the jade vault, ending a long-lasting bond of friendship. Even though the mandarin ducks of wounded wings cannot fly in pairs, the swan geese shall strive to sail in a flock" (351:6892). Irrevocably, at this moment Hengchao and Hengkui, "the enamored sisters become spouses." The images of mandarin ducks and swan geese here, normally embodiments of love and chastity between couples, are evoked to commemorate the pledge of affection between the two.

The text's ramification of feminine homoerotic *qing* through the character of Hengchao could be understood in the following aspects. First, the trope of making the characters' *qing* as a driving force for Hengchao and Hengkui's recurrent sojourns between life and death certainly recalls the eminent playwright Tang Xianzu's defense of *qing*, "What gives birth to love (*qing*) is unknown, but love runs so deep. The living can die for love, and the dead can also come back to life because of love. That which the living cannot die for and for which the dead cannot be resurrected is not supreme love" (Tang Xianzu, "Preface to Peony Pavilion"; Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 44). As Martin W. Huang observes, Tang's strategic association of *qing* to the concept of *sheng-sheng* (perpetual renewal of life) from 易經 (*Yijing, Book of Changes*) authenticates *qing* ontologically (44). *Qing* is "a power that transcends the boundaries of life and death" and "merits celebration as much as life itself" (44). Besides, "*qing* is conceived in opposition to *li* (reason or principle; the metaphysical moral concept in Neo-Confucianism)" (44). In *Pomegranate Flowers*, the devoted Hengchao embodies the enigmatic power of *qing* that transcends moral and ethical norms; the heroine's excessive passion is such that her beloved Hengkui has to hide her design of leaving for immortality. Hengchao's repetitive efforts to take her own life and eventual suicide renders this character the ultimate spectacle of hyperbolic *qing*. Before Hengkui passes away, she attempts to persuade Hengchao to succeed her role as a queen in reigning the palace and give parental instructions to the royal descendants. However, Hengchao's suicide shortly after Hengkui's death indicates her refusal to give up *qing* for the sake of *li*, that is, reason or the moral principle of conduct. Second, the text's strong accentuation of two female cross-dressers' homoerotic *qing* distinguishes itself from other traditional *tanci* that depicts the disguised heroine's firm rejection of heterosexual *qing* (as Meng Lijun in her relationship with the lovesick Huangfu Shaohua), or offers an expansion of *qing* to include men's feelings aside from a couple's conjugal love, such as sympathy and filial passions in Zheng Danruo's *Dream, Image, Destiny*. Feminine homoerotic love in *tanci* fiction is traditionally depicted as an ironized and thus often comical admiration, usually involving the amorous party's misunderstandings of the cross-dressers' true identities. Such scenes may occur between a disguised heroine and her unsuspecting spouse in a mock union, or between a female cross-dresser and other unknowing heroines who are enchanted by the beauty of the effeminate "scholar." These illustrations deftly embed homoerotic nuances in moments of amusing misunderstandings, and do not pose challenges to the heteronormative gender roles. The same-sex love in *Pomegranate Flowers*, in comparison, offers a rather open, explicit, and dedicated depiction of feminine homoerotic sentiment beyond norms. These textual features indicate a much more resolute and self-affirming authorial stance in depicting women's same-sex companionship to a late nineteenth-century audience who were possibly more open and more accepting of fictional same-sex relations.

Homoerotic *qing* in women's "golden orchid" bond underlies the social and emotional interconnections between Hengkui, Hengchao, and Hengkui's many sworn sisters. As she says before her death, "Resting on the pillow I recall my sister, what a weighty pledge we must have made on the Three-Life Stone! In reflection, in this dust world, I have forged bonds with many other than Hengchao! Xiangyu, Qinxian and Yuyu, have all committed themselves to our golden orchid oath. Who doesn't have profuse *qing* and camaraderie? Who has not been entrenched in love and caresses!" (338:6641). Yet knowing Hengchao as one with exceptional benevolence and emotional commitment for her, Hengkui worries about risk of life for her companion, "living my treasured sister in the world, is as vexing as putting a thread through a needle, and is truly difficult to do" (338:6641). Here, the Buddhist allusion to 三生石 (*sansheng shi*, the Three-Life Stone) refers to the stone of three lifetimes, birth, death, and re-birth (Widmer, "Reviewed Work" 205). Yuan Jiao's *Ganze yao* elucidates the reference of "Three-Life Stone" as a symbol of the friendship between a Tang dynasty scholar Li Yuan and a Buddhist monk Yuan Guan Yuan Guan.

A prominent example is the literary heroine Lin Daiyu, who is the reincarnation of the goddess of Crimson Pearl by the banks of the Western spirit river, beside the Three-Life Stone. The Three-Life Stone is therefore related to the illusory site where *qing* is generated. Although the allusion was evoked often to as a bedrock for literary depictions heterosexual love, "Three-Life Stone" originally embodied an ideal of uniting with one's destined companion through reincarnation, because of the two's predestined bond, or 性靈相投 (*xingling xiangtou*, two people's nature and soul as one) (Zhang Manling 46). Hence in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the relation between Baoyu and Daiyu is not based on heterosexual love, but rather evolves from the rhetoric of "*xingling xiangtou*" embedded in the above. The allusion itself does not exclude a space for including homoerotic *qing* as one of the relations between the two predestined companions (46). The allusion is reconfigured to specifically denote homoerotic *qing* between women in *Pomegranate Flowers*. Even though Hengkui has thought of waiting for the end of Hengchao to take her to the immortal realm together, she could not bear the slight and advance from her husband Binyu. Irrevocably, marriage established on heteronormative relations obstructs feminine homoerotic *qing*, rather than allowing a space for it. Unlike Hengchao, who would gladly accept "two wives serving a husband" as a precondition for maintaining her intimate bond with her sister, Hengkui's self-willed and precipitated death indicates a rejection of the traditional option of a polygamous marriage as a veneer for women's same-sex love. A viable space for homoerotic relations, almost as unattainable as immortality itself, could only be found in an imagined feminine utopia.

TRIANGULATED LOVE RELATIONS

The triangulated love relationship between Hengchao, Hengkui, and Binyu invites a new understanding of the polygamous marriage system, and its relationship with feminine love and desire. Frequently, late imperial fictional works display the frustration or failure in establishing a harmonious relationship underlying a polygamous family. In *Story of the Stone*, as Martin Huang rightly argues, the triangular relationship between Baochai 寶釵, Daiyu 黛玉, and Baoyu 寶玉 always involve the two heroines “managing to interrupt each other’s rendezvous with Baoyu” (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* 302). Yu Pingbo, however, proposes Baochai and Daiyu are initially represented through the trope of *chaidai heyi* as duo characters, who were introduced simultaneously and evoked as if “they were two opposing hills and two rivers flowing from the same origin, each presenting their delicateness without surpassing the other” (Yu Pingbo 112). The textual references to moments of sisterhood and female intimacy between Baochai and Daiyu also draw attention to potential implications of female homosociality. Some went further to suggest a homoerotic tension between Daiyu and Baochai. Also the triangular love between the three protagonists has been projected onto the love relationships in the three female opera singers Ouguan 藕官, Ruiguan 蕊官, and Fangguan 芳官. These three opera singers were assigned to serve Daiyu, Baozhai, and Baoyu, creating an implication of character equivalence between them and the main characters they follow. In this light, *The Story of the Stone* projects a feminine homoerotic dimension of interpretation by recasting the protagonists’ love through the three minor feminine characters. This new approach to the triangulated love in the novel allows a recontextualization of fictional depictions of female same-sex intimacy foreshadowing representations of such themes in women’s *tanci* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Dynastic depictions the triangulated love relationship between a husband and his wife and concubines comprise scenes of jealousy and rivalry among the women for the husband’s love. Keith McMahon argues that in dynastic China, the institutionalization of polygamy “projects an illusion that the multiple women would serve one man happily, as if that one man could unite and satisfy them all. In support of that illusion, polygamy invented the ideal wife, the woman who introduced other women to her husband and even loved the concubines as much as the husband did” (McMahon, “The Institution of Polygamy” 932). Whereas this main and domineering wife managed the marital relations of the polygamous family, McMahon rightly points out that rather than eliminating feminine jealousy, this illusion of the ideal wife represents a “good, constructive” jealous that regulates the man’s sexual life and prevents him from sexual indulgence and profligacy (932). The institution of polygamy, according to McMahon, operates on four principles: (1) “the strict distinction between main wife

and the concubines,” (2) “women must not be jealous,” (3) “prohibition against passionate intimacy,” (4) “polygamy could only survive if it observed order, hierarchy, and distribution of effort” (920–22).

McMahon’s work sheds light on how feminine jealousy, rivalry, and conflict with the polygamous institution are reconfigured in women-authored *tanci* fiction. The cross-dressed and then refeminized Gui Hengkui plays the role of the main wife who rescues Binyu when he falls victim to the infatuating and scheming fox spirit and nearly lost his life. Later in the story, Gui Hengkui discovers that a concubine of Binyu’s Liu Xiangqing 柳湘卿 was wrongly accused by Binyu of seducing him before marriage. It was actually a maid of Liu’s who disguises as her mistress to seduce Binyu. Hengkui discovers the truth, and takes pains to persuade Binyu into trusting Liu’s chastity. She goes so far as to arrange the servants to act as haunting ghosts in front of the lying maid, thus making her confess the truth and redeem the innocence of her mistress. These plot arrangements display the refeminized Hengkui taking on the role of the main wife in regulating domestic relations, endorsing chastity and virtue, and maintaining the decorum and the hierarchy underlying the polygamous family system.

The idealized wife’s “jealousy” in a polygamous marriage is very much rewritten. The husband Binyu, like many fictional heroes, displays favoritism toward the bashful and beautiful Meixian (i.e., Hengchao). This favoritism of one concubine is usually considered as threatening to the balance of the polygamous family structure, and should be restrained by the main wife under normal circumstances. However, Hengkui, who painstakingly avoids sexual intimacy with her husband, finds this situation relieving and even encourages Binyu to spend nights with Meixian more often. Feminine jealousy for a male protagonist’s love becomes largely absent except in the case of the misbehaving maid, whose jealousy for the master’s love is represented through a much-ironized tone. Meanwhile, the gentry heroines in the book are preoccupied with another form of rivalry: the competition for the main heroine Hengkui’s affection. The following passage, for example, depicts several female characters who have been all become sworn sisters with the heroine Hengkui, vying against each other for Hengkui’s love. At one point Hengkui decides to take a sworn sister Jiang Qinxian 蔣琴仙 on a trip to pay tribute to the ancestors. Her other sworn sisters Qian Caichun 錢彩春, Long Yayu 龍雅玉, and Heng Qiongqing 恆瓊卿 all expressed covetousness: “Since we are all beloved sisters of golden orchids, why do you discard the old and cherish the new, leaving your Meixian behind?” (72:1416). Hengkui, unwilling to be blamed for being untrue, retorts that it was all because “the faithless Hengchao went against our former agreement” and went back to femininity.

Biyun, with a smile, says, “Indeed Hengkui is ardent and has sincere emotions. In the general’s bed, how affectionate and loving they are to each other! It looks that

Hengkui you are too partial in your love to Hengchao. Sister Long also has forged an orchid bond with you. Between the old and new, why do you favor one and ignore another?" The amused Hengkui replied to the younger Sister Zou, "How could you blame that I have shifted my love to another person? For my dedication in feelings, you should ask Sister Qian, and why she agreed to forge a sworn sisterhood with me on Mount of Nine Heroes. It is Yayu who is frivolous and uncaring. She is infatuated with her husband, and has reduced her affection for me. Even we two are close, it is not easy to see her in person. Even though I suffer from missing her, what could I do after all?" Yayu, smiling, answers, "My dear sister, please do not bother to visit us and make confessions about your profuse love. Your true love is Cousin Mei. How could you have any sincere feelings for the rest of us?" Zhuqing adds an interjection, "Sister Long, what is the need for being envious? What good is there were she really affectionate to us? We would have been jeered and ridiculed by others everywhere. Our reputation will be damaged; our names will never be cleansed." Jiang Qinxian, hearing this, could not hold back her beams, "Indeed your words are true! When Hengchao accompanies Hengkui every night at the Spring Greeting Mansion, all kinds of suspicions and rumors were spread. Hengkui is known as the most enamored one. In my view she gives equally great fondness and anguish to others." (72:1416)

Resonant with the triangulated love relationship between the refeminized Hengkui, Hengchao, and their husband Binyu, the above passage describes Long Yayu, a minor female character, whose marriage evoked envious feelings from her sworn sister Hengkui. The passage illustrates a situation of feminine homosocial affections, facilitated through the "golden orchid bond." The reconfiguration of the "golden orchid bond" in the text facilitates a kind of female same-sex relationship that endorses the heroine Hengkui's autonomous subjectivity. Whereas the disguised Hengkui eschews a heteronormative marriage, friendships and sworn sisterhood allowed her to forge a much more egalitarian bond with other heroines. These rather prevalent "golden orchid bonds" between the fictional heroines—like the bonds between Yayu and Hengkui, Hengkui and Heng Qiongqing, and Hengkui and Jiangzhi—emphasize the affectionate heroines' feminine subjectivity rather than ascribing a masculine to Hengkui or reaffirming her relationship with other women into a heterosexual norm.

Aside from the trio Hengkui, Binyu, and Hengchao, several triangulated relationships in the latter half of the novel continue to illustrate the comical competition between heterosexual love and feminine homoerotics. In such intriguing scenes, the female homoerotic bond is depicted as superior. The heroines engage in such homosocial bonds, whether they are disguised women themselves, or fiancées and brides of the cross-dressers, and are depicted as loyal and chaste characters without exception. Hengkui's adopted daughter Qihui is Binyu and Hengchao's eldest daughter.

To flee from an imposed marriage, she disguises herself as a man named Luo Yufeng and establishes herself as a martial general. She becomes a sworn brother with a disguised female general Geng Yaoguang 耿瑤光, the third daughter of Binyu and his concubine Qian Caichun. As half-siblings of different mothers, the two cross-dressed heroines often share the same bed when resting, under the veneer of brotherhood. However, their fondness for each other evokes strong jealousy from Yaoguang's fiancé Gui Shunying 桂舜瑛, who knows Yaoguang's identity but does not know that Yufeng is also a woman, and suspects the two are having a secret affair. One night, after Yaoguang becomes drunk at a banquet and returns to rest early, Shunying comes in after her, pretending himself to be Yufeng, and tests Yaoguang's relationship with Yufeng by attempting sexual intimacy. Luckily the endeavor is detected by Yaoguang, who in great rage exposes Shunying's rancorous conduct to Yufeng when he returns from the banquet.

This subplot is vital in highlighting the following intriguing aspects of the triangular love relations. First, for the beguiled Shunying, Yufeng is no more than an adopted son of the Heng family. Yufeng's cross-dressed identity causes the ironic misunderstanding of her homoerotic bond with Yaoguang as an incestuous affair between two close siblings, not unlike that of the notorious Lady Wen Jiang and her half-brother Duke Xiang of the Qi. Second, the humiliated Yaoguang insists on defending her chastity by firmly rejecting Shunying's sexual advances and then restating her observation of virginal chastity. This textual detail not only foreshadows Yaoguang's refeminization and marriage with Shunying, but also indicates the asexual nature of Yaoguang's relationship with the disguised Yufeng, affirming that both heroines do not break moral norms in behavior despite their emotional intimacy with each other. Third, in the text, through the voice of Yufeng, the narrator expresses indignation against the inequality between men's and women's gender roles: "The frivolous men are wary and mistrustful, every one of them intent to despise women. Heaven has wronged me and my sister, how could we endure such inhuman maltreatment?" (198:3894). Demonstrably, in this example, the triangulated relationship does not so much illustrate conflicted ideals of marriage and love, but focuses more on deeper prejudice and inequality with regard to the roles of men and women in Confucian gender ideologies.

The contention between heterosexual relations and heroines' homoerotic bond, centrally reflected in the relationship between Hengkui and Hengchao, is recreated in several relationships among younger generations of heroines in the second half of the story. A daughter of a minister Pan Mingxian is betrothed to Yufeng. The king and queen, unaware of this engagement, arranges for Yufeng to take another girl named Jiang Bingzi as his wife. It happens that Bingzi has already been engaged to Yufeng's cousin Luo Yuqi 羅毓奇. The jealous Yuqi, prompted by this incident, injures Yufeng with a sword. One night on the battlefield, the cross-dressed Yufeng was suffering from

this injury during a routine nightly inspection, and “he” has to stop by Mingxian’s camp. Yuqi, who is secretly in love with the beautiful Pan Mingxian, finds out that Yufeng is visiting her and receives tender care from the gentle girl. Not knowing that Yufeng is also a woman, the enraged Yuqi returns to Mingxian, accuses her of risking her chastity before marriage, and taking advantage of the moment, attempts to force a sexual advance onto Mingxian. The insulted Mingxian flees to Yufeng’s camp and tells her about Yuqi’s misconduct. When the enraged Yufeng storms out to look for Yuqi, Mingxian is exasperated that the two’s unavoidable brawl might make the scandal public and ruin her reputation. In the midst of fury and desperation, she seeks to hang herself, but fortunately is rescued. Eventually, Queen Hengkui has to interfere in person as a mediator, to appease the anger of Yufeng and Mingxian, and to deliver appropriate punishment for the bellicose Yuqi.

This triangular relationship between Yufeng, Mingxian, and Yuqi expresses certain ironizing textual nuances. In the rivalry of the brothers, the cross-dressed Yufeng’s true identity is not exposed to others, including her betrothed fiancée Mingxian. Yufeng’s admiration for Mingxian and intimacy with her could be identified as homoerotic in Yufeng’s point of view, as well as in the eyes of the knowing audience, but appears to others as a gendered yearning that is masculine. Second, multiple mechanisms of feminine cross-dressing are embedded in the plot, complicating the gender dynamics in the story. After her engagement with Yufeng, Mingxian herself undergoes cross-dressing, attends and passes the civil exam, and ultimately becomes a military general. As Mingxian establishes her career, Yufeng does not seek to complete their marriage ceremony in order to keep Mingxian’s cross-dressing a secret. This guileful camouflage allows the “groom” Yufeng herself a convenient extended time to keep her true identity secret, though it ultimately triggers Yuqi’s dramatic burst of envy and jealousy. Third, the love between Hengkui and Hengchao is self-identified and reciprocal same-sex love, whereas Binyu’s jealousy encompasses an envy for each of the duo for being the receiver of another’s passionate affection. In comparison, Yufeng and Mingxian’s relationship is much more heteronormative on the surface, and homoerotic nuances are quite hidden and one-directional. Yufeng’s identity takes on a split position as she plays the role of an insulted fiancé when confronted by Yuqi.

René Girard notes that the dynamics of triangular desire, far from being a fixed concept, is a model or “a whole family of models” that “always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations” (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 2). Sexual differences are “mobile, variable, and inessential, whereas the triangular structure is permanent and essential” (*A Theater of Envy* 260). In view of the triangular structure, only certain forms of homosexuality can be described from the point of view of a performative dynamics, suggesting the integration with a more essentialist perspective (see Antonello and Webb). Li Guiyu’s novel expresses multiple modes of triangular

structure that all accommodates feminine homoerotic desire within the Confucian regulations of human relationships. These diverse modes of triangulated desire include: (1) a reconfiguration of the polygamous ideal of “two wives serving one husband,” by intensifying the competition between heterosexual love and women’s same-sex desire, as illustrated in the case of Binyu, Hengkui, and Hengchao; (2) a reinterpretation of women’s wide-ranged “orchid bond,” not merely as sisterhood, but as a spectrum of women’s homoerotic bonds, comprising the intersections and rivalry of multiple heroines striving for an emotional bond with Hengkui; (3) an ironized representation of male rivalry for a heroine, displayed in the case of Yufeng and Yuqi’s conflict about Mingxian’s love, by portraying one of the male characters as a disguised woman in a clandestine bond with the pursued heroine; (4) regarding another trio of Yufeng, Yaoguang, and Yufeng’s half-brother Shunying, the tensions among the three foreground the conflict between heterosexual love and familial bond. The homoerotic bond of the cross-dressed Yufeng and her half-sister Yaoguang comes off askew to the covetous Shunying, who, not knowing that Yufeng is a disguised woman, accuses Yufeng of committing incest with Yaoguang.

The curious and unconventional bonds between betrothed lovers, half-siblings, sworn sisters, and marital companions not only bespeak new forms of intersubjective relations that appropriate and transcend Confucian definitions of social and familial hierarchy, but also invite ponderance about the relation between gender dynamics and the novelistic knowledge in *tanci* fiction by women. The cross-dressed female character, as Hengkui exhibits, may acquire a desirability as an androgynous subject and evoke jealous zeal of possession from admiring parties, including both men and women. This passion for the disguised heroine in the story is channeled through two venues, that is, competitive actions to acquire the subject (as Binyu displays), or an equivalently compelling desire to emulate the subject of desire in order to become her. The disguised Hengkui inspires many of her sworn sisters to cross-dress or explore life as war generals or civil officers. Markedly, feminine homoerotic desire falls into this second category of jealous zeal. The desire to become the cross-dresser activates a “positive jealousy” that helps the supporting female characters break the social and familial confines and accomplish exceptional achievements. Feminine homoerotic desire in the above triangular structures is endowed with a progressive potential that propagates the moral purpose of the novel—in other words, women’s self-empowerment and wide-ranging participation in social affairs and governance of state affairs.

Finally, feminine same-sex intimacies in the text do not exclude the heroines from claiming their moral and ethical integrity, but rather serve as a covert rhetoric that reinforces their stance in terms of chastity and womanly virtue. In the story, the envious male rivals including Binyu, Yuqi, and Shunying invariably attempt to make physical advances to the heroines, and are depicted as avid in sexual desire but rather unwieldy

or downright incompetent in achieving emotional connection and understanding with their beloved. The text's palpable irony indicates that the heroes entranced in heterosexual desire perceive *qing* as a subjective feeling of love itself, and frequently become obsessed with sexual passion. Intriguingly, such belligerences and advances allow the heroines to prove their insistence of virginal chastity (as in the case of the unmarried Mingxian and Yaoguang), or to make known their determination of religious pursuits (as in the case of Hengkui). Masculine cardinal desire in this regard carry a twofold function in the plot. First, it promotes a moral defense for heroines in same-sex bonds, and assuages the tensions between adventurous characters' personal actions and the social paradigms that they inevitably operate in, proving that such exceptional sentiments do not seek to break certain cultural boundaries. Second, the text emphasizes the distinction and interplay of *qing* and *se*, demonstrating feminine homoerotic love as a form of sublimated, emotionalized desire superior to carnal lust. If plot could be considered as "a dynamics of desire," as Patricia Meyer Spacks observes in *Desire and Truth*, the text's undertaking, in addition to illuminate the exuberance of desire beyond the heteronormative regime, is still to moderate desire, particularly feminine same-sex longing for the moral approval by other characters in the diegesis, as well as the implied readers of the book.

FEMALE HOMOSOCIALITY AND FEMININE UTOPIA IN CONTEXT

Feminine homosocial bonds in early modern Chinese contexts, as discussed above, could be engaged in a productive dialogue with a cross-cultural exploration of homosociality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (Sedgwick 696). Sedgwick further points out that the "diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women . . . than for men. . . . The apparent simplicity—the unity—of the continuum between 'women loving women' and 'women promoting the interests of women,' extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms, would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males" (697). Sedgwick's discussion invites a reconsideration of the patriarchal familial hierarchy depending on and reinforcing "interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (697). Women's homosocial relations, on the other hand, call attention to the "intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations" that links "lesbianisms

with other forms of women's attention to women: the bonds of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women's friendship, 'networking,' and the active struggles of feminism" (697). Based on these discussions, Sedgwick proposes that the concept of "homosocial" does not need to be dichotomized as against "homosexual," but could "intelligibly denominate the entire continuum" (697).

The above discussion is largely based on recontextualizing feminine homosocial bonds in dialogue with male homosexuality studies, and on delineating the relations between homosociality and homosexuality. Dynastic Chinese literature, history, and culture could provide records and narratives of female homosociality that eloquently expand modern and Anglophone theoretical discourses about this subject. To begin with, literary women's friendship in early modern China could contribute to the current study of feminine homosociality beyond that of female same-sex desire. The expanding literacy of women writers of the late imperial China (from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century), as Paul S. Ropp states, "helped to popularize the ideals of romantic love, and to raise women's expectations regarding marriage and their active participation in creative cultural activities" (Ropp, "Love, Literacy, and Laments" 107). Literate women experienced the conflict of their own hopes and aspirations with the patriarchal family system. Some chose to respond to these conflicts or raise questions about social constraints on women in general (107). As early as the Wei Jin period, women developed communities to participate in religious activities such as learning the Buddhist scriptures and paying ritualistic tributes. Female religious communities provided spiritual comfort as well as material assistance for participating women. With the rise of Confucian orthodox thoughts in the Song dynasty, such female religious communities gradually vanished. Women were largely confined to domestic activities. By the seventeenth century, Ropp observes, "commercial expansion, the growth of printing, and the rise of an urban entertainment culture, especially in such urbanized areas as the lower Yangtze valley, provided women (both as courtesans and as gentry wives) with increased opportunities for literacy, self-awareness and in some cases, economic independence" (108). Thanks to the rise of the talented women's culture and a transformed social environment, some learned women were able to develop communities of their own among female relatives and friends. Such earlier forms of women's community allowed women wider socialization and display of artistic talent through family-based exchanges.

Such supportive networks of women's authors were often supported by sympathetic male relatives or friends, though the general culture displayed ambivalence or indifference to women's literary undertakings. Examples of such family-based women's literary communities include the reputed Ye family, consisting of poet Shen Yixiu (沈宜修, 1590–1635) and her daughters Ye Wanwan (葉納納, 1610–1632), Ye Xiaoluan (葉小鸞, 1616–1632), and Ye Xiaowan (葉小納, 1613–1657). Other notable women's

family-based networks include the Huanhua Poetry Club (浣花詩社, *Huanhua shishe*) in Sichuan; the Nine Women of Lixiang in Jian'An, Fujian (荔鄉九女, *Lixiang jiunü*); the Ten Ladies of the Dong Family (董十媛, *Dong shiyuan*) in Jiading, Jiangxi; the Six Talented Women of the Zhang Family in Jiangsu, among others. With the expansion of women's activities through travel and social interactions, formal literary communities of women came into being. An important poetry exchange club is 蕉園詩社 (*Jiaoyuan shishe*, Banana Garden Poetry Club), consisting of poetesses Xu Can (徐燦, 1610–1678), Chai Jingyi (柴靜儀, fl. mid-seventeenth century), Zhu Rouze (朱柔則, 1662–1722), Lin Yining (林以寧, 1655–after 1730), Qian Fenglun (錢鳳綸, 1662–1722), and others. Similar networks include 清溪詩社 (*Qingxi shishe*, Clear Creek Poetry Club) and the female disciplines of the Sui Garden. Gentry women's literary clubs not only endorsed and extended the mother-daughter legacy in practices of family learning, but also allowed women to develop friendships and social connections beyond the domestic sphere. These networks allowed educated women to compose and exchange poems to celebrate feminine friendship.

As scholars pointed out, in Ming dynasty literature the shared interest in literary and artistic pursuits is often portrayed through male-female relations between literati and courtesans, whereas in Qing writings, such male-female relations were often portrayed through the intellectual and spiritual companionship of husbands and wives. Ropp argues that the growing literacy of women in Qing possibly contributed to the “development of intellectual and emotional intimacy, especially between gentry husbands and wives” (Ropp, “Love, Literacy, and Laments” 109). However, literary friendship and companionship in the abovementioned circumstances are largely depicted as between men and women. Women's poetry clubs and literary networks of the Ming and Qing allowed some space for female authors to endorse feminine friendship or even articulate intimate feelings and emotions. Some women's poems expressed passionate emotional dedication to their bosom friends. It should be noted that women's language still very much conditioned by the conventional discourses of the male-female companionship. In rare cases when female friendship or intimate bonds were described, authors resorted to the formulaic expressions or languages typical in the literary exchanges between literati and courtesans, or between husbands and their companionate wives, creating textual ambivalences about voice and gendered subjectivity. Textual ambivalence creates a space for feminine homosocial readership, by allowing women to articulate female friendship through the language of the male-female emotional expressions. Women's homosocial connections transcend the heteronormative expressions of *qing* in conventional poetic expressions of love, intimacy, and desire. The careful appropriation of male-female poetic formulas and negotiations with textual ambivalences granted women certain kind of freedom in foregrounding their affections for each other.

The rise of women's *tanci* fiction in the late Ming and Qing shared many similarities in context with the development of women poets' literary networks. First, similar to the late Ming family-based traditions of women authors' communities, there was a strong mother-daughter legacy. Quite a number of women *tanci* authors expressed their writing purposes as to please their mothers-in-law or articulate filial love. The reputed *tanci* work *Jade Bracelets* was coauthored by a mother and her daughter. The *tanci* author Zheng Danruo authored the famous nineteenth-century work *Dream, Image, Destiny*. Her daughter Zhou Yingfang (周穎芳, ?-1895) later authored another *tanci* fiction (*Story of a Devoted Son*). Dissemination of *tanci* fiction by women was sometimes passed down by women to their female descendants in the family. *A Tale of Vacuity*, for example, was passed down orally to the daughter of the author Wang Oushang, who also preserved the hand-copied version of the novel by the author herself. Hu Xiao-chen rightly pointed out that these feminine traditions of writing, chanting, reading, or teaching *tanci* tales by mothers and daughters refracted and enriched the dynastic traditions of 母教 (*mujiao*, or mother's instructions) and endorsed the material authority in the domestic sphere.

Second, the circulation of *tanci* fiction by women in the inner chambers relied on women's networks, which were through female relatives, friends, or mentor and discipline relationships. These broad networks of women readers provided psychological support and encouragement for the authors' writings, and often were reflected in women's prefaces, congratulatory poems, or even editorship of their beloved *tanci* fiction authors. Niu Ruyuan 鈕如媛, who was the sister-in-law of Zhu Suxian, composed a preface for Zhu's *tanci* novel *Linked Rings of Jade* and provided endorsement of Zhu's literary talent through the perspective of a close family member. Yu Zhang offered a study of a case of interfamily *tanci* reading and writing between Zheng Danruo, Zhou Yingfang, and Judaoren 橘道人, the author of *A Tanci to Please My Mother-in-Law*. Yu Zhang insightfully argued that in the Ming Qing period, educated women from gentry families had relied on family networks to develop a "shared community of womanhood" in which women "treated the practice of reading and writing as a significant moment of the female experience" (Yu Zhang 21). This shared community of women authors and readers could contribute to a collective process of writing and revising the *tanci* works that were attributed to a certain author's name.

Third, related to this feminine social community supporting literate women's writing activities, Ming Qing women also took to active editing and anthologizing to make female writers' works available through publication. Kang-i Sun Chang's pioneering 1992 study called attention to a dozen anthologies of women's poetry and anthologies that contained wide selections of women's poetry. The compiling of these anthologies reflects the collaborative efforts of both men and women in preserving women's writings. Building on Chang's study, Grace S. Fong puts forth the important queries about

the implications of the late imperial anthologizing of women's poetry and the role of "these gender-specific anthologies" in "participating in the process of canon formation" (Fong, "Gender and the Failure of Canonization" 130). Fong argues that "the prevalent hermeneutics of the everyday in women's poetic practice in the Ming and Qing periods had a counter-effect to canon formation. This was the case in spite of, or even because of, the exponential increase in the number of women writing poetry in the last five hundred years of the late imperial era" (130–31). Fong observes that "the collapse of the canonization process from the late Ming on is related to the increasingly quotidian and personal function of poetry in the widening literacy of the late imperial period" (131). Chang's and Fong's studies on the failure of canonization of women's poetry since the late Ming shed much light on women authors' own efforts of participating in the editing and publication of written *tanci*, which was a gender-specific vernacular genre largely outside the canon. Ellen Widmer offers a groundbreaking study of female *tanci* writer and editor Hou Zhi (1764–1829), her *tanci* work *Remaking Heaven*, and overlapping aspects of this work with Li Ruzhen's novel *Flowers in the Mirror* (see Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book* 70–101).

Hu Siao-chen, in her 1998 article, argues that Hou Zhi had taken on both the position of a *tanci* writer herself as well as a reader of the time in her editing practices. Hu studies Hou's criticisms of the moral limitations of Chen Duansheng's *Destiny of Rebirth*, her sequel to Chen's work *Heroes of the Golden Chambers*, and her own *tanci* titled *Remaking Heaven*. These activities of Hou Zhi, Hu suggests, reflected a difference in Hou's own subjective positions as an editor, author, and reader, as well as a collective horizon of expectations shared by the talented women's communities in the mid-Qing period (see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*). Further, representative works among women's *tanci* fictions from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries frequently foreground a feminine "implied readership" by appealing for moral and psychological support from them, seeking their criticism and suggestions, or evoking compassion about women's hardship in literary pursuits.

Women's literary, familial, and social networks in late imperial China could have inspired and supported women *tanci* authors' creative endeavors, and their construction of a feminine readership. A situated reading of *tanci* novels by women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in light of the above contexts, suggested productive directions to assess and evaluate contribution of women's *tanci* fiction in gender and sexuality studies. Sedgwick evokes Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy "in terms of 'relationships between men' in making the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men" (Sedgwick 711). Sedgwick further suggests that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an

inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (711). According to Sedgwick, that this mechanism potentially provides the ground for “ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or intensively structured combination of the two” (711). On the one hand, Sedgwick’s study draws heavily from the studies on same-sex love and female homosocial world in the late eighteenth- to twentieth-century Europe and America, and does not address directly the complex implications of patriarchy, gender, and sexuality in dynastic Chinese context. A comparative approach allows the current study to revisit the implications of “patriarchy” in Ming Qing Confucian orthodox discourses with a fresh theoretical reflexivity. Women’s networks, clubs, and exchanges in the Ming Qing period created a social and cultural condition, and allowed literary definitions and recreations of love and marriages on women’s own terms. Accordingly, the literary products of this more open and encouraging environment in poetry, drama, and *tanci* fiction contained depictions of feminine immortality, women’s religious agency, cross-dressing and masquerade in borrowed masculinity, feminine military agency, friendship, sisterhood or disguised “brotherhood” between cross-dressers, and even same-sex desire and homoerotics.

Li Guiyu’s *Pomegranate Flowers* possibly provided a textual extension of women’s social, familial, and literary communities through its depictions of feminine utopia via its mythical narrative frame. The novel depicts an imagined feminine utopian sphere called 群芳仙界 (*qunfang xianjie*, The Immortal Realm of the Flower Goddesses), under the leadership of 碧霄 (Bixiao, Blue Sky), alternatively called the “Master of the Cave of the Flower Goddesses” (Qunfang dongzhu). Bixiao has two sisters 瓊霄 (Qiongxiao, Jade-like Sky) and 素霄 (Suxiao, Clear Sky). The names of the three sisters originated from the classic collection of mythology stories 封神榜 (*Fengshenbang*, *Investiture of the Gods*), published during the Ming, though bearing no direct connection to the tales in the volume (see Qiu Jin 2015). Under the leadership of Bixiao, this utopian realm is governed by goddesses, fairy ladies, and maidens at their respective heavenly posts. Four goddesses are in charge of deciphering Daoist classics and composing annals, in order to pass along the histories to the enlightened heroines when they return to the heavenly realm after completing their journeys in the mortal world. The realm was also governed by four sword goddesses, several temporary, inferior female spirits practicing alchemy, as well as honorable fairies, servants, a deer spirit, and a converted fox spirit, among others. This realm under Bixiao’s governance is out of the bounds of Penglai Island and on Mount Jiuhua above Yingzhou. The vast realm of Mount Jiuhua, with numerous caves, is the ideal site for the socialization of female immortals and their bosom sisters. Among the fairies who have been associated with Bixiao and her subordinates, there are Magu 麻姑, Qingnu 青女 and Heng’e 嫦娥, the two fairies of Mount Tiantai, the Eight Daoist Immortals of Penglai, the fairy maid Hanhuang 寒簧, and Dong Shuangcheng 董雙城, who is the maid for the

Queen Mother of the West. Depictions of feminine mythical or religious utopias in *tanci* novels are prevalent. Zheng Danruo's *Dream, Image, Destiny*, a work completed in the mid-nineteenth century, shortly before *Pomegranate Flowers*, portrays twelve flower goddesses who descend to the human world to transform social customs and endorse virtue, and eventually reunite in the celestial realm and live in eternal joy together.

Zheng's *tanci* particularly highlights the talented and chaste heroines' rectification of *qing* beyond secular interpretations of love and romance, but rather as embodiment of women's filial passions, virginal chastity, and dedication to sworn sisterhood. However, although the characters' celestial roots occasionally allow them certain access to assistance from heavenly agents, the shared fates of the heroines are ridden with personal suffering, sacrifice, death from illness, or even suicide. The feminine utopian realm does not provide as many interventions and rescues from calamities through *deus ex machina* in the characters' secular lives, though it does promise an ultimate moral reward for the heroines with immortality in heaven. In comparison, in *Pomegranate Flowers*, the feminine immortal agents are depicted as more frequent forces of intervention in plot development, adding a stronger melodramatic element to the book's narration. This feminine celestial realm, akin to a literary mirage of a women's community, maintains active exchanges and interactions with itinerant legendary female immortals.

This mythical all-women realm in *tanci* invites a reconsideration of women's literary utopia in late imperial and early modern China. Women's literary utopias, as Qingyun Wu insightfully argues, can be seen at two levels: "as the expression of timeless, universal dreams of the impulse for women to escape and transcend patriarchy, or as the manifestation of the goals of specific women's movements" (Qingyun Wu 2). Wu herself focuses on the first level in her comparative study of late imperial and modern Chinese literature and western feminist utopian fiction. Wu observes that Qiu Jin's *Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird* (1905) articulated the cross-cultural impacts of Western ideals of modern utopia on the traditional genre of *tanci* (Wu Qingyun 153). Regarding *鏡花緣* (*Jinghuayuan, Flowers in the Mirror*), authored by Li Ruzhen (李汝珍, 1763–1830), as a feminist utopian novel, Wu suggests that Li's novel envisions two kinds of separation from the patriarchal world: "sex-role reversal, as in the Country of Women; and spiritual transcendence, as represented by Little Penglai—a Daoist utopia" (Wu Qingyun 90). The closure of *Pomegranate Flowers* poses a similar stance by envisioning the Daoist utopia in Penglai as a prototypical feminine space that not only grants women characters a form of embryonic autonomy outside the patriarchal social system, but a cosmic abode that exists *before* and *after* the immortal heroines' predestined sojourns to the human world. Whereas the late eighteenth-century *tanci* author Chen Duansheng foresees the ideal of a feminine utopia as women's destiny,

more than half a century later, *Pomegranate Flowers* has articulated a much more explicit and progressive desire for female solidarity, gendered autonomy, as well as social and political agency through the illustrations of a wide spectrum of valiant and extraordinary heroines. Feminine networks through sisterhood, friendship, disguised brotherhood, and mock unions, on the one hand, facilitate expressions of women's same-sex yearnings, and on the other hand, functions as women characters' central alliances in social, political, and military endeavors to govern government affairs, appeasing political chaos and defending the nation on the battlefield. It should be noted that in this book, feminine same-sex alliances, rather than being a means for women to flee from the feminine condition in a patriarchal environment, also carry the potential to reform the social reality in which the characters live.

CONCLUSIONS

Whereas the current chapter could not completely discuss the rich textual nuances and the myriad articulations of female homoeroticism in Li Guiyu's work, a revisit of the authorial reinvention of *qing* is proved to be productive in highlighting the text's creative facilitation of feminine same-sex desire through the disguise of "brotherhood," drawing attention to the dramatized, plenteous, and triangulated circulations of women-oriented desire. The centrality of women's desire for women in the story of *Pomegranate Flowers* breaks new ground in written *tanci* traditions' renovation of gender and sexuality representations, by depicting feminine homoerotic relations in rivalry with conventional heterosexual love. Instead of entirely reproving women's same-sex desire in depiction of the heroines' bond, the textual illustrations provide ample examples in which spiritual love is engaged in dialectical interplay with sexual attraction between enamored heroines. The manifold intersecting and gendered relations of the character, on the one hand, bespeak a recurring rivalry between male-oriented heterosexual desire and women's homoerotic relation, and the conflicting discursive gendered paradigms of love, marriage, and companionship beneath characters' surges of jealousy, covet, and melodramatic strife. On the other hand, gender dynamics consistently negotiate with, evade, or rewrite heteronormative relations through the characters' articulations of emotional excess, clashes over unreciprocated love, trials of sexual identities, and confrontations about moral precincts of one another. Li's *tanci*, in comparison with earlier *tanci* works, takes on a much more self-affirming stance by reclaiming women's homoerotic affection a moral and ideological position equivalent and frequently superior to heterosexual desire in providing true spiritual companionship and support for women.

Also, this study evokes cross-cultural comparisons of studies on early modern European women's same-sex relations in literary representations and historical accounts. A study of early modern Chinese literary manifestations of women's homoerotic desire could be considered in light of what Lee Edelman has identified as "an epistemological impasse," "an encounter with *what can't be assimilated to any systematic understanding*" (in Dinshaw, Edelman et al., 181, 188). Susan Lanser proposes to shift "the emphasis from studying lesbian history to studying 'lesbian' and 'history' as mutually constitutive" (Lanser, *The Sexuality of History* 9). Peter Coviello focuses on identifying "the very obliquities between past and present from which we might stand to learn something important—and something more, perhaps, than that the past, like the present, is always already queer" (Coviello 395). Building on these discussions, Valerie Traub makes the incisive observation that the elucidations of diverse articulations of female desire and sex in early modernity come "before identity and the formation of modern forms" of queer identity, but ironically appear "*not queer enough*" to be included as research objects in the study of the supposedly modern-only identities such as "the lesbian" (Traub 280, author's emphasis). Women's homoeroticism in *tanci* fiction provides a valuable and thought-provoking case for gender and sexuality studies in that it elides the definitions of established discursive paradigms, and yet foreshadows manifestations of modern modes of feminine same-sex desires and experiences, and thus richly contributes to our understanding of the historiography of feminine homoeroticism in the early modern world through the lens of dynastic women's literary creations. The question at stake is not merely to redefine *tanci* heroines' homoerotic desires vis-à-vis early modern queer expressions in a global context, but rather to reconsider these women's narratives as an inspiration to initiate a more contextualized epistemological, historical, and methodical renovation in our understanding of early modern same-sex intimacies.

Chapter Three

GENDER, SYNCRETISM, AND FEMALE EXEMPLARITY: JIN FANGQUAN'S *QIZHENZHUAN* (A TALE OF EXCEPTIONAL CHASTITY)

EVOKING THE ENDURING themes of love affinities and heavenly mandate, earthly desire and celestial aspirations, 奇貞傳 (*Qizhenzhuan*, A Tale of Exceptional Chastity, self-prefaced 1861) tells the story of a disguised heroine who by fate survives death three times and whose outstanding moral integrity is deemed as worthy of endorsing illustrations by historians. The author is identified in the self-preface as E'Hu Yishi (鵝湖逸史, Leisurely Scholar by the Goose Lake), which is the artistic name of female writer Jin Fangquan. The only copy of this text is a version at Shanghai City Library, which was hand-copied by multiple people. The *tanci* work contains twenty *juan* in fourteen volumes. Consisting of 1,543 hand-copied pages, the length is at least 360,000 words. The work contains both fictional narration and traditional seven-character rhymed lines, as well as two examples of 攢十字 (*cuan shizi*), or ten-character compositions, a form of poetic writing in three-seven-character rhymed lines, which also appeared in earlier *tanci* works such as Zhu Suxian's *Linked Rings of Jade*. In the narrative tradition of women's written *tanci* fiction, *Qizhenzhuan* adapts

some established narrative motifs but also opens up new ground for innovative interpretations of orthodox values in terms of personal emotions, moral integrity, and the legitimacy of women's literary pursuits. As highlighted in the title, 貞 (*zhen*) or chastity is a central theme. The author draws from and rewrites the cult of faithful maidens by endowing female chastity with the value and status of a penultimate feminine virtue. Chastity, rather than being treated merely as the usual case of a maiden's passionate display of devotion to a deceased fiancé through suicide or celibacy, could be a vehicle channeling the heroine's greater devotion to express filial love, political loyalty, moral fortitude, or aspirations of social justice. The story transforms the Confucian ethical code of chastity into a women-oriented moral disposition and competence, envisioning chastity or *zhen* as a principle moral ambition of governing-class women.

Celibate, strong-willed, or deeply religious heroines in previous *tanci* works, like Meng Lijun in *Destiny of Rebirth*, sometimes draw criticisms that these disguised heroines lack *qing* or sincere emotional devotion to their fiancés, parents, and others around them. *Qizhenzhuàn*, however, surpasses previous works by explicitly reclaiming *qing* as one of the heroine's principle qualities. Rather, the heroine receives frequent endorsement for being *duoqing* or having abundant emotions and feelings. The plot is laced with plentiful examples in which the disguised heroine displays her love and desire—or even feminine jealousy and envy—when her fiancé marries Princess Yunhe. In addition to depictions of the female character as one of reason and passion, the text illustrates the heroine's affective competences in filial love for her parents, female friendship or 閨情 (*guiqing*) with her “wife” in the mock union, love and sympathies for her cousin and sibling, and ultimately loyal affection for the emperor. The heroine Ziyong's plan of cross-dressing is first known and supported by the wife of her cousin, with whom she maintained an intimate friendship since her childhood. The text reveals their close relationship in the inner chambers as an example of *guiqing* or female friendship. Xianzhen used to spend some time during her childhood with her cousin's family reading, embroidering, and playing chess games with her sister-in-law Madam Lu: “Together we took to embroidery by the green gauzed windows, and spent the long evenings playing chess and reading poetry scrolls” (4:19). *Qing* is a comprehensive emotional disposition or temperament that speaks to and represents the heroine's moral sensibility that corresponds to her genuine emotional state. Thanks to this inherent sincerity and genuineness, *qing* is an indispensable part of the heroine's self-cultivation.

Besides, *Qizhenzhuàn* offers reflexive considerations of debates about femininity. Evoking the controversial paradox of female talent and fate, the text displays incongruous stances on the subject. Plot arrangements and characters' destinies display me-les and sufferings of female characters caused by their exceptional literary or artistic talent. The authorial insertions project a cautionary voice for women readers who are committed to reading and poetry writing. The text endorses the heroine's extraordinary

talent, which grants her a life of eminence and even a place in historical chronicles. The text presents women engaged in family learning under the mentorship of female relatives or teachers in the inner chambers. The story also addresses the question of beauty and fate, reflecting on beauty as inducing calamities to women as well as on narcissism as a moral flaw that contributes to afflicted destiny.

C. T. Hsia insightfully comments that two major premises could be found in traditional Chinese fiction writers' depiction of reality: "their total acceptance of life in all its glory and squalor and their strong sympathy for the individual's demand for self-fulfillment," or rather, a "dual affirmation of life and the self" (Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* 20). Although *tanci* fiction receives much less scholarly attention in comparison with Ming Qing canonical fictional works, such tensions and dialectics between life and selfhood, social demands and individual aspirations could likewise be found as underlying principle themes in *tanci* novels. In particular, readers are presented with women authors' sympathetic representations of female talent and a cautionary stance against women's learning, an ironic depiction of a beautiful heroine's aggrieved destinies versus the formulaic and brimming endorsement of beauty as part of the exemplary character's social and individual competency and power. The inconsistent writerly and textual ideological stances in defining femininity in *tanci* certainly recall Hsia's observation that "some of the best Ming and Ch'ing novels are intellectually exciting precisely for their embodiment of various attitudes in a state of unreconciled tension" (20). The text's inconsistencies, and the constant negotiations between ostensibly paradoxical parameters, whether of beauty, talent, virtue, or chastity, are representative of a "syncretism" in imagining an early modern femininity.

Jin's *tanci* evokes rich intertextual readings with other late imperial women's works beyond the *tanci* genre. Yang Binbin argues that dynastic women resorted to their writings to promote themselves as female exemplars of feminine virtue "defined precisely by their kinship roles" (Yang Binbin 10). Their writings "produced records of their self-promoting strategies and their assertion of moral authority" (10). Writing for women writers could provide "a certain path to immortality" achieved through lasting moral repute or literary achievement. Yang observes that such feminine self-expressions in women's writings could allow women authors to garner power and creative vigor through their negotiations with and appropriations of orthodox discourses of feminine exemplarity, and thereby achieve the effect of "resignifying the power discourse with subversive citations from within" (13). Yang argues that dynastic heroines as gendered subjects should be understood "through the prism of the *relational, role-based self* rather than by the standards of the *autonomous, egoistic self* in the Western philosophical traditions" (14). Yang's work provides an expedient analytical method for the study of Jin's *tanci* and its exploration of femininity, as defined by the traditional kinship system and her stratagem in justifying the heroines' moral and intellectual

self-cultivation in the story. Jin's work makes important contributions to the study of early modern women's self-representations of exemplarity because of its articulation of a syncretistic early modern femininity through the conceptual apparatus of the Confucian familial and social discourses.

WRITING IN EXILE

Among current scholarship in Chinese and English, critic Zheng Zhenwei's pioneering book offers two chapters on the authorship of this *tanci*, as well as its content. Other than in Zheng's book, *Qizhenzhuàn* remained unaddressed in *tanci* fiction studies. It was not included in *Tanci xulu* edited by Tan Zhengbi and Tan Xun, nor is it included in the works cited in Bao Zhenpei's bibliography of women-authored *tanci*, or in Zheng Zhimei's comprehensive bibliography of *tanci* works remaining today. Jin Fangquan is largely unknown to most researchers and readers. Other than four poems anthologized in several Qing poetry collections, little information could be found about her. Tracing Jin's publications in print media, Zheng Zhenwei identified twenty-four writings of diverse genres authored by Jin Fangquan published in *Shenbao* from November 1879 to June 1882. These poems vary in topic and content, including a lamenting poem about a deceased friend, a poem describing gathering with relatives, a poem on a certain suicided chaste widow, a portrait of her two early deceased daughters and a lamenting poem on the portrait, a poem to a female friend, a poem on a filial daughter, a poem composed for exchange with a female friend, among others (Zheng Zhenwei 165–66). These additional works by Jin are important sources for today's readers to perceive Jin's social network, her personal aesthetic and moral ideals, as well as women's literary activities within their local literary societies consisting of family relatives and close female friends. Based on some of Jin's commentating poems on another *tanci* work titled *Blossoms from the Brush*, published in *Shenbao*, Zheng Zhenwei discovers Jin's seminal *tanci* text. This research finding makes a groundbreaking contribution to the study of late imperial women's *tanci* fiction as well as dynastic Chinese women's literature in a broader dimension.

Jin's work could be considered as a seminal example of *tanci* by women, who through composing and depicting the politically polemical Taiping Rebellion era, find new social mobility beyond the inner chambers and new spaces of self-articulation (for discussions on the traumatic impacts of the Taiping Rebellion on families and communities, see Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*). Writing in the time of 亂離 (*luanli*, chaos and exile) allows Jin, along with other authors such as Zheng Danruo and Wang Oushang, to expand their writing subjects to warfare and exile, trauma and nostalgia, not merely to borrow and expand upon these themes that are often privileged topics in literati writings, but to introduce a gender-specific perspective in renovating

a fictional tradition of wartime realism. As exemplified in Jin's *tanci*, wartime realism transcends a traditional literary and aesthetic view of art as an imitation of reality. Rather than capturing war scenes and political chaos in the real world, Jin's work displays a fictional renovation of social and historical reality through the narrative art of *tanci*. In reflecting on the larger question of realism in traditional Chinese fiction, Maram Epstein incisively observes that the representation of gender in the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* could be deemed one of the "most realist" in traditional novels and was even "frequently cited as a source for historical studies of women and gender in eighteenth-century China" (*Competing Discourses*, 60). However, such "realist" representation transcends "mimetic description" (60). Instead, realism in such fictional works should be understood in terms of the texts' "structural and ideological uses of gender," and "the competing aesthetic and moral truths promoted by orthodox rhetoric and the cult of sentiment (*qing*)" (60). The realistic elements in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are rather "built on a rich foundation of narrative conventions" (60). A similar stance of interpreting realism as an aesthetic mode of expression is articulated by James J. Y. Liu in *Chinese Theories of Literature*. Marston Anderson observed that in the modern Chinese literary imagination, realism represents how authors utilized "frankly reflexive elements in their writings" in their collective endeavors to "remake their literary culture" at the failure of political reform (Anderson 3–4). The current examination of women's *tanci* fiction composed during and after the Taiping Rebellion period makes a resonant endeavor to understand realism in terms of early modern writers' artistic responses to war and traumatic experiences, and in particular, the suffering of women in the nineteenth century.

The story takes place during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Ming. A heroine named Yang Xianzhen, whose courtesy name is Liqing, is a reincarnated 瑤花仙史 (*Yaohua Xianshi*, or Goddess of Jade Flowers). Her fiancé, Liang Qi, is originally an immortal Star of Military Arts. Liang's wife, Princess Yunhe 雲和, is the reincarnation of 玉女 (*Yunü*, or Jade Goddess). The three immortals, because of misconduct, are banished to the human world to seek redemption for their misdeeds. Yang Xianzhen 楊仙貞 is born as the daughter of Yang Chaodong 楊朝棟, a chief prosecutor in Nanchang. At fourteen, she is engaged to Liang Qi 梁錡, son of Liang Tingxian 梁廷顯, the governor of Jiangxi province. It happens that Liang Tingxian offends the treacherous Prince Ning and the eminent eunuch Liu Jin 劉瑾, and is wrongly accused of corruption and blasphemy against the emperor. His family property is confiscated, and he is imprisoned. Prince Ning, while confiscating the properties of the Yang household, catches a glimpse of Yang's daughter, Xianzhen, and is instantly enchanted by her beauty. He presses Xianzhen to become his concubine, and he promises that in exchange he will drop the charges against her father and release him from prison. Though she is already betrothed to Liang Qi, she gives her consent to the prince, eager

to save her father's life. Having determined to commit suicide, Xianzhen throws herself into a river by Prince Ning's garden on her wedding day. Fortunately, she is saved by a Madam Feng, widow of a prefect of Jiujiang 九江. While staying with the Feng family, Madam Feng's son Feng Junwen 馮俊文 falls in love with the beautiful heroine but is rejected. Soon Junwen falls ill because of lovesickness. Xianzhen, afraid of being forced into marriage with Junwen, attempts to hang herself at night but is rescued just in time. Madam Feng, seeing Xianzhen's determination to guard her chastity, agrees to send her home. On her way, Xianzhen becomes wary of the dangers of being recaptured by Prince Ning or of her whereabouts being disclosed to the disgruntled Junwen if she returns to her parents. To avoid such risks, she disguises herself as a man under the name of Cui Ziyang 崔子瑛 and goes to the capital to seek help from her cousin.

On her way to the capital, Ziyang encounters Xu Jin 許進, a member of the Grand Academicians who helps Ziyang when she is robbed of her belongings at a traveler's lodge. Later, an envoy from Korea brings a poem written in tadpole scripts to the emperor. None of the court officials can decipher the poem. Upon Xu Jin's recommendation, Ziyang is summoned by the emperor, translates the poem, and amazes the emperor with her exceptional talent. She is directly promoted to the position of an imperial scholar without having to go through the civil service exam. Xu Jin, deeply fond of Ziyang, makes Ziyang agree to marry his niece. Having no other choice, Ziyang marries Xu's niece Wang Xiangying 汪湘英, but keeps her secret of cross-dressing from her. Claiming that "he" had been engaged before and his fiancée had passed away in illness, Ziyang insists on abstaining from physical intimacy for three years to honor "his" fiancée. In the second half of the story, Ziyang gains the emperor's exclusive trust and favor and becomes a most eminent minister at court. She uses her influence to rescue Liang Qi from danger, and after Liang passes the civil service exam, becomes his mentor herself. She acts as a go-between and arranges Liang to marry Princess Yunhe. Liang, however, has previously seen Xianzhen's self-portrait, made before she decided to marry Prince Ning. When meeting Ziyang, Liang instantly suspects Ziyang to be his missing fiancée Xianzhen, and he subsequently resorts to countless efforts to test Ziyang's true identity. The emperor, who is deeply enchanted by Ziyang's beauty and talent, also plots to find out about Ziyang's sexuality.

Later in the story, a concubine of the emperor, jealous of the emperor's love for Ziyang, schemes with a eunuch and makes Ziyang drunk. She then arranges for the royal maidens to test Ziyang's femininity with *gongsha*, a traditional means of testing feminine virginity. They find that Ziyang is indeed a virgin. The emperor, now knowing Ziyang's secret, resorts to a twofold scheme. He denounces Liang Qi's suspicion about Ziyang's identity at the court and forbids anyone to raise a question about the matter. In private, hoping to keep Ziyang as a secret companion, the emperor proposes to Ziyang that so long as she gives her consent to his demands, she can continue her

life as a leading court official. When Ziying refuses, the emperor threatens her life and her family's lives. Desperate, yet unwilling to succumb to the emperor's will, Ziying attempts suicide again by breaking the gold dragon bracelets, the love token of her engagement to Liang Qi, and swallowing pieces of gold. After Ziying's death, Liang Qi is so grief-stricken that he dies at Ziying's funeral. When Ziying's spirit ascends to heaven, Ziying encounters the immortal Lu Dongbin, who has previously revealed to Ziying her celestial origin and predestined bond with Liang. Ziying is thus dispatched back to the human world to complete her self-cultivation and her marriage with Liang. She and Liang Qi are both revived with magical pellets brought by the immortal's servant, and they finally marry. However, Ziying happens to see in King of Death's life brochure that her brother is destined to die of illness during the exile, as a punishment for having betrayed her identity to seek favor and fortune from the emperor. Ziying blames herself for bringing upon her brother such suffering and an early death. Worried that her aged parents would have no one to take care of them, Ziying considers her brother's fate to be the consequence of her lack of filial piety. She vows to take three years to commit to ritual offering and prayers after marriage, in order to extend the life of her brother. The story, though ending in the heroine's turn to polygamy, indicates that she would take to a celibate religious lifestyle even after marrying Liang Qi.

Zheng Zhenwei discovered that the authorial preface by E'Hu Yishi is nearly identical to a female author's preface to her thirty-two commenting poems on the *tanci* work *Blossoms from the Brush*, published on April 6, 1882, in *Shenbao*. This author is self-identified as 橋李畹雲女史 (Zuili Wanyun Nüshi). In addition to the striking similarities between these two prefaces, Zheng discovered a sidenote by the thirty-first poem, as follows: "I have composed a draft of *Qizhenzhuan tanci*, which includes twenty-four *hui* and is nearly completed. The themes and diction, though different, also bear similarities with this *tanci*. Reading this work makes me smile indeed" (Jin, "Quatrains on the *chuanqi Blossoms from Brush*"). Zheng observes that there is a chance that this *Qizhenzhuan*, including twenty-four *hui*, though carrying the same title, could be a different text than our *tanci* text, the hand-copied edition at Shanghai library that consists of twenty *hui*. However, the almost identical prefaces indicate that E'Hu Yishi is none other than Zuili Wanyun Nüshi. In the end of *Qizhenzhuan tanci*, the author claims that her tale comes to a close in *juan* 20, and the following *juan* will continue under the title of 袖箭盟 (*Xiujian meng*, Oath of Arrows in the Sleeves). Zheng indicates that the following work *Xiujian meng* might constitute the additional four *juan* of text mentioned by Zuili Wanyun Nüshi in her comment about her self-authored *Qizhenzhuan* (Zheng Zhenwei 157). Zuili Wanyun Nüshi is a pen name of Jin Fangquan, whose style name is Wanyun 畹雲. Jin published a poem "采白吟次韻填詞並附錄綉秋軒舊草二章" ("Caibaiyin ciyun tianci bing fulu Xuanqiu xuan jiu cao erzhang," "To the Tune of Caibaiyin with Matching Rhymes,

and Two Old Manuscripts Composed in the Studio of Radiant Autumn”) in 瀛寰瑣紀 (*Yinghuan suoji*, Jade Splinters from the Entire Universe) under the name 樵李曇華吟館女史金琬雲 (Zuijin Tanhua Yinguan Nüshi Jin Wanyun).

Following this thread, Zheng finds abundant intertextual evidence to support the above proposition that the author’s identity is Jin Fangquan. Besides the two artistic names E’Hu Nüshi and Zuili Wanyun Nüshi, Jin Fangquan also used two other names, 曇花館吟月山人 (Tanhua Guan Yinyue Shanren) and 樵李曇華吟館女史 (Zuili Tanhua Yinguan Nüshi; Zheng Zhenwei 164). The above poem contains the line: “When a beauty pursues virtue, many sing to praise her and reaffirm her achievement. Her tale deserves to be written down by this red brush emanating fragrance, and to be passed along history for thousands of years behind.” This same line of poetry also appears in identical form in *Qizhenzhuan*, in the emperor’s edict to commemorate the heroine after she commits suicide. Another piece of evidence is as follows. A poem by Jin Fangquan was anthologized in 全清詞鈔 (*Quanqing cichao*, Song Lyrics of the Qing dynasty). The poem was titled “如夢令” (“Rumeng ling”):

Outside the pagoda, the setting sun in scarlet dawn light,
Willow casket flowing in disarray over the flower-lined pathway.
Slender hands picked them by chance, such lightness suggests the end of spring.
Shadow of the fragrant one!
Wandering like the east wind, with no destination. (Jin, “Rumengling” 1776)

The same poem appears in *juan 7* of *Qizhenzhuan*. There is a striking similarity between the author Jin Fangquan’s life experiences with a female character Quan Renlan 全綉蘭, who is a 閨師 (*guishi*, female mentor) in *Qizhenzhuan* (*juan 10*). The character Quan Huiniang (全慧娘, Huiniang being the courtesy name for Renlan) composed six poems, titled 哭娟女 (“Ku Juannü,” “To My Late Daughter” 7:11). These poems could be fictional representations of Jin’s experiences of losing a young daughter.

The discovery of Jin Fangquan as a *tanci* author makes an important addition to studies of Qing women *tanci* writers’ community. *Quanqing cichao* records that “Jin Fangquan, alternatively named Wanyun, was born in Xiushui, Zhejiang province. She was married to Chen Jingmai in Pinghu, and composed a poetry collection titled *Renxiu guan ci*” (Ye Gongchuo, *Quanqing cichao*). According to 清閨秀藝文略 (*Qing guixiu yiwen lue*), Jin Fangquan was the great-grandniece of scholar Jin Xiaowei (金孝維, 1752–?), who had a collection of poems titled 有此廬詩鈔 (*You cilu shichao*). The Jin clan included several well-versed women and was famous for a family tradition of learning. Jin Fangquan’s great-grandaunt Jin Yingdi 金穎第 authored a poetry collection 蘭省詩鈔 (*Lansheng shichao*). Her two aunts also were capable of composing poems. Zheng Zhenwei, through a study of 金氏如心堂譜 (*Jinshi ruxin tangpu*), proposes that

Jin Fangquan was born in 1833 and passed away after 1890. According to the local gazette of Pinghu county, her mother, Shen Shi (1812–1890), had lived with her and relied on her care. Jin Fangquan was the alleged author of *絢秋閣詩詞稿* (*Xuanqiu ge shici gao*).

Living in the era of the Taiping Rebellion, the author's statements in *Qizhenzhuan* and in other texts bespeak the extraordinary hardships of women living and writing in the time of chaos and exile, or *luanli*. Many authorial statements articulate a pervading melancholy by a refugee and victim of the Taiping Rebellion. As she describes,

On a sunny day the flying willow catkin fills the sky and dims the dawn light,
 In my dream I linger on and remember my deceased mother.
 Heaving out long sighs, I hold the brush and cannot dispel my regrets,
 A languished one in the wind sheds tears alone.
 Having endured the vicissitudes in life, there is no bound of my sorrows.
 The perils and evictions in fate overwhelm me with sadness.
 Agile as a swallow leaving her nest,
 I wave my hands to the eminent host and return to my hometown. (8:1)

This epochal melancholy at a time of political turmoil is intensified because of Jin's personal hardship due to illness, poverty, and exile, as is powerfully articulated in the following passage:

Living in chaos and exile, I embrace my regrets in vain.
 When one is haunted by illness and poverty, she becomes nonchalant.
 Having pawned all my golden hairpins, I worry about being unable to get by.
 Having ransacked my book containers, I suffer intense anxiety.
 With a well-worn brush, I attempt to create beautiful lines.
 A few long writing papers accompany me to spend the late nights. (3:75)

This writing impulse to express anguish in a perpetual state of exile and homelessness distinguishes Jin's work from earlier *tanci* fiction by women that was largely composed in the domestic space at the female author's maternal house before her marriage and at her in-laws' residence after marriage. The eighteenth-century author Chen Duansheng finished writing the first half of *Destiny of Rebirth* largely at her maternal house before marriage. Such is the case for Zhu Suxian who authored *Linked Rings of Jade* and remained unmarried, due to a dedication to Daoism. Among Jin's peer *tanci* authors, Wang Oushang, the author of *A Tale of Vacuity*, shared the constant exile and vagrancy during the Taiping Rebellion. These writers displayed a stronger political consciousness in response to the national trauma, personal dislocation, life endangerment, and loss of home.

Similar to *Qizhenzhuàn* in which chastity is endorsed as a heroic virtue, Jin's poetic works praise chaste widows who committed suicide when captured by rebels or when betrayed by a treacherous husband. The following example articulates her endorsement of a chaste Lady Xu, who in resistance to being raped by invading bandits, first cut off an arm but threw a stone into a bandit's face with her remaining hand, and died after her throat was slit (Feng Guifen 7).

Once I read *Random Sketches of the World*. When it comes to the Wu region's "Biography of the Chaste Lady Xu" and "A Lament on Caibai" dedicated to her, I let out long sighs in melancholy but also rejoice in assurance. As the ancient saying goes, one's death could be heavier than Mount Tai, or lighter than a wild goose feather. The essence of the earth's beauty and vitality is often less endowed to men, but is more favorably entrusted with women. Lady Xu's inspiring suicide to preserve her chastity outshines the conducts of loyal ministers and chivalrous knights. Indeed, her death shows the metaphor about a death equal to Mount Tai or wild goose feather! When a beauty pursues virtue, many sing praise for her and reaffirm her achievement. A red brush emanating fragrance shall pass along her tale as part of history for thousands of years behind. Hence I compose this tune, using the original rhymes in the melody, to demonstrate my respect and admiration, not discouraged by my uncouth style. (Jin, "To the Tune of Caibaiyin" 20)

Against the backdrop of rebellion and bereavement, female chastity transcends the realm of personal virtue and becomes a form of political integrity. Jin published a series of poems that amplified the notion of women's chastity in a historical milieu of chaos, angst, and political violence. A striking example is a poem "劉烈婦行" ("Liu Liefu xing," "On the Chaste Lady Liu"), which was published in *Shenbao* on August 4, 1880. The poem laments the fate of a chaste girl Liu Lanqing 劉蘭卿, who, at a young age, became a war refugee and was sold into a brothel in Yangzhou. Later she was bought by a commander named Guo Zimei 郭子美 and became his concubine. In 1879, Guo died of illness on his way to an official post. Liu, only fourteen at the time, committed suicide by swallowing opium to display her chastity to Guo. Moved by the incident, Jin Fangquan composed a lamenting poem, writing, "Do not accuse singsong girls of being minor and loveless; this one upholds her ice-like purity. . . . The general devotes his life to serving the emperor; the chaste lady consummates her integrity by committing suicide to follow her husband" (Jin, "On the Chaste Lady Liu" 3). Jin endorses Liu by claiming that despite her young age, her "loyalty and chastity shall be applauded for a thousand years, and illuminate history" (3). Liu's life and suicide in this case powerfully exemplify nineteenth-century women's suffering and responses to exile and war, which particularly resonated with Jin's authorial aspiration to write about women's wartime

experience, or in her own words, to “take up the brush for my favored cause of endorsing exceptional integrity” (3). A similar poem by Jin on chaste ladies is “題吳中段疇五茂才悼亡詩草” (“Ti Wuzhong Duan Chouwu Maocai daowang shicao,” “Poem Draft Lamenting the Passing of Scholar Duan Chouwu in the Wu Region”), which records a Lady Yu who committed suicide by drowning herself when confronted by bandits (Jin 20). The above three historical examples of chaste women (Lady Xu, Lady Liu, and Lady Yu) who took their own lives following a husband’s death or to protect their own chastity from rioting outlaws against a stark social and political milieu offer a nascent dimension of interpreting the meaning and implications of women’s suicide. The heroine’s suicide in the Ming dynasty, Paola Zamperini observes, staged an enchanting spectacle through the “death of young, beautiful women” (Zamperini, “Untamed Hearts” 86). Jin’s poetic works on the three chaste ladies’ deaths, however, emphasize the women’s deaths as representations of 奇烈 (*qilie*, chastity and martyrdom), which in a context of war and disorder gains a political dimension of meaning.

Perhaps the most compelling example of a female *tanci* author who enacted the example of chastity and martyrdom is Zheng Danruo, who committed suicide when the Taiping troops first broke into the city of Hangzhou in 1860. In the winter of 1861, Jin Fangquan composed a preface to her *Qizhenzhuàn* in her residence in Hessa (鶴沙, a part of today’s Shanghai).

Having read through *chuanqi* and fiction extensively, I found that these tales, striving to stand out among others, do not surpass the conventions of love *rendezvous*, and tales about scholar and beauty. Repellent to the reader’s eyes, these stories are all about lovers’ oaths under the starry sky or in the moonlight, merely offering conventional words and clichéd plots. Even when occasionally a tale or two intends to preserve morality and customs, to instruct and benefit the masses with principal virtues, they are sweeping and not reliable, superficial and not sincere enough. At this season of war and upheaval, in a world of chaos and separation, women in the inner chambers are almost all endangered and rarely have the chance of survival. If they do not choose to become broken ice, they would be harmed like contaminated jade. How sad! How could I bear to put their suffering into words! (Jin, *Qizhenzhuàn* 1)

In a world of chaos, to commit suicide in order to preserve chastity becomes not only a virtue, but also an inevitability for women who have no hope of survival. It is no coincidence that in these *tanci* works composed or completed at the time of the Taiping Rebellion, depictions of cross-dressed heroines’ voyages display a cognizant turn toward social and political reality, and an evident voice articulating women’s sentiments and grievances in response to a tumultuous world. As Jin states, “Many events in this book are about people wronged and mistreated. Like Qu Yuan’s poem 離騷 (*The Li Sao*, *An*

Elegy on Encountering Sorrows), the book has deep implications. Evoking allusions of the fragrant grass and the beautiful one for my own intentions, perceiving the shadow of life in writings, I always suffer from uncertainty” (1:48). This distinctive evocation of the patriotic poet Qu Yuan (屈原, 340–278 BCE) and his epic work *Encountering Sorrows* Serves as an example of women writers’ self-fashioning by appropriating literati discourses of political loyalism. Women’s adaptation and self-identification with ancient examples of loyalist male court officials are by no means rare in diverse late imperial literary genres. Wai-ye Li, in her analysis of poetess Li Yin’s (李因, 1610–1685) “悼亡詩” (“Daowang shi,” “Elegiac Poems”), argues, “Imagery of martyrdom, hopeless quests, and unfulfilled ideals from the Verses of Chu tradition are staples in loyalist discourse” (Wai-ye Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Literature* 127). These self-comparisons to Qu Yuan in expressing personal emotions are found in other genres such as plays and *tanci*. In Wu Zao’s play 飲酒讀騷圖 (*Yinjiu dusao tu, Drinking Wine and Reading Li Sao*, nineteenth century), the protagonist dresses in a male’s robe, and by imitating the ancient poet Qu Yuan, expresses her own angst against social confinement of women. In *tanci*, Chen Duansheng emulated Qu Yuan in *Destiny of Rebirth*: “I scratch my head and call out to Heaven, wishing to ask, / ‘Can the Way of Heaven be turned around?’” (17:65, 1084). Identifying with the poet in exile enables her to articulate a self-endorsing and self-empowering voice. In this example, Chen is “the reincarnated Qu Yuan in both her talent and banishment” (Guo 58). In comparison with these examples, Jin’s authorial insertions demonstrate a remarkably detailed personal observation of and response to the political crisis of the nation at the time of the Taiping Rebellion, and a deepened sense of separation from home, under the constant haunting of social unrest, rampant bandit disturbances, and endless travel together with countless refugees. This sociopolitical milieu sets the lifelike tone of the authorial voice in *Qizhenzhuang*, expands the book’s relevance to a broader social terrain outside the inner chambers, grants the writer herself a degree of social mobility because of her identity as a war refugee, and instills her writings with a profound sense of homesickness, as poignantly illustrated in the following passage:

Having spent the last two years in wandering and disquiet, I haven’t had a day of leisure and rest. With my land and house abandoned at a time of war, I have roamed the roads, far away from home. Ten thousand long swords could not destroy the rebels’ troops, west regions in Zhejiang have been plagued by ceaseless warfare. Taking a small boat, I travelled by the sea and arrived at the north bank of the Yangtze River. It is finally a day with gentle wind and warm sunshine. Fortunately, my life was safe and sound at a time of upheaval. My only wish is to have a year of peace. The sceneries of the distant lands are indeed exceptional; the years in the distant lands are particularly vexing and difficult. I fondly dream of returning home along the long

river, across boundless mountains shrouded in clouds, my homesickness draws me back. Steeped in sadness, I have no diversion for entertainment, but to put down some new writings and continue this story. (2:1)

Susan Mann argues that late nineteenth-century women writers displayed “a keen interest in the state of the country and an astute cognizance of issues that, properly speaking, belonged to the domain of men, ‘beyond the women’s quarters’ (閨外, *kun-wai*)” (Mann, “The Late and the State” 283). Mann observes from her study of women’s poems that “increasingly after 1840, political factions, military struggles, social problems, and even statecraft policies, became poetic subjects for women” (283). Mann points out that these women poets’ work foreshadowed the rise of the “new women” in the ensuing century in that they displayed a shared and earlier form of feminine political consciousness. Relating Jin’s *tanci* work to this broader context of women’s encounters with and depictions of their wartime experiences, we can immediately perceive that Jin’s exposition and exploration of *luanli* is resonant with her contemporary poetesses’ illustrations of similar politically charged poetic tropes in response to the Taiping Rebellion, as Mann has incisively discussed. These poetic tropes related to war and political turmoil during this time include 感事 (*ganshi*, moved by events), 喪亂 (*sangluan*, death and destruction), and 避兵 (*bibing*) or 避亂 (*bibluan*, both meaning to flee the fighting). Wilt Idema and Beata Grant noted the increased coverage of war and political matters in women’s works: “warfare is a subject that only rarely makes its appearance in the poetry of women poets of the eighteenth century,” however, in the polemical nineteenth century, women poets frequently addressed and depicted warfare in their works (Idema and Grant 652). Closely prior to Jin’s work, a number of women poets wrote about their tested lives as refugees during social unrest. These, as Mann discussed, include Chen Yunlian (陳蘊蓮, fl. mid-nineteenth century), who expressed her political sentiment in a poem about fleeing from foreign assault on the Jiangnan region during the years following the Nanjing Treaty that ended the Opium War. The Yang sisters of Changsha, Hunan, as Mann discussed, composed poems about flight that “reveal a political consciousness provoked by the plight of refugees, and show how fighting for the empire forced women in flight to weigh their political concerns against their personal concerns for family” (Mann, “The Lady and the State” 301).

Wu Szu-ting offers a study on *luanli* poems by women from the Opium War to the Taiping Rebellion period. Wu observes that for many women who were themselves refugees from the war, exile could be considered as another form of traveling experience (Wu Szu-ting 67). As a result, their poems composed during such sojourns provided vivid depictions of the sceneries and dangers they encountered on the way, a keener feeling of dislocation from home, a greater sense of social and physical mobility, and also because of their identities as refugees, a new perspective on social and political events

when situated in 異鄉 (*yixiang*), unknown lands. *Luanli* poems by women during this period not only share a profound sense of loss, trauma, and nostalgia, but also channel women's new insights about homeland, nation, and personal sense of belonging from a distinctive feminine point of view. Wu points out that 流離書寫 (*liuli shuxie*, or writing in exile) empowers writers in ways that are distinctively gender-specific and channeled through feminine points of view, rather than relegating them to the same perceiving and writing stances as their male predecessors and peers. Writing in exile is particularly empowering for women by granting them the access to the exterior social terrain, access that would not be allowed or available for women in the inner chambers were it not for the extraordinary circumstances of wartime exigencies.

This broad panorama of women writers, mostly elite women from the Lower Yangtze areas addressing social and political calamities and personal plights, supports Susan Mann's valuable perception that scholars and readers "should probably start to draw a line between the writings of women who lived through the Taiping Rebellion, and those who never experienced it" (Mann, "The Lady and the State" 313). Mann calls for attention on how women writers who survived the Taiping Rebellion could have been transformed by their experiences of trauma, exile, and loss. Building on Mann's proposition, this chapter suggests that *tanci* fiction by women writers of the era, such as Jin Fangquan, Zheng Danruo, and Wang Oushang, provides authoritative examples of women's writings that recorded the events and affairs of polemical times, and articulated women's prototypical political consciousness about warfare, exile, and loyalty through a gendered perspective. If these poems by women could be considered as 女性戰亂紀實詩 (*nüxing zhanluan jishi shi*, women's wartime recording poetry), women's *tanci* composed during and shortly after the Taiping Rebellion contains equivalent stylistic components and could represent the rise of realism in war representations in women's fictional writing. As illustrated earlier, Jin Fangquan herself took part in writing commemorative poems for chaste historical women who committed suicide to preserve purity and integrity when confronted by rebels and bandits or when captured in war conflicts. Praising these historical women for "cherishing their ice-pure hearts and their sagaciousness about great righteousness," these poems by Jin could be considered as wartime recording poetry, in that, in every example, they articulate an authorial eagerness to inscribe these heroic women's deeds into history and "send afar their names through the red brush" (Jin, "A Tribute Composed After Madam Tang's Letter to Her Family" 3). These poems express an ambition of a female author to claim personal access to historical truth, as well as the authority to inscribe women's place in a world of imaginary history. In Jin's *tanci* work, numerous authorial illustrations of subjective experiences of war, nostalgia, and exile connect personal sufferings to parts of women's collective wartime experiences, and provide situated reflections on women's changing views of their societal roles in the second half of the nineteenth century.

CONTESTING FEMALE CHASTITY

At the center of Jin's reinterpretation of feminine orthodox virtue is the much-contested notion of chastity. Maria Franca Sibau insightfully observes that chastity "almost entirely overshadowed other exemplary traits" in late imperial collections about exemplary women (Sibau, *Reading for the Moral* 105). As an important part of female exemplarity, the cult of chastity had been increasingly redefined in terms of heroism or martyrdom if a wife or fiancée resisted forced remarriages or sexual assaults by suicide: "*Jie*, originally a gender-neutral attribute indicating integrity or the quality of being principled, has been used since at least the Song dynasty onward to indicate almost exclusively the virtue of wifely fidelity or chastity when applied to women" (106). Sibau incisively observes that "*zhen* (often used in tandem or interchangeably with *jie*) underwent a similar shift, from the idea of integrity and steadfast loyalty to sexual purity, chastity, and virginity" (106). The gendering of these terms in their ramifications in classic texts, Sibau notes, reflects the perceptions and inscriptions of male literati who "wrote accounts of virtuous women" as "theologians and officiants" (106). Chaste women were fashioned into morally exemplary heroines in commemorative writings and biographies composed by literati scholars.

Endorsement of female exemplarity in biographical accounts of virtuous and chaste women was "often used as a polemic denunciation of male deficiency," that is, the chaste heroines were glorified as "superior to men, and that it was much easier to find heroic women than loyal ministers in actual life" (106). Sibau's study of female exemplarity in late Ming short stories about chaste women is instrumental in exposing some key questions in the current study of Jin Fangquan's reconfiguration of female chastity in *tanci* fiction. *Tanci* fiction by Qing women epitomizes a vernacular "discursive frame" (to borrow Sibau's term) in depicting the exceptional heroine's moral conflicts and choices through the character's externalized connections and interactions with others in her extended familial and social relations.

In an emblematic plotline of a *tanci* tale, a disguised heroine's deliberation and moral choices about refeminization characterizes what Sibau calls the "discursive frame" in narration that opens up a textual space of feminine self-fashioning and self-transformation. Female exemplarity, bespoken by the heroine's insistence on protecting her virginal chastity, could often provide a moral relief when a heroine is questioned for her choice of cross-dressing to reject an ill-suited matrimony or to travel outside the inner chambers for a new social life as a "man." What happened when women themselves became writerly subjects (as exemplified by many female *tanci* authors), and fashioned the notion of chastity through a gender-specific discursive frame? How does Jin Fangquan's *tanci*, composed at a time of civil war and political emergency, enrich and expand the implications of chastity in the continuum of

family-society-state, and contribute to a new understanding of women's moral exemplarity? By situating the chaste heroines at the focal point of the narrative, how does written *tanci*, as a seminal vernacular genre, reproduce, transform, and relate to narrative accounts of female exemplarity in classical biographical accounts as well as other vernacular representations?

To respond to these questions, a retrospective exploration of the evolving notion of chastity could be beneficial. Yu Zhengxie (俞正燮, 1775–1840) proposes that the principle virtue of chastity should apply to both genders: “The ancient saying goes that one shall never remarry, it applies to both men and women. To use obtuse rationale to deceive women, it is indeed a shameless argument” (Yu Zhengxie 493–95). On the other hand, the moral standard for male and female chastity remains dubious and unbalanced. Lu Weijing argues that a licentious woman would be named a *yinfu*, while a male counterpart is instead called *jianfu*, or the “adulterous man.” Lu argues, “the difference in terminology betrays a double standard: a man was condemned for his adulterous act, but was not subject to the same degree of demonization as a woman would be for sexual misconduct. The term encodes a critique of his action, not his fundamental character” (Lu Weijing, “The Chaste and the Licentious” 185). Mark Elvin argues that among the traditional Confucian virtues that were honored, feminine virtue includes the fidelity of the widowed women toward their deceased husbands and the safeguarding of sexual purity by a woman through self-mutilation or suicide if necessary (Elvin 111–12). After the Song dynasty, the cult of a widow's fidelity grew and reached its climax during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (112). The feminine virtue of chastity stood apart from and in contrast against a secular world of “robust popular practicality and sensuality” during the late Ming and Qing dynasties. The Confucian moral endorsement for fidelity and chastity coexisted with the celebration of physical passion and desire in Yuan plays. During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, with the popularization of honors for virtue, the government institutionalized the procedures for verifying the information about chaste women. Women who were celebrated because of their chaste acts received promulgation and codification through 旌表 (*jingbiao*, imperial awards). As Janet Theiss observes in *Disgraceful Matters*, this practice developed into an elaborate institution buttressed by a sprawling web of social legislation and cultural engineering.

The political system was thus used to “confer explicit honours for behavior defined as virtuous in *private, everyday* life” (Elvin 151). Lu Weijing observes that chaste women could be considered in two categories: 節婦 (*jiefu*, chaste widows) and 貞女 (*zhennü*, faithful maidens), the latter being “young women who pledged a lifetime of fidelity to or committed a suicide for their deceased fiancés” (Lu Weijing, “The Chaste and the Licentious” 183). The faithful maiden, particularly, “became a pivotal symbol of moral integrity and political loyalty, and was fiercely used by the traumatized elite

to express various emotions and moral convictions” (187, and Lu Weijing, *True to Her Word* 40–44, 49–67). Because of the metaphorical power of the chaste female, chaste women “became a powerful rhetorical weapon through which the Confucian elite gave vent to their frustrations and expressed their moral conviction as they sought to retain moral supremacy and cultural distinction” (Lu Weijing, “The Chaste and the Licentious” 186). At the time of political crisis, some chaste women’s exceptional fortitude set off their male counterparts’ weakness and “put disloyal men to shame” (186).

The discourse of female chastity, in some cases, could however serve as a means to mediate traditional women’s participation in or situated perception of social and political affairs at the time of chaos and upheavals. Wai-ye Li’s 2014 studies of female chaste martyrs and poems by abducted women at the time of exile and social disorder illustrate the political consciousness of women who articulate their chastity as a form of political integrity or loyalty. Siyen Fei, when tracing the origin of the late imperial cult of female chastity in late Ming, argues that the rise of the chastity cult was instigated by “various strains of activism that sought to protest and repair the failing system of chastity awards” (Fei 992). Fei, building on Beverly Bossler’s 2013 research, observes that “the seemingly formulaic appearance of chastity discourse belied its widely varied foci from Song to Yuan as literati responded to specific concerns of their time” (992). In the Ming, local gazetteers played significant roles in promoting selection of local moral paragons, a process fraught with politics (Bol, “The Rise of Local History”). Collective editorial approaches to selecting local chaste women displayed obsessions with state awards. The court repetitively pressed local officials to nominate candidates through touring regional inspectors. In addition, *jingbiao* nominations were also integrated into officials’ career evaluations and considered a critical element for promotion (Wen Zhengming 490). These state initiatives expanded the impact of chastity awards.

Lu Weijing’s monograph offers an important study of Ming Qing scholars who debated about the cult of female chastity. During the Ming, the cult of faithful maidens, Lu argues, received particular debate among literati scholars because of the ideological correctness of it (Lu Weijing, *True to Her Word* 215). The Confucian scholar Gui Youguang (歸有光, 1507–1571) contended that “for a betrothed girl to die or to remain celibate for her dead fiancé violated the rituals prescribed in the classics” (216). However, as Lu points out, Gui himself displayed an ambivalent attitude toward chaste young women’s sacrifices. The late Ming critic Ma Zhide 馬之德 denies faithful maidens’ acts of suicide or taking up celibacy as eligible expressions of orthodox passions that could receive moral endorsement. Lu further reviews debates about the faithful maidens among early Qing scholars, including Wang Wan (汪琬, 1624–1690) and Zhu Yizun (朱彝尊, 1629–1706), who were assertive of the faithful maidens’ ritual obligations to their fiancés, and Mao Qiling (毛奇齡, 1623–1716) and Wang Zhong

(汪中, 1745–1794), who were critical of the faithful maidens' cult in observing orthodox moral roles and relations (226).

In the Qing period, public exaltation and official propaganda stressed “female chastity” as “a metaphor for community honor” (Mann, “Widows in Kinship, Class, and Community Structures of Qing” 43). Literary depictions of chaste heroines in the Qing, however, do not always portray women as passive characters subjected to agony and grievance. Keith McMahon argues in his study of the chaste women in beauty-scholar romance in the seventeenth century,

the aura of chastity goes beyond the narrow frame of widowhood and provides female characters with a power of self-determination and self-invention that exceeds not only normal female roles but male ones as well. . . . Although self-sacrificing chastity still dominates the moral discourse and is the main model for female excellence, another type of chastity is shown to exist that allows for active female self-direction, at least in the imaginary realm created by the beauty-scholar romances and other works of Qing fiction such as the stories of Li Yu, Pu Songling, and the novels *Rulin waishi* (Wu 1984) and *Jinghua yuan*. (McMahon, “The Classic ‘Beauty-Scholar’ Romance” 228)

Women's *tanci* fiction of the Qing enriched the normative understandings of the faithful maiden cult in the following aspects. In *tanci* fiction, the faithful maiden cult was evoked as a frequent plot arrangement for the heroine, who is often betrothed to a fiancé before her family suffers a calamity. Though the heroine often resorts to cross-dressing to flee from misfortunate circumstance or being forced by dominant forces to remarry, her act of disguising herself as a man could be considered as a creative enactment of the faithful maiden cult, and is much celebrated in the text as an expression of exceptional chastity. Her concealed identity as a “faithful maiden” provides a rationale for the heroine's declinations of arranged marriage when the protagonist establishes “himself” in fame and honor, as a court official or a military general. Also, the faithful maiden cult in *tanci* sometimes is an extension of the orthodox passion of filial piety, and is able to claim its moral propriety. Young heroines under dire circumstances of imposed marriages express their filial passions to their parents as a morally higher form of *qing* in comparison with conjugal love, and will sacrifice seeking personal happiness through marriage to lifelong caring and service of their parents. The faithful maiden cult is by no means opposite to the cult of *qing*, but elevates it in observance of Confucian filial piety.

In contrast with young women who take to suicide or celibacy to mourn their deceased fiancés in the cult of faithful maidens, the heroines also take such actions in defense of their own chastity in life-threatening situations. Some are rescued by fantastic

forces or minor characters, and cross-dress as men, while their fiancés mourn their deaths and keep celibate in observance of their emotional loyalty and dedication to the “deceased” maidens. Hence the secular cult of the faithful maidens is sometimes overturned or bestowed more valences and complications. Male chastity before marriage is frequently performed by the disguised heroines’ fiancés through mourning and postponement of matrimony for some years before the original marriage arrangements are abandoned. Chastity for one’s betrothed companion in *tanci* is upheld as a virtue that both genders share and perform. Virginal chastity, though largely a private dedication, could at times be depicted as a vehicle of the heroine’s political passions. Such is the case in *Heaven Rains Flowers*, in which the heroic Zuo Yizhen, who, when forced to become a usurper’s concubine, stabs him to death on the wedding night. In *Destiny of Rebirth, A Tale of Vacuity*, and here in *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*, the disguised heroines’ protests, by suicide or death from illness, against being forced to become the emperors’ concubines at the exposure of their femininity disrupts the ruler-subordinate relations underlying the Confucian political ethics. However, such disruption of the ruler-subordinate relationship is tolerated and even endorsed by other characters in the story and by the authorial narrator because of the heroines’ claim to remain chaste and pure.

Resonating with these debates, Jin Fangquan’s *tanci* provides rich fictional reconfigurations of the faithful maiden cult. The heroine Xianzhen, who remains chaste throughout the whole story, is depicted as one with penultimate virtue. She was born with the apt name of Xianzhen (immortal and chaste). She was endorsed by the male court officials for her “exceptionality”: “With exceptional talent, beauty and ambition, she embodies loyalty and chastity in her person. She makes her male peers ashamed; no one can rival the female hero at the court” (12:7). This “exceptionality” in her beauty, intelligence, and deeds grants the heroine a relatively freer space in her conduct and in her responses to exigent situations. In the heroine’s recurrent statement, female chastity is not a singular moral principle, narrowly defined as sacrifice or celibacy for a deceased fiancé, but rather a means of displaying a woman’s 節 (*jie*, moral integrity) in a much broader sense. Xianzhen’s suicide on the day of the wedding when she is forced to marry Prince Ning definitively recalls the scene in which Su Yingxue commits suicide on her wedding day in *Destiny of Rebirth*, as well as many similar scenarios in other *tanci* stories. However, Liqing’s suicide differs from these conventions. Her act of suicide aims for 捐身救父 (*juanshen jiufu*, sacrificing her body to save her father) and observes filial piety before her dedication to her fiancé Liang Qi. This displays the heroine’s relative freedom before the consummation of marriage in commanding her own fate. Though pretending to agree to marry Prince Ning, she premeditates suicide; her actions make her own mother and grandmother suspicious of her true intention. By committing suicide, Liqing achieves the moral accomplishments of both filial piety and feminine chastity.

Lisa Raphals observes that filiality was celebrated mainly as a male virtue in ancient times. Narrations about female filial piety were not often seen. In *The Book of Exemplary Women* by Liu Xiang, filiality was not mentioned among the instructions about women's virtue. Some argue that filiality was initially a gendered virtue before Tang. According to Keith Knapp, medieval historical records indicated that daughters might carry the responsibility of filial service if there were no sons. However, records of filial women are much fewer than of filial men, and the criteria for allowing filial women to leave records in historical writings are much higher and more rigorous (Lu Miaw-fen 8). However, women's filial piety received more social recognition and endorsement from medieval times. During the Tang, filiality became a major component of feminine virtue, as signified in the didactic book *女孝經* (*Nü Xiaojing*, Classic of Filial Piety for Women) by Madam Zheng. Filial women continued to receive folk endorsement and admiration during the Song dynasty, as represented by the legendary filial daughter Cao'E, whose legacy has been commemorated by local shrines and temples, and utilized in a broader moral sense to advocate male loyalty and women's chastity (Chan, *Considering the End* 41–42). During the Ming, women's filial deeds were prevalently present in literary and historical archives. Lin Li-Yueh observes that 480 filial women of the Ming were recorded in the section *Guixiao bu* in *Gujin tushu jicheng* (Lin Li-Yueh 15). More than half of these women's filial deeds are practices of caring for ill parents, particularly the act of cutting off their own flesh as medicine to heal the ill parents (Lin Li-Yueh 15–16).

In Jin's *tanci*, the morally instructive function of the heroine as a 孝烈 (*xiaolie*, filial and chaste) woman is displayed in the following aspects. First, to her fiancé, Xianzhen appeals to the moral principle of 忠烈 (*zhonglie*, loyalty and integrity) to persuade him to abandon the thought of following her in her Daoist pursuit. She says: "A great man establishes himself through loyalty and filial piety, and thus spreads his name widely in the whole world. How could he treat his own father boorishly? A gentleman shall never forget his honorable name, and shall establish himself by abiding by the great principles of loyalty and filial piety. . . . How could you, for the mere sympathies between friends, unnecessarily leave your blood relatives and parents and commit suicide for me?" (17:32–33). To her own brother, Ziying herself embodies a moral exemplar of 孝義忠貞 (*xiaoyi zhongzhen*, filiality, integrity, loyalty, and chastity), and transforms her selfish and deceitful brother through her actions. To the emperor, Ziying recurrently counsels abstinence from indulgence in physical desire. As displayed in her blood letter to the emperor left before her suicide, her death is both a rejection of becoming the emperor's secret concubine and a loyal subordinate's final 死諫 (*sijian*, or remonstrance by death) against sexual indulgence. Importantly, the heroine's loyal devotion to the emperor is an extension of her filial passions, because of the analogous relationship between a king and his subordinate and that of father and son, and the parallel

between family and state. When the emperor falls seriously ill, Ziying, in addition to attending to him day and night, cuts off a piece of flesh from her wrist to prepare the medicine to cure the emperor of his disease. As Hubert Durt argues, the connection of cooking a piece of one's own flesh and filial piety, evoked first in a medieval Buddhist text, is adapted to the Confucianist system as a supreme act of filial piety (Durt 131). In Jin's *tanci*, this convention is reenacted creatively to endorse the heroine's exceptional deed as a filial daughter of the emperor and the state.

The theme of filiality, integrity, loyalty, and chastity permeates the authorial statements throughout the text and is a core theme underlying the writing purpose. The author states, "These stories of filial piety and chastity follow the ways of proper learning. With passion and elatedness I apply my brush to write this heavy-hearted tale, to leave it for the appreciation of understanding friends who uphold the rites and morality. / By no means would I allow my work to fall prey to the ridicule of the uncultured and conceited readers" (2:72). At the end of the story, knowing that her brother would suffer a shortened lifespan for having betrayed her, Ziying considers it her responsibility for causing her brother such suffering and subsequently bringing her parents the hazard of having no child to take care of them. She vows to devote three years to ritual offering and prayers in order to extend the life of her brother (20:44). Her filial act eventually transforms her greedy brother. He laments, "Virtuous sister! Listening to your words, I feel both pity and respect for you. Indeed, you possess loyalty, chastity, filiality and integrity all at once, and are no less than a saint!" (20:45). Similar endorsement is expressed by Madam Li, wife of Liang's maternal uncle Minister Li. Rejoicing that Liqing would marry Liang Qi, Madam Li says, "What a fine lady she is! Loyal and chaste, filial and integrate. She brings glory to the family's name and ten thousand prospects of fortune" (20:55). The heroine does not conceal her moral ambitions but takes a candid and outspoken stance. When deciding to agree to marry Prince Ning, she observes,

I honor my reputation most and am learned in the rites and principles. When this calamity befalls my family, it gives me a chance to establish my integrity and spread my name. When I save my father and commit suicide for this filial course, I shall leave a celebrated name for many later generations, and achieve both filial piety and chastity. (1:8)

Liqing's desire for moral endorsement and reputation in the world is exalted to a heroic aspiration in the following *juan*: "Seeing death as a return to my mandate, I would rather spare this fleeting life and guard my pure chastity. / Despite the hundred years of man's life span, one is bound to die. I would rather leave an honorable name that excels in the records of history" (1:9). This expression alludes to and rewrites the

lines by the South Song general Wen Tianxiang, who before being executed famously wrote in his poem “過伶仃洋” (“Guo Lingding Yang,” “Passing A Lonely Ocean”): “Death befalls all men alike and I choose to die, so that my loyal heart will shine in the history of humanity.” For the heroine, chastity or *zhen* is appropriated as a means of self-endorsement and self-inscription. Taking her own life transcends the purpose of a young woman honoring faithfulness to her husband, but gains the significance of becoming a pillar of moral exceptionality for future generations.

Third, the text emphatically depicts the extraordinariness of the heroine’s chastity and its superiority to historical exemplars of chaste women. In the introduction, the authorial narrator makes clear the book’s focus on “exceptional chastity” (*qizhen*),

Though it is difficult to set a clear river apart from a muddy one, this book advocates exceptional chastity.

Easy it is for the country to change its emperor, the chaste and resolute one will not forego her sturdy determination.

A woman’s aspiration cannot be decreased even when sawing knives, ice-cold tests and travail press the heroine in the green pagoda.

She is unlike Xiahou Ling’s widowed daughter who cut off her nose to remain chaste.

Nor is she the legendary chaste queen Moji, who only wishes to preserve her purity.

Her loyalty and filial piety enthralled many, and earned her the fame of a sacred maiden. Solitary and self-affirmed, she stands out from the multitudes.

Descended to the dust world to uphold virtue and rites, she is expelled from the Jade Terrace and made to endure hardship.

I share this advice with friends in the inner chambers, please follow the ancient instructions, treasure yourself as pure white jade and hold your integrity dear. (1)

Through the minor characters, the text recurrently addresses the heroine as a “sacred woman” (*shengnü*), one with a “chaste soul” (*zhenhun*) (3:25) (for the idolization of female chastity, see Cai Mingfeng, “From Divinization to Encagement” 35–52). Her suicide to preserve an “exceptional chastity” justifies her cross-dressing. In the story, the heroine experiences life-threatening calamities three times and succeeds in preserving her chastity: drowning herself in a river on her wedding night to Prince Ning; attempting to

hang herself when she finds out Feng Junwen, the son of Madam Feng, hopes to marry her; and finally, swallowing gold to kill herself when forced to become the emperor's secret concubine and threatened that her relatives' lives would be at risk. The narrator praises Liqing: "How could one know that like an untainted lotus flower from a muddy pond, the more she is tested the more luminous she becomes. / Were it not that she suffers death three times in defense of her chastity, how could her exceptional chastity gain admiration for thousands of years?" (4: 52). Paola Zamperini insightfully argues that whereas some women chose death for their male kin, including their husbands, fiancés, parents, or children, "there are fictional heroines who can use suicide as a vehicle to convey to eternity the strength of their passions, from love to hatred, from jealousy to thirst for vengeance" (Zamperini 77). Suicide, as Zamperini observes, allows women to transcend the inner chambers and gain attention of men, including their husbands, male siblings, as well as potential male audiences in and out of the diegesis (83).

The heroine's resolve to preserve her chastity exempts her from the hefty charge of intentionally deceiving the emperor. The narrator reasons in a sympathetic voice:

Take Ms. Yang Xianzhen as an example, did she intend to deceive the Emperor after all?

Her heart is calm and tranquil, and only wishes to become a recluse. Her elegant pursuits are about preserving her chastity.

Her fate transforms into a hundred folds of trials, she cannot control her own destiny. Heaven makes her change into a man's robe and become a minister.

Unwittingly the foreign ambassador caused the fairy girl to be summoned to the Emperor's service. (4:52)

Similar to earlier *tanci*, the heroine's circumstance is described as an exceptional one because of her predestined undertaking to endorse chastity. Her extraordinary display of talent and learning in front of the emperor when she deciphers and translates the poem delivered by the Korean envoy is arranged by heavenly mandate, rather than being self-chosen. This mythical narrative frame relieves the cross-dressed heroine of the moral hazard of disrupting the ruler-subordinate relationship, and allows her a degree of narrative uncertainty in plot development and characterization. Whereas women's *tanci* works are invariably mythical tales, the intervention by fantastic forces (such as by the Daoist immortal Lu Dongbin or his waiting servants) allows the heroine to experience other possibilities beyond her orthodox roles. As Anna Lefteratou argues, in some cases, "the structure of myth, or of a mythical narrative, is supposed to unveil

something outside the tale, outside the story logic, such as a cultural, psychological, biological and/or mental procedure” (Lefteratou 18). The function of myth in narration rests in inviting the intertextual reading of mythical literature and women’s appropriation of myths in depicting love, marriage, and romance, in opening up new ways of understanding feminine agency. Mythical megatexts grant a utopian imagination of feminine subjectivity, and situate the “remarkable or tellable occurrences” in the heroine’s encounters “against a backdrop of stereotypical expectations about the world” (317). The metaliterary function of myth in women’s *tanci* novels, in this case and in women’s *tanci* in a broader sense, allows the characters to negotiate between the orthodox and the mythical, the ideal plot of canonical fiction (in the happy reunion of star-crossed lovers), and an individual’s delay of or diversion from such “happily ever after” endings. In the story, the heroine’s many attempts of suicide to preserve her chastity were invariably discovered precipitately or thwarted, for her reentrance into the mythical realm could be achieved only *after* she goes through all the fated suffering and atonement in the human world. If suicide mobilized by chastity suggests the absolute rejection of women’s life possibilities in secular orthodox principles, her unwitting and often undesired “return” to life suggests the prevailing force of the mythical realm in giving her alternative paths to personal and moral achievements.

Guarding one’s chastity, rather than proving one’s loyalty to a deceased fiancé or spouse, is depicted in the text as a particular act of women holding personal ambitions, or 雅志 (*yazhi*, elegant aspirations), equivalent to the *zhi* or aspiration often endorsed and implemented by literati poets. Emulating the literati convention of voicing one’s aspiration through lyrical portraits of objects, the heroine, after being rescued from drowning as she flees from the tyrannous Prince Ning, composes a poem “落梅詩” (“Luomei shi,” “To the Fallen Plum Flowers”).

How can one bear to mention the crushed jade and falling flowers?
 The embroidered flag is made to guard the Flower Spirit.
 When dusk befalls the river of Xiang and Fu and invites sweet dreams,
 Dim moonlight casts on Mount Luo Fu, bringing shadows to my doorway.
 The one in the painted pagoda worries about the end of the season,
 Silent, seated by the green window, lamenting the passing dawn light.
 Who has been playing the flute all night?
 The few distant villages of Jiang’nan are fully covered in snow.

碎玉飛瓊忍再論，繡幡欲使護花魂。
 煙沉湘浦香生夢，月暗羅浮影到門。
 畫閣有情愁歲暮，綠窗無語怨黃昏。
 憑誰一夜吹長笛，零落江南雪滿村。(3:30)

Comparing herself to the fallen plum flowers, the poem illustrates the heroine's grief and foreshadows her continued determination to pursue Daoist immortality. Mount Luo Fu, the mountain located in Guangdong, is the site where Jin dynasty Daoist scholar and alchemist Ge Hong (283–343) practiced. Legend has it that during the Kaihuang period (581–600) of the Sui dynasty, Daoist Zhao Shixiong 趙師雄 falls asleep in the pine forest on the mountain and dreams of an encounter with the Goddess of Plum Flowers. When he wakes up, he finds that he was under a giant plum flower tree, and that the lady who converses and drinks with him has vanished. Aptly applied here in a poem on the fallen plum flowers, the allusion to 羅浮夢 (*Luofu meng*, Dream of Luo Fu) indicates the ephemeral nature of one's experiences. The image of "crushed jade" alludes to the saying "Better to be broken jade pieces than an unimpaired mud tile," and suggests the heroine's resolution to preserve her chastity at the price of death. The reference to 飛瓊 (*fei qiong*, falling flowers) implies the heroine's immortal origin. The image of the plum flower is one of the four fundamental images (plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) in painting and poetry embodying noble virtues of literati scholars. Zuyan Zhou insightfully argues that in Chinese culture the plum blossom is capable of dual-gender association (Zhou 79). Zhou, citing Maggie Bickford on the heroic and pathetic mode in the presentation of plum flowers, observes that the heroic mode of plum imagery has often "prevailed over its pathetic mode in Chinese art and literature, for the endurance and fortitude it embodies evokes an easy analogy with the valor and stamina in literati identity in their confrontation of the court" (79). The plum blossom started to rank with pine and bamboo as a popular figure of literati's self-identity in poetry from the mid-Tang. Bickford points out that the "ultimate in the masculinization of the flowering plum image" in Chinese art occurs in the "Yuan personification of old plum as resolute recluse" (Bickford 212). This heroic mode of plum presentation continued to prevail in late Ming. Zhou argues that the popularity of the plum blossom among literati in late Ming probably was associated with their compulsion against their feminized status. Similarly, in *The Peony Pavilion*, as presented by the hero Liu Mengmei, "the masculine mode of the plum imagery eclipses its feminine mode" (Zhou 81). These discussions shed light on this study of *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* on the ambiguous status of the heroine, as this is the scene before her decision to cross-dress as a man to flee from the relentlessly pursuing Prince Ning. In addition to the uncertain gender of the poetic personae, the ending two lines foreshadow the heroine's future voyage from the inner chambers to remote lands.

The theme of chastity is embodied in the characters' ingenious self-expressions through objects exchanged with their loved ones. An example is a scenario in which Liang Qi and Ziying exchange gifts to express their intentions. Previously, Liang Qi had sent Ziying ten baskets of 蓮子 (*lianzi*, lotus seeds) and ten baskets of 桂圓 (*guiyuan*,

longan). Ziying's wife Xiangying rightly finds out the implications of these gifts: "The lotus seeds carry the pun of seeking pity from thy heart; the aptly named longan indicates longing for the day of reunion" (17:40). Knowing Liang's intentions, Xiangying makes the choice by returned gifts to express Ziying's wishes. The gifts include "a green pine plant in a jade basin, and ten baskets of ice-like rock sugar, each bound with red ropes" (17:40). The implications of these gifts are that "Her elegant aspirations are like the pine trees and bamboo, her integrity shall never be moved. Her pure intentions are like ice, cold and bitter, and yet the fiancé's state is sweeter than wheat potage. The crystal 'ice sugar,' like its name, contains two attracting and compelling parts. Both of them are concealed in the same secret situation" (17:40).

The story intensifies the conflict between the heroine's wishes to live a life of autonomy by guarding her chastity, and the external pressures to make her return to marriage. Ziying confessed her act of cross-dressing to her parents and brother soon after she established her new life as a court official. Her rapacious brother, knowing that the emperor is suspicious of Ziying's true identity and is deeply fond of her, carries out a twofold scheme. To the lovesick Liang Qi, he, gaining the consent of his mother, Madam Zheng, denies Ziying being the cross-dressed Xianzhen, while secretly hoping to press Ziying into agreeing to become the emperor's secret companion so that the brother could personally gain the emperor's favor because of his sister. Ziying, knowing that she is betrayed by her own maternal family, insists on guarding her chastity for Liang Qi and refuses to succumb. The narrator comments, "Once the lustrous pearl is revealed to the eyes of the fisherman, beware that the treasure hidden under the head of the dark dragon is coveted. / Combatting for the beauty, who shall prevail? The immortal lady after all is not an ordinary soul. / In vain her brother laid out the scheme to capture her. / Helpless is he, for the sister is too chaste and determined to concede" (11:40). Lynn A. Struve makes the point that because of women's obligation to be "loyal and obedient to their brothers and their husbands alike," "tensions among these crucial male figures often brought on, or exacerbated, suicidal behavior in Chinese women" (note 14, 276, Struve 93–114; Hsieh and Spence 31). Ziying's brother acts in the interest of a Confucian familial network that seeks self-reinforcement by utilizing the heroine to gain favor of and connections with the royal clan. The mechanism of this family structure represented by the brother's authority almost diminishes mother-daughter intimacy and sympathy, and makes Ziying's mother a silent and unwitting conspirator, foreshadowing the heroine's tragedy.

The Tale of Exceptional Chastity, to conclude, surpasses literati-composed biographical depictions of chastity as cases of female exemplarity by introducing a female author's innovative interpretation of chastity as a means of women's personal self-cultivation within the discursive parameters of Confucian moral ethics. As Sherry J. Mou observes, regarding the discrepancy between ideology and practice in women and men's

perception of chastity, the Confucian tradition of “womanly virtues” is “often based on a woman’s negation of a life of her own” (Mou 178). Whereas women’s suicide or martyrdom to protect their chastity received recognition and systematic canonization by imperial edit, Jin’s *tanci* envisions the cross-dressed Ziying’s endeavors of taking her own life as heroic because of her ability to protect her moral and personal selfhood in atrocious situations when paternal figures embodying Confucian authority (be it her deceiving brother, her compulsive fiancé, or the rapacious emperor) fail to observe principle precepts of 仁 (*ren*, humaneness), 義 (*yi*, righteousness), and 禮 (*li*, rules of propriety). Ziying’s deeds surpass those of female “chaste martyrs” recorded or depicted in biographies and historical accounts because of her resolute agency in governing the inner moral life of herself as an individual, and further, because of her exceptional ability to extend such practices and resolutions from self-cultivation to regulations of the outer sociopolitical order by transforming her brother’s behavior and regulating the emperor’s conduct. The heroine’s exemplarity thus is achieved through enrichment of her moral truthfulness and authenticity as an individual, the principal element in the process of achieving individual exemplarity.

RECLAIMING EMOTIONS IN FEMALE EXEMPLARITY NARRATIVES

Besides the aforementioned rewriting of chastity conventions, Jin Fangquan’s *tanci* contributes rich and productive ramifications of the notion of *qing* (feelings or emotions). Bongrae Seok observes that *qing* in ancient texts refers to “the affective states of the mind with various sensory, phenomenal, and motivational qualities” (Seok 131). On the other hand, *qing*, as men’s dynamic and interactive emotional reactions to the outside world, often comes under the regulatory power of rites and rituals. The chapter *Liyun* 禮運 of the *Liji* 禮記 describes the relation of *qing* and ritual propriety as follows: “Through the ritual of rank and order people’s *qing* is governed. Therefore, people’s *qing* is the sage king’s field where he cultivates it through ritual propriety” (see note 16, Seok 142). In Confucian discourses, *qing* or emotion is perceived “to be co-given or equiprimordial with human nature (性, *xing*),” as Eric S. Nelson observes in a recent study (193). Confucianism advocates “the social education and self-cultivation of ‘genuine feelings’ as well as sincerity and correct naming in expression,” indicating the “education and cultivation that would ultimately result in the realization of naturalness” (194). Nelson points out that the Confucian form of *qing* entails understandings of the performative enactment of human nature in affective life experiences, rather than rigid following of conventions and roles. That is to say, “the emotions are psychosomatically and intersubjectively enacted lived realities” (194). On the other hand, as

described in 中庸 (*Zhongyong, The Doctrine of the Mean*), an exemplary individual is characterized by an internal state of harmony and an ability of “centring equilibrium” (中, *zhong*). Whereas Nelson focuses on exploring emotions in Confucianism as “an aesthetical-ethical pattern” to be emulated and performed, one can find ample ramifications and expressions of the interpretations of *qing* in relation to rites and ritual propriety, and as a medium of achieving spiritual harmony and the establishment of consistency in dynastic literary and vernacular narratives (Nelson 321). Specifically, women authors of *tanci*, in depicting their unconventional heroines’ choices of a life under male disguise and recurrent rejection or delay of prearranged marriages, sought to justify their characters’ stances by generously emphasizing their orthodox emotions such as filial passion, chastity, loyal devotion to the nation, or political integrity as feelings that are of a superior nature to personal affection or conjugal love. The heroines’ exemplary passions that bespeak the Confucian ethical values such as filial piety, righteousness, loyalty, and integrity are demonstrated as more elevated forms of emotional dispositions.

Also, the disguised heroines’ reluctance to concede their emotional ties with their family or fiancés, concurrently, are illustrated affirmatively as indicative of their moral aptitude to coordinate personal feelings and achieve the neutralization of the emotions. In a comical contrast, the cross-dressers’ fiancés or male spouses are frequently the ones with excessive *qing*, and are often unable to moderate or regulate personal emotions in possessive passion and prolonged lovesickness. Hence, in *Destiny of Rebirth*, the disguised Meng Lijun, when posing as the prime minister, justifiably rejects her fiancé Huangfu Shaohua’s attempts to expose her femininity, and flawlessly enacts being an exemplar scholar following the Confucian principle of *li* (reason), emotional equilibrium, and internal harmony. In Qiu Xinru’s *Blossoms from the Brush*, filial passions provide a reason for Jiang Dehua to live a celibate life after marriage, in the name of beseeching heaven’s blessing for her aged parents. In Wang Oushang’s *A Tale of Vacuity*, the disguised Pei Zixiang devotes herself to appeasing political rebellions, defending the nation, restoring juristic impartiality, and protecting the royal heir. Her political integrity, an expansion of personal *qing* for her beloved fiancé and family members, allows her to be enshrined with the penultimate honor as a dedicated minister. As indicated above, the notion of *qing*, rather than being absent or eradicated from the discourse of female exemplarity, undergoes much transformation and redefinition in women’s *tanci* beyond the dimension of personal feelings or affective experiences.

Despite Ziyi’s recurrent efforts to reject Liang Qi’s pressing requests for reunion, the heroine is rather endorsed for having abundant *qing*, or emotions. On the day when Liang Qi marries the princess, Ziyi suffers from deep solitude and regret, even though she herself as Liang’s mentor has participated in making this marriage arrangement for Liang. The narrator comments, “Look at the disguised

Minister Cui! Since the beginning of the universe she is the most affectionate person. Unwittingly she falls into a marriage arrangement with Liang Qi, but helplessly sees him marrying another woman. For days she travels back and forth between the palace and the Liangs' house, and tirelessly fulfills her duty as a match-maker. Even though she claims that she has no complaints about this chore, she could not help but feel a little upset" (17:44). Giving her own fiancé to the princess, Ziying drowns her sorrows in wine: "Tipsy, she becomes immersed in her thoughts; her heart is overridden, her chest fully locked in regret and sorrows. Peach-like blushes arise on her pure cheeks, long brows like willow leaves, knit together in melancholy" (17:44). Importantly, the heroine does not entirely denounce her feminine feelings toward her fiancé. The text takes much effort to depict her complex emotions of envy, sadness, and loss on Liang's wedding day. She ponders, "Riding the phoenix he becomes the royal son-in-law. How fortunate to enjoy such penultimate affluence! The newlyweds joyfully dream of the clouds of Mount Wu. He may no longer think of me Yang Liqing!" (17:46). Shedding tears and finding it impossible to sleep, Ziying clearly articulates envy for Liang's new life in marriage in a feminine voice: "Over there, you search for the best design in the brow brochure and happily draw the eyebrows for the princess. Back here, the mirror reflects my face, and my waning body. Over there, the amorous pair enjoy the pleasure of love to their hearts' content. Back here, countless words of sorrows could not find a single audience. Over there, scholar and beauty are blessed with much happiness. Back here, the confined bird and abandoned phoenix maintains a good name in vain" (17:81). Unwilling to admit that she is jealous, she feels that her "heart and spirit split open, and robe is soaked in tears" (17:81). Unable to overcome her melancholy, Ziying goes so far as to compose a poem on losing her marriage prospect:

The lustrous pearls that light up the chariots dim the shine of the brocade,
 A narrow river separates the couple on both sides of the Milky Way.
 Waking up after wine, the fading coolness of spring lingers on the pillows.
 Fallen petals by the lamp, like many of my bygone dreams.
 Regrets last till the copper dragon feels the long nightly hours,
 Emaciated, how could her fine stature endure such sorrows?
 By chance she rises and watches the wind and rain,
 And sees only the fallen plum flowers caught in the green window gauze.

照乘珠光掩綺羅，盈盈一水隔銀河。
 酒醒枕上春寒淺，花落燈前舊夢多。
 恨到銅龍知漏永，瘦來玉骨奈愁何。
 無端曉起看風雨，飄瞥殘梅滿綠莎。(17:81)

The depiction of the emaciated heroine in the poem takes on a distinctive feminine voice, and expresses the sentiment and longing of a woman waiting for her beloved. The direct expressions of forlornness through phrases such as 恨 (*ben*, regret), 奈何 (*naihe*, helplessness), and 愁 (*chou*, melancholy), together with the allusion to the Milky Way, indicate the heroine's profound sense of loss and regret for being separated from her companion. The plum flowers are evoked here as a sentimental subject, echoing the heroine's forlorn feelings facing her imminent flight from home and anxieties about prospects of her future life.

Concurrent with these illustrations of Ziying's *qing*, Liang Qi is thinking of his fiancée on the wedding night, too. Though his handsome appearance charms many royal maidens, he ignores them all and keeps thinking of Liqing: "When he is served by many beautiful maidens, in private he feels the pain of losing his beautiful one who drowns herself. Saturated in sorrow, he is newly wedded to the princess. Yet this amorous one still misses his former wife" (17:64). The author endorses Ziying for her disavowal of private feelings for integrity (*zhijie*): "Who could rival Minister Cui's aspiration and integrity? She is of the same achievement as Prince Yongping. Writing about sorrows, my brush cannot dissolve them; expressing regret in the story, my regret cannot be mended after all. / Taking a bright pearl as an ordinary grain is wrongdoing that may hold for later generations; misdeed to the heroine, like truth mingled with falsehood, may never be erased" (17:69).

Martin Huang, in his study of 野叟曝言 (*Yesou puyan*, *Humble Words of a Rustic Elder*), notes that the hero of the novel, a Confucian scholar, though also rich in emotions (*duoqing*), demonstrates his "abundant *qing* without overstepping the bounds of Confucian propriety, or *li*" (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 238). *Qing* was represented as opposite to 欲 (*yu*), or physical lust. However, "the Song Neo-Confucian contrast between *qing* 'passions' and *xing* 'nature' is not found in pre-Han texts. In these earlier writings, *qing* as a noun means 'facts,' and as an adjective, 'genuine' or 'essential'" (31). Anthony Yu calls for a return to considering Chinese subjectivity: Yu cites Xunzi's definition of *qing* in which "the three aspects of human subject [*xing*, *qing*, and *yu*] are categorically placed on one continuum" to argue for the subjective implications of *qing*. He translates *qing* as "disposition" or "affective disposition" and emphasizes the action of "seeking" (*qiu*) in Xunzi's definition (Yu, *Rereading the Stone* 58; Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 32). Huang himself points out that the use of the term *qing* in literary traditions is very different. Some late Ming writers "made *qing* a central issue in fiction and drama by promoting it as a supreme human value and worthy of celebration" (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 34). This "prosaic approach" to *qing*, Huang argues, has "sensualized (*yubua*) as well as secularized *qing*" (34). In late Ming writings, *qing* was presented as sexual love between man and woman.

Throughout Jin's *tanci*, the heroine is endorsed as one with passion and abundant emotions, or *duoqing*. Even though Ziyang has cross-dressed for many years, she has been wearing the Gold Dragon Bracelet, or 金龍釧 (*jinlong chuan*), the love token for her marriage arrangement to Liang Qi (17:83). When Liqing reflects on her feelings in the moonlight, she comments,

The Goddess Chang'E 嫦娥 should not laugh at me for my rich emotions. . . . The gold bracelet has never left my wrist, the jade ring is always tied to my dress. When I haven't met Liang, I thought of all the means to approach him. When we have finally met, my feelings for him grow even deeper. Longing for him, I bite my teeth and could break ice; for whom else would I brave vicissitudes and exhaust my spirit? Having survived many deadly dangers, I loved and protected him. Indeed I hoped, that we two could be united and fulfill our promise of marriage. Who would have thought that he would have another companion, leaving me dreaming in the east wind? (17:83)

At the end of the story, Ziyang's act of suicide is symbolic in displaying her determination to break away from her matrimonial bond as well as a will to protect her chastity against the pressing emperor who was hoping to make her his secret mistress. Reminiscent of the enchanted Du Liniang, the heroine of the great *qing*, Ziyang celebrates and claims her own emotions, and speaks in the voice of one deeply wronged in love.

The text approves of Liang Qi that "his immersion in *qing* is exceptional in the past and present" (17:42). In the text, when Ziyang commits suicide, Liang Qi has just departed from the capital to complete an official mission. Upon hearing the news of Ziyang's death on the way, he immediately travels back, and seeing his deceased fiancé, he will not let go of Ziyang's body and wails to his death, his inner organs split in tremendous grief. In *The Peony Pavilion*, *qing* is described as "a power that transcends the boundaries of life and death" and therefore deserves endorsement as much as life itself (Huang 44). Liang Qi's *qing* for Ziyang takes his own life, and yet does not receive the narrator's endorsement, because his love for his fiancée opposes *li* (reason or principle), or particularly, the principle virtue of filial piety for his living parents. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the heroine comes back to life because of the power of *qing*. In Jin's *tanci*, death and rebirth are not mobilized by love, but are predestined calamities, or 劫 (*jie*), that constitute the banished immortals' voyages of moral redemption, a precondition for their return to the heavenly realm. Hence Liang Qi and Ziyang were revived by magic pellets given by a servant of the Daoist deity Lu Dongbin 呂洞賓, who sees to it that both characters complete their trials in the dust world, including the prearranged marriage. *Qing*, or love and private emotions between the predestined couple,

could not surpass the characters' mandate in life and death. In the scene of Ziying's suicide, she discovers that the only means to kill herself is to swallow the gold pieces from her bracelets. The pair of gold bracelets are "indeed my ultimate cause of death" (19:25). Lamenting her transitory fate, that is, 薄命 (*boming*), Ziying says to her bracelets,

Always on my wrists, you have accompanied me through mishaps and sufferings, yet even gold could not be firmer than my determination. Accompanying me to today, we have to sadly separate. Swallowing the gold, I will now depart for the underworld. For thousands of years, who has had a fleeting life like mine? My heart ridden with an immense and perpetual sadness, I wish to ask heaven for an answer. Ya cui! Yang Liqing, how slow-minded and obstinate you are! Are there any events since your birth that make you truly happy? What is the need for shedding blood and tears when jumping from the cliff? From now on, you shall enjoy freedom, far away from the sea of bitterness, riding a phoenix, you shall return to testify in front of the supreme Daoist immortal. Today is indeed the day of completion. For you would hear, in the distance the cry of the magic crane and the melody of the *sheng*, and perceive the rise of jade-white mist. (20:2)

Jin's text shares with previous *tanci* the plot motifs of women's cross-dressing and mock union, the heroine's divergences from principle virtues in terms of obedience to the husband, the parents, and the ruler, her exasperation at disclosure of her femininity, and the predestined reunion with her fiancé in a polygamous marriage. The characterization of the heroine also displays much similarity, if not direct influence, by influential *tanci* works by earlier women authors. Reminiscent of the tragic Meng Lijun, whose life is at risk when she spits blood under the relentless pressure of the emperor, and the enamored Mei Meiniang, who spits blood excessively when under emotional stress of losing the companionship of her beloved "sworn brother," the disguised Cui Ziying has a "blood-spitting" illness, or 噴紅症 (*penhong zheng*) (3:75). In the earlier part of novel, Ziying spits blood when her *qing* or emotions (be it filial love, anxiety, indignation, or affection for her fiancé) is triggered by external circumstances. In *juan* 2, when she decides to sacrifice herself and marry Prince Ning in order to rescue her imprisoned father, she reveals her plan of suicide to her grandmother on the wedding day, saying, "why not slit open my throat and let blood color my clothes" (2:10). Stating her filial love for her family, the impassioned heroine spits blood and loses consciousness.

Another example of suicide takes place when Xianzhen, pressed by the marriage proposal of Feng Junwen, attempts to hang herself. When rescued and questioned on why she would not give in to such a merry arrangement, she could not articulate her determination to stay chaste. No word could express her feelings; only red blood gushes

from her mouth (4:4). In *juan* 4, Liang Qi is wrongly accused of murdering a concubine of a rich landlord. Desperate to rescue him, the Liang family asks for help from their relative Minister Li at the capital, who recommends Ziyang (the cross-dressed Xianzhen) solve the case. When Ziyang meets Liang Qi for the first time in person, she deeply pities him for his misfortune, identifies the deceitful witness provided by a maid at the landlord's house, and rescues Liang from a death penalty. After the case is resolved, Ziyang can no longer control herself, and she suddenly spits blood, displaying her sympathy and affections for her fiancé. In *juan* 12, when Minister Li Wenhua 李文華, brother of Liang Qi's mother, Madam Li, suspects that Ziyang is the cross-dressed Yang Xianzhen, he exposes this suspicion to the emperor and pleads with the emperor to test Ziyang's identity. Hearing this from her cousin Cui Wenqin 崔文欽, Ziyang, petrified with fear and rage, spits blood. The most emotionally wrenching moment is doubtlessly in the scene before Ziyang's suicide. Her true identity exposed, and the exasperated Ziyang heaves out blood excessively. Mixing blood with ink, she composes her death letters to her parents and the emperor. Images of heroines spitting or coughing up blood are reminiscent of the frail and ill-fated Lin Daiyu in *Dreams of the Red Chamber*. In *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, blood symbolizes the exchange and repayment of *qing* between predestined female characters. In *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*, blood-spitting is an extended articulation of intensified emotions. Whereas in some of the above cases blood-spitting displays the heroine's unspoken emotions, a prominent implication of blood is related to the heroine's determination to sacrifice life for chastity and moral integrity.

In Jin's text, blood could be a symbol of Ziyang's *qing*, encompassing private emotions as well as orthodox passions, such as her filial love for her parents and chaste devotions to her fiancé. Before her third attempted suicide, Ziyang writes blood letters to her parents, her fiancé, and the emperor in the form of "letters expressing her feelings," that is, 陳情書 (*chenqing shu*) (19:4). Thinking of those she loves, she sheds tears excessively: "Her tears, like autumn rain, drip upon her garment" (19:4). Even she herself is startled by such expressions of sentimentality: "How strange! I could control many things, but why couldn't I control my own tears?" (19:5). For her parents, she reiterates her filial love: "When it comes to bidding farewell to them in great sadness, her words are sincere and sorrowful, and most heart-breaking" (19:5). For her fiancé, she calls upon him as 薄倖人 (*boxing ren*), "the fickle one lacking feelings" (19:4). Blaming Liang for wrongly suspecting her chastity, she reclaims her moral integrity in the letter: "My iron-like heart remains the same even until the day when the rocks collapse and the sea dries up. Firm and steadfast, I did not betray our former arrangement. How lamentable, you are such an unfaithful one! How many could hold their determinations like I did?" (19:4). Insisting on her integrity as the precondition of *qing*, Ziyang reclaims her affective competence.

In the text, Ziyong makes great effort to articulate her loyalty to the court as a more elevated form of *qing* to the emperor, who, however, fails to meet with Ziyong's understanding. Appealing to the ruler's virtue (*de*), Ziyong endeavors to dissuade the emperor from the plan of taking her in as a concubine and encourages him to neutralize his personal desire and passions. She says, "My emperor may follow the virtuous example of the ancient Emperor Yao, and do not lose your tranquil mind because of your humble servant" (19:15). Though Ziyong regulates her loyal passions by instructing the emperor with the principle of virtue, the emperor only regards her affective competence or *qing* in terms of love or private feelings. He threatens to execute Ziyong if she rejects his plan, and dictates, "For me to give the grace, you must have the feelings for me. Since you are bereft of love, like iron and stone, how could you expect me to spare your life? A wise one should ponder and act according to his circumstances. Do not wait until the moment of execution to become remorseful" (19:16). Whereas Ziyong interprets *qing* as a state of lived reality from the perspective of a loyal minister who is ardently engaged in serving the court and the nation, the emperor himself is yoked to the dimension of *qing* as a personal and private mode of mind, and fails to resonate with Ziyong's observation in an equivalent moral model.

Feminine jealousy and rivalry are presented in archetypal antiheroines in women's *tanci*, as in *Blossoms from the Brush*. The heroine in *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* insinuates subtle envy and jealousy for Princess Yunhe, Liang Qi's royal bride. However, this emotional rivalry is depicted in a lenient and tolerant light by the narrator. The Qing scholar Yu Zhengxie disagrees with the belief that "jealousy is an evil aspect of feminine virtue," or 妒為女人惡德 (*du wei nüren e de*), but rather considers it as a conducive constituent of 夫婦之道 (*fufu zhi dao*), or the way of a couple, and that according to classic texts and orthodox schools, jealousy is not an evil moral quality of women. In Jin Fangquan's *tanci*, feminine jealousy is depicted as an expression of Ziyong's *qing* toward her fiancé, and indicates the author's affirmation of Ziyong's moral aptitude as an orthodox heroine.

The heroine's moral aptitude to negotiate with personal feelings of jealousy and envy is attributed to her *zhi*, or an aspiration to return to immortality, surpassing the requests of earthly love and desire. Ziyong offers to be a go-between to persuade Liang Qi, her former fiancé, to marry Princess Yun He. In the passage below, she provides self-endorsement of her chastity and aspirations, without excluding the possibility of her returning to femininity and reuniting with Liang Qi.

Regarding my cousin Yang Liqing, she was gentle, considerate and wise.

If a person's heart is a drop of water in the Milk Way, her grace and generosity could be compared to the profound blue ocean.

Were she still live, she would never become jealous or resentful against you.

The fair girl has her own ambition to become an immortal; no one of this world could perceive her pure intentions.

If she returns to life, she and your wife shall become the royal sisters E'Huang and Nüying. (10:37)

Here, feminine *zhi*, or aspiration for immortality, regulates Ziying's ethereal emotions. The heroine's consistent deliberation between marriage in the secular world and pursuing immortality persists throughout the story. Before Liang Qi and Princess Yunhe's marriage, Ziying suffers a sense of guilt for having caused delays of marriage for Liang Qi, and contemplates joining him later in marriage or pursuing immortality with him later on: "I have delayed your marriage because of my desire for fame. I sigh for leaving you in suffering. / In future if we can indeed marry, I shall serve you and plead guilty for my deeds. / And yet, sadly I have no path of retreat now. / In this life, fortunate or not, I have no choice" (11:19–20). Later, Ziying contemplates giving up her marriage with Liang Qi entirely and living her life under disguise as a court official. In her own words, "Let Shaoyun and his wife be a merry couple, I shall continue a disguised life assisting the Emperor. / I do not desire to return and live the life a woman. / Even if I only become a wise minister, I shall leave fame for myself" (11:30). These two examples indicate that Ziying's ambition is twofold, comprising a desire to enter a utopian realm free from earthly sufferings, and a yearning for fame established through talent and achievement.

Daria Berg insightfully argues in her study of the *Biography of Great Master Tanyang*, "for the late Ming literati one way of dealing with the rising phenomenon of the talented gentlewoman was to explain her talent by her divine nature" (Berg 44). According to the biography, in 1574, sixteen-year-old Tanyangzi foresees the death of her fiancé, and she decides to forsake marriage and pursue a religious ideal instead. Berg states that "faithful maidenhood endows Tanyangzi with the aura of chastity and moral purity but it also aligns her lifestyle with that of the Daoist adept, characterized by withdrawal from the traditional social relationships carved out for a woman's life" (44). Suzanne Cahill, in *Transcendence and Divine Passion*, displays that Daoist women in the Tang dynasty lived secluded lives away from society, and took to religious practice as a path to physical liberation and immortality. Women Daoists renounced food, sexuality, and reproduction. As part of the process of approaching immortality, women adepts rejected marriage and motherhood. Wang Yanning, in discussing a poem about a female transcendent by Luo Qilan (駱綺蘭, 1775–1813), observes that for Luo, true immortality could only be achieved by "constructing one's

own transcendent space within the human world” (Wang Yanning, *Reverie and Reality* 46). Wang notes that *youxian* poems displayed forward-looking gender consciousness. Daoist practice to achieve immortality is a path toward higher life esteem and significance in life for moral women.

In Jin’s text, the characters’ inborn divinity underlies their predestined marriage, as well as their sufferings in the human world. As Prince Yong Ping observes to the heroine, “You and Wenyuan are indeed an exceptional pair, being both reincarnated immortals from heaven. / Perhaps your blissful bond makes heaven envious. Hence calamities befall recurrently and hardships are frequent” (17:18). Ziying and Liang Qi are destined to complete their travails on earth. Terminating one’s life by suicide does not complete this process of self-cultivation. Ziying’s three suicides are unsuccessful and are followed by her “return” to life. Liang Qi, who passes away in grief after Ziying’s suicide, is also revived, indicating that his *qing*, or desire, is yet to be fulfilled. In addition, pursuing immortality allows the heroine to transcend orthodox roles in the mundane world and achieve a life of her own. This course of achieving immortality allows her to leave the inner chambers and surpass “human limitations,” to travel to and between the celestial realm and the underworld. Her voyages transcend the boundaries of inner and outer, the lived and the deceased, the mortal and the immortal. For literati intellectuals who took to pursuits of transcendence, the identity of a Daoist adept is a “powerful alternative to and substitute for the scholar-official’s conventional persona of a recluse who expresses political defiance solely through non-cooperation” (Luo 51). In women’s *tanci*, the configuration of the Daoist adept as a gendered subject allows women to express a personal moral integrity. Jin’s text innovatively unites pursuit of immortality and the Confucian notion of *zhi* (directions of the heart/mind), and indicates that the relatively independent nature of *zhi* from external forces allows women to attain their own purpose on a path toward emotional and intellectual self-cultivation.

The text’s reclamation of the heroine’s *qing*, or emotional competency, to conclude, reflects strategic negotiation and appropriation of Confucian discourses on orthodox emotions. Rather than casting the disguised Ziying as one with no emotional attachment, the text depicts her as one with exceptional and profuse *qing* toward her fiancé, her family, and the emperor. Ziying’s character inherits earlier conventions in *tanci* by reconfiguring *qing* from the personal and private affective state of mind to a broader and morally elevated dimension that encompasses orthodox passions and emotions such as filial love, loyalty, integrity, and chaste devotion. Women’s orthodox *qing*, in such cases, acquires authority through the story’s moral valorization. On the other hand, the depiction of Ziying does not sacrifice or forsake the heroine’s private feelings and personal yearnings as a feminine subject. The above comical and albeit moving

moments of Ziying's affliction and suffering, deliberation, and self-control give an ingenuous portrayal of the woman's negotiation between emotional yearnings and ritual propriety, between dispositional sincerity and reason's ambitions. Rich and sincere expressions of her personal and private emotions in the text, such as love longing, envy, melancholy, and angst, do not undermine the exemplarity of her character, but rather strengthen her humaneness. These outspoken expressions of feminine emotions indicate a literary and cultural space for gendered emotional expression, a space of emotionality that projects a richer and much more diversified vision of feminine sentimentality than traditional Confucian interpretations of emotionality.

TYPICALITY OR SYNCRETISM?

As Richard C. Hessney argues, "Confucianism has always accorded a great authority to exemplars, historical or living, as determinants in the formation of personality and character" (Hessney 215). The "exemplariness" of the protagonists, male or female, bespeaks the issue of "individual and typical characters" in traditional Chinese fiction. Hessney states that the functional roles of these exemplars could be equated with human types, such as chaste women, filial sons, and loyal officials. The heroine of *Qizhenzhuan* embodies the overlapping types of the chaste woman, the female talent, the filial daughter, the ill-fated beauty, the caring sister, and the prudish official. Hessney observes that the influence of Yuan *zaju* plays and Ming *chuanqi* drama with their role types in fictional narratives contributed to the distinctive typicality of characters in scholar-beauty romances (215). In the *tanci* under discussion, the heroine in particular embodies such intersecting typical roles that jointly constitute, define, and reconfigure the discursive constructions of a feminine subjectivity that talks to but also exceeds gender norms of the author's times. As a minor character comments, Ziying bespeaks this exemplary femininity because of her "exceptional talent, beauty and ambition, she embodies filiality, integrity, loyalty, chastity in her person" (12:7). The quality of *qi* (exceptionality) could represent a synthesized ideal of femininity, which is built on elevated cardinal virtues and reclamation of feminine authority through the heroine's connections and interactions with her maternal family, her fiancé, the state, and the emperor. Hessney suggests that such typicality in characters could be partially due to a convention of depicting the comic rise of a hero or heroine who is superior in endowment, but is yet to come to terms with his or her social environment. In *Qizhenzhuan*, the heroine's rise to fame and eminence complicates this norm by making the "typicality" of the character the very means and vehicle of contesting traditional notions of femininity.

THE ILL-FATED FEMALE TALENT

In the text, feminine talent was depicted as an overriding force that causes the premature death of women. The authorial narrator observes in a cautionary tone to her readers, “Having the talent but not the fate is most tragic. / I advise women in the inner chambers: do not take up the writing brush, for many who were engrossed in writing poetry suffered an early death” (10:42). A similar description of women’s talent, or 才 (*cai*) and mandate, or 命 (*ming*) paradox is displayed in the episode when the aforementioned female family teacher Quan Huiniang passes away at a young age. The author ponders the unfortunate situation and attributes Huiniang’s premature death to her exceptional talent:

It is indeed that those who are talented do not have good fortune, and have to leave regrets for many years after death. / One’s talent cannot rival predestination.

Some may gain eminent power and high honors/ Yet others who have no word of commemoration on their grave steles enjoyed more long-lasting fortune.

Huiniang boasted of her talents in vain, a beautiful jade is buried in earth and dust after all.

I advise women in the inner chambers that you should be reserved in pursuing intellect

Showing off intelligence will harm your fortune and ruin your capacities.

Were it not that this bamboo brush helps me dissipate the distresses

My boundless sadness would bring me unbearable suffering. (4:89)

Zheng Zhenwei suggests that Quan Huiniang could be a fictional projection of the author herself. As depicted in the text, Huiniang, like the author, also has a young daughter who dies of illness. Among the poems by Huiniang cited in the text, a poem titled “絮影” (“Xu ying,” “In the Shadow of Willow Catkin”) is actually a poem by the author Jin Fangquan herself, according to *Quanqing cichao*. Literati allusions to the talent and mandate paradox are numerous. The Tang poet Li Shangyin famously said, “since ancient times, one’s talent and fate always affect each other” (Li Shangyin 6232). The talent and fate paradox could be traced to the authorial narrator’s comment on the famous Han dynasty scholar and politician Jia Yi (賈誼, 200–168 BCE) in 史記 (*Shiji, Records of the Grant Historian*). Among late imperial women writers, the

poet Wang Pei 王佩 alludes to this paradox in her poem “題《印月樓詩剩》” (“Ti Yingyuelou shisheng,” “On The Remnant Poems of Moon Impression Pagoda”). On the early death of her third younger sister who is infatuated with poetry and the arts, the poem laments, “The exclusion of talent and fate is as such, I cry out against heaven for its lack of benevolence” (Wang Pei 136). Chen Zhaolun (陳兆崙, 1700–1771), the grandfather of *tanci* author Chen Duansheng, offers a contradiction against the talent and fate paradox in his famous essay “On Talented Women”:

Among those who made observations, they often say that women should not possess talent or fame. If they obtain talent or fame, they will usually suffer misfortune. I myself disagree with this view. Fortune by itself is difficult to acquire, not to mention to obtain it fully. Since the ancient times, countless women suffered mishaps and adversity. And yet among them only a few were known to the world. For these few, it is indeed because their talent should not be forgotten. On the other hand, talent and fortune are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There are also quite a few women who took to literature and enjoyed affluence and honor in their lives. Why then should one claim that women should not enjoy fame because of their talent? (Chen Zhaolun 6)

Likewise, the poet and writer Ye Shaoyuan (葉紹袁, 1589–1648) famously endorses women’s literary talent as equivalent to the importance of feminine virtue. He states, “Men have three eternal principles: to observe their virtue, their deeds, and their words. Women also have three principles: virtue, talent and beauty. These illustrious principles have been upheld for nearly tens and thousands of years” (Ye Shaoyuan 1). The Ming playwright Li Yu justifies women’s talent, noting, “I would say that talent and virtue are not by nature contrary to each other” (Li Yu, *Leisure Notes* 216).

Late imperial women reflected on the paradox of talent and fate in their writings. The late Ming poet Shang Jinglan (商景蘭, 1604–1680) laments that “women’s death is often not because of heavenly mandate, but due to their excessive talent” (Shang 20). The Qing poet Yuan Jia (1793?–1853), the granddaughter of Yuan Mei, addressed the above convention in a poem, which goes as follows: “Xie Daoyun was born to an eminent family, her ephemeral and desolate lifetime testifies the karma of the world. / The saying that man can triumph heaven is erroneous; rather, it is true that talent could indeed hamper one’s life” (Yuan Jia 263). Women authors’ reflection on the paradox of talent and fate could be considered as an extended response to the paradox of talent and virtue, and could bespeak their anxiety about writing in a dominantly paternal literary tradition. Liu Yongcong, in his studies of Qing women’s responses to and laments on the convention of “talent harming fate,” makes the point that the authors’ shared accepting attitude toward this norm is by no means passive, but rather brings alleviation to their grievances as writers. Maureen Robertson, in her analysis

of the poem “Qi Xi” (“七夕,” “Seventh Eve”), authored by Xu Quan 許權, a Qing governing-class woman, argues that, from a feminine perspective, the poet’s representation of the view that “talented women are ill-fated” possesses a deep sense of irony and bitterness, and that “the iconicity of the image is mocked or destroyed as a result” (Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine” 96). Similarly, Jin’s *tanci* presents characters’ serious queries about or even challenges to this convention. A heroine named Lanjun 蘭君 fully embraces talent. In a conversation with Ziying and her mentor Quan Renlan, Lanjun articulates her ambitions.

One’s life is as ephemeral as morning dew. Only a woman’s good name could last in the universe. What is the benefit of becoming one of those who are common in nature and ordinary in fortune? Those truly talented and of high moral status could gain the admiration of this world. Just like my earnest uncle, who, thanks to his exceptional talent and learning, holds jade plate, wears draping ribbons, and serves the emperor. Since a female hero is rare for hundreds of years, her name could be inscribed in history and forever remembered. Even though my mentor does not have supreme fortune, her talent and style are both extraordinary. Her fame is prominent as such that she could open a family school. Everyone is joyful about this exceptional heroine in the inner chambers. Your niece, I myself, likewise admire true talents, even though they may be less favored by fortune. (10:43)

As displayed in the text, there are discrepancies between the authorial observations of “talent harming one’s fortune” and depictions of female characters’ views on women’s pursuit of learning. It is made clear in the very first *juan* that the heroine, Yang Xianzhen, is selected by Liang Qi’s mother, Madam Li, as a future daughter-in-law because of her talent (1:4). Upon Madam Li’s request, Liqing composes two poems of rather different style and subject; one is titled “繰絲行” (“Zaosixing,” “Reeling Silk”), and another is “鄴中懷古” (“Yezhong huaigu,” “Reminiscing on Ancient Times by Yezhong”) (1:25). The first poem, taking a feminine voice, begins by depicting women of Jiangnan harvesting silk and weaving silk clothes, and then moves on to illustrate one particular woman expressing sadness and longing because she is separated from her husband who is serving as a soldier at the remote frontier, who would not receive her embroidered letter and clothes made for him. The second poem takes up a masculine mode and laments on course and mandate of the unscrupulous Cao Cao (曹操, 155–220) of the Wei kingdom during the Three Kingdom period. These two poems in contrasting gendered voices attracted Madam Li and inspired her to make a marriage proposal for her son Liang Qi immediately.

Throughout the story, it is frequently indicated that the heroine has the so-called 觀書癖 (*guanshu pi*), that is, a strong infatuation with reading. The hero Liang Qi, in

order to please his fiancée, searches for extraordinary books and sends them to Ziying as gifts. Appreciating these books, “she could not cease commenting on ancient texts, her lotus-flower tongue makes wise contentions” (18:6). Selected as a court official because of her exceptional talent to read the writings in tadpole scripts from Korea, Ziying is exempted from the civil service and directly promoted to be a prime minister by the emperor. Her exceptional talent even dispels some suspicions about her being a woman. When Minister Li Wenhua questioned Ziying’s feminine appearance, suspecting “him” to be a woman, Minister Xu dismisses his doubts, saying, “When I first met Ziying, I suspected that he was a woman. Later I tested his learning, and my doubts are dispelled. How could a woman in the inner chambers possibly have such aspiration and knowledge?” (4:69). Similarly, when Minister Xu, Ziying’s future father-in-law, first meets Ziying, he suspects Ziying to be a girl. And yet Ziying’s “talent is so boundless, when he detects ‘his’ exceptional learning Minister Xu’s doubts are entirely dispelled” (4:85). The text does not hide the irony against the normative bond of the word “talent” with literati identity and the unrecognized female talent as counterparts to scholars in a male social and political order. Aptly this literati prejudice against women’s talent gives Ziying the much-needed confirmation of masculinity as an effeminate scholar.

As Qian Nanxiu observes in her important study of 列女 (*lienü*, exemplary women) and *xianyuan* (virtuous and talented ladies) biographical traditions in Chinese women’s history, in the Confucian classics in the Han period, the term *xian* depicts those who “possess both *de* (virtue) and *cai*, the ability and/or talent to actualize virtuous qualities” (Qian 72). Qian observes that the terms *xian* and *zhen* in the discursive context of Liu Xiang’s *Biographies of Exemplary Women* are mutually referential and gesture toward “combined qualities—virtue, talent, righteousness, and chastity” (72). Only by possessing these qualities could exceptional heroines make the “state prosperous and their families illustrious” (72). In Qian’s exploration of 後漢書 (*Hou Hanshu, History of the Later Han*), compiled by Fan Ye (范曄, 398–445), two-thirds of the chapters endorse learned women’s aptitude in instructing their families. Fan observes that his selection “brought together women of particularly outstanding talent and lofty behavior, without focusing on one specific virtue” (74), as most representatively illustrated in the entries on Bao Zhao (班昭, 45–114?) and Cai Yan (late Han). Qian continues to examine Liu Yiqing’s glorification of the *xianyuan* tradition in *Shishuo*, in which virtuous and talented women were named *xian* because their commitment to pursue spiritual freedom and transcendence surpassed the Confucian virtues of obedience and submission. Rather, virtuous and talented historical women, in Liu’s perception, emulate the manners and philosophies of the Seven Literati of the Bamboo Grove during the Wei-Jin period. In the *xianyuan* tradition, women’s literary talent was reclaimed as a principle component of *xian*, a moral trait that is not only equivalent to virtue in

importance, but also mobilizes women's practice of virtuous deeds in everyday reality. Whereas the textual affirmations of women's talent gained continuous growth in Ming Qing women's writings, written *tanci* provided women's own profound reflections on debates about female talent, and its contested relations with womanly virtue and fate. Jin Fangquan's illustration of female talent reflects an intriguing ideological inconsistency in the divergence between a conservatively positioned narrator, and more forward-looking heroines in the story who choose fame and exemplarity over an ordinary life unenlightened by literacy and learning. In the story, the male scholars' blind prejudice against women's learning adds much amusement to the reading experience; such male-centered cynicism against the existence of female talent dramatically offers even more narrative expediency and probability in the plot development. With exceptional talent being her most convincing social disguise as a man, the cross-dresser is now able to present her intellect for literature and classics as cardinal qualities of a Confucian gentleman.

THE BURDEN OF BEAUTY

Aside from asserting the image of the ill-fated female talent, the burden of beauty to women receives rich textual reflections in *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*. In this volume, there are recurrent references to the heroine's beauty as the cause of her misfortune. When Xianzhen is pressed by Prince Ning into becoming his concubine in exchange for saving her father from imprisonment, her grandmother Mrs. Zheng laments, "Beautiful maidens often suffer an early death; the ancient proverb is indeed true. Xianzhen was born with such a beautiful look. It is indeed the root of all her misfortunes" (2:7). This narrative convention is embedded in the story's plot in Jin's *tanci*. On her way to the capital to seek help from her cousin, the disguised heroine's silver and belongings were stolen by a greedy clerk at a traveler's lodge. The heterodiegetic narrator intervenes in a didactic storyteller's voice:

Readers, it should be known that Miss Yang's entire life is hampered by her talent and beauty, and is thus ridden with extreme hardship and misery. Most of the calamities that haunt her are induced by her talent or beauty, such as being forced to marry Prince Ning, being proposed to by Feng Junwen, the incident of attracting the lodge clerk's attention because of her beauty and therefore suffering theft, as well as numerous later mishaps and distresses. Hence a cautionary note to people in the world: do not envy those who are endowed with talent and beauty. Rather, it is those who are particularly slow-minded, and unattractive as the legendary Mo Mu who would live a peaceful life. (4:35)

Such an admonishing tone in commenting on the beautiful heroine is evocative of the emblematic “ill-fated beautiful woman” image in literati depictions. Daria Berg observes that late Ming literati readers “found the mixture of beauty and talent that engenders tragedy compelling,” as illustrated through the example of the tragic and beautiful poet Feng Xiaoqing (Berg 151). This ideal of womanhood combining beauty, talent, and *qing* (emotions) allowed literati society to find a rationalization for the rise of educated women (152). Martin W. Huang, in his study of eighteenth-century literati scholars, makes the incisive point that frustrated literati “who always considered their own talent as failing to gain proper recognition” displayed an obsession with literary images of “a suffering female” (Huang, *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation* 84). From this male-oriented point of view, “the more beautiful, the more talented, and the greater her suffering, the greater the appeal of that female other to those male literati” (84). In such examples of infatuation, the male authors’ narcissistic obsession with their own unappreciated talent is transformed into an imagined intersubjective identification with talented women authors (84). Huang observes that as illustrated in the case of the Qing novel *Lin Lanxiang* (*The Fragrance of Forest and Orchid*), the novel presents a gendered allegory through which the unfulfilled male protagonist projects his own woe and sorrows onto the literary images of the suffering heroine.

Qizhenzhuan complicates this convention with the comic motif of cross-dressing. The heroine herself does not disguise her beauty even after she has to cross-dress as a man to escape from Prince Ning’s pursuit. Her disguise rather brings out her good looks.

He is like the reborn Pan’An, the handsome scholar who divided fruits to admiring ladies,
 Or the fine Du Yi with porcelain skin who became alive once more.
 His refined face and stunning looks startle others’ eyes,
 Literary talent and elegant air make him particularly outstanding.
 He could let those in the inner chambers lose their fine spirit and soul,
 And even stir the emotion of the fairy ones in heaven. (4:10–15)

Even her maid questions whether she looks too feminine with her 削肩細腰 (*xiaojian xiyao*), or “slanted shoulders and slim waist.” Xianzhen, who now goes by the name of Ziyong, reasons, “The famous scholar Shen Yue has a waist so slender that it could be held by one hand. I would be fine even if I had a smaller waist than him” (4:16). Ziyong’s insistence on beauty foreshadows a later part of the story in which she evokes suspicions of cross-dressing at the court, as well as the final exposure of her secret to the emperor. In the second half of the story, Ziyong was wrongly suspected by her fiancé Liang Qi of losing her chastity to the emperor when serving the ill emperor in private. The benevolent Prince Yongping perceptively observes that such wrong suspicions

against Ziying are caused by her 愛好自憐 (*aibao zilian*), that is, her narcissist inclination to beauty (17:13), as follows: “Ziying loves and pities herself to the extent of inducing misfortunes onto herself, who could believe that she is actually, ice-hearted underneath her snow-pure appearance, and has iron-hard determination. Hence she suffers such peculiar wrongdoings. This is all because she is harmed by the flaws in her actions and demeanors” (17:13). Besides Ziying’s narcissist care for her beauty and appearance, she suffers from some moral flaws. Despite her poetic genius, she is depicted as lacking in wisdom, caution, and alertness in avoiding potential dangers and schemes particularly designed to entrap her. The narrator comments on Ziying’s character, saying, “She is too obstinate to execute her wisdom, too proud of herself and makes her chastity to no avail. This is very much like: webs woven and cages laid, waiting particularly for her misdeed. / Once a word mislaid, it plants seeds for suspicion” (12:30).

Keith McMahan suggests that in cases of a woman disguising herself as a man, “the young man and woman look alike or at least easily pass as members of each other’s gender” (McMahan, “The Classic ‘Beauty-Scholar’ Romance” 223–24). Tales of beautiful women disguised as men are not unique to *tanci* fiction. McMahan, in his study of similar plot motifs in classic beauty-scholar romance, observes that “the classic beauty-scholar romance is the story of the upward mobility of the woman, so that a man’s dressing or acting like a woman would be not only illogical but perverse” (McMahan, “The Classic ‘Beauty-Scholar’ Romance” 234). Whereas beauty-scholar romance tales display “permeability of gender boundaries, as with the notion that the woman is ‘as good as’ a son,” true “symmetry of male and female cross-dressing would have to occur in a context devoid of the gender hierarchy that dictates that women must act like men in order to prove their superiority” (234). Also, in beauty-scholar romance, “there is often a similar inequality in the ratio of sexual partners” (234).

Classic women-authored *tanci* tales such as *Destiny of Rebirth*, *Blossoms from the Brush*, and *A Tale of Vacuity*, resonant with the above discussions, display an uncertain ideological stance toward the problem of feminine beauty. In quite a few texts, the exceptional beauty of the cross-dressers brings them plaguing experiences of abduction, forced marriage, or even suicide. Fine heroines such as Meng Lijun in *Destiny of Rebirth* and Cui Ziying in the current *tanci* suffer the exposure of their femininity when their captivating self-portraits in feminine attire are discovered by their amorous fiancés or conspiring parties. Quite a number of beautiful heroines suffer premature death, especially when they are confronted with the dilemma of becoming an avaricious emperor’s concubine or returning to a polygamous marriage. On the other hand, almost all *tanci* fiction writers go to a remarkable extent to depict the refined and exceptional appearances of the leading female characters before and after they take on male disguise. Rather than devaluing or concealing the characters’ charming looks, these stories transform beauty into a component of the protagonist’s cross-gender identity.

Whereas in some *tanci* there are women who attract calamity to their chastity because of their outstanding looks, most *tanci* depict their leading heroines as courageous women endowed with individual autonomy. Maram Epstein, regarding literati writers' fantasy about feminine beauty, observes that "connoisseurship, including the appreciation of beauty, was so central to the cult of passions, that the ability to express one's taste became an important expression of self" (Epstein, "Turning the Authorial Table" 161). This connoisseurship of beauty is profoundly transformed in women-authored *tanci*. The cross-dresser's beauty, rather than reinforcing gendered stereotypes of femininity, highlights the permeability of gender boundaries. The text opens up an imagined space of female connoisseurship of beauty, women's spectatorial pleasure, or momentary homoerotic encounters. In comparison with the uneven gender relationship between the beautiful heroine and the literati in classic beauty-scholar romance, women's *tanci* tales depict an innovative ideal of partnership in which the beauty herself, as a disguised scholar, preserves the autonomy of her body and spirit, or even negotiates between borrowed identities of a husband, father, and son through a mock union with a celibate or understanding female companion. The imagining of a gendered connoisseurship of beauty in women's *tanci* could be indicative of the texts' visionary query into an early modern feminine selfhood.

CONCLUSIONS

Written at a time of turmoil and exile, *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* manifested contested ideals of femininity by renovating orthodox discourses on women's chastity, talent, beauty, as well as moral and political integrity. The author's identity as a wartime refugee during the Taiping Rebellion period allows her inquiry of a nascent sovereign identity beyond the inner chambers through personal writings about warfare, exile, loss, and homesickness. Rather than emulating literati depictions of wartime trauma and dislocation, Jin's authorial reflections provide a woman author's situated observations of social and political realities at a historical time of disturbance and crisis. This study of Jin Fangquan's *tanci* examined how the social and political circumstances of warfare and disorder condition and inspire Jin's reconfiguration of orthodox values such as chastity and filial passions, political loyalty, and female martyrdom into new narratives of female exemplarity. Tensions between secular desires and sacred aspirations underlie plot development, and rather than being reconciled in the end, continue to unravel in more complicated forms, indicating narrative uncertainty underlying the text's ideological stances about women's social and personal outcome. The novel does not conclude the plot by solely depicting a disguised heroine's comic rise in the social hierarchy followed by her ascent (or escape) to the immortal realm, nor

does the plot force the heroine to face the irresolute dilemma between death (by suicide or illness) and compromise through marriage. Rather, the story suggests a realistic, though indefinite outcome, hinting that the heroine after marriage would continue three years' of celibacy in exchange for her brother's longer lifespan. This adroit "delay" in making Ziyang return to traditional feminine roles, though not most satisfactory, is perhaps the best option that the war-stricken and melancholy author could devise for her exceptional heroine. In the story, the protagonist composes a poem on her self-portrait before she cross-dresses and departs on her new journey. Perhaps this poem could be read as an intertextual echo to the author's own mirage: an author anticipating an understanding audience, a woman ahead of her time anticipating a better ending for her story.

Playing the zither to the melody of Xiaoxiang qu,
light and airy are the clouds, deep the waters.
When rainbow wanes, the setting sun withdraws,
the returning birds tweet on top of tall trees.
Thin and moist evening dew coat the vine-covered path,
cooling gusts stir the bamboo bushes.
Striking a chord, and yet who could hear it?
Hitting the stone stick, I sigh for my solitary song. (12:2)

Chapter Four

“BEYOND ROUGE AND POWDER”: REWRITING FEMALE TALENT IN SUN DEYING’S *JINYUYUAN* (AFFINITY OF THE GOLDEN FISH)

I N *AFFINITY OF THE GOLDEN FISH* (published in 1871), author Sun Deying expressed her ardent yearning for equality for men and women, asserting that those who held prejudiced views “shall use this book as a mirror, carefully read it, to redress their wrongdoings and achieve self-awakening. Women shall be men’s equals. Thence there would not be any women who hold regret in the ensuing generations” (20:26). This chapter explores the author’s gendered consciousness as centrally expressed through her reconfigurations of talent and feminine identity in the following aspects. Sun distinguishes herself by writing “beyond rouge and powder.” Rather, to surpass normative writing themes ascribed to femininity in the inner chambers, predominantly love and affection, Sun Deying illustrates feminine talent in light of women’s aptitude for transcending gender norms and achieving literary and artistic excellence, or even social and historical eminence, as men’s equals. Published in an era of chaos and disorder after the Taiping Rebellion, *Affinity of the Golden Fish* demonstrates a progressive stance in appealing to women’s self-awakening and consciousness

for gendered equality, and most prominently, reinterprets the notion of female talent. First, the text's depiction of women characters' erudition and knowledge, their yearning for learning, and their confidence in personal talent and aptitude resonates with Ming Qing women authors' increased social visibility and impact. Second, Sun Deying's talented heroines manifest strong self-associations with a literati selfhood. The text reenacts dynastic women's socialization and exchanges of writings within their networks of family members, relatives, and close personal friends who share similar interests in and knowledge of literature and art. Third, the text takes a revisionist stance on the normative paradox of talent and virtue by depicting filial or chaste feminine characters whose literary and artistic talents give them the power and agency to seek imperial grace and exoneration for culpable parents or a guilty husband. Fourth, aside from learned heroines from gentry and governing classes, the text illustrates a broad array of talented minor female characters, ranging from singsong girls and female storytellers to servant-maidens and concubines. The text invites a reconsideration of the relationship between female talent and social class in late imperial literature, and a reconsideration of how such relationships define literary imagination of feminine subjectivity. Fifth, through elaborate embedded subplots, framed narratives, and *tanci* scenarios, the text also highlights women's artistic talent and its association with late imperial vernacular culture. Women characters' artistic talent is demonstrated in their expertise in poetry, painting, foreign language, music, opera, chess, divination, drinking games, and vernacular storytelling. Women's learning and erudition surpass the traditional arts of literati scholars. The *tanci*'s reconfiguration of female talent in this regard constructs a vernacular feminine subjectivity in interaction with, but different from, the literati-feminine norm.

WRITING BEYOND ROUGE AND POWDER

Sun Deying has an artistic name of 凌雲仙子 (Lingyun xianzi, "Goddess Riding the Clouds"). The edition I used was a 1903 lithography by Shanghai shuju consisting of twenty volumes. I used the version held at the Shanghai City Library. The work largely contains narration in seven-character lines, without resorting to theatrical formulas of 腳色 characters (*jiaose*), and occasionally contains some 十字句 (*shiziju*), or ten-character lines. Sheng Zhimei characterizes this *tanci* work as 敘事體彈詞 (*xushiti tanci*), or "narrative *tanci*." The work contains two prefaces, both authored by women and dated the Tenth Year of Emperor Tongzhi's Reign (1871). The first preface was composed by a Woyun nüshi, called Wu Xiaolu, and another was by self-identified female *tanci* author Niu Ruyuan, Sun Deying's sister-in-law. According to Bao Zhenpei, based on the preface by Niu Ruyuan, Sun was possibly born on or after 1841. She was

a daughter of the Sun family who were from the clan rooted in Gui'an county in the east Zhejiang province. Her father took a post as a government assistant in Xijiang, and then received an appointment at Xunguan, where their family resided for thirty years. Niu Ruyuan 紐如媛 praises Sun for her exceptional talent, even in childhood, and her interest in reading and writing: "Whenever she had a moment of rest from needlework and embroidery, she could not put down the books. From the classics, history, and writings by the various masters to studies of strange things and miscellaneous biographies, she would read them and know them by heart" (Niu 1). Departing from the convention of coquettish "rouge and powder" writings, Sun was praised for "knowing the events from ancient times to the present, surpassing the dreary matters of the rise and fall of current events. She perceives fame and fortune as floating clouds, and finds lifelong pleasure in playing the zither and reading books" (1). In her youth, Sun studied by herself without instructions: "She was self-disciplined in reading and chanting poetry, discreet in mood and generous in character, and was very much reminiscent of the manners of the legendary novel women in history" (1). Niu records in her preface that Sun, from a young age, had the intention of spending her life serving her parents and did not want to get married.

Acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between women's lives and their writings, Niu Ruyuan expresses dissatisfaction with the reception of women's works because of gender prejudice, and she endorses Sun Deying as an exemplar of women's accomplished authorship. From Niu Ruyuan's preface, the readers could see that after the author's mother suffered a stroke and fell very ill, she expressed her wish to remain unmarried and serve her parents for the rest of her life. The parents and elders of the family sought to dissuade her to no avail and finally consented to her life choice. Her mother passed away of aggravated illness after the family had to flee by sea from rebellions in Canton. She had then taken to Buddhist self-study and writing of *tanci* from 1863 to 1868, and thus completed the work *Affinity of the Golden Fish* (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 275). The preface by Wu Xiao'e 吳小娥 offers descriptions of Deying's literary talent and her writings' endorsement of women; in Wu's words, "one does not have to be a man to establish virtue or to make great achievements" (Wu Xiao'e 1). Bao Zhenpei writes that the tone and address in the preface indicate Wu was a female friend of Sun Deying's, of about the same age (Bao, *Manuscripts of Treatise* 274).

Like previous *tanci* works by women, Sun Deying's *tanci* is addressed to understanding women audiences who in return lend encouragement and endorsement to the author in her long and assiduous writing process. As the authorial narrator confesses, "My sisters frequently urged me on, and friends in the inner chambers have given me many unearned praises" (4:1). When the author's mother passed away after being paralyzed for three years, Deying relied on her female friends' support through

this traumatic personal loss; in her words, “My benevolent female friends in the inner chambers have resorted to kind and healing words to alleviate my worries and change my mind” (3:21). Sun Deying’s extensive insertions of authorial narration and reflection, Hu Siao-chen argues, illustrate the increased space and autonomy for women *tanci* writers of this period in shifting the boundaries between the private and the public, sharing personal life experiences with a targeted audience akin to trusted friends in the boudoir (Hu, “Burning the Midnight Oil” 148). Such increased autonomy for women writers is addressed in the preface by Niu Ruyuan, Sun’s sister-in-law, at the beginning of this *tanci* work. Hu Siao-chen argues that these textual and paratextual features suggest an increased social acceptance of women writers and their writings as self-representing texts (149). Sun Deying’s strategic alignment of a woman author’s private emotional realm with writings addressed to a readership in the public sphere represents women authors’ efforts to cope with anxiety about writing and orthodox discourse about feminine virtue.

The duality of private and public spheres determines the function of *tanci* fiction in articulating women’s 私情私志 (*siqing sizhi*, private emotions and ideals) through words intended for the public. Hu argues that Sun Deying’s *Jinyuyuan*, and Qiu Xinru’s *Bishenghua* constructed an imaginative private sphere that is an intersection or interpolation of private time and private space (153). Sun’s reconfiguration of the gendered division between private and public spheres evokes relevance to studies of gender and history on a broader scale. Joan Kelly, in her article “The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory,” stresses that the division between “female sphere” as “private” and “male sphere” as “public” is an ideological split, rather than being based on biological difference. Likewise, Patricia Demers points out that “the interanimation of public and private realms is part of the legacy of early modern women writers” in England (Demers 128). In the imperial Chinese context, learned women still uphold the division of gendered roles between the inner chambers and the exterior social sphere in terms of managing domestic duties and socially inscribed roles in terms of labor. Women writers, rather than disrupting the inner/outer divide, still observe and sustain this division. Activities and creations of women on subjects related to traditional womanly work or domestic duties are considered legitimate in a social and cultural division of labor affirmed by patriarchal tenets. On the other hand, late imperial women writers whose publications position themselves in the public sphere always “had to defend themselves against accusations of lewdness” while managing to continue to write and to find venues of publication (Bruneau 164). The constraints imposed on women to access the outer sphere also impelled them to appropriate and reconfigure the inner sphere as a space of their own. In light of Sun Deying’s work, the process of writing allows her to express a singular, private identity, as illustrated in the authorial narration below:

I do not have the instruction of a wise teacher, nor do I boast exceptional talent and surpass others in the word. I read, toil, and seek solution myself, without coherence in writing nor trespassing of conventions. I dare to ponder on disseminating this work and passing it down to later generations, and only want to express my ideals and yearnings. Humbly I bow and beseech my female friends not to laugh me, but to pity me for my lack of knowledge. If there are errors and inaccuracies in my writing, I shall seek truly learned friends to revise and expurgate the work into a better condition. (20:1)

This interior sphere of writing could be taken literally as a reference to Sun Deying's cloistered space of living and writing. Also it is an emblematic and gendered space of women's literary creativity and pursuit, indicating the author's commitment to writing for a woman's personal interest instead of following the literati conventions of writing for public consumption, or writing in response to ideas and subjects in the public domain. The text suggests that the implied readers of Sun's work are appreciative and learned women audiences sharing the same figurative sphere and community.

Women writers' efforts to transform and utilize the domestic sphere as a site of literary activities, however, had to be balanced with their evolved domestic roles and duties due to life-changing events such as marriage, childbearing, caring for elders, household management, or unfortunate incidents such as illness, poverty, or personal loss of a spouse, parent, or child. Among the Qing women *tanci* authors, Chen Duansheng and Qiu Xinru started writing their works before marriage, but both ceased writing for a long period of time after marriage before picking up their brushes again in middle age. The late eighteenth-century author Zhu Suxian took to writing during her widowhood and finished *Linked Rings of Jade* at an elderly age. A later writer Wang Oushang completed her work *A Tale of Vacuity* during her widowhood. Others, like Liang Desheng (梁德繩, 1771–1847) and Huang Xiaoqin, found more time and freedom to commit to writing *tanci* at an older age. Sun Deying, who remained celibate and unmarried all her life, was one of the few authors who completed her *tanci* works at an early age before marriage. Similar examples of women completing their *tanci* at an early and unmarried age include the anonymous daughter who coauthored *Jade Bracelets* with her mother, the anonymous author of 晝錦堂記 (*Zhoujingtangji*, Tale of the Daylight Hall), and Cao Xiangpu 曹湘蒲 who wrote 雙魚珮 (*Shuangyu pei*, Double Fish Pendant) before dying at twenty-one. Unlike other authors, Sun Deying was determined to remain celibate even at a young age and chose to embrace a cloistered religious life in the name of serving her parents. Based on Niu Ruyuan's preface to Sun's *tanci*, Bao Zhenpei proposes that Sun completed her *tanci* in her late twenties. Three years after the book's completion, Niu Ruyuan composed the preface for the book's publication (Bao and Xiaoyi 275).

Susan Mann observes that women writers of the mid-Qing, because of “their literacy, their religiosity, and their own strivings for comfort and security,” helped to provoke the social and moral discourses on marriage (Mann, “Grooming a Daughter for Marriage” 111). The life and writing of late Qing author Sun Deying is a similarly thought-provoking example of Qing women authors’ transformation of, if not emphatic challenge to, the social order and the refashioning of gender roles in a progressive yet polemical historical era (111). *Affinity of the Golden Fish* contains explicit articulations about feminine consciousness and reflections on gender equality. In *juan* 1, the authorial narrator articulates these reflections: “men and women are born the same, and should not be treated with differences. So strange that many in the world worry about having daughters, and only hope for giving birth to sons. It should be known that such thoughts are ignorant and unenlightened, for familial principles and grace should not be damaged” (1:1) The authorial narrator then goes on to evoke historical examples of feminine heroism:

Since ancient times, many women in the inner chambers surpass men in their courage and righteousness. Their exceptional deeds move heaven and earth, and they are no less than exceptional “heroines wearing head-handkerchiefs.” Who says that men are necessarily superior to their rouged peers? Behold, the disguised Huang Chong’gu served as an imperial official, the filial Cao E committed suicide to honor her deceased father, upholding the cardinal virtue. The most resourceful Mulan fought at the borderlines. The brave and exceptional Xun Guan climbed over the city wall to seek help for her besieged father. The everlasting fame of General Yang’s armies is mostly owed to the brave female generals of the family. (1:1)

The author goes on to advise her readers, “Do not become joyful or sad for giving birth to a son or a daughter. So long as one treats sons and daughters with equal love, the children will have exceptionally filial hearts” (1:1). This outspoken authorial consciousness about gender equality underlies Sun’s *tanci*, which is written precisely “to express the ambition of women in this world” (1:1). The plot illuminates women’s gendered consciousness and their striving for equal access to societal pursuits with their male counterparts. The story focuses on two cross-dressed heroines. A character named Qin Meng’e 秦夢娥, betrothed to a protagonist Qian Jingchun 錢景春, is forced to disguise herself as a man to flee when her father, together with the families of Minister Qian and Minister Feng, are wrongly accused of treason. After serving the nation as a military general, she reassumes her feminine identity and marries her fiancé. Meng’e is awarded the title of Countess of Dingshan and becomes the adopted daughter of the empress, with the title of Princess Shengping (昇平公主, Shengping Gongzhu). After her refeminization, Meng’e garners a role of authority in the family, appeasing disputes between the wives of Jingchun in a polygamous marriage, serving her

parents and parents-in-law, and raising children of her own. Another heroine named Qian Shurong disguises herself as a man and flees from a family calamity. She takes the name Zhu Yunping 竺雲屏 and becomes a prime minister as well as a mentor for the prince. After rescuing her father and relatives from a calamity, Yunping refuses to return to her feminine identity. She is unwilling to compromise when repeatedly provoked and tested by her father and fiancé in private and at the court. To appease and distract her pressing fiancé Mei Lanxue 梅蘭雪, Yunping serves as a go-between and arranges for her “sister” from her adopted family to marry Lanxue. Later, she suggests that the emperor command Lanxue to take Princess Lixian as a second wife, and she persuades Lanxue to take the loyal maid Luo Linxiang as a concubine. Though declining a consummate marriage with Lanxue, Yunping ingeniously finds substitutes for herself and arranges a polygamous marriage for her fiancé through strengthening interfamilial ties and connection with the royal clan.

In comparison with Chen Duansheng’s Meng Lijun, Yunping has the resourcefulness for avoiding repetitive trials and tests with quick wit and intelligent maneuvers. To resolve the challenge of serving her aged parents while living her own life in disguise, she suggests that her own “wife” Li Yu’e in the mock union become an adopted daughter of her birth parents. Yu’e is given the role of a substitute daughter to perform the heroine’s filial duties. To dispel the suspicious emperor’s doubts about her being a woman, Yunping readily takes in two royal maidens when the emperor gives them to her, but secretly dismisses them, allowing them to marry their own previously betrothed fiancés. Having made full arrangements for the care of her parents and her fiancé, Yunping plans to leave officialdom and pursue immortality through Buddhist practice. On her journey, a monk enlightens her, revealing that she and her “wife” were both deities who were banished to earth to mend their misconduct in heaven, and that they would return to the immortal realm when their deeds in serving the country and their families were accomplished. Yunping is informed that she, though having been loyal to the nation, has been much lacking in filial piety. Hence, she returns to her family and the court, and privately confesses her secret to her parents and adoptive parents. Her eventual compromise with her parents to complete her filial duties could be considered as a belated concession to orthodox values, and serves her private purposes of achieving freedom and moral fulfillment. After completing this filial action in private, Yunping does not lose her public identity as the minister and continues to serve in her official position. She later succeeds in leaving the post and becoming an immortal with her “wife” with the assistance of an immortal intermediary. In comparison with Qiu Xinru’s talented heroine Jiang Dehua and Li Guiyu’s ambitious Gui Hengkui, both of whom have to undergo refeminization upon revelation of their true identity, the learned Zhu Yunping manifestly enjoys more freedom in deciding her own destiny and successfully escapes from the confines of the domestic space.

RECONSIDERING FEMALE TALENT AND LITERATI SELFHOOD

Women's literary and artistic talents receive prominent endorsement throughout Sun Deying's book. The author herself candidly describes her own interest in reading and writing:

All my life I do not have other interests, but to collect tens of thousands of books and ponder on them. By chance I spiritedly put down these words, *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, and now without knowing it I have compiled seventeen volumes. I dare to claim that every word is exquisite, and fortunately not every sentence follows the form of folk songs. Loyalty, chastity, filial piety, and righteousness are innate in everyone; virtue and benevolence are endowed in every individual's nature. Do not say that flowing words could not contain lasting meaning. There must be moments in the writing that awaken the hearts of the readers, and dispel their illusions. (17:1)

Like the talented author, the leading heroine in the story is a learned woman who aspires to emulate the achievements of historical figures and to establish a personal career, rather than contemplating her life after marriage after her father arranges her engagement to a talented scholar named Mei Lanxue. While praising the ancient heroes for their "illustrious deeds that are applauded and extolled for tens and thousands of ages," she expresses anxiety about her imminent marriage: "I would have travelled to this world without reward, and could not, raise my eyebrows and release my breath and gain fame for myself. After a fleeting life in this world, I shall return to the realm of illusion and emptiness, without being known. Even though I may have enjoyed fortune and affluence, what worth does a life like that have after all?" (1:5). She contemplates to herself:

Ay, since ancient times there are quite a few heroines wearing head kerchiefs, all of whom possess valor, bounteousness, and the character of true heroes. Their lofty ideals well surpass those of their rouged peers. Spread afar, their enduring names and reputations last for tens of thousands of years. Spread afar, literature about their extraordinary deeds gains admiration from later generations. Even though my ambitions are beyond ordinary, how could I find the way to truly commit myself to making great accomplishments? Hai, how could my wish be satisfied by the matter of marriage and commonplace pursuits in the world? (1:5)

The heroine's well-stated yearning for fame and achievement beyond the inner chambers is reminiscent of numerous resonant examples in women's *tanci* fiction. Hu Siao-chen, in an important study of *Blossom from the Brush* and *Affinity of the Golden*

Fish, points out that talented heroines' compelling expressions of personal ambitions for fame and achievement often foreshadow their choice of cross-dressing later in the plot, for it is impossible for women in the inner chambers to transcend their inscribed gender roles and access or participate in social matters (Hu, "Burning the Midnight Oil" 166–75). Notably, Shurong's servingmaid Lianyan 簾燕 expresses much understanding by confirming Shurong's thought: "My lady, you can compose tens and thousands of words and surpass other ladies; having known thousands of scrolls by heart, your talent outdoes the scholars. Your talent should be well exercised in this world, for you are an extraordinary lady; your words and deeds shall be circulated in future years, and you shall be lauded for your brilliance and remarkability" (1:6). Inspired by Shurong's example, even the maid Lianyan is determined to decline her engagement made in childhood and remain by Shurong's side as a handmaid. As later revealed in this *tanci* work, servingmaids, rather than merely being depicted as inferior, minor characters, may also possess certain literary or artistic talents, and also frequently express intellect and insight. Late in the same *juan*, Shurong, feeling her ambitions for the future to be thwarted, composes a poem to express her sense of frustration and helplessness:

For long I have parted with worldly concerns and the snare of desire,
 Rouge and coiffure could no longer gain my interest.
 Not longing for a life of luxury in lofty mansions,
 I only hope that my writings will have a reputation of being worthy and agreeable.
 Fragrant in aroma, Osmanthus flowers invite me to pluck a branch;
 Close yet afar, the path to a recluse's life is not open to me.
 Do not say that Heaven is merciful and pities man,
 This one's resolute ambitions have to be divulged in the end. (1:12)

Notably, Shurong is prompted into cross-dressing when her father has been wrongly accused of treason by the minister Feng Ruojin 封若金. It is in this condition of life and death, and under the pressing need to rescue her father and seek revenge for him, that Shurong is granted the obligation to take on a male identity and seek a social life using her talent. As the plot shows, filial piety provides the incentive and narrative probability for the heroine to apply her talent outside the inner chambers. Determined to disguise herself as a man in order to find the whereabouts of her imprisoned parents and save them, she states, "I myself dare to boast expansive learning as deep as the sea. If I attend the exam, I shall become a top scholar and receive a title at the Golden Palace. How I wish that I could rank high in the exam and be received by the Emperor; I would certainly seek reprisal for this immense wrongdoing and accomplish great deeds" (3:5). Whereas the thought of cross-dressing sprouts as a wish to repay her parents' grace, to accompany them in prison, or, in the most desperate

situation, to “receive the death penalty for my parents,” she states her longing to obtain officialdom and serve at the court, for “wearing a gold embroidered robe and jade rings is true nobility” (3:5).

The inquisitive heroines’ yearning for knowledge and their confidence in their literary aptitudes could be understood in the context of Ming Qing women authors’ increased social visibility and impact. The celebration of women’s education and learning since early Qing provided social and historical conditions for familial support for women’s literary pursuits. Chen Dongyuan observes that the rise of women’s education or *nüjiao* 女教 in early Qing was unrivaled (Chen Dongyuan 275–83). A pioneering work about women’s education is 女學 (*Nüxue*, Women’s Learning) by Lan Dingyuan (藍鼎元, 1680–1733), completed in 1712. While emphasizing the penultimate importance of women’s virtue, Lan went into great detail in defining women’s study. He observes,

Women’s learning differs from that of men. Men can take to learning all their lives, and hence can find their path through the classics and history, and gain deep and broad understanding of a hundred schools of thought. Women’s time for learning is no more than ten years. Then they marry and become committed to household affairs, and shoulder responsibilities of a hundred kinds. Unless they are concentrated in study, it is not easy for them to gain thoroughness in learning. To study without breadth, she would not have much gain. To have a broad scale of interest in learning, one will lose the focus for study, and find it difficult to make choices in style and genre. Considering these, this book *Women’s Learning* is indeed indispensable! (Lan 1)

Similar endeavors of literati scholars advocating for women’s learning include 教女遺規 (*Jiaonü yigui*, Repository of Rules for Education of Women) by Chen Hongmou (陳宏謀, 1697–1771), and 女教經傳通纂 (*Nüjiao jingzhuan tongzuan*, Compilation of Classics and Histories for the Instruction of Girls and Women) by Ren Qiyun (任啟運, 1670–1744).

Women writers promoted female learning as well. An eighteenth-century female author from Guangdong named Li Wanfang (李晚芳, artistic name Luyi 蓁漪) authored a work 女學言行纂 (*Nüxue yanxing zuan*, Record of Words and Deeds on Women’s Learning), which further developed the concept of *nüxue*. She claims her book “compiles together the worthy words and honorable deeds of famous scholars and ladies since Zhou and Han dynasties, with an intention to amend the missing parts in *Zhou Offices* and *Dai’s Book of Rites* in order to assist women in enhancing the governance of the household,” and she occasionally offers her own thoughts (Li Wanfang 26). She proposes four important components of women’s study, including “removing one’s selfishness,” “observing the rites,” “reading books,” and “managing affairs.” Women’s study

for the author is guided with the purpose of disciplining her mind and deeds, and establishing the basis for governing the household (for discussions of Zhang Xuecheng on women's learning, see Mann, "'Fuxue' (Women's Learning) by Zhang Xuecheng" 40–62; *Precious Records* 89–91). For the author, women's learning, rather than distracting them from commitment to women's duties and responsibilities, grooms and prepares them for their wifely and motherly roles.

In a comprehensive review of *nüjiao* (women's education) and 女學 (*nüxue*, women's learning), Li Guotong cites poet Wu Qi (吳琪, 1644–1661), who commented in her self-preface to a poetry collection 紅蕉集 (*Hongjiaoji*, Red Plantain Collection): "And yet why do women of ancient times and at present have to be banned from poetry? Regarding those who are chaste and calm in manners, there is not a lack of people who can compose poetry; as to those who behave with liberty, they may not even know how to write simple poetry on daily objects such as meadows and flowers. Some may transgress major moral principles, and yet say that women's speech shall not surpass the inner chambers, and look at all women in this way, how digressed they are from the right path!" (Wu Qi 8). Wu Qi expresses disagreement with those who perceive women's writing and virtue as a contradiction, and proposes that women could also achieve 不朽 (*buxiu*) or an "unperishable" literary status.

In a historical study of Ming Qing women's educational books, Li Guotong considers three categories: (1) didactic texts catering to women as readers, such as 閨範 (*Guifan*, Rules of the Chamber) by Lu Xinwu (呂新吾, 1536–1618) and 女兒經 (*Nü'erjing*, The Classics for Girls); (2) excerpts about women's education from family regulatory writings and clan rules; and (3) persuasive writings for women readers in folk narratives, particularly 勸善書 (*quanshan shu*, morality books). The Ming Qing era witnessed increased social expectations of women's competence in carrying on the tradition of *mu-jiao* (mother's education) and in performing educational roles for their descendants. According to Li, the awakening feminine consciousness displayed in women writers' compositions during the Ming and Qing had far surpassed the parameters of family learning and women's education, and heralded a new form of literary enlightenment. Women writers of the era, rather than being the addressed audience for and recipient of orthodox moral values, developed nascent forms of subjectivities through subjunctive expressions of their feelings and thoughts. Their writings, particularly poetry, Li proposes, consist of diverse kinds, such as self-expressing poems articulating their personal aspirations through historical figures or events, poems to family expressing longing or giving advice, and poems instructing their children in behavior and moral conduct. Women who achieved literary reputations relied on the endorsements of male members of their natal families, such as a father or a brother. Some gained visibility thanks to their spouses, who were scholars. A third group of women received endorsements from their children or from younger male relatives, such as a cousin.

In light of studies on women's *tanci* fiction, Hu Siao-chen acknowledges that *mujiao* plays a crucial part in *tanci* texts. The moral deficiency of Feilong in Hou Zhi's *tanci* novel *Jinguijie* could be contributed to the failure of *mujiao* or Feilong's mother's improper education of her daughter before marriage. On the other hand, the important influence and outcome of *mujiao* could also be found in the mother-daughter legacy among *tanci* fiction authors. In her study of elite women in the Ming-Qing Jiangnan, Dorothy Ko notes that "women's culture emanated from the intimate bonds between mother and daughter in the inner quarters," and that such intimacy was often cultivated in the process of "a literary education provided by the mother" (Ko, "Pursuing Talent and Virtue" 12). *Tanci* fiction by women authors of the Jiang Nan region from late Ming to Qing expressively articulates this mother-daughter legacy in the creation and sustainment of this literate women's culture. The seventeenth-century work *Jade Bracelets* was self-identified as a *tanci* coauthored by a mother and her daughter. Zheng Danruo, the author of *Dream, Image, Destiny*, was the mother of Zhou Yingfang, author of the later *tanci* fiction *Story of a Loyal Son*. Many authors declared their writing purpose was to entertain their mothers or mothers-in-law, as in the case of Qiu Xinru, who authored *Blossoms from the Brush* and 娛萱草彈詞 (*Yuxuancao tanci*, *A Tanci Work to Please My Mother-In-Law*). *Tanci* fiction has been passed down from the authors to their descendants, especially to daughters, as narratives of family legacy and women's education. The author's hand-copied edition of *A Tale of Vacuity* by Wang Ou'shang has been passed down generation by generation to her daughter, granddaughter, and finally great-granddaughter. Every generation of female descendants chanted the tale to their children as a way of celebrating continuing the legacy of women's learning.

As Hu proposes, women's *tanci* fiction played a role of "women's textbooks" (*funü jiaoke shu*) in late Qing. In mid Qing, Hou Zhi's works were representative of the tradition of *mujiao*, and provided a transition between *tanci* novels in high Qing focusing on women's self-expression, and late Qing *tanci* works that focus on the educational potentials of traditional *tanci* tales. Hu Siao-chen points out that, as manifested in Ming-Qing women's *tanci* fiction, in terms of women's education before their marriage, the father's instruction had to be channeled through the mother's instruction to reach the daughter (Hu, "Burning the Midnight Oil" 196). Women's family education by the mother is depicted in *Affinity of the Golden Fish*. Among the Han dynasty guidebooks for instructing women, the eminent female scholar Ban Zhao's 女誡 (*Nüjie*, *Instruction for Women*) articulated the importance of female literacy, which is essential in the relationship between men and women. Ban Zhao's interpretation of classical texts envisions marriage as "a reciprocal relationship that depended on the wife's ability to 'serve' her husband as well as on his ability to 'control' her, both service and control depended on the 'worthiness' (*xian*) of each other" (Mann,

“Grooming a Daughter for Marriage” 102). Like men, women should receive education so they can “serve properly in the domestic realm” (102). Chen Hongmou stresses the utmost importance of educating women for wifely roles and family living, for “a family’s future advantage is tied to the purity and the education of its women” (Chen, Hongmou 1). In this light, parents’ grooming of a daughter for understanding and obeying norms governing marriage is an essential aspect of instructing women. In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, Qin Meng’e resumes her feminine identity and marries Qian Meiyou. Before her marriage, her foster mother Princess Jin instructs her on the importance of virtue and advises her to harness her militant vigor and follow ancient rituals at home:

You should be aware that filial duties to the parents begin with full obedience. You should assist their dinners, give greetings, and follow women’s duties, inquire about their conditions and abide by their instructions. If the siblings-in-law have any concerns, you should be gentle and listen to them instead of insisting on your own wishes. Peace and tranquility in the inner chambers should be esteemed by the couple; you two shall enjoy harmony and love and not break any regularities. A proud character cannot be considered virtuous; breaking apart in relationship openly is even more against the rituals. (9:18)

This instruction by Princess Jin, Meng’e’s foster mother stresses the importance of obedience to the rituals and the priority of domestic harmony at the root of the Confucian family structure. On the other hand, Susan Mann notes, the bride’s obedience was essential because “the rituals expressing obedience were coupled with those emphasizing responsibility and authority” (Mann, “Grooming a Daughter for Marriage” 99). Obedience not only “upheld the authority of the elders but also . . . was essential to the harmony of the household; one day the bride herself would have to command obedience from younger women” (99). Simultaneously, “all power consigned to wives in the domestic realm was constrained on every side by fine distinctions of age and status. Teaching women how to use this power became an obsession of mid-Qing scholars” (99). In the text, Princess Jin reminds Meng’e to be exempt from feminine jealousy and rivalry against Qian Meiyou’s other wives, particularly Zhang Jingshu, who is no less than a royal sister of Meng’e’s. Also, she instructs Meng’e that to achieve ultimate moral integrity, she should pursue the accomplishment of feminine virtue. In the princess’s words, “My dear daughter, you have been claimed as an exceptional woman of the world; you should also strive to be widely known as a virtuous woman” (9:18). Princess Jin is an exemplary of *mujiao*, even though Meng’e is only her adopted daughter. Specifically, this example characterizes women’s education for marriage. The paramount education for marriage was training in 四德 (*si de*, the Four Attributes) appropriate to wives: proper virtue, speech, carriage, and work. In contrast with Princess

Jin, Lixian's capricious and scheming stepmother serves as an example of the failure of motherly education: her lack of moral righteousness is such that the daughter Lixian eventually has to take on the mother's role to transform her mother's conduct.

Discussions of women's talent by *tanci* authors are widespread in their writings. In *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* by Jin Fangquan, the author reiterates the ostensible incompatibility of women's talent and their well-being. In commenting on a talented heroine Quan Huiniang 全慧娘 who dies early because of illness, she says, "With talent but not longevity, one's regrets last for many years. Even though talented she cannot contravene her mandate" (4:94). The author takes on a didactic tone: "I advise women in the inner chambers to hold onto their ignorance, for intelligence harms one's fortune, and talent is likewise hurtful" (4:94). A similar example can be found in a conversation between a female character Cui Ziyang and her cousin Cui Lanjun 崔蘭君. The elder Ziyang laments the short lifespan of talented women: "I caution my friends in the inner chambers to avoid taking up the writing brush, for those who are of a shorter life are mostly poetesses" (10:43). However, the young Lanjun squarely disagrees, saying that she would still prefer those who have exceptional talent and a rather weak fortune. She argues, "One's life of a hundred years is ephemeral as a drop of morning dew. Only a scholar's name could last for centuries. What is extraordinary about those common people even though have had fortune? All the world rejoins in appreciating the works by truly talented authors. Like my virtuous uncle, he could hold the official's tablet and earnestly serve the emperor at the court. As to heroic women, there are a few examples in history, and they could gain lasting fame in history after death" (10:44–45). Zheng Zhenwei observes that the author, through Lanjun's words, contradicts the commonly shared belief that women's talent is harmful for their health and fortune in life.

These irresolute and sometimes self-contradictory stances about female talent between the authorial narrator's statement and the female characters' observations, in Jin Fangquan's *tanci* and a large number of *tanci* texts by women, recall what Idema and Grant identify among self-censoring elite women authors as a "tension between the desire to participate in literary life and the social pressure to refrain from writing," which resulted in what could be considered as "multiple personalities," and sometimes became identified as a condition equivalent to spiritual possession (Idema and Grant 165). The popular conception of dynastic women's talent as harmful for their fate has been articulated in many famous texts. The reputed late Ming writer Ye Shaoyuan attributed the early death of his wife, Shen Yixiu, and two daughters Ye Wanwan and Ye Xiaoluan to the burden of their talents. In *隨園全集* (*Suiyuan quanji*, Complete Records of the Suiyuan Garden), a collection edited by Yuan Mei (袁枚, 1716–1798), the three younger sisters of Yuan Mei, and other female poets, frequently lamented the incongruity of women's fate and feminine literary talent. Among women authors of

the Ming and Qing, some expressed opposition to the conundrum of women's talent and fate, including Yuan Mei's granddaughters Yuan Jia (袁嘉, 1793?-1853) and Yuan Shou (袁綬, 1795-?) (see Liu Yongcong, "A Glance at Views on Women's Talent and Fate," 71). In opposition to these writers, some women expressed understanding and acceptance of the belief that women's talent could harm their lives. The female *ci* poet He Shuangqing (賀雙卿, eighteenth century) suffered a laborious and miserable life with a domineering husband and an abusive sister-in-law. However, she considered her suffering to be 宿业 (*su ye*, old score carried over from previous incarnation). Liu Yongcong considers He Shuangqing's attitude to be a conservative one ridden with the influence of karmic bonds and the endurance of suffering in exchange for a congenial next life. However, the female poet's text does not entirely relinquish itself to this idea. Rather, He insisted that a woman should not understate or conceal her talents when facing controversies about her overbearing aptitude. She should confront such conceptions and squarely face the karmic outcome related to them rather than restraining her inborn traits.

Women *tanci* authors' reflections on talent, writing, and personal lives are abundant in their authorial insertions, self-prefaces, or opening and closing lines in individual chapters. Chen Duansheng resorted to large amounts of authorial statements in *Destiny of Birth* as parts of her self-portrayal and included copious reflections on women's literary talent. Hu Siao-chen, through her study of a cluster of women *tanci* authors including Chen Duansheng, Zheng Danruo, Qiu Xinru, and Hou Zhi, argues that the vernacular form of *tanci* fiction allowed late imperial women a medium of writing to express their gendered consciousness. In particular, women authors of *tanci* novels made great efforts in distinguishing their work from popular *tanci* songs or stories that utilize narrative conventions to evoke readers' illicit desires or transgressions of orthodox moral values. Instead, prefaces or self-narratives depict authors of *tanci* as erudite and virtuous women who were well read in classics and highly capable in composing poetry (such an example could be found in the depiction of Zhu Suxian in the preface of *Linked Rings of Jade*).

Tanci authors' revisionist stance on the question of women's talent, as discussed above, encompasses explicit authorial self-endorsement of their identities as writers, their active inscriptions of gender in codes of the *tanci* genre and their female readerships, and their cautious allusions to normative discourses about talent and femininity, all in an effort to incarnate new ideals of feminine intellect into established literary canons. Characterization of erudite women in the fictional narrative, in this light, rather than mirroring elite men's ideals of selfhood, takes on a more vigorous and diverse form beyond emulation of the elements of the Confucian-literati scholar. In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, after Shurong disguises herself as a man, she takes on the name of Zhu Yunping. Her "wife" Li Yu'e, daughter of a censor-in-chief, enjoys the reputation

of 閨中女博士 (*Guizhong nü boshi*, a female scholar in the inner chambers) (3:18). Not only is Yu'e cultured in poetry and painting, she even masters the ancient art of divination. Being a friend of the heroine Qin Mengxiang, Yu'e resorts to her knowledge of 金錢卦 (*jinqiangua*, Golden Coin Diagrams) and predicts that Meng'e's parents shall be rescued and released from prison once her younger brother passes the civil exam and becomes appointed as an official (3:18). Yu'e's talent even catches the empress's eye with her exceptionally refined painting and poem on a fan, a gift to Qin Meng'e. Deeply appreciative of Yu'e's outstanding talent, the empress takes her in as a daughter and grants her the title 清平公主 (*Qingping Gongzhu*, Princess of Purity and Peace) (9:19). The heroines often compose and appreciate poetry as an entertainment or leisure activity. Women's literary talents are encouraged and approved by their family. The heroine Qian Shurong's father initially thinks that Shurong has committed suicide by drowning herself to protect her own chastity when forcefully taken by the malicious Minister Shui. Reminiscing about his daughter, her father laments, "This daughter of mine was born with intelligence and talent, and thus I particularly adore her. Her writings are so polished and did not need correction; her poetry and prose works all are peerless in terms of excellence. Not to mention how skilled, refined and outstanding her calligraphy is. In painting she also has an aptitude that can appeal to the immortals" (9:15).

The heroine herself, who later takes on the name of Zhu Yunping, boasts a talent in observing and interpreting celestial signs and images (4:1). This exceptional talent becomes crucial later in the story (11:5). One night, as Yunping and Yu'e take a stroll in the garden, the curious Yu'e asks Yunping to explain to her how to read constellations and identify the star for the emperor (帝星, *dixing*). Yunping points out the star and gives a forecast of the mandate of the state: "Our dynasty already displays abnormal signs; great changes and calamities shall take place in several decades. Even though the emperor is wise, sagacious, and follows the principles, the luster of the emperor's star is still quite dim. . . . Not for long; there will be chaos and war from the four corners of the nation. Man's power will not be able to change the way of heaven; how could I witness the decline of the nation while serving at the court every day?" (11:3). Having perceived the perilous prospect of the court, Yunping makes the determination to leave her post. Yet she also detects a surreptitious star attempting to quickly attack the star for the heir. Alerted by this, Yunping summons Mei Lanxue and rushes to the prince's palace, arriving in time to thwart an attempted assassination. The crisis turns out to be a political scheme to kill the heir of the throne by Prince Cheng Wang and his concubine. The ancient practice of observing heavenly signs and predictions of the mandate of the nation is traditionally only conducted by celestial officers designated by the emperors. The learning and knowledge of observing and interpreting astrological signs, accordingly, implies the capacity to predict political disorder and

the mandate of the rulers, and therefore wields significant power in political decision making. Rather than simply being considered as mastery of magic skills, the heroine's access to such knowledge in the text indicates a bold imagination of official divinatory practices, suggesting the heroine's intellectual power to influence the hierarchical social and political structures of the state.

The plot foreshadowing the exposure of the cross-dressed Yunping's true identity differs quite significantly from established traditions in earlier *tanci*. Yunping's self-composed poem on one of her scenery portraits rouses suspicion in her elder brother Qian Jingchun about her true identity. He shares this discovery with Prince Ning Wang, who observes, "Not only is the painting most exquisite and refined, the writing is also exceptional. Neither you nor I could rival such writings; Father used to praise her for being uniquely beautiful in handwriting" (12:12). This minor detail in the plot departs from the beauty self-portrait convention in previous *tanci*, such as the text *Destiny of Rebirth*, in which the heroine Lijun makes a portrait of herself in feminine attire before changing into a man's clothing and fleeing from her home. The self-portrait of the cross-dresser would later be discovered as evidence of the disguised heroine's true identity, prompting inquisitions from her family and lovesick fiancé, and eventually leading to the revelation of her true identity. In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, Shurong does not leave a self-portrait of her feminine image, thus displaying an implied determination of never returning to femininity after cross-dressing. Her true identity, rather than being visualized through the convention of a beauty self-portrait, is hidden in her handwriting, suggesting a strong self-association with a literati selfhood.

This association of exceptional talent with the heroine's character and individuality is recurrently evoked and affirmed by other characters in the story. Later when Lady Shui reveals to Shurong's fiancé Mei Lanxue that Shurong has not drowned herself but has fled after disguising herself as a man, Lanxue laments Shurong's suffering and praises her for being 女中智士 (*nüzhong zhishi*), or an ingenious scholar among women (12:17). He reasons her escape to be a filial act to rescue her endangered parents by emulating the courageous Han dynasty heroine Ti Ying, who petitioned Emperor Wen of the Han to serve as a government slave in place of her father who was accused of bribery, saving her father from cruel corporal punishment. Lanxue, reflecting on Shurong's talent, hopes that she shall return to him one day: "You are endowed with such talent for great achievements, as well as the wisdom and resourcefulness to escape from the inquiries of common people. . . . Heaven may not be completely blind to justice; may it not betray this chaste girl in the end" (12:17). Supposing that the minister Zhu Yunping is none other than Shurong herself, he suspects that his fiancée has "cut off her feelings for him because of her high official post and affluent situations" (12:17).

Besides Shurong and Yu'e, quite a few other heroines are depicted as talented writers capable of composing poetry, and they often exchange their writings at family

gatherings. In *juan* 15, at the end of a banquet at Qian Jingchun's house, seven heroines, summoned by the host Princess Meng'e, each participate in writing a poem on the topic of bidding farewell to give to each other and to express their friendship (15:3). These poems on separation and reunion are respectively from Li Yu'e 李玉娥, Zhu Suying 竺素瑛, Qin Meng'e, Feng Yunluan 馮雲鸞, Zhang Jingshu 章錦書, Luo Xianzhi 羅仙芝, as well as Yan Yingzhu 晏英珠. The participating characters include three exceptional heroines who are adopted by the empress as princesses, daughters of eminent officials, and Yan Yingzhu, daughter of a foreign military general. Bound by family ties, Qin Meng'e, Feng Yunluan, Zhang Jingshu, Luo Xianzhi and Yan Yingshu are all wives in a polygamous marriage with Qian Jingchun. Li Yu'e is the wife of Zhu Yunping, who is the foster son of the Zhu family and elder brother of Zhu Suying.

As Paul S. Ropp observes, by the seventeenth century, "supportive networks of women in the gentry elite regularly exchanged poems and letters, offering each other recognition and encouragement of their literary and artistic talents" (Ropp, "Love, Literacy, and Laments" 108). These literary networks among women "provided many female authors with important psychological support" (108). At the same time, the momentous growth of women's publications in the seventeenth century and after indicates, according to Ropp, that "female literacy also expanded at a comparable order of magnitude" (108). The above scene of the talented heroines mastering and expressing diverse voices and moods on the subject of 惜別 (*xibie*, bidding farewell), emulating the literati practice of 贈人以言 (*zengren yiyen*, gifting others with words), indicates the prevalent practice of educated women expressing their literary talent and enacting a "literati-feminine" voice.

The text, while reenacting this scene of literary women's socialization through exchange of poetry, depicts Yan Yingzhu as an extraordinary heroine with outstanding martial talent who aspires to achievements beyond the inner chambers. At the age of fourteen, she has become a leading female general on the battlefield: "Not only is she well-read and brilliant in literature, she is also uniquely talented in martial skills. At a young age, she has met a roaming monk who has taught her the magic of using nine flying daggers" (30). Though captured in the battlefield during a war between the Jin kingdom and Song dynasty, and married to Jingchun upon the emperor's command, Yingzhu often suffers prejudice and dislike from her sharp-tongued husband who jeers at her for being "a woman from a foreign land," lacking in benevolence and virtue, and ignorant of "rituals and propriety" (10:21; 15:17). In the above banquet scene, the modest Li Yu'e, when complimented by Qin Meng'e for her exceptionally fine poem, praises Meng'e and Yingzhu for being peerless heroines who "possess superb literary and martial talents" (15:5). This commendation however prompts Yingzhu's melancholic lament, "My sister could indeed be called a female hero, for she has taken up her sword

and defended the royal clan on a battle steed. How ashamed am I to be mentioned? I have a slightest trace of accomplishment, though having practiced martial skills all my life. Knowing my failings, I am truly incompetent and useless, and not worthy at all” (15:5). When Luo Xianzhi, another wife of Jingchun, comforts Yingzhu for her encounter and marriage to Jingchun, Yingzhu is offended and enraged, because this marriage was initially arranged by her parents and commanded by the emperor, rather than having followed her personal wishes. This dispute evoked by Yingzhu and Xianzhi reflects the author’s approving attitude to women’s martial prowess and military talent. Ambitious characters such as Zhu Yunping, Yan Yingzhu, and Qin Meng’e are illustrated as well-versed in both civil and the military craftsmanship, displaying courage, swordsmanship, strategizing ability, and astute political maneuvering in the military arena. Claiming expertise in martial talents that are often associated with masculinity, these heroines signal the fluid gender boundaries in the text and women’s martial vigor that rivals the capacities of their male counterparts.

BLOOD WRITING ON FILIAL PIETY

Women characters, aside from displaying poetic talent, also have taken on other folk forms to express personal yearning and moral ambitions. The text depicts a Princess Lixian 麗仙 who composes a blood-written plea to the emperor to rescind a death sentence on her father. Such a passionate act of filial piety, reminiscent of Buddhist traditions of writing blood scriptures, expresses the heroine’s spirit of self-sacrifice and filial piety. Eventually, with the emperor’s commendation, the heroine is rewarded with exceptional authority and moral autonomy. As Patricia Ebrey argues, “filial piety was presented as a political virtue, tied to loyalty to political superiors” up to the emperor (Ebrey, “The Classic of Filial Piety” 64). Yuet Keung Lo proposes that in such situations “family ethics and political success joined in a convenient symbiosis of *realpolitik*. Filial devotion was recognized as a universal virtue, which serves to ‘regulate the family, govern the state, and perfect the world’” (Lo, “Filial Devotion for Women” 73). In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, filial piety could also serve as a moral purpose and justification for female characters to display their literary talent.

In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, filial piety becomes a means of women to claim a degree of political power. Two heroines Qin Meng’e and Li Yu’e are appreciated for their outstanding military or literary talent and become princesses. By taking up their filial duties as imperial daughters, they are endowed with more eminence and authority. Another heroine Wen Yingzhen 聞英貞 utilizes a daughter’s mandatory three-year filial service after her father’s death to postpone her marriage, displaying an ingenuous understanding that filial devotion must be accomplished through the performance of

rituals in a scholar-official's family. During a long-lasting battle with the Song troops, the khan was informed by the prince that his mother was deeply worried about the khan and had fallen seriously ill. To fulfill his filial duty, the khan agrees to retreat from the battle, thus allowing the possibility of the two countries forging peace through a marriage alliance between the hostage Yan Yingzhu and the Song dynasty general Qian Jingchun (8:17). Filial piety allows the khan to find a space to compromise between his political ambition and the necessity of retreat and peace. Filial piety in the story is a universal virtue that is enacted in the Song dynasty as well as in foreign lands, and upheld as a major moral parameter by characters of diverse social class. For another example, the emperor's brother Prince Cheng attempts to assassinate the heir of the throne and frame Zhu Yunping as the culprit. He deploys a swordsman to execute the plan. However, Yunping finds out about the assassin by reading it from a heavenly omen and prevents the tragedy. She then fakes a letter from the swordsman's mother claiming her serious illness, and sends the letter to him, thus deceiving him into leaving for his hometown. On the way he is stopped by Yunping's messengers who beguile him and lead him to the minister. He confesses to Yunping about his wrongdoings (11: 10). Here, a minor character's filial piety plays a crucial role for Yunping to discover the assassin and exempt herself from a political calamity.

The aforementioned Princess Lixian, for example, composes a plea to the emperor to rescind a death sentence on her father. The plea was composed in ten-character lines written with her blood. The text represents a unique case of female authorship, endorsed by filial piety:

Bowing my head, kowtowing to Your Highness, I am truly reverent and fearful. Please allow Lixian, a daughter of a culpable official, to explain the circumstances through tears and blood. Because my father, provoked by a small matter, took the liberty of breaking the laws, he harmed the Prince, by sending an assassin, and committed a penultimate offense. Now that the matter was disclosed, thanks to Your Highness's grace, he was not yet thrown into prison. Like the Han general Xiao He, who was not pardoned when breaking the law, my father should not receive any lighter punishment. Myself his daughter, I have been aware of this circumstance, and feel very blamable. Recalling the sorrowful cases in history, and lessons to learn from, I would like to emulate Ti Ying and rescue my father. If my guilt-ridden father could seek life from death, he would hold deep gratitude for the imperial grace, as if given another life; how would he dare to have any other thoughts? My mother, lacking in wisdom, took to the scheming and shared the offense. As the order from Your Highness goes, she was given the royal sympathy, and can take her own life by hanging. Yet please pity their daughter, me, who at a younger age, lost my birth mother. My step-mother took care of me, raised me with benevolence, and has been the only mother

to me. Living together for more than a decade, she has loved me as her daughter. I regret my incompetence, and haven't yet repaid their kindness in the least manner. Now that I see such a mishap in the family, how could I bear to merely watch by the side? Wouldn't I be the same as the animals? Hence I plead Your Highness, give sympathy, and exempt my parents from death. Please allow me to provide them advice, persuade them to return to the rightful path. Should my parents redress their wrongdoings, and my mother repair her womanly duties, this will all be attributed to the imperial grace. I am keenly aware that my parents carry a crime comparable to mountains. The rules of the court, by themselves, should not be abandoned because of royal blood. Hence please take their daughter me, behead me in place of my parents. If by deserting my own life I could save the two elders, I would be satisfied upon my death. At the end of this letter, I cannot fully express my true feelings and my sadness. I plead that Your Highness would give pity and grace, considering my humble sincerity. Please give great forgiveness, grant my parents another life. From a culpable one who awaits her penalty. (11:15)

Deploying ten-character lines, an informal style of writing often found in oral literature, Lixian pleads with the emperor to spare her parents' lives so that she can complete filial duties to them and repay her stepmother's efforts in raising her. She alludes to the ancient example of filial daughter Ti Ying 緹縈, who rescues her father and bravely volunteers to be a substitute for her culpable parents in taking the death penalty. Further, she proposes that if the emperor might exempt her parents from death, she is willing to assist her mother-in-law to repent for her behavior, mend her moral flaws, and fulfill her 婦職 (*fuzhi*), or feminine duties. Blood-written compositions may be found in numerous historical records or literary depictions to express grievances against injustice, to express devotion in religious pursuits or self-sacrifice, or to articulate loyalty or political fidelity. Li Xian's blood composition is reminiscent of the tradition of blood writing in Buddhist practices. Blood writing is also found in some examples as a means of expressing or endorsing filial piety. John Kieschnick notes that a certain sixteenth-century monk Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 practiced blood writing in which he stated that his actions would "repay his parents for their benevolence," "referring to the merit from copying the scriptures to his parents in the afterlife" (Kieschnick 183). A Tang official Yuan Dexiu 元德秀 commemorated his mother's death by pricking himself, "using the blood to paint images and copy Buddhist scriptures" (183). The merits of blood writing could be applied to the living as well as the dead, such as a wife praying for the healing and recovery of her husband, or a son praying for the healing of a parent's illness.

Kieschnick argues that based on the prevalent references to blood writing and the notion of Buddhist merit, "blood writing was not confined by boundaries of gender, religious or social status: monks, nuns, humble laymen and powerful empresses

all found occasion to copy a Buddhist scripture or two in their blood" (183). The reputed late Ming official Huang Daozhou (黃道週, 1585–1646) took to hand-copying *孝經* (*Xiaojing, The Classic of Filiality*) in his own blood as a way of self-expression. A late Ming scholar Chen Xiyou 陳希友 copied *The Classics of Filiality* in blood writing as a way to repay his parents' benevolence (Lu Miaofen 199). A well-known Qing women's blood-writing practitioner is Lin Jingren 林敬紉, daughter of the famous Qing official Lin Zexu and wife of the official Shen Baozhen (沈葆楨, 1820–1879). In 1856, when Shen was governing Guangxin 廣信, the city was surrounded by Taiping Rebellion troops. Lin Jingren composed an urgent letter in blood to ask for rescue from a military commander who was residing in the adjacent Yushan county. The rescuing army quickly arrived and saved Guangxin City from the siege. Shen Baozhen and Lin Jingren subsequently became very famous. Shen was promoted to be the governor of Jiangxi province. Lin's famous blood letter not only indicates the urgency of the political situation, but also expresses feminine virtue; her writing is justified as a righteous act of completing her feminine duties and paying service to her husband (see Lin Chongyong 287–308).

Lixian's blood writing is written in *shiziwen*, that is, every line is written in ten characters. Each line consists of three consecutive segments, in three, three, and four characters. This is a form of vernacular writing that can be traced to the Ming dynasty, when writing in such ten-character lines with a structure of three-three-four are called *zan shizi* (making ten characters). Such syntactical structures may be found not only in *tanci* and 鼓詞 (*guci*, drum songs), but also in other vernacular genres, including late Ming and early Qing 寶卷 (*baojuan*, precious scrolls), Qing dynasty 善書 (*shanshu*, morality books), and *luanshi* (鸞詩, opera songs) (see Ye Dejun). The style of ten-character lines may be found in other parts of this *tanci*. In depicting the battle scene between the general Mei Lanxue and the armies led by the king of the northern Chanyu kingdom, the narrator also takes up the ten-character lines to quicken the pace of the storytelling: "How trimmed and orderly do the troops look? Allow me to put together ten-character lines and take up a new tune" (8:19).

The folk genre of ten-character lines allows Lixian a modest writing medium to express herself and articulate her filial passions in a feminine voice. The emperor, who is the addressee of this letter, is so effectively moved by Lixian's writing that he commutes the death sentence on Lixian's parents, and allows her to oversee the moral regulation and transformation of her stepmother's behavior. As a result of her writing, Lixian empowers herself as a filial daughter and further gains endorsement from the emperor who arranges for her to marry the eminent official Mei Lanxue, as her parents originally had hoped. She is also awarded by the emperor the title 孝義王妃 (*Xiaoyi Wangfei*), or Princess of Filiality and Integrity. Her writing, though distinctively written in a feminine voice and in a minor literary form, is a self-claimed 表 (*biao*) to the

emperor. Jane Geaney argues that *biao*, or “speech and action on display” are “those of commoners or would be *junzi* or gentlemen, not superiors, and their purpose is to reveal one’s character to superiors” (Geaney 183). By deploying filial piety as a righteous cause for her extraordinary action, Lixian articulates her thoughts and strategically puts herself on display in front of the emperor, and in return, gains the domestic authority and moral autonomy as a regulator of her shrewd and imperious stepmother and her imprudent father.

BEYOND THE GENTRY: TALENTED MINOR HEROINES

Aside from the leading heroines who are talented women themselves, minor female characters both from the gentry class and lower upbringings have displayed literary or artistic talents in the story. Women characters’ acts of writing receive moral endorsement because of their virtuous nature or righteous purposes, whether to rescue parents or to seek alleviation of punishment on husbands. Mrs. Shui, the wife of the vicious Minister Feng Ruojin, also demonstrates remarkable talent composing a memorial addressed to the emperor pleading for her guilty husband to be summoned back to the capital city after being expelled for many years. The minister Zhu Yunping agrees to present this memorial for her to the emperor; the latter is amazed by her writing and praises her for being “a woman of virtue and talent” (16:6). Shui Shi’s letter begins by alluding to the fact that since ancient times people have been governed by the emperors’ benevolence and their filial devotion to the emperor, and therefore should not ask for exceptional grace beyond the law. She proceeds to articulate her husband’s sincere wish to repent for his wrongdoing, confesses the difficulty to live in poverty on her own with a very young child, and appeals for the emperor’s pity and sympathy. She says,

Because I stayed with the family and made a meager living with a young son, we are deserted and helpless. Neither do we have strong and powerful relatives to rely on, nor do we have any servants at the house. All alone by ourselves, we live in true grief and misery. Your Highness is benevolent and forgiving. I bow to plead that you might perceive our bitter situations, broadly give pity and grace, and exempt my husband from further punishment. If he can return home alive, and our family can reunite, we shall consider our lives as being given by Your Highness, and strive to repay your tremendous kindness in this life and future generations. (16:6)

Moved by Shui Shi’s writing, the emperor pardons Feng and allows him to return to reunite with his family. In composing this memorial, Shui Shi tactically takes on the

position of a filial subject of the emperor, a 子民 (*zimin*, child civilian), seeking to be reunited with her husband. By enacting the discourse of filial piety, she positions the emperor as 君父 (*junfu*) or emperor-father of the subordinate sons and daughters, rationalizes to gain his pity, and reiterates her devotion and subordination. Previously, Shui Shi succeeds in moving Zhu Yunping with her virtuous character and makes Zhu agree to assist her in presenting her memorial to the emperor. Although a minor character, Shui Shi displays how feminine virtue and talent could be applied to grant satisfaction of personal desires and to gain endorsement from men or even the emperor himself.

Representations of women's literary and artistic talents comprise rich diversity well beyond traditional learnings of literature and art. Quite a few women are brilliant in music. In *juan* 16, at a family gathering, five heroines play zithers together. The narrator describes this extraordinary scene as follows:

The five zithers reverberate in the decorated hall, a tune of "Geese Descend on a Sandbank" resonates long last. When they play, the tune is fine and serene, the notes elegant. When they play, the rhythms alternate between high and low, rapid and leisurely, sounding smooth and echoing. Hearing the melodies, the white cranes in the sky soar and dance to the tunes. Hearing the melodies, the flowers extend and shake their branches to the beat. When the melody is completed, they all halt, leaving the audience clear-minded and elevated in spirit. (16:16)

Not only are these heroines talented in playing musical instruments, even maidens and house servants are well-trained in music or endowed with artistic talent. Luo Linxiang 駱林香, a maid of Shui Shi, is particularly adept at playing the flute (17:11). Instructed by Princess Meng'e herself, Linxiang is praised for "an exceptional elegance in musical notes and melodies" (17:11). Minor characters also are capable of changing their own fate by displaying their literary or artistic talent. Once, the disguised minister Yunping takes a stroll in her garden and overhears live-in singsong girl Yu Liniang lamenting her fate through singing:

Deeply confined in the minister's mansion for an endlessly long time,
In vain I lament my ill fate and bear the sadness.
This rouged face has not known the caress of the spring breeze,
My dark hair becomes frosted in the mirror as my sorrows grow. (18:14)

Hearing the singsong girl's lament, Yunping is deeply moved and decides to allow all the grown-up singsong girls in the house to leave and return to their parents or relatives. Likewise, in *juan* 16, Yunping's house servant Wang Ming selects four singsong girls to perform at the birthday banquet of Minister Zhu, Yunping's foster father. It turns

out that the youngest girl, Shunzhen 順珍, who is particularly beautiful and adept at singing, is a granddaughter of Yunping's teacher Mr. Yang. In her childhood, Shunzhen had been abducted while attending a Lantern Festival with her family. Upon this discovery, Yunping takes in the six-year-old Shunzhen as an adopted daughter. Other distinctively cultured minor characters include two royal maidens who the emperor gives to Yunping as concubines. Not willing to expose her identity, the disguised Yunping accepts the two maidens, but later dispatches each of them to marry their previously betrothed fiancés (13:17). After their marriages, both maidens become wives of civil officials and pay a visit back to Yunping to thank the minister. One brings a gift of a 焦尾琴 (*jiaoweiqin*, burnt-tail zither), a family treasure that belonged to the legendary Cai Yi of the Eastern Han, to thank the minister for allowing her to reunite with her fiancé. The other maiden presents a Han dynasty incense burner that has been passed down in her family. Despite their humble status, both heroines display outstanding knowledge in art and culture.

As a marginal heroine, a servant-maid and singsong girl in *tanci* rarely receives personal endorsement, for she mostly serves as a comic relief, a substitute for the heroine in marriage, or a personal (often disguised) confidante on the disguised heroine's journey. In some cases, a servingmaid who is prone to jealousy or of low moral standing could create an aggravated situation for the hero or heroine. Or, a maid could act as a messenger between the heroine and her admirer, and mediate the subtle exchange of messages in and out of the inner chambers. Although servingmaids are evidently of low social status, they do have more physical mobility in the domestic space in comparison with the relatively more cloistered women who are instructed to observe Confucian gender rules. The Red Maid (Hongniang) in the *Romance of the West Chamber* acts as a go-between for the lovesick Zhang Sheng and her mistress Cui Yingying, and makes it possible for the two to develop a covert relationship; ultimately, as a reward for her loyalty, she becomes the hero's concubine. Minor women characters may be given temporary importance to highlight the leading heroine's integrity or chastity, create dramatic conflict, provide insight to the characters' mental activities, facilitate contact between characters of diverse social castes, allow the intervention of chance and surprise in plot development, or act as an agent to unravel the disguised truth. In *Destiny of Rebirth*, it is the palace maidens who unravel Lijun's bound feet and expose Lijun's femininity. Yet in Ming Qing *tanci* novels, the servingmaids are often created to enrich the system of narrative motifs that foreshadow leading characters' mandates or impending dramatic conflicts, or to mediate ideological stances of the text or authorial narrator. These maidens are invariably limited as minor roles and correspond to marginalized women confined to humble lower social status.

Affinity of the Golden Fish enriches these narrative conventions by characterizing a group of supporting heroines whose talent allows them to transcend the hierarchical

social strata and gives them a certain degree of power to express personal desire. Rather than casting female talent as an exclusive phenomenon among governing-class women, the text indicates a broad and vigorous scene of accomplished heroines of lower up-bringsings taking to literary and artistic practices. These adept and resourceful maids, singsong girls, and concubines recall what Dorothy Ko calls “women as everyday strategists” in the Ming and Qing, and how social reality could have “involved a much more complicated process of accommodation, negotiation, subversion and collusion” (Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue” 14). Ko observes that “in real life, the inner-outer boundary was constantly being trespassed or redrawn” (14). Servant-maids embody the social class of a well-born young lady with a cultured family. Yet the talented servant-maids in *Affinity of the Golden Fish* embody a feminine identity that not only observes or reinforces the Confucian doctrine of separate spheres, but also has intermittent power to go between and mediate communications among characters in these spheres.

The text prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between female talent and class represented in late imperial literature, and how such relationships redefine literary imagination of feminine subjectivity. Susan Naider Lanser notes that narrative technique is “not simply a product of ideology but an ideology itself,” and that narrative voice “embodies the social, economic, and literary conditions under which it has been produced” (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority* 5). Resonating with the text’s redefinition of female beyond the governing gentry class, *Affinity of the Golden Fish* portrays literary activities as part of women’s everyday lives. For example, literary drinking games mobilize women in diverse creations in genres including poetry, *tanci*, riddles, jokes, and anecdotal stories as fitting to each character’s family background and personal interest. Associations of drinking and women’s literary activities are prevalent in Ming Qing literature. The reputed Qing playwright Wu Zao composed the play 喬影 (*Qiaoying*, Image in Disguise), in which the protagonist Xie Xucai disguises herself as a man and makes a self-portrait. Facing her painted image as a man, she reads the classical work 離騷 (*Lisao*, *Encountering Sorrows*). The theatrical character Xie Xucai, through enacting the role of the drinking poet, expresses her wish to transcend gender boundaries as a literary author as well as her wish for a purported appropriation of the voice of a literatus.

An illustrative scene of women participating in literary drinking games can be found in *juan* 18 of *Affinity of the Golden Fish*. In this scene, the wives of Qian Jingchun gathered together at a banquet with Zou Yunping, “his” wife Li Yu’e, and sister Zou Suying. For entertainment, Jingchun proposes a rather easy wine-drinking game, with the one who fails required to tell a story or compose a poem: “The player needs to throw out three dice all at once. If one is red, the player takes a cup of wine. If there are two red dice, the player takes two cups of wine. If all three are red, the player tells a joke, an anecdote, a riddle, or makes a poem, as he likes. Afterwards, all shall accompany

the player and have a cup of wine” (18:4). Princess Shengping tells an anecdote of 黃梁一夢 (*Huangliang yimeng*, a golden millet dream) about the Daoist Lu Dongbin, who dreams of a life of fortune and fame, and wakes up to the realization of the illusory nature of the human world. Lady Luo offers a poetry riddle. Lady Yan from the northern Chanyu kingdom does not have as much learning, and hence tells a joke. As for the cross-dressed Yunping, “his” sister Suying, and “his” wife Yu’e, they take the theme of chrysanthemum and each compose a poem. Each character’s story or poem reflects her birth and family learning, personal temperament, and preference, as well as lifelong pursuits or ambitions. The cross-dressed Yunping decides to play 歡樂令 (*Huanle ling*, The Joy Drinking Game) with “his” wife Li Yu’e as a couple and composes the following poems:

PLANTING THE CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERS

The high time of autumn is ideal for seeing the flowers
 I plant the flowers at this time as a habit of planning
 Caring for the flowers so that they have robust branches to brave frost and snow
 And have fine airs for appreciation.

ON CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERS

When writing about the chrysanthemum garden, there are some exceptional flowers.
 Putting down my brush at times, I was ridden with thoughts.
 My eyes are filled with the scenery of autumn, all fully blooming,
 Several bushes of beautiful blossoms already urge me to write them down in poems.

FACING THE CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERS

Like smoke, condensed dew, and densely laid out clouds;
 The flowers display different hues of whiteness and yellow layer by layer.
 Taking up the brush, I would like to admire the flowers with the secluded ones,
 Pouring a cup of wine, I shall give a toast to this flower of longevity. (18:8)

The chrysanthemum flower, the fourth “gentleman of flowers,” is favored in dynastic poetry and painting, symbolizing excellence, integrity, longevity, or the ideal of a life in seclusion. In the Ming dynasty, the chrysanthemum was a special subject of painting for literati scholars (Goody 364). It is a flower of exceptional disposition. The painter of this flower should be one who perceives and cherishes a conception of the flower in a sincere and wholesome way. The above textual example of Yunping and Yu’e sharing the rhyme and subject in composing poems invites a close reading beyond the surface implications of the lines. In her article “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China,”

Maureen Robertson observes that female writers' acts of ventriloquism in appropriating a male literary mode allow them to express their own concerns. Here, the heroine Yunping appropriates this poetic convention to express a literati ideal of selfhood, which reinforces her masculine veneer. Also, Paul S. Ropp suggests, "the increased female literacy in the Qing . . . inspired the development of intellectual and emotional intimacy, especially between gentry husbands and wives" (Ropp, "Love, Literacy, and Laments" 109). In Sun Deying's fictional reconfiguration, the couple's participation in the poetry writing game perfects their mock union and displays the "intellectual and spiritual companionship" of husband and wife (109). Female literacy is endorsed not only through the talented wife's poetic works, but also through the cross-dresser's self-fashioning as a Confucian scholar by performing poetic "transvestism" (Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities* 2).

In comparison with these rather literary outputs from the drinking games, other characters produce lively stories, riddles, or jokes. Yan Yingzhu, who was born in the northern Mongolian region and is a former general, rather than composing a poem, tells a joke:

A young man liked wandering and did not favor reading. His enraged father locked him up in a room. He ordered the servants to send in food and water for the son, and asked the son to focus his eyes on the books, and contemplate the scrolls carefully. The father thought that if the son took to reading with such dedication, he would achieve new understanding. Three days later, the father came to check on the son's work. The son answered, "Thanks to my father's ingenuous instructions, I find that reading is indeed beneficial. I only spent three days reading and have already understood a lot." The overjoyed father asked, "What did you discover?" The son, also quite pleased, said, "I have often thought that these books were handwritten by brushes. After studying them for three days, I found out that each page of the books was actually made by printing boards." (18:4)

The incorrigibly ignorant son could be read as ridicule of some men's lack of learning. Or, the joke might be a satire against unperceptive readers who may "read" the text, and yet have no interpretive potency to go beyond the surface. The joke, as part of the wine-drinking game, offers a window for readers to ponder the metatextual nuances between the joke as an embedded text and the novel. It is impossible to decipher whether the laughably ignorant male "reader" in the joke refracts authorial anxieties about crude readers. And yet, the joke, appreciated by a group of learned heroines, casts an ironic overtone upon the customary perception of learning and cultural attainment that are inscribed as parts of Confucian masculine identities.

This scene recalls representations of wine-drinking games enjoyed by heroines of diverse social class in various dynastic texts. Cao Xueqin's eminent novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides rich examples of women playing drinking games together, using diverse *jiuling* (wine-drinking rules). Drinking becomes a powerful means of textual transaction. The occasion of drinking facilitates the spreading of rumors through casual chatting. It may enable a minor character to transcend his or her class or social status temporarily and express grievance or insurgence, as in the scene “焦大醉罵” (“Jiaoda zuima,” “The drunk servant Jiao Da curses others”), a demonstrative narrative strategy called 醉人文法 (*zui ren wen fa*, writing through the drunken character). That is to say, when the intoxicated character enacts the role of a commentator, he or she foreshadows the plot development. The most recognized episode about women and literary drinking games take place at the celebration of Baoyu's birthday, when the characters play the drinking game of 占花名兒 (*zhan huaming er*, “Guessing the Names of the Flowers”). On each drinking straw there is an image of a flower and a resonating line from a Tang or Song poem. Both the flower and the poetic line depict the character's personality and presage her fate. Aside from governing-class women, lower-class women also play literary drinking games. When a singsong girl Yun'er participates in a drinking game with Xue Pan 薛蟠, Feng Ziyi 馮紫英, and Baoyu, she takes up the game of “女兒悲” (“nü'er bei,” “The Girl's Sorrows”) to express the feelings and emotions of the courtesans.

Women's literary experiments with *jiuling* or drinking games are well illustrated in nineteenth-century fictional works, such as *Flowers in the Mirror*, 花月痕 (*Huayuehen*, Traces of Flowers and the Moon), 青樓夢 (*Qingloumeng*, The Dream in the Green Bower), and *A Tanci Work to Please My Mother-In-Law*. Women's drinking games in these novels engage roleplaying and creations such as linked verses, rhyme-redoubling, allusions, puns, riddles, and jokes, which in turn facilitate double entendre, foreshadowing, empathetic identification, embedded narratives, or character focalization. Games with drinking cards frequently serve as storytelling ploys with which players blend and combine characters, locations, and actions to create new tales. Often, characters' compositions or storytelling at the games are regulated by designated methods of wine consuming. Wine-drinking games in the novels could evoke narrative urgency, intercede the plot with flirtation or suspense, or transform the characters into performative “subjects” who are endowed with a degree of writerly agency. In the above novels, specifically, drinking games reflect women's shared cultural interest with men, endorse women's learnedness and artistic creativity, and allow heroines means of self-representation. Whereas drinking games invented by literati provided the cultured and the common with shared joy, women's drinking games invite a situated study on gender, talent, and play.

Li Ruzhen's *Flowers in the Mirror*, an illustrative "novel of erudition," reconfigures learned women's drinking games and projects a vision of feminine literary utopia. The text's depiction of one hundred talented women playing drinking games at their gathering could be recontextualized in light of educated women's culture and the proliferation of women's poetry clubs and literary networks since the late Ming. The play of the drinking games allowed women to imitate the voices of the literati, articulate criticism on historical figures, endorse loyalty and filial piety, cast mockeries of the civil service exam, state disapprovals of historians and critics, or applaud deserving and less known scholars. Drinking games draw attention to the ways in which feminine voices have been constructed by men at a time of educated women's rising social visibility. The heroines' drinking games provide examples for scrutinizing the discursivity of the "feminine voice," the differences underlying the position of the female speaking subject, and authorial maneuvering of the voice in relations with dominant social, political, and gender ideologies. Insisting on playing the elegant games, rather than the secular games, the heroines' deployments of allusions, puns, and riddles are purportedly selected from the classic texts for audiences in the inner chambers. The heroines insisted upon their writings' dedication to the instructions of learning, as distinguished from writings in the lowly sensational genres. Their compositions expressed an anxiety about rectifying the moral purpose of their products, and the editing and circulation of writings beyond the inner chambers.

Women's drinking games in "talent and beauty" novels reconfigure gendered play in the exchanges of literati and courtesans. In two male-authored novels, *Traces of Flowers and the Moon* and *The Dream in the Green Bower*, drinking games between literati and courtesan heroines in both texts serve as means for the characters to present talent and articulate a shared epochal melancholia about the declination of a literati culture. Different from and yet resonant with Li's elite heroines, courtesans are depicted as a community of cultured players with exceptional knowledge and artistic dexterities. Courtesans' drinking games, which broadly encompass archaic ballads, musical performances, oral-vernacular speech, and even political events and current affairs, could carry rich implications of imminent social changes in the form of traditional entertainment (also see Yeh 111, 165–66).

In *Affinity of the Golden Fish* and the late nineteenth-century work *A Tanci Work to Please My Mother-In-Law* by 橘道人 (Ju Daoren), women's literary drinking games address a feminine literary community built on interfamilial relations and networks. Whereas women's drinking games in male-authored texts construct diverse literati imaginations of femininity through multifarious images of learned women or talented courtesans, women-authored fictional works depict characters' strategic appropriation of poetry, drama, jokes, and vernacular traditions in drinking games to display talent and humor, to endorse filial piety or chastity, to enhance relationships in a

polygamous family, or to express heroines' aspirations in love, marriage, and writing. Women's drinking games reflect heroines as players who actively engage in negotiations with diverse tastes, class, and moral aesthetics of femininity, and contribute to shared pleasures of reading/playing among these novels' targeted audience, that is, female readers in the inner chambers. The function of women's literary drinking games in these texts and many more fictional works of this time transcends that of a mere narrative device, or that of a rhetoric mode of *mise en abyme* in the narratological sense. Rather, these games provide a reflexivity of gendered discourses about femininity, writing, and women's increased visibility in their participations in and responses to social changes the nineteenth century.

WOMEN'S ARTISTIC TALENT AND THE VERNACULAR CULTURE

Aside from the literary drinking games, in *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, women characters' artistic talent is demonstrated in their expertise in poetry, painting, music, and even vernacular storytelling. It is illustrated in the book that heroines frequently play chess, one of the four arts for literati scholars (i.e., zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting). Yunping plays chess with one of her young nieces. Another niece gains the name of "female scholar" for expressing interest in a set of Japanese *igo* (*weiqi*), a foreign tributary item that the emperor has gifted to Yunping (20:21). Li Xiaorong observes in her study of new cultural ideals of femininity in Ming and Qing periods, "the emphasis on women's learning and artistic talent was a major trend in the rewriting of traditional womanhood" (Li Xiaorong, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China* 74). This nascent ideal of "women of letters" was "instrumental in Ming-Qing poets' transformation of boudoir poetics"; women's engagement in poetic and artistic activities contributes crucially to their self-representations (74). Li emphasizes how "the cultural ideals and expressions developed in literati self-cultivation influenced women's self-perceptions and created an idealization of their lived space" (74). Building on Li's analysis, this study of Sun's *tanci* shows that women characters' self-cultivation and display of literary and artistic talent take on a rather expansive dimension that transforms boudoir poetics and the ideal of womanhood affiliated with it, and reach to competent and extraordinary heroines beyond the governing class, such as opera performers, storytellers, servingmaids, and singsong girls. The text reenvisions women's learning beyond the four arts of traditional scholars, and endows its heroines with rare assets such as martial talent, divinatory skills, or even the competence to decipher foreign languages. The *tanci*'s rewriting of female talent can be viewed as a vernacular imagination of feminine subjectivity.

Endorsement of women's exceptional knowledge and learning could be found in embedded narratives and subplots. There are frequent depictions of women celebrating marriage, births of children, or parents' birthdays by means of summoning female theatrical performance. Among these examples, there are two descriptions of women's *tanci* performance that provide intertextual illustrations of heroines who cross-dress as men, accomplish outstanding careers as officials and scholars, and finally return to their feminine identities and reunite with their fiancés in marriage. In *juan* 16, at a birthday banquet for Minister Zhu, Yunping's father-in-law, a house servant summons three young singsong girls to give a performance of a *tanci* titled 雙仙會 (*Shuangxian hui*, Meeting of Two Immortals). In this embedded tale, during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty, a literati official's daughter Huang Caixian 黃彩仙, who is already betrothed to a young scholar, flees from her home to escape a forced marriage with her cousin. On her journey, Caixian encounters an imperial minister who adopts Caixian as his son and takes her to the capital city. It happens that the Korean kingdom sends an envoy requesting the Tang court to read and identify the new name of the Korean king. If no one knows the king's name, Korea shall wage a war against the country. Whereas no civil or martial officials can read the inscriptions on the royal seals, Huang Caixian is the only one who knows the Korean language and identifies the king's title. Upon the emperor's command, she attends the civil service exam in the following year and becomes a first scholar (16:21). When the Korean kingdom invades the nation, Caixian ventures to lead the armies to fight the enemy, secures the border, and later is promoted to be minister of the rites, at the core of the administrative organization that controls the imperial education system. Whereas this embedded *tanci* tale ends with Caixian's refeminization and marriage with her fiancé, the heroine in the singsong girls' tale is doubtlessly a narrative miniature of the disguised heroine Zhu Yunping in her literary talent and martial powers.

Women's depictions of female-performed *tanci*, as in the earlier *Linked Rings of Jade*, and in this nineteenth-century work by Sun Deying, pose an affirmative attitude toward lower-class women's artistic talent and expertise in mastering vernacular performances, such as 女彈詞 (*nü tanci*, female *tanci* storytelling) and 女戲 (*nüxi*, women-performed opera). In *juan* 20 of *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, at a family banquet, Qin Meng'e observes that *tanci*, rather than oblique poetry or singing and dancing, is particularly pleasant to hear, fresh in subject, and appealing to the audience's taste. Recalling the previous *tanci* *Meeting of Two Immortals*, she summons the two singsong girls again who perform another work 拾金釵 (*Shi jinchai*, A Golden Hairpin), which is a scholar-beauty romance ending in a polygamous marriage. Meng'e proposes to keep at her house a group of female entertainers who are adept at playing the *pipa* instrument, and asks them to practice singing dozens of famous *tanci* works. Later, Luo Xianzhi, at a gathering with female relatives, observes, "Beginning with the *tanci* singing at Minister Zhu's house, everyone takes to listening to *tanci* storytelling for

leisure and entertainment. Even refined dances and fresh-tuned songs lose their popularity; every official's house hosts a few storytellers" (20:3). Earlier in the text, at occasions of marriage and childbirth, the Qian family summons a female opera troupe to perform at their house. These textual details indicate the popularity of lower-class women's vernacular performances for gentry female audiences.

These two embedded *tanci* tales exemplify the device of a "story within a story," and allow shifted and interactive narrative points of view, with the exposure of complex and different narrative levels. In both scenarios of *tanci* performances, and most prominently in the first scene, the female members of the Qian family house intervene frequently, raise questions about the challenges of Caixian to travel in disguise, the probability of the heroine's mock union with a sister, the irony of the heroine's father's inability to recognize his own daughter when overseeing the civil exam, as well as Caixian's bravery and ingenuity in keeping her true femininity a secret. The text here is constructed by paralleled narrative frames, including the fictional heroines questioning *tanci* singers regarding the plausibility of story, unveiling a possible reflexivity on the part of the authorial narrator, and contemplating and responding to possible inquiries from her implied readers about her plot choices and arrangements. This important textual moment of reflexivity recalls the popularity of vernacular literature among elite audiences. As Richard J. Smith observes, despite the stylistic differences and gaps, popular vernacular literature "tended to reflect elite values" like orthodox classic literature, and "the elite enjoyed certain types of popular literature (such as novels) as much as, if not more than, the less privileged masses" (Smith 307). In light of content and attractiveness, "vernacular literature provides us with a valuable perspective on life in late imperial China" (307). The text's endorsement of the heroine's ability goes far beyond connoisseurship of feminine literary talent. Yunping's aptitude brings her a social position and political power in governing the state, even overseeing and instructing the newly enthroned young emperor. In *juan* 17, Yunping composes a poem on her role in steering the education system and selecting the officials for the court:

In the chambers the scholars' knowledge is exceptional from this generation;
 In front of the Minister's gate, numerous disciples receive instruction.
 During the ten years of her service, talented officials fill in the court,
 All of them are recommended and promoted by your humble minister, myself. (17:1)

Like Meng Lijun in *Destiny of Rebirth* and Zhao Xiangxian 趙湘仙 in *A Tale of Vacuity*, the disguised heroines exhibit their literary talent by passing the civil exam and becoming court officials themselves, but also take the position of exam officials in selecting civil talents for the court. In *juan* 18, Yunping reflects on her achievement in the position of prime minister after living a life in disguise for eight years:

All my ambitions and wishes have come true, success and fame are now attained. Having redressed the name of my wronged parents, and redeemed them from suffering, I also eliminated the lascivious and dishonest officials, and cleansed the palace. Governing balance in measurement of state affairs, I promote benevolence in administration and am applauded by people of the nation; in the minister's headquarters, I harmonize relations at the court and assist the revered and wise emperor. . . . In front of my mansion, my disciples amass like hill mounds; all subordinate officials bow and follow my commands. (18:16)

Contemplating her fortune, she exclaims, "Ah, I am no more than a frail woman in the fragrant chambers, but have made such an astonishing accomplishment!" Sensing the risk of having her true identity exposed, Yunping plans to leave her position for life as a recluse. Yet she worries that "the Emperor has displayed the intention of making me assist the young heir. I have received such royal grace and favor, because I have been considered as an equivalent of the famous Minister Yi Yin of the Zhou dynasty, who mentored and instructed the young heir of the throne" (18:17). Deemed as a sage-minister for the court like the legendary Yi Yin, Yunping is entrusted by the emperor with authority to manage the daily operations of the royal bureaucracy and to rise up to the challenge of political emergencies of the nation.

Whereas the disguised Yunping obtains success in the male-centered civil exam, the text, in an embedded tale, mentions 女試 (*nǚshì*), or "women's exam," as a way for women to receive endorsement for their talents. In the last *juan*, upon Meng'e's request, two singers perform a new *tanci* story called 英奇傳 (*Yingqi zhuan*, "A Story of the Heroic and Extraordinary"), set during the reign of Emperor Yuan of the Jin dynasty. This short story recounts the tale of an official's daughter who is abducted and forced to marry a minister's son. She manages to escape, and later is adopted by a minister as his daughter. It happens that the empress holds a "women's exam" in order to select female scholars to instruct the princesses in learning. The heroine attends the exam with her foster parents' encouragement and becomes the first female scholar. Meanwhile, her fiancé passes the civil exam and becomes a first scholar. The two are appointed to appease a military revolt, and they are triumphant on the battlefields. In the end the couple are reunited in a polygamous marriage. This embedded *tanci* tale is unique in that it recalls the ancient practice of "women's exam," which was an education system parallel to the civil exam, and allowed women to receive recognition and officialdom for their talent regardless of their status and family upbringing. Hence the talented heroine, who does not disguise herself, still is granted the access to achieve personal aspirations and is not confronted with the lot of refeminization as in the plot of *Affinity of the Golden Fish*. This subplot highlights Sun Deying's *tanci* as an exemplar of framed narratives, as the authorial narrator, through these embedded

and incredibly detailed *tanci* tales, contemplates the ironically different narrative possibilities in the singsong girls' inventive *tanci*, and her own much grimmer, intricate, and realistic plot.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of women's *tanci* fiction, shifting paradigms of talent and feminine subjectivity invite scrutinization of gender relations and ideologies embedded in the social and cultural norms of dynastic China. Marie Florine Bruneau incisively notes, "the history of women within patriarchy can be viewed as the history of women's opposition, tactical struggles and adaptive devices" (Bruneau 157). The history of women, rather than one of victimization or a history to be considered in isolation, is "the history of the dynamics of strategies of control on the part of the dominant power and of tactics of survival, negotiation, accommodation, opposition or self-affirmation on the part of women" (157). Women's history, Bruneau suggests, is a history "of a relation of power opposing blocks of power on a horizontal axis" (157). Sun Deying's textual ramifications of female talent as fashioned in the conventions of literati feminine subjectivity and beyond, as this chapter has illustrated, gesture toward a creative space for women's self-expression of literary and artistic talent. On the one hand, the talented Yunping's emulation and reconfiguration of the talented Confucian scholar allows a kind of literary transvestism, a disguise that allows her to garner administrative authority and power at the court and in selecting civil officers. This successful transvestism even allows Yunping to dispel suspicions of her act of cross-dressing, and reinforces her masqueraded identity as an erudite scholar, drawing on the normative associations of literati learning and Confucian masculine identity.

The text transfigures the normative premises of the gentry class underlying the definitions of literary talent by portraying minor heroines, such as servingmaids, concubines, and singsong girls, whose intellect, aptitude, and artistic competency not only mirror or strengthen the talents of the leading heroines or provide plot enrichment, but also indicate ordinary heroines' increased access to self-articulation and self-expression in a late imperial vernacular community. The text's exceedingly intricate narrative frames, from time to time, allow such minor female characters to take on temporary authorial positions in sharing their own voices, whether through literary drinking games, poetic songs, or entailed *tanci* stories. This textual hybridity indicates active authorial experiments in narrative techniques, allowing polyphonic interventions in the flow of the story, engaging interplay between diverse speaking subjects and voices across genres, and indicating recurring moments of authorial deliberations of possibilities on plot development and narrative closure. On the other hand, textual

dissonance, hybridity, polarity, and stylistic gradience may be characteristics of a rising vernacular trend of reinterpreting feminine talent through less canonical genres, with *tanci* being a crucial artistic form of such nature.

The text's reconfiguration of the literati feminine voice through vernacular narratives recalls narratological analysis of sociopolitical discourses' appropriation of "voice" to mobilize it as a signifier for "resisting oppressive power structures" (Rosen 94). Susan Lanser observes that "the fictional practice of minor-character elaboration" could illustrate women writers' usage of "voice" as "a crucial signifier for female authority and autonomy" (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority* 272). Lanser writes that when diverse undertakings to "voice" merge "in what Mikhail Bakhtin has called a 'sociological poetics,' it becomes possible to see narrative technique not simply as a product of ideology but as ideology itself" (5). Jeremy Rosen, in response to Lanser's observation, further points out the nuanced and important distinction between the authorial construction of the minor characters' voices, and the characters' voices of their own, the latter representing a more resolute degree of fictional autonomy not entirely subjected to authorial maneuver and control. In light of *Affinity of the Golden Fish* and *tanci* fiction by women in general, "voice" remains a richly mobile and fluid textual construct that constantly negotiates with and often shifts the permeable boundaries between hierarchical norms of gender roles, class and familial background, power, and authority. Ultimately, at the focal point of Sun Deying's tale rests the shared and much more universal concern of women writers about "how to escape the female condition," as Idema and Grant put it, "the way in which a woman can escape her female condition with all its attendant hardships, and join the world of men" (Idema and Grant 562). The comparably humble status of *tanci* fiction paradoxically allowed women authors to appropriate this narrative form and develop a distinctive voice of their own without explicitly challenging the established norms. Rather, Sun's text demonstrates that voices from gender-affiliated speaking positions could be a discursive strategy for authorial self-endorsement and reclamation of authority, for using ventriloquism to re-fashion the literati-feminine voice through fictional narratives, for giving voices to the marginal and disempowered minor heroines, and thereafter shifting the center of fictional authority.

Chapter Five

A NEW ROMANCE OF THE NATION-STATE: ON WANG OUSHANG'S *ZIXUJI* (A TALE OF VACUITY)

IN A RECENTLY reprinted *tanci* work 子虛記 (*Zixuji, A Tale of Vacuity* 1883), the talented author Wang Oushang (汪藕裳, 1832–1903) wrote down these melancholic reflections on her experiences as a war refugee during the Taiping Rebellion: “Ever since my hometown collapsed under chaos caused by soldiers, I have led a homeless life in eviction and lamented my desperate circumstance. In the deep autumn, I am separated from my husband. Seeking a lodging of peace and comfort, I have travelled like drifting dry weeds” (Wang Oushang 1:37). Wang was born to an affluent family in Xuyi 盱眙 county, Anhui province, with a father who was a late Qing provincial governor. She received an extensive education from her family and even accompanied her father in his travels to various official posts. During their travels, Wang witnessed the everyday lives of provincial governmental officials, which could have provided insights for her literary creations of characters and their political lives in *tanci*. After her father died on his official post in Henan in 1848, the then seventeen-year-old author returned to her hometown with her family and was married to her fiancé Hu Songnian 胡松年. During the following era when South China was plagued by the Taiping Rebellion, Wang and her husband traveled from one city to another to escape from the rebelling armies. In 1860, she became a widow at the age of twenty-nine after losing her husband to illness. The above lines address

her profound experience of loss and trauma during and in the aftermath of China's tumultuous civil war of the nineteenth century. In 1883, after nearly twenty years of writing, she completed *A Tale of Vacuity*, an important *tanci* work that contains sixty-four *juan* (chapter) and totals 2.3 million words in length. The book was never published during the author's life. Before her death, she followed the tradition of passing along *tanci* texts to female family descendants and left a hand-copied version of *A Tale of Vacuity* to one of her granddaughters. The family's female descendants preserved the text with the utmost care throughout their years of exile during the eight years of China's Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the turbulent decade of the Cultural Revolution. In 2011, the author's fifth-generation maternal granddaughter, Xiao Rongzhang 肖镛璋, returned from the United States to her hometown (today's Huai'An city) and donated this family-held *gaoben* (稿本, original manuscript) to the city's museum. The book, edited by scholar Wang Zeqiang, was eventually published in full in 2014.

For today's audience, this book's extraordinary and arduous path to publication not only bespeaks the mother-daughter family legacy in the appreciation and preservation of women's *tanci*, but also indicates its exceptional value for the study of nineteenth-century women's representations of warfare, statecraft, and gendered political consciousness. This chapter provides a situated study of gender and nationhood in *A Tale of Vacuity*, with a focus on fictional depictions of women's enactments of nationalist passions and the heroines' political agency. Probing into themes of cross-dressing, female military agency, nonnormative gendered relations, as well as women's reflections on warfare and trauma, this study suggests that *A Tale of Vacuity* allows for women's temporary freedom and their negotiations between obedience and resistance under confining environments. Specifically, this chapter is comprised of four parts. Part I offers a contextualized overview of earlier women *tanci* authors' fictional representations of gender politics and the ideal of the nation-state, and proposes that these *tanci* texts invite an innovative understanding of the nation-state and late imperial women's political consciousness. Part II asks how *A Tale of Vacuity*, together with other *tanci* works written during or shortly after the Taiping Rebellion, expressively explores and represents the interconnections of women authors' personal experiences during warfare and bandit uprisings, and the larger social and political structures of the late Qing. Part III analyzes the text's innovative depictions of women warriors and female military agency, and its reinvention of narrative conventions from traditional military romances. Part IV shifts the focus from heroines in the text to depictions of the author Wang Oushang herself through paratextual materials, such as self-preface, prefaces by male relatives and friends, an endorsing poem by a female writer and friend, as well as authorial insertions in the opening and closing lines of each chapter. Paratextual references in prefatory or marginal spaces of the

text bespeak gendered positions of interpretation from different subjective positions of male and female readers, editors, and the talented woman author herself, and offer important insights into diverse ideological attitudes toward the book's moral stance and social function. The chapter concludes with discussions of further themes to explore, including authorship of *tanci* as gendered and ideological constructs, translations of early modern notions of the nation, and *tanci* works' representations of racialized femininity and interracial marriages.

GENDER POLITICS AND PERFORMANCES OF THE NATION-STATE IN *TANCI* NOVELS

Depictions of women's political passions already are ubiquitous in traditional *tanci* novels. From the reputed Zheng Danruo who committed suicide to protect her integrity during the Taiping Rebellion, to her daughter Zhou Yingfang who retold the story of General Yue Fei in *tanci Jingzhongzhuan* (*Story of a Devoted Son*, 1899), *tanci* authors projected multifarious ideals of the nation-state by reconfiguring folklore about male national heroes, or by endowing their heroines with military intelligence and martial art skills. Explorations of the nation-state in *tanci* constitute a crucial part of late imperial women's writings about statecraft and political events. Ellen Widmer in "Hou Zhi (1764–1829): Poet and *Tanci* Writer" studies Ming loyalism as inspirations for women in experimenting with innovative genres. Suzan Mann in "The Lady and the State" argues that nineteenth-century women's growing political awareness and explorations of disorder, death, and exile invites a reconsideration of the sociopolitical dimensions of women's domestic lives. Wai-ye Li in *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Literature* explores how Ming Qing transitions, the Opium Wars, and the Taiping Rebellion brought women into voicing their political concerns through poetry, drama, novels, and *tanci*.

Illustrations of political disorder and national crisis about the Ming Qing transition are prominently found in *Heaven Rains Flowers*, the authorship of which is attributed to a woman writer Tao Zhenhuai. The text depicts a loyal minister Zuo Weiming 左維明 living through the reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Ming, who defends the nation against the northern invaders. However, the novelist goes to great lengths to portray the heroic deeds of Zuo's daughter Zuo Yizhen. When a treacherous minister Zheng Guotai kills the emperor and usurps the throne, he takes Yizhen as his empress. Yizhen pretends to agree to be his empress, makes him drunk, and beheads him with her father's sword. Yizhen's heroic deed of decapitating the usurper of the throne, Hu Siao-chen argues, illustrates the heroine's fight against the forces threatening the bloodline of the Ming court and "the rules that circumscribe her as a woman" (Hu, "War,

Violence, and the Metaphor of Blood” 258). She first beguiles the tipsy Zheng by singing two songs for him. Composed to the heroic tune of “滿江紅” (“Manjianghong”), the lyrics ridicule the unlettered Zheng, foreshadowing her determination to avenge the emperor. The first song goes as follows:

Iron-minded and indomitable, I shall dedicate my loyal heart to my country.
 I lay my eyes on the bejeweled curtains and painted pillars, on the palaces of the
 Ming Dynasty.
 All eight hundred lords helpless and out of their wits,
 three thousand armored soldiers surrender to the opponent.
 A woman, tonight I shall avenge the deceased Emperor.
 What a loyal heart!
 My ambition is as pure as the white jade, my integrity as genuine as the green
 pine tree;
 holding the sword, in my wedding gown,
 I count the hours of this long night. The dripping sounds of the water-clock die out.
 Flashing out the silver blade by the dragon and phoenix pillows, red blood gushes
 from beneath the mandarin-duck curtains.
 The treacherous one has met his end and cannot flee.
 Tonight is his time to meet his doom.
 —To the tune of “Manjianghong” (15:568; my translation)

Yizhen’s application of the masculine mode “Manjianghong” before she decapitates the usurper evokes an embodied masculine voice that justifies her act with heroic intentions of avenging the deceased emperor and endorsing her loyalty to the court. In *Heaven Rains Flowers*, both songs by Yizhen voice the double implications of *jie* (節, chastity) and *lie* (烈, loyalty) as symbols of chastity and political loyalty to the royal bloodline. As the second song goes, “Silver blade dashes like icy frost from the sky, the cuckoo bird in the forest weeps scarlet blood. / I lament that flowers have withered for a long time, their lingering aroma has entirely dispersed” (15:568–69). This song delivers a tragic voice by alluding to King Du Yu of the Shu, who after being assassinated and losing his nation transforms into a cuckoo bird and weeps tears of blood that stain the petals of the azaleas red, illustrating an image of a Ming loyalist. The text provides a valuable example of late imperial women’s interests in the statecraft and their articulations of political awareness. Maram Epstein insightfully suggests a Ming-loyalist reading of *Tianyuhua*, and observes that “the text accurately depicts the factional intrigues that plagued the late-Ming court; and that the narrative concludes with the collective suicide of five hundred members of the five intermarried families at the fall of the Ming” (Epstein, “Patrimonial Bonds” 2). The current study, building

on Epstein's and Hu's studies, suggests that this novel provides a valuable example of late imperial women authors' interests in political affairs. Yizhen offers a compelling case in which the politics of *jie* (chastity/fidelity) encompasses a broader implication of political loyalty, and endows women's imaginary social and military agency with moral endorsement.

Women's *tanci* often depict female military leaders and generals who exercise magical powers on the battlefield to pacify the conflicts at the frontiers and protect the country's borderlines. A striking example is the cross-dressed general Wei Yong'E 衛勇娥 in *Destiny of Rebirth*, whose magical incantation could freeze the enemy in motion. Yong'E is the daughter of an official who is captured and held hostage during a battle against Korea. Yong'E's father is wrongly accused of treason; she flees from home in a man's disguise and is unexpectedly ambushed by a group of mountain bandits. She fights against them and kills their leader; then she takes over the subordinates and becomes a lord. Addressing herself like an emperor, "she is courteous and humble to the talented, the way of a true hero. / The generals and soldiers accede to her authority, and all vow to let this real dragon supersede the false one" (9:124). Thanks to her outstanding militia, Yong'E is recruited by the court, thwarting an invasion by a disloyal general Wu Bikai 鄒必凱 at the northeast frontier. Yong'E is more than an archetypal militant heroine, in that she carries the political imagery of a woman as an emperor and plays a decisive role in restoring peace at the border. Images of female monarchs appeared in other *tanci*. In Hou Zhi's 再造天 (*Zaizao Tian*, Remaking Heaven), Feilong expresses admiration for the Tang Empress Wu Zetian. Utilizing the emperor's infatuation with her, she endangers the palace and even overturns the court. Likewise, Gui Hengkui in *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* articulates her wish to become a man, ascend the throne, and achieve the penultimate political power.

Sketches of female military alchemy and intelligence as threatening and powerful forces can be found in *Jade Bracelets*, with preface and textual evidence suggesting a mother and a daughter as coauthors. In the story, during the reign of Emperor Ningzong of the Song, a concubine's brother becomes a traitor and collaborates with the Jin kingdom in launching an attack on the Song empire. The hero Xie Yuhui 謝玉暉 leads the army to battle against the invading enemy but is defeated by Princess Minghua 明華, who is the chief commander of the Jin troops and a master of magic. By reciting a martial spell she commands her dragon and phoenix sword to act on its own and chase the opponent into the air. Whereas the text ends by making Princess Minghua become one of Yuhui's concubines, the narrative portrays women as dangerous, eruptive powers against patriarchy and the sovereignty of the empire. Minghua's exotic identity as a foreigner allows the author a certain degree of freedom to endow this heroine with greater political autonomy and military prowess. The text's romanticized

battle scenes between Princess Minghua and Xie Yuhui enriches a narrative tradition of female military agency with that of courtship, dramatizing “the conflict between passion and honor” (Hsia, *C. T. Hsia on Chinese Literature* 162). The defeated Yuhui could be considered as a “hero of a comedy of manners” who has to succumb to the resourceful princess.

The above examples demonstrate that in quite a few cases, militant heroines are forces for redressing social injustice and endorsing patriotic passions. Images of women as pillars of the nation at times of treason and political turmoil consistently recur in turn-of-the-twentieth-century *tanci*. In 四雲亭 (*Siyunting*, Pavilion of Four Clouds, 1899) by Peng Jingjuan, set during the reign of Emperor Tianqi of the Ming, the author depicts four loyal and heroic female characters. These heroines fight bravely against a treacherous official and the domineering political forces of the eunuch Wei Zhongxian, and exercise their political and military powers in terminating Wei’s forces. The constructions of feminine characters and the depictions of the nation-state in the above *tanci* novels manifest a perturbed and double-sided boundary. The interconnection of imagined femininity and the evolving notions of nation-state in these texts insinuate women’s literary creations as a means of acquiring gendered access to greater social and political autonomy. Women’s gendered performance in *tanci*, enriched and magnified through fantastic narrative conventions, cross-dressing, female swordsmanship, alchemy, and the embodiment of literati patriotism, calls for an in-depth study of women’s gender politics as a means of transforming ideals of the nation-state in late imperial Chinese literature. In this regard, late Qing *tanci* texts with unequivocal and eloquent articulations of women’s political ideals about the nation-state, such as *A Tale of Vacuity*, *Pavilion of Four Clouds*, and the later *Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird*, expand the way we envision the politics of early modern women’s writings, including “both the politics of our critical approaches, and the politics of the texts themselves” (Salzman 209). These texts suggest a more tolerant social context for women’s publication, which granted the possibility for women *tanci* authors to implant and articulate political or even progressive poetics through their narratives. Whereas individual *tanci* authors varied in their personal stances on social and political matters, this corpus of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century *tanci* narratives indicates nuances of women’s responses to social and political matters in multilayered literary discourses, bridging the divide between familial politics and state politics in and outside the diegetic world. These texts unveil *tanci* authors’ endeavors to observe and articulate politics during times of war and turmoil. They invite today’s readers to reflect on the politics of reading as they approach these women authors’ works from diversely framed paradigmatic positions.

DISRUPTING THE NATION-STATE ROMANCE IN *A TALE OF VACUITY*

An important *tanci* work that offers rich depictions of women's participation of national defense and warfare is *A Tale of Vacuity* by Wang Oushang (1832–1903). According to Wang Zeqiang's "A Chronological Biography of Wang Oushang," the author's grandfather Wang Yunren 汪雲任 was a county official in Guangdong and then appointed Shaanxi provincial judge and treasurer. Wang was the author of 汪孟堂太守詩抄 (*Wang Mengtang taishou shichao*, Collected Poems by Governor Wang Mengtang) and 繭園詩文稿 (*Jianyuan shiwen gao*, Album of Poems of the Silk Cocoon Garden), and is most well-known for a well-circulated collection of thirty poems 秋舫吟 (*Qiufang yin*, Poems of the Autumn Boat), which commemorated his love for his wife. Wang Yunren was the father of four sons; the third one, Wang Genjing (汪根敬, 1818–1848), was the father of Wang Oushang. Wang Genjing was a scholar with governmental grant and was appointed a prefect in Henan province for more than ten years. Wang Oushang was the third one among her siblings; she accompanied her father during his post in He'nan in 1839 when she was just eight years old. From then to 1848, when Wang Oushang was sixteen years old, she accompanied her father during his official post as head of the Xiangfu 祥符 county and then governor of the Xuzhou 許州 county.

In 1848, Wang Oushang's father died suddenly on an official post in Henan. She returned to her hometown Xuyi, soon married her fiancé Hu Songnian, and moved to Tongcheng, where her husband resided. Hu was orphaned in childhood and had been taken in by Wang Oushang's father, Wang Genjing; he lived with their family for several years. From 1853, 1859, and 1860, the author and her husband had fled from Tongcheng 桐城 to their hometown Xuyi, and then to south Jiangsu province to escape from the invading Taiping Rebellion armies. In 1860, after the Taiping armies had taken Suzhou city and multiple counties nearby, the author and her family fled again to north Jiangsu province and took shelter with her elder brother Wang Zuma's family. Wang Oushang's husband Hu Songyan then died of illness. Wang was widowed at the age of twenty-nine. Susan Mann insightfully suggests, scholars of Qing women's literature in the late nineteenth century should "draw a line between the writings of women who lived through the Taiping Rebellion, and those who never experienced it" (Mann, "The Lady and the State" 313). Importantly, Wang Oushang's life experiences display a figurative and literal "crossing" of the historical periods before and after the Taiping Rebellion. Reminiscent of Zheng Danruo, the author of *Dream, Image, Destiny*, who committed suicide by taking poison at the fall of Suzhou in 1860 during the Taipei Rebellion, Wang Oushang's two novels both were composed during her exile from the aftermath of war and the national crisis of the Qing.

Before *A Tale of Vacuity*, Wang Oushang was author to another long *tanci* novel 群英傳 (*Qunyingzhuan*, Legend of the Heroes, 1861) at the age of thirty, which received sensational responses from readers and encouraged her to conceive her second book, *A Tale of Vacuity*, which was completed in 1883. *A Tale of Vacuity*, situated in the Ming dynasty, portrays a heroine named Zhao Xiangxian who flees from a tyrannous stepmother to look for her father who is at an official post in the capital. She is persuaded by a servant to disguise herself as a man to travel safely. Later Xiangxian is adopted by an official and takes the name of Pei Zixiang. She attends the civil service exam and becomes a first scholar. She then serves as an imperial inspector who travels the country redressing injustices. It turns out that her father finds out about Zixiang's true identity and discloses it to the emperor. Xiangxian admits her true sex, but refuses to marry her fiancé Zhang Rui, who has now married a princess and would have to take the heroine as a concubine. Her disguise exposed, Xiangxian falls ill and refuses to take meals. She passes away after three days, and before death, pleads with the emperor to cancel her former engagement and bury her in her man's robe, together with her previously deceased "wife." The emperor endorses Zixiang as "a pillar of the nation in governing the country and pacifying the people" (51:2393). At her death, the narrator describes her as follows: "Seated in the chair, the Minister looks unconscious and yet still alive, silent, not breathing a single word" (52:2466). In the end the protagonist departs the world and ascends to heaven as an immortal. The text comments, "This melancholy tune has come to its end, even at her death she would not change back to women's attire. / Receiving the rank of nobility and presiding as a minister, her achievement and name are inscribed in the ancestral shrine of the nation" (52:2466). It is clear that the heroine has chosen a subjectivity as the official of the nation, rather than as a virtuous wife and filial daughter.

A parallel plot depicts a Wen family in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. The father Wen Zhongming 文仲明 was a descendent of the reputed Song national hero Wen Tianxiang 文天祥. Zhongming was the father of two sons, Wen Zhenlin 文振麟 and Wen Yulin 文玉麟. Both Zhenlin and Yulin became court officials. Zhenlin was sent as an imperial diplomat to appease a border dispute with the northern kingdom of Yunchang 雲昌, to educate the stubborn and unenlightened among local residents, and to acquaint them with knowledge and rituals. Wen Yulin later became a leading military general endowed with the title "Lord of Eternal Peace" (永平侯, Yongping hou), and rescued the emperor from multiple political coups launched by a rebelling general, and later a dominant Prince Ying who collaborated with several ministers to assassinate the emperor and seize the throne. Against this background of political schemes and myriad battle scenes, the text depicts a group of women characters who took up the sword and dedicated themselves to the cause of defending the nation. Such heroines include Princess Pingyang, who was outstanding in martial arts and trained an exceptional team of court maidens. In historical records, when Emperor Gaozu captured

the capital city of Chang'an before overthrowing the Sui dynasty (581–618), Pingyang played an active military role (Lee and Wiles 198). The princess allegedly led a women's army and played crucial roles in several military campaigns of her father and her husband. At her funeral, martial music was played to honor her achievements during her former life as a military commander (198). *A Tale of Vacuity* evokes this historical figure to endorse the princess's military talent and courage. In the text, when the emperor was forced into exile in a political coup, the princess cross-dressed as a man and led her subordinates to rescue the emperor and help him flee from the chasing rebelling armies. The emperor praised the princess and her women's army, saying that, "Even women aspire to devote their lives in the service of the nation; those men who betrayed their nation should be really ashamed" (12:523). The text illustrates a group of female soldiers and military officers who joined the battle against tyrannous court ministers, to avenge their persecuted family and to defend the nation at times of political crisis. Being a later nineteenth-century work, the text's emphasis on women's loyalty and passion to nationhood surpasses previous *tanci* novels with its adventurous conceptions of women's political and military agency.

The narrative's intertextual reference to national heroism is compelling, particularly in its depiction of the leading hero Wen Yulin. When the court was threatened with attack by the neighboring kingdom of Yunchang, Yulin and several loyal officials proposed waging a war against Yunchang. The lascivious and scheming minister, however, insisted on brokering peace with Yunchang by giving seven hundred *li* of land to them. The story of Yulin is reminiscent of the life of another South Song heroic general named Yue Fei who was persecuted by the scheming and slandering minister Qin Hui and condemned to death. Later, a treacherous minister named Niu Feng 牛封, hoping to eliminate the Wen family in court, schemed to send Wen Zhenlin, Yulin's elder brother, as an imperial diplomat to Yunchang, and asked the emperor to send Yulin himself to appease a long-lasting rebellion led by Tang Baozuo 唐保祚, a provincial governor in Hubei. After assiduous battles, Yulin succeeded in putting down the uprising and making Tang's subordinates surrender; however, he was not aware that the minister Niu Feng had wrongly accused him of dissenting against the emperor with his armies and seeking rebellion by secretly scheming with the Yunchang kingdom. The deceived emperor then sent an imperial messenger to capture Yulin for interrogation. Though he was wronged, Yulin decided to go with the imperial messenger to the capital to prove his innocence to the emperor. On their way to the capital, Yulin and his subordinates passed by a temple honoring Yue Fei. Stricken by the similarities of his own fate and that of the legendary hero, Yulin composed four poems dedicated to the tragic Yue Fei on a wall in the temple, which also ironically disclosed his own ill-fated destiny. The following are the four poems Yulin composed, which showed the text's reconfiguration of the legacy of Yue Fei in Yulin's words:

I.

What would have happened if Yue Fei had not followed the orders on the golden
plaques and had not retreated?
Holding the imperial order, he clearly had been determined to remain loyal.
How regretful that he suffered the false allegations.
In vain he had practiced martial training for a decade to avenge the shame of his nation.
The former land of the Central Plain is not difficult to reclaim,
Yet the minister's skill is only used to make a peace pact.
In extreme desolation he casts gazes from his humble abode.
What sort of day would it be for the Yue's family army across the Yellow River?

II.

A small palace retained half of its territory,
The loyal Han Shizhong, riding a donkey, lingering by the autumn West Lake.
Upon his return to the capital, the faithful general presented many petitions,
Yet the minister made the Emperor give away land and schemed with the opponent.
The captured royals shed their tears in vain.
The Emperor of the southern court did not have any concern.
This melancholy handful of water from the West Lake
Is in exchange for fourteen Yanyun regions in the North.

III.

Days and days of surrendering towns and wealth,
The sorrowful cries of the towns' people were unbearable to one's ears.
One could only see the towns' people welcoming the hero with bowls of fragrance.
Who would even allow the portraiture of the general in a commemorating pavilion?
In great haste crossing the mountains and rivers to the south,
Every branch of the trees in the imperial shrine brushed against the northern clouds.
Graciously, the grass by the Xiling Bridge
Would turn green in spring and come to the grave of the patriot.

IV.

Who could command the army and return to the Central Plain?
The river roaring eastward is still inflamed with blood.
The sovereigns were held hostage in the desolate desert.
No scholar would still shed tears at Xinting, lamenting the lost land.
The remnant minister could not detect the Emperor's intent.
Even the opponent country still revered the general.
At the retreat of his one hundred thousand soldiers,
A thousand years of regret were cast by this small court. (9:369–70)

The poems expressed the hero's identification with the legendary general Yue Fei, his anguish for the dilapidated nation, his indignation against court officials, and his contempt for the degraded "small court" (9:369–70). In the story Yulin's satirical poems are recorded and reported to the emperor. The emperor is enraged by Yulin's undermining of the imperial authority, removes Yulin from his post, and exiles him to the frontier as a commoner. In the story, these poems dedicated to Yue Fei are interpreted as disrupting narratives about the nation-state, which challenge the royal regime and foreshadow the hero's political exile.

Poems on the walls (題壁詩, *tibi shi*) was a popular genre that both men and women utilized to express personal emotions, pathos, and anguish during times of hardship. Wai-ye Li provides a rich study of poems on the walls that were attributed to seventeenth-century women poets who were abducted by Qing troops during times of national disaster, and who composed poems to express domestic woes and personal misfortunes. The political content of these women's poems even elicited matching poems by sympathetic literati scholars. Wang Yanning, in discussing women poets' experiences of exile when traveling to flee from rebellions and chaos, argues that distressed women travelers frequently resorted to poetry to express their angst and traumatic personal experiences (Wang Yanning, *Reverie and Reality* 91). Poems on the wall "fulfilled the women's desire to vent their sadness and allow their voices to be heard, because once the poem was written on the wall (an informal publication), other travelers would have a chance to see it" (91). Women's poems on the wall written during their exile in war-ridden eras articulate their melancholy due to tragic separation from family, and invite readers' sympathy and sometimes deliver messages for their lost family members. Wang Yanning argues that during the Ming and Qing period, "poems of women in exile often transcend women's personal concerns to carry a national significance" (93). In *tanci* novels, a resonant example of poems on the wall by a female author can be found in a late nineteenth-century *tanci* 俠女群英史 (*Xianü qunying shi*, A History of Woman Warriors), in which a heroine Wen Xiaxian avenges her father's death by beheading his assassin in a restaurant. Afterward, she composes a poem on the wall in order to justify her act, and she includes her name at the beginning of the fourth line, a symbolic act of affirming her bravery.

In *A Tale of Vacuity*, a second look at the commemorating poems on Yue Fei in this female-authored *tanci* novel invites questions about women's enactment of male heroism and literati nationalist passions. Examples of women poets and playwrights imitating masculine voices in writing were not rare during Ming Qing. During the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods, scholar Chen Wenshu (陳文述, 1771–1843) mentored a group of famous talented women under the name of 碧城仙館女弟子 (*Bicheng xianguan nü dizi*, Female Disciples of the Bicheng Hall), including poets Wang Duan (汪端 1793–1839), Zhang Xiang (張襄, nineteenth century), Wu Guichen (吳歸臣, nineteenth century), and the poet and playwright Wu Zao. Several of these authors were

known for their emulations of the masculine voice in poetry or drama. Wu Zao, the author of *Image in Disguise*, composed poems using the masculine tune “Manjianghong,” such as the lyric poem devoted to Yue Fei titled, “棲霞嶺岳武穆王” (“Qixialing Yue Wumuwang,” “The Tomb of Yue the Military and August King at the Mount of Rosy Clouds”). Li Xiaorong in “Engendering Heroism,” her study of Ming-Qing women’s song lyrics to the tune “Manjianghong,” argues that women’s appropriation of this masculine tune allowed women’s creations of a masculine voice, permitted them to act as witnesses of historical upheavals such as the Ming-Qing transition and the Taiping Rebellion, and to express their concerns about political situations and personal loss.

In Wang Oushang’s text, the depictions of Wen Yulin through the historical legacies of Yue Fei and Wen Tianxiang serve manifold purposes: while endorsing the character’s loyalty to the nation and celebrating male heroism, the poems composed in the voice of the male character Yulin allow layers of embedded literary transvestitism. In Wang’s *tanci*, not only is the narrator in the poems a commentator on historical figures and events, but this commenting voice is inherently a narrative construct, a strategically defeminized and also regendered voice. To what extent can readers of today claim that these poems are Wang’s depictions of her own experiences of witnessing the decline of the imperial regime under the threat of invading foreign powers, of her own personal loss of family, and of her exile during the turmoil of the Taiping Rebellion? If the legacy of Yue Fei inscribes loyalty to the nation as the fictional kernel of Wang’s *tanci*, it also provides historical readers connections over the irreducible gaps between the author’s personal life and the fictional setting of the story in Ming, by evoking shared memories of loss, exile, and faith in nationhood. The story surpasses preceding *tanci* by celebrating women as self-identified loyal citizens of the nation. Zixiang is appointed by the emperor as a censor-in-chief, a high-ranking state official supervising the officialdom of the empire. The emperor bestows on Zixiang the role of imperial inspector to supervise jurisdiction justice, and even entrusts her with the autonomy of using an imperial sword on his behalf. The imperial sword indicates that the heroine Zixiang is endowed with such political authority that she may even take the place of the emperor in governing officialdom and executing political decisions. Also, the text’s romanticized depictions of a group of women warriors celebrate feminine subjectivities, and surpass the conventions of women cross-dressing and borrowing masculine social identities. These depictions enable transformations of the heroines from female knights-errant or 女俠 (*nüxia*) to women warriors whose subjectivities are reinscribed by the orthodox discourse of loyalty, martyrdom, and patriotic passions, displaying the boundaries of women’s imagined military and political autonomy.

The above discussion also calls for an expanded understanding of the diverse modes of fictional realism in wartime women’s *tanci* works. Although Wang Oushang, like the aforementioned *tanci* author Jin Fangquan, suffered devastating family exile and

personal displacement during the Taiping Rebellion period, her *tanci* works offer a rather dissimilar example of fictional realism in the repertoire of nineteenth-century women's wartime writings. Jin's work took on a grieving and melancholic authorial voice as an indispensable part of her narrative tableau, interweaving personalized moments of emotional truth into the course and progress of narration. In comparison, Wang Oushang's *tanci* takes a more distanced stance in mediating authorial voices and presents an example of what Patrick Hanan identified as "formal realism" in vernacular stories. Hanan rightly observes that the story worlds of Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu prioritized a more "realistic" narrative depiction; the "realistic" stance in their stories is often characterized by a positionality of "disparaging fantasy and expressing a preference for tangible reality" (Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story* 25). However, rather than always being facilitated through moralization or didacticism, formal realism in fiction often takes on much more subtle and dynamic forms. Hanan's interpretation of "formal realism," inspired by but departing from Ian Watt's narrative theory, includes four aspects, as Wilt Idema elucidates: "a) the use of non-traditional plots, b) particularity as to person, place and time, c) the provision of a distinct historical background, d) the use of descriptive and denotative language" (Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction* 53–54). In this light, fictional realism could encompass creative plot arrangements, rich circumstantial details, and illustrative and denotative vernacular expressions, all of which are constitutive elements of the fantastic narrative. The seemingly impossible union of the imagined and the real, as discussed earlier, allows authorial autonomy in using creative aesthetic forms to illustrate the real. This elastic understanding of fictional realism encourages more nuanced considerations of the works' diverse social meanings and moral implications beyond a unified definition.

Whereas the narrative frame of *A Tale of Vacuity* gains mobility and space of literary creation by borrowing the historical legacy of male national heroes Yue Fei and Wen Tianxiang, the text's depiction of women characters enriches and transforms the well-known tales of patriotic loyalty and filial piety into new stories of women's heroic service for the endangered nation and the besieged court. The story portrays a disguised female character achieving societal success as a man's equal, as well as multiple women of outstanding martial skills and military intelligence who seize the occasion of war and political upheaval to join the army at the frontier and battlefield to defend the nation and secure the reign of the court. The depiction of women's political and military agency in this *tanci* novel surpasses that in preceding famous novels by celebrating women, cross-dressed or not, as self-identified loyal citizens of the nation and individual agents of intellectual, political, and military power.

Depictions of female military agency are prevalent in women's *tanci* novels. In *Blossom from the Brush*, the disguised heroine Jiang Dehua dreams of meeting the legendary female warrior Lady Sun, the younger sister of the Wu general Sun Quan

(孫權, 182–252) in the Three Kingdom period. Lady Sun is married to Liu Bei (劉備, 161–223), the king of the Shu kingdom. After her parents' death, she is taken by grief and homesickness and commits suicide by drowning herself. The Jade Emperor in Heaven pities her and makes her an immortal who sees to it that filial and chaste women are given blessings and fortune, and that the lascivious and shrewd are punished. Moved by Dehua's valiant deeds, Lady Sun teaches Dehua military strategies, saying, "Now that the Holy Palace is suffering a misfortune, / how will it ever secure the country with writing brushes? / Today I shall instruct you in the art of war, / so that in the future you can assist the Emperor and accomplish remarkable achievements" (4:16, 749). She offers Dehua a brocade book with a jade rod, which records the military heritage of the Wu kingdom, and she personally instructs Dehua in martial arts skills. Among texts produced after the Taiping Rebellion, in *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* by Li Guiyu, set in the mid-Tang dynasty, the leading female characters Gui Hengkui and her sworn sister Gui Hengchao both disguised themselves as men, ranked high in the civil service exam, and became leading generals. When a neighboring kingdom corroborated with the Tang court ministers and invaded the nation, the emperor fled to Yangzhou and was besieged. Hengkui led her subordinates, defeated the invading enemy, and rescued the emperor. As a reward for her achievement, she was entrusted with the power of commanding all the military forces of the regime to safeguard the emperor, and was later bestowed with the title of a lord in a frontier area. Like the adventurous Meng Lijun, Hengkui does not want to doff her disguise and would rather continue to explore a life as a man, and even fantasizes about becoming a king herself. She confesses, "My heart bears an ambition as high as heaven, I pledge to ascend the court and become a lord. / Wearing gold belt and python jade, I shall take Twelve Golden Hairpins as concubines" (28:543).

A Tale of Vacuity likewise depicts a broad spectrum of female warriors, court officials, swordswomen, and military commanders who rise to fame by protecting the royal family and suppressing rebelling forces at the time of national crisis. As mentioned above, the emperor entrusts Ziying with an imperial sword. The symbol of the sword is often considered to be representative of patriarchal phallic power as described in the aforementioned *Heaven Rains Flowers*. In *A Tale of Vacuity*, the imperial sword indicates that the heroine Zixiang is endowed with remarkable authority in governing officialdom and executing political decisions. The text praises Zixiang's wisdom and loyalty as follows: "The young touring Censor-in-Chief is exceptionally judicious and impartial, and inspects the cases of each provincial office. / Those corrupted and greedy officials conceal their traces, local mobsters and wandering bands all disappear" (4:135). The plot device of Zixiang's appointment as an imperial official provides timely relief and an excuse for her to postpone her foster parents' pressing request of marriage, in the name of serving the nation. The text's depiction of Zixiang's observations provides

a satirical portrayal of the corruption of the governmental system and rampant use of brutal interrogations that caused countless wrongdoings in judicial practices. A pivotal example is when Zixiang encounters Zhang Rui, to whom she was engaged in childhood. Zhang is wrongly accused of murder by the son of a debauched minister, and he is forced into confession under gruesome torture. Zixiang finally succeeds in rescuing Zhang Rui through cautious strategies without exposing her own true identity. The story shows striking similarity to the story of the famous courtesan Su San, who is wrongly accused of murder but is rescued by her fiancé Wang Jinlong, who redresses the injustice and marries her. *A Tale of Vacuity*, however, provides a quite different setting and outcome: the gender roles are reversed, with the disguised heroine acting as the official redressing the injustice afflicted upon her fiancé; she also keeps their relationship secret and does not aspire to become his wife.

Seeing that Zhang kneels down in front of her, Zixiang ponders, “Feeling sorrowful that you, my husband, broke the law and are kneeling before the stairway; / not suspecting at all, that this person in purple ribbon and court robes is your wife herself?” (7:271). She vows that, “I have already discarded the thought of being a woman, / and intend to, / wear this black gauze hat for the rest of my life” (7:269). Taking on her new role as the pillar of the nation, she thinks to herself, “In charge of law and order, and acting as the imperial envoy, / How could I obscure myself in the inner chambers again and suffer people’s mockery?” (7:269). The ideal of serving the nation provides a moral justification for her rejection of marriage, and offers a much-needed endorsement of her faithfulness to the emperor prevailing over her familial obligations as a wife and daughter. Like cross-dressed Meng Lijun who becomes a minister, Zixiang takes on the role of a traditional Confucian scholar-official. Not only does she oversee the process of recruiting officials through the national civil service exam, she also is endowed with the power to act as a judicial arbiter, governing and adjudicating state affairs. By taking on this borrowed paternal role, the heroine is given a temporary power to effect social and political changes.

In addition, the novel offers extensive depictions of women’s practice of martial arts skills, which prepares them as armed forces to save the country from national crisis. The aforementioned Princess Pingyang leads a well-trained army of palace maids and defeats numerous attacks by the rebelling troops of the minister Niu Feng. Many women characters in the inner chambers also take to military practice under diverse circumstances. The text portrays a heroine named Xiao Yunxian who joins Princess Pingyang’s army after her father, a high-ranking official, is killed by the rebelling minister Niu Feng. She vows to avenge her father and the nation. This textual example shows the analogy of family and the nation, which provides moral justification for the heroine’s role in battling against the treacherous ministers and avenging her family’s and nation’s ruin. Fictional heroines’ participation in warfare and deployment of their

military intelligence expands the traditional notion of the “woman warrior,” that is, “the hero in female military headgear.” As Eugenia Lean argues in an analysis of late Qing’s Shi Jianqiao (1905–1979) who avenged her father by assassinating a warlord, adopting the identity of a woman warrior allows a woman to “engage in extreme acts of filial piety beyond what a conventional daughter would do” (Lean 57). Taking on the militant role of a woman warrior allows a heroine (be it a historical woman or a fictional character) to garner agency and power by enacting orthodox passions, specifically, her filial piety, “the cornerstone of the family-based Confucian order” (57). In *A Tale of Vacuity*, the aforementioned heroine Yunxian’s passionate expression of filial love as a motivation for her participation in the armies displays that in the fictional realm, heroines can exercise a certain degree of personal autonomy by transforming and expanding Confucian gender roles (here a filial daughter) into the social and political sphere.

In the story, women’s practice of martial arts skills such as swordsmanship and archery is prevalent and is endorsed by their male family members. The male hero’s younger sister Wen Fangzi 文芳姿, and her female friends Qiao Huirong 喬慧容 and Qiao Huizhi 喬慧芝, all study archery and swordsmanship under a male general Jiang Tingfang 蔣廷芳 and later join Princess Pingyang’s women’s army. When Qiao Huirong learns that Wen Fangzi shares her interest in martial arts, Huirong is overjoyed and says, “I have regretted that there are few women who share interest in martial arts, and those in the painted chambers will only be jeered at when they take up swords. Unexpectedly I find someone who shares the same mind and great ambition. This elates me even more, making my boundless aspiration ascend to the zenith of the universe” (10:420). Among the heroic warriors in Princess Pingyang’s army, a certain female commander named Huo Pinxiang 霍蘋香, who is a daughter of a governor, is exceptionally fearless. At the age of seventeen, Pinxiang is selected to lead the assault on the rebelling enemy with five hundred valiant soldiers. The text offers a vivid illustration of the female hero:

Miss Pinxiang summons her courage; on a warhorse she flies into the battlefield, instantly raising dust and sand. Because of a chaotic world she puts on her gilded armor, a woman of the inner chamber also vows to devote her service to the nation. Peach-colored face fine as jade, aromatic cheeks as beautiful as flowers. Spurring her lightning-fast steed, she marches, her scarlet robe under the armor outshines the red clouds. Holding a plum-flower-shaped spear, what a commendable heroic female general! (11:496)

This vibrant depiction provides a romanticized view of an extraordinary female commander whose military power and patriotic devotion to the nation strengthens the appeal of her feminine identity to the readers, instead of effacing or compromising her

femininity through disguise as a man. Such depictions of women as warriors defending national security and appeasing political upheaval celebrate women's feminine subjectivities and surpass the narrative conventions of women cross-dressing as men and borrowing masculine social and political identities. However, these depictions also enable transformations of the heroines' identities from the heroic female knights-errant to that of women warriors whose subjectivities are reinscribed by the orthodox discourse of loyalty, martyrdom, and patriotic passions, displaying the boundaries and limitations of women's imagined military and political autonomy.

The above study of *A Tale of Vacuity* explores the representations of patriotic passions and female heroism in this *tanci* novel, and considers these textual depictions of female generals, ministers, and women warriors in the context of *tanci* novels' traditions of portraying women's heroic dedications and loyalty to the nation and their imagined military and political power. The text was composed shortly after the author's personal exile during the Taiping Rebellion and celebrates the legacy of male patriotic heroes such as Yue Fei and Wen Tianxiang, providing an example of rewriting women's personal pursuit of social and political subjectivities in the context of national crisis and survivance. Such nationalist passions found expression also in an 1899 *tanci* novel *Story of a Devoted Son* by Zhou Yingfang, who rewrote the legend of Yue Fei in the form of *tanci*. *A Tale of Vacuity*, preceding Zhou's *tanci*, adapts such well-chanted tales of national heroes by embedding them in the narrative frame. The rewriting of the Yue Fei legacy is mediated through a gendered perspective in Wang's *tanci*, suggesting women authors' power to construct a masculine mode of expression through historical commentary poems of nostalgia and regret for the loss of the nation.

One may surmise whether such depictions in Wang's *tanci* could be read in conjunction with the political crisis of the post-Taiping Rebellion Qing, and that whether mourning reflections of the past could be a means of grieving the polemical era in which the author and her projected readers lived as historical witnesses. Tales of women's collective heroism transform the existent legacy of Mulan by advocating for women's political aspirations through patriotic discourse, and endorsing the characters' military and political powers as nascent forms of feminine power. The novel's expression of intersecting themes of gender and nation, as well as personal and national identities, raises possibilities of envisioning a feminine patriotic citizenry through strategic mediations of intertextual resonances, historical rewriting, and blended storytelling. A related theme is women authors' depiction of military wisdom in plot arrangements. Hu Siao-chen has suggested that depictions of military plots and war scenes in *tanci* fiction very often display tendencies toward romanticization and embed sensual details. A relatively less studied aspect of women's military activism in *tanci* novels, however, is women's descriptions of martial wisdom and tactics, particularly in deploying and reconfiguring ancient and well-known military art and philosophy as described in classical or

canonical narratives. In *Dream, Image, Destiny*, during the reign of Emperor Taizong of the Song, a talented heroine Lin Xianyu 林纖玉 assists her father on the battlefield by emulating “the empty fort strategy” originated by the minister Zhuge Kongming 諸葛孔明 as told in popular stories about the Three Kingdom period. Using this tactic, Xianyu successfully makes the surrounding enemies give up an assault in fear of an ambush. This fictional scenario rewrites an example in a military romance into a tale of women’s participation in warfare, mobilized by their filial passions.

In *A Tale of Vacuity*, the plot is embedded with multiple examples of war tactics that are resonant with or slightly modified in comparison with classical cases of warfare. For example, when a rebelling prince Yingwang is planning to set the date for a political uprising against the emperor, a group of loyal court officials, short of military support, secretly spread the rumor among the people in the capital that General Wen Yulin, indignant against the tyrannous doings of Minister Niu and the Prince Yingwang, is leading a troop of a hundred thousand soldiers toward the capital and is determined to eliminate Yingwang’s forces. The word of Yulin approaching the capital city shocks Yingwang and his subordinates and causes them to halt the political coup, allowing the emperor to arrange an escape from the capital on the pretense of going hunting. The ingenuous rumor stratagem is similar to Sun Tzu’s tactic of *wuzhong shengyou* (creating something out of nothing), suggesting that there can never be too much deception in war. To undermine Minister Niu’s forces, an official applies the “beauty trap” to bribe one of Niu’s counselors, and successfully collects information about Niu’s plotted time of revolt. When Minister Niu launches a coup d’état to support the prince Yingwang as the new emperor, Niu orders his son, a provincial governor, to follow suit and rebel against the emperor. A scholar who is sent as an imperial envoy deploys the strategy of *fanjian ji* (反間計, let the enemy’s own spy sow discord in the enemy camp); the disloyal scholar causes the governor to reject his father’s command and sows discord among the minister’s family and allies. Other intricate tactics include 借刀殺人 (*jiedao sharen*, killing with a borrowed sword), 圍魏救趙 (*weiwei jiuzhao*, besiege Wei to rescue Zhao), and sometimes one tactic inlaid with another.

Whereas most military tactics described in the book endorse the loyal and faithful—and penalize the corrupted—occasionally certain tactics are applied against neutral or positive characters to set off their personality flaws or moral virtues. A courageous female commander named Zuo Jifen in Princess Minghua’s army falls into the trap of an opponent’s 激將法 (*jijiangfa*, goad somebody into action), and, ignoring the princess’s warning, is goaded into a hasty assault on the enemy; as a result, she suffers an ambush and is heavily wounded. The breathtaking expediency of the plot and the inlaid subplots about intelligence and combat in this novel display an exceptional panorama of wartime military stratagems. In comparison with previous *tanci* fiction

that center on the interplay of war and romance, *A Tale of Vacuity* offers a more sophisticated depiction of the vicarious experience of warfare, political crises, and elaborated intelligence ruses. The trope of 紅妝會戰 (*hongzhuang huizhan*) or “women who are outstanding in the art of war” in *tanci* novels by women deserves more study. One such text is Wang Oushang’s unstudied *tanci* *Tales of the Heroes*, which depicts a group of Tang dynasty officials and female military leaders fighting against tyrannous officials to protect the interests of the country. These works invite us to reconsider women’s appropriation of masculine bravery and chivalry as ways of gaining access to masculine domains of social and political affairs and enhancing women’s presence in public domains.

REVISIONING THE WOMEN WARRIORS

Hu Siao-chen, regarding the *tanci* *Pavilion of the Four Clouds* (author’s preface dated 1899), discusses the female author’s interest in warfare and military strategy, and suggests that *Pavilion of the Four Clouds* is one of the few women’s *tanci* that takes warfare as a serious topic, along with *Story of a Devoted Son* and *Pomegranate Flowers* (Hu, “War, Violence, and the Metaphor of Blood” 257–67). Hu points out that *Story of a Devoted Son* relies on folk narrative conventions to depict the war scenes, whereas the portrayal of war scenes in *Pomegranate Flowers* predominantly relies on supernatural powers (259–61, 267). Peng’s depiction of war, as revealed in her author’s preface to the work, possibly comes from her experiences of accompanying her husband at the frontier, and has some contextual relations with the late nineteenth-century national crisis. Building on Hu’s research, this chapter suggests that the representation of warfare in women’s *tanci* could be considered in a longer historical span as early as the late Ming. These *tanci* fall into three clusters based on the historical era in which the authors lived. The first group of works include the late Ming *tanci* *Jade Bracelets* and *Heaven Rains Flowers*. Second, a series of war-themed *tanci* works were composed during the Taiping Rebellion, including *A Tale of Vacuity*; *Dream, Image, Destiny*; and *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*. Third, after the Taiping Rebellion, several *tanci* works by women reflected on the theme of warfare and political chaos by projecting a feminine political utopia, as in *Pomegranate Flowers*, or by offering vivid and lifelike depictions of battle scenes, as in *The Pavilion of the Four Clouds* and *A Histoire of Women Heroes* (preface dated 1905). These later works demonstrate a connection with the social realities at a time of national crisis, and a relatively more open space for the heroines’ social mobility and political agency.

Depictions of female warriors at the battlefield provide a panorama of women’s military participation and heroic achievement. In *A Tale of Vacuity*, the hero Wen Shaoxia’s

fiancée Xiao Yunxian 蕭蘊仙 has joined his troops to avenge her father's death. Her opponent, knowing her engagement with Shaoxia, insults her intentionally and accuses her of attempting to seduce Shaoxia before their marriage.

Hearing his insult, the refined girl bites down on her silver-white teeth. Blush rises on her cheeks, and her rosy face turns color in rage. Crying out loud, she says, "You insolent one, stop spreading rumors!" In great indignation, she gains ten thousand *jin* of strength, and heaves her long spear swiftly at him. The defending officer Fengzhou barely had a chance to dodge when the brave heroine chases him with her silver spear, stabbing at him in a thousand ways. Fengzhou's body is entirely wrapped in the shade of the piercing spear. Not for long his throat is hit, and blood gushes out like a spring. As Fengzhou loses his life, the soil of the battlefield is washed in blood. (15:654)

In comparison with traditional depictions of cross-dressed heroines who became soldiers and military generals, the above passage highlights Yunxian's identity as a filial daughter and faithful maiden, whose passionate participation in war is the legitimate expression of filial love and moral honor. Between her betrothment and the formal marriage with Wen Shaoxia, Yunxian enjoys autonomy in displaying her martial arts skills as a filial daughter of her maternal family. Female military agency is well portrayed in the following scene of a youthful female general Huo Pinxiang bravely fighting the enemy: "She rides a steed with silver leopard skin and wind-chasing speed, and holds in hand her fire lance, a long pear blossom spear. When the thundering battle drums reverberate in the camp, the refined heroine shall display her valor and expertise" (15:655). As the enemy venture out to meet Pingxiang's troops,

He directly runs into the female general; ten thousands of daggers fly into his face. Barely had the two troops settled their soldiers and horses, when a female hero dashes forward. Holding her fire gun and spurring her steed, Huo Pingxiang comes forward to wage a war. She is met by Shang Wanchun the general in the mid-way. After barely ten rounds of fight, the refined girl can no longer hold her anger, and her fine cheeks turn red.

You, watch my sword!

Letting out a shout, she draws out the steel sword; which glistens with coldness as it flies towards the enemy. It strikes Wanchun off the horse; Pingxiang then throws out a rope to capture him. Truly remarkable, and irresistible, where her fire gun turns the guards fall. The Princess's army, seizing the chance, chases after them; all the heroic ones use their strength and prowess to their hearts' content. (15:655)

It should be noted that such depictions of militant women are evidently romanticized in *A Tale of Vacuity*; women's participation of war mostly occurs when they are maidens before marriage, and supervised by fathers or elder brothers. A close reading brings our attention to recurring themes that are refashioned from the fictional genre of military romance. As C. T. Hsia observes, the story elements of military romance include: "the persecution of the hero by his determined enemies," "the female warrior, the comic warrior, the companion heroes, magical weaponry, and the magical formations" (Hsia, *C. T. Hsia on Chinese Literature* 169). *A Tale of Vacuity* enacts the military romance convention strongly by depicting the political mishap of the hero Wen Yulin, who is dispatched to fight at the frontier, and then suffers blasphemy and persecution from lascivious ministers. More importantly, in comparison with the earlier *tanci* work *Jade Bracelets*, which relies on extravagant depictions of magic and alchemy to rationalize women's exceptional power in the battlefields, *A Tale of Vacuity* extends a panorama of women collectively participating in warfare and even governance of statecraft, suggesting a fresh political imagination of women's agency at a time of national crisis and social unrest in the late nineteenth century.

Although Chinese women's armed citizenry is often considered to be a modern concept, the early modern imagery of militant women has received extensive scholarly discussion. Peter Lorge observes that, although almost all imperial dynasts utilized war for state formation and maintenance, men and women both participated in war and political strife, and held eminent political, military, cultural, and economic power (Lorge 2). In popular literature, the often-seen "woman warrior" character, as Roland Altenburger observes, differs from the female *xia* or knight-errant, in that "the primary character type commonly subsumed under the woman warrior category is 女將 (*nüjiang*, woman general), a stock character of the military romance," and "has emerged in the narrative cycles about some military families," such as the tales about the Tang general Xue Rengui (薛仁贵, 614–683) and the Song general Yang Ye's military family clan, including a group of heroic women generals led by the female commander-in-chief She Saihua (Altenburger 46). These women generals' engagements in warfare are often considered as righteous courses of action, for they often combat to "defend the empire along with their husbands or fathers, or as widows replacing their male spouses after they have lost lives in battle" (46). Louise Edwards further observes that preeminent female generals in literary and historical narratives include Hua Mulan 花木蘭, Mu Guiying 穆桂英, Liang Hongyu 梁紅玉, Qin Liangyu 秦良玉, and Thirteenth Sister. During the Taiping Rebellion era, famous historical examples of this tradition include "the women of the Red Lantern Brigade and the female battalions of the Taiping forces who are recognized as successful intelligence gathering and fighting forces" (Edwards, "Women Warriors and Amazons of the Mid Qing Texts" 226). These literary and historical examples of women warriors serve as tales exemplifying "the virtues of patriotism

and loyalty to one's husband," Edwards argues (227). However, Edwards notes that the role of the woman warrior also embodies contradictory authorial imaginations of this character and the multifarious function of this role in "the patriarchal sexual ideology of mid Qing China" (228). Because of her military prowess and strength, the woman warrior is at once threatening to the paternal social and familial power, and instrumental in reinforcing the prevailing Confucian social and moral system (228). From Princess Minghua to the filial Xiao Yunxian and the fearless Huo Pingxiang, militant women in *tanci* novels embody these heroines' disruptive potentials, as well as the authors' progressive visions of their time. These depictions of women warriors in *tanci* fiction, rather than understating feminine attractiveness, intensify the characters' feminine beauty in military attire. This fictional outlay of militant women further invites a connoisseurship of unconventional or exceptional femininities. These characters manifestly differ from conventional disguised heroines who denounce their sexual identities and perform inverted gendered roles.

Images of militant women expand and transform the tradition of cross-dressing in *A Tale of Vacuity*. Tong Lijun proposes that *A Tale of Vacuity* displays the marriage of two diverse narrative elements in *tanci* fiction, that is, 英雄傳奇 (*yingxiong chuanqi*, romance of heroic characters), and themes of 家族世情 (*jiazu shiqing*, family and social mores). Tong argues that the text builds on its ambitious narrative structure by including radiant depictions of grand battle scenes, as well as complicated military stratagem and maneuvers, and states that it surpasses many similar *tanci* works by women. In the end, the disguised Zixiang passes away in her male robe by declining food for three days. Before death, she pleads with the emperor to invalidate her former engagement to Wen Shaolin. Tong observes that such an ending opens up a new narrative space for the narrative tradition of women's *tanci* (Tong, "Breaking the Narrative Convention" 286). Earlier *tanci* heroines could delay or avoid their refeminization with the assistance of heavenly agents or magical power. In this *tanci*, the story maintains a mythical structure by suggesting that the heroine is a descendent from heaven, and shall return to the immortal realm in the end. The deployment of fantastic elements is much less in comparison with earlier *tanci*. The heroine succeeds by entirely denouncing the probability of her refeminization, and even receives social and political endorsement as a man. Not only was she granted a burial as a prime minister, but she was allowed to be buried with Zixiang's "wife" Yang Zhenzhen 楊珍珍 in the mock union. A royal descendent pays tribute to her at the funeral; her adopted son is allowed to inherit the family title of her clan. This closure of the novel eschewed the possibilities of marriage and opted for death as the culminating event of Zixiang's life. Whereas the outcome of female characters in returning to marriage or death (by illness or suicide) is common in *tanci*, Zixiang's death and entombment as a "man" is a more determined rejection of the marriage institution and the possibilities of the heroine's refeminization.

SILHOUETTE OF A FEMALE SCHOLAR

As the author insists, the story is purely fictional; the text projects an ideal of a social and political order of the world that is established upon values of loyalty, justice, and benevolence. The phrase Zixu was initially borrowed from a poem by the famous Sima Xiangru (司馬相如, 179–118 BCE) to illustrate the futility of earthly strife and pursuits. A younger brother Wang Zuxin 汪祖馨 praises Wang Oushang's writing as a significant work in women's literature:

In the past Ban Zhao took on the task of continuing writing *Book of Han*,
 Over time, she accomplished the mission of her brother Ban Gu.
 Yet she did not venture on her own writings and make inventions,
 Or continue to pursue lofty aspirations and reach the achievement of Sima Xiangru's
Rhapsody of Sir Vacuous.
 Only the female scholar of my family
 Could compose a work and be considered a female Xiangru!
 In future years of her life this work shall be printed,
 Readers shall clamor to buy her book and raise the price of paper! (2)

As displayed in this poem, Wang Oushang's talent is considered as an exemplar of women's writing, and could even surpass the ancient female historian Bao Zhao in creativity and stylistic innovation. One of her nephews Ruizeng 瑞曾 observes that Oushang, in her widowhood, took up the task of mentoring her nephews in the family. Her talent even surpasses other reputed women writers: "Even though works by talented women like Zuo Fen (左棻, third century) and Bao Linghui (鮑令暉, fifth century) are well circulated, readers still praise the female scholar of our house most" (Wang Oushang, "Prefaces and Commentaries" 3–4). Not only did these male readers admire Wang Oushang's literary talent and achievement, a younger cousin even went so far as to address her as a female master (女宗, *nüzong*) with a status equivalent to that of a Confucian scholar, saying that "it is more appropriate to admire this female master as a Confucian master, every day I read this grand work several times" (5). Wang Xiyuan (王錫元, 1824–1911) compares Wang's *tanci* to 廿一史彈詞 (*Nian yi shi tanci*, *Tanci* of the Twenty-One Dynasties), the work of Yang Sheng'an (楊升庵, 1488–1559), and validates its significant position in literary history: "Even though it is said that women in the inner chambers could not easily become famous, they still deserve a place in the field of literature. She could indeed be a rival for legendary poetesses like Xie Daoyun and the talented wife of Liu Zhen" (5). These paratextual references reflect literati scholars' endorsement of the female author's achievement and talent, and they focus on illustrating Wang Oushang as part of a historical tradition of learned women writers.

Wang Oushang's efforts to innovate the *tanci* genre receive endorsement from her own male relatives in the family. In a preface to *A Tale of Vacuity*, Wang Zushou 汪祖綬, an elder cousin, compares Wang Oushang's text with previous *tanci* works such as *Heaven Rains Flowers* and *Destiny of Rebirth*, and considers it as a continuation of a narration tradition of women-authored *tanci*. As Wang Oushang noted, "The selection of diction and choice of subject are all meticulous and well-ordered, without a trace of shallowness, carelessness, or repetition. When it comes to depictions of sadness and joy, separation and reunion, the book is so riveting and heartrending that readers would not suspect the events as fictitious, but rather take them as real occurrences" (Wang Oushang, "Prefaces and Commentaries" 1). The literary and artistic achievement of *A Tale of Vacuity* received endorsement widely from other male relatives of the author's family, including her brothers and nephews, and from a famous local scholar and longtime family friend named Wang Xiyuan (王錫元, 1824–1911). The endorsement of Wang Oushang's work by these male family members and friends, as displayed in their prefaces and congratulatory poems, centers on the stylistic achievement of Wang Oushang's writing.

Outside this community of family relatives and friends, Wang Oushang's *tanci* even attracted the attention of Li Boyuan (李伯元, 1867–1906), who published the chapter titles of *A Tale of Vacuity* in his edited journal 世界繁華報 (*Shijie fanhua bao*, *World Vanity Fair*) on October 5–7, 1901, and recurrently promoted the book in the journal. Different from the male readers in Oushang's family circle, Li Boyuan's reading and reception of Wang Oushang's work reflects a late Qing literati scholar's activist approach to traditional women's writings. Li himself was a *tanci* author, and was devoted to exploring the educational potentials of *tanci* narratives for women and younger readers when the nation was at the threshold of modernity. As early as 1887, Li published portions of the *tanci* *Phoenix Flying Together* by Cheng Huiying in the journal *World Vanity Fair*. His works 庚子國變彈詞 (*Gengzi guobian tanci*, *Tanci On the National Crisis in the Year of Gengzi*, 1902) and 醒世緣彈詞 (*Xingshiyuan tanci*, *A Tanci to Awaken the Society*) broke through the narrative conventions of love and romance, and depicted sociopolitical conflicts of the time, or transformations of old social customs and abolishment of superstition.

Although it is difficult to trace the reception of Wang Oushang's work among female readers, a five-character congratulatory poem by Chen Suxin nüshi 陳素心女史 is included in the paratexts of Wang Oushang's work. Depicting herself as an elderly female reader and writer who hasn't discovered refined writings for long, Chen is overjoyed to read this work by Wang Oushang. She applauds Wang's writing mores and her eminence in the history of women's writings, insisting that the text "advocates literary learning following the example of the reputed Cao Dagu, and depicts women's militant practices like that of the Mother of Gao Yang, a famous general" (Wang

Oushang, “Prefaces and Commentaries” 6). She endorses the book for its educational potential as “a source to counter chaos and unrest, and pass along lessons and knowledges to later generations” (6). And she states, “It deserves to be considered as a classic, one of perpetual value in the inner chambers” (6). In the end, she even asks in an ironic tone, “Shouldn’t so-called scholars themselves, also concede their inferiority to Oushang’s talent?” (6). This ending line casts a quite bold mockery against literati scholars and reiterates women’s writerly authority. Her commenting poem articulates women authors’ writing ethics in reinforcing personal moral principles, and she consciously distinguishes Wang Oushang’s work from popular *chuanqi* tales that are often criticized for shallow preoccupations with love and romance. In short, Chen endeavors to reclaim a status of eminence and canonicity for female authors like Wang Oushang by suggesting this work be read as a classic text of women’s instructions. This peer author and female friend’s endorsement evidently bespeaks a gendered divergence from male-authored prefaces and poems. Rather than transcending the gendered divide between the inner and outer spaces, Chen’s poem states the inner chambers as a space that women authors could reclaim as their own, while also offering a glimpse of a community of rising talented women authors of the time, including herself.

Grace Fong, in her study on paratextual materials in women’s poetry collections, considers that such collections could be considered as “life/history writing” produced through the dialectics between the texts (the anthologized poetic works) and the paratexts (that is, the framing narrative devices written by the author or others) (Fong, “The Life and Afterlife of Ling Zhiyuan” 127). Fong rightly argues that paratexts in women’s anthologies written by those other than the authors provide a figurative “threshold” into the “inner quarters” of the women’s poetry collections (131). These paratexts provided readers with ways of imagining the author, her self-representations, her family and social networks, as well as her impact on the literary community of her time. Whereas Fong’s study centers on interpreting late imperial women’s poetry as “interior history” or “life history/writings,” as well as writings of other genres contained in women’s poetry collections, similar studies on paratextual materials in women’s *tanci* novels still await more scholarly attention. Paratextual content of a written *tanci*, as displayed in *A Tale of Vacuity* and many other examples, usually contains authorial insertions, chapter titles in rhymed couplets, author’s preface, prefaces by her male and female family relatives, congratulatory remarks, or poems dedicated to the author by a female friend. In some illustrated editions of well-circulated *tanci*, such as *Heaven Rains Flowers*, *Destiny of Rebirth*, and *Blossoms from the Brush*, there are also illustrations of leading characters in the story, often with commenting poems on the personae of the heroes or heroines. In some hand-copied versions of *tanci*, such as the sole copy of *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* held at Shanghai City Library, there are even the copying person’s decorative drawings and spontaneous sketches. These rich and informative

paratextual materials deliver to the readers myriad perspectives on the author's personal life and style of writing, and fill in the gap of the readers' knowledge about the lesser known facets in the authors' lives.

In sum, paratextual materials in women writers' works could embody the authors' negotiation and appropriations of the canonical discourses of female exemplarity, thus opening the possibilities of "resignification, redeployment, subversive citations from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences within other [power/discourse] networks" (Butler 135; see also Judge and Hu 285). In the case of written *tanci* by women, prefatory spaces also encompass male and female readers' gendered interpretations of the book's social and moral value, its ideological tendencies, as well as the author's own ethical propensities. The voice of the female author often finds compelling articulation in the author's self-preface, as well as in authorial insertions at the beginning and end of individual chapters, prior to the narrative. In *A Tale of Vacuity*, the author claims that her book's purpose is "to portray the loyal and the treacherous, to demonstrate the triumph of benevolence and the demise of malice. When the lascivious ones are eliminated, peace is redeemed to the world. The rivers shall regain clearness, and the sea shall resume calmness. True felicity shall reveal itself" (64:3024). This stance of perceiving fiction as a means of revisioning the world of the author's time is also directly associated with the author's own experience of exile as a refugee of the Taiping Rebellion. "*Zixu*," or "vacuity," as illustrated in the title of the book, provides an imaginary writing space for the female author to depict social and political realities without being confined to the immediate historical circumstance within which she lives. This aesthetic fictitiousness in Wang's *tanci* differs from truth claims in historical novels, and yet allows the author much needed elasticity and autonomy in reflecting on warfare, heroism, and women's political participation in a fictional realm.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, *A Tale of Vacuity*, which was composed after Wang Oushang's family exile during the commotion of the Taiping Rebellion, describes the legacy of patriotic heroes, providing a precedent example of rewriting women's pursuit of social and political subjectivities in the context of national survivance. Examples of women writers resorting to narratives to express personal grievances as war victims or refugees could be found in earlier dynastic works. For example, the "*ci* poetry of grievance" by the reputed Song dynasty poet Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084–1155), as Liuxi Meng observes, articulated her sorrows of losing her husband and the bitter experiences in exile because of the turmoil of war (Meng 186). Ronald Egan offers nuanced distinctions of Li Qingzhao's personal life and her poetic construction of a female

persona as a displaced northerner far from her native land. Likewise, Li Xiaorong discusses the talented women authors or *guixiu* who suffered displacement at the time of war and chaos, particularly during the disruptive transition from the Ming to the Qing, the mid-nineteenth-century Taiping Rebellion, and other outbreaks during the time, such as the Nian Rebellion (1853–1868) (Li Xiaorong, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China* 117). Li incisively observes that during such times of social and political unrest, many women from war-torn areas lost their lives or were forced to leave the inner world of the *gui*. Against this social background, women authors who survived the war or political uprisings “left behind rich records of their agonizing experiences of war and violence” (117). Writing allowed women authors to take up the subject of war and chaos and record social realities. Their poems articulate “historical concerns and political sentiments . . . that were supposed to be in the male social sphere” (117). Such accounts of loss, exile, and trauma were often delivered from a distinctively gendered point of view, and differ from male authors’ accounts of wartime experiences.

This study of *A Tale of Vacuity* fills in the gap in current studies by exploring such gendered articulations of wartime experience in *tanci* fiction by women during the war-ridden decades of the nineteenth century, and invites a productive assessment of women’s literary depictions of their own experiences of dislocation and disempowerment, as well as offering imagined, alternative possibilities of women’s political intervention in the fictional realm. Similar to women poets before or during her time, Wang Oushang’s *tanci* rewrites the Yue Fei legacy through a female-oriented perspective, and transforms the tune of “Manjianghong,” a masculine mode of poetic expression, through historical commentary poems of nostalgia and regret for the loss of the nation. The story ironizes and rewrites the gender politics underlying Confucian nationalism by introducing a cross-dressed heroine as a Confucian “scholar-official” who serves the court as a national pillar, and a group of heroic women generals and soldiers whose military talents and powers play fundamental roles in terminating political chaos and securing the throne. Fictional heroines’ patriotic passions are strongly portrayed in the later text *Story of a Devoted Son* (1899) by Zhou Yingfang, in which the author rewrote the legend of Yue Fei in her *tanci*. In Wang’s *tanci*, the novel’s expression of personal and national identities beckons a feminine patriotic citizenry through intertextual resonances, historical rewriting, and blended storytelling. A topic for further exploration is women’s military activism and their martial wisdom and tactics, particularly based on ancient military art and philosophies in canonical narratives. For example, *A Tale of Vacuity* is embedded with multiple war tactics that are resonant to or modified in comparison with classical cases of warfare. The novel offers a sophisticated depiction of warfare and women’s appropriation of masculine chivalry as ways of accessing social affairs and new powers.

In addition, the significance of Wang's *tanci* invites reflections about the assiduous process through which the manuscript was preserved by her family during the polemical years of exile, war, and chaos throughout the twentieth century. Xiao Rongzhang, a fifth-generation maternal granddaughter of Wang, described that the manuscript, consisting of sixty-four volumes, had to be hidden in a large case and carried by the family on incessant exiles during the Anti-Japanese War. At the event of the Nanking Massacre in the winter of 1937, Xiao's maternal grandmother Ding Hanxiang 丁翰香 (Wang Oushang's maternal granddaughter) forsook most of her belongings and took the *tanci* manuscript as the family hastily fled by boat from the city of Yangzhou to north Jiangsu. Three years later, they returned to Yangzhou, only to find the family residence had been completely ransacked. During the second phase of China's Civil War (1945–1949), Xiao's father Xiao Liru 肖栗如 lost his job. Exasperating social conditions and enormous economic pressure forced the family to relocate from Yangzhou to Suzhou, and then to Bangbu 蚌埠. Although the family lived in meager conditions, Xiao's mother Shen Caixi 沈彩西 took care of the *tanci* manuscript and prevented it from suffering damage. During the early years of the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976), under the influence of the dominant radical leftist ideology, individuals and families in possession of classical fictional works were categorized as counterrevolutionaries and supporters of 封資修 (*fengzixiu*, feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism). With her grandmother and mother both deceased, Xiao managed to preserve the *tanci* manuscript despite the political pressures and risks at the time.

In 2009, Xiao Rongzhang donated the family's manuscript copy of this *tanci* to Huai'An City Museum after reading about several mainland Chinese scholars' endeavors to edit, research, and publish this *tanci* work. War, disarray, and family exile persisted through Wang Oushang's lifetime and interrupted the lives of her descendants throughout the twentieth century, hindering the work from being published and meeting a broad audience. And yet, the *tanci* work traveled with the family during times of unrest and disorder, and was used by generations of descendants as a source for family learning. The preservation of this manuscript exemplified and bolstered the kind of mother-daughter bond that was an important legacy in written *tanci* and early modern Chinese women's literary undertakings at large. It should be noted that a significant part of Wang Oushang's literary legacy still awaits exploration. An earlier *tanci* work by Wang, titled 群英傳 (*Qunying zhuan*, Legend of the Heroes), was circulated among readers during the author's lifetime, and was passed down to her eldest granddaughter Ding Yun 丁韻. A hand-copied version of this manuscript, containing twenty-eight *juan*, was housed at the Shanghai City Library. This important work was completed in the tumultuous year of 1861, just a year after Wang's family's exile to north Jiangsu to escape the invading Taiping Rebellion armies, and the subsequent death of her husband (see Wang Zeqiang, "Wang Oushang nianpu" 3035). Future research on *Qunying*

zhuan, one may surmise, could reveal a fuller vision of Wang's development as an author, her interactions with readers at the time, her experiments with writing wartime experiences, as well as the aesthetic potentials of the *tanci* narrative.

CONCLUSION

THROUGH EXPLORATIONS OF five voluminous and less studied works by reputed women authors of the Qing dynasty, this book has endeavored to develop current studies of women's written *tanci*, not by projecting a unified vision of a feminine literary tradition, but rather by inviting a situated, in-depth, and extended understanding of women's innovation of orthodox gender roles beyond the saturated plotline of cross-dressing in an enormous and significant corpus of early modern vernacular narratives. The chapters of this book contribute to current scholarship on Qing vernacular narratives, Chinese women's writings, and early modern fictional and cultural models of global protofeminist tendencies in the following aspects.

Chapter 1 on Zhu Suxian's *Linked Rings of Jade* reconsiders the mechanism of the Confucian family relations by focusing feminine authority and women's self-realization through the governance and reconfiguration of the domestic sphere. As Zhu's *tanci* illuminates, virtuous and resourceful heroines garner feminine authority by transforming their normative social and familial roles as discursive locations of subjective formation. Zhu's work exemplifies a textual model of women's self-configuration by reinforcing feminine moral and intellectual virtues within the norms of Confucian social and familial relations. Simultaneously, the text's innovative reclamation of vernacular literacy through embedded theatrical modes of expression in written *tanci* allows the author to reach blended popular audiences beyond gentry class readers and illustrates multifarious modes of moral expressions, as well as gender valences and dynamism.

Chapter 2 on Li Guiyu's *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*, a much-needed study of early modern Chinese women's homoeroticism, illustrates how female same-sex bonds reconfigure heterosexual and often polygamous marriage institutions, expand the models of

gender relations in Confucian family relations, and find means of moral self-justifications. Illustrations of women's homoerotic sentiments in *Destiny of Rebirth* and *Linked Rings of Jade* place more emphasis on the characters' spiritual love and almost always end with a return to orthodox conjugal relations. Li's text departs from this established convention in *tanci* in the following aspects. First, at the center of the plot is the same-sex relation between two women who are both disguised as men. This camouflage of both characters' sexualities allows the heroines the same opportunities to explore life possibilities as men's equals and maintain homoerotic bonds under the disguise of "brotherhood." Second, the text's illuminations of female same-sex love transform the early modern narrative model of *qing*, and mobilize dialectic interchanges of spiritual love and sexual desire in depicting women's homoerotic bonds. Manifest representations of enthused sexual attraction between the heroines throughout the novel display a relatively open-minded authorial stance in endorsing a women-oriented love that encompasses emotional intimacies and sexual attractions. Third, as Li's text illustrates, female same-sex bonds interpolate the polygamous system and trigger rivalry, tension, and dynamism between heteronormative relations and the enamored female characters, and thus create multiple and divergent models of triangulated love inside the marriage institution.

Jin Fangquan's *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*, discussed in chapter 3, and Wang Oushang's *A Tale of Vacuity*, discussed in chapter 5, are two important and only recently discovered *tanci* works by women authors who suffered during the Taiping Rebellion as war refugees. This polemical social and political milieu for both Jin and Wang induced personal loss, dislocation, and exile, and is recorded and depicted through richly diversified and deeply affecting illustrations through the two authors' individualistic lenses. Among currently discovered *tanci*, Jin's work affords precious and extensive personal accounts of the traumatic impact of the Taiping Rebellion on women of the Jiangnan regions. Jin, like the eminent authors Zheng Danruo and Wang Oushang, responded to this historical moment of national crisis and epochal trauma by way of direct authorial articulations of indignation and nostalgia, and through fictional reconfigurations of chastity as a form of moral exemplarity and political integrity. Specifically, Jin's exposition and development of *luanli* (chaos and exile) in *tanci* narrative indicate women authors' increased social participation in witnessing, recording, and portraying wartime political realities when they were forced to leave the inner quarters and personal sites of belonging, and to explore a new form of social and physical mobility as travelers of distant and unfamiliar terrains. Against this epochal scene of social change, Jin's story surpasses earlier works in her exploration of female exemplarity through redefinitions of orthodox values of virtue and talent, beauty and mandate. The story transforms the conventional discourses on female exemplars of chaste martyrs to narratives of women's strategic and self-determined moral choices and deeds. Further, the story reclaims feminine emotions or *qing* as part of the Confucian notion of humaneness

underlying an exemplary individual. This tactical arrangement in plot and characterization emphasizes the heroines' autonomous position in defining feminine emotionality, be it orthodox passions of chastity, filial piety, or private feelings of love. The text presents a syncretistic stance in its vision of an early modern feminine subject, channeled through rewritings of discourses about female talent, beauty, and mandate. The manifest inconsistency between Jin's cautionary authorial voice and the courageous expressions of her heroines perhaps indicates an ideological dilemma of reconciling personal ideals of exceptionalism with the discursive frames that shape and constitute the cultural and social views of feminine subjectivity.

Resonating with Jin Fangquan's articulation of talent as a constituent part of female exemplarity, Sun Deying's *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, as chapter 4 illustrates, expands the literati feminine norm in Ming Qing women's literature by portraying women's literary and artistic talent in vernacular cultural contexts. The author Sun Deying explicitly expresses a feminine consciousness in writing, stating that her story purportedly "expresses the ambition of women in the world" (1:1). In traditional Chinese thought, there are three ways to achieve immortality, including 立功 (*li gong*, action), 立德 (*li de*, virtue) and 立言 (*li yan*, words). Grace S. Fong observes that this notion of immortality was "in no way lost in educated women" in late imperial China (Fong, *Herself an Author* 4). Daria Berg points out that early modern Chinese literary women are at once writing subjects themselves and objects of literary constructions under the gazes of male scholars, editors, biographers, and the reading public, as well the gazes of other women authors (Berg, *Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China* 5). Women authors themselves, as Berg suggests, could also be agents using "the power of the eye and the power of the mind" to garner social and public visibility, and gain appreciation from like-minded audiences of their time (6). Such is the case with Sun Deying, whose borrowing, reinvention, and development of the literati feminine form in her *tanci* work invites new understandings and interpretations of feminine talent in the context of a rising vernacular literary and cultural trend. The text's diversified articulation of female talent is not only manifested through the disguised heroine Zhu Yunping's outstanding traits of gentility as a poet and writer, but also through a broad array of talented and intelligent minor heroines of more humble familial background and upbringing. Mirroring the heroine's talent and achievements, some minor female characters also strike the readers because of their education, learning, poetic sensibilities, or writing competencies. The text not only recounts a tale of a disguised heroine who succeeds in enacting a literatus identity through physical and literary transvestism, but also signals the increased prominence and recognition of women's learning in gentry class households and vernacular cultural situations alike.

The last chapter analyzes a recently reprinted *tanci* work *A Tale of Vacuity* by Wang Oushang. Reminiscent of personal experiences of the aforementioned Jin Fangquan,

Wang Oushang and her family migrated in multiple self-exiles to escape from the invading Taiping Rebellion armies. Whereas the plot of the book is situated in the previous Ming dynasty and does not directly illustrate the sociopolitical turbulences of her era, Wang's *tanci* possibly resorted to the narrative strategy of 借古諷今 (*jiegu fengjin*), that is, borrowing from the past to satirize the present, a tactic that is frequently utilized in other *tanci* works, such as *Heaven Rains Flowers* and *Pomegranate Flowers*. Resonant with the illustrations of heroines' political passions, loyalism, and the ideals of the nation-state in the earlier *tanci* *Heaven Rains Flowers*, Wang's work shifts and disrupts the conventional nation-state romance in the following aspects. First, the text's adaptation and rewriting of General Yue Fei's legacy in plot and inserted commemorative poems dedicated to Yue Fei, besides affirming the male protagonist's loyalty and patriotism, opens up a space for the authorial narrator's literary transvestism through appropriation and emulation of masculine, nationalist passions. Second, illustrations of courageous women warriors and generals—and female martial talent and stratagem at war—celebrate women's collective political participation and exceptional achievements in defending the nation on the battlefield. Among current *tanci* works, the novel's characterization of the disguised heroine Pei Zixiang as an eminent Confucian scholar-official also stands out among others, as Pei not only completely rejects refeminization, but also receives the court's ultimate recognition of "his" identity as an indispensable minister of the state and a pillar of the nation after "his" death. In a comparative light, Chen Duansheng's *Destiny of Rebirth*, halted at the moment of Lijun's pending death upon the exposure of her femininity, perhaps bespeaks the improbability of the adventurous heroine's reconciliation with social reality. Qiu Xinru's *Blossoms from the Brush* possibly indicates that the cross-dresser's refeminization, rather than being a mere reconciliation of social and familial pressures, could initiate a relocation of feminine authority in the domestic sphere. Wang Oushang's *A Tale of Vacuity*, unlike the above two works, presents the heroine's determined denial of social reconciliation in defense of her hard-earned identity as an autonomous individual.

Current readings of these understudied *tanci* texts lead to exciting directions for future research. Studies of women's *tanci* at present have transcended the theoretical frame of genre studies or of analyzing these narratives as gendered texts; however, there is still a notably large repertoire of *tanci* fictional works by Ming Qing women authors that await scholarly attention and rigorous research. Among women's *tanci* composed during the Qing, 三生石彈詞 (*Sansheng shi tanci*, *A Tanci of the Three-Life Stone*), authored by Huang Xiaoqin 黃小琴, and 赤玉蓮花 (*Chi yulianhua*, *A Scarlet Jade Lotus*), Wang Oushang's first *tanci*, 群英傳 (*Qunying zhuan*, *Legend of the Heroes*), and 醒愁篇 (*Xingchou pian*, *A Tanci to Awaken Myself from Sorrows*), authored by Shen Qinghua 沈清華, are texts of prominent research value. Quite a number of such texts exist only in hand-copied form or as sole copies, and are yet to be reprinted or

made available for researchers' access by their holding libraries. Ensuing studies of these texts will introduce today's readers to an immense collection of feminine literary productions, and facilitate a truly situated and in-depth understanding of the formation and evolution of women's discursive horizons in the transforming cultural environment of late imperial China. Continuous and extended research on Ming Qing women's *tanci* works is beneficial in furthering historicized and comparative scrutinization of the complex definitions of authorship, women's self-representation, the connections of *tanci* writers to female writers of other genres, and their possible social networks of negotiations, exchanges, and support. Melissa E. Sanchez, in reviewing scholarship on writing gender and class in early modern England, rightly observes that feminist, new historicist, and cultural materialist critics have insisted that "literary texts emerge in dialogue with the gendered, political, social, and material structures of their historical moment" (Sanchez 533). Likewise, in the Ming Qing contexts, texts that were considered as "noncanonical," such as *tanci* narratives, refract the interchange and interconnections of popular creativity and literary inventions, and are indispensable constituents of the early modern literary and cultural landscape. Reading and analyzing these rare and important writings by women entails not only studying them as objects of inquiry, but also deriving critical methods and methodologies from them, and understanding these sources as windows to new insights into gendered writing, popular cultures, and the formation of diverse trends of vernacular literature.

Besides, quite a few *tanci* works, such as the late Ming work *Jade Bracelets* and the nineteenth-century *tanci* novel *Brocade Flowers*, provide profuse depictions of foreign princesses with magical powers, military stratagem, and diplomatic talents. Several *tanci* novels depict exotic heroines from the kingdoms of Liao, Jin, the Huns, the West Rong, the West Fan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Luzon, as well as from fictional nations. These heroines facilitate rich dynastic imaginaries of geographical, cultural, and political others, and portray a complex and broad spectrum of racialized femininity that was appropriated or displaced for the expression of Confucian virtues or nationalist passions. Tales such as *Jade Bracelets* and *珍珠旗* (*Zhenzhu qi*, The Pearl Flag) portray foreign princesses as heroic characters with magical powers whose dedication to war, espionage, and military intelligence could play a fundamental role in imperial conquest or defense against invasions. However, a significant number of other *tanci* tales depict foreign princesses as virtuous, educated court women who find their bonds with the Chinese empire and through interracial marriages become effectual cross-cultural ambassadors. Many examples of foreign princesses could be found in later nineteenth-century *tanci* novels, such as *錦上花* (*Jinshanghua*, Flowers on the Brocade), *桃柳爭春* (*Taoliu zhengchun*, Spring of Peach Blossoms and Willow Trees), and *賜笏樓* (*Cihu lou*, Pavilion of the Ivory Scepter). A few *tanci* novels depict characters from the Chinese empire who are "adopted" as princesses by foreign

countries. Later on in the stories, these heroines facilitate diplomatic exchanges, conduct espionage, or expedite the surrender of the other kingdom. 十粒金丹 (*Shili jindan*, Ten Grains of the Golden Elixir) and 梨花夢 (*Lihuameng*, *The Dream of Pear Blossoms*) depict adopted “foreign” princesses who are Chinese women and travel to distant lands. These adopted “foreign” princesses indicate the performativity of gendered and racial identities, and the characters’ border-crossing mobility and resourcefulness in seeking autonomy and survival. Such depictions of foreign princesses allow the authors to project nascent geopolitical imaginations about the native and the foreign, the nation-state and the adjacent kingdoms. Portrayals of foreign princesses allow the readers to reconceive the ideals of nation and citizenship through an ironized point of view, and sometimes even replace an imperialistic discourse of the Chinese empire with an overturned discourse of the nation and self. Tales of foreign princesses call attention to the convention of “marriage alliance” and illustrate the possibility of embodying the marriage regime with political impact. Interracial marriages of foreign princesses into the Chinese empire designate women as mobile and powerful agents in pacifying disputes between nations and fortifying intercultural connections.

A productive direction for future research is the representation of war, nation, and women’s gendered political consciousness in women’s *tanci* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Among the few new *tanci* works composed by women in the early twentieth century, the Nanjing-born author Zhang Laisun’s 杜鵑血 (*Dujuan xue*, *Blood of the Cuckoo Bird*, completed in 1938, published in 1944) is the latest work in the narrative tradition of women’s written *tanci*. According to a preface by a female cousin of the author, Zhang Laisun, whose artistic name is Maichou nüshi 埋愁女史, was born in Nanjing city, Jiangsu province. Zhang was widowed at an early age. After the Anti-Japanese War broke out, Zhang left her hometown, went to Anhui province, and passed away in Huaining county in 1938. Her son subsequently entrusted Zhang’s cousin Duanmu Wanlan 端木畹蘭 with this work. In 1944, the manuscript, after being edited by Du Mingtong 杜明通, came into print. The story in this *tanci* work takes place in the era of the Anti-Japanese War. It depicts the love relations between a patriotic writer Heng Jianming 恆劍鳴 and his cousin Yun Luhua 雲珺華 who is struggling in a calamitous marriage with a husband addicted to opium. The romance of the progressive Jianming and the traditional Luhua comes to a tragic end with Luhua’s accidental death; the grieving Jianming, under the influence of a progressive friend, forsakes the thought of suicide and devotes himself to the course of national rejuvenation. Tong Lijun observes that this work departs from the female-oriented traditional *tanci* novels because of its historical setting in the Anti-Japanese War period, a polemical era in which the author lived (Tong, “On the Status of *Blood of the Cuckoo Bird*” 73). Though the story could be considered as a tale of 哀情 (*aiqing*, tragic love) tradition, the *tanci*’s extraordinary historical setting emphasizes a greater epochal sentiment of

melancholy, loss, and exile in a war-ridden nation. Zhang's illustration of the characters' social and political consciousness receives endorsement from the critic Ye Shengtao, who, in his preface to the *tanci*, praises Zhang for "being able to do away with the styles of old *tanci*, and present the consciousness of her peers in this era" (Ye, quoted in Zhang Laisun, 1). In comparison with Zhang is the earlier Republican author Jiang Yingqing, whose *tanci* fiction and songs accentuate traditional heroines facing the precarious impact of modernization. Zhang's work, the latest female-authored Republican *tanci*, is of unique importance because of its historical setting of World War II and an ending suggestive of the protagonist's devotion to a nationalist cause.

As foreshadowed in the introduction of this book, further research could be conducted on the major corpus of *tanci* published under anonymous authorship or artistic names, by productively reflecting on authorship of *tanci* as a constructed concept. The vast majority of chantefable narratives were published with anonymous authorship or under artistic names, and resort to rich, textual self-reflections to imply possible feminine authorship and represent the female writing subject. As Alexis Easley in a study of women writers and Victorian print media, argues: "Anonymity is not just a form of self-repression but is also a response to the identity politics associated with popular authorship" (Easley 22). In *tanci*, anonymity in authorship could be related to educated authors' anxiety about risking fame and visibility when their works are published, and invites an engaged criticism of anonymity as alternative ways of self-expression. And to bring this dynastic genre to a global audience, more study needs to be conducted on translating *tanci* and translators' tactics in carrying over discursive differences, register shifts, and multiple voices. Translation of polyvocal texts allows researchers to expand cross-cultural understandings of women's innovations and aesthetic autonomy. More work needs to be done on translating paratexts, including prefaces, endorsements from male editors, female editors' interventions, poems by publishers or anonymous commentators on illustrated characters, and poems dedicated to the author by her family or female friends. There is a need to study the linguistic, cultural, and historical gaps in translating theoretically embedded notions such as *guojia* (nation) and the early modern notion of "nation-state," *yingxiong* (hero) and gendered ideal of heroism, and *jinguo* (women) and its implications in dynastic *tanci* works and fin-de-siècle protofeminist *tanci* tales. The fissures between the original and the translations offer readers a productive encounter with the discursive implications in these complex terms, and remind us to take a theoretical stance in assessing the texts' historical ambiguities.

This study, finally, invites continuous exploration of women's agency as writers, editors, and readers of *tanci* tales, and of the complex relations between orality, textuality, and vernacular literacy. As discussed in chapter 1 and other parts of this book, in the Ming Qing period when the notion of literacy was defined by the Confucian ideological discourses, the rise of vernacular literacy in *tanci* texts and performance-based

narratives allowed readers of low levels of education and humble social status to partake in the reading and appreciation of literature. *Tanci* texts by women, this book argues, is an important medium and emblem for the development of early modern vernacular literacy. The discursive notion of vernacular literacy in the early modern women's *tanci* entails rich possibilities of reproducing and redefining the objects and methods of writing beyond the Confucian canonical systems and processes. By relegating the female author to the status of a storyteller, the chantefable rhetoric in *tanci* tales grants the female authorial narrator a position of authority and speaking power. The vernacular mode underlying *tanci* stories yields productive ruptures and possibilities of gendered self-representations, bodily valences, and dynamic performances of sexual roles. *Linked Rings of Jade* illustrates the prominence of vernacular literacy by recuperating theatricality in conventional expressions and characterization, envisioning readership as an epistemological position similar to that of audiences of vernacular drama. *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers*'s audacious and melodramatic portrayals of female same-sex intimacies and triangulated love bespoke women's vernacular imaginations of sexuality within the apparatus of the Confucian social and familial hierarchies. *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* illustrates female exemplarity as a vernacular discursive frame that enables women's appropriation and refashioning of orthodox moral values as means of self-affirmation and self-realization. *Affinity of the Golden Fish* presents a vernacular imagination of female talent, and constructs a feminine subject in relation with, but different from, the literati feminine subject in mainstream literature. Wang Oushang's demonstrations of women's political activism and loyalism to the nation in *A Tale of Vacuity* effectively verify *tanci* as a premium vernacular vehicle for disseminating progressive social and political incentives to the mass audiences. The ostensible discrepancy between 案頭彈詞 (*antou tanci*, written *tanci*) and 書場彈詞 (*shuchang tanci*, *tanci* performance), Qin Yanchun observes, invites scrutinization of the mutual influence of these two immense repertoires of narratives. The discursive intermediality of *tanci* tales allows the expressions of innovative artistic potentials in the interstices between written, sung, and spoken forms. The textuality of *tanci* narratives thus stands beyond the writing brush, and could be envisioned as a practice of art or event, or as an ongoing process of performance.

GLOSSARY

- aibao zilian* 愛好自憐
aiqing 哀情
Anbang zhi 安邦志
antou tanci 案頭彈詞
Baimin guo 白民國
Ban jieyu 班婕妤
Bangbu 蚌埠
bangzi 梆子
Bao Linghui 鮑令暉
Baochai 寶釵
baojuan 寶卷
Baoyu 寶玉
biao 表
bibing 避兵
biluan 避亂
Bicheng xianguan nü dizi 碧城仙館女弟子
bingtou lian 並頭蓮
Bishenghua 筆生花
Bixiao 碧霄
boming 薄命
boqing 薄情
boxing ren 薄倖人
buxiu 不朽
Cai Yan 蔡琰
cai 才
caiming xiangfang 才命相妨
“Cainü shuo” 才女說
caizi jiaren 才子佳人
Cao Cao 曹操
Cao Dagu 曹大家
Cao Gong 曹宮
Cao Xiangpu 曹湘蒲
Cao'E 曹娥
Chai Jingyi 柴靜儀
chaidai beyi 釵黛合一
changci 唱詞
Chen Chousong 陳儔松
Chen Duansheng 陳端生
Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀
Chen Jingmai 陳景邁
Chen Miaochang 陳妙常
Chen Suxin nüshi 陳素心女史
Chen Wenshu 陳文述
Chen Xiyou 陳希友
Chen Yunlian 陳蘊蓮
Chen Zhaolun 陳兆崙
Cheng Huiying 程蕙英
Cheng Wang 成王
Cheng Zhanlu 程瞻蘆
chenqing shu 陳情書
Chi yu lianhua 赤玉蓮花
chou 愁
chou 醜
Chu Renhuo 褚人穫

- Chu Tinghui 楚廷輝
chuan xiwen 串戲文
chuanqi 傳奇
Cihu lou 賜笏樓
cixu 雌婿
cuan shizi 攢十字
 Cui Lanjun 崔蘭君
 Cui Wenqin 崔文欽
 Cui Ziyong 崔子瑛
 Daiyu 黛玉
 Dao Fang 道房
 Daoguang 道光
 Daowang shi 悼亡詩
Dashi 大詩
Daya 大雅
dayi 大義
de 德
dianjiangchun 點絳脣
 Diao Chan 貂蟬
 Ding Hanxiang 丁翰香
 Ding Ling 丁玲
 Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢
Dingguo zhi 定國志
 Dong Bai 董白
Dong shiyuan 董十媛
 Dong Shuangsheng 董雙城
 “Dongxiange” 洞仙歌
 Du Liniang 杜麗娘
 Du Mingtong 杜明通
du wei nüren e de 妒為女人惡德
 Duanmu Wanlan 端木畹蘭
dufu 妒婦
dui shi 對食
duoqing 多情
 E’Hu Yishi 鵝湖逸史
 E’Huang 娥皇
 “Ernü tongsi” 二女同死
Ernü yingxiongzhuan 兒女英雄傳
Ersbi shiji nüjie wenmingdeng tanci
 二十世紀女界文明燈彈詞
Eryan mu 二言目
Faguo nüyingxiong tanci 法國女英雄彈詞
 Fan Ye 范曄
fanbang 番邦
 Fanguan 芳官
fanjian ji 反間計
 Feilong 飛龍
feiqiong 飛瓊
 Feng Guifen 馮桂芬
 Feng Junwen 馮俊文
 Feng Ruojin 封若金
 Feng Xianzhu 馮仙珠
 Feng Yunluan 馮雲窩
 Feng Ziyong 馮紫英
Fengshenbang 封神榜
Fengshuangfei 鳳雙飛
Fengyi ting 鳳儀亭
fengzixiu 封資修
 Fu Jurong 傅菊蓉
fufu zhi dao 夫婦之道
funü jiaoke shu 婦女教科書
fuzhi 婦職
gaijia 改嫁
ganshi 感事
Ganze yao 甘澤謠
 Gaotang fu 高唐賦
 Gaotang 高唐
 Gaozu 唐高祖
 Ge Hong 葛洪
 Geng Yaoguang 耿瑤光
 Geng Yunpei 耿雲佩
Gengzi guobian tanci 庚子國變彈詞
 Guanglingzi 廣靈子
 Guangxin 廣信
guanshu pi 觀書癖
guaqing 寡情

- guci* 鼓詞
 Gui Bifang 桂碧芳
gui chou 癸醜
 Gui Hengchao 桂恆超
 Gui Hengkui 桂恆魁
 Gui Shunying 桂舜瑛
 Gui Youguang 歸有光
Guifan 閩範
Guifu 規夫
guiqing 閩情
guishi 閩師
Guixiao bu 閩孝部
guiyuan 桂圓
 Guizhong nü boshi 閩中女博士
 “Guo Lingding Yang” 過伶仃洋
guojia 國家
 Guo Zimei 郭子美
hanfu 悍婦
 Hanhuang 寒簧
 Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清
Hanwu gushi 漢武故事
 He Danyan 何淡煙
 He Peizhu 何佩珠
 He Shuangqing 賀雙卿
 Heichi guo 黑齒國
hen 恨
 Henan 河南
 Heng Binyu 恆斌玉
 Heng Jianming 恆劍鳴
 Heng Qiongqing 恆瓊卿
 Heng'e 姮娥
 Hengxian 姮仙
 Heshha 鶴沙
Hongjiaoji 紅蕉集
Hongloumeng 紅樓夢
hongzhuang huizhan 紅妝會戰
 Hou Zhi 侯芝
 Hu Songnian 胡松年
 Hu Yuexian 胡月仙
 Hua Qinshan 華琴珊
huadan 花旦
 Huaining 懷寧
 Huang Caixian 黃彩仙
 Huang Daozhou 黃道週
 Huang Jurui 黃鞠瑞
 Huang Xiaoqin 黃小琴
 Huangfu Feilong 皇甫飛龍
 Huangfu Zhanghua 皇甫長華
huangliang yimeng 黃梁一夢
 Huanhua shishe 浣花詩社
Huanle ling 歡樂令
 Huanmei nüshi 浣梅女史
Huayuehen 花月痕
hui 回
 Huichu 悔初
 Huiniang 慧娘
Huizhenji 繪真記
 Huo Pinxiang 霍蘋香
huo 禍
 Ji Kang 嵇康
 Jia Yi 賈誼
jiaguo tonggou 家國同構
jiaguo 家國
Jiang Cheng 江城
 Jiang Dehua 姜德華
 Jiang Qinxian 蔣琴仙
 Jiang Tingfang 蔣廷芳
 Jiang Wencai 姜文彩
 Jiang Yingqing 姜映清
Jiang'ershui 江兒水
jiangsbilei tanci 講史類彈詞
jianqiang 箭腔
Jianyuan shiwen gao 繭園詩文稿
 “Jiaoda zuima” 焦大醉罵
Jiaonü yigui 教女遺規
jiaose 腳色

- jiaoweiqin* 焦尾琴
Jiaoyuan shishe 蕉園詩社
Jiaqing 嘉慶
jiazu shiqing 家族世情
jie 劫
jie 節
jiedao sharen 借刀殺人
jijiangfa 激將法
Jin Buyun 金步雲
Jin Fangquan 金芳荃
Jin Xiaowei 金孝維
Jin Yingdi 金穎第
jingbiao 旌表
Jingguo Furen 靖國夫人
Jinghuayuan 鏡花緣
Jinguijie 金閨傑
jingguo yingxiong 巾幗英雄
jingguo 巾幗
Jingweishi 精衛石
Jingzhongzhuan 精忠傳
jingqiang 京腔
jinlong chuan 金龍釧
Jinqiangua 金錢卦
Jinshanghua 錦上花
Jinshi ruxin tangpu 金氏如心堂譜
Jinyuyuan 金魚緣
jiuling 酒令
juanshen jiu fu 捐身救父
Judaoren 橘道人
kongcheng ji 空城計
 “Ku Juannü” 哭娟女
Lan Dingyuan 藍鼎元
Lansheng shichao 蘭省詩鈔
laodan 老旦
Li Boyuan 李伯元
li de 立德
li gong 立功
Li Guiyu 李桂玉
Li Junyu 鄺君玉
Li Shangyin 李商隱
Li Wanfang 李晚芳
Li Wenhua 李文華
li yan 立言
Li Yin 李因
Li Yu'e 李玉娥
Li Yuan 李源
Li Yunsu 李雲素
Li Yunzhen 李韻珍
li 禮
Liang Desheng 梁德繩
Liang Hongzhi 梁紅芝
Liang Qi 梁琪
Liang Qi 梁錡
Liang Qichao 梁啟超
Liang Tingxian 梁廷顯
Liang Ziwen 梁子文
Lianhuameng 蓮花夢
Lianxiangban 憐香伴
Lianxiang 憐香
 “Lianxiang” 蓮香
Lianyan 簾燕
lianyong 聯詠
lianzi 蓮子
Liaodu yuan 療妒緣
lie 烈
Lienü zhuan 列女傳
Liubumeng 榴花夢
Lin Jingren 林敬紉
Lin Lanxiang 林蘭香
Lin Xianyu 林纖玉
Lin Yining 林以寧
Lingyun xianzi 凌雲仙子
Linjiangxian 臨江仙
Liqing 麗卿
Lisao 離騷
Liu Bei 劉備
Liu Chen 劉晨
Liu Jin 劉瑾

- Liu Kuibi 劉奎璧
 Liu Lanqing 劉蘭卿
 Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅
 Liu Xiangqing 柳湘卿
 Liu Yiqing 劉義慶
 Liu Yuncui 劉雲翠
Liuhuameng 榴花夢
liuli shuxie 流離書寫
 Lixian 麗仙
 Lixiang jiunü 荔鄉九女
 Long Yayu 龍雅玉
 Lu Bu 呂布
 Lu Dongbin 呂洞賓
 Lu Xinwu 呂新吾
luanli 亂離
luanshi 鸞詩
 Luo Chuanbi 羅傳璧
 Luo Jinkui 羅錦魁
 Luo Linxiang 駱林香
 Luo Qilan 駱綺蘭
 Luo Xianzhi 羅仙芝
 Luo Yufeng 羅毓峰
 Luo Yuqi 羅毓奇
Luofu meng 羅浮夢
Luomei shi 落梅詩
 Luyi 菴漪
 Ma Jiefu 馬介甫
 Magu 麻姑
 Maichou nüshi 埋愁女史
 “Manjianghong” 滿江紅
mangci 盲詞
 Mei Lanxue 梅蘭雪
 Mei Meixian 梅媚仙
 Meng Lijun 孟麗君
Mengyingyuan 夢影緣
ming 命
 Minghua 明華
Mingzhai xiaoshi 明齋小識
 Mu Suhui 穆素徽
Mudan ting 牡丹亭
 “Mudan ting tici” 牡丹亭題詞
mujiao 母教
naihe 奈何
Nan Mengmu jiaobe sanqian
 男孟母教合三遷
nei-wai 內外
ni tanci 擬彈詞
Nian yi shi tanci 廿一史彈詞
ningwei yusui, buwei waquan
 寧為玉碎，不為瓦全
 Niu Feng 牛封
 Niu Ruyuan 鈕如媛
 Nongyu 弄玉
nü tanci 女彈詞
Nü Xiaojing 女孝經
 “Nü'er bei” 女兒悲
Nü'erjing 女兒經
nüjiang 女將
Nüjiao jingzhuantongzuan 女教經傳通纂
nüjiao 女教
nüshi 女史
nü tanci 女彈詞
nüxi 女戲
nüxia 女俠
nü xiansheng 女先生
nüxing zhanluan jishi shi 女性戰亂紀實詩
Nüxue yanxing lu 女學言行錄
Nüxue 女學
 Nüying 女英
nüzhong zhishi 女中智士
nüzong 女宗
 Ouguan 藕官
 Pan Minglan 潘茗蘭
 Pan Mingxian 潘茗仙
 Pei Zixiang 裴子湘
 Peixiang nüshi 佩香女史
 Peng Jingjuan 彭靚娟
penhong zheng 噴紅症

- pihuang* 皮簧
Pinghu 平湖
Pingyang Gongzhu 平陽公主
Pipa ji 琵琶記
pofu 潑婦
qi xiongdi 契兄弟
qi zhiben yu zhuangtai, shi yiguan yu langmiao
 棄脂粉與妝臺，拾衣冠與廊廟
Qian Caichun 錢彩春
Qian Fenglun 錢鳳綸
Qian Meiyu 錢梅友
Qian Shurong 錢淑容
Qianquan si 繾繾司
Qiao Huirong 喬慧容
Qiao Huizhi 喬慧芝
Qiaoying 喬影
Qiaoying 喬影
Qihui 琦徽
Qin Hui 秦檜
Qin Meng'e 秦夢娥
Qing guixiu yiwen lue 清閨秀藝文略
qing 情
qinggen 情根
Qingloumeng 青樓夢
qingmo 情魔
Qingnü 青女
Qingping Gongzhu 清平公主
Qingxi shishe 清溪詩社
Qiongxiao 瓊霄
Qiu Jin 秋瑾
Qiu Xinru 邱心如
Qiufang yin 秋舫吟
Qixialing Yue Wumuwang 棲霞嶺岳武穆王
qixian qin 七弦琴
qizhen 奇貞
Qizhenzhuang 奇貞傳
Quan Huiniang 全慧娘
Quan Renlan 全劬蘭
Quanqing cichao 全清詞鈔
Quanshan shu 勸善書
Qunfang dongzhu 群芳洞主
Qunfang xianjie 群芳仙界
Qunying zhuang 群英傳
Rao Ringxuan 饒廷選
Ren Qiyun 任啟運
ren zi 壬子
Renxiu guan ci 纫秋館詞
Ruan Ji 阮籍
Ruan Zhao 阮肇
Ruiguan 蕊官
Ruizeng 瑞曾
 “Rumeng ling” 如夢令
ruzhu 入贅
sangluan 喪亂
Sansheng shi tanci 三生石彈詞
sansheng shi 三生石
Sanxiao yinyuan 三笑姻緣
se 色
shanshu 善書
Shan Tao 山濤
Shang Jinglan 商景蘭
Shangshu 尚書
Shen Baozhen 沈葆楨
Shen Caixi 沈彩西
Shen Qinghua 沈清華
Shen Yixiu 沈宜修
sheng 聲
shengnü 聖女
Shengping Gongzhu 昇平公主
shengsheng 生生
shengsi jiao 生死交
shiji 侍疾
Shijie fanhua bao 世界繁華報
Shijincai 拾金釵
Shijing 詩經
Shili jindan 十粒金丹
Shishuo xinyu 世說新語
shiziju 十字句

- shiziwen* 十字文
shuangmei yifu 雙美一夫
Shuangxianhui 雙仙會
Shuangyu pei 雙魚珮
shuchang 書場
shuchang tanci 書場彈詞
 Shunzhen 順珍
shuyu nü tanci 書寓女彈詞
sijian 死諫
 Sima Xiangru 司馬相如
siqing sizhi 私情私志
Siyunting 四雲亭
 Song Yu 宋玉
 Song Zi'An 宋子安
 Su San 蘇三
 Su Yingxue 蘇映雪
 Su Zixiu 蘇子秀
Sui Tang yanyi 隋唐演義
Suiyuan quanji 隨園全集
 Sujie 素姊
 Sun Deying 孫德英
 Sun Lingyun 孫凌云
 Suxiao 素霄
suye 宿業
tanci yuanshi ti 彈詞原始體
Tanci 彈詞
 Tang Baozuo 唐保祚
 Tanhua Guan Yinyue Shanren
 曇花館吟月山人
 Tao Gu 陶穀
Taoliu zhengchun 桃柳爭春
 Tao Zhenhuai 陶貞懷
tao 套
 Ti Ying 緹縈
ti 悌
Tiantai 天台
tianxiang 天象
Tianyuhua 天雨花
 Tian Rucheng 田汝成
tibi shi 題壁詩
tiequan danshu 鐵券丹書
 Tongcheng 桐城
Tongxinzhi 同心樞
wai yinyuan 歪姻緣
waibang 外邦
 Wang Duan 汪端
 Wang Genjing 汪根敬
Wang Mengtang taishou shichao
 汪孟堂太守詩抄
 Wang Oushang 汪藕裳
 Wang Pei 王佩
 Wang Shi 王氏
 Wang Tingzuo 王廷佐
 Wang Wan 汪琬
 Wang Wei 王威
 Wang Wencai 王文彩
 Wang Xiangying 汪湘英
 Wang Xianxia 王仙霞
 Wang Xiyuan 王錫元
 Wang Yinhuai 王蔭槐
 Wang Yunren 汪雲任
 Wang Zumao 汪祖茂
 Wang Zushou 汪祖綬
 Wang Zuxin 汪祖馨
 Wanyun 畹雲
 Wei Yong'e 衛勇娥
 Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢
weiwei jiuzhao 圍魏救趙
wenci 文詞
 Wen Fangzi 文芳姿
 Wen Jiang 文姜
 Wen Shaoxia 文少霞
 Wen Tianxiang 文天祥
 Wen Xiaxian 文霞仙
 Wen Yingzhen 聞英貞
 Wen Yulin 文玉蓂
 Wen Yunzhen 聞雲貞
 Wen Zhenlin 文振蓂

- Wen Zhi'an 文志安
 Wen Zhongming 文仲明
 Weng Qiqian 翁起前
 Wu Bikai 鄔必凱
 Wu Guichen 吳規臣
 Wu Qi 吳琪
 Wu Xiao'e 吳小娥
 Wu Xiaolu 吳小嫻
 Wu Zao 吳藻
 Wunü yuan 五女緣
 Woyun nüshi 臥雲女史
wuzhong shengyou 無中生有
 Xiahou Shuhua 夏侯淑華
 Xiahou Shuxiu 夏侯淑秀
xian 賢
 Xiang Jin 項金
 Xiangfu 祥符
Xianü qunying shi 俠女群英史
 Xianxia 仙霞
 Xianzhen 仙貞
 Xiao Liru 肖栗如
 Xiao Rongzhang 肖鎔璋
 Xiao Yunxian 蕭蘊仙
xiaodan 小旦
xiaodiao 小調
xiaojian xiyao 削肩細腰
Xiaojing 孝經
xiaolie 孝烈
Xiaolin guangji 笑林廣記
 xiaosheng 小生
 Xiaoshi 蕭史
 Xiaoyi Wangfei 孝義王妃
xiaoyi zhongzhen 孝義忠貞
xibie 惜別
Xici zhuan 繫辭傳
 Xie Chunrong 謝春溶
 Xie Daoyun 謝道韞
 Xie Huixin 謝蕙心
 Xie Qingdao 謝清道
 Xie Suzhen 謝素珍
 Xie Xucai 謝絮才
 Xie Xuexian 謝雪仙
 Xie Yuhui 謝玉暉
Xilou ji 西樓記
xin bai 辛亥
Xingchou pian 醒愁篇
 “xingling xiangtou” 性靈相投
Xingshi yinyuan zhuan 醒世姻緣傳
Xingshiyuan tanci 醒世緣彈詞
 Xiong Peiyu 熊佩玉
Xiujian meng 袖箭盟
 Xiushui 秀水
Xiuxiang yulianhuan 繡像玉連環
 Xiyu 惜玉
 Xu Can 徐燦
 Xu Jin 許進
Xu Jinghuayuan 續鏡花緣
Xu Jinpingmei 續金瓶梅
 Xu Mengdan 徐檬丹
 Xu Quan 許權
 “Xu ying” 絮影
Xuanqiu ge shici gao 絢秋閣詩詞稿
 Xue Pan 薛蟠
 Xue Rengui 薛仁貴
 Xue Sujie 薛素姐
xundao 訓導
xunfu 巡撫
Xunqin ji 尋親記
xushiti tanci 敘事體彈詞
 Xuyi 盱眙
 Xuzhou 許州
 Yan Yingzhu 晏英珠
 Yang Chaodong 楊朝棟
 Yang Meijun 楊美君
 Yang Sheng'an 楊升庵
 Yang Xianzhen 楊仙貞
 Yang Yun 楊芸
 Yang Zhenzhen 楊珍珍

- Yanzhixue* 胭脂血
 Yao Er 姚二
Yaobua Xianshi 瑤花仙史
 Yaoyuelou zhuren 邀月樓主人
yazhi 雅志
 Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁
 Ye Wanwan 葉紈紈
 Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞
 Ye Xiaowan 葉小紈
 “Yezhong huaigu” 鄰中懷古
 Yi Yin 伊尹
Yijing 易經
yin-yang 陰陽
yinfu 淫婦
Yinghuan suoji 瀛寰瑣紀
Yingmei an yiyu 影梅庵憶語
Yingqi zhuan 英奇傳
 Yingwang 英王
yingxiong chuanqi 英雄傳奇
yingxiong 英雄
Yinjiu dusao tu 飲酒讀騷圖
Yinyun 氤氳
yixiang 異鄉
 Yiyun shuwu 亦芸書屋
 Yongping hou 永平侯
 Yongping Wang 永平王
You cilu shichao 有此廬詩鈔
youjia wushi 有家無室
 Yu Chenglai 俞承萊
 Yu mou furen shu 與某夫人書
 Yu Shuye 于叔夜
 Yu Xuanji 魚玄機
 Yu Zhengxie 俞正燮
 Yuan Dexiu 元德秀
 Yuan Jia 袁嘉
 Yuan Jiao 袁郊
 “Yuanlinhao” 園林好
 Yuan Shou 袁綬
Yuchuan yuan 玉鈞緣
 Yue Fei 岳飛
yuhua 慾化
Yulianbuan 玉連環
 Yun Luhua 雲瑤華
 Yun'er 雲兒
 Yunchang 雲昌
 Yunjian nüshi 雲間女史
 Yunü 玉女
 Yushan 玉山
 Yuting zhuren 兩亭主人
Yuxuancao tanci 娛萱草彈詞
Yuzan ji 玉簪記
Zaishengyuan 再生緣
Zaizaotian 再造天
zan shizi 攢十字
 “Zaosixing” 縹絲行
zengren yiyuan 贈人以言
zhan huaming er 占花名兒
 Zhang Feixiang 張飛香
 Zhang Jiangzhi 張絳枝
 Zhang Jinshu 章錦書
 Zhang Laisun 張萊蓀
 Zhang Neng 張能
 Zhang Pingping 張瓶瓶
 Zhang Rui 張瑞
 Zhang Tingbao 張廷保
 Zhang Xiang 張襄
 Zhao Huanxiang 趙浣香
 Zhao Shixiong 趙師雄
 Zhao Wopei 趙我佩
 Zhao Xiangxian 趙湘仙
 Zhao Xuzhai 趙勛齋
 Zhao Yuege 趙月哥
zhaozhui 招贅
 “Zhennü shuo” 貞女說
 Zheng Danruo 鄭澹若
 Zheng Guotai 鄭國泰
zhengdan 正旦
zhengsheng 正生

- zhenhun* 貞魂
Zhenjing Wangfei 貞靜王妃
zhenlie 貞烈
Zhenzhuqi 珍珠旗
zhi 志
zhibie 志節
Zhong Xinqing 鐘心青
zhongguo 中國
zhonghua 中華
zhonglie 忠烈
Zhongqing zhanlu dan 種情湛露丹
Zhongqing zhuàn 鍾情傳
zhongqing 鍾情
Zhongxiao Yinglie Nühou 忠孝英烈女侯
Zhongyong 中庸
zhongyuan 中原
Zhou Ruilong 周瑞隆
Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵬
Zhou Yingfang 周穎芳
Zhu Huixiang 諸晦香
Zhu Qingqing 竺清瑛
Zhu Rouze 朱柔則
Zhu Suxian 朱素仙
Zhu Suying 竺素瑛
Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊
Zhu Yunping 竺雲屏
Zhuge Kongming 諸葛孔明
Zidishu 子弟書
zimin 子民
Zixu 子虛
Zixuji 子虛記
zi 子
Zuijin Tanhua Yinguan Nüshi Jin Wanyun
 樵李曇華吟館女史金畹雲
Zuili Wanyun Nüshi 樵李畹雲女史
zui ren wenfa 醉人文法
Zuo Fen 左棻
Zuo Weiming 左維明
Zuo Yizhen 左儀貞
zuodan 作旦

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