

Rewriting the Inner Chambers:
The Boudoir in Ming-Qing Women's Poetry

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Résumé</i>	<i>iv</i>
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Green Window: The Boudoir in Poetic Convention	26
Chapter 2: Constructing Women's Space as a New Cultural Ideal: The <i>Guige</i> in the Qing Anthology <i>Zhengshi ji</i>	80
Chapter 3: The Boudoir in Times of Chaos	146
Chapter 4: Convention and Intervention: The Boudoir in Gu Zhenli's Song Lyrics	222
Conclusion	280
Primary Sources Cited by Abbreviation	291
Other Primary Sources	293
Works Cited	297

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I dedicate this to my grandmother, Wang Dongmei (1909 —), who raised me.

Abstract

My dissertation takes the social and symbolic location of women—the inner chambers [*guige* or *gui*] — as a point of departure to examine Ming-Qing women's unique approach to the writing of poetry. In Ming-Qing China, women continued to be assigned to the inner, domestic sphere by Confucian social and gender norms. The inner chambers were not only a physically and socially bounded space within which women were supposed to live, but also a discursive site for the construction of femininity in both ideological and literary discourses. The term *gui* embraces a nexus of meanings: the material frame of the women's chambers; a defining social boundary of women's roles and place; and a conventional topos evoking feminine beauty and pathos in literary imagination. Working with the literary context of boudoir poetics, yet also considering other indispensable levels of meanings epitomized in the cultural signifier *guige*, my dissertation demonstrates how Ming-Qing women poets re-conceive the boudoir as a distinctive textual territory encoded with their subjective perspectives and experiences. Compared with the poetic convention, the boudoir as inscribed in Ming-Qing women's texts is far more complex as its depiction is informed by nuances in their historical, social and individual experiences.

Résumé

Ma thèse prend le lieu social et symbolique de la femme— les chambres intérieures [*guige* or *gui*] — comme point de départ pour étudier l'approche particulière des femmes Ming-Qing en matière de composition poétique. Dans la Chine Ming-Qing, les femmes continuèrent d'être assignées à la sphère interne domestique par les normes sociales confucéennes et les normes de genre. Les chambres intérieures n'étaient pas uniquement des lieux physiquement et socialement délimités où les femmes devaient vivre, mais ces lieux constituaient également le site discursif de la construction de la féminité à travers les discours idéologiques et littéraires. Le terme *gui* fait allusion à un ensemble de significations reliées: les frontières matérielles des chambres des femmes, les limites du rôle et du statut de la femme et le *topos* conventionnel évoquant la beauté et le *pathos* dans l'imagination littéraire. Travaillant dans le contexte littéraire des boudoirs poétiques, considérant également d'autres niveaux indispensables de signification tel que celui du *guige*, ma thèse montre comment les femmes poètes Ming-Qing ont, grâce à leurs perspectives et expériences subjectives, repensé le boudoir comme un territoire textuel distinct. En comparaison avec la convention poétique, le boudoir en tant qu'inscrit dans les textes des femmes Ming-Qing est bien plus complexe puisque sa description est imprégnée de nuances provenant de leurs expériences historiques, sociales et individuelles.

Introduction

The past decade has seen the emergence of exciting scholarship on women's literary practice in Late Imperial China (circa 1500-1900). Setting out to reconceptualize China's past from a women-centered point of view, social and literary historians have shown the previously invisible and silenced female half of society to be an active cultural community.¹ Their achievements include the rediscovery of women's writings and the investigation of female-authored anthologies and canon formation. They have explored the complexity of women's entry into language and their literary voices. Their studies demonstrate the fruitfulness of a women-centered approach to literary and historical studies and call for further exploration of women's distinctive contribution to literature. However, for literary studies that take women's writing as a critical category, there are some difficult yet compelling questions which we still need to re/think in order to understand better the complex subject we have been dealing with: How imperative and how sustainable is it to maintain gender as a critical perspective in literary studies? What are the important ways in which women participate in literary practice as a socially and culturally determined group? To what extent should we recognize gender difference in literature by women? By focusing on a poetic space in which women are both objects and producers of meaning, namely the women's chambers or the boudoir [*guige* 閨閣 or *gui* 閨] represented in poetry, my dissertation aims to methodologically reflect on these questions.

¹ Among the most active scholars in this area are social historians such as Dorothy Ko, Paul Ropp, and Susan Mann, and literary scholars such as Kang-i Sun Chang, Grace S. Fong, Maureen Robertson, and Ellen Widmer, whose major studies are listed in the bibliography.

I believe our understanding of Ming-Qing women's intervention into literature can be enriched by an examination of how women, through literary means, interacted with their gender boundaries. Thus, my dissertation takes the social and symbolic space of the inner chambers/sphere as a point of departure to study Ming-Qing women's approaches to the writing of poetry. In Ming-Qing China, women continued to be assigned to the *gui* by Confucian social and gender norms. The inner chambers were not only a physically and socially bounded location within which women were supposed to live, but also engendered a discursive space for the construction of gender ideology and femininity in both ideological and literary discourses. The assignment of the *gui* influenced women's life and culture profoundly. Social historians have shown the complex ways in which women both depended on and negotiated with their gender boundaries to cultivate a distinctive women's culture.² Ming-Qing women's interaction with the symbolic order associated with the *gui*, however, has not yet been closely examined on the level of textuality, though some literary historians have begun to map out some important stages of women's entry into poetic language.³ There are multiple strata of social and cultural forces that shape the meaning of texts by women, but women's distinctive approach to the writing of poetry lies in the ways in which the writing subject interacts with the socio-cultural domain to which she belongs.

Problematics and Objectives

The focus of my dissertation is Ming-Qing women's poetic depiction of the boudoir, a topical subgenre crossing both the *shi* and *ci* forms. The *shi* and *ci* genres had been constructed within male social, political, and cultural practices long before women

² For example, see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* and "Lady Scholars."

³ See Robertson, "Changing the Subject" and "Voicing the Feminine"; Fong, "Engendering the Lyric."

significantly entered into the field. The poetic treatment of women's image and boudoir, whether for aesthetic appreciation or political-erotic allegory, is one influential and far-reaching literati tradition, beginning from early times up until the Qing period. It left behind a vast repertory of vocabulary, imagery, themes, and motifs centered on women's image, emotional world, and life settings. Ming-Qing women writers must to a large extent rely on the repertory of available representations to write about themselves. They have also derived some textual positions and voices from the conventional boudoir poetics. Speaking through recognized poetic conventions suggests that women writers found an important channel through which they were connected to the literary past. As Rita Felski suggests, we should not forget that women's writing is also a literary form, "the cultural and aesthetic significance of which is necessarily shaped by its relation to existing literary traditions and conventions."⁴

Nonetheless, when assuming the place of writing subjects, Ming-Qing women poets do not merely perpetuate the literary tradition, but more importantly they rewrite it informed by their social and cultural experiences. The thematics and imageries of conventional boudoir poetry are too narrow to serve their expressive needs. Furthermore, the erotic tint that colours some literati versions makes it problematic for women to simply reiterate previous articulations. As Grace S. Fong points out, to participate in writing poetry, a woman not only has to learn already established conventions of the genre, but also is expected to internalize moral propriety appropriate to her gender (of course on the condition her act of writing is approved in the first place).⁵ Among numerous poetic conventions that are subject to women's reinscription, Robertson

⁴ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 28.

⁵ Fong, "Engendering the Lyric" 118-9.

observes, the ‘boudoir’ scenario underwent the most remarkable changes in the hands of Ming-Qing women poets:

In the literati versions of the boudoir, women are alone and sad, or they are entertaining or dreaming of men. Women writers reclaim the boudoir as their own domestic space; although they sometimes write of their loneliness within the household and of the absence of the men they love, the majority of their poems show the boudoir as the “women’s apartments,” a de-eroticized place of work, leisure, and companionship with other women.”⁶

The literary historians Maureen Robertson and Grace S. Fong have offered important theoretical insights into Ming-Qing women writers’ negotiation with conventional poetics in the *shi* and *ci* genres.⁷ Assuming that the *shi* and *ci* genres prior to the interventions of women poets were coded with male interest and desire, both scholars have generally explored how new feminine subjectivities and voices were produced in Ming-Qing women’s writing through re-writing image codes, controlling the gaze, and opening up new topical territories. Although the site of the boudoir is not the focus of these scholars’ studies, it underlies their analysis as the ground of articulation so often in women’s poetry. Taking the narrow scope of “the literati-feminine” represented by the palace-style poetry in the six-century anthology *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 as a referential frame, Robertson illustrates that one important change of the boudoir scenario effected by women is the transformation of women as the object of the gaze (typical in literati

⁶ Robertson, “Changing the Subject” 200.

⁷ Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine” and “Changing the Subject”; Fong, “Engendering the Lyric.”

versions) into the subject who now constitutes this gaze.⁸ For Robertson, Another significant way in which women poets reclaim the boudoir as “their own” as quoted above is that they reconceive it as a space in which women enjoy everyday activities such as sewing and writing.⁹ Fong also examines women’s self-expression in relation to “the history of the gaze in Chinese poetry” within the framework of women’s appropriation of the gendered poetics particular to the *ci* genre. Through an analysis of “the emotional and psychological immurement” expressed in some women’s lyrics (mostly from the late imperial period), she illuminates how the image of the female persona confined in the conventional space of the boudoir is transformed into a subjective voice expressive and reflective of the confinement and isolation of the feminine space.¹⁰

These pioneering studies identified Ming-Qing women poets’ important achievements in transforming the poetic convention: First, the construction of new feminine subjectivities that express women’s new interests, such as the voice of the mother. Second, the opening up of new topical territories, establishing a wide range of themes and motifs specific to women’s subjective experiences, such as the artistic activities of writing and embroidering which are performed on a daily basis.¹¹ Third, in offering fresh visions of the women’s sphere, they have transformed poetic conventions and created new images and metaphors based on available literary forms and discourses. It is textually evident that as a critical mass Ming-Qing women recreated some distinct, “female” textual territories informed by their subjective experiences and perspectives.

⁸ Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine” 84-85; Robertson, “Changing the Subject” 203.

⁹ Robertson, “Changing the Subject” 200-204.

¹⁰ Fong, “Engendering the Lyric” 121-27.

¹¹ For a recent study of embroidery as a field of knowledge and practice in women’s everyday life in the Late Imperial and early Republican era, see Fong, “Female Hands.”

Their inscriptions on the space of the boudoir constitute one of these vibrant sites of re/construction.

Articulating female subjectivity as inscribed in women's texts is crucial in feminist literary criticism, but the approach presuming that a text by a woman as the representation of her authentic self has become more problematic in Western feminist criticism as it has encountered critiques from the postmodernist point of view.¹² While insisting on the agency of women writers, scholars in Late Imperial Chinese women's literary practice such as Robertson and Fong have also paid attention to the constructed nature of feminine subjectivities in literary texts. In particular, Robertson has offered a focused study of the complexity of women's different strategies in constructing both "authorial" and "textual" subjects respectively in their self-prefaces and poetry, subjectivities with distance from the historical self. In analyzing the contradictory authorial self presented in women's self-prefaces, Robertson shows how women's representation of their literary pursuit is mediated by the discourse of female virtue. She also suggests the degrees of mediation by moral discourse in women's poetic texts, but she does not develop a critical model to systematically explore this issue in her examination of women's transformation of poetic conventions. Generally speaking, both Robertson and Fong's examinations of women's textual transformation are confined within relevant literary traditions; the limited scope of their articles do not allow them to sufficiently take into account the influence of the structure and ideology which construct these women as social subjects on women's textuality.

Presuming a link between women's depiction of the boudoir space with their subjective experience with the *gui*, I hope to reconnect women's transformations of

¹² See, for example, Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 50-69, 75-84.

boudoir poetics to the relevant sociohistorical conditions under which the texts were produced. The *gui*, both a social space and discursive site associated with female gender, provides a specific framework for us to investigate historically both the levels of mediation to women's textual production by ideological and socio-historical conditions and their literary agency as shown in their different textual strategies in reacting to these conditions. Working with the literary tradition of boudoir poetics yet also considering other discursive meanings attached to the *gui*/boudoir, my dissertation examines Ming-Qing women's interaction with various discourses which constructed women as gendered subjects as formulated in their textual practice. Ultimately, by locating my textual analysis of women's boudoir poetry in the framework of the *gui*, I hope to suggest in what sense we can make a claim for women's socially gendered experiences as the ground for the formation of subjectivity and why the gender of the authors can make for textual differences in specific historical contexts.

The *Gui*: The Social and Symbolic Location of Women

Before elaborating on my approach, I would introduce the key concept in this study, the *gui*. The *gui* is not a historical absolute, but a concept which needs to be situated in specific contexts. However, it is not the purpose of this section to offer an account of the historical changes of the *gui* in Chinese history (part of this task will be taken up in the succeeding chapters). Rather, I will review some prevalent ideas which helped conceptualize the *gui* as an ideal spatial location of women in Late Imperial China's social and cultural life. To do so does not presume that these ideas constitute the whole system of gender ideology or a map of social behavior, but shows how they contributed to mold the *gui* as a recognizable signifier in Late Imperial Chinese social and cultural

practices. In other words, what I attempt to show is the dimension of meanings generally acknowledged by Ming-Qing women poets, the social agents to be examined in this study. As shown in succeeding chapters, they inevitably brought these meanings into their writing of the boudoir. After all, as I will show, around the notion of the *gui* there is more than one discourse constructing and contesting the meanings of female gender and femininity.

The consignment of women to the *gui* /inner chambers originated from the ideal of physically and socially separating the sexes. The recognized, earliest source of this idea is the Confucian ritual and ethical classic, the *Li ji* 禮記 (Book of Rites), which notes: “While men live in the outer, women live in the inner sphere” 男子居外, 女子居內.¹³ It goes on to say, “From the age of seven, a boy and a girl would not sit together or share a meal” 七年男女不同食不共席.¹⁴ While a boy “from the age of ten would seek instructions from an outside teacher” 十年出就外傳, “a girl from the age of ten should not go outside” 女子十年不出.¹⁵ In addition, the “*Nei ze*” 內則 section (Regulations for the inner sphere) of the *Li ji* goes further to elaborate the behavior codes of sex segregation. These principles among others have been repeatedly quoted verbatim or rephrased in moral instructions of later ages. The *Nü lun yu* 女論語 of the Tang, for example, rephrases the idea stated in the “*Nei ze*”: “Inner and outer each has their place. Males and females gather separately. Women do not peek outside the walls, nor step into the outer courtyard. If they go out, they must cover their faces. If they do peek, they

¹³ Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing* 十三經 28.533. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

¹⁴ Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing* 28.538

¹⁵ Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing* 28.538-9.

conceal their forms.” 內外各處，男女異群。不窺壁外，不出外庭。出必掩面，窺必藏形。¹⁶ Another influential source reiterating the separation of spheres is Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019-1086) “Miscellaneous Proprieties for Managing the Family” 治家, which is considered a remarkable signpost of the Song’s increasing attention to gender distinction associated with spatial terms.¹⁷

The idea of gender separation is supposed to be not only materialized with physical boundaries, but also to be extended to labor division in terms of social, economic and ritual responsibilities. Men are supposed to be in charge of social and public affairs, whereas women are called to mind domestic business. As the *Li ji* emphasizes, “Men should not discuss affairs of the inner sphere; women should not discuss affairs of the outer sphere” 男不言內, 女不言外.¹⁸ Presuming the separate spheres between males and females, the Han classic, Ban Zhao’s 班昭 *Nü jie* 女誡 (Precepts for Women), provides specific codes for women to conduct themselves in the domestic sphere.¹⁹

These moral instructions, among others, are recognized orthodox sources on gender division in Late Imperial society. Both elite men and women drew on these sources to construct the cultural ideal of the segregated women’s quarters and female propriety. Together the *Nü jie*, *Nei xun* 內訓 by the Ming Empress Xu, *Nü lun yu* by the Tang palace woman Song Ruozhao 宋若昭, and *Nüfan jielu* 女範捷錄 by Wang Jiefu 王節婦 (The Chaste Woman Wang) of the Ming constituted the so-called *Four Books for*

¹⁶ Song Ruozhao, *Nü lun yu* 70. 3291.

¹⁷ Sima Guang, “Zhi jia” 治家 40.22952. For a quotation and discussion of this passage by Sima Guang, see Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters* 23-4.

¹⁸ Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing* 27.520.

¹⁹ For Ban Zhao, see Swann.

Women (Nü si shu 女四書), a standard curriculum of didactic texts for women established by the late Ming.²⁰ These books were recognized as the quintessential works on normative womanhood and “required reading for the daughters of all upper-class families.”²¹ Despite different emphases and temporal periods, these moral classics clearly set forth the separate spheres: male: outside/ female: inner. The ideology of the separate sphere, in the feminist historian Joan Scott’s words, “typically take[s] the form of a fixed binary opposition, categorically and unequivocally asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine.”²²

The ideal material expression of these ethical principles was a Chinese house built to provide “the physical frame of women’s lives and gave concrete form to the separation of men’s and women’s domains.”²³ The women’s sphere is located within the inner quarters. Enclosed by high walls, the house ensures that women were kept out of sight of the public. As a girl grows up in such a house, she learns about her proper place and roles within society. As Francesca Bray points out, the Chinese house is not merely a shelter made of materials, but also “a cultural template”: it is a learning device, a space imprinted with ritual, political and social messages.²⁴

Although these ideological principles cannot tell us how well they were received and practiced, there is evidence of the elite’s insistence on gender distinction in everyday life. A father of five daughters and a believer in the ethical values espoused by the

²⁰ According to Huang Liling 黃麗玲, there were two versions of *Nü sishu*, the Chinese and Japanese versions. The set of four books circulated in Japan does not include the *Nüfan jielu*, but the *Nü xiaojing* 女孝經 by Chen Miao 陳藐 of the Tang period instead. The other three are the same. See Huang Liling, *Nü si shu* 3. The author of *Nüfan jielu* is also known as Liu shi 劉氏.

²¹ Mann, *Precious Records* 80.

²² Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category” 1067.

²³ Bray, *Technology and Gender* 55.

²⁴ Bray, *Technology and Gender* 55.

Cheng-Zhu school, Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696-1771) compiled the *Jiaonü yigui* 教女遺歸 (Inherited guide for women, 1742), instructing the women in his family on their proper roles and daily conduct.²⁵ He sees women's major role as managing the household in order to ensure the prosperity and propriety of the patrilineal family. In addition to the old doctrines of sexual segregation, he gives to the women of the house specific pieces of advice such as: "If women do not know how to cook and do not enter the kitchen, they cannot effectively manage the household; if women are enabled to be in company and form clubs, showing their bodies and faces in public, they cannot order the household." 婦人不諳中饋，不入廚堂，不可以治家；使婦人得以結伴聯社，呈身露面，不可以齊家。²⁶ From such a detailed discussion of domestic matters, we can imagine how the father's words might affect his daughters' self-perception and lifestyle. In fact, Chen's book was widely recognized and reprinted repeatedly during the Qing and Republican periods.²⁷ The case of Chen Hongmou was not isolated. Female seclusion, Charlotte Furth shows, was always the first and foremost concern of "household instructions" (*jia xun* 家訓), a practical genre established from the mid-Ming on.²⁸ In arguing how gender distinction had become a core belief by the mid-Qing, William Rowe points out, "[n]o elite commentary in Late Imperial China, no matter how self-consciously reformist on gender issues, challenged the view that women fundamentally were not, could not be, and

²⁵ For a discussion of Chen Hongmou's thought on women and family, see Rowe, *Saving the World* 313-22.

²⁶ Chen Hongmou, *Jiaonü yigui* 100.

²⁷ Rowe, *Saving the World* 314.

²⁸ Furth, "The Patriarch's Legacy" 196.

indeed morally should not be identical with men, or assume the same functions in society.”²⁹

However, drawing on different sources, new trends in historical studies have shown the shifts of consciousness and the discrepancies between reality and ideal principles, especially in the socioeconomic dynamics of the late Ming period. Through an examination of the sixteenth-century manual *Gui fan* 閨範 (Regulations for the women’s quarters) by the late Ming scholar-official Lü Kun 呂坤, Joanna F. Handlin illustrates a more sympathetic and pragmatic approach to women’s moral issues in a changing society. Dorothy Ko’s article on women of the Clear Brook Poetry Club indicates that women from the gentry class also crossed gender boundaries in their literary interaction with a male teacher and leader.³⁰ In her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, Ko further theorizes a female literary culture based on the expanding women’s sphere in the fluid society of seventeenth-century Jiangnan.

From different perspectives, scholars have painted two different pictures, both of which are supported by strong evidence and arguments. Their divergent points of view, for me, reveal the complexity of the issue we deal with. Taking into account both visions of gender boundaries associated with the *gui* as presented by these scholars, I hope to find a better position to examine how the ideological concept of the *gui* was established and what profound implications this had on women’s role and place in society in the late imperial period. A revisit of Lü Kun’s thought on women’s issues and his *Gui fan* may serve this purpose. A didactic work specially designed for women in his contemporary

²⁹ Rowe, “Women and the Family” 495.

³⁰ Ko, “Lady-Scholars.” It is noteworthy that these women poets were active in the same period as Chen Hongmou.

society, the production of *Gui fan* reveals a more complicated situation of the ideological construction of women's social subjectivity.

First of all, as Lü Kun explains in his preface, he compiled the *Gui fan* as a reaction to what he perceives as the degenerating behavior of women such as the vulgar speech of village women, the extravagant lifestyle of wealthy women, and their difficult relationship with other family members. He also frowns upon women's participation in literary activities.³¹ Lü Kun's criticism of the disappointing behavior of women and his act of compiling the didactic *Gui fan* reveals the gap between orthodox principle and social reality. One of the preface writers of the *Gui fan*, She Yongning 佘永寧, points out, "There are so many transgressions of the principles for the inner sphere; the way of the world is daily getting worse" 內則之多愆, 世風之日下.³² As Handlin remarks, we should not view didacticism as representation of reality, but as reactions to the "aggressive behavior of women."³³

Moral doctrines cannot represent social reality, but their status as orthodoxy remained stable. As the title of the *Gui fan* suggests, the *gui* or *guige* had become an anchor notion of a recognized discursive site of constructing gender consciousness, or more precisely female propriety, in dominant ideological discourse. The preface writers to the different editions of the *Gui fan* insisted on the *gui* being inscribed with moral codes, turning it into a locus of defining women's proper roles in society. As She Yongning claims, "There must be regulations in the women's chambers" 閨中不可無

³¹ Lü Kun, *Gui fan* 1-2.

³² Lü Kun, *Gui fan* 5.

³³ Handlin, "Lü K'un's New Audience" 26.

範.³⁴ They compiled and reprinted the *Gui fan* to continuously spread “old values.” The first *juan* of the *Gui Fan* is a large collection of quotations from Confucian classics such as the *Li ji*, with Lü’s annotations and interpretations. Among them, gender division on a daily basis is reiterated without suggesting practical changes. Handlin meticulously reads between the lines of Lü’s moral stories in order to show his changing attitude towards women’s issues, but the values he reasserts are indeed unchanged. Lü Kun’s strategy in promoting these ideas is adaptive; he made the *Gui fan* more “user-friendly” with illustrations and annotations. Lü Kun’s more practical approaches can be viewed as efforts to make his didacticism more effective and more widely received. His encouragement of women to be “expedient” in case of emergency is to call for women’s moral autonomy rather than change the orthodox values.

As Catherine Belsey states, “The destination of all ideology is the subject (the individual in society) and it is the role of ideology to construct people as subjects.”³⁵ The didactic books instructing women on proper social boundaries and behaviors such as the *Gui fan* provide clues for the social formation of subject positions for women. The subject which the *Gui fan* is intended to target is termed *guiren* 閨人 (the person dwelling in the *gui*) or *guimenzhongren* 閨門中人 (the person dwelling within the inner quarters).³⁶ Troubled by the fact that the *guimenzhongren* discarded rituals and behavior codes, Lü Kun hopes his *Gui fan* can provide moral guidelines which the *guiren* can uphold, recite, and learn.³⁷ The *guiren* subject appears to be a synonym with the generic notion of women vis-à-vis men. Lü Kun and other assertive preface writers do not

³⁴ Lü Kun, *Gui fan* 5.

³⁵ Belsey, “Constructing the Subject” 47.

³⁶ The two terms respectively appear in Lü Kun, *Gui fan* 1, 3.

³⁷ Lü Kun, *Gui fan* 1, 3.

specifically define the *guiren* in terms of social class. Not by any means could the majority of women in the late imperial period physically live in the ideal Chinese house as envisioned by Bray. The physical location of the *gui*, with which the literal meaning of the *guiren* is associated, suggests a class prerogative. However, it seems that Lü Kun does not feel impelled to address this issue in his *Gui fan*. Elsewhere in his *Shi zheng lu* 施政錄 (Records on practical government) as quoted by Handlin, Lü Kun does show his class differentiation in addressing women's issues. Unlike his contemporary Hai Rui 海瑞 (1514-87), who insists that all women should remain inside the home, Lü Kun holds a tolerant attitude towards women working outside their home as wine vendors and weavers and thinks that they contribute to the local economy.³⁸ However, the ambiguity of class in constructing the regulations for the women's chambers seems to be intended to be more socially inclusive in calling for observation of the promoted values. In making his *Gui fan* easier to understand, Lü Kun also aimed at a more general female audience, and not to exclude women from the lower classes.

Most women regardless of class, except nuns and courtesans, were conceptually associated with the proper place for women. Despite degrees of complexity in actual situations, the *gui* had become both a "real" and an "imaginary" place for women. Having said that, I am indebted to Catherine Belsey's understanding of ideology as "both a real and an imaginary relation to the world—real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence

³⁸ Handlin, "Lü K'un's New Audience" 26.

and the ways in which people are socially constituted within them.”³⁹ The orthodox ideology centered on the *gui* produced an ideal gendered position for women to be interpellated regardless of their actual situations.

Once again, I would like to emphasize that in showing the ideological construction of the *gui* as the proper social place of women, I do not imply a monolithic gender ideology, but I have tried to show how the influential ideas molded the *gui* as a symbol of women’s sexual status and gender position in systematic terms. As social subjects supposedly living in the *gui* and newly emergent writing subjects, how do Ming-Qing women poets depict this space which is supposedly their own? In constructing the meaning of female gender, ideological and literary discourses have produced different messages. As Bray shows, the unconventional writer Li Yu 李漁 (1610-80) deliberately subverts the presumption that female seclusion can facilitate true virtue.⁴⁰ His erotic novel *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat) sharply satirizes the Confucian scholar Master Iron Gate (Tiefei daoren 鐵扉道人), who has strictly made his daughter live in seclusion by having the daughter eventually elope with a male seducer. Literary constructions of women’s boudoir life are different from the orthodox gender ideology. How did women receive these contradictory discourses? To what extent does gender ideology influence women’s representation of their boudoir? How does their life in the inner chambers inform their writing? How do their social status and perspective influence their writing? What kinds of gendered consciousnesses do they (re)map onto this symbolic space? How do literati conventions influence women poets’ self-representations? What kinds of creative strategies do these women poets adopt in order to

³⁹ Belsey, “Constructing the Subject” 46.

⁴⁰ Bray, *Technology and Gender* 142.

write about their daily experiences and express their own interests? In pursuing these questions, my dissertation will attempt to shed light into the ways Ming-Qing women interact with dominant literary and ideological discourses on their gender.

Establishing a Dynamic Poetics of the *Gui*: Objectives, Approaches, and Sources

The term *gui* embraces a nexus of meanings: the material frame of the women's chambers; a defining social boundary of women's roles and place; and a conventional topos evoking feminine beauty and pathos in literary imagination. As a cultural metaphor, the *gui* is deeply implicated in Ming-Qing women's poetry to the extent that it becomes a significant determinant in women's approach to the writing of themselves and their gendered experience, whether as an inspirational force in their poetic imagination, or a constrictive frame from which they are trying to escape. To account for the complexity of Ming-Qing women's problematic relation to their symbolic space, this dissertation draws upon not only the culturally specific insights into Late Imperial Chinese women's writing by Robertson, Fong and other scholars in the field, but more generally upon a model of language politics developed by scholars in Western feminist criticism such as Rita Felski. In her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, a critical response to French and American feminist literary theories as well as a study of Western feminist literature of the 1960s, Felski criticizes the limitations of both schools, and proposes an approach that reads women's texts in relation to the social conditions of their production and reception. Through an analysis of the social meaning and function of two types of women's novels, she demonstrates the political significance of these writings in relation to the contemporary feminist movement. Although she works with a different historical and cultural context with the purpose of establishing a feminist textual politics, her

theorization of the general relationship between the writing subject and language use is inspirational for my project. In responding to postmodernist challenges, Felski has developed a more sophisticated theoretical model which neither resorts to an essential female self nor views female subjectivity as merely a discursive position without room for the historical subject.

Felski's model seeks to avoid the theoretical weaknesses of both American and French literary feminism. In Felski's opinion, the former approaches women's writing in experiential terms, reading literary works as authentic sources of women writers' self-expression. It fails to acknowledge the mediated nature of women's writing by social and ideological conditions. The latter school adopts a more sophisticated approach to literary language, but holds an absolutely negative view of women's entry into the patriarchal symbolic order: women's desire in terms of language can be obtained only by means of deconstruction and subversion. It presupposes language as male-defined and forecloses the possibilities that the existing symbolic system can offer to women's interests and rights. For Felski, neither of these approaches can sufficiently account for the relationship between gender and symbolic structures.

Felski proposes a theoretical model that takes into account social and cultural determinants in women's discursive practice as well as women's individual agency which can transform language. Language, she suggests, should be understood as "a form of social activity which is both rule-governed and open, which does not simply determine consciousness but can also be employed to contest existing world views and to develop

alternative positions.”⁴¹ Specifically, her theoretical position is constitutive of the following set of assumptions:

1. Structures of power determine the relationship between gender and discourse. There are determinants of existing social structures and symbolic systems that shape and constrain women writers’ communicative practices.
2. Gendered subjects do not passively reflect monolithic systems of domination, but have creative and critical capacities to reflect upon or offer resistance to their environment.
3. Language is a social form open for use and contextually determined; it can acquire new significances in different uses; the relationship between language and life worlds is dialectical.

Moreover, Felski remarks, “the interaction between structural determinants and the capacity for agency” needs to be located in a specific and differentiated analysis in terms of historical and cultural contexts and variables in the subject’s positioning such as gender, class, and age.⁴² This approach relates literary discourse to existing power structures, but aims to show “both the flexible, innovative, and creative capacities of language itself and particular instances of the richness and complexity of women’s language use.”⁴³

The theoretical focus of the *gui* helps this current study to determine a cultural locus to grasp the dynamic use of language by a certain social group. A group of authors newly arisen in Late Imperial China’s cultural horizon, Ming-Qing women demonstrated

⁴¹ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 66.

⁴² Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 64.

⁴³ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 62.

their literary agency and creativity on two levels. Allocated to the inner, domestic sphere, women were ideologically and institutionally excluded from the public sphere of intellectual and literary activities. When women wrote and published poetry they challenged patriarchal social norms. The visibility of writing women therefore generated heated debates on the issues of women's talent and virtue, exemplified in the famous debate between the conservative scholar Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801) and the liberal poet Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797).⁴⁴ Although women knew that their literary engagement was not generally approved by society (some were actually struggling with the question of whether to write or not to write), they took it as a serious pursuit—not only as an emotional outlet, but also as a path for fulfilling intellectual achievement and fame in the literary world. Literature provided an alternative dimension for women to relieve boredom and bitterness and make sense of their lives.

When she has the opportunity to wield the brush, a woman, consciously or unconsciously, must make another difficult yet compelling choice: how to present herself to the intended or possible reader (even if she is writing to herself). Drawing on a prevalent cultural assumption about the poetic genre in Chinese literary history, poetry is taken as an important source of women's self-representation in this dissertation. Due to the belief in and practice of “*Shi yan zhi* 詩言志 (Poetry expresses one's intent),” a poem is presumed to be a record of historical experiences, an expression of the author's intent, and it is supposed to be read authentically and in relation to the poet.⁴⁵ In this sense, the corpus of Ming-Qing women's poetry provides a significant basis for us to explore what

⁴⁴ On the *querelle des femmes* between Zhang Xuecheng and Yuan Mei, see several studies by Susan Mann. For other discussions of the debate on women's talent, see also Chang, “Ming-Qing Women Poets” and Ho, “The Cultivation of Female Talent.”

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the non-fictional nature of traditional Chinese poetry, see Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, Chapter 2.

women wanted to reveal about themselves and their daily lives, and how they responded to their historical and cultural environments. In other words, a woman's poetry was perceived as self-representing in her historical context; she was responsible for the meaning of the text under the signature of her name. Therefore, the choices she made—what to write, what not to write, and how to write as existing power structures dictate language and symbol-making practice—testify to her agency and creativity.

The two bodies of discourse, moral teachings on female gender boundaries and literati poetic versions of the boudoir, may be particularly relevant to women's writing as they reflect upon their life in the symbolic framework of the *gui*. These discourses provide different messages on femininity, but both have profound implications in women's representation of the *gui*. In examining Ming-Qing women's writing about the boudoir, this study adopts a two-fold approach. First, it engages with an intertextual analysis to show how their writing is both connected to and different from mainstream boudoir literature that had long been constructed by largely male authors. Second, this study will take Ming-Qing women's textual production as an evolving literary and historical process and thus will pay much attention to historical and individual differences in women's poetic treatment of the boudoir. Although women of Late Imperial China are universally associated with the symbolic realm of the *gui* from which historical contingencies and individual differences are excluded, their represented experiences in relation to and perceptions of the boudoir are diverse and changing over time. Textual positions and perspectives projected in their writing are consequently various. Thus, while the texts to be examined in this dissertation are connected with the general

framework of the boudoir/*gui*, simultaneously they are informed by different modes of women's experiences.

This dissertation consists of four main chapters. Chapter 1 traces conventional boudoir poetics and aesthetics established before and continued into the Ming-Qing period. Traditional boudoir poetry has a complicated history of evolution, and involves a variety of origins, sub-genres, and themes. I will focus on widely recognized sources of literati representations of women and the boudoir, such as the sixth century anthology *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 (*New Songs from a Jade Terrace*), the song lyrics from the tenth century *Huajian ji* 花間集 (*Among the Flowers*), and the feminine-style song lyrics in the Southern Song (1127-1279), and related writings by Ming-Qing male poets. This chapter will lay a foundation for discussions of women's appropriation of literary language and imagery.

Through an examination of the *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集 (Correct Beginnings: Women's Poetry of Our August Dynasty) and its sequel, the *Zhengshi xuji* 正始續集, Chapter 2 explores how Qing women poets rewrite the *gui* in their *shi* poetry in order to construct the cultural ideal of *guixiu* informed by their common social and cultural experiences in a historically specific context.⁴⁶ As a result of Yun Zhu's 惲珠 (1771-1833) selection or re-representation for the purpose of establishing an orthodoxy, or a canon, of Qing women's poetry, the anthology makes it

⁴⁶ Susan Mann has invoked the case of Yun Zhu and the poems included in her anthology as important sources to illustrate the social meanings and functions of women's learning in the High Qing era (c.1683-1839). Mann has examined some poems included in this anthology for the purpose of her socio-historical study, but my examination of the anthology will focus on the poems written on the boudoir theme, which has not been thoroughly examined so far.

possible to investigate the influence of orthodox gender ideology and poetics on women's construction of the *gui*.⁴⁷

Chapter 3 examines the influence of historical transitions and political disasters in the late imperial period on women's reflection of their position in the inner sphere. The main references will draw upon the poetic writings by women who lived through tragic historical changes such as the Ming-Qing transition and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64). Many texts examined in this chapter are new materials rediscovered by archival research, which will, for the first time, receive sustained critical attention.

By focusing on the lyrical world of Gu Zhenli 顧貞立 (1623-1699), Chapter 4 explores the problematic relationship between the female subject, gender convention, and poetic discourse. The poet's inscription on the boudoir space involves several contrasting and even contradictory modes of articulation, which reveals complex interrelations between her conceptions of self and other and cultural codes of femininity.

There is a complex range of variables in the way in which women depict their boudoir, but what I attempt to do within the scope and limits of this dissertation is to try to grasp the major types of differences that closely reflect the female subject's positioning in relation to the symbolic frame. However, underlying these major modes of articulation are complicated relationships between the writing subject and the age-old poetic tradition, relationships affected by different social and historical factors as well as personal backgrounds and experiences. These different modes of articulation cannot be interpreted by one straightforward historical and social framework, but have to be

⁴⁷ I use the notion of canon here to illustrate the anthology as a historical construction of a body of texts to promote certain literary values by a certain group of authors, namely the Qing *guixiu* in this case.

examined under differentiated analysis of intersections of literary tradition and its varying contexts.

Although this dissertation is confined to the analysis of women's textual strategies on a literary level, its major framework and organization of references are informed by an investigation of the historical condition and circumstances under which the texts were produced. In other words, in selecting the primary sources, I assume that nuances in women's historical, cultural, and individual experiences played an instrumental role in shaping their changing perceptions about their symbolic space and the meanings of their texts. To say so, I do not mean that the text necessarily always mirrors the author's life experiences, but we should consider the historical conjunctures at which their texts are produced. Women's writing is a product of their broader social and cultural contexts as well as a reflection of their individual experiences and perspectives.

The sources to be examined in this dissertation fall into two main categories: male-authored and female-authored writings on the boudoir. However, it would be impractically ambitious for this dissertation to cover all these writings. Guided by my theoretical framework and the insights of previous studies on Chinese literary history, I will focus on several groups of poetic writings produced in different historical moments and personal contexts. The poems to be examined include both the *shi* and *ci* genres. There are particular conventions and cultural implications pertaining to each genre, which I will take into account when they are relevant to my study.

I consider two categories of sources— anthologies and individual collections— as constitutive of two axes of information on the common features and individual differences of women's writing. As Fong points out, anthologies are by nature selective,

for they are compiled to embrace the implicit or explicit criteria of the editor for inclusion or exclusion.⁴⁸ Due to this selective nature, if carried out consistently, anthologies can reveal in a significant way particular recurring features of women's writing. For example, Yun Zhu's selections in the *Zhengshi ji* strike us as very similar in themes, styles, and language. This is important for identifying some common processes of meaning production in women's literary practice. Individual collections provide a sense of 'completeness' and indicate the depth of an individual poet's writing; they can tell us much about what anthologies have left out: what she has written, her personal preferences of themes and styles, and in some cases information on her personal life experiences. These two kinds of sources constitute the basis for us to obtain close and extensive knowledge about Ming-Qing women's writing of the boudoir.

Although the *gui* as both ideological and literary discourse appears to be a familiar site to us, it has not yet been used as a theoretical focus in the study of Ming-Qing women's poetics. A discursive space intimately connected to both Chinese poetic tradition and the social prescription of women's place, the *gui* is an inevitable point of departure for us to study Ming-Qing women's distinct approach to the writing of poetry. As this dissertation intends to demonstrate, it provides a productive framework to systematically examine the interactions between gendered poetics and women's gendered consciousnesses in Late Imperial China.

⁴⁸ Fong, "Gender and the Failure of Canonization" 6.

Chapter One

The Green Window: The Boudoir in Poetic Convention

On patterned silk, golden kingfishers;
Fragrant candles melt into tears.
Flowers fall; the cuckoo cries;
At the green window, the remnant of a dream dims.¹

畫羅金翡翠，香燭銷成淚。花落子規啼，綠窗殘夢迷。
Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (ca. 812-ca. 866), “Pusa man” 菩薩蠻

The boudoir as a poetic convention had long been established in both the *shi* and *ci* genres by the Ming-Qing era. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to trace a comprehensive history of the evolution of boudoir poetics. Rather, I attempt to identify some essential features and elements constituent of normative poetics and aesthetics of the women’s boudoir in order to establish a frame of reference for subsequent chapters through which to examine how Ming-Qing women as newly emergent writing subjects interacted with the literary convention.

A useful concept I find for the study of the boudoir convention is “topos.” Topos, originally a Greek word meaning “place,” is generally understood as a commonplace or conventional theme or motif in literary studies. Decades ago, Michael E. Workman proposed the term “boudoir/bedchamber topos” as a major convention of the *ci*. Although in his essay Workman, sampling early lyrics, only focuses on one conventional theme, the grief of separation associated with the women’s chambers, his concept of topos in theory is multidimensional and dynamic. His view of a topos as “a form-element in literature that presents a certain setting, with the range of associations that have adhered to it through time and use” is particularly germane to this chapter in working through the

¹ *HJJ* 1.4.

formation of the boudoir topos.² The boudoir/*gui* is such a poetic element which encompasses a constellation of recognized themes, motifs, and images. Moreover, a topos is not unchangeable, but historically constructed and received. It can be enlarged in its long practice to include new conventions recognized by writers of later generations. The most far-reaching and widely-recognized theme associated with the boudoir setting is the abandoned woman's grief, the boudoir plaint (*guiyuan*).³ However, the boudoir is in fact a locus of several sets of standardized themes and modes of expression in Chinese poetic history. From the perspective of Ming-Qing contemporary practice of boudoir poetry, the boudoir as a topos provided more than one "topical pattern of thinking" for the poet to follow or manipulate.⁴ Through reviewing several significant moments in the development of boudoir poetics and aesthetics in both the *shi* and *ci* genres, I attempt to show the formation of the boudoir topos, trying to identify what typical themes, sentiments, image codes, and aesthetic effects it generates when a poet explicitly or implicitly places the content of a poem within the boudoir space. Finally, I conclude this chapter by summarizing how the boudoir convention was recognized and practiced in the Ming-Qing periods.

My review of the poetics of the boudoir will be organized along two major lines: the *shi* and *ci* genres. These two forms have different generic conventions, but they share some common ground in representing boudoir themes. I rely heavily on widely recognized anthologies as primary sources— especially those which played an instrumental role in genre formation—because they allow for the identification of generic

² Workman, "The Bedchamber Topos" 7.

³ For a recent study of the persona and voice of the abandoned woman in early *ci*, see Samei, *Gendered Persona*. For her discussion of the abandoned woman topos, see p. 8 and p.175.

⁴ Workman, "The Bedchamber Topos" 168.

conventions. This chapter examines the traditional mode of boudoir poetry by both genders. Although the boudoir convention was established mainly by male literati authors, women were not completely out of the picture even in earlier times when female authors were far fewer. In addition, Ming-Qing women authors continued to write conventional boudoir poetry. By taking into account the literary practice of both genders, I hope to shed light on the complexity of the literary tradition.

New Songs from a Jade Terrace: The Establishment of the Boudoir Topos

The two earliest poetic classics, the *Shi jing* and *Chu ci*, are followed by a third anthology, the Southern Dynasties *Yutai xinyong*.⁵ It was compiled by the Liang court poet Xu Ling 徐陵 (507-83) under the patronage of the Liang Crown Prince, later known as Emperor Jianwen, Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503—51).⁶ The anthology consists of ten *juan* of more than eight hundred poems arranged in chronological order.⁷ Although proclaimed “new” as its title indicates, the collection actually covers a time span from the second century B.C. through the early sixth century. By “new,” the anthology was intended to embody a new poetic vogue, the so-called *gongti shi* 宮體詩 (palace-style poetry).⁸ I choose to focus on

⁵ For an English translation of and introduction to the anthology *Yutai xinyong*, see Birrell, *New Songs*. For an in-depth study of this anthology with regard to postmodernist issues such as transgressive writing and homoerotics, see Birrell, *Games Poets Play*. For a discussion of this anthology from the perspective of male literati’s homosocial community, see also Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies*, Chapter 4 “Spectator Sports.”

⁶ On Xiao Gang’s literary salon and practice, see Marney, *Liang Chien-wen Ti*. See also Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence* Chapters 1 and 2; Miao, “Palace-Style Poetry.”

⁷ The anthology was reprinted in many different editions during its long circulation history. Editors of the anthology from the Song on tended to expand it by adding their own selections. Scholars hold different opinions about the number of poems. Ronald Miao and Anne Birrell claim that there are more than six hundred. The version I use is a collated version by the modern scholar Mu Kehong 穆克宏 based on a Qing edition (1774) annotated by Wu Zhaoyi 吳兆宜 and edited by Cheng Yan 程琰. Wu notes that there are as many as 870 poems in the version he obtained. He also points out that Song editions of the anthology were shorter, consisting of 691 poems. For Mu Kehong’s discussion of the versions, see *YTX* 3.

⁸ On palace-style poetry, see Miao, “Palace-Style Poetry.” See also Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence* Chapters 1 and 2.

this sixth-century anthology because, drawing as it does on earlier traditions, it is instrumental in establishing the poetics and aesthetics of the boudoir in Chinese literary history.

The emergence of the *gongti shi* was very much a reaction to the orthodox view of poetry as expression of one's moral intent and as indispensably implicated in social and political didacticism.⁹ Viewing poetry as art for its own sake, the interests of the court poets lies in meticulously depicting feminine beauty, psychology, and setting for aesthetic and erotic appreciation. In order to assert that the purpose of his anthology is artistic appreciation, Xu Ling imagines in his preface the goddess-like figure of a palace lady as his reader: extremely beautiful and talented, she can write, and devotes all her idle hours to reading "the latest verses," which will soon include those found in Xu Ling's volume. The figuration of a female audience here, however, does not mean that the intended readers are merely palace ladies. Rather, this figurative strategy is meant to assert the agenda of the *Yutai xinyong*, an agenda focusing on artistic pleasure. The elaborate description of the beautiful appearance and environment of the woman reader is consistent with court poets' approach in their poetry to images of women and the boudoir.

The authors of Xu Ling's anthology are of both genders, but only about ten are identified as women. While some of these women authors only have vague identities such as a certain man's wife, some have historically credible names, such as the famous poet Bao Zhao's 鮑照 (? 412-? 466) sister, Bao Linghui 鮑令暉 (fl. C. 464). Whether these women actually authored the texts attributed to them, their gender identity complicates the reading of the female voice projected in their poems. In her recent book, Anne Birrell

⁹ Miao, "Palace-Style Poetry" 8.

attempts to show the distinctiveness of a few women authors' voices, arguing that these women to varying degrees inscribe their female selves into their verses.¹⁰ As far as this section is concerned, the nuances in different authors' approaches are not significant enough to affect what we can discern about the formation of the boudoir setting as a topos in the anthology. A selective collection with a specific agenda, the poems included in the *Yutai xinyong* share a high degree of textual conformity in terms of themes and representational codes.

The practice of palace-style poetry by Xiao Gang's literary coterie reveals a dynamic dimension of the court poets' homosocial competition for the female and the control of desire and language.¹¹ However, this is not to say that the whole collection is a self-serving construction by male literati. Their construction of feminine voice and consciousness embraces common ground shared by both genders. In particular, they draw from various sources of inspiration, including various folk songs created by active communications between men and women. It would be unfair to claim that the literati textual productions absolutely exclude women's interests.

The poems anthologized in the *Yutai xinyong* are not all palace-style poetry in the narrow sense established by Xiao Gang and his courtiers. In fact, a project attempting to embrace a new poetic taste, the corpus of *Yutai xinyong* reveals a process of genre formation. Anne Birrell has aptly observed that the collection can be roughly divided into two groups: the first group of 150 poems, written from the second century B.C. to the late third century A.D., is "more loosely structured," while the remainder of the poems, written from the fourth century to the early sixth century, follow "a stricter conventional

¹⁰ Birrell, *Games Poets Play* 176-208.

¹¹ Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies* 289.

pattern.”¹² Kang Zhengguo 康正果 further points out that the inclusion of poems of similar themes and styles from the Han to the Liang by Xu Ling was intended to establish a genealogy of the *gongti shi*.¹³ The Qing scholar Wu Zhaoyi’s note on *juan* 8 of the anthology supports these scholars’ observations:

In the third and fourth *juan*, the *gongti* style begins to appear sporadically; in the fifth and sixth *juan*, it has gradually taken shape; the seventh *juan* is where the emperor from his highness elevates the *gongti* to a privileged place, and all scions sing alike; this *juan* (*juan* 8) are poems in which ministers imitate the style from their lower position, and women follow them in the same style. (YTXY 385)

三四卷是宮體間見;五六卷是宮體漸成;七卷是君倡宮體於上,諸王同聲;此卷是臣仿宮體於下,婦人同調。

Palace-style poetry represents a synthetic development of broader poetic practices. Many scholars note that palace-style poetry is very much “an aristocratic refinement” of early amorous songs such as “*Wu sheng*” (Songs of Wu) and “*Xi qu*” (western melodies).¹⁴ In fact, the emperor and his entourage drew more from literati traditions, including earlier literati *yuefu* and Han ancient-style poems in creating a distinctive sub-genre representing their aesthetic and artistic tastes. The *Yutai xinyong* not only includes the court poets’ conscious textual production, but also earlier works that inspired them. Thus, the anthology provides a rich source for us to examine the dynamic process in which the

¹² Birrell, *New Songs* 9.

¹³ Kang Zhengguo, *Fengsao* 167.

¹⁴ See for example Marney, *Liang Chien-wen Ti* 103. See also Miao, “Palace-Style Poetry” 13–4.

poetics and aesthetics of the boudoir are established through a synthesis of earlier traditions.

The poems of female lamentation produced in the Han and Wei periods were a major influence on the formation of palace-style poetry. Although the image and voice of the deserted woman can be traced back as early as in the *Shi jing*, it is from the Han period that they have begun to be visibly associated with the boudoir setting, or more precisely the bedchamber (fang 房, guifang 閨房). The bedchamber seems to be a natural locus for depicting the situation of the one being left behind, a setting which becomes both a physical and emotional trap. The earliest examples to date are the ones from the Nineteen Old Poems set (*gushi shijiu shou* 古詩十九首), some of which are included in the beginning chapters of the *Yutai xinyong*.¹⁵ Among them, the following two are the most notably centered on the bedchamber setting and are frequently imitated by poets of later ages.

Poem No.2

Green, green riverside grass,
Lush, lush willow in the garden,
Sleek, sleek a girl upstairs,
White, white faces her window.
Fair, fair her rouge and powder face,
Slim, slim she shows her white hand.
Once I was a singing-house girl,

¹⁵ For a discussion of the Old Nineteen Poems and an English translation and annotation of seventeen poems of the set, see Watson, *Chinese Lyricism* 15-32. The version of the anthology I use includes nine poems considered to be authored by the Han writer Mei Cheng.

Now I am a playboy's wife.

A playboy roves, never comes home,

My empty bed is hard to keep alone.¹⁶

(YTXY 1.19-20)

青青河畔草，鬱鬱園中柳。盈盈樓上女，皎皎當窗牖。娥娥紅粉妝，
纖纖出素手。昔爲倡家女，今爲蕩子婦。蕩子行不歸，空床難獨守。

Poem No. 19

Bright moon white, so white

Shines on my silk bedcurtains.

In sad despair I cannot sleep,

I take my robe, get up and pace.

To travel, they say, is pleasant,

But not as good as coming back home.

I go outside, stroll in solitude.

My sad longing to whom can I tell?

I lean forward, go back to my room,

Tears fall soaking my robe.¹⁷

(YTXY 1.21)

明月何皎皎，照我羅床帷。憂愁不能寐，覽衣起徘徊。行客雖云樂，
不如早旋歸。出戶獨彷徨，愁思當告誰。引領還入房，淚下霑裳衣。

Although the above two poems are both framed by the bedchamber setting, they represent two different approaches. The first one pays much attention to the objective description

¹⁶ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 39.

¹⁷ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 40.

of the female persona's appearance, whereas the second constructs a subjective voice articulating a troubled inner world. Both address the lonely situation of the persona by mentioning the "empty bed" or the restlessness at night, but the effects of their expressions are different. While the speaking voice at the end of the first poem reads more like a tantalizing gesture inviting a companion, the second poem expresses inescapable physical confinement and emotional troubles. In sum, the first poem, in Maija Bell Samei's words, plays with "the erotic potential of the lonely wife," while the second voices sorrow and grief.¹⁸ These two poems set up two different models of emulation for poets of later ages.

However, a crucial issue that must be addressed is the ambiguity of the second poem with regard to gender. It can be typically interpreted as an expression of the deserted woman's sorrow, but can also be read as a more generalized grief which is specific neither to the female gender nor the theme of separation. Nowhere in the poem is this information specified. Even on the rhetorical level, Han and Wei poems centered on the bedchamber setting are not unambiguously limited to the theme of female lamentation. In expressing their troubled emotions, male poets also directly adopted similar modes of expression as used by the deserted female persona without invoking the figure in their poems. For example, in a poem mourning his wife's passing, Pan Yue 潘岳 writes:

White, white moon through a window
Shines on my room's south end.
Clear-tone winds usher autumn in,
Sultry heat ebbs with the season.

¹⁸ Samei, *Gendered Persona* 57.

Bleak, bleak cold winds rise,
I begin to feel my summer quilt too flimsy.
I wouldn't say I have no thick clothes,
But with whom will I share year's end cold?

The year's end cold no one to share with.
Lustrous moon so glistening!
I toss and turn, stare at pillow and mat.
The long mattress lies empty on the bed,
The bed lies empty, lost to clear dust.
To my vacant room mournful comes the wind.

I'm alone, have no vision of Lady Li.¹⁹

Vague, faint, I glimpse your face.
I stroke my collar, sigh long sighs,
Tears unawares soak my breast,
Soak my breast, how can I stop them?
Sad longing wells deep inside me.²⁰

[...]

(YTXY 2.86-87)

¹⁹ Lady Li was a Han palace woman famous for her beauty and singing talent. After she died, the necromancer of the Han emperor tried to make her soul return. See Mu Kehong's annotation in YTXY 2.87. Adopting this allusion, the poet expresses his wish to see his late wife.

²⁰ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 83.

皎皎窗中月，照我室南端。清商應秋至，溽暑隨節闌。凜凜涼風升，
始覺夏衾單。豈曰無重絀，誰與同歲寒。歲寒無與同，朗月何朧朧。
展轉眄枕席，長簟竟床空。床空委清塵，室虛來悲風。獨無李氏靈，
仿佛覩爾容。撫衿長嘆息，不覺涕霑胸。霑胸安能已，悲懷從中起。

In mourning his wife, the major textual strategy the poet adopts is the elaborate description of the lonely bedchamber as a foil to reflect his traumatized inner world. One could read this poem as sorrow expressed by the deserted woman if not for the indication of the speaker's gender identity in the line "I'm alone, have no vision of Lady Li."

The *Yutai xinyong* anthologizes many earlier works on themes associated with bedchamber or domestic settings. But as the court poets developed a new interest in representing women's beauty and psychology for the very end of artistic and erotic appreciation alongside the old tradition of female lament, they placed images of women and their boudoir at the front of the poetic agenda, consequently establishing the women's chambers as an aesthetic site in Chinese poetry. The old bedchamber topos is now more explicitly associated with the female persona; meanwhile the specifically gendered term *guiyuan* (the boudoir plaint) for the first time appears as a poetic title in the anthology. Even though the anthology includes some works ambiguous in the gender of the speaking voice or persona in early chapters, the increasing, conspicuous tendency in depicting feminine beauty and setting in the rest of the anthologizing project might have affected the reader's reception of these works. It is not surprising that later critics such as the Ming scholar Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1618) could jump to the conclusion:

“the *Yutai xinyong* only collects a single body of poetry written about women’s boudoir.”²¹ 《玉臺》但輯閨房一體。

The court poets’ meticulous attention to the portrayal of a beautiful woman and her boudoir is intimately connected with the *yongwu* mode (celebrating objects) cultivated in the Chinese literary tradition.²² “Woman” is inscribed as a beautiful object. Her loveliness is portrayed through detailed descriptions of her body parts, such as her eyebrows, fingers, and waist, and perhaps more importantly, of her attire and ornaments, such as her silk dress, hairstyle, and hairpins. Titles such as “Embroidery on Her Collar” and “Slippers on Her Feet” inform us of the court poets’ obsessed fondness of what is perceived as feminine beauty.²³ For poets, “woman is adored when adorned.”²⁴ Xiao Gang’s “A Lovely Woman’s Morning Make-Up” is a good illustration of this point:

At the north window she faces her dawn mirror.

Brocade curtains she drapes in a slanting twist.

Sweet, shy, unwilling to come out

She still claims her make-up isn’t done.

She spreads kohl wide along her eyebrows,

Yen rouge appears across her cheeks.

No doubt with all this she’s sensational,

She deserves to be called ‘Adorable’!²⁵

(YTX 7.299)

北窗向朝鏡，錦帳復斜縈。

²¹ As quoted by Mu Kehong in YTX 2.

²² Fong, “Wu Wenying’s Yongwu Ci” 324; Kang Zhengguo, *Fengsao* 168.

²³ YTX 5.191-2.

²⁴ Birrell, *New Songs* 10.

²⁵ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 199.

嬌羞不肯出，猶言妝未成。

散黛隨眉廣，燕脂逐臉生。

試將持出眾，定得可憐名。

By the same token, the boudoir, the women's chamber, has been treated with equal attention in palace verses. A woman's bedroom, and by extension her small tower and backyard, is the most typical site for the poet's imagining of feminine activity. Compared with early love poems, "love moves indoors" to the boudoir as the court poets confine their interest to tamed nature and artificial luxury brought by the palace lifestyle.²⁶ No matter whether it is a palace harem, a courtesan's bedchamber, or a deserted wife's small tower, women's boudoirs generally are referred to as *gui* 閨. Many poems include the term *gui* in their title, in various guises: "Spring Boudoir," "Cold Boudoir," and "The Moonlit Night in the Boudoir." The boudoir, more often than not, is lavishly decorated with luxurious furniture and utensils. Poems about objects (*yongwu shi*) are one major subcategory of palace verses, and boudoir accoutrements such as mirror, screen, and candle are popular objects for the poets to celebrate and evoke the aesthetic and erotic imagination of the women's chambers.

Although the *gongti shi* is narrowly defined as poetry treating feminine beauty and settings for the purpose of evoking "amorous and sensual feelings" (*yanqing* 艷情), most of the poems collected in the *Yutai xinyong*, including the poems by the court poets, are still dominated by the ancient theme of the abandoned woman. Palace poetry carries on the old theme of the female lament, but is more concerned with the "playful" representation of female images and boudoir life than with forcefully expressing

²⁶ Birrell, *New Songs* 11.

lamentation.²⁷ The poets tend to renew the old story of the deserted woman with their poetic taste and descriptive skills. In many cases the old theme is subdued by a meticulous description of feminine beauty and setting. The poem quoted above from the Nineteen Old Poems written on a singing girl is exactly the precursor of palace-style poetry, which sets up the classical formula of the palace-styled boudoir plaint: a rhetorical complaint about the “empty” room or bed by an elaborately beautiful persona.

The “empty room” *kong fang* 空房 (more often appearing as the “empty boudoir” *kong gui* 空閨 in palace verses) and the “empty bed” *kong chuang* 空床, elements derived from earlier poems on female lament, explicitly or implicitly constitute the most typical scenario in palace poetry tales. The boudoir where the lover is absent yet desired is a perfect place for the court poet to exercise his imagination and artistic skills. The boudoir not only functions as the central stage on which to expose the female persona’s beauty and mind, but also constitutes the very site of aesthetic appreciation. For example, Xiao Gang opens a window on “Her Late Boudoir” for us:²⁸

Her hidden room in cold sun grows late,
2 Declining rays cross the window sill.
Red blinds far do not prevent my view,
4 Light drapes hang half rolled up.
I know slim hands are tailoring,
6 Such perfection her finely sewn cloak.
Dragon shears lie across her knees,

²⁷ Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies* 139.

²⁸ Trans. by Anne Birrell with modification of Line 11. See Birrell, *New Songs* 198-99. The original title is “To harmonize with Xu Lushi’s Poem on Seeing His Wife Making Beddings” 和徐錄事見內人作臥具. I follow Birrell’s translation of the title, “Her Late Boudoir.”

- 8 Painted ruler slips down her skirt front.
Pressing iron, sheen of gilt varnish,
10 Needle spool cased in ivory.
Cloth cut into joint-love pleats,²⁹
12 Designed as nestling mandarin ducks.
In sewing she uses double needle thread,
14 For padding a silkworm's eightfold thread.
Perfume laced with Liqui nectar
16 And musk exhaling Zhongtai smoke
Now enter lapis lazuli bedcurtains,
18 Suffuse Mount Tai rugs.
Besides she has a carved stove warm,
20 Unlike the round fan rejected.
She fears more keenly wartime separation:
22 An empty bed and futile self-pity.

(YTXY 7.289)

密房寒日晚，落照度窗邊。紅簾遙不隔，輕帷半捲懸。方知織手製，
詎減縫裳妍。龍刀橫膝上，畫尺墮衣前。熨斗金塗色，簪管白牙纏。
衣裁合歡襦，文作鴛鴦連。縫用雙針縷，絮是八蠶絲。香和麗秋蜜，
麝吐中臺煙。已入琉璃帳，兼雜太華氊。具共雕鑪煖，非同團扇捐。
更恐從軍別，空床徒自憐。

²⁹ Here I modify Birrell's translation according to my reading of the line from the edition I use.

Although her room is located in a secluded area and sheltered with blinds and curtains, the poet still tries to slip through with his gaze. He discovers that she is sewing, an ordinary female activity, yet the poet will find something interesting as he watches. Each detail of the woman's activity and surroundings is being examined: her slim hands, her fine materials and decorated tailoring tools, and the clothes she is making. The images of "joint-love pleats" and "nestling mandarin ducks" obviously reveal the theme of the poem: she is waiting and preparing for a reunion and passionate consummation. Once the theme is revealed, the poet continues to depict her careful tailoring and the luxurious decorations of her room to convey the perfect environment for the release of passion and how much she values the love union she is going to have. However, the concluding lines take an abrupt, subversive turn. The poet seems to put the female persona at ease by subverting the allusion of "the round fan"—a symbol of the abandoned woman derived from the story of Ban Jieyu³⁰—but he does not foreclose the possibility that she might still end up with an empty bed if he is recruited into the army. The delay to reveal the sad ending only serves to make a stronger anticlimax. This is a masterpiece of palace-style tale with playful cleverness.

Sometimes, the neglect is depicted through the persona's subjective feeling of the coldness of the boudoir. The cold boudoir (*han gui* 寒閨) or the cold night in the boudoir is a common theme in the anthology. There are several poems directly entitled "The Cold Boudoir." It is not necessarily a cold season, but the absence of "him" that makes the solitary woman feel chilled:

There is no news from the wanderer,

³⁰ For this poem attributed to Ban Jieyu, see YTXY 1.25-26.

The empty boudoir is quiet and cold.
Wind harsh—the morning loom is dry,
Mirror dim—it is hard to apply makeup by night.
Her waist was originally slender,
But the sash now is even looser.

(YTXY 8.376)

行人消息斷，空閨靜復寒。風急朝機燥，
鏡闥晚妝難。從來腰自小，衣帶就中寬。

Another poem informs the reader how the coldness of the season becomes unbearable for a woman after her lover is gone:

After we parted the spring pool looked different,
Lotus died, ice seemed to form.
In my sewing-box the shears felt cold,
On the mirrorstand my face-cream froze.
My slender waist become so frail
Can hardly bear the coldness of the clothes.³¹

(YTXY 8.346)

別後春池異，荷盡欲生冰。箱中剪刀冷，
臺上面脂凝。纖腰轉無力，寒衣恐不勝。

Everything she sees and touches is cold and frozen. Certainly it is not merely because of the winter, but more the result of her loneliness. The cold boudoir without a male companion is now an alien space for a woman to live in. Neither of the above poems

³¹ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 220. For another translation and discussion of this poem, see also Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine” 70.

directly addresses the female persona's emotion at all, but only describes her appearance and the external environment surrounding her. Every detail, however, serves to express the grief of separation.

The boudoir is also differentiated according to seasons. As Birrell points out, the perceived parallel between the cycle of nature and the span of human life had long been held in Chinese philosophical and literary tradition: human life is as transient as the seasons.³² The depiction of seasonal boudoirs in palace verses reflects this common perception. As Birrell notes, spring and autumn scenes are the two most common motifs because in these two seasons nature undergoes the most fundamental and visible changes that can strike melancholy chords in the abandoned woman.³³ Spring, the season during which everything is flourishing, is an amorous season. Flowers, metaphor of feminine beauty, are brought to bloom by the east wind, sun, and rain. Human love in palace poems, however, does not mirror the patterns of nature in a smooth way. Court poets often twist these cultural assumptions to express the emotions of yearning or loss. Against the flourishing background of the spring, the boudoir is a place denied access to love; passion is in no way fulfilled:

The Spring Night

The spring night is still long,

My amorous heart is not broken just once.

The moonlight shapes the shadow of the garden and tower,

The wind brings to me the aroma of flowers and trees.

³² Birrell, *New Songs* 15. For an early example linking human aging with seasonal changes, see lines 7-10 in Qu Yuan's "Li sao" (Encountering Sorrow) in the *Chu ci* 2. For a thematic analysis of lamentation over human transience expressed in Han *yuefu* poetry such as the Nineteen Old Poems, see Cai Zongqi, *The Matrix of Lyric Transformation* 69-74.

³³ Birrell, *New Songs* 15.

Who can face the paired swallows
And stay in the empty bed feeling indifference?

(YTXY 8.366)

春宵猶自長，春心非一傷。月帶園樓影，

風飄花樹香。誰能對雙燕，暝暝守空床。

The spring night would be short when spent in an enjoyable way. However, the woman in this poem feels that it is painfully long. Her time is ironically wasted under the bright moon and in front of fragrant flowers. To break her heart more, a pair of swallows, both a spring sign and a symbol of love, offers a further contrast to her loneliness. Thus, the rhetorical question raised in the final two lines complains about the difficulty of going to the empty bed, both a typical rhetoric asserting the abandonment plaint and a tantalizing gesture to the male reader.

Autumn is a season of withering: leaves fall, and flowers fade. Nature is finishing one cycle, but passion has not been fulfilled in the boudoir and the unfulfilled passion grows into a deeper sorrow:

Dawn River dies on a tall ridge-pole.

The slanting moon halfway over an empty garden.

Fallen leaves cross the window sill,

Beyond the blind flitting fireflies are trapped.

Full of love she lowers kingfisher drapes,

Tearful shuts the gold screen.

My long promised love has not come back,

Spring grass though chill is green once more.

My love for you is unswerving

When will the North Star veer?³⁴

(YTXY 5.214)

曉河沒高棟，斜月半空庭。窗中度落葉，簾外隔飛螢。含情下翠帳，

掩涕閉金屏。昔期今未反，春草寒復青。思君無轉易，何異北辰星。

This poem is titled “Boudoir Complaint” 閨怨, explicitly indicating its theme. The complaint arises as the woman’s lover has broken his promise to return. The mention of the new growth of “spring grass” suggests the imminent arrival of spring and that she has been waiting for their reunion for a long time. Time passes by meaninglessly in the lonely boudoir. The seasonal changes only remind her of the bitterness of waiting and the evanescence of life and love.

With examples from the *Yutai xinyong*, I have shown the two often interlocking major thematic concerns associated with the boudoir setting—female lamentation and the appreciation of feminine beauty, as well as major formulaic modes of expression. Through their literary practice of a palace style and their anthologizing efforts in compiling the *Yutai xinyong*, Xiao Gang and his courtiers consequently established the aesthetic space of the women’s chambers in the Chinese poetic tradition. One can safely say that the anthology represents a significant moment in the founding of the sub-genre of boudoir poetry. Distancing themselves from the orthodox view of poetry while devoting themselves to the depiction of women’s bodies and bedrooms made the court poets a target of attack by many critics from the Sui on. Palace-style poetry became the synonym

³⁴ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 158-9.

for ‘decadence’ and “the tone of a lost dynasty.”³⁵ The aesthetic site of the women’s boudoir it helped to craft, however, rooted itself, if marginally, in the poetic imagination of later ages. It left behind a rich discourse that influenced later poets on boudoir themes for centuries, even when they adapted the language to other interests.

It is believed that palace-style poetry gradually declined in the early Tang. However, it never really died out; later generations carried on the tradition in various ways. A widely recognized renewal of palace poetry themes and technique was occurring in the hands of late Tang poets such as Li He 李賀 (791-817), Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (ca. 812-ca. 866) and Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813?-58).³⁶ What these three hold in common is their unconventional use of palace poetry conventions. The play of palace poetry conventions by these poets suggests that they were acutely conscious of such conventions; paradoxically they wrote both within and beyond the tradition. As Paul Rouzer points out, these late Tang poets mastered the palace-style to the extent that they “could use palace poetry to comment on the genre itself or to point consciously to the historical circumstances that produced it.”³⁷

Among the Flowers: The Development of Boudoir Aesthetics in the Lyric

Unlike palace-style poetry, the *ci*, an alternative approach deviating from the orthodox *shi* poetics, arose from the very beginning as a popular form exploring love themes. Inspired by their involvement in the courtesan and singing girl’s quarters, literati authors

³⁵ Many scholars have noted the immorality associated with palace-style writing. For an early study making such an observation, see Marney, *Liang Chien-wen Ti* 115-7. Fusheng Wu’s *The Poetics of Decadence* views “decadent poetry” as a sub-genre, arguing that the poetry poses a challenge to the orthodox poetic canon. For a review of the critiques of palace-style poetry, see Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence* 33-36.

³⁶ See, for example, Rouzer, *Writing Another’s Dream*; Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence* Chapters 3-5.

³⁷ Rouzer, *Writing Another’s Dream* 70.

developed the *ci* as a genre expressing private love and sentiment.³⁸ This section focuses on another founding moment of boudoir poetics marked by the *Huajian ji*, generally recognized as the first major *ci* anthology, to examine how the boudoir topos established in *shi* poetry resurfaces. The significance of the *Huajian ji* should not be underestimated if we consider the role it played in establishing the generic conventions of the *ci*. Like the *Yutai xinyong*, it was also compiled with well-defined boundaries. It consists of five hundred *ci* divided into ten chapters, a collection of lyrics mostly written during the Five Dynasties (the mid 9th through the mid 10th centuries).³⁹ The authors are exclusively male literati, who were either from the local areas of the Shu or had fled there from Chang'an, the capital of the fallen Tang.⁴⁰ The lyrics included in this anthology also fashion a world of women and love with sensual beauty and tender pathos. They bear a strong resemblance to palace-style verses in their thematic scope and descriptive imagery. In fact, as Grace S. Fong points out, the depiction of the boudoir setting in early *ci* is largely indebted to its stylistic and thematic precedents such as palace/boudoir lament poetry in the Southern Dynasties.⁴¹

Ironically, it is because of this obvious similarity to earlier love songs and poems such as palace-style poetry that the author of the preface to the *Huajian ji*, Ouyang Jiong 歐陽炯 (896-971) feels compelled to distinguish the *Huajian* lyrics from the former. He singles out palace-style poetry as the target of his criticism: “The *gongti* [*shi*] of the Southern Dynasties has revived the music of the prostitute’s quarters. Not only was its

³⁸ There are many debates regarding the origin of the *ci*. My argument focuses on the literati practice. For a review of the evolution of the genre in its broader social and cultural contexts, see Chang, *The Evolution of Chinese Tz'u Poetry*, Intro. See also Lin, “The Formation of a Distinct Generic Identity” 375-91.

³⁹ It includes a few Tang Poets.

⁴⁰ Fusek, *Among the Flowers* 12.

⁴¹ Fong, “Persona and Mask” 460.

language uncultured; it was superficially elegant without substance.” 自南朝宮體，扇北里之娼風。何止言之不文，所謂秀而不實。⁴² His critique of the *gongti shi* is somewhat ironic. The charge of “*xiu er bu shi*” can also be used against the *Huajian* style. In his postscript to a Song edition of the *Huajian* anthology, Chao Qianzhi 晁謙之 makes a similar critique within an overall positive comment: “even though its language is decadent and useless in saving the world, it can be called crafted” 雖文之靡，無補於世，亦可謂工矣。⁴³ Ouyang Jiong’s excessively ornate yet ambiguous preface cannot be taken at face value. As Pauline Yu has shown, his real concern is to elevate the literati’s *ci* to a more respectable status.⁴⁴ His anxiety lies in the interrelationship between the literati *ci* and songs of more popular origin. Thus, he painstakingly distances the *Huajian ci* from “ditties of the lotus boat” (*lianzhou yin* 蓮舟引), but situates it within the tradition of more respectable forms such as the song lyrics by Li Bai.

The central message conveyed in Ouyang’s preface is that the literati should feel proud in composing and enjoying the *ci* form as a high art. Lavish private and official banquets are often mentioned in the preface, which reveal the social setting and entertainment function of the *ci*. Ouyang feels no shame in talking about this entertaining aspect, but he is concerned about the literary quality of the form. He is right in pointing out the high craftsmanship of the *Huajian* lyrics cultivated in the hands of literati authors. The lyrics are indeed more sophisticated in their descriptive artifices and more evocative in expressing the moods of love, even though they are still in the process of development, and far from the more elevated poetic genre as it was to become in the Song period. Due

⁴² Quoted in *HJJ* 221.

⁴³ Quoted in *HJJ* 221.

⁴⁴ Yu, “Song Lyrics and the Canon” 75.

to its musical association, the *ci* requires special linguistic demands and has thus generated more varied forms of expression.

The major thematic concerns associated with the boudoir setting in the *Huajian ji* are still to express nostalgia for lost loves (most often from a woman's point of view) and appreciation of feminine beauty and the erotic.⁴⁵ However, the *ci* form added more lyrical qualities to the love stories. In general, the poetics and aesthetics of the boudoir are further developed in three correlated dimensions. First, the central setting is more consistently constructed as the private chambers of women. The imperial harem, a typical setting in Southern Dynasties and Tang palace verses, disappears from the *Huajian* lyrics as this group of authors were not courtiers but official scholars writing about their private pursuit of love and pleasure. While at certain times the setting is identified as the courtesan's quarters, the boudoir is more often depicted as a homogeneous and essentialized feminine setting rather than socially and historically differentiated women's lived spaces. In referring to the women's chambers, they use a variety of terms graced by aesthetic elegance, such as *xianggui* 香閨 (the fragrant boudoir), *hongchuang* 紅窗 (the red window), *lüchuang* 綠窗 (the green window), *xiuge* 繡閣 (the pavilion of embroidery), and so on. Among them, *lüchuang*, a window with a green-gauze screen, is the most popular term. A synecdochic reference to the boudoir, it had already been used in Tang poetry, but it was through the *Huajian* poets' particular construction that the term acquired its aesthetic quality with feminine connotations, and gained its popularity in later ages. Both Wen Tingyun and Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (ca. 836-910), the two prominent

⁴⁵ There are a few poems in which love sentiments are expressed from the perspective of the male lover. Although the male perspective can be identified through some specific referential information, the sentiments are not significantly different from those expressed from the perspective of the female persona. For a discussion of the male voice in the *Huajian ji*, see Samei, *Gendered Persona* 176-81.

poets among the *Huajian* authors, frequently use “the green window” as a central image in their lyrics. For example, Wen Tingyun’s well-cited lyric to the tune *Pusa man* 菩薩蠻 reads:

Jade tower, bright moon, I always remember;
The willow branches were long and graceful in a languorous spring.
Outside the gate grasses grew luxuriantly.
While seeing you off, I heard the horse’s neigh.

On patterned silk, golden kingfishers;
Fragrant candles melt into tears.
Flowers fall, the cuckoo cries;
At the green window, the remnant of a dream dims.

(*HJJ* 1.4)

玉樓明月長相憶，柳絲裊娜春無力。門外草萋萋，送君聞馬嘶。
畫羅金翡翠，香燭銷成淚。花落子規啼，綠窗殘夢迷。

This lyric of two stanzas constructs an indistinct world of memory, reality, and dream. While the first stanza deals with a scenario fresh in memory, the second depicts a real scene which blurs into a dream. The sorrow of separation, the bitterness of waiting, and the confusion between reality and dream (there may also be the happiness of a brief reunion in the dream followed by the pain upon awakening) are all framed by “the green window.”

Second, the *Huajian* songs employ more imagistic language than propositional statement; more connotative than direct expression. Rather than offering an overview of

the woman's image and her space, the poet prefers to select isolated, dense imagery to intensify the sensual impression of the scenario. Wen Tingyun has been hailed by *ci* critics as a master in employing coded imagery. His lines "Stitched in the silk of her bright new coat / Golden-threaded partridges fly pair by pair" 新帖繡羅襦，雙雙金鷓鴣 are frequently quoted to show the intense aesthetic and connotative effect created by the image of the golden partridges flying in tandem: superficial beauty is combined with the deeper longing for love. Here, I quote another of Wen's lyrics to the tune *Pusa man* in its entirety to show more fully his typical approach to the depiction of a woman in the boudoir:

Within a crystal curtain, a pillow of crystal;
Warm fragrances rouse dreams in mandarin duck brocade.
Along the river, willows like mist.
Geese fly beneath a sky of waning moon.

Her lotus threads are a light autumn tint,
Cloth-doll ribbons cut unevenly.
Side curls concealed by fragrant red,
Jade hairpins—a breeze in her hair.⁴⁶

(*HJJ*1.2)

水晶簾裏玻璃枕，暖香惹夢鴛鴦錦。江上柳如煙，雁飛殘月天。
藕絲秋色淺，人勝參差剪。雙鬢隔香紅，玉釵頭上風。

⁴⁶ Trans. by Paul Rouzer in *Writing Another's Dream* 64-65.

This *ci* is composed of two stanzas and three scenarios. The first stanza sets up the boudoir setting by juxtaposing two separate scenes. It begins with a close-up of the bed, drawing our attention to three images: the crystal curtain, the crystal pillow, and the mandarin duck brocade. The contrasting qualities of these images, as a result of the poet's careful selection, strengthen our sensual impression of the setting. They are not only material elements of the bedroom, but also reveal the love theme of this lyric. We are not informed of any human presence at this moment, but the dream roused by the mandarin ducks suggests an atmosphere of love. The poet then shifts the gaze from the bed to a broader view of the river bank. This second scene, often suggestive of traveling, either implies her lover's departure, or expectation of his return. Either possibility, however, points to the fact that the male lover is absent. Finally, the poet spends the whole second stanza describing the one left behind in the boudoir. She is described as if void of emotion. Only the movement of her hairpins leaves the reader to imagine what may have disturbed her.

Rather than asserting the female persona's concerns and emotions, her state of mind is hinted at through the use of objects. A common approach in the *Huajian* lyrics, this also resembles the *yongwu* mode yet with a different agenda: it neither celebrates the object itself nor explores the symbolic meaning of the object, but uses the object as a vehicle to convey the subjective feelings of the persona. Centered on one single image of the Wutong tree on a rainy night, another Wen Tingyun lyric to the tune *Genglou zi* illustrates this artistic effect:

Incense in the jade burner,
Tears of the red candle

Just shine on autumn grief in the painted hall.

Brow-kohl pales,

Side-curl clouds thin:

The night is long, coverlet and pillow cold.

Wutong trees

In the midnight rain

Don't need to say the grief felt right now at parting.

Leaf by leaf,

Sound by sound,

They drop on empty stairs till dawn.⁴⁷

(HJJ 1.8)

玉爐香，紅蠟淚。偏照畫堂秋思，眉翠薄，鬢雲殘。夜長衾枕寒。

梧桐樹，三更雨。不道離情正苦。一葉葉，一聲聲，空階滴到明。

Having revealed the theme of love-longing in the first stanza, the second part of the lyric is devoted to the depiction of the woman's feelings. However, the poet does not directly approach her emotion, but turns to a description of the external world to reflect her internal emotional state. The central image is the Wutong tree with big leaves, a kind of tree associated with the nest of the phoenix in legend. It is supposed to be a symbol of love's reunion, but ironically witnesses the pain of separation in this poem. It is a rainy night in autumn; raindrops are splashing on Wutong leaves. Unable to sleep, the female persona is alert to every noise the rain makes throughout the long night. The three-

⁴⁷ Translation based on Paul Rouzer's in *Writing Another's Dream* 66-67.

character line facilitated by the *ci* form provides a fitting rhythm to vividly convey the process of raindrops falling on the leaves. The poet does not need to tell how painful the lonely night is for the woman; each drop from the rainy tree measures each intensification of her suffering. This lyric is the epitome of the *Huajian* poets' skills at evocation.

Third, the *Huajian* poets pay particular attention to creating a sensuous world in the boudoir. The sensuous tone also typifies the Southern Dynasties' palace verses, but the *Huajian* lyrics bring it to a new level due to the special properties of the *ci* form and the lyrical writers' imagistic approach. With particular attention paid to sensual details and delicate diction, the vocabulary of the *Huajian* poets for describing women's image and boudoir is largely expanded. Terms regarding women's appearance and boudoir accoutrements are also enriched. Recent studies of the anthology have provided some statistical results showing word frequency used by the *ci* writers.⁴⁸ More than twenty nouns and terms used most frequently in the *Huajian* lyrics are centered on the boudoir furnishings and environment, many of which emphasize the sensual aspects of women's image and their boudoir such as color, scent, and other material qualities.⁴⁹ In depicting the boudoir setting, they try to catch any sensual reflection of the space: color, smell, sound, and touch. As a statistical study shows, the *Huajian* poets tend to use the green color series such as *bi* 碧 and *qing* 青 for color; *jin* 金 (gold) and *yu* 玉 (jade) for materials; and *xiang* 香 (scented) for smell.⁵⁰ Of course, these are natural choices largely resulting from the actual living conditions and lifestyles of the women about whom the poets write. The emphasis on these aspects, however, suggests the *Huajian* poets' interest

⁴⁸ See, for example, Gao Feng 高峰, *Huajian ci yanjiu* 花間詞研究 47-50.

⁴⁹ Gao Feng, *Huajian ci yanjiu* 49.

⁵⁰ Hong Huasui 洪華穗, "Huajian ci" 花間詞 218-73.

and approach. The following lyrical piece to the tune *Su zhong qing* 訴衷情 by Wei Chengban 魏承班 further shows how the sensual aspects of the boudoir setting are specially highlighted in his imagination:

Clouds pass from the Milky Way, the jade clock runs on.

The chirp of a cricket fills the quiet hall.

The bamboo mats are frosty.

The green window is chilly.

The red candle splashes its perfumed tears.

A chilled light seeps from the bright moon.

It cuts at one's own heart.

How can one bear to be so alone and walk beside the pond,

And see the mandarin ducks!⁵¹

(HJJ 9.167)

銀漢雲晴玉漏長，蛩聲悄畫堂。筠簟冷，碧窗涼，紅蠟淚飄香。 皓

月瀉寒光，割人腸。那堪獨自步池塘，對鴛鴦。

This lyric is very short yet extremely rich in sensuous details presented from the female persona's perception: the sound of the jade clock, the chirp of a cricket, the chill of the bamboo mats, the cold outside the green window, the redness and scent of the candle, the pain brought by the brightness of the moonlight and paired mandarin ducks. In seeing what she sees, hearing what she hears, smelling what she smells, and feeling what she

⁵¹ Trans. by Lois Fusek in Fusek, *Among the Flowers* 165.

feels, we have been led to experience, though paradoxically, the subjective world of a woman in the boudoir as perceived by a male author.

In sum, the *Huajian* poets were able to craft an evocative and emotive world of the boudoir, and reinforced its topos as thematic locus of feminine beauty, sexuality, and love. If the practice of palace poetry brought the boudoir to the front of the poetic agenda, the *Huajian* poets refined it in the poetics of *ci*. The male lover is still absent from the boudoir, but the direct remark found in palace verses—such as the voice complaining about “the empty bed”—is replaced with indirect suggestion. The emptiness of the space is depicted through the woman’s sense of ennui and melancholy. There are also a few poems adopting a frank and explicit tone in asserting sexual desire and love, but the language in general is allusive and connotative. The *Huajian* lyrics are replete with erotic elements, but they are more often suggested through images and metaphors. Although the *Huajian ji* represents an early stage in the *ci* practice, its collection of lyrics paved the way for the feminine/*wanyue* 婉約 aesthetics of the *ci* genre recognized in later ages. The *Huajian* lyrics as a whole came to function as a repertory of the subjects, themes, and language that influenced practitioners of the lyric in subsequent periods. As Yeh Chia-ying claims, “It was only with the appearance of [*Huajian ji*] that [*ci*] achieved widespread recognition as a new genre with its own special characteristics and began to exert an influence that continued well after [*ci*] had developed into other channels.”⁵²

Convention and Transformation: The New Aesthetics of the Boudoir in Song *ci*

⁵² Yeh, “Ambiguity and The Female Voice in ‘Hua-chien Songs’” 121.

The *gongti shi* and *Huajian* lyric each represents a crucial stage of development in boudoir poetics and aesthetics. After them, we do not witness any more monumental moments marked by anthologies of canonical status like the *Yutai xinyong* and *Huajian ji*.⁵³ With highly conventionalized themes, sentiments, settings, and imagery, boudoir poetry left limited margins for further development if one chose to write within its narrow thematic scope. As Ronald Egan points out in his study of the Northern Song poet Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-72), the subjects and themes of the songwriters of Ouyang Xiu's generation were still largely confined to those of the *Huajian ji* tradition.⁵⁴ First, consider his *ci* to the tune *Lin jiang xian* 臨江仙, a song with an erotic theme:⁵⁵

Faint thunder beyond the willows, rain in the pool.
 Rain, the sound of it hitting and shattering lotus.
 Over the western corner of the building a fragment of rainbow glows.
 They lean against the banister,
 And wait for the moon to rise.

Swallows come to spy under painted beams,
 The curtain hangs down from its jade hook.
 The cool waves subside and the bamboo mat is still.
 Beside the two crystal pillows
 A fallen hairpin lies.⁵⁶

⁵³ Here, I use the concept of canon in Wendell Harris' sense of "nonce canon," which promotes a body of texts embracing an emerging new literary style or taste. See Harris, "Canonicity" 112, 116.

⁵⁴ Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu* 133.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of this *ci* and the anecdote describing the circumstances under which the poet wrote this *ci*, see Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu* 135-7.

⁵⁶ Trans. by Ronald Egan in *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu* 136.

(OSC 1.140)

柳外輕雷池上雨，雨聲滴碎荷聲。小樓西角斷虹明，闌干倚處，待得
月華生。燕子飛來窺畫棟，玉鉤垂下簾旌。涼波不動簟紋平，水精雙
枕，傍有墮釵橫。

This poem tells a story through cinematic shifts of scene. It begins with a broader view of the surroundings, and gradually moves from outdoor scenes and events to indoor ones as time passes. Once indoors, the reader is held at a distance from what is happening there. Only the inquisitive gaze of swallows is allowed. Finally, the poet invites the reader to focus on the lovers' bed—the bamboo mat woven with wave-like patterns, paired crystal pillows, and a fallen hairpin—a scene after love-making. Although these coded images are also repeatedly employed in the *Huajian ji*, Ouyang Xiu's description of the scene is obviously inspired by the Tang poet Li Shangyin's lines, "The amber pillow on the wave-patterned bamboo mat / Beside it is a fallen hairpin with kingfisher feathers" 水文簟上琥珀枕，傍有墮釵翠翹橫。⁵⁷ His opening lines, as Egan points out, are also derived from Li Shangyin's "Faint thunder sounds beyond the lotus pond."⁵⁸ Borrowing phrases and lines from earlier works, Egan observes, is not a personal tendency of Ouyang Xiu, but a common textual strategy of songwriters of his time.⁵⁹ Borrowing or adapting well-known lines, especially from late Tang verse, is a practice encouraged by *ci* critics in order to add a quality of elegance to the *ci* writing. Shen Yifu, for example, advises that "in seeking [material for] diction, one should look for fine and unvulgar lines from the poetry

⁵⁷ QTS 541.6222

⁵⁸ Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu* 156.

⁵⁹ Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu* 154.

of Wen Tingyun, Li He and Li Shangyin.”⁶⁰ Whether it is conscious borrowing or unconscious intertextual influences, a basis of recognized idioms is necessary to show the writer’s familiarity with the tradition.

Of course, Ouyang Xiu, a writer with great creativity, can go further than borrowing lines; he is limited only by generic convention. Here I would like to take another widely circulated work of Ouyang Xiu to the tune *Die lian hua* 蝶戀花, a lyric considered to be a masterpiece of the boudoir lament, to illustrate the interplay between tradition and innovation.⁶¹

The inner courtyard deep, so deep, how deep is it?
Willows pile up mist,
Blinds and curtains are of endless layers.
Where bridle of jade and carved saddle are seeking pleasure,
From the high tower, the road to Zhang Terrace cannot be seen.

The rain rages and the wind blusters on an evening in the third month,
The door closes twilight in—
No way to induce Spring to stay.
Tearful eyes ask the flowers, but the flowers are silent,
Confused red petals fly over the swing.⁶²

(*OYXQJ* 231-32)

⁶⁰ As quoted in Fong, *Wu Wenying* 50.

⁶¹ This *ci* has also been attributed to Feng Yansi, but scholars such as James Liu think that its style is closer to Ouyang Xiu’s. See Liu, *Major Lyricists* 43. The authorship of this *ci* does not matter for my discussion of the development of the boudoir poetics by literati authors.

⁶² Trans. by James Liu in Liu, *Major Lyricists* 43 with modifications.

庭院深深深幾許？楊柳堆煙，簾幕無重數。玉勒雕鞍遊冶處，樓高不
見章臺路。雨橫風狂三月暮，門掩黃昏，無計留春住。淚眼問花花不
語，亂紅飛過鞦韆去。

Ouyang Xiu is telling an old story: the abandoned woman longing for her absent lover. The allusion in the fourth and fifth lines to the male wanderer frequenting the pleasure quarters is a cliché. However, the poet both literally and aesthetically explores the feminine world of the boudoir to a greater “depth” than his predecessors. The poet begins by questioning how deep the inner courtyard is, which of course points to not merely its physical depth. It is so immeasurable that even the writer seems lost in it. This immeasurable depth, however, paradoxically measures the deeper sense of the woman’s confinement within her boudoir (through its extension, the courtyard, in this case). The boudoir, by convention so readily open to voyeurism, is no longer available for easy connoisseurship in this lyric; one has to measure its boundaries by one’s own imagination. The way in which the poet ends his lyric is also craftily plotted, letting the fall of fragile blossoms speak for the destiny of the woman. Like Wen Tingyun, Ouyang Xiu also relies heavily on evocative images. The differences between their ways of employing coded images is that Ouyang Xiu does not juxtapose isolated images together, but starts with an image and goes on to elaborate it as part of an event. This lyric has been widely hailed for its high literary quality. The high songstress Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1081-1155) appreciated this lyric very much, especially the opening line “The inner courtyard deep, so deep, how deep is it,” and wrote several lyrics beginning with the same line.⁶³

⁶³ For these lyrics, see *LQZJ* 105-10.

The representation of women and love surrounded by the boudoir environment prevailed in *ci* poetics from the late Tang through the Five Dynasties and early Song, and they continued to constitute a time-honored aspect of the feminized poetics and aesthetics of the genre in later ages. The two lyrics by Ouyang Xiu discussed above are two classical models representing the themes of amorous and sensual feelings and the grief of separation. However, along with the general developments of the *ci*, while the old convention was reinforced, the ground of the boudoir topos was also expanded. As the *ci* matured into a sophisticated literary art in the Song period, its compositional scope was largely expanded both in terms of thematics and stylistics. The widely recognized trend is of course the rise of the masculine/*haofang* 豪放 lyrics from the Northern Song for expressing male poets' political and heroic sentiments. Within the dimension of feminine/*wanyue* style, lyricists also began to explore the breadth and depth of their inner, private world.

The lyrics by the prominent *ci* writer Li Qingzhao can illustrate this remarkable change at its best. A genre shaped by the voice and feeling of women (though to a large extent constructed by male literati authors), the *ci* seemed to have provided "a 'natural' mode of expression" to women.⁶⁴ Li Qingzhao's lyrics indeed fully embrace the generic convention in expressing her sentiments as a woman (of course within de-eroticized, "clean" boundaries as Fong suggests).⁶⁵ However, she often pushed the generic conventions to the limits in order to accommodate the depth, intensity, and complexity of her inner feelings. The major themes of Li Qingzhao's lyrics centered on the boudoir setting may still be the depressed feelings of the lovelorn woman, but the moods and

⁶⁴ Fong, "Engendering the Lyric" 121.

⁶⁵ Fong, "Engendering the Lyric" 121.

sentiments expressed in the poem are expansive and complex. The following lyric to a long tune *Fenghuangtai shang yi chui xiao* 鳳凰臺上憶吹簫 provides an example of Li Qingzhao's approach to the conventional theme of sorrow over separation:

- The incense chilled in golden lions,
2 The coverlet ruffled like red waves:
I get up but am too lazy to comb my hair.
4 Let the precious mirror be covered with dust,
And the sun climbs as high as the curtain hook.
6 So afraid of rootless sorrow and smoldering resentment,
There are so many things
8 That I would like to say but don't.
The reason I have grown so skinny lately
10 Is not because of too much wine,
Nor is it due to autumn sadness.
12 Over! It's all over!
When you left this last time,
14 Not even a thousand, ten thousand "Yang Pass" songs
Could keep you here.
16 Remembering my Wuling fisherman now so far away,
Mist locks in the tower.
18 None but the flowing stream in front of the tower
Seems to remember me

20 Gazing upon it all day.

Where the gaze is frozen

22 From now on there should add

A new sorrow.⁶⁶

(LQZJ 59-60)

香冷金猊，被翻紅浪，起來慵自梳頭。任寶奩塵滿，日上帘鉤。生怕閒愁暗恨，多少事、欲說還休。今年瘦，非干病酒，不是悲秋。休休，這回去也，千萬遍陽關，也則難留。念武陵人遠，雲鎖秦樓，惟有樓前流水，應念我、終日凝眸。凝眸處，從今又添，一段新愁。

Like Ouyang Xiu, Li Qingzhao often borrowed others' lines. The first two lines are adaptations of the famous lines by Li Qingzhao's contemporary male lyricists: Xie Yi's 謝逸 "Incense is finished, and chilled in golden lions" 香盡冷金猊, and Liu Yong's 柳永 "The coverlet embroidered with Mandarin ducks rumped like red waves" 鴛鴦繡被翻紅浪.⁶⁷ Playing with these famous lines, the woman poet sketches a typical boudoir setting.

What follows is also a typical image of a woman listlessly dwelling in her boudoir.

However, as a first-person persona projected in the rest of the lyric begins to voice what she feels about her situation, we encounter a story that seems not so familiar. The theme is revealed in the second stanza as the sorrow over separation, but it is not a simple matter of missing somebody who is away; expressing this sorrow seems to have some unwanted implications. She can only give you some clues that her emotional trouble is not caused by obvious reasons. This withholding of "truth" may partly be an aesthetic effect of

⁶⁶ Trans. by Wilt Idema and Beata Grant with modifications. See Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush* 225-6.

⁶⁷ For Xie Yi and Liu Yong's lines see respectively *QSC* 2.649; 1.25.

indirectness the author intended to pursue, and may partly be the result of conventional language that is too limited to describe the complicated feelings her persona holds within. The female voice presented in this lyric is different from the outcry of grief over abandonment expressed in early works on the boudoir plaint. As lines 6-12 suggest, it is more interested in exploring how to express her sorrow than in voicing the sorrow itself. It reads like the writing subject self-consciously searching for a better mode of expression.

With the support of solid historical evidence of her life and literary practice, the case of Li Qingzhao provides more historical credibility for the autobiographical reading of her lyrics. Although I do not view her texts as mirroring her actual life experience, I believe that the poet's subjective experience and perspective as a woman dwelling in the boudoir were a major source inspiring her to bring personal touches to the boudoir stories in her lyrics. Consider the following lyric to the tune *Yong yu le* 永遇樂:

The setting sun melts into gold,
The evening clouds merge into a disk of jade,
But where on earth is he?
The mist that dyes the willows is so heavy,
The flute that plays "The Plum Tree" sounds resentful—
God knows how many, many thoughts of spring!
The festival of the First Night,
A weather that is nice and pleasant—
But later there is bound to be some wind and rain.
People come to fetch me—
Fragrant carts and finest horses—

But I decline the invitations of those companions of poetry and wine.

In those glory days of Kaifeng
Leisure reigned in the inner quarters
And I remember how we relished the Three Times Five:
Kingfisher-feather little chaplets,
Snow-willow hairpins rolled of gold,
As each tried to outdo the other with her headdress!
But now I am a bag of bones,
My hair disheveled and turning gray—
I'm afraid to be seen when going out at night.
Far better I should from
Behind a lowered blind
Just listen to other people's laughter.⁶⁸

(*LQZJ* 150)

落日鎔金，暮雲合璧，人在何處。染柳煙濃。吹梅笛怨，春意知幾
許。元宵佳節，融和天氣，次第豈無風雨。來相召、香車寶馬，謝他
酒朋詩侶。中州盛日，閨門多暇，記得偏重三五。鋪翠冠兒，捻
金雪柳，簇帶爭濟楚。如今憔悴，風鬟霜鬢，怕見夜間出去。不如
向、帘兒底下，聽人笑語。

This lyric presents the perspective of an aged woman. Although previous poets do
sometimes invoke the image of old women such as old palace women in their poems,

⁶⁸ Trans. by Wilt Idema and Beata Grant in Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush* 232.

young and attractive female personae are a common place. The perspective and voice of the old woman elaborated in this lyric have never been encountered before. It is generally held that this lyric was written in Li Qingzhao's later years after she moved to the south. Whether or not it is necessary to read this lyric against the background of the author's life, the author was definitely inspired by her widowed life in constructing the boudoir story in this lyric. It embraces several major motifs, such as separation (by death), loneliness, nostalgia for youthful years, and sorrow over aging. These motifs are not new, but the poet weaves them together, yielding a fresh perspective on the old theme of a lonely woman in her boudoir. Importantly, the lonely situation in the boudoir is a choice, a choice made by an old woman who understands the place where she has to be. Her gesture refusing company and public attention in order to guard self-esteem is unconventional, yet echoes the idiosyncratic voice adopted by other poems of Li Qingzhao.

With personal touches, Li Qingzhao individualized her boudoir stories. However, the unconventional stamp Li Qingzhao marks on her boudoir lyrics are not always personal traits. She also introduced other literati conventions into her depiction of the boudoir life by infusing rich details regarding her lifestyle as a literata as important motifs, such as drinking, admiring flowers, and moments of leisure and meditation. For example, in a lyric to the tune *Su zhong qing*, she writes:

Last night I was so tipsy that I removed my headdress late,
In my hair I still wear a branch of withered plum blossoms.
When I wake, its fragrance shatters my spring dream,
In which the one far away cannot return home.

Everyone's quiet,
The moon still lingers,
The kingfisher screens hang down.
Once again I rub the plum's remaining petals,
Once again I press out its leftover fragrance,
Once again I enjoy it for a moment more.⁶⁹

(*LQZJ* 111)

夜來沈醉卸妝遲。梅萼插殘枝。酒醒熏破春睡，夢遠不成歸。 人
悄悄，月依依。翠帘垂。更按殘蕊，更捻餘香，更得些時。

Line 4 of this lyric still suggests the theme of a woman missing her absent man. But with the elaborate motif on appreciating the fragrance of plum blossoms, the lyric reads more as a serene moment of solitude in the boudoir. The soberness after being slightly drunk interrupts her dream of reunion with her beloved, but the moon is still her companion, and the plum blossom comforts her with its fragrance. Interestingly, while her persona is awakened by the fragrant plum blossoms in this lyric, in another lyric she proposes to drink till intoxicated in order to celebrate the blossoming of the plum tree in the courtyard.⁷⁰ As an unconventional woman poet, Li Qingzhao likes to use drinking motifs to represent her idiosyncrasy. Admiring plum blossoms is also a gesture to demonstrate her cultured taste and unusual spirit for the image of plum blossoms stands for nobility

⁶⁹ Translation by Wilt Idema and Beata Grant with minor modifications. See Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush* 233.

⁷⁰ For this lyric to the tune *Yujia ao* 漁家傲, see *LQZJ* 8.

and integrity in the literati culture. These rich details of the poet's daily life subtly change the sentiments associated with the boudoir setting.

As *ci* writers, including male authors, began to increasingly explore their perception of self or emotions in relation to the boudoir or inner space, they consequently expanded and enriched the boudoir thematics and sentiments. The boudoir setting was not only associated with explicit love sentiments between men and women, but also other categories of tender moods including both joy and sorrow. The associated moods may primarily be those which appear to be derived from the ancient theme of abandoned woman's grief, such as loneliness, ennui, depression, and languor, but they are neither necessarily caused by real reasons like separation from one's love, nor necessarily belong to female personae, such as the delicate world embodied in Qin Guan's 秦觀 lyric to the tune *Huan xi sha* 浣溪沙:

An expanse of light chill rises up to the small tower.

This cloudy morning is listless as the end of autumn.

Light smoke and flowing water are dim in the painted screens.

Free-flying catkins are light as a dream,

Boundless threads of rain fine as sorrow.

The ornamented curtain idly hangs on a small silver hook.

(QSC 1.461)

漠漠輕寒上小樓。曉陰無賴似窮秋。淡煙流水畫屏幽。

自在飛花輕似夢，無邊絲雨細如愁。寶帘閒掛小銀鉤。

Along with the expansion and subtle change of feminine sentiments in general, the boudoir topos also becomes subtle and complicated. In many cases, it is indistinguishable from a general interior, domestic setting. Due to her gender, Li Qingzhao's lyrics can be read autobiographically as a woman's expression of her boudoir sentiments. However, one cannot say for sure what sentiments are embodied in the following lyric by the male poet Yan Shu 晏殊 (991 – 1055):

To the Tune *Xi qian ying* 喜遷鶯

The flame of candle flickers,

The incense tapers to ashes.

At midnight I just wake from my intoxication.

In the painted tower, the faint sounds of the second or third night-watch.

The moon shines softly outside the window.

Dawn curtains hang down,

The startled magpie is gone.

Where is the sweet dream?

Spring has come back to the southern garden.

The tree in the courtyard is a chilled plum.

(QSC 1.94)

燭飄花，香掩燼。中夜酒初醒。畫樓殘點兩三聲，窗外月朧明。

曉帘垂，驚鵲去。好夢不知何處。南園春色已歸來，庭樹有寒梅。

Like Li Qingzhao's *ci*, Yan Shu's also captures a moment of sobriety in the midst of intoxication. The two lyrics share many common elements: the moon, a screen, a dream,

and plum blossom. It is not surprising that the two poets both focus on these images, for they both describe a view at night seen from within the inner, domestic space.⁷¹ Only Li Qingzhao's piece suggests that the setting is vaguely related to the female gender by the detail of removing her headdress (*xie zhuang*). Although the persona in Yan Shu's *ci* can well be read as gendered feminine, there is no specific information with regard to gender. The theme of Yan Shu's poem is also elusive: it addresses the interruption of a sweet dream like Li Qingzhao's lyric does, but does not indicate the dream's content. Nor does the mention of the return of spring help us to understand the theme. On the one hand, it can be understood that although spring, the season of youth, love, and hope, has returned, the persona's pleasant dream is gone. But on the other hand, it seems to suggest that while human life offers no good news, there is something hopeful from Nature: spring has come back, bringing a chilled plum tree to blossom. This poem, if not over-read, depicts a perception of a domestic environment tinted with a mood of light sorrow, which is not necessarily understood as the old theme of the boudoir plaint. Another Yan Shu lyric, similar in style yet expressing a slightly more cheerful mood, reinforces the above point:

To the Tune *Huan xi sha* 浣溪沙

Tired of jade goblets after I wake from my hangover.

The incense gets cold, but I am too lazy to scent my clothes.

The early plum blossoms are bursting from sun-drenched branches.

As loneliness has gone with the chilly snow,

⁷¹ In addition to the view at night, Yan Shu's *ci* describes a longer process of time change, from night to early morning.

Spring wind is loitering on its way.

The small screens are idly placed; painted curtains hang down.

(QSC 1.89)

宿酒纔醒厭玉卮。水沈香冷懶薰衣。早梅先綻日邊枝。

寒雪寂寥初散後，春風悠悠欲來時。小屏閒放畫帘垂。

Yan Shu is believed to have been greatly influenced by the Southern Tang emperor and poet Li Yu's 李煜 (937-78) lyrics. As many scholars note, Li Yu was one of a few pioneering lyricists in articulating the male subjective voice and perspective in the *ci*. Li Yu is particularly acknowledged for his manipulation of the abandoned woman convention in order to express his nostalgia for his lost kingdom.⁷² Yan Shu seemed also to have found an emotional outlet for his subjective feelings in projecting a boudoir-like setting, but his way of engaging with this domestic setting is different from Li Yu's. While Li Yu constructs an extraordinary personal perspective as a ruler of a fallen kingdom by the way he refers to his lost country and palaces, the voice of Yan Shu's lyrics quoted above is ambiguous, and the subtle moods it expresses are befitting to the domestic setting and everyday life. In this way, Yan Shu transforms the conventional boudoir setting from within and constructs a new domestic space in the lyric for accommodating private feelings.⁷³

⁷² For a discussion of Li Yu's manipulation of the boudoir convention, see Workman, "The Bedchamber Topos". See also Samei, *Gendered Persona* 83-84.

⁷³ Long before the *ci* practice, literati authors had invoked daily life in the home setting as a rich source of representational codes in the *shi* genre. Early examples can be traced back to Tao Qian 陶潛 (365-427), but mid-Tang poets such as Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) brought forth the literati's private, domestic life as popular subject matter. See Liu Ning 劉寧, *Tang Song zhi ji shige yanbian yanjiu* 唐宋之際詩歌演變研究, especially 3-10. The representation of the literati's everyday lifestyle in the *shi* genre may have influenced *ci* writers in choosing the subject matter, but the two genres are different in aesthetic style.

Ronald Egan has observed that from the Five Dynasties to the Song, poets increasingly produced songs whose voice is ambiguous in terms of gender identity.⁷⁴ But in most cases, there exists a direct correlation between the gender identifications of the speaking voice and the characteristics of the setting. The indeterminacy with respect to gender results partly from the ambiguity of traditional Chinese poetic language, and partly from the fact that Song male lyricists preferred to directly represent themselves and their inner states in the lyric from their subjective perspective without employing the female persona. This subjective perspective is paradoxically constructed through impersonal, objective description. In other words, it is seemingly objective yet in fact a “monologue” of the author. In describing his/her perceptions, the poet does not need to always provide information regarding gender.

Based on the boudoir and by extension the domestic setting, *ci* writers in the Song period constructed a feminine world in a broader and more fluid sense. The sentiments appear to be womanly, but not necessarily women’s. As Fong points out, “[T]he ideal program of a song lyric of the mainstream feminine [*wanyue*] style was to articulate subtle and elusive moods, perceptions, and states of feeling and emotion by means of feminized, ‘domesticated’ imagery and diction.”⁷⁵ In this way, Song lyricists extended the territory of the boudoir topos by including subtle, delicate, and fluid feminine beauty and pathos. It is now a locus of several sets of correlative themes and expressions: the boudoir plaint, amorous and erotic feelings, and tender pathos related to daily, domestic life. As the third category itself is elusive, it might not be easily recognized as a standard area of expression, but would certainly affect poets of later ages when engaging with the

⁷⁴ Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed* 312.

⁷⁵ Fong, “Engendering the Lyric” 121.

genre. With a construction of an ambivalent feminine space in the lyric, Song *ci* writers in fact constructed a poetics of “interiority” on two levels: an expression of one’s inner state of mind framed by perceptions of an inner space. It both accommodates old conventions and allows more latitude for the poet to explore his/her inner world within its stylistic limits.

Performing the Literary Past: The Boudoir Convention in Ming-Qing Poetry

In terms of the classical poetic tradition, writers in the Ming-Qing era lived in the shadow of previous ages. Confronting the tremendous legacy of early ages, Ming-Qing practitioners of poetry often felt compelled to manage and reflect on the poetic tradition. In other words, it was impossible to write their own poetry without meditating upon the relationship between their practice and the tradition. Time-honored boudoir poetry continued to assume an important place not only in critical discourse but also in writing practice by poets of both genders. Before examining women authors’ writing of the boudoir in succeeding chapters, this section outlines how boudoir poetry was received and carried on in the broader contexts of male-dominant poetic practices in the Ming and Qing.

Boudoir poetry in its conventional sense had been already over-developed by the Ming-Qing era. To sum up, traditional boudoir poetry including both *shi* and *ci* genres serves three correlative or overlapping interests: an aesthetic and erotic appreciation of feminine beauty and psyche; an expression of love sentiments and other tender moods related to daily, domestic life; and the metaphoric articulation of political messages through the tropes of women and love.

I have schematically ignored the third dimension in previous sections, because on the surface, all the poems can be read as reflections upon women and love; the political meaning of the poem on a deeper level is derived from a contextualized historical reading. However, traditional Chinese hermeneutics indeed complicated the production and reception of male-authored boudoir poetry, especially the subgenre of boudoir plaint, *guiyuan*.⁷⁶ The method of allegorical reading originates from the Han period exegeses of the Confucian classic *Shi jing* and *Chu ci*. The sexual desire expressed and relationships described in the texts are read as public and political: the relationship between the female persona and her lover or husband stands for that between minister and ruler. The typical poetic situation of unfulfilled desire and lamentation as depicted in the boudoir plaint is understood as the expression of the minister/poet's frustrations with political reality. Due to its unique history of development, allegorical readings were not applied to love lyrics until very late in the eighteenth century. A group of *ci* writers and critics, known as the Changzhou school, made efforts to ascribe the reading and writing of *ci* to the allegorical tradition originating in the *shi* genre.⁷⁷ The founder Zhang Huiyan 張惠言 (1761-1802), through compiling the *Ci xuan* 詞選 (*Anthology of ci*), proposed to apply the allegorical approach to the practice of *ci*, not only in interpreting previous works such as Wen Tingyun's lyrics, but also consciously writing *ci* with allegorical intent. Although his idea and interpretations were criticized as rigid and farfetched, the school had lasting influence on *ci* writers well into the late Qing and early twentieth century. The allegorical

⁷⁶ Poetry with erotic themes has been thought to resist allegorical reading because of its particular attention to the evocation of "glamour and charm" by means of sensual details. See Miao, "Palace-Style Poetry" 31.

⁷⁷ On the theory and practice of this school in some length, see Yeh, "The Ch'ang-chou School." See also Fong, "Contextualization and Generic Codes."

manipulation of the trope of female lament by both male writers composing poetry and critics interpreting it revealed the sociopolitical implications of literature in literati culture.

In dealing with the boudoir convention, Ming-Qing poetic practice particularly recognized the two major branches of the conventional boudoir poetics, the boudoir plaint/*guiyuan* and the erotic/*yanqing*, and demonstrated a critical discernment between the two categories. In the *shi* genre, erotic poetry elicited more critical attention because from the very beginning it posed a challenge to the orthodox view of poetics. Some poets, especially in the liberal cultural ambience of the late Ming, indeed pursued the erotic styled boudoir poetry for its own sake. As Zhang Jian points out, the late Ming and early Qing saw a wave of interest in the late Tang aesthetics based on sensual beauty. Scholars such as Wu Zhaoyi reprinted and annotated the collections of Li Shangyin and Han Wo 韓偓 (844-923) as well as the *Yutai xinyong*.⁷⁸ Derived from Han Wo's collection *xianglian ji* 香奁集 (Collection of the scented dress-case), *xianglian ti* 香奁體 became a term specially referring to poetry devoted to the aesthetic and erotic appreciation of women's image and the boudoir scene. The late Ming poet Wang Cihui 王次回 (1493-1642) was known as an avid practitioner of the *xianglian ti*. He left behind two collections, *Yiyun ji* 疑雲集 and *Yiyu ji* 疑雨集, which are full of poems with sensual and erotic representations of women and the boudoir.⁷⁹ His poems are included in anthologies such as Qian Qianyi's 錢謙益 (1582-1664) *Liechao shiji* 列朝詩集 and Zhu Yizun's 朱彝尊 (1629-1709) *Ming shi zong* 明詩綜. However, as the orthodox poetic movement gained more and more currency in the Qing, sensual and erotic poetry became more

⁷⁸ Zhang Jian 張健, *Qindai shixue* 清代詩學 203.

⁷⁹ These two collections were put together and reprinted as *Wang Cihui shi ji* in 1984. This is the edition used in the current study.

marginalized than in earlier periods. In stating his editing principles in his *Qing shi bie cai* 清詩別裁, Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1764) criticizes Wang's poems as "the most harmful to people's minds" 最是害人心術.⁸⁰ Shen's critique of Wang's erotic poems is not surprising, for he insisted on the Confucian view of poetics, "poetry should express one's moral intent."

The subgenre of the boudoir plaint, however, enjoyed a respectable place in Ming-Qing mainstream poetic practice. Major anthologies are replete with poems with titles such as "*Guiyuan*" or "*Gui ci*." Shen Deqian's anthology, for example, includes a poem by Dong Yining 董以寧 titled "*Guiyuan*" among others:

Silk sash is tied on the joint-pleasure bed in vain,
As my husband is on his long march, my heart is broken.
Since it preserves my tear stains at the time of parting,
I cannot bear to wash my robe for over a year.

(*QSBC* 7.132)

流蘇空繫合歡床，夫婿長征妾斷腸。

留得當時臨別淚，經年不忍浣衣裳。

This poem expresses the plaint of a soldier's wife. The first line makes use of stock images from the *Yutai xinyong* such as "bed of joint-pleasure," an erotic element. But this minor detail is subsumed within the sad story of the female persona's extreme sorrow. Presumably touched by this poem, Shen Deqian cannot help but note at the bottom of the text that "no one surpasses this poet's skillfulness in invoking the image of tears."⁸¹ He

⁸⁰ *QSBC*, "Fanli" 2.

⁸¹ *QSBC* 7.132.

reads the poem as a conventional *guiyuan* poem with an excellent artistic touch. Whether entrusting their own emotional experience to the boudoir plaint or simply writing as a literary exercise, Ming-Qing poets continued to create various versions of the lonely, love-longing woman in the boudoir. A perfect version, whether by a man or woman, would be appreciated for its own virtue in representing the classic situation and sentiments. The inclusion of boudoir poetry in mainstream anthologies suggests that even orthodox poetic practice valued this long-standing literary tradition as long as there was no particular attempt to evoke the erotic. The potential of the boudoir plaint for political allegory also made poems with this theme more acceptable in orthodox poetic practice.

As time-honored subjects and themes sanctioned by the *ci* form, women and the boudoir seemed to have always assumed a central place in the genre from the late Tang onward. As generally held, the *ci* genre declined during the Yuan and Ming periods, but was revived by some important late Ming and early Qing poets in the seventeenth century.⁸² The seventeenth century *ci* revival has been attributed by both modern scholars to the achievements of a few prominent poets such as Chen Weisong 陳維崧 (1625-82), Zhu Yizun, Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608-47), and Nalan Xingde 納蘭性德 (1655-1685). They are recognized for their broadening of the thematic scope of *ci*, adding the quality of sincerity, and injecting the poet's own individuality.⁸³ Although they turned to different earlier models to seek inspiration, these poets all reaffirmed the function of the *ci* as a vehicle of self-expression.⁸⁴ The *ci*'s generic convention allowed the poet to

⁸² For a study of the seventeenth-century *ci* revival, see Chu, "Interplay between Tradition and Innovation".

⁸³ Chu, "Interplay between Tradition and Innovation" 74.

⁸⁴ On different *ci* schools in the Qing period, see 王運熙 and Gu Yisheng 顧易生, *Zhongguo wenxue piping shi* 中國文學批評史 Chapter 4. See also Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生, *Qingdai cixue* 清代詞學 Chapter 6.

explore private emotions in more depth— not only love and desire, but also other sentiments. As far as this chapter is concerned, they continued to invoke the inner, boudoir space in representing these themes. While they still engaged with the conventional mode of the boudoir plaint, they tended to produce love lyrics from their individualized perspective as male lover or husband. Chen Zilong and Zhu Yizun deserve our special attention. A heroic Ming loyalist and romantic lover of the famous courtesan Liu Rushi, Chen Zilong has been particularly noted for his love songs. His patriotic intent and actual love affair lent these poems more political and historical implications.⁸⁵ The political meaning of his love poems relies more on an allegorical reading. His expression of love sentiments on the surface, however, is refreshed as a result of his poetic exchange with Liu Rushi. In these exchanges, the description of her appearance and the boudoir setting is not as important as a subtle emotional communication with the addressee. In his *Jingzhiju qinqu* 靜志居琴趣, a collection of his love lyrics and erotic songs, Zhu Yizun both follows generic conventions and pushes against their limits to inscribe his private feelings and memories about his secret love affair.⁸⁶ The convention of the boudoir as a site of public eroticism is turned into a “forbidden space of illicit passion” in his autobiographical context.⁸⁷

Generally speaking, the Ming-Qing male poets’ engagement with boudoir themes in both *shi* and *ci* genres did not exceed their predecessors in terms of broader thematic

⁸⁵ Yeh Chia-ying thinks that the autobiographical and symbolic elements of Chen Zilong’s love lyrics made them great candidates for allegorical readings, particularly as the expression of patriotic sentiment. See Yeh, “Ch’ên Tzu-lung.” Kang-i Sun Chang’s book-length study of Chen Zilong and Liu Rushi provides the perspective that Chen’s political poetry was inspired by his love poetry addressed to Liu. See Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch’ên Tzu-lung*.

⁸⁶ For a study of Zhu Yizun’s love lyrics in the *Jingzhiju qinqu*, see Fong, “Inscribing Desire.” My statements about Zhu Yizun here are indebted to her discussion.

⁸⁷ Fong, “Inscribing Desire” 448. It is believed that the lyrics were produced to record his love affair with his wife’s sister.

categories. Their boudoir poetry is primarily a performance of conventionalized themes and codes with more or less personal touches. They indeed continued to explore in more depth their “interiority” in the private, domestic setting, a fluid dimension already opened up by Tang and Song poets, but their exploration in this dimension deserves another independent study. A distinctive transformation or transcendence of the boudoir convention for women’s own interests is yet to be seen accomplished in the hands of the critical mass of Ming-Qing women authors, whose writings will be examined in the following chapters.

Chapter Two

Constructing Women's Space as a New Cultural Ideal: The *Gui* in the Qing Anthology *Zhengshi ji*

Under the shadow of crimson clouds and deep behind the painted blind,
She refuses the visits of wandering bees and wanton butterflies.
She does not complain to the east wind about scattering,
In light rouge, she accompanies me idly singing by the secluded window.

絳霞掩映畫簾深，謝絕游蜂浪蝶尋。不向東風怨零落，幽窗紅粉伴閒吟。

Guo Jie 郭价, "Peach Blossoms in a Vase" 瓶中碧桃¹

Although women's poetry of the Ming-Qing period is greater in thematic and stylistic scope than that of earlier periods, boudoir life is still a major source of inspiration for women's poetic imagination. My research shows that, despite its ambivalent status in Chinese poetic history, traditional boudoir poetics had tremendous influence on Ming-Qing women's poetic production. It is evident that women not only had access to classical sources of boudoir poetry such as the *Yutai xinyong*, but also consciously modeled their writing on conventional boudoir poetry, including the palace style. Poems excessively evoking glamorous and erotic feelings, whether by men or women, of course were not acceptable by the standards of orthodox poetics. However, conventional expressions of feminine beauty and other tender pathos associated with the boudoir setting are commonplace in Ming-Qing women's poetry. In reading this type of poetry, it is often difficult to tell whether it is merely an exercise in the artistic conventions of the genre, or a perception of boudoir life already shaped by the author's textual experience of the literary past.

However, women's writing was not only connected with the literary past, but also more directly and substantially with their contemporary world and society. A genre

¹ ZSJ, Buyi 15b.

centered on the images and lives of women, boudoir poetry both influences and is influenced by changing conceptions of femininity. As Ming-Qing writing women developed a mature literary culture, their poetic production more fully embraced their literary tastes cultivated in this culture. Women's boudoir writing, understood as a product of this historical and cultural ambience, both enlarges the parameters of and sets up new limits of representation. The conventional subject positions—the abandoned woman or the objectified beautiful woman—were rendered outdated or marginalized as women attempted to explore more meaningful subjectivities within their society.

In her seminal study of women's reinscription of conventional textual subjects, Robertson claims that Ming-Qing women writers "reclaim the boudoir as their own domestic space" by turning the lonely corner of the boudoir into "a de-eroticized place of work, leisure, and companionship with other women."² Her observation aptly captures some new trends in Ming-Qing women's representation of their boudoir life. However, within the limits of her essay, she only confirms this observation with a preliminary survey; there are many questions left unanswered. What kinds of ideological and literary forces were behind this remarkable textual transformation? Which textual strategies have women poets used to craft a new space of the boudoir? How do women specifically interact with the boudoir convention? By focusing on a Qing women's *shi* anthology, the *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集 (Correct Beginnings: Women's Poetry of Our August Dynasty, abridged as *Zhengshi ji*) and its sequel, this chapter examines how Qing women poets refashion the boudoir convention in order to project their cultural taste and lifestyle as *guixiu* (cultivated women of the inner chambers), a new feminine ideal

² Robertson, "Changing the Subject" 200.

not only reflecting the general development of women's literary culture from the late Ming on, but also historical trends particular to the Qing period.

The *Zhengshi ji* marks a significant historical juncture. Through its retrospective selection of women's poetic production ranging from the beginning of the Qing to its own time (including poets who lived during the late-Ming and Qing), the anthology was intended to establish a normative poetics of women's poetry in light of dominant ideological and literary discourses. The representation of women's lives in the inner chambers in this anthology reflects some commonly valued aesthetic qualities of femininity in the Late Imperial era as well as new trends emphasized in the Qing. As I have shown in Chapter 1, important anthologies were instrumental in the establishment of the boudoir topos. A monumental anthology of women's poetry, the *Zhengshi ji* provides a rich source for us to examine the distinctive boudoir poetics and aesthetics established by Qing women poets which reflect their contemporary ideological and aesthetic standards.

As the *Zhengshi ji* is a *shi* anthology, this chapter focuses on the *shi* genre, a genre in general more directly involved in sociopolitical arenas in Chinese history. Yun Zhu's anthologizing project supported by some women poets and scholars also reveals a textual politics of a female literary community. Seeking general approval from their social and literary authorities, women writers needed to reform the conventional parameters of boudoir poetics in order to be aligned with their social and ideological system. As their own "poet-autobiographers," these women poets had to be cautious regarding how others might interpret the self-images presented in their poetry.³ While men could afford to

³ This term is borrowed from Stephen Owen's essay. See Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror" 79. I find it useful because women's boudoir poetry was often produced and received as a more realistic

discount the boudoir because it was marginal to their public domain, women, whose lives revolved around this space, were sensitive to its significance in their textual production.

The Anthology and its Agenda

In order to historicize Qing women's relationship to literary discourse and authority at the historical juncture of the *Zhengshi ji*, I shall begin by examining the context in which the anthology was compiled and Yun Zhu's anthologizing agenda. The volume of Qing women's writings had reached a strikingly unprecedented level. Hu Wenkai's 胡文楷 *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考, the most comprehensive catalogue of women's literary works to date, covers the period from the Han to the early Republic, and includes more than 4,000 individual authors. But most of these works are of the Ming-Qing period, among which over 3,000 titles of anthologies and collections were produced in the Qing. Consisting of 1,736 poems by 933 poets in the first edition, and 1,229 poems by 593 poets in the sequel, the grand *Zhengshi ji* is a crystallization of contemporary women's literary culture. It was intended to be a summation of women's poetry from the beginning of the Qing (the year 1644) through 1836. It was not the largest collection of Qing women's poetry, but it was perhaps the most widely circulated anthology of Qing women's writing.⁴

depiction of their life experience. There are cases in which the author claims a distance from what she presents, signaling this distance with titles such as "I Wrote this Poem on Behalf of Others" 代擬. Poems in these cases are mostly written in conventional modes such as the boudoir plaint and the appreciation of feminine beauty.

⁴ Wang Qishu's 汪啓淑 *Xiefang ji* 擷芳集 (printed 1773) and Huang Zhimo's 黃秩模 *Guochao guixiu liuxu ji* 國朝閨秀柳絮集 (printed 1853), two anthologies compiled by male scholars, include more poems and authors than the *Zhengshi ji*. Given the large number of copies extant in libraries around China and in present-day book markets in the Jiangzhe region, it is likely that the *Zhengshi ji* was widely published and circulated. However, I need to do further investigation in order to judge how widely it was circulated in the Qing.

The *Zhengshi ji* was compiled by the woman scholar Yun Zhu 惲珠 (1771-1833).

She informs us that there were originally over three thousand poems in her collection, from which she selected and published 1,736 poems by 933 poets for the first edition in 1831.⁵ In the three years following the publication of the *Zhengshi ji*, many women sent their poetry to her in order to get published. Yun Zhu then selected from this group a further 919 poems by 459 poets and planned to publish them in a sequel.⁶ However, her health deteriorated, and she entrusted her granddaughter Miaolianbao 妙蓮保 to continue the project.⁷ After her grandmother's death, Miaolianbao assumed the responsibility of editing the sequel, which was published in 1836 and contains 1,229 poems by 593 poets.⁸ In the introduction ("Xiaoyin" 小引), she indicates that she published without alteration the poetry that her grandmother had selected, a selection consisting of 10 *juan* of poems in the main body and an addendum (*Fulu* 附錄) of poems mostly by anonymous authors. In addition to Yun Zhu's selection, she added one *juan* of poems compiled by her mother Cheng Mengmei 程孟梅 as a supplement (*Buyi* 補遺), which consists of 310 poems by 134 poets.⁹ This project of great endurance and devotion was the result of decades of collection and compilation by Yun Zhu, with various forms of assistance from members of her family as well as from her social network.

In her study, Susan Mann has situated Yun Zhu's anthology in the broader context of the classical revival in the High Qing period. One of the profound consequences of this

⁵ ZSJ, "Bianyan" 1b-2a.

⁶ ZSXJ, "Xiaoyin" 1b. These numbers are provided by Miaolianbao.

⁷ Miaolianbao also participated in copy editing the *Zhengshi ji* in turn with her sisters Yilanbao 伊蘭保 and Jinsubao 金粟保.

⁸ ZSXJ, "Xu" 1b.

⁹ ZSXJ, "Xiaoyin" 1b. Foyunbao 佛芸保, another sister of Miaolianbao, also participated in copyediting the sequel.

intellectual movement, Mann observes, was a renewed interest in the authoritative female scholars and literary voices of the classical age and the subsequent *querelle des femmes* between Zhang Xuecheng and Yuan Mei.¹⁰ As many scholars have noted, the central issue of this debate about women revolves around the legitimacy of women's poetic voice.¹¹ While a liberal like Yuan Mei recruited female disciples and published their poetry in appreciation and support of their literary talent, the conservative Zhang Xuecheng considered such acts to be outrageous transgressions of proper gender boundaries. While acknowledging women's potential in transmitting the Dao of classical learning under unusual circumstances, Zhang's attitude towards women's engagement with poetry, especially towards those from respectable families making public their literary talent, is disapproving. For Zhang, it might be acceptable for the courtesan to participate in the literati's poetic culture due to her special social status, but it should never be the vocation of "women from illustrious families governed by ritual" because she has to fulfill her domestic responsibilities.¹² Informed by both sides of the debate, Mann suggests, Yun Zhu struck a balance between women's talent and virtue in her editing project. In defending the propriety of women's poetry, Yun Zhu claims that her selection of poems embraces both "moral rectitude" and "eloquence of expression."¹³

At the time Yun Zhu published her anthology, several decades had passed since Zhang Xuecheng wrote his famous essay "Fu xue" 婦學 (Women's Learning, 1797) objecting to women's public literary activities. In fact, the inclusion of women's poetry in

¹⁰ See Mann, "Classical Revival" and "'Fu xue' (Women's Learning)." See also her English translation of Zhang Xuecheng's essay, "Fu xue" in Chang and Saussy, eds., *Women Writers* 783-99.

¹¹ See Mann, "Classical Revival;" Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets;" and Ho, Clara Wing-chung, "The Cultivation of Female Talent."

¹² Chang and Saussy, eds., *Women Writers* 792.

¹³ Mann, *Precious Records* 97.

anthologies alongside male poets and the compilation of anthologies of exclusively women's poetry had become inevitable trends in mainstream poetic practice well before Zhang Xuecheng's time. Although many preface writers for collections or anthologies of women's writing still feel compelled to defend women's literary practice, their defensive discussion appears to follow conventional rhetoric, an after-effect of the earlier debate. Yun Zhu's arguments for the legitimacy of women's poetic voices can be read in this light, but her use of defensive rhetoric has a strategic purpose, whereby she attempts to establish an orthodoxy for Qing women's poetry.

In the "Liyan" 例言 (Editing Principles), Yun Zhu particularly acknowledges seven anthologies of exclusively women's poetry compiled in the Qing period.

1. Wang Shilu 王士祿 (1626-73), comp. *Ranzhi ji* 然脂集, preface dated 1658.¹⁴
2. Chen Weisong 陳維崧 (1628-82), comp. *Furen ji* 婦人集.¹⁵
3. Hu Xiaosi 胡孝思 (1662-1722), comp. *Benchao mingyuan shichao* 本朝名媛詩鈔, 1766.
4. Wang Qishu 汪啓淑 (1728-99), comp. *Xiefang ji* 撝芳集, 1773.
5. Jiang Jixiu 蔣機秀 (fl. 1793), comp. *Guochao mingyuan shi xiu zhen* 國朝名媛詩繡鍼, Preface dated 1793.

¹⁴ According to Judith Zeitlin, the *Ranzhi ji* was completed in 1665. See Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses" 99. However, Wang Shilu's *Ranzhi ji* was not formally published. Most of the collection was lost. Today only several *juan* are preserved in the Shandong Museum and the Shanghai library. See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 906-911. Although the *Ranzhi ji* seems to have never been published, it was well-known to Qing anthologists of women's poetry; his name and the anthology are often mentioned in their prefatory writings. The *Ranzhi ji li* (Principles of the *Ranzhi ji*) is included in the *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書. See Wang Shilu, *Ranzhi ji li*.

¹⁵ Due to the lack of any preface or postscript, it is difficult to accurately date this anthology. According to Judith Zeitlin, it was most likely compiled between 1644 and 1666. See Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses" 101. In his anthology, Jiang Jixiu mentions that the collection of the *Furen ji* ends in the early years of the Kangxi Reign (1622-1722), which supports Zeitlin's guess. See Jiang Jixiu, *Guochao mingyuan*, "Liyan" 2a. See also Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 915.

6. Xu Kuichen 許夔臣 (fl. 1804), comp. *Xiangke ji* 香咳集, 1804.¹⁶
7. Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621-ca.1706), comp. *Mingyuan shiwei* 名媛詩緯, 1667.¹⁷

In addition, she mentions five other anthologies that most likely include predominantly male poets as models of organization and formatting, anthologies such as Deng Hanyi's 鄧漢儀 (1617-89) *Mingjia shiguan* 名家詩觀 (also known as *Shiguan*) and Shen Deqian's *Guochao shi biecai* 國朝詩別裁 (Poetry of Our August Dynasty).¹⁸ With the exception of Wang Duanshu's *Mingyuan shiwei*, these anthologies were all compiled by male scholars in the Qing period. These anthologies provide important clues that can help us to identify the anthologizing trends to which the *Zhengshi ji* was closely related.

The late Ming began to see a flourishing practice in the compilation of anthologies of exclusively women poets; women's poetry was also being included in anthologies alongside male poets. With a focus on the late Ming period, Kang-i Sun Chang and Grace Fong have examined the issue of making anthologies of women's poetry with regard to gender and canon formation.¹⁹ In particular, Fong's examination of two groups of Ming anthologies outlines several approaches to anthology compilation in terms of time span, selection scope and organizing principles. While Qing anthologists, especially those in the early Qing, in many ways continued Ming conventions of

¹⁶ This anthology is referred to as *Diaohua ji* 雕華集 by Yun Zhu in her "Liyan."

¹⁷ For an introduction to this anthology, see Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies" 157-9. On Wang Duanshu and the significance of her *Mingyuan shiwei*, see also Widmer, "Ming Loyalty."

¹⁸ ZSJ, "Li yan" 3b-5b. Shen Deqian's anthology is popularly known as *Qingshi biecai* 清詩別裁 in contemporary scholarship, but was more often referred to as *Guochao shi biecai* in its own time. To be clear, I use the title *Guochao shi biecai* for the sake of discussion in the text, but the version I rely on as a primary source is titled *Qingshi biecai*; the source of reference is thus noted.

¹⁹ See Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies" and "Gender and Canonicity;" Fong, "Gender and the Failure of Canonization." In her essay "Ming and Qing Anthologies," Chang also provides an introduction to a number of Qing anthologies of women's poetry.

anthology-making, their practices of anthologizing women's poetry also underwent tremendous changes along with broader literary movements of their time. The inclusion of women poets in authoritative anthologies that claim women's poetry as an indispensable part of the imperial grand civilization is very much a Qing phenomenon.²⁰ Some of the anthologists who do not include women authors still feel compelled to give an explanation for their absence, which suggests that the inclusion of women's poetry was becoming a standard practice.²¹ In addition to including women's poetry in male-dominant anthologies, some Qing anthologists also had a strong impulse to devote their anthologies exclusively to the women poets of their dynasty. Wang Qishu's *Xiefang ji* and Hu Xiaosi's *Benchao mingyuan shichao* on Yun Zhu's list are two ground-breaking pioneers.

Moreover, along with the broader poetic movement of reviving the Confucian *shijiao* 詩教 (the teaching of the *Shi jing* 詩經), encapsulated in the principle of "to be meek and gentle" (*wenrou dunhou* 溫柔敦厚), there was also an increasing demand that women's writing reflect moral values.²² The term *wenrou dunhou* originally appears in the *Li ji*, in which it is used to briefly illustrate an ideal poetics as well as an ideal personality.²³ Although different poetic schools place different emphases on the term, as a poetic and aesthetic standard it is generally understood to refer to kindness and morality

²⁰ Among the fifty-five entries of Xie Zhengguang 謝正光 and She Rufeng's 余如豐 recently compiled catalogue of early Qing anthologies of contemporary poetry, nineteen anthologies include women's writing. Fifteen of these anthologies view women's writing as a part of the Qing's overall literary achievement. See Xie Zhengguang and She Rufeng, comp., *Qing chu ren xuan qing chu shi huikao* 清初人選清初詩彙考.

²¹ See, for example, the "Fanli" of the *Guochao shidi* 國朝詩的 reprinted in Xie Zhengguang and She Rufeng, comp., *Qing chu ren xuan qing chu shi huikao* 305.

²² On the revival of the *Shijiao* in Qing poetic movements, see Zhang Jian, *Qindai shixue*, especially Chapters 1 and 12.

²³ Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing* 50.845.

in intention and restraint and gentleness in expression. Shen Deqian, one of the most influential leaders of this orthodox poetic movement, deserves our special attention here. The principle of *wenrou dunhou* is central to his poetic theory. He thinks this principle can be applied to the evaluation of the following three aspects of poetry: an author's moral quality and cultivation; the correct way in which the poet/minister admonishes his ruler (*fengjian* 諷諫); and the overall aesthetic qualities of the poem.²⁴ In other words, a good poem for Shen should be a perfect expression of a poet's authentic moral intent or of social and political didacticism: substantial in content yet gentle in style; elegant yet unembellished in language. Shen Deqian's insistence on the integration of moral and aesthetic values represents "a great and final summation" of the broader literary trend of returning to the poetic orthodoxy set forth in the Han exegesis of the *Shi jing*.²⁵ Despite changing social and historical conditions, from its revival in the late Ming through the Qianlong reign (1736-95), the Confucian *shijiao* had established its orthodox place in Qing literary practice; *wenrou dunhou* or *wenhou heping* 溫厚和平 (to be meek and peaceful) became a popular slogan in poetic criticism.

As a leader of the orthodox poetic movement, Shen Deqian is concerned with women's poetry and extends his theory to women's literary practice. Consistent with his general anti-erotic tendency as shown in the previous chapter, his selection of one *juan* of poems by women (*juan* 31) in his *Guochao shi biecai* excludes poems about sexual love and romance (*fengyun yuelu zhi ci* 風雲月露之詞) associated with courtesans (*qinglou shixing funü* 青樓失行婦女) and only includes poetry by "worthy women" (*xianyuan* 賢媛). He thinks only women who carry on the teachings transmitted from female

²⁴ Zhang Jian, *Qindai shixue* 533.

²⁵ Zhang Jian, *Qindai shixue* 570.

instructresses such as Ban Zhao can make their poetic voice heard and that their poetry is significant in maintaining Confucian ethics and orders. The purpose of his selection of women's poetry, he claims, is to "pay respect to the quality of poetry and to set up a paradigm for those from the inner chambers."²⁶ Considering his stature as leader of a contemporary poetic movement, Shen's assertion sets up a moral standard for judging women's writing, but may also have given writing women more confidence in the moral authority of their poetic voice if they chose to follow orthodox paradigms.

As a result of the moral concern of women's writing, Qing anthologists of women's poetry increasingly marginalized courtesan poets and chose to focus on respectable gentry women in their anthologies. Although many claimed to exclude courtesans' writing because of its association with the erotic, the marginalization of this group of authors was more due to their ignominious social status as perceived in the Qing.²⁷ The classification of women poets according to moral categories was common in Ming anthologies and earlier times, but the social status of the female author was never such a serious concern as it was in the Qing period. While the Ming anthologist Li Hu 鄺琥 puts concubines and courtesans in a separate section in his *Tongguan yibian* 彤管遺編 (Compilation of Works Left by Red Writing Brushes, 1567), his contemporaries Qu Juesheng 蘧覺生 and Zheng Wen'ang 鄭文昂 openly refuse to consider social status or the moral conduct of women as selection criteria.²⁸ Qu and Zheng's "indiscriminate

²⁶ *Qingshi biecai*, "Fanli"2.

²⁷ The marginalization of the courtesan in Qing social and cultural life was a complex phenomenon, but the Manchu state policy delegitimizing the status of female entertainers was a direct factor responsible for the decline of courtesan culture. See Mann, *Precious Records* 126-8. On the criminalization of prostitution by the Qing legal system, especially during the Yongzheng reign (1723-35), see Sommer Chapter 7.

²⁸ For a discussion of these anthologies from the perspective of canon-formation, see Fong, "Gender and the Failure of Canonization."

attitude in selection” in fact reflects the “comprehensiveness/inclusiveness” of the Ming trend in anthologizing women’s poetry.²⁹ However, Qing anthologists became more and more discriminating with the social status of female authors.

Yun Zhu’s anthologizing project echoes orthodox literary trends of her time. Her ambitious agenda is epitomized in the title of her anthology, a title that combines three key terms, *guochao*, *guixiu* and *zhengshi*. With the first word *guochao* (our august dynasty), Yun Zhu not only embraces the mainstream fashion of anthologizing contemporary poets, but also demonstrates her seriousness in incorporating Qing women’s poetry into the ongoing imperial cultural enterprise. By aligning her project with similarly titled authoritative anthologies such as Shen Deqian’s *Guochao shi biecai*, the woman editor was astute in her attempt to elevate the status of women’s writing. She particularly recognizes the authority and significance of the *Guochao shi biecai* and meticulously models her own collection after this anthology. She aspires to make the *Zhengshi ji* a female counterpart to Shen’s authoritative achievement both in terms of poetic and moral standards.

Yun Zhu’s adoption of the term *guixiu* indicates not only the gender orientation of the project but also the exclusivity of the authors’ social and cultural standing. The conception of *guixiu* changed over time. It could be used to refer to women with artistic talents in general (including courtesans) in the late Ming. But Yun Zhu holds a well-defined conception of the *guixiu* in her anthologizing project. By focusing on *guixiu* poets, she is following the orthodox trend represented by Shen Deqian and Xu Kuichen’s exclusion of courtesans and other marginal groups. The explanation for her exclusion of poems by courtesans is phrased in almost exactly the same terms as those used by Shen

²⁹ Fong, “Gender and the Failure of Canonization” 147.

Deqian: “Fallen women of the green bower often write poems about sexual love and romance. While earlier anthologies find their writings enjoyable, this anthology does not include them” 青樓失行婦人，每多風雲月露之作，前人諸選津津樂道，茲集不錄。³⁰

Shen Deqian includes a total of sixty-four women poets in his *Guochao shi biecai*; of these sixty-four poets, fifty-nine are also chosen by Yun Zhu with almost the same selection of poems. However, inspired by Xu Kuichen’s discriminating way of treating courtesan poets, she also enlists a few exceptional cases such as the courtesan Liu Rushi; she thinks that such women transcended their social status by marrying famous literati and performing virtuous female acts in their later life. In addition, she also claims that both Taoist and Buddhist nuns do not fall into the category of *guixiu*. However, to be discriminating she also includes the poems by several women who became nuns to protect their integrity.³¹ When we examine the biographical notes of the female authors in the *Zhengshi ji*, it becomes evident that these *guixiu* poets are mostly wives (including concubines) and daughters of the gentry class, whose male family members often held official titles. But there are also women from lower classes such as poor commoners and exceptional cases such as Liu Rushi. Yun Zhu’s construction of *guixiu* identity, then, is more concerned with moral and cultural cultivation than only with class background. In her recent paper on “the female reading public” in early nineteenth-century China, Ellen Widmer considers the case of *Zhengshi ji* and notes: “[a]lthough hardly devoid of snobbery and class privilege, it conveys a sense that *guixiu* status could be acquired through reading and good behavior, not only through inheritance.”³² Despite Widmer’s

³⁰ ZSJ, “liyan” 5a. Not to be confused with “the green widow,” “the green bower” refers to the dwellings of prostitutes and courtesans.

³¹ ZSJ, “liyan” 5a.

³² Widmer, “Considering a Coincidence” 301.

focus on the aspect of reading, her observation aptly reveals that the *guixiu* group was perceived as sharing a high degree of social and cultural homogeneity. As Yun Zhu's selection criteria emphasizes, a *guixiu* should express "chaste and virtuous nature and emotion" (*xingqing zhenshu* 性情貞淑) in the "harmonious sound" (*yinlü hexie* 音律和諧) of their poetry.³³

Having brought forth a well-defined notion of *guixiu*, Yun Zhu attempts to construct a discursive arena for women based on "properly" defined gender boundaries as suggested by the third term *zhengshi* (correct beginnings). This term was originally used in the Great Preface to the *Shi jing*: "'Zhou nan' and 'Shao nan' are the correct beginnings, the basis of the process of kingly transformation" 周南召南，正始之道，王化之基.³⁴ The songs in the "Zhou nan" 周南 and "Shao nan" 召南, the first two sections of the "Airs of the States" ("Guo feng" 國風) in the *Shi jing*, are mostly interpreted as songs illustrating wifely virtue. As Mann notes on the term, "Correct beginnings refer to the women's apartments (i.e., the domestic realm, women's realm) as the starting point for the process of kingly transformation that ordered the imperium."³⁵ Educated women understood well this commentary tradition. For example, one of the *Zhengshi ji* authors, Wang Nairong 王迺容, writes in her poem, "Reading the Zhou nan and Shao nan, / I understand the women's chambers are the beginning of the kingly transformation" 我讀

³³ ZSJ, "liyan" 5a.

³⁴ Kong Yingda, ed. 36-37. For an English translation and interpretation of this Preface, see Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* 37-49. However, the version Stephen Owen uses does not include these lines; it ends at "the ultimate perfection of the poems" 詩之至也, a few lines earlier. On the Preface, see also Yu, "Allegory."

³⁵ Mann, *Precious Records* 116.

二南詩，王化閨房始。³⁶ This is exactly the point of departure from which Yun Zhu attempts to elevate women's poetic voices.

When Zhang Xuecheng argued against women's engagement with writing poetry, what troubled him most was women's transgression of gender boundaries through literary activity. Yun Zhu and her like-minded supporters were aware of the socio-ethical problematics they, as writing women, posed to men such as Zhang, and they rightly address this issue in their defensive prefatory writings. First of all, they argue that the women's sphere is not inherently improper as a poetry-producing site; rather, incorrect approaches have resulted in immoral poetry. What threatens women's morality is not poetry itself, but a failure to follow the principle of *wenrou dunhou*. In support of Yun Zhu, Pan Suxin 潘素心 (fl. 1831), a bosom friend for twenty years, contributed both poems and a preface to the *Zhengshi ji*. Pan clearly points out that Yun Zhu's purpose in making her anthology is to establish an orthodoxy of women's poetry in light of *shijiao*:

Madam has painstakingly collected women's writings for decades. Her collection is rich, but her selection must be superb in order to illustrate profound and subtle principles. She hopes to establish models for women studying poetry, making their writing "begin with feelings" and "end with the rites and morality." Therefore, she completely excludes those writings about sexual love and romance in order to conform to the correct way conveyed in "Er nan" [Zhou nan and Shao nan]. (*ZSJ*, "Xu" 2a)

³⁶ *ZSJ* 16.23b.

太夫人積數十年之力，蒐羅既富，選擇必精，用以微顯闡幽，垂爲懿範。使婦人女子之學詩者，發乎情止乎禮儀，盡刪夫風雲月露之詞，以合乎二南正始之道。

The quotation of the ideas from the Great Preface to the *Shi jing* reveals that Yun Zhu and her supporters are perfectly aware of the quintessence of orthodox poetics. As a close friend and participant in the project, Pan Suxin elaborates the rationale of Yun Zhu's anthology.

Having empowered women's poetry by citing the *Shi jing*, Yun Zhu's supporters such as Huang Youqin 黃友琴 (fl. 1831) go on to argue that living within the inner chambers women are actually situated in an advantageous position for the pursuit of poetic practice because they have more spare time after fulfilling their domestic and ritual responsibilities.³⁷ She goes on to write:

[The grand literary achievement of women in our dynasty] is also due to the fact that the trend [of women writing poetry] had already begun in earlier ages, whose elegance and refinement have gradually spread for over a thousand years. Nowadays, women have become skilled in it. Writing poetry, along with weaving and sewing, should also be women's vocations. (ZSJ, "Xu" 4b)

亦由風會既開，優柔漸漬，千有餘年，而後婦人嫻此者。與織紉、組紃，同其服焉。

From defending the legitimacy of women's poetic voices to arguing that poetry should be the prerogative of women is a giant leap. She gains her confidence from the fact that

³⁷ ZSJ, "Xu" 3b.

women's literature enjoys an unprecedented flourishing in her time after a long history of gradual development. For her, it is time for women to claim a literary territory.

The *Zhengshi ji* was not the first anthology of women's poetry compiled by a woman. Yun Zhu had her predecessors such as Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635), who compiled the *Yiren si* 伊人思 (Their Thoughts, 1636) and Ji Xian 季嫻 (1614-1683), who compiled the *Guixiu ji* 閨秀集 (Collection of Boudoir Talents, 1652). However, their slim collections of Ming women's writings cannot be compared with the scope of the *Zhengshi ji*.³⁸ With the general exclusion of courtesans and other marginal groups such as nuns, Yun Zhu's author-orientation is significantly different from that of Ji Xian. Although Ji Xian also used the term *guixiu* in her collection title, her conception of the *guixiu* is not as exclusive as Yun Zhu's as her selection of the authors includes courtesans.

Composed of 42 *juan* of poems by about 1,000 women poets (from the Ming and Qing periods), Wang Duanshu's 王端淑 (1621-ca.1706) ambitious project *Mingyuan shi wei* is considered a "breakthrough" in terms of women editing women's writing.³⁹ As Kang-i Sun Chang notes, in naming her anthology *shi wei* (literally, the woof of poetry), a term complementary to the title of the authoritative canon *Shi jing* (literally, the weft of poetry), Wang Duanshu gives women's poetry "canonical" status.⁴⁰ However, Wang's

³⁸ The *Yiren si* consists of one *juan* of poems by 46 authors, and the *Guixiu ji* collects three *juan* of poems by 75 authors (one *juan* of *shi* poems and two *juan* of the *ci*).

³⁹ Widmer, "Ming Loyalty" 374. On this anthology, see also Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies" 157. The number of poets is provided by Chang. Among the forty-two *juan* of this anthology, *juan* 1-34 are *shi* poetry, *juan* 35-36 are *ci*, *juan* 37-38 are *sanqu*, *juan* 39 consists of miscellanies, *juan* 40 is an index of the authors' names, and the last two *juan* are Wang Duanshu's own poems.

⁴⁰ Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies" 158. Mark E. Francis has aptly illustrated the meaning of the term *jing* as "vertical threads" and described the special role the *Shi jing* played in the loom of Chinese civilization. See Francis 53-4.

anthology is comprehensive in orientation rather than selection.⁴¹ The 42 *juan* of this anthology is organized into 17 collections by multiple criteria: genres, the authors' social statuses, sources from which the works were obtained, and so on. While she generally puts gentrywomen in the collection of *zheng* 正 (the correct or the orthodox) and courtesans in the *yan* 艷 (the beautiful or the erotic), to distinguish the social statuses of these authors is not a serious concern to her for she also mixes them in other sections. Nor do the two terms *zheng* and *yan* indicate the theme and style of the works. Although Wang Duanshu's comments value women's virtue in many places, her main purpose in making this anthology is curatorial, preserving women's poetry as much as possible. As she claims, "Even though some poems are vulgarly beautiful, lewd, and ridiculously expressive, I still collect them. Is my collection excessive? I would say no. When Confucius compiled the *Shi jing*, he did not exclude the music of Zheng and Wei (erotic songs)." 嬌麗而鄙俚者，淫佚而譴誕者，亦存之。得無濫乎？曰：不然。孔子刪詩而不廢鄭衛之音。⁴² While she also refers to the *Shi jing*, Wang Duanshu's strategy is completely different from that of Yun Zhu.⁴³

Neither of these above-mentioned women editors nor other male anthologists of women's poetry attempt to establish an explicit poetics for women's poetry through their project and elevate women's writing to the same level as does Yun Zhu. To do so, Yun Zhu's major strategy is to integrate female virtue with literary elegance, establishing a

⁴¹ While Kang-i Sun Chang views the Ming-Qing period anthology-making of women's poetry in general as an attempt at canonization, Grace Fong argues in her recent study of late Ming anthologies of women's poetry that late Ming anthologists, including women compilers, failed to establish a canon of women's writing due to their comprehensive, curatorial approach. See Chang, "Gender and Canonicity," "Ming and Qing Anthologies;" and Fong, "Gender and the Failure of Canonization."

⁴² *Mingyuan shiwei*, "Fanli" 2.

⁴³ According to Zhong Huiling, Wang Duanshu's poetics is more inspired by the theory of the Gong'an School. See Zhong Huiling 325-40.

poetics of women's poetry within the bounds of propriety. In the "Bianyan" (Editor's Words), Yun Zhu claims that, of all the poems she has selected, "[t]he genres and their contents vary, but the sentiment and tone of each is correct. Pure beauty, chaste emotion, conjugal harmony, limpid verse—none would shame the woman scribe's admonitions, and all conform to the standards required of a poet" 體裁不一，性情各正。雪艷冰清，琴和玉潤。庶無慚女史之箴，有合風人之旨爾。⁴⁴ This poetics is unique in its gender-specific orientation. It does not merely consider the sex of the author, but also evaluates her poetry according to the prescriptions placed upon the female gender by orthodox discourses. In other words, the poetics represented by the *Zhengshi ji* constitutes women's participation in the revival of the Confucian view of poetics. Although there is some degree of inconsistency involved in the *Zhengshi ji* corpus—not every poem conforms to Yun Zhu's standard—the gendered poetics articulated in her editorial writings does account for the main currents of expressions represented by the anthology. This explicit poetics provides important clues for our understanding of the major forces that influenced Qing women's representations of themselves and their place in society.

The most obvious change at the hands of female authors is the great expansion of boudoir thematics. While one may find quite a few poems written on conventional themes, they are greatly outnumbered by those depicting new boudoir scenarios. Robertson has delineated a long list of the activities associated with the boudoir setting in Ming-Qing women's poetry, a list which includes "sewing, study, chess, writing, playing and listening to music, teaching (children and other women), conversing, religious activities (meditating, chanting sutras, reading religious works), painting, dinner parties,

⁴⁴ ZSJ, "Bianyan" 2a. Translation by Susan Mann in *Precious Records* 96, with a minor modification.

resting, and sleeping.”⁴⁵ In reading the anthology, one cannot help but notice that the boudoir as a space of women’s self-representation can accommodate such a broad topical range that even Robertson’s rather comprehensive list does not exhaust it. Women authors in the *Zhengshi ji* construct an expansive picture of their lives within the inner chambers.

The pictures of daily life that women authors depicted in their poetry, however, do not randomly cover everything going on in their lives, but present what they think proper for poetic topics and appropriate to their social and cultural status, namely *guixiu*. The construction of an ideal *guixiu* identity was a major force underlying the transformation of boudoir poetics. While even the *Zhengshi ji* authors do not share an identical understanding of *guixiu* attributes, their self-representations do share common values and ideas. In the following sections I will focus on two correlative approaches adopted by the authors selected in the *Zhengshi ji*, the revision of conventional boudoir themes and motifs such as *yanqing* (amorous and sensual feelings) and *guiyuan* (the boudoir plaint), and the reconceptualization of the boudoir space with new cultural ideals; this will illustrate the important ways in which authors in the *Zhengshi ji* establish a distinctive boudoir aesthetics and poetics that corroborate Yun Zhu’s vision of women’s poetics.

Recoding Feminine Images

In representing themselves, women poets encounter a poignant irony: while they are called on to be virtuous subjects and moral guardians in orthodox gender ideology, their images and the boudoir space are portrayed as objects of sexual desire and erotic pleasure

⁴⁵ Robertson, “Changing the Subject” 200.

in the sensual, erotic mode of boudoir poetry. Even though women writers of boudoir poetry found their emotional world in many ways connected with traditional boudoir sentiments, many realized that it would be problematic if they simply relied on whatever available sources to represent themselves without discernment. De-eroticization was the first and foremost stylistic consideration for a woman who intended to embrace orthodox ideology and poetics. Filtered through Yun Zhu's censorship, the *Zhengshi ji* had no place for the erotic. It was not only articulated in Yun Zhu's anthologizing agenda, individual women authors were also conscious of the potential harm which the sensual, erotic poetics might do to their moral images. As Tang Jingxian 唐靜嫻 urged her peers in her poem, "Stirred by Feelings after Reading Poems by Guixiu" 讀閨秀詩有感: "Earnestly I tell friends of powder and rouge / Cultivate moral character to avoid being criticized" 多謝脂粉儔, 立品防譏評.⁴⁶ "Powder and rouge," women's make up, is a term often used by male critics to characterize trivial feminine qualities, including that of poetry. Tang Jingxian uses it to refer to other women poets to caution them not to fall into the target of critique.

In the anthology, one may find a few poems evoking neutral tender feelings such as lamenting the passing of spring, but the evocation of erotic feelings is definitely not in order. The boudoir is used to depict more serious themes than the appreciation of feminine beauty. Many Ming-Qing women poets, including the authors in the *Zhengshi ji*, were familiar with the tradition of palace style poetry. For example, in her collection *Hongxuexuan gao* 鴻雪軒稿, Gao Jingfang 高景芳 (fl. 1718) had a poem titled "Composed on 'Looking at a Dropped Hairpin Reflected in the River's Flow'" 賦得照流

⁴⁶ ZSJ 20.24b.

看落釵, which is exactly modeled on Xiao Gang's poem "Looking at a Dropped Hairpin Reflected in the River's Flow" 照流看落釵. Xiao's poem reads:

One by one reflected in green water,
They seem to crave a cooling breeze.
The flow trembles, painted image ravaged.
A hairpin drops, coiffure flowers vanish.
Where is her beloved so long?
She suffers in vain for hearts no longer one.⁴⁷

(YTXY 7.285)

相隨照綠水，意欲重涼風。

流搖妝影壞，釵落鬢華空。

佳期在何許，徒傷心不同。

While Xiao Gang's original poem only consists of six lines, Gao's poem is lengthy, containing 26 lines. I only quote part of it:

[...]

Coming out from behind the bamboo screen, her appearance glistens,
Hand gliding over railings, her pace is elegantly slow.
Straight, she crossed under the trellis of white blossoms,
And turns to pass by the Purple-bamboo Hut.
To play she stops at the patterned rock bank,
The joint-love pleats of her skirt slightly swaying.
Dew moist, she is worried about slippery lichens,

⁴⁷ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 191.

Waves clear, she is happy that railings are open.
Her reflection sways with the water weeds,
Her lovely face is next to a lotus.
Exchanging glances as they idly face each other,
Lowering and turning her head, she marvels at their likeness.
Arranging her lapel, she finds her gold bracelets too heavy,
Touching up her coiffure, she regrets that her hairpin has dropped.
Fallen in the water, the gold still glitters,
Facing the depths, she is afraid to stretch out her jade arms.
Hairdo bare (of ornaments), she's embarrassed to look again at her
 reflection,
Hair flattened—she intends to have it redone.
Sorrowful, returning late,
Leaning against the pavilion, her manner is more than charming.

(*Hongxuexuan gao* 紅雪軒稿 3.17b-18a)

出簾容灼灼，拂檻步徐徐。直度白花架，橫過紫竹廬。戲停文石岸，
微漾合歡裾。露濕愁苔滑，波澄慶檻虛。影搖同藻荇，臉媚並芙蕖。
顧盼聊相向，低徊怪儼如。整襟嫌釧重，擁髻惜釵除。墮水金猶亮，
臨深玉怯舒。鬢空羞更照，髮薄擬重梳。惆悵歸來晚，憑軒態有餘。

Focusing on the detail that a woman dropped her hairpin into a pond, Xiao Gang's poem repeats the abandoned woman's tale. As the title suggests, Gao Jingfang's poem is most likely a poetic exercise, which exactly works on the same theme. Only, the woman poet devotes a lengthy section to the description of the female persona's appearance, activities,

and surroundings before giving a thematic remark in the final two lines. Her approach differs from that which Xiao Gang takes in the same-titled poem, but it is an approach influenced by the palace style in general. In this poem of 26 lines, all the couplets, except for the beginning and ending ones, are structured by parallelism. They are meticulously arranged to show the beautiful appearance and elegant manner of the persona, as well as her harmonious relationship with the environment. The parallel relationship between the persona's image and the garden scene—both are beautiful and cultivated—are especially emphasized in the poem. The woman author's elaboration on her model demonstrates not only her familiarity with but also skillful mastery of the palace style.

Gao Jingfang was one of Yun Zhu's favorite authors. In addition to including Gao in the *Zhengshi ji*, Yun Zhu also included Gao in her *Langui baolu* 蘭閨寶錄, a much smaller yet not less significant collection of biographies of female paragons in several categories such as virtue and talent.⁴⁸ Although the entry of Gao is a brief biographical note which is almost exactly phrased as that in the anthology, the inclusion of Gao in the *Langui baolu* shows Yun Zhu's special recognition of Gao's artistic talent:⁴⁹

Gao Jingfang belongs to the Han banner: She is the wife of the first-rank Marquis Zhang Zongren. Specialized in both the Seal and Clerk scripts in calligraphy, she is capable in composing poetry and rhapsody, and she is also good at the parallel-style prose. She has produced the collection *Hongxuexuan gao* of thirty-six *juan*.

高景芳: 漢軍人, 一等侯張宗仁妻。工篆隸, 能詩賦, 兼善駢體文。

著有紅雪軒稿三十六卷。

⁴⁸ On the *Langui baolu*, see Mann, *Precious Records* 208-14.

⁴⁹ Yun Zhu, comp., *Langui baolu* 6.15b.

In spite of the fact that Yun Zhu mistakenly notes that Gao Jingfang's *Hongxuexuan gao* contains thirty-six *juan* (actually six *juan*), the biographical note suggests that she might have consulted Gao Jingfang's individual collection.⁵⁰ Yun Zhu includes eight poems by Gao Jingfang in the *Zhengshi ji*, but the long poem written on "the dropped hairpin" is not in it. Among the eight poems, there is only the following poem written on the boudoir theme, which reveals to us what matters to Yun Zhu's anthologizing agenda:

My Morning Make-Up

I open up my dressing room in the clear dawn,
Morning sunshine lights up the painted railings.
As my chignon isn't done up yet,
I dare not pay respects to my parents.
I properly add a phoenix hairpin,
Lowering my head, I pin on an orchid blossom.
Behind the bamboo blind, I call the maid
To take a second look from the back.

(ZSJ 8.13b)

晨妝

妝閣開清曉，晨光上畫欄。未曾梳寶髻，不敢問親安。
妥貼加釵鳳，低徊插佩蘭。隔簾呼侍婢，背後與重看。

This poem captures a moment during which a woman meticulously dresses herself up after rising in the morning, a familiar boudoir scenario depicted in palace verses such as

⁵⁰ ZSJ 8.11b. The copy I consulted is held in the Library of Chinese Academy of Science, which contains six *juan*. Hu Wenkai also points out this mistake made by Yun Zhu. See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 499.

Xiao Gang's "A Lovely Woman's Morning Make-Up."⁵¹ Gao Jingfang seems to have been inspired by Xiao Gang's poem in plotting the scenario of her poem. Although she focuses on a different detail, that of hairstyling, the scenario progresses in a way similar to Xiao Gang's. Like Xiao Gang's persona who is "[s]weet, shy, unwilling to come out" because "her make-up isn't done," Gao Jingfang's is also afraid to step out of the boudoir before she makes sure that her hair is perfectly done. The only significant difference lies in the reason why these two women make themselves up. While Xiao Gang asserts for his persona that "No doubt with all this she's sensational / She must win the reputation of 'the adorable,'" Gao Jingfang claims that "As my chignon isn't done up yet / I dare not pay respects to my parents." Dressing up in Gao's poem thus becomes a ritualized aspect of paying respects to parents; the female persona's meticulous attention to her appearance reveals the degree of a daughter or daughter-in-law's filial piety.⁵² The woman author sets up a new, "serious" context for the reader in which to locate the meaning of a typical boudoir activity.

In the two poems by Gao Jingfang and the one by Xiao Gang cited above, one can see that the image of the hairpin (*chai* 釵) plays a crucial role in the boudoir scenario. A staple in the boudoir convention, a hairpin functions not only as a signifier of female gender and feminine adornment, but also as an object implicating sexuality and desire.⁵³ It is often used, especially when linked with the image of "pillow," as a cue for the scene of love-making.⁵⁴ Writing on an occasion in which a hairpin was dropped for a reason other than love-making, Xiao Gang plays with the image on a different level to reveal the

⁵¹ This poem is cited in Chapter 1, 37-8.

⁵² The term *qin* 親 in line 4 is ambiguous; it can refer to her natal parents or to her parents-in-law.

⁵³ Men also wore hairpins, but the type of hairpin called *chai* was specially used by women.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Ouyang Xiu's lyric and Li Shangyin's lines discussed in Chapter 1, 58.

theme of unfulfilled passion: the dropped hairpin reminds the female persona of her absent lover. But the evocation of the image still falls into the thematic category of love between a man and woman. Following poetic convention in the poem imitating Xiao Gang, Gao Jingfang also writes a narrative in which a hairpin dropped. However, she morally rescues the image in “My Morning Make-Up,” a self-referential poem, by “properly” using it for the occasion of paying regards to her parents. The poet must have understood in her historical and cultural context that a woman’s loose hair suggests improper etiquette and lax morality.

Echoing Gao’s manner of rescuing a “fallen” hairpin, Zhu Zhongmei 朱中楣 (1521-1661) also creatively transforms this image steeped in eroticism into a “proper” element in her poem “Spring Night” 春晚:

The silk curtain gracefully drops, rustling in the breeze,
Lovely orioles begin to chirp on the highest branches.
I draw on the edges of the pillow with my tingling gold hairpin,
To remember the poem I dreamed of last night.

(ZSJ 1.14a)

瑟瑟湘帘裊裊垂，嬌鶯初轉最高枝。

枕棱畫得金釵響，爲記深宵夢裏詩。

The beginning couplet consists of clichés describing the scene of a woman awakening in her boudoir. If the poet were to have followed the boudoir convention, the female persona in the second couplet would have likely stated her dream of a reunion with her lover, often with sexual innuendoes. The female poet, however, suddenly changes the tone of the poem by making clever use of the hairpin: it helps the female persona to remember

the poetic lines she had composed in her dream. This subtle yet significant change demonstrates a *guixiu*'s "pure" imagination and taste and her literary skill.

Image coding is essential in shaping the boudoir topos. The boudoir as a sensual, erotic, and sentimental setting in poetic convention is established through sets of recognizable expressions and coded images. Although *Zhengshi ji* authors to a large extent inherit the conventional lexicon, in many cases women authors feel compelled to re-inscribe established image codes when they are not suitable for their expressive needs. Robertson suggests that women's rewriting of coded images is not conducted in "any programmatic way;" only some cases show that their employment of established codes is the result of discursive positions different from those in conventional models.⁵⁵ If the above examples are not explicit enough to show the authors' intention of innovation, the following poem by Guo Jie 郭介 assertively demonstrates the poet's plan to alter conventional, negative associations with the images of women and the boudoir:

Peach Blossoms in a Vase

Under the shadow of crimson clouds and deep behind the painted blind,
She refuses the visits of wandering bees and wanton butterflies.
She does not complain to the east wind about scattering,
In light rouge, she accompanies me idly singing by the secluded window.
(ZSJ, Buyi 15b)

瓶中碧桃

絳霞掩映畫簾深，謝絕游蜂浪蝶尋。
不向東風怨零落，幽窗紅粉伴閒吟。

⁵⁵ Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine" 82.

In this poem, the female author unveils to the reader a secluded corner of her room sheltered by elegant blinds. Although the title indicates that the poem is written about peach blossoms arranged in a vase, the flower is an obvious metaphor of her self. Peach blossoms conventionally symbolize a sexually attractive woman, and can also stand for a woman lax in female virtue. They especially attract “wandering bees and wanton butterflies,” metaphors of philandering males. The Tang poet Du Fu’s 杜甫 (712-770) famous lines, “Wanton willow catkins dance with the wind / Frivolous peach blossoms flow with the stream” 顛狂柳絮隨風舞，輕薄桃花逐水流, represent this point of view.⁵⁶ In Guo Jie’s depiction, however, the peach blossom adopts an explicit moral gesture: she positively declines any frivolous wooing. The peach blossom is well guarded, impermeable to any gaze or invasion. Guo’s poem contrasts sharply with the voyeur’s gaze in Xiao Gang’s poem “Her Late Boudoir,” which I have discussed in Chapter 1:

Her hidden room in cold sun grows late,
Declining rays cross the window sill.
Red blinds far do not prevent my view,
Light drapes hang half rolled up.⁵⁷
[...]

Arranged in a vase and well-sheltered in the boudoir, the peach blossom feels both secure and confident in her ability to control her destiny: kept indoors, she is saved from withering and scattering in the wind. She also finds something meaningful to do in this inner world, enjoying the pure pleasure of poetry. By making use of the flower metaphor,

⁵⁶ *QTS* 227.2451.

⁵⁷ Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 198.

the woman poet portrays the self-image of a chaste and talented woman enjoying her boudoir life.

If Guo Jie enjoys her boudoir as a sanctum, Tong Feng's 童鳳 poem "Writing about My Feelings" 書情 provides an example of a woman who wants to open up the space of her boudoir for homosociality:

To release my boredom, I push open my window screen:
The shadows of bamboo obscure the spring pavilion.
A thirsty bee is peeping at the water in the ink-slab,
An idle butterfly rests on the flowers in the vase.
I try to play the flute, yet its trill is rather jilting.
I inscribe a poem on letter paper, but the characters fall aslant.
The girl next-door just arrived at my invitation,
With a smile, we sip this year's new tea.

(ZSJ 12.1)

排悶拓窗紗，春亭竹影遮。渴蜂窺硯水，閒蝶息瓶花。
弄笛聲全澀，題箋字半斜。相招鄰女至，一笑啜新茶。

The boudoir in this poem is represented as an open house. Some guests are invited, and some guests come in unexpectedly, such as the bee and the butterfly, conventional symbols of philandering males rejected by Guo Jie's poem discussed above. But the poet places these unwelcome "guests" in a different setting. The bee is usually linked with nectar by convention, a metaphoric description of a sexual consummation. As Han Wo suggests in his poem "Amorous" 多情, love takes place "at the place where the bee just

tastes the wild nectar it steals” 蜂偷野蜜初嘗處。⁵⁸ The woman poet intends to break with this formulaic expression. In her depiction, what the thirsty bee attempts to drink is not nectar but the poet’s ink; the butterfly lands not on wild flowers but upon those carefully arranged in a vase. Having opened her window, the poet intends to display her artistic engagements, although she appears to be a novice in these arts in her humble self-representation. What is more precious to the poet, however, appears to be the carefree moment shared with female company, which dispels the state of boredom and ennui with which the poem began.

In recoding the established images, the common strategy these women authors adopt is re-contextualization. By introducing “a new frame of reference” in their poetry, they attempt to direct the reader to understand the conventional codes differently.⁵⁹ Although examples such as those examined above appear to be sporadic, the differences these women authors make in their poetry are crucial in that they are clearly conscious efforts to alter conventional associations with women and the boudoir while keeping with the aesthetic taste of their own time. The social historian Dorothy Ko has convincingly shown the changing perception of womanhood in the late Ming and early Qing in terms of three components: talent, virtue, and beauty. With evidence of women’s writings about their physical attractions, she argues that the increasing emphasis on women’s beauty in its compatibility with women’s virtue and talent was a force in shaping a new womanhood.⁶⁰ Her observation is made by presuming that “womanly deportment does not necessarily mean glamour and beauty” but describes a normative womanhood

⁵⁸ *QTS* 683.7911.

⁵⁹ Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine” 83.

⁶⁰ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 160.

according to Ban Zhao's "Precepts for Women."⁶¹ However, within the poetic tradition the change is the other way around: as reflected in the *Zhengshi ji*, the women authors' inscription of female beauty with moral values is the new trend against the conventional construction of women's images as aesthetic and sexual objects.

The case of Shen Huiyu 沈蕙玉 (eighteenth century) provides a salient example in this regard. Shen wrote "Four poems: Admonitions for Women" 女箴四首 in light of Ban Zhao's instructions on the Four Virtues.⁶² Among them, the one on "womanly deportment" (*furong* 婦容) reads:

- A husband hopes that his wife treats him as a guest,
2 As Meng Guang holds a food tray.
How can a husband feign his emotions?
4 He shuns you because you're lazy and perfunctory.
The one with "weeping eyebrows" and "broken-waist steps"⁶³
6 Is the seductress in the country.
Confused and ignorant,
8 She is even proud of herself.
The composed, serene, and pure
10 Is the true match of a gentleman.
With gentle countenance and smile,
12 She behaves like an assistant Scribe.

⁶¹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 145.

⁶² ZSJ 1.6b-7b.

⁶³ "Weeping eyebrows" (*ti mei*) and "broken-waist steps" (*zhelayao bu* 折腰步, also known as *duoma bu* 墮馬步) refer to the feminine fashion and manner created by the Han woman Sun Shou 孫壽. She made up her face and eyebrows as if she was sad and weeping, and she walked in a way that would suggest her waist had been injured after a fall from a horse. For Sun Shou's story, see Fan Ye, comp. *Hou Han shu* 3270-3271.

- Only with respect can there be harmony,
14 As gentle as pure breeze.⁶⁴
Cultivate yourself according to these standards,
16 Your marriage will last happily until the end.
(ZSJ 1.7b)

冀妻如賓，孟光舉案。夫豈矯情，媿墮斯遠。啼眉折腰，邦國之妖。
彼昏罔知，反以用驕。幽閒貞靜，曰配君子。載色載笑，若左之史。
敬而能和，穆如清風。修身準此，維以令終。

Using the archaic, four-character meter of the *Shi jing*, Shen Huiyu illustrates her understanding of women's deportment from a wifely perspective. She first turns to the image of Meng Guang, an exemplary wife celebrated in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書.⁶⁵ Meng Guang is portrayed as a wife who is ugly in appearance, yet with her virtues and elegant manner she eventually wins her husband's respect and is treated as his equal. In the fourth line, in contrast the author alludes to the story of Sun Shou, a Han woman famous for her artificiality and affected manner, to express her criticism of women's excessive concern over beauty and glamour. Quoting a line from the *Shi jing*, "as gentle as pure breeze" 穆如清風, the author believes that the ideal wife should conduct herself with gentleness, serenity and harmony in her relationship with her husband. In reading the *Zhengshi ji*, one can see that women do not always agree with each other on what women should look like; some prefer dressing-up and some a homely style. However,

⁶⁴ A line quoted from "Zhengmin" 蒸民, *Shi jing* (Maoshi # 260). For an English translation of this poem, see Waley, *Book of Songs* 141-3. See also Legge, *The Book of Poetry* 411. The translation of this line cited in Shen's poem is mine.

⁶⁵ See Fan Ye, comp., *Hou Han shu* 83. 2766-2768.

they generally hold that women should present themselves whether physically or verbally, according to ritual and moral propriety.

Weng Guangzhu 翁光珠's "Poem on Making up" 理妝詩 goes further to link the issue of women's appearance and propriety with poetic expression, which sheds light on the new trend of women's textual transformation in rewriting conventional feminine aesthetics:

When Meng Guang was married to Boluan,
2 They were banished because Boluan sang the "Five Sighs."⁶⁶
Following laborers on the road,
4 She simply knotted her hair in a cone shape.
For the wife of a dignified scholar
6 There are naturally fitting models for the boudoir.
If you don't adorn yourself and beware of your manner,
8 Your venerable parents-in-law will criticize you.
Now I know if we want to learn from the ancients,
10 We should do so in a way suited to our times.
The girl next door competes to make herself pretty
12 It's like adopting Xu and Yu's rhetoric.
What I would like to imitate is
14 The plain simplicity of Tao and Wei's poetry.
(ZSJ, Buyi 43b)

⁶⁶ Meng Guang's husband Liang Hong 梁鴻 (zi Boluan) wrote the "Song of Five Sighs" 五噫歌 which criticizes the Han court's decadent lifestyle and was forced to go into exile to escape from the emperor's persecution. For Liang Hong's biography, see Fan Ye, comp., *Hou Han shu* 83. 2765-2768.

孟光歸伯鸞，遷流歌五噫。道路隨傭夫，聊挽髻如椎。

堂堂士人室，閨範自有宜。儀容不修飾，尊嫜且詰之。

始知學古人，學之須適時。鄰女竟靚妝，如爲徐庾辭。

我亦何所擬，澹素陶韋詩。

The poet cautions against two extreme tendencies: a woman not paying attention to her appearance or one obsessed with it. She begins by analyzing again the case of Meng Guang, a recognized virtuous wife who possesses more inner than outer beauty. Like Shen Huiyu, quoted above, many *Zhengshi ji* authors identify Meng Guang as a role model, claiming for their own the image of wife wearing a “thorn hairpin and plain skirt” 荆釵布裙 to emphasize their moral orientation. Weng Guangzhu, however, opposes an undiscerning imitation of Meng Guang without considering first Meng’s historical situation. For Weng, a gentry wife should be dressed properly to perform her gender roles and in accordance with her social status. But she also frowns upon women’s excessive concern with beauty and glamour. At this point, she begins to draw parallels between women’s dressing and poetic styles. In lines 11 and 12, by linking together as negative examples a woman’s elaborate make-up and palace style poetry referred to as the rhetoric of Xu Ling and Yu Xin 庾信 (513-581) (*Xu Yu ci*), she articulates her critique of the aesthetics of shallow beauty and ornamentation in general.⁶⁷ What she prefers, she goes on to say, is naturalness, simplicity, and elegance as represented by Tao Qian 陶潛 (365-427) and Wei Yingwu’s 韋應物 (737-792?) poetic style. Although the poet is discussing the issue of women’s dressing, she perceives it as an aesthetic issue intimately related to

⁶⁷ Xu Ling, as mentioned in Chapter 1, was the compiler of the *Yutai xinyong*. Yu Xin was also an important poet in the practice of the palace style.

poetics. The naming of Tao and Wei as role models and the denigration of palace style poetry demonstrates her orthodox view of a poetics that values the substantiality of poetry over its formal properties. Though we do not have any other extant poem by Weng, it seems certain that she would have kept a critical distance from the boudoir convention in representing herself. Her assertive poem makes explicit the intention of the women authors who attempt to rewrite conventional feminine images in light of orthodox poetics and aesthetics.

“Sent to My Husband” 寄外:
Re-Writing the *Guiyuan* Theme

The boudoir plaint/*guiyuan* theme in the narrow sense of the deserted woman’s lament seems to constitute an inconsequential portion of the *Zhengshi ji*. There are only 14 poems in total explicitly titled “*Guiyuan*.” However, a wife separated from her husband is still a common poetic situation explicitly or implicitly conveyed in the texts. The *Zhengshi ji* includes over one hundred poems whose titles indicate that they have been written to husbands who are away from home. Poetic titles such as “Sent to My Husband” and “To the One Faraway” 寄遠 explicitly mark this topical territory. Poems claiming to be written by historical women to their (absent) husbands can be traced back to the Han period, as recorded in the *Yutai xinyong*. But only with the emergence of the sizable group of writing women in the late imperial period and the solid evidence of their textual production can it be shown that wives writing to their husbands in poetry had become a significant practice. This is to a remarkable degree consistent with the lived situations of these authors who were gentry wives. Although the separation of men and women’s spheres was not a monolithic and fixed social practice, it was not merely constructed on an ideological level; it had an institutional basis. Women were barred

from civil examinations. While men could go outside to pursue education and official careers, women were supposed to remain inside and shoulder domestic responsibilities. As in the Ming-Qing officials were appointed to posts in other provinces than their native place, travel away from home was an obligation.⁶⁸ Although gentry wives did have opportunities to follow their husbands to their official posts, staying home taking care of the family was also a responsibility they often had to assume.⁶⁹

The *Zhengshi ji* was not the only source for poems on this topic, but it was the first anthology to collect a considerable number of poems by contemporary authors. This is an important site of poetic production valued by Yun Zhu's anthologizing agenda, a topical subgenre resulting from the women authors' innovations upon the *guiyuan* tradition. Although there are specifically wifely images and voices in early *guiyuan* poems, the longing wife's [*sifu* 思婦] emotions and sentiments represented in those poems are more often than not indistinguishable from those expressed in the voice of courtesans or singing girls. While *Zhengshi ji* authors speak from a textual position similar to that of the longing wife and heavily rely on old vocabulary, the emotions and sentiments expressed are distinctively of those who are wives, mothers, and women of their society. Consider Zhou Yao's 周瑤 (fl. 1799) poem, "Sent to My Husband":

Stirring the incense in a cold gilt lion censor,

Spring is deep at midnight.

A lapel full of moonlight through willow boughs,

Brushing the hair on my temples, an apricot-blossom breeze.

⁶⁸ The bureaucratic practice of avoiding the native place in appointing officials started in the Qin Dynasty, but the Ming and Qing developed this system of avoidance. For a study of the avoidance system of the Qing and its predecessors, see Wei Xiumei 魏秀梅, *Qingdai zhi huibi zhidu* 清代之迴避制度 5-56.

⁶⁹ In fact, it was also a common practice that a husband went to his post accompanied by his concubine, while his wife was left behind to take care of the household.

Too tired at this moment to embroider mandarin ducks,
For several days I've been writing letters to him.⁷⁰

Our lovely child having just fallen soundly asleep,
Sealing my thoughts I entrust them to the flying geese.
(ZSJ 17.4)

香撥金猊冷，春深子夜中。一襟楊柳月，雙鬢杏花風。
鴛繡此時倦，魚箋幾日通。嬌兒方睡穩，緘意託飛鴻。

From a cluster of familiar, sensuous images, such as the chilled lion censor, the fragrance of spring blossoms, and the embroidered mandarin ducks, we can immediately tell the degree to which the poet is inspired by the boudoir convention. But the detail of “our lovely child” stands out against the familiar background. The presence of the sleeping child changed the tone of the conventional boudoir setting. The female persona is not so much a lonely wife longing for her absent husband as a loving mother who is thinking of the father of her child. The juxtaposition of the mother identity to that of the wife distinguishes the persona in this poem from the conventional abandoned woman persona. In her examination of the *Yutai xinyong*, Robertson points out that in order to articulate their sexual fantasies the literati authors create “an iconic image of woman”, which bears no “referentiality to actual women.”⁷¹ The mention of the child in the above poem, however, provides much information regarding the dynamics of the poet’s communication with her husband and potential readers. The detail regarding the sleeping child may be intended for the father, and it may also be intended to assure the reader that

⁷⁰ *Yujian* (fish letter) is a special term referring to a letter carried by a carp to a loved one, which is derived from the Han *yuefu* “Watering Horse at a Long Wall Hole” 飲馬長城窟行 (YTXY 1.33-34). For an English translation of this poem, see Birrell, *New Songs* 47.

⁷¹ Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine” 69.

her yearning for her husband comes only after the fulfillment of her responsibilities as mother. To convey the latter sense, the sequential order in which the poet arranges the last couplet is crucial: she first puts the child to sleep before she finishes the letter and sealing it up to be sent. While the poet relies on the boudoir topos in this poem, the moment of life presented in this poem is much more than a performance of the literary past; it is a wife's self-representation informed by both her actual situation as a mother and awareness of her motherly role.

The following poem, "Stirred by Feelings in a Spring Day" 春日有懷, shows that women poets such as Qin Puzhen 秦璞貞 went even further in rewriting the *guiyuan* tradition. The poem demonstrates that they were not only aware of poetic conventions but also consciously wrote against the tradition if they deemed it improper for their self-representations:

I don't complain about my husband's seeking for noble rank,
Feelings are concentrated in our kind, yet too shy to express them.
But it is hard to forget matters in our destiny—
I await the one who harmonizes with my pure poems under the flowers.
(ZSJ 9.23b)

不嫌夫婿覓封侯，我輩情鍾語亦羞。
未免難忘緣底事，清吟花下待誰酬。

The first line speaks directly to the famous poem by the Tang poet Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698?-756?):

The young wife in the boudoir doesn't know what sorrow is,
On a spring day, dressed up well she climbs up the green tower.

All of a sudden, she sees the color of willows on the road,

She regrets letting her husband go to seek noble rank.

(QTS 143.1446)

閨中少婦不知愁，春日凝妝上翠樓。

忽見陌頭楊柳色，悔教夫婿覓封侯。

Wang Changling's poem is titled "*Guiyuan*," and the last line "She regrets letting her husband go to seek noble rank" has become a cliché that epitomizes the boudoir plaint. Qin Puzhen's direct challenge to this line asserts her opposite opinion: she is not the conventional "young wife in the boudoir," but a woman of a new generation who supports her husband's pursuit of an official career and knows how to contain her private feelings. She is not without passion, but she understands how to express it in a proper manner. Poetry, as she states in the last line, becomes a medium through which she entrusts her emotions; and only at this point does she suggest how she misses her husband: "I await the one who harmonizes with my pure poems under the flowers." What is significant is that she has transformed her relationship with her husband from a merely sexual or emotional one to one based on literary sharing.

Qin Puzhen was not exceptional in rewriting the *guiyuan* cliché. In the quatrain by Yang Sushu 楊素書, "Boudoir Sentiments" 閨情, the second couplet also challenges and negotiates Wang Changling's lines: "The wonderful scene of the willow road is boundless / Yet, my fragrant heart has never regretted his pursuit of nobility" 楊柳陌頭無限好，芳心原不悔封侯.⁷² It is not surprising, then, that Qiu Puzhen defines herself as a woman of "our kind" 我輩; she was aware of the age in which she lived and her peers

⁷² ZSXJ, *Fulu* 13b.

who thought alike. These examples demonstrate that women such as Qin and Yang were consciously keeping distance from the conventional boudoir representations of women, and attempted to present new female images that conformed to their contemporary aesthetic and moral standards.

Chen Shulan's 陳淑蘭 poem, "Sent to My Husband," provides an example in which a woman carefully constructs an ideal self-image:

In the small courtyard pure fragrance blows on my face,
Several times I put aside my needlework and stand on green lichens.
The secluded orchid seems also to be thinking of someone,
Lightly holding in its white pistils, it would not bloom.

(ZSJ 14.5b-6a)

小院清香撲面來，拋針幾度立蒼苔。

幽蘭亦有懷人意，素蕊微含不放開。

The orchid, often growing in secluded areas and with unusual appearance and fragrance, is a generally recognized symbol of superior purity, loftiness, and virtue in the Chinese cultural context. These positive meanings were particularly acknowledged in the literary tradition after the canonical poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (B.C. 340 - B.C. 278), whose works frequently associate the image with his virtuous self, a gentleman (君子 *jūnzi*). The woman author's first name, Shulan, literally "virtuous orchid," is obviously derived from this culturally assumed meaning, and she is playing with this symbolic dimension of her name in portraying her self-image. The first couplet is still much indebted to the conventional descriptive formulas, which establish a typical boudoir setting. However, the second couplet introduces an image which is not normally associated with the

scenario: a pure, virtuous orchid. Through personifying the orchid, the poet both claims a self-image with lofty attributes, and expresses her love for her husband in a reserved and elegant manner. According with the status of a loving and virtuous wife, this is a way of expression what would be deemed highly admirable in her cultural context.

Writing to their husbands was not merely an artistic activity but also an important means through which women poets communicated with their husbands as cultured wives. Some feel more compelled to report on matters of “rice and salt” than to express love sentiments to their husbands. For example, Mao Shuzhen 茅淑珍 wrote the following poem to her husband:

Sent to My Husband

Knocking on ice as I get up, the year has come to an end,
My worn-out skirt cannot keep out the chill of the north wind.
Responsibilities facing you, not only that your son's clothes are thin,
Do you know our kitchen is also short of breakfast?

(ZSXJ, Buyi 9b)

寄外

臥起敲冰歲已闌，破裙難敵朔風寒。
君前不獨兒衣薄，知否中廚缺蚤餐。

Each line of this quatrain is devoted to depicting a difficult situation the wife or the family encounters. Insofar as the speaking voice of the wife is complaining, the poem can also be characterized as a boudoir plaint. Only her complaints are all about poverty and the hardships she faced in managing the household. We do not know why the husband is away from home and where he is, but we know from the poem that the wife has been left

behind to take care of the needy family, and she is calling his attention to the situation through the poem. The realistic description of the family's straitened circumstances suggests that life in the inner chambers is not always composed of tender, romantic moments.

While Mao Shuzhen is outspoken about her difficult life, not surprisingly many more women poets anthologized in the *Zhengshi ji* tend to present the self-image of an understanding and contented wife. Let's consider a poem by Li Yingzhou 李瀛州:

Sent to My Husband

While enjoying the spring scene, I only eat vegetarian food,

A Lang and Xiaoruan are both doing fine.

At this moment of leisure after sorting out books,

I especially compose a poem to send news to Boluan.

(ZSJ 9.11a)

寄外

消受春光祇素餐，阿郎小阮各平安。

圖書整暇清無事，特爲裁詩報伯鸞。

A Lang is an ancient term referring to father. Xiaoruan, the nickname of Ruan Xian 阮鹹 (234-305) the nephew of Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263), became a euphemistic term referring to a nephew in poetic convention. By these terms, the poet generally refers to the family. The language of this poem is plain and simple, and especially the line mentioning the family members is very colloquial. The poem reads like the wife is chatting with her husband. She tells him how the family fares, what she eats, and how she spends the day, all everyday matters. Her tone is easy, or she intends her tone to be easing and soothing

in order to allay her husband's worries about the family as she writes to him with news from home. In the last line, Li Yingzhou refers to her husband as Boluan, the husband of Meng Guang, revealing both her respect for the husband and her self-definition as a virtuous wife. As another *Zhengshi ji* author Pan Suxin suggests, "Because I am afraid to hinder your ambition / I dare not tell you my sorrow over our separation" 恐教妨壯志, 不敢訴離憂.⁷³ These wives understand the ideal wifely role they are supposed to perform.

As writing wives, these women are conscious of how to present themselves to their husbands and society. They like to demonstrate not only their efforts and capabilities in household management, but also their artistic talents as cultured wives. A balance between the two aspects is often sustained in their poetry. I would like to conclude this section with Sheng shi's (née Sheng) 盛氏 poem, "I Chatted with my Children at a Moonlit Night" 月下同兒女坐話, for it manages to comprise almost all the important features of the poems by writing wives discussed above:

Over the frosty river geese announce the second watch,⁷⁴
Beside the window I talk about my life with my children.
Because the moon is bright, I order the servant boy to roll up the blind,
When the water boils in the pot, I watch the maid make tea.
My hair easily turns gray due to worries about poverty,
A poem is suddenly completed because I miss the one who is far away.
Living in the boudoir I don't know the way to the capital gate,
How did I arrive in the capital in dream last night?

⁷³ ZSJ 18.1b.

⁷⁴ The second watch [7:00-9:00 p.m.], *er geng*, is the second one of the five two-hour periods into which the night is divided in the traditional Chinese way of measuring nighttime.

(ZSJ 5.6b)

江上霜鴻叫二更，窗前兒女話平生。

月明簾命奚童捲，鑪沸茶看小婢烹。

髮爲愁貧容易白，詩因懷遠忽然成。

閨中不省都門路，昨夜何緣夢到京。

This poem, as the poet proudly claims, is inspired by her thoughts of “the one who is far away.” It begins by projecting the image of a loving mother and, by the end, shifts to that of a loving wife. The major theme of this poem is to show how a wife/mother manages to live a contented and harmonious life with the rest of her family while her husband is away in his office in the capital. The poetic form adopted by the author is regulated verse (*lüshi* 律詩). In the regulated parallelism of the middle couplets, while the second describes a symmetrical picture of the arrangement of the servants’ labor, the third couplet presents a contrast between the difficulty of household management and the ease of composing poetry. Her complaint about poverty may be betrayed by her earlier mention of servants, but what is important is that by this detail the author attempts to emphasize her efforts in fulfilling her domestic responsibilities. Moreover, the contrast between the meanings may also be created to conform to the conventions of parallelism. They cannot be taken absolutely at face value. However, linking the two motifs in conceiving this couplet is certainly the author’s conscious choice, a choice to consider the two essential attributes of a cultured wife. She would like to be seen as coping with the hardships of life as mother and wife while still maintaining her artistic sensibility. The end couplet continues to play on another level of contrast: the poet indicates her social and physical location, the inner chambers, and the distance from her husband, but she can

move beyond these boundaries in dream to meet him. The poet herself seems to be amazed by both her strong feelings towards her husband and her imaginative power.

As the term *zhengshi* (correct beginnings) is originally related to wifely virtue in *Shi jing* hermeneutics, wifely authority is especially celebrated in this anthology.⁷⁵ In commenting on the “Guanju” 關雎, Confucius states: “The tone of ‘Guanju’ is joyful yet not lewd; sad yet not wounded in spirit” 樂而不淫, 哀而不傷.⁷⁶ These women authors indeed attempt to portray ideal images of the wife in light of the teaching of the *Shi jing*. The voice of the wife in their poetry is chaste and often positive. Significantly, these writing wives, in communicating with their husbands and their society by extension, consequently modified the conventional wifely voice and image with historical and cultural insights informed by their own age. They opened up a distinctive topical territory alongside the ancient *guiyuan* tradition.

Valorizing Domestic Life with New Cultural Ideals

In the above two sections, I have examined the *Zhengshi ji* authors’ direct innovations in conventional boudoir poetics and aesthetics in two important areas, *yanqing* and *guiyuan*. Although Yun Zhu and her editing team rhetorically claim a discursive space for women based on the socio-symbolic space of the inner chambers, women’s literary imagination, as reflected in their rich corpus, in fact goes far beyond its boundaries. Their re-vision of the boudoir life is not only informed by their socially gendered experiences, but also inspired by broader cultural and literary visions that may lead them to transcend gender boundaries. In her essay “Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny,” Kang-i Sun Chang introduces the concept of “androgyny” into the discussion of Ming-Qing

⁷⁵ Mann, *Precious Records* 99.

⁷⁶ *Lunyu* 3.20, 32.

women's literary culture. Originating from a Western cultural context, the term represents an ideal state that synthesizes both female and male elements in philosophy and aesthetics. Coining the term "cultural androgyny," Chang attempts to use this Western concept to characterize the commonalities shared by the cultural spheres of both genders. While the marginalized Ming-Qing male literati tended to engage in "a kind of self-feminization," talented women developed "a lifestyle typical of the educated male" in their artistic pursuits such as writing poetry.⁷⁷ She argues that "cultural androgyny" created a common ground in poetics that erased the female/male opposition. Although using a Western term to define a complex cultural phenomenon in the Chinese context is always problematic, it is a productive way to think about the shared cultural interests in the Late Imperial era by both genders.⁷⁸ Drawing on the notion of "cultural androgyny" as defined by Kang-i Sun Chang, this section goes on to explore in more depth how cultural ideals and expressions developed in literati self-cultivation influenced women's self-perceptions and created an idealization of their lived space.

Femininity was a changing concept in Late Imperial China's social and cultural life. Specifically, the emphasis upon women's learning and artistic talent was a major trend in the rewriting of traditional womanhood. The new identification of women with letters played an instrumental role in Ming-Qing women poets' transformation of boudoir poetics. As examples examined above have already shown, participation in artistic, especially literary, activities constitutes a striking feature in the women authors' self-representations. The self-image of a devoted poet in the boudoir setting had rarely been encountered in earlier poetry. She is knowledgeable, talented, and diligent in reading and

⁷⁷ Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny" 14, 15.

⁷⁸ For another study drawing on the concept of androgyny, see Zhou Zuoyan's recent book on Ming-Qing fiction, *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature*.

writing, in sharp contrast to the passive and lovelorn female in conventional boudoir poetry. As Huang Youqin argues in her preface to the *Zhengshi ji*, writing poetry indeed became one of the Qing *guixiu*'s vocations.

Though still confined within the frame of the boudoir, the female persona presented in the *Zhengshi ji* no longer feels only listlessness and ennui. She often finds something meaningful with which to busy herself, as shown in Tang Qingyun's 唐慶雲 poem "A Night in Early Summer" 初夏夜:⁷⁹

At night sitting in front of my tower, I meditate in silence,
It is a pure and peaceful time at the moment of the second watch.
Brushing over tender tips of bamboos, the wind becomes soft,
Approaching new leaves of the Wutong tree, the moon is round.
My heart is at leisure in conceiving lines, writing them down as they come,
As my eyes become tired from reading, I fall asleep holding a book.
In a fleeting dream, it seems like I entered an immortal realm,
Waking up I find incense wafting next to my sleeves.

(ZSJ 15.12b)

夜坐樓前思悄然，清和時候二更天。
風從嫩竹梢頭軟，月向新桐葉底圓。
覓句心閒拈句寫，看書眼倦抱書眠。
偶然一夢如仙境，醒後香煙滿袖邊。

⁷⁹ For another English translation and brief note on this poem, see Robertson, "Changing the Subject" 204.

It is late at night, but the poet is still awake, sitting thoughtfully outside her tower. She is preoccupied with composing poems and reading books. She falls asleep for some time because of exhaustion from long reading, but feels refreshed after a dream of the immortal's land. She is alone in the boudoir, but she has her books to hold on to. In reading this poem, Robertson points out that the association of the self with books de-eroticizes the sleeping and dreaming motifs as represented in literati poetry. Indeed, the image of books marks a distinct change from the sensual, erotic tone of conventional boudoir sentiments. More importantly, the activity of learning has transformative power for the poet here, not only providing her with a serene mood to enjoy the quiet night in the boudoir, but also suggesting that she has found a way to transcend her life through the immortality of her verse.

Tang Qingyun's poem is not rare, but representative of numerous similarly themed poems. As Robertson and Chang briefly yet insightfully note, Ming-Qing women poets tend to portray their boudoir as a study, and themselves as bookworms.⁸⁰ Their association of themselves with artistic activities had already become a convention of women's self-representation, as exemplified by numerous *Zhengshi ji* poems. Books both physically and spiritually fill in the void of the boudoir. As Wang Yaofang's 王瑤芳 lines suggest, "What accompany me are thousands of books / What is peeping at me is the moon shining through the curtain" 伴我書千卷, 窺人月一帘.⁸¹ With the company of thousands of books, the poet enjoys her exposure to the moon. She reinscribes the moon,

⁸⁰ Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny" 17; Robertson, "Changing the Subject" 203.

⁸¹ ZSJ 20.23b.

the “voyeur” of lonely women’s restlessness in traditional boudoir poetry, into a witness of her knowledge.

Poems portraying women enjoying more meaningful cultural activities in the boudoir consequently changed the plaintive or sentimental tone associated with the boudoir setting. A comparison between a *yuefu* by Cao Rui 曹睿 (204-39) from the *Yutai xinyong* and a poem by Zhang Lingyi 張令儀 will help us to understand this important transformation. Cao Rui’s poem reads:

Shine, shine white moon bright,
Let gleaming rays lighten my bed.
One in despair cannot sleep,
Dull, dull nights so long.
Soft breeze blows the bedroom door,
Silk curtains unmoved flare and drift.
I take my robe trailing its long sash,
Put on slippers, leave the high hall.
East, west, which way to turn?
I hesitate and falter.
A spring bird southward flies,
Soars and soars fluttering alone.
Sad its voice calling to its mate,
Mournful cries that wound my breast.
Moved by nature I long for my lover,

Suddenly spilling tears drench my coat.⁸²

I have stood long, singing my song loudly

To express my anger to Heaven.⁸³

(YTXY 2.68)

昭昭素明月，輝光燭我床。憂人不能寐，耿耿夜何長。微風衝閨闥，
羅帷自飄颻。攬衣曳長帶，縱履下高堂。東西安所之，徘徊以彷徨。
春鳥向南飛，翩翩獨翱翔。悲聲命儔匹，哀鳴傷我腸。感物懷所思，
泣涕忽沾裳。佇立吐高吟，舒憤訴穹蒼。

This poem is voiced by a female persona, expressing her sorrow over being left alone in the boudoir (*guida*). We do not know whether her lover deserted her or passed away, but she is deeply troubled by his absence. She cannot sleep while the moon lights up her empty bed. As the wind shakes her door and her bed curtains flutter, she might believe, mistakenly, that somebody is coming. She goes outside, but is unsure where to go. Only spring birds flying in pairs again remind her that she is without a companion.

Heartbroken, she bursts into tears and laments her misfortune to Heaven. This earlier *yuefu* poem included in the *Yutai xinyong* presents a strong case of the representation of the forceful voice of the female lament.

Zhang Lingyi's poem, "Facing the Moon by the Bookworm's Window" 蠹窗對月, reads:

Pacing to and fro, I love this beautiful night,

There is so much enjoyment in my hut.

⁸² Trans. by Anne Birrell in *New Songs* 71-72.

⁸³ Birrell's translation does not have these last two lines, which are included in the version I use. Translation of these two lines is mine.

Stars thin out, as the moon increases in brightness,
Chill invades the trees in front of the steps.
Sparse shadows of branches naturally aslant,
Cast onto my hooked curtains.
Water weeds here and there on the outer veranda,
Water shimmers on all four sides
Balustrades meandering, good for finding poetry,
Corridor narrow, I'd better slow down.
Chilled petals float in the wine cup,
Fallen leaves decorate the tea set.
Storks nest on the top of pines,
The night quiet, somebody is coughing.
Wild geese cry high in the sky,
Gone with the autumn clouds.
Sitting long I almost forget to go to sleep.
The world-weary mind is cooled by dews,
I want to describe the scene at this moment.
But who can pick up paper and brush?

(ZSJ 6.19a-b)

徘徊愛良夜，吾廬有佳趣。星稀月轉明，冷侵階前樹。疏影自橫斜，
正對簾鉤處。藻荇散庭除，水光還四布。曲檻好尋詩，修廊宜緩步。
寒花浮酒盞，落葉添茶具。鶴巢松樹顛，靜夜如人嗽。高天鴻雁鳴，
唳入秋雲去。坐久欲忘眠，煩襟感涼露。欲寫此時景，誰能展毫素。

The female persona's restless night in the boudoir, an emotional sign of her sadly missing the lover, is a common motif in the *guiyuan* tradition. However, the scenario is remarkably transformed in Zhang Lingyi's poem. Here a sleepless night is also depicted, but the female poet is having "so much enjoyment." She is alone apparently, but she is not missing anybody. She enjoys every moment of the night's beauty and joy. What we see in this poem is emphatically not a lovelorn woman isolated in the boudoir, but an inspired poet indulging in her perceptions of the world around her. Everything is poetry for her, but she is so enchanted with her vision of beauty that she protests she cannot stop to write it down. Of course, she writes it down anyway. The irony is only to suggest the intensity of the poet's sense perception. The poetic form adopted by Zhang Lingyi is the pentasyllabic ancient style (*wuyan gushi* 五言古詩), the same as that used by Cao Rui, but the female author constructs a completely different world in her poem.

The joy and pleasure both Tang Qingyun and Zhang Lingyi find in their everyday life are not the exclusive prerogative of women in the inner chambers. As Chang points out, the sixteenth century began to see an emergence of the culture of the "marginalized literati" (*bianyuan wenren* 邊緣文人), a group who withdrew from the public domains of examinations and officialdom and indulged in artistic pursuits such as poetry.⁸⁴ The ideal of withdrawal and pursuit of the meaningfulness of private life had long existed in the literati tradition.⁸⁵ With more sources of inspiration and opportunities for self-cultivation, the Ming-Qing literati simply brought this culture to an unprecedented level. Particularly relevant to the concerns of this chapter is that the home is also depicted in literati poetry

⁸⁴ Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny" 13.

⁸⁵ For a study of the changing concept of the recluse in literature from antiquity to the late Qing, see Li Chi. For a book-length study of the evolution of the practice of reclusion from early China to the Six Dynasties, see Berkowitz.

as a place of retreat.⁸⁶ The valorization of leisure, or disengagement itself was not only a luxury afforded by the gentry class, but also could be useful as a way of protecting individual integrity from political corruption.⁸⁷ Consider a poem titled “Sitting Alone” (*Du zuo* 獨坐) by the Ming poet Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610):

I know my heart but find it is difficult
To express whether I should work or withdraw.
Opening books, I find the characters too small,
So I boil water in order to taste the new tea.
To release boredom, I cast lots to divine,
Praying for a return home, I pay respect to the earth god.
Idle clouds and tired birds,
They are in the end the foremost among men.

(*Yuan Zhonglang quanji* 77)

胸臆知難盡，行藏未可陳。攤書嫌字小，烹水試茶新。
撥悶占茅卜，祈歸拜土神。閒雲與倦鳥，終是一流人。

A poetic leader of the Gong'an school, Yuan Hongdao not only valued individualism and honest expression in his poetic theory, but also followed his heart in his life decisions.⁸⁸ He had served at his post as magistrate in Wu County for less than two years when he retired from office for the rest of his life. The allusion to the proverbial “idle clouds” and “tired birds” expresses a scholar-official’s disenchantment with officialdom and desire to return to Nature. The details of daily life in the home setting are central in this poem.

⁸⁶ As noted in Chapter 1, Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi of the mid-Tang had begun a trend of taking daily life in the home setting as a rich source of poetic inspiration.

⁸⁷ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 152.

⁸⁸ On Yuan Hongdao and the Gong'an school, see Chou.

Many of these details, such as reading books and tasting new tea, are also common in the *Zhengshi ji* poems, as illustrated by the poems examined above. These shared details in texts by authors of both genders reveal some common interests and tastes valued in Late Imperial Chinese culture. Both men and women not only took delight in everyday life in the domestic setting, but also took pride in doing so.

Reading in this light, one can understand better why the Manchu woman poet Bing Yue 冰月 enjoys her life in the boudoir. Her enjoyment is clearly indebted to the literati's ideal of self-cultivation:

Moved by Feelings in Late Spring,

Using Lu Fangweng's Rhymes⁸⁹

When spring is leaving, I don't know how to send away the long day,

Several tattered scrolls keep me from my daily nap.

Being indifferent to worldly affairs, my heart is like still water.

Being at leisure, I begin to know a day is as long as a year.

You may just say that I'm lazy, not composing fine lines,

But I'm happy that my bag is short of official salary.

Recently this flavour rather suits me,

Sitting absorbed in the empty boudoir, my enjoyment is profound.

(ZSXJ 6.2b)

暮春感懷用陸放翁韻

春歸無計遣長天，幾卷殘編醒晝眠。

⁸⁹ Lu You 陸遊 (1125-1210) has a number of poems titled "Late Spring" 暮春, yet none of them uses the same rhyme as Bing Yue's poem. He only has one pentasyllabic poem, titled "Families in Late Spring Mountains" 山家暮春, that adopts the same category of rhymes. See *QSS* 2177.24771. Presumably, what Bing Yue refers to is this poem. However, there is no thematic relevance between these two poems.

世淡自知心似水，身閑始信日如年。

漫言詩懶無佳句，卻喜囊空少奉錢。

此味近來頗自適，空閨兀坐趣幽然。

The poet refers to the space in which she lives as “the empty boudoir,” a term derived from the boudoir convention, yet the meaning of “emptiness” in this poem is profoundly different. It may still point to the absence of the husband, but it definitely takes on philosophical depth as the poet’s persona develops a new perspective on her life within the confines of the boudoir: the day is long in the boudoir, yet this allows her time to pursue her interests; she does not have a salaried job, but she does not have worldly concerns either; in her leisure she can listen more to her heart. As the line “Recently this flavour rather suits me” suggests, she may not have thought about her life this way before. Inspired by the ideal of withdrawal, she also finds “profound” interest in her boudoir life.

Once she finds a way to transcend her worldly concerns, Bing Yue can care less about the material world. In another poem titled “My Humble Residence” 敝宅, she writes:

My humble residence is located at the end of the alley,

Secluded, it is suited to my taste.

Uninhabitable, it is discarded by other people,

But I take it as a place to lodge.

The gate is unfrequented; only sparrows come to rest,

The walls are as unstable as piled balls.

Rickety windows are held up with ropes,

Decayed pillars are buttressed with wood sticks.

Goose-teeth steps are hard to fix,
Fish-scaled tiles are incomplete.
My bed has to be frequently moved to avoid wind,
My books need to be aired because of bookworms.
When guests come, I'm worried about the narrowness of the hall,
Flowers in blossom, I like the breadth of my backyard.
I plant wormwoods as if they were bamboos,
And grasses as orchids.
At night, the moonlight brightens the threshold,
In the morning, the sunshine reddens the eaves.
This is my high studio,
Why is it necessary to build carved rails?

(ZSJ 6.3a-b)

敝宅當窮巷，幽然可適歡。人因難住棄，我作寄居看。門靜可羅雀，
牆危若累丸。敗窗繩繫穩，朽柱木支安。雁齒階難備，魚鱗瓦不全。
楊綠風數徙，書爲蛀重攤。客至愁堂窄，花開喜院寬。植蒿聊當竹，
藝草且爲蘭。夜檻蟾光白，朝簷日色丹。高軒即此是，何必置雕欄。

This long, elaborate poem is constructed through a striking contrast between the shabby condition of the dwelling and the dweller's high spirit. The inspirational forces that keep her spirits high come from two sources popular in her historical and cultural context. First, as the term 寄居 (lodging) suggests, the poet holds the Buddhist view of human life as transitory; no matter how luxurious a house may be, for her it is just a place to pass a short life. Second, in highlighting images encoded with cultural values such as books,

bamboos, and orchids, the poet suggests that she pursues learning, purity, and strength even in extremely difficult situations. This poem can be literally summed up in the line by the Tang poet and prose writer Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842): “My hut may be mean, but the fragrance of Virtue is diffused around” 斯是陋室, 唯吾德馨.⁹⁰ The concept of virtue with regard to the female gender has different meanings, but the woman poet can still empower herself with the high value she places on transcending the harsh living conditions.

In contrast to the refined and decorous setting represented in the boudoir convention, Bing Yue’s poem above introduces a completely different aesthetic modality, which represents an alternative mode adopted by Qing women poets in depicting their living space. They tend to depict a bleak space (whether based on real conditions or not) as a background against which to emphasize the spiritual quality of their daily lives. In many cases of this kind of representation, the female authors claim that they do not have the luxury of a boudoir, whether due to poverty or misfortune. As we have seen in the poems examined earlier, a curtain or blind is an essential component that defines the boundary of a woman’s room and controls the reader’s gaze or the persona’s vision. However, Yuan Hanhuang 袁寒篁 presents her family’s poor abode as not having walls:

To ease hunger, I certainly have a place to forget sorrow—

I delight in the bay in front of Hengmen!

Don’t be surprised that my poor home lacks even four walls,

Without walls it is better to appreciate the mountain view.

(ZSJ 6.2a-b)

⁹⁰ Trans. by Herbert Giles in Minford and Lau, eds., *An Anthology of Translation* 1009.

療饑自有忘憂處，樂此衡門水一灣。

漫訝家貧無四壁，家無四壁好看山。

As Yun Zhu notes in Yuan's biographical sketch, Yuan remained unmarried in her lifetime in order to take care of her widowed and sonless father. Her father was a commoner and the family was in straitened circumstances.⁹¹ The impoverished condition of her life implied by the poem is consistent with this background. However, what she intends to show is not her destitution, but the positive attitude and sense of humour she adopts in dealing with the problem: she still finds pleasure in simple nature. Even though she does not have the luxury of an upper-class boudoir, she is able to preserve her integrity along with her spiritual power. She is proud to be who she is, and contented to live the life that she lives.

Similarly, the title of Mao Huifang's 茅慧芳 poem indicates that the wall of her house was damaged by a storm (土牆爲風雨所壞). She goes on to say in the poem:

I'm originally a pure and poor person,
I only have three crooked rooms as a shelter.
Don't grieve that the wind and rain are too harsh,
There are plum blossoms to mend my broken wall.

(ZSXJ 3.16b)

我本清貧者，三間部屋斜。莫愁風雨甚，補壁有梅花。

The poet begins by claiming to be a *qingpin zhe*, a person who is poor yet pure in spirit. It is because of this spirit that she is not stricken down after the storm ruins her house. Instead, she comforts herself that there is a blooming plum tree which survived the storm

⁹¹ ZSJ 6.2a.

and can be seen through the broken wall. In the Chinese cultural lexicon, the image of the plum blossom, along with the pine and bamboo, stands for integrity, purity, and strength in confronting difficult circumstances. In this poem, the image of the plum blossom is suggestive of an unyielding spirit, echoing the poet's strength of character.

“Maintaining firmness in adversity” (*gu qiong* 固窮) is a moral principle upheld in the *Analects*, and specifically applied to the male literati's self-cultivation.⁹² The subject who upholds this principle is called a *junzi*/gentleman. In poetic history, the Eastern Jin poet and hermit Tao Qian is celebrated as such a time-honored icon.⁹³ He chose to withdraw from his official career to preserve his integrity when it was threatened by the dark politics of his time. He returned to a farming life in the country, *tianyuan* 田園 (farms and fields), seeking pleasure and inspiration in nature. He died poor but never gave in. He wrote a group of poems admiring seven “poor gentlemen” (*pinshi* 貧士) in Chinese history, his role models.⁹⁴ In his poetic expression, hunger and cold are recurrent factors that challenge the choice of personal principle, but they testify to the iron will to hold onto what he perceives as the “Way”:

Isn't it hard enough in reality?
But what I fear is not hunger or cold.
Poverty and affluence are ever at war,
But when the Way prevails there is no sad face.

⁹² *Lun yu* 論語 15.1.

⁹³ Relating Tao Qian's life philosophy to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism is a complex issue in Chinese scholarship. A popular theory is that he was a Confucian in his early years, but turned to the philosophy of Lao-Zhuang and Buddhism in his late years. For a study of Tao Qian's influence in the Chinese literary tradition, see Kwong, *Tao Qian*. For a study of Tao Qian's image and legacy as a recluse, see Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement* 215-26. On the construction of Tao Qian as a perfect recluse by his early biographers, see Swartz, “Rewriting a Recluse”.

⁹⁴ *TYMJ* 123-28.

(TYMJ 126)

豈不實辛苦，所懼非飢寒。貧富常交戰，道勝無戚顏。

Although Tao Qian was a role model more relevant to men faced with political choices, many Qing *guixiu* drew inspiration and strength from his image and poetic legacy. There are quite a number of poems written about Tao Qian in the *Zhengshi ji*. The self-image of a *qingpin zhe* claimed by Mao Huifang reveals her intent to be such a virtuous *junzi*. It is because they believe they also hold the Way that women like Yuan Hanhuang and Mao Huifang have “no sad face” even when facing extreme difficulties. However, while women appreciate Tao Qian’s personal integrity and free spirit, simultaneously they also find gender barriers between his world and their own. As Wang Wei’s 王煒 lines suggest:

[...]

I’m from the rank of women,

But I myself also like being broad-minded and carefree.

How can I be like Sir Tao

And enjoy the rest of my life in worriless wandering?

(ZSJ 6.12a)

我本巾幗儔，曠達亦自喜。安得似陶公，優游樂餘齒？

Presumably, she means that it is the household responsibilities of a woman that restrain her from pursuing a lifestyle like Tao’s.

However, Xu Zaipu 許在璞 informs us that, although she could not afford the ideal life of a hermit, she has managed to live in a carefree world by making recourse to her inner forces:

A Poem of Improvisation

To protect and nourish my remaining life I withdraw from external
relations,
Shutting the door of my painted pavilion I am naturally peaceful.
I had wanted to build a hut far from the human world,
But in what place does a green mountain not charge you money?
(ZSJ 8.19a)

偶吟

保養餘生絕外緣，畫閣獨掩自恬然。
結廬欲遠人間世，何處青山不要錢。

By shutting the door of her boudoir from external human society, Xu Zaipu establishes an unperturbed world for herself. She does not even bother to take refuge in secluded mountains. The way she adopts is in fact “reclusion in the city” (*yin yu shi* 隱於市), an ideal of reclusion inspired by Taoism: one can find refuge in society as long as one can protect oneself from the vulgar and profane.⁹⁵ The third line of this poem is derived from Tao Qian’s lines, “Building my hut in the human realm / But there is no noise of wagons and horses” 結廬在人境，而無車馬喧。⁹⁶ With similar wit, the female poet creates a protective, nurturing, and relaxing space for herself within the boundaries of the boudoir.

Despite gender boundaries, these women authors internalize various cultural factors regarding self-cultivation, and attempt to craft an ideal space not in terms of their gender roles but their personal qualities. The space depicted in their poems appears to be distinct from the traditional feminized boudoir, and in most poems there are no explicit

⁹⁵ Li Chi, “The Changing Concept of the Recluse” 241.

⁹⁶ *TYMJ* 89.

terms to specify their gender identity (except for Bing Yue's first poem). In the sense of cultivating a literary style that transcends gender, I agree with Chang that these women adopt an androgynous stance in depicting their lived space.⁹⁷

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented two general approaches used by *Zhengshi ji* authors in depicting the confines of their domestic lives. First, I have examined how these women authors critically use the boudoir convention in their self-representation. On the one hand, they adopt descriptive skills and vocabulary derived from the tradition, but on the other hand, they rewrite conventional images to express proper, meaningful activities in the boudoir. The physical setting of the boudoir is similar to that in poetic convention—ornamented and elegant—yet it is filled with completely different personae and activities. They de-eroticize the space of the boudoir and change the plaintive tone of traditional boudoir sentiments into one that is positive and joyful. The women represented enjoy leisure and autonomy to pursue their cultural interests and enjoy themselves with or without companions. The boudoir is consequently re-encoded as a space within which a talented daughter, a cultured woman, or a capable wife enjoys her daily life.

Second, I have explored the approach by which the women authors represent their living space and everyday life from a broader cultural perspective that transcends gender. They do not limit themselves to the representation of their gendered experiences, but also valorize their everyday, domestic life with values derived from literati cultural ideals. In doing so, they neither necessarily frame their living space with the symbolic, gendered *gui*, nor represent it as a feminized space even in a loose sense. Whether based on their

⁹⁷ Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny" 11.

real life experience or literary creativity, these women authors craft an alternative space through which to explore further dimensions of their personal life.

These are two different kinds of self-representation, but both serve a common goal in emphasizing the positive aspects of the authors' everyday lives. As most of the life vignettes examined in this chapter have shown, these women poets attempt to capture what they perceive to be an ideal life in the domestic sphere. No matter within or without the material construction of the *gui*, whether rich or poor, self-contentment and individual integrity are emphasized as the ideal qualities of the interior self. These positive attitudes are not only required by the moral principles of female virtue, but also valued by the orthodox, didactic poetics of the age.

As Yun Zhu claims, the *Zhengshi ji* is intended to present voices of “gentleness and meekness.” Specifically in keeping with this principle, most of the poems selected by Yun Zhu conform to the standard of “no resentment and lewdness” (*buyuan buyin* 不怨不淫) derived from the *Shi jing* hermeneutic tradition. Although *yuan* 怨 (to voice grievance), along with *xing* 興 (to stimulate), *guan* 觀 (to observe), and *qun* 群 (to socialize), is considered by Confucius to be one of the major functions of poetry, it is not a desirable poetic mood or aesthetic in orthodox poetics.⁹⁸ As the Great Preface states, “the tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is balanced. The tones of an age of turmoil are bitter and full of anger; its government is perverse” 治世之音安以樂，其政和；亂世之音怨以怒，其政乖。⁹⁹ The revival of the Confucian view of poetics from the early Qing on, which was firmly supported by the court, was intended to

⁹⁸ *Lunyu* 17.9, 192.

⁹⁹ Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* 43.

reflect the glory of the new age and consolidate the Qing Empire. As stated in her editing principles, Yun Zhu seriously incorporates her anthologizing project into this ongoing imperial enterprise. Although coordinating women's writing with authoritative discourses on both female gender and poetics is the major strategy used by the *Zhengshi ji* editors and authors to elevate women's poetic voice, their appropriation of dominant discourses appears to have been not merely a tactic, but was also based on their genuine belief in the values espoused by their society. Yun Zhu's anthologizing strategies and rhetorical remarks only make explicit the underlying value systems.

The corpus of the anthology is also richly reflective of its contemporary cultural ambience. Yuan Mei's *Xingling* (nature and inspiration) School, an individualist poetic approach intended as an alternative to Shen Deqian's poetic movement, also had tremendous influence on women's poetic production. The anthology includes poems by many disciples of Yuan Mei, such as Sun Yunfeng 孫雲鳳 and Jin Yi 金逸, who were very active in Yuan's circle. Ge Fuhua 戈馥華, for example, remarks in her poem titled "Learning Poetry" 學詩: "After all one's brush should follow the call of natural inspiration" 筆底還須寫性靈.¹⁰⁰ Neither Yun Zhu nor other prefatory writers discuss different poetic theories in articulating their anthologizing agenda, but it seems that to them the *Xingling* School is not at odds with their aims as long as it conforms to the principle of "gentleness and meekness" in general.

In conclusion, I would argue that the women authors in the *Zhengshi ji* crafted a meaningful space of the boudoir and beyond, and this space not only demonstrates the

¹⁰⁰ *ZSXJ*, *Buyi* 49b. As noted earlier in this chapter, the *Buyi* section was compiled by Miaolianbao's mother Cheng Mengmei.

distinctive features of women's culture, but also reveals that this culture was evolving within a larger historical and cultural context.

Chapter Three

The Boudoir in Times of Chaos

Assigned to the inner, domestic sphere, women were supposed to be not only circumscribed by gender-based conventions of etiquette, but also physically protected from dangers and threats from the outside world. As most of the poems included in the *Zhengshi ji* show, peace and harmony are ideal qualities associated with life in the women's sphere. Compiled during the early decades of the nineteenth century, a time when social and political life was relatively stable, at least in Jiangnan, the anthology was intended to celebrate the prosperity of its age. But the larger picture of women's textual practices beyond the thematic scope and temporal frame of the *Zhengshi ji* was far more complicated. The earlier Ming-Qing transition, the Opium War (1840) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) were indeed tumultuous times. During these times of social upheaval even normally well-sheltered women of the high classes were inevitably thrust into the chaotic world beyond the inner quarters. Women also had to confront historical transitions and political disasters.

Women in the late Ming and Qing were not the first to witness tragic historical changes. However, as Kang-i Sun Chang points out, "the late Ming was an era that for the first time saw an unprecedented number of writing women who consciously acted as witness to history by recording their personal experiences."¹ Grace Fong has also insightfully noted that with the spread of literacy, self-writing or self-recording became particularly prevalent and significant in late imperial individuals' lives, especially in

¹ Chang, "Modai cainü de luanli shi" 226.

contexts of social disorder.² Although most of these records were written by men, women also played active roles in constructing textual responses to historical crises and personal losses. They recorded their traumatized experiences during times of disorder and articulated their feelings about and reflections upon tragic historical changes.

In this chapter, I focus on my analysis of the boudoir as inscribed in individual collections by women who lived through traumatic instances of war and social chaos from the late Ming to late Qing. In her examination of Shen Shanbao's autobiographical impulse as shown in Shen's poetry collection, Fong points out that individual collections and manuscripts, such as those of Shen's, can function as the autobiographical records of the authors.³ Indeed, many of the collections by women that I have examined in my archival research are arranged in chronological order; this order demonstrates the author's life course or development of poetic practice. Compared with anthologies, these individual collections provide an immensely rich source of information regarding the poets' personal lives and experiences. The violent conquest of China by the Manchus and the Taiping Rebellion stand out as the two most tumultuous moments in the cultural memory of Late Imperial China. My research shows that these two chaotic moments received the most attention in women's poetic witnessing. In delving into individual collections by women produced from the mid-nineteenth century through the late Qing, one frequently encounters poems written about "chaos caused by soldiers" (*bingluan* 兵亂). Poems with titles such as "Escaping from the disorder of war" (*bi bingluan* 避兵亂) or "Escaping from Bandits" (*bi kou* 避寇) stand in sharp contrast with those depicting placid and sentimental boudoir scenarios experienced in more peaceful times by the same

² Fong, "Reclaiming Subjectivity" 1.

³ Fong, "Writing Self" 302.

poets. Although in many cases the collections only include a few poems on *bingluan*, the authors seem deeply traumatized from their experiences of war and chaos. For those who had great personal losses, their lives were changed forever, as were their perspectives on life and history and their approaches to the writing of poetry.

Importantly, one can see that the *gui* as the normative, symbolic location of female gender is deeply implicated in women's representation of their traumatic experiences of disorder. Some women poets went even further to protest gender restrictions imposed on women as social chaos opened up a perspective for them to consider their place in society. Through examining women's textual production under extraordinary historical circumstances, I will attempt to illustrate how these poets depict the *gui* against the larger socio-historical background of disorder, and how the broader social and historical experiences they brought into their writings further transformed conventional boudoir poetics and aesthetics, including new conventions developed in contemporary women's literary culture.

In addition to the theoretical concerns of this dissertation, this chapter will also shed significant light on women's witnessing of history as inscribed in their poetry. As Chang notes, Ming-Qing writing women did have literary predecessors in poetic witnessing, such as the Han woman poet Cai Yan's 蔡琰 narrative of her personal trauma in her well-known series, "*Hujia shiba pai*" 胡笳十八拍 and the Tang poet Du Fu's poetry on social reality.⁴ Through an examination of Wang Duanshu's "*Beifen xing*" 悲憤行 (The Song of Grief, title presumably derived from Cai Yan's "*Beifen shi*" 悲憤詩)

⁴ Chang, "Modai cainü de luanli shi" 224. The attribution of authorship of these poems to Cai Yan is debatable in both Chinese and English scholarship. For a study reviewing the major debates and an argument that Cai Yan was not the author of these writings, see Frankel, "Cai Yan and the Poems Attributed to Her" 133-56.

and other related examples, Chang argues that Wang, among others, constructs a poetic history (*shi shi* 詩史) in which the author is both the subject of personal experience and an objective witness.⁵ In this chapter, I will examine the voices of women witnessing historical crises, women whose gender-specific experiences and perspectives may enrich Chang's early insights.

Guixiu in Displacement: Encountering War and Chaos

The transition from the Ming to the Qing is considered by historians as the most dramatic dynastic succession in Chinese history.⁶ The Manchu conquest of China and the subsequent consolidation of the Qing Empire was a long, violent process that lasted until the last decades of the seventeenth century. As the social historian Lynn Struve observes, "It probably is safe to say that no locale in China escaped some sort of 'soldier calamity' (*binghuo*) during the middle decades of the seventeenth century."⁷ Lasting almost two decades and affecting hundreds of cities, the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, with the several concurrent rebellions such as Nian 捻 [1853-68], also brought "gigantic human catastrophes" to the Chinese people.⁸ In the Taiping Rebellion alone, twenty million people died as a direct result of the war.⁹ When waves of social turmoil turned the larger world upside down, women found that the inner world of the *gui* also changed or even collapsed. In war-ridden areas, women along with the larger population were forced to leave their homes and take refuge in remote areas or mountains. Countless

⁵ Chang, "Modai cainü de luanli shi" 224.

⁶ See, for example, Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise* 1.

⁷ Struve, *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm* 2.

⁸ Twitchett and Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History* vol. 10: 264.

⁹ Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* 3.

women lost their lives during the turmoil. Writing women who survived these calamities left behind rich records of their agonizing experiences of war and violence.

In her study of women's poetic witnessing mentioned above, Chang argues that the speaking voice tends to adopt a voice which is not gendered (for example, the voice is similar to Du Fu's) as a public witness.¹⁰ Chang's discerning of public elements within these women's accounts presumes a social distinction between the private female realm and the public male realm. Indeed, historical concerns and political sentiments belonged to the male social sphere; in expressing these themes, Chinese literary history had canonized the perspectives and voices of male literati. However, in emphasizing the effect of public witnessing, Chang underestimates women's gendered point of view as reflected in their poetry. A poem by Wang Duanshu cited in Chang's study provides a good example of a gender-marked account. Entitled "The Song of Tragedy Written for Sister Zhen" 敘難行代真姊, this long poem records how a widow had to take her old mother-in-law and young son into hiding in the mountains, and ended up cutting off her hair to be a nun in order to protect her chastity.¹¹ The poem was written by a woman but speaks for another woman: from the point of view of Sister Zhen and in her voice. The author only inserts her own voice at the end: "The grieved voice is recorded on a piece of paper / I can write it but cannot bear to read it" 悲聲落紙中, 能書不能讀.¹² Although this poem is in the style of "speaking for another" 代言體, it is written from a female's gendered experience and perspective.

¹⁰ Chang, "Modai cainü de luanli shi" 227.

¹¹ Chang, "Modai cainü de luanli shi" 233-4.

¹² Chang, "Modai cainü de luanli shi" 234.

In examining poems by women recording war and chaos in the Ming-Qing transition and later times, I find that these authors tend to record what they personally saw and experienced *as women*. The concept of the *gui* is often invoked in their accounts of trauma even though its physical frame had been destroyed by war. The poem, “Escaping from the Red Turbans” 避紅巾, by Dong Baohong 董寶鴻 (fl. 1853), a survivor of the Taiping Rebellion, exemplifies this characteristic:

Looking around, beacon smoke all around, like a palm closing up,
 To escape misfortune and seek luck, where should I go?
 Turning around, I can only weep for Zhenzhou,¹³
 From now on, I will be haunted by dreams about my homeland.
 I remember I lodged beside a chill creek when I had just left home—
 An uninhabited inn in a deserted village with a low gate.
 The second night, I was surprised to come to a small market,
 Both people and places are strange; I am afraid to take a close look.
 How pitiful this body from the boudoir!
 How pitiful—her bitterness of chaotic times!
 If Luofu had a husband, that husband could be relied on,
 Luofu without a husband, on whom can she count?

(YXGSC 11a)

四望烽煙如掌合，避凶趨吉身何往。
 抽身我固哭真州，從此家山勞夢想。
 離家初記宿寒溪，野店荒村入戶低。

¹³Zhenzhou refers to present day Yizheng, Jiangsu.

再宿忽訝臨小市，人地生疏難近視。

可憐閨中身！可憐亂世苦！

羅敷有夫夫可依，羅敷無夫誰代主。

By “the red turbans,” the author means the army of the Taipings.¹⁴ Dong Baohong was a native of Yizheng, Jiangsu, which the author refers to as Zhenzhou in line 4.¹⁵

Presumably, this poem was written about her situation when the Taiping troops attacked Yizheng in 1853.¹⁶ The author narrates her experience escaping the war after the catastrophe befell her hometown. Forced to abandon home and plunged into the chaotic world, she is terrified and confused. In order to seek shelter, she drifts from place to place, but it seems that she can never settle. Bewildered by the strange world which she has not seen before, she lets out her cry of sorrow at being torn from the place to which she used to belong, the *gui*. Moreover, she identifies herself as Luofu, a beautiful and clever female persona portrayed in *yuefu* songs.¹⁷ In one representative Luofu poem, Luofu successfully discourages a man who intends to take her by claiming that she has a powerful husband.¹⁸ However, the Luofu in this poem does not have a husband to rely on. As a poem mourning her late husband included earlier in the collection suggests, Dong Baohong was already widowed at the time.¹⁹ Through these details describing her encounter with the “alien” world as a widow, the poet depicts the powerless and helpless situation of a refugee *guixiu*.

¹⁴ There are several rebellions involving armies called the “Red Turbans” in earlier times. Given her time and region, the author presumably means the Taipings because they also wore red turbans as typical rebel head covering.

¹⁵ Yizheng was also referred to as Zhenzhou in ancient times.

¹⁶ *Qing shi gao* 清史稿 20.727.

¹⁷ For a discussion of songs centered on the image of Luofu, see Allen, “From Saint to Singing Girl.”

¹⁸ For the poem, see YTX 1.6-9.

¹⁹ “Orally Composed the New Year’s Day”元旦口占, YXGSC10a-b.

One of Dong Baohong's poems written on her boudoir life included earlier in the collection will help us better understand what she means by claiming herself as one from the *gui*:

In the Boudoir: A Random Poem

Serenely, I dwell in the secluded boudoir,
Entrusting my idle feelings to poetry.
Beside the emerald window, volumes of books are spread out,
A silver brush is hung on a flowering branch.
Only the spring breeze is aware of my embroidering,
Only the moon knows when I compose poetry.
I like the red flowers which dot the path,
I love the green willow strands hanging.
Coming up with poetic lines, I hope my brother will harmonize with them,
Adding incense late, I complain to the maid.
Living in seclusion, it tends to be solitary,
As for ordinary matters, I can manage them.
Drawing phoenixes is not my original intent,
I can paint but I do not wear rouge.
Father's books pile up on my desk,
I step back to reflect often on mother's instruction.
Meditating on the past, I admire virtuous women,
Living at the present time, I value filial piety and compassion.
In my powder case, I store ink stones,

On my dressing table are folded my writings.

I will follow custom in affairs of our time,

My new make-up is barely fashionable.

Turning round, I let out a laugh,

As I rinse my ink-slab “facing the pond.”²⁰

(YXGSC 1b-2a)

閨中雜詩

靜處深閨裏，閒情寓以詩。碧窗橫卷冊，銀管架花枝。

繡只春風覺，吟惟夜月知。紅憐花點徑，綠愛柳垂絲。

得句期兄和，添香怪婢遲。幽居偏寂寞，常分自操持。

描鳳初非志，塗鴉不點脂。父書堆一案，母訓退三思。

懷古崇芳烈，居今美孝慈。粉龕藏翰墨，鏡檻疊文辭。

近事還從俗，新妝勉入時。抽身渾一笑，洗硯亦臨池。

In this poem, the author's persona is secure within the inner chambers, enjoying her peaceful everyday life. She is free from household labor yet busy with reading, embroidering, and composing poetry. She is served by maidservants, inspired by the elder brother and father's learning, and guided by her mother's moral instructions. While she does not pay much attention to the fashion of her time in dressing herself, she values moral and literary cultivations. With a cluster of parallel couplets, the author describes the typical lifestyle of a well-to-do gentry daughter in times of peace. In her later poems, she repeatedly invokes this scene to express her sorrow over the hardship of her widowed

²⁰ “Facing the pond” means to learn calligraphy.

life in wartime. In addition to lines such as “In those years I wore light silk robes in my embroidered inner room / Who’d expected I would now suffer?” 當年繡闥着輕羅，誰料而今受折磨，²¹ she also composed “Rhapsody on My Life’s Encounters” 平生際遇賦 to express her bitterness over her suddenly reduced circumstances in wartime.²² In it, she begins with a similar claim, “In the past I was living in my secluded boudoir” 昔予之在深閨, and goes on to contrast her previous comfortable life with what “the sudden emergence of the Red Turbans” 紅巾忽現 has brought upon her.²³ Her marriage into a family plagued by ill fortune was a turning point. Both her mother-in-law and husband passed away after she was married.²⁴ Her life as a widow was further exacerbated by the war. As she claims in another poem “Recording My Feelings” 誌感, she feels unable to cope with the harsh reality she is faced with: “My strength exhausted, there is no place to settle in this world” 力殫斯世居難定. After this line, she explains in an interlinear note that this is “[d]ue to the disturbance of the Red Turbans” 紅巾擾亂.²⁵ Dong Baohong’s repeated reference to her former boudoir life demonstrates her strong identification with the normative location of women, and her way of protesting the war is also a well-sheltered *guixiu*’s typical reaction to social upheaval.

The nostalgic memory of the peaceful boudoir life typifies women’s textual responses to social disorder. In the Ming-Qing transition, Cai Runshi 蔡潤石 (*zi* Yuqing 玉卿, 1612-94) presented a striking contrast between her old boudoir life and terrible experiences of war in a long poem, “While I Dwelled in Poverty in the Mountains My

²¹ “Sigh over My Life” 自嘆, YXGSC 12a.

²² YXGSC 19a-b.

²³ “Rhapsody on My Life’s Encounters,” YXGSC 19a, 20b.

²⁴ “Rhapsody on My Life’s Encounters,” YXGSC 19a.

²⁵ YXGSC 11b.

Younger Sister Liansu Came by to Visit Me and Talked about Difficulties of Wandering
as Refugees” 窮居山中蓮素妹枉道過訪并道流離苦況:²⁶

[...]

- We learnt embroidery from Madam Yao of Chang'an,
2 In our spare time we both studied the art of poetry.
We shared desk and ink at Wuling's Plum Blossom Pavilion,
4 Holding hands we explored all the paths to the Peach Blossom Spring.
How happy our life was and how miserable it is now!
6 After the calamity, we've suffered more misfortunes as refugees,
I lost two sons on Heyang's post station road,
8 And collapsed in snow in the valley of Mount Huaimeng.
Running into an old servant I was able to survive,
10 Three months in an old shabby temple, I grieved at my homelessness.
In the howling wind, I often heard noises of killing and plunder,
12 Smelling the stench of blood, I felt more worried and afraid.
Thousands of words cannot describe what I've suffered,
14 Facing each other, we cried with tears like rain and dew.

(HSZGKL 42)

長安姚母學針繡，餘暇共習詩與賦。
武陵梅閣同硯席，相攜踏遍桃源路。
昔何歡娛今何苦！遭難流離更多故。

²⁶ For a biography of Cai Runshi, see *Guangxu Zhangzhou fuzhi* 光緒彰州府志 34.742-743.

河陽驛道二子失，懷孟山坳雪中仆。

會逢舊僕得再生，十旬破廟悲流寓。

風號時聞殺掠聲，血腥觸鼻更憂怖。

千言萬語說不盡，相對嘿嘿淚霑露。

Cai Runshi was the wife of the Ming loyalist and martyr Huang Daozhou 黃道周 (1585-1646).²⁷ She was married to Huang as his second wife in 1626 when she was only fifteen.²⁸ After the fall of the Ming in 1644, Huang Daozhou joined the Southern Ming regimes and actively participated in the restoration cause.²⁹ He was captured by Qing troops in 1646 and killed in the same year because he refused to surrender to the Qing.³⁰ While Huang devoted himself to his military campaigns, Cai stayed home in Fujian taking care of the household.³¹ The above poem was written after Huang's death.³² The "calamity" brought her tremendous loss and emotional trauma. She lost her husband and sons, her home, and confronted bloody violence face to face. The ordeal she suffered, in her words, is beyond description.

The peaceful and joyful boudoir life she once shared with her sister can only be revisited in memory. She recalls the happy times she spent with Liansu in the past. Given traditional Chinese customs in referring to a female friend or relative of one's own generation, this younger sister Liansu was not necessarily her biological sister. However,

²⁷ For a biography of Huang Daozhou, see *Ming shi* 255. 6592-6601; and *Guangxu Zhangzhou fuzhi* 31. 638-41. For Huang Daozhou's loyalist activities in the last years of his life, and for an account of his death, see also Struve, *The Southern Ming* 89-92; Mote, *Imperial China* 835-36.

²⁸ *Guangxu Zhangzhou fuzhi* 34.742.

²⁹ Mote, *Imperial China* 835.

³⁰ Mote, *Imperial China* 836.

³¹ *Guangxu Zhangzhou fuzhi* 34.742.

³² The poem mentions Huang's death. See Huang Daozhou and Cai Yuqing, *Huangshizhaigong kangli weikangao* 43.

as suggested in the poem they were very close and seemed to have grown up together. What the author primarily recalls are activities typical of women's boudoir life at that time, such as embroidery, composing poetry, and sightseeing. The Plum Blossom Pavilion, which is specially mentioned in line 3, would be a place located in the family's garden that they frequented in the old days. Sightseeing was not unusual for women of their status, but it is hard to know whether she describes armchair traveling or actual trips, for the Peach Blossom Spring is a literary allusion to an ideal world of peace and innocence hidden from the vulgar and chaotic world.³³ Recalling this imagined utopia would have served a special purpose in that she could escape in her imagination from her current terrible circumstances.³⁴

A famous female poet and painter, Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介 (ca.1620-ca. 1669) lost her home after the Qing army occupied Yangzhou in 1645; she spent the remainder of her life wandering around Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. She had to sell her artistic skills to support her family, and has been invoked by Dorothy Ko as an example of an early "professional" woman challenging traditional gender boundaries.³⁵ However, in her poems she is often bitter about her wandering life and expresses a sense of powerlessness. Lines such as "There are one thousand poems in my bag to which I can entrust my feelings / Although my home does not have any walls, I always think of returning" 囊有千詩聊寄賞, 家無四壁亦懷歸 reveal a strong sense of nostalgia for home and stability.³⁶

³³ This allusion is derived from Tao Qian's "The Peach Blossom Spring" 桃花源, for which see TYMJ 165-68. For an English translation, see Hightower, trans. & annot., *The Poetry of Tao Qian* 254-58.

³⁴ In Tao's writing, people in the Peach Blossom Spring had fled to avoid troubles at the time of the Qin Dynasty. It is particularly relevant for Cai to allude to this story in her poem.

³⁵ See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, esp. 117-122.

³⁶ "An Autumn Day on the Lake" 湖上秋日. See Gong Xianzong, *Nüxing wenxue bai jia zhuan* 女性文學百家傳 366.

In “Harmonizing with Meicun’s Four Pieces on Mandarin Duck Lake” 和梅村鴛湖四首, Huang Yuanjie’s four-poem reply to the male poet Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609-1672), she writes, “Since like bramble flying with the wind, I’ve been seeking a hiding place / Where can you send your poems to me when they’re done?” 一自蓬飛求避地, 詩成何處寄蕭娘 and “I recall in the past in the gilded boudoir I used to match your tunes / By the bank of small river outside No-Sorrow city” 憶昔金閨曾比調, 莫愁城外小江干.³⁷ To quote these lines, I do not challenge Ko’s basic premise, but intend to show Huang’s strong sense that being a displaced woman was a misfortune for her.

However, women poets do not always represent themselves as powerless, dislocated victims of war. Although war physically destroyed their home and boudoir, the boudoir could function as a spiritual site from which they drew not only comfort but also strength to empower themselves in adversity. Wu Chai’s 吳菡 (1838-74) boudoir and study, named Pavilion of Autumn Sash (*Peiqiuge* 佩秋閣), played just such a role in helping her survive the upheaval of the Taiping Rebellion. Wu Chai was a native of Wu County, Jiangsu. She was married in 1858, but her husband soon died from disease, and his posthumous son also died from disease in the following years while Wu was fleeing the war.³⁸ The Pavilion of Autumn Sash was the name of Wu Chai’s boudoir perhaps before she married and experienced all these misfortunes. Her collection, *Posthumous Manuscripts from the Pavilion of Autumn Sash* (*Peiqiuge yigao* 佩秋閣遺稿), was named after this place. As a significant location in the poet’s life and memory, it frequently appears in the poems, as in the following, “At the Pavilion of Autumn Sash, I Sit at Night

³⁷ Gong Xianzong, *Nüxing wenxue bai jia zhuan* 367.

³⁸ *PQYG*, “Xu” 10a-b.

with My Sisters and Write this Poem for My Second Elder Sister Who is Married to a Family of Lujiang” 佩秋閣同諸姊夜坐賦贈歸廬江氏仲姊:

Wandering all these years—it’s hard to know how we feel,
In the music of broken bamboo flutes and sad strings, another season
passed.
The setting moon hangs by the curtain hook; the wind plays with the
shadows,
Beside lamplight by the small window we compose song lyrics.
Indeed, getting together in the midst of war is not easy,
But the bitterest sorrow would be to weep the rest of our lives.
Sighing from all your chores, you’re exhausted and wasting away,
Again, I write a poem for you, matching “A Splendid Woman.”

(*PQGYG* 1.12a)

頻年蹤跡感難知，殘竹哀絲又一時。
斜月簾鉤風弄影，小窗燈火夜填詞。
兵戈聚首良非易，涕淚餘生最可悲。
太息蘋蘩勞悴甚，爲君重賦碩人詩。

As the title indicates, Wu wrote this poem for her second elder sister. It seems the gathering of the sisters recorded in this poem took place during this married sister’s visit to her natal family. As the poet suggests, it is an unusual reunion; everybody is touched by it. They must have suffered tremendously from the war and did not expect to be reunited. On this precious occasion, they are exchanging poetry again beside their “small window.” The “moon” and the “lamp” might have witnessed this activity of theirs many

times before, but this time it takes place under extraordinary circumstances. Outside their window, the world is teeming with soldiers and weapons. They are not sure when they will see each other again. The author dedicated this poem to her second sister, encouraging her to be strong and positive. To cheer her up, Wu also recalls a poem she wrote for her, presumably at her wedding praising her beauty and virtue as modeled on the poem, “Shuo ren” (A splendid woman), in the *Shi jing*.³⁹ At this moment, the boudoir provides the sisters with a space to recollect their sweet memories and seek emotional support from one another.

Having written the above poem, the poet composed another poem, “Playfully I Reply to My own Poem on Behalf of My Sister” 戲代姊氏答贈:

- At year's end, thankfully family and friends care for one,
2 It's when we can retreat to a corner of the lakes and mountains.
Holding iron castanets in the morning, we sing about the snow in Liang
Garden,
4 Burning oil in the night, we write the lyrics of the Han Palace.
We should hold the ambition to write a supplementary history in the future,
6 Do not compose poems on the sorrows of the fugitive's wandering.
Always remember in this stormy evening,
8 We allot rhymes and compose poetry together by the green window.
(*PQGYG* 1.12a)

歲寒仗有故人知，一角湖山招隱時。

³⁹ The original poem in the *Shi jing* (Maoshi # 57) celebrates the wedding of daughter of the Lord of Qi. As Waley suggests, this song might be also sung at ordinary people's wedding. See Waley, *Book of Songs* 81. For an English translation of the poem, see Waley, *Book of Songs* 80.

持鐵曉吟梁苑雪，然脂暝寫漢宮詞。

好懷續史他年志，莫作寄公流寓悲。

長憶當年風雨夕，綠窗分韻共裁詩。

In speaking for her sister, Wu Chai is speaking to both herself and her sisters. She encourages them to maintain optimism and faith that they can manage to survive and live a meaningful life. Although they cannot control historical changes, they have each other to count on and aspirations to keep their spirits high. They can withdraw from the worldly realm to the mountains, where they can continue to engage with meaningful pursuits. As Wu Chai suggests in the second couplet, composing poetry, particularly poems of historical meditation, will significantly engage her. Liang yuan was originally an imperial garden in Kaifeng established by the Han prince Liu Wu 劉武, which later became a ruin and was frequently invoked by literati poets to suggest the vicissitudes of history. The Tang poet Li Duan 李端 (fl. 770), for example, wrote lines such as “The Sui Palace is far away on the river / The Liang Garden is buried in deep snow” 隋宮江上遠，梁苑雪中深.⁴⁰ Wu Chai also desires her sisters and herself to write poetry reflecting on their historical situation. The phrase *ran zhi ming xie* (literally, burning oil and writing at night) in line 4 is borrowed from Xu Ling’s preface to the *Yutai xinyong*. On one level, the poet uses it to depict their diligence in writing, and on another level to associate it with feminine-style writings such as the subgenre of *gongci* (palace lyrics) established in the Tang, a genre similar to the boudoir plaint but focusing on palace women. By paralleling two poetic styles—historical and feminine—in the couplet, the author suggests the range of their poetic writings. “To write a supplementary history” *xu shi* in the third couplet

⁴⁰ QTS 285.49

alludes to Ban Zhao, who completed the *Han shu* after her brother Ban Gu's death, the author goes on to make more explicit her intent to be a subject witnessing and writing history like Ban Zhao, rather than a refugee merely lamenting her sufferings.⁴¹ Finally the poem returns to the moment in which the sisters were composing poetry and supporting each other at their "green window," a moment to be remembered.

Referred to by the synecdoche "small window" or "green window," the boudoir is a central image in the above poems by Wu Chai. As in the *Zhengshi ji* poems, the boudoir here also functions as a space for the *guixiu*'s cultural activities such as poetry composition. However, the vignette of the sisters' getting together in the boudoir is a smaller picture placed within the larger context of social disorder. As the small window reflects "soldiers and weapons" and the green window is shaken by the "storms of war," these women are no longer circumscribed by the former peace and seclusion of the boudoir. Wu Chai pushes the women's sphere to the socio-historical front.

The belief that she can retreat to her boudoir to pursue her goals indeed empowered Wu Chai when faced with difficult situations. In 1860 when the Taipings occupied Jiangsu province, Wu Chai and her husband's family fled from their home city and became fugitives for months, during which time her one year old son died of disease. In the years that followed, she seemed to be always on the run. Most of the poems in the second half of her collection record moments of fleeing from place to place. As the poetic titles indicate, she traveled through at least five cities and towns in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, such as Haimen, Meili, Shanghai, Loujiang, and Yinxi in 1863.⁴² In a long

⁴¹ For a historical record mentioning Ban Zhao completing the *Han shu*, see her biography in Fan Ye, comp., *Hou Han shu* 84.2784.

⁴² See, for example, "In the Fifth Month of the Year Guihai [1863] when Bandits are Fleeing into the Mountains, I'm Going to Haimen to Escape Calamity. Stirred by the Situation, I Write These Four

poem titled “After being Stopped by Wind at Huangpu, I was Stopped by Snow Again when Arriving in Pudong”黃浦阻風夜至浦東復阻雪, she recorded the time when she was caught by a snowstorm while traveling near Shanghai on a boat. Having described the terrible conditions of the snowstorm, she continues with the following lines:

[...]

If lakes and mountains are well, I could retreat there,

In the end I hope to heat up my ink stone at the Pavilion of Autumn Sash.

Tomorrow I set out in the chill air to return home,

Plum trees in my old garden must be in bud.

(*PQGYG* 2.10b)

湖山無恙儻招隱，終期炙硯佩秋閣。

明發衝寒歸去來，故園梅樹定含萼。

Once the poet survives this storm or the country survives the social disorder, she hopes to return to her boudoir/study and devote herself to the writing of poetry. The Pavilion of Autumn Sash may not have physically survived, but it has become a spiritual site to which she turns to for hope and strength. A close friend, Yu Menghua 俞夢花 (fl. 1864) painted a picture of the Pavilion of Autumn Sash and sent it to Wu Chai as a gift, on

Regulated Verses”癸亥五月山中寇竄將避難之海門感賦四律, *PQGYG* 2.3a-4a; “Crossing Lake Tai” 渡太湖, *PQGYG* 2.4a-b; “Temporarily Dwelling in Meili” 梅里卜居, *PQGYG* 2.5a; “Chatting with Lansheng at the Night at the Qinchuan Lodge, I Present a Poem of Thirty-Two Rhymes to Her. At the Time I’m about to Go to Loujiang” 琴川寓館同蘭生夜話賦贈三十二韻時余將之婁江, *PQGYG* 2.6b-7b; “My Impression when Traveling in Yinxi” 印溪旅感, *PQGYG* 2.8a; “I Encountered Snowstorm when My Boat Landed at the Pond of Baimao. Upon Arriving at Meili, I Hear of the Success of Taking Back the Provincial Capital. It is the Twenty-Fifth Day of the Tenth Month in the Winter of Guihai” 舟次白泖塘遇雪至梅里聞省城克捷時癸亥冬十月廿五日也, *PQGYG* 2.9b-10a.

which she also inscribed four poems and which Wu Chai has included in her poetry collection.⁴³ The following are the second and the fourth:

Poem Two

I still hear people talking about your old boudoir, Autumn Sash,
Wearing orchids may help us to forget sorrow.
Now you have been away from your homeland for a year,
I paint this picture for you to visit in spirit.

(*PQGYG* 2.14a)

舊閣猶聞說佩秋，紉蘭應許抵忘憂。
而今爲年家山遠，尺幅批來當臥游。

Poem Four

Both are flying geese landing on snowy mud,
Let's borrow a branch at the Peach-Blossom Spring on which to perch.
Our hometown is still on alert with beacon smoke,
On my sad pillow in the isolated city I listen to battle drums.

(*PQGYG* 2.14a)

同是飛鴻踏雪泥，桃源暫借一枝棲。
故鄉尚有烽煙警，愁枕孤城聽鼓聲。

It seems that Wu Chai's *Peiqiu ge* was famous among her friends. Yu Menghua might be one of the frequent visitors. According to Wu Chai, Yu was also living an unsettled life

⁴³ Wu appended Yu's poems after her reply, "Yu Menghua Painted a Picture for me and Inscribed Wonderful Poems. I Write These Poems as a Reply" 婁江俞夢花作圖寄余并題佳詠賦此荅之. See *PQGYG* 2.14a.

as a refugee at the time.⁴⁴ The image of “flying geese landing on snowy mud,” meaning the traces of a wanderer or fugitive’s life, characterizes Yu’s similar situation. Painting this picture also gave her a moment escaping from the depressing reality. Yu Menghua suggests to the absent Wu Chai that she can make “a visit in spirit” (*wo you*) to her former abode. The spiritual site of the boudoir plays the role of the Peach-Blossom Spring for these women in a world full of beacon smoke.

The nostalgia for the old peaceful boudoir life reveals these women’s deeper sense of displacement as a specific social group, the *guixiu*. Although the physical frame of their boudoir was destroyed by war, it still played a significant role in their writings. These displaced subjects invoke their normative location not only to reveal the degree to which social turmoil affected their lives, but also to maintain their subjectivity in the context of social disintegration. However, while the turmoil of the larger world broke up these women’s studies or pavilions, it also broadened these cultivated ladies’ perspectives on life and history. Significantly, in their poetic depiction the boudoir is no longer an isolated world of women, but connected to the larger social and historical background. In the remainder of this chapter, I will continue to examine the expansion of themes and sentiments associated with the women’s chambers.

“Poem Sent to My Husband”: Writing as a “Soldier’s Wife”

In most of the cases I have examined in my research, women wrote about their experience of war and chaos as married adults. War affected them in more complicated ways because more dimensions of their lives were involved. As I have shown in Chapter 2, separation from their husbands who had official careers away from their hometown

⁴⁴ “Poem Sent to Yu Menghua (Zhen)” 贈俞夢花楨, *PQGYG* 2.11a.

was a common situation gentry wives had to deal with. Separation in wartime, especially for those whose husbands were involved in the military and political fronts, was compelling and difficult. The writing they sent to their husbands conveyed high emotional content. By focusing in this section on two exemplary cases, that of Zuo Xijia 左錫嘉 (1831-94) and Yang Shulan 楊書蘭 (fl. 1852), I will continue to examine writing wives' poems sent to their husbands in wartime. In particular, these women's writings to their husbands who joined the Qing military campaigns during the Taiping Rebellion enable us to examine the ways in which they engage with "The Complaint of a Soldier's Wife" (*zhengfu yuan* 征婦怨), a recognized subgenre within the *guiyuan* tradition, in their specific historical and personal contexts.

Zuo Xijia was a native of present-day Changzhou 常州, Jiangsu 江蘇. She was famous in her own time for her artistic achievements in painting, calligraphy, and poetry. Along with her sister Zuo Xixuan 左錫璇, they have begun to attract critical attention for their *ci* poetry in recent scholarship.⁴⁵ In fact, Zuo Xijia was a prolific writer of *shi* poetry. Her collection *Lengyinxianguan shigao* 冷吟仙館詩稿 consists of seven *juan* of *shi* poems and one *juan* of *ci* and prose. Zuo was married as the second wife to Zeng Yong 曾詠 (*zi* Yincun 吟村, ?- 1862). Zeng was the Prefect of Ji'an, Jiangxi, and finally participated and died in Zeng Guofan's 曾國藩 military campaign against the Taiping Rebellion.⁴⁶ The *Lengyinxianguan shigao* in fact contains four smaller collections,

⁴⁵ For a discussion of Zuo Xixuan and Zuo Xijia's life and lyrics, see Deng Hongmei 鄧紅梅, *Nüxing ci shi* 女性詞史 526-41.

⁴⁶ The entry of Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 in the *Qing shi gao* records Zeng Yong's military achievement in taking back Ji'an from the hands of the Taipings. See *Qing shi gao* 475.12922. There is no record in the *Qing shi gao* regarding Zeng's participation in Zeng Guofan's military campaign in Anqing. My information is from Zuo Xijia's poem and Zeng Yong's poetic collection, which I will discuss below.

Huanxiang xiaocao 浣香小草 (*juan* 1-2), *Yinyun ji* 吟雲集 (*juan* 3), *Juanshi yin* 卷蔬吟 (*juan* 4), and *Lengyin ji* 冷吟集 (*juan* 5-7). Each collection marks an important phase of her life as a woman. The first collection contains poems dated up till 1851 before she was married, the second are poems written after she was married dated till 1862, the third collection of poems were written between 1862 and 1864 on an extremely difficult journey due to Zeng Yong's death, and the last collection are poems produced during her widowed years.⁴⁷

Yang Shulan was not as famous as Zuo Xijia, and has not received critical attention yet. Little is known about her husband Zhou Benhan 周本瀚 (*zi* Hanpu 涵潛, ?-1865). From Yang's poems we know that he joined the Qing army in Shaanxi some time after 1852 and died there in 1865.⁴⁸ Compared with Zuo's considerable volumes, Yang Shulan's collection *Hongquyinguan shichao* 紅渠吟館詩鈔 is slim, containing only one *juan* of seventy-five poems. Despite differences in quantity, Yang's collection is also organized chronologically and shares a parallel pattern with the former in demonstrating the poet's life trajectory. The poems written to and about the husband assume an important place in both collections. The two women's similar life experiences and their sometimes similar and sometimes different poetic voices can well illuminate both the commonplace and complicated nature of Qing women's poetic practice during times of chaos.

⁴⁷ This is another salient example supporting Fong's observation of the significance of women's individual collections as conscious autobiographical records. The *Lengyinxianguan shigao* I use is the 1891 version included in the *Zeng Taipu Zuo furen shigao heke* 曾太僕左夫人詩稿合刻 (Combined Collections of the poems by Zeng Taipu and Madame Zuo). Zeng Yong's *Yinyunxianguan shigao* 吟雲仙館詩稿 is put in the end of the collection, to which Zeng Guoquan 曾國荃 (1824-90) wrote a preface ("Xu" 1a-2b). Taipu (Chamberlain for the Imperial Stud), a position in charge of the imperial horse management, presumably refers to Zeng Yong's role in Zeng Guofan's troops.

⁴⁸ "Sending off My Husband to Join the Army in Shaanxi" 送夫子從軍陝西, *HQYGSC* 12a-b.

According to the clues provided by their collections, Zuo Xijia was married after 1851, and Yang Shulan before 1852.⁴⁹ Most of their marital years overlapped with the period of the Taiping Rebellion. Both their marital lives in wartime were eventful. Only a few poems record tender conjugal moments. Far more poems communicate the wives' feelings about separation and concerns about their husbands' welfare, especially after the husbands were sent to the warfront. Zuo Xijia, for example, remembered the moment her husband set out for the war as recorded in her poem, "In the Winter of the Year Xinyou [1861], My Husband Went to the Grand Camp in Anqing to Coordinate Military Affairs upon Receiving General Zeng Disheng's (Guofan) Letter of Transfer. I Orally Composed this Poem after Seeing him Off" 辛酉孟冬外子奉曾滌生節帥(國藩)札調赴安慶大營襄理軍務別後口占:

Battle drums rise beat after beat from the watch tower,
 From now on I am even more worried about your safety.
 Last night my startled soul plummeted into the water of West River,⁵⁰
 The urgent waves, even though heartless, have also become white-headed.
 Dense trees are shady, gathering evening smoke,
 A skiff heads towards the remote white cloud.
 Stars and moon, filling the river, are silent and wordless,
 But there is another sorrowful heart flying towards the sky.
 (LYXGSG 3.16a-b)

鼙鼓聲聲起戍樓，安危從此更增憂。

⁴⁹ The title of the last poem in Zuo's *Huanxiang xiaocao* indicates that the poem was written in 1851. See LYXGSG 1.20a-b. As Yang Shulan's collection shows, she had a poem sent to her husband put before a poem which was written in 1852. See HQYGSC 2.8b; 2.9b-10a.

⁵⁰ Presumably, the "West River" here refers to the Yangzi.

驚魂夜落西江水，急浪無心也白頭。

密樹陰陰斂夕煙，扁舟遙指白雲邊。

滿江星月悄無語，別有愁心飛上天。

With the long title, Zuo Xijia noted down the circumstance under which her poem was written. The original poem was orally improvised (*kou zhan*), which suggests that the poet was stirred by strong feelings at the time. As the emotionally voiced lines show, she is overwhelmed by her worries for the husband's departure. Being startled and agitated by every sign of danger, even the insentient river waves, in her perception (pathetic fallacy), mirror the state of her troubled mind, turning white like the hair on a worried person's head. This poem was not written to her husband, but records a crucial event that affected their life, which sets up a historical context for us to understand Zuo's poems sent to her husband later. Although parting was a frequent situation in the couple's life, Zuo Xijia felt deeply for their separation this time. Thinking of her husband thus becomes a predominant theme in the poems following the above. From "Imitating the Ancient Poem on Separation" 擬古別離 to "Thinking of the One Faraway" 懷遠, from "Sleepless" 不寐 to "Stirred by Feelings on a Cold Night" 寒夜感懷, poetic titles and styles vary, but the primary thematic concern remains the same.

In dealing with the situation of being separated from their husbands who were on military duties, these women poets found a conventional subject position available for their poetic expression, the voice of soldiers' wives constructed in the *guiyuan* tradition. Yang Shulan, for example, clearly claims in her poem, "Listening to a Flute on a Moonlit Night" 月夜聞笛, that she is a wife longing for her soldier husband:

[...]

The longing wife's thoughts in the boudoir,

The soldier's heart beyond the frontier.

While I'm listening to this melody,

My clear tears are about to wet my lapel.

(*HQYGSC* 12b)

思婦閨中意，征人塞外心。

我來聽此曲，清淚欲沾襟。

The soldier's wife [*zhengfu* 征婦 or *shufu* 戍婦] is one of the longing women personae portrayed in the *guiyuan*/boudoir convention. Its history is as long as the boudoir convention. Yet it was during the Tang period that the *zhengfu* was more explicitly represented as a poetic subject, and the plaint of a soldier's wife became a recognized topical subgenre. Tang poets were interested in portraying the image and voice of the soldier's wife not only as a specific persona associated with the *guiyuan* tradition, but also of its usefulness for their agenda of social criticism, protesting the court's military campaigns and political policy. Within the *guiyuan* tradition, the soldier's wife persona is generally represented as the conventional longing wife, but her loyalty and sustained emotion for the husband are often emphasized. In other words, she is more persistent in holding onto her feelings towards him. Meng Jiao's 孟郊 (751-814) poem, "The Plaint of a Soldier's Wife" 征婦怨, is considered a representative work:

Grown up under silk garments,

I don't know the road to Yuyang.⁵¹

⁵¹ Yuyang was the ancient name for Beijing in Warring States, Qin and Han periods. It is often used to refer generally to the northern frontier in poetry.

Since my husband has gone to guard the frontier,

I go there in my dream night after night.

(YFSJ 42.614)

生在綺羅下，不識漁陽道。

良人自戍來，夜夜夢中到。

This poem begins by locating the female persona in the boudoir, in which Yuyang, a remote frontier, is far beyond her reach, not only physically but also perceptually. However, each night she can surpass this seemingly impossible distance in her dream. The language of this five-character ancient-style poem is simple and plain, but it depicts the powerful emotion of the soldier's wife by poignantly contrasting her physical location and boundless imagination.

The physical distance between the boudoir and the frontier is a typical situation dealt with in the plaint of the soldier's wife. Meng Jiao's poem provides a classical model. In reading Yang Shulan and Zuo Xijia's poems, one can see that many of their poems also follow this classical pattern in conceiving the poems sent to their absent husbands. After her husband left for Shaanxi, Yang Shulan composed a group of three poems titled "Sent to My Husband" 寄夫子. The first poem reads:

Listless on the pillow, I rose late from sleep,

Too lazy to open the phoenix mirror to paint my eyebrows.

Last night, I dreamed of the road to Chang'an,

Where I was still saying farewell to my soldier.

(HQYGSC 12b)

一枕慳慳睡起遲，嬾開鸞鏡畫雙眉。

昨霄夢入長安路，猶與征人話別離。

The image the poet claims is that of a listless woman who has no mood to dress herself up, a stereotype in the boudoir convention. As she demonstrates in her overall performance in the collection, Yang Shulan was well learned in poetic history and skillful in employing various poetic devices. It must be because this conventional image well represented her situation that she felt no need to modify it. The second couplet then gives an explanation for her melancholy: since her husband left on his military journey to Chang'an, she still cannot recover from the sad mood caused by his departure. Like Meng Jiao's poem, this poem is also structured by linking the boudoir and the frontier through the female persona's dream. While Meng Jiao's persona mentions Yuyang, the woman poet refers to Chang'an in her case because her husband left for Shaanxi. This realistic detail coming from Yang Shulan's life background suggests that while following generic conventions, simultaneously she was adapting them to the account of her own life experience.

While dream or subjective imagination may help the poet to transcend the boundaries between the boudoir and the frontier, there are also situations in which distance is indeed insurmountable. As Yang Shulan goes on to write in her second poem in the same group:

Ordinary, short-term partings broke my heart,
Even more amidst beacon smoke and cruel battles.
About to send your army clothes, I become sorrowful,
How terrible there is no road that reaches Xianyang!
(*HQYGSC* 12b)

尋常小別尙傷神，況復烽煙莽戰場。

欲寄征衣轉惆悵，可憐無路達咸陽。

Preparing and sending clothes to the husband who is away on military or other government duties is a classical theme or motif treated in the *guiyuan* convention. Wives often prepare clothes for their husbands in summer or autumn before the cold season comes. Concerned about the husband in the cold frontier, preparing warm clothes for him is a motif expressing the wife's love for him. However, often this means of care and communication is cut off due to time and distance. The Tang poet Zhang Hong's 張洵 "Poem of Complaint" 怨詩 illustrates this motif:

When we parted last year wild geese had just returned,

Tonight, when I'm sewing, fireflies are already flying.

There is no news since my soldier left,

I don't know where to send his winter coat.

(YFSJ 614)

去年離別雁初歸，今夜裁縫螢已飛。

征客去來音信斷，不知何處寄寒衣。

Zuo Xijia also has lines such as: "I want to send his army uniform, yet I don't know where to send them / The wind in the frontier is strong and autumn nights are long" 征衣欲寄不知處，邊塞風高秋夜長。⁵² As such similar lines show, these women poets were inspired by earlier poems in the tradition such as Zhang Hong's poem.

⁵² LYXGSG 2.2b.

While heavily relying on the poetic convention, what the women poets do in their poems is more than simply adapting available expressions. Also primarily dealing with the theme of separation, Zuo Xijia offers more creative versions in the following series of four poems entitled, “Sent to the One Faraway, Using the Rhymes of My Husband’s ‘Sending My Feelings’” 寄遠用外子寄懷韻:

Poem One

No longer thirsty for wine, your manner is different from the past,
The cuckoo cries to Heaven, “What is to be done?”
The sounds of pounding cloth are broken under the pear-blossom moon,
My dreams after separation, clinging to clouds, surround your pillow.
(LYXGSG 3.18b)

酒渴風情異昔年，杜鵑啼喚奈何天。
搗衣聲碎梨花月，別夢依雲繞枕邊。

Poem Two

The longing orchid resents that another year has passed,
Fragrant green-peach blossoms dip in the water, reflecting the sky.
Spring wind, don’t say you don’t know me,
My poetic soul just visited the frontier last night.
(LYXGSG 3.18b)

蕙怨蘭思又一年，碧桃香蘸水中天。
春風莫道不相識，昨夜吟魂到戍邊。

Poem Three

By the silk window and red door, a night is like a year,

The courtyard dewy and flowers chilly, moonlight fills the sky.

A sad heart is turned into a butterfly,

The spring wind blows its dream to your side.

(LYXGSG 3.18b)

綺窗朱戶夜如年，露井花寒月滿天。

一縷愁心化蝴蝶，春風吹夢到君邊。

Poem Four

Idle in the spring scene, I feel for my prime years,

The river rises with new waves, greenness stretching to the horizon.

A thousand miles apart, under the bright moon, we both are full of sorrow,

The cries of wild geese fly across to the edge of white clouds.

(LYXGSG 3.19a)

等閒春色感華年，新漲連江綠際天。

千里月明共惆悵，雁聲飛度白雲邊。

These four quatrains are all conceived in a binary structure linking the two different worlds of the wife and the husband. The approach adopted by the poet in conceiving the poems is also the same: bridging the physical gap between the loved ones through various imaginative means. All these four quatrains use the three characters *nian* 年, *tian* 天, and *bian* 邊, as rhymes. We do not have Zeng Yong's poem written to her, but the rhymes she adopts must be originally used in his poem.⁵³ Within the limits set up by the same rhyme characters, the poet employs as many different imagistic devices as possible—dream,

⁵³ This poem is not included in Zeng Yong's collection. According to Zuo Xijia, his *Yinyunxianguan shigao*, compiled by his son, only collects a small portion of his poems; many were lost. See *Yinyunxianguan shigao*, "Xu" 2a-b.

clouds, spring wind, butterfly, and wild geese—media through which the poet can reach her loved one in imagination. The poet's sustained efforts in bridging the distance between her and her husband testify to the intensity of her love and longing. As the term “poetic soul” 吟魂, by which the poet refers to herself, suggests, the voice speaking in this poem is indeed more than a longing wife; she is also a poet with creativity.

Living in the time of both national and personal crises, these writing wives do not merely express love sentiments. They also voice their opinions about the historical situation and their husbands' careers. In a poem sent to her husband, Zuo Xijia writes:

Sent to My Husband

- Even in the snap of fingers, the sun and moon do not stop for an instant,
2 To save the perils of the age one needs not care for noble rank.
Your salary goes like flowing water because you feel for people,
4 Now the traveler faces autumn; the longing wife is worried.
Reed catkins are like snowflakes; waves dash against the sky,
6 Among mat sails and cloud shadows, my dream lingers on and on.
In accordance with the seasons, take care of your precious body,
8 Don't blame the west wind for your gray head.

(LYXGSG 3.17a)

寄外

彈指雙丸不暫留，匡時何必計封侯。
宦囊似水蒼生感，客況經秋思婦愁。
蘆絮雪花波浩浩，蒲帆雲影夢悠悠。
因時自重千金體，莫向西風怨白頭。

Presumably, this poem was written after Zeng Yong went to Anqing because it is arranged in the collection after the one written on the occasion sending him off to the military camp. Compared with the emotional reaction in Zuo's poem composed upon Zeng's departure, what she expresses here are more rational thoughts and advice on her husband's situation. First of all, she shows her understanding of the importance of his mission and encourages him not to consider self-interest but to fight for the sake of the people. Like Qin Puzhen, one of the *Zhengshi ji* authors discussed in the last chapter, Zuo Xijia also speaks to the *guiyuan* cliché, "I regret letting my husband seek noble rank," by suggesting to her husband that "one need not care for noble rank." Only their purposes and contexts are different. While Qin aims to rewrite the conventional wifely image, Zuo Xijia attempts to advise the husband with her insight into the political situation. She goes on to offer both her admiration for his kindness to people and concern for his difficulties. As a concerned wife, she then expresses her tender feelings for him. Finally she urges him to take good care of himself both physically and emotionally. In line 4, the poet refers to herself as a *sifu*, "longing wife," but the *sifu* speaking in this poem bears no similarity to the ones we encounter in the poetic convention. It is one from Zuo Xijia's time, marked with the stamp of a woman with an education and life experience like Zuo Xijia's.

Because women like Zuo Xijia and Yang Shulan did not simply adopt the conventional voice of the longing wife, their voices are different from each other as well. Unlike Zuo Xijia, Yan Shulan's attitude towards her husband's joining the army was ambivalent, as shown in her poem, "Sending off My Husband to Join the Army in Shaanxi" 送夫子從軍陝西:

- Spring wind sends off your boat on the Xiang River,
2 You follow the army for 10,000 miles, I write about your brave journey.
You drive your noble bones just to save the family from hunger and cold,
4 It does not concern fame or rank, nor do you want to be leader of the herd.
Rivers and mountains are distant, the Qin Pass precipitous,
6 Drums and horns sound out anew, the Chu frontier sad.
In evening darkness we frequently shed tears on the road,
8 Grudgingly pouring the wine for farewell, I give you a Wu sabre.⁵⁴

(*HQYGSC* 12a-b)

春風湘上送行舟，萬里從軍賦壯遊。

祇爲饑寒驅駿骨，非關名爵慕羊頭。

河山遠歷秦關險，鼓角新添楚塞愁。

遮暮臨歧頻灑淚，強斟別酒贈吳鉤。

Without the third line, this poem could certainly be read as a description of a wife seeing her husband off on a heroic trip: he joins the army in a time of peril; caring for neither fame nor rank, he is determined to save his country from defeat. This may be true, but it is compromised by the poet's statement made in line 3: he made the decision to join the army "only because of" (*zhi wei*) the practical need to support their family. The succeeding line also suggests the poet's reservation towards officialdom and political power. No matter the reason, this is a difficult decision at a difficult time. The contradictoriness of the motifs reveals the poet's complicated feelings about the situation.

⁵⁴ *Wu gou* is a kind of sword with a curved shape.

Immediately following the above poem are seven poems expressing Yang Shulan's depression after her husband's departure for the front.⁵⁵ Despite the wife's longing for his return, Zhou Benhan did not come home alive. Yang's collection ends with two poems titled "Weeping for My Late Husband" 哭先夫子 with a brief preface: "In the second month of the year Yichou [1865] he died in the military camp in Shaanxi" 同治乙丑[1865] 二月卒於秦中戎幕. I quote the first poem:

Bad news comes, a myriad thoughts turned to ashes,
 My boudoir tower has become a Widow's Terrace.⁵⁶
 On the three-thousand-*li* road floating clouds shift,
 Your forty-year life was spent like a hasty arrow.
 I gave you a gold ring at separation, who expected a permanent farewell?
 You didn't return from the Jade Pass, though I had hoped you would come
 back alive.

I regret that at the beginning we desired noble rank,
 The book and sword drifted and fell, how terribly sad.

(*HQYGSC* 13a-b)

凶耗傳來萬念灰，妝樓化作望夫臺。

三千里路浮雲變，四十年華急箭催。

金玦那堪成死別，玉關無復冀生回。

當初悔作封侯想，書劍飄零劇可哀。

⁵⁵ *HQYGSC* 12a-13a.

⁵⁶ *Wangfu tai* is literally a terrace where a wife gazes into the distance waiting for her husband. There are also similar legends of Wangfu Mountain 望夫山 and Wangfu Rock 望夫石, which portrays a passionate and loyal wife turned into a mountain or rock in her persistent waiting for her husband who never returns.

When the worst came to pass, it destroyed all the hopes and expectations the wife held onto during the years of separation. She must have gazed upon the road from her boudoir, wishing to see him returning, yet now she knows for sure her wish will never come true. She might have thought about the worst possibility, but she was not prepared for this sad ending. Calling her boudoir a Widow's Terrace (*Wangfu tai*), the poet expresses her despair. In extreme disappointment and sadness, she reveals the feelings about her husband's choice of career: "I regret that at the beginning we desired noble rank." In the poem composed upon sending off her husband to Shaanxi the poet may try hard to be strong and supportive, but in this poem she speaks out her painful regret. Once again, Yang Shulan lets the famous idiom speak for her. But she is echoing neither Qin Puzhen nor Zuo Xijia, nor Wang Changling's persona; what she expresses is her heartfelt sorrow and pain over the loss of her beloved. While the wifely images and voices in Yun Zhu's selected representation tend to be positive and supportive of their husbands' careers, Yang Shulan expressed herself distinctively as a result of her own circumstances.

In 1862 Zuo Xijia's husband Zeng Yong died from disease in the military camp in Anqing. The years from 1862 through 1864 were the most difficult time in Zuo Xijia's life. Her third collection *Juanshi yin* records the most excruciating moments during her heartbreaking trek which began in 1861 when she received the news that her husband was sick and ended with her bringing his coffin back to his hometown in Sichuan in 1864. Although Zuo Xijia continued to write poetry mourning Zeng Yong, there is nowhere for her to send those poems. However, from the poems sent to the husbands during their marital years, we have heard the voices of writing wives in the context of both national and personal crises. They engaged with a particular subgenre, namely the plaint of the

soldier's wife, from their own experience in wartime. Their pressing of poetic convention into service for their own expressive needs generated both familiar and distinctive voices.

Embracing Political Concerns

War and social chaos brought tremendous trauma and loss to women. However, women were not only distressed by their personal losses, but also began to reflect on broader social and political concerns. In her examination of Zuo Xixuan's lyrics, Deng Hongmei points out that "the sentiments expressed in Zuo's lyrics extend from the realm of the inner chambers to the larger human world" 情感內容由“閨閣化”向“人間化”的擴張。⁵⁷ This observation rightly captures the significant changes in Qing women's poetry at this critical juncture of social disorder. Although Deng does not elaborate what she means by the term "*renjian hua*" 人間化, women's concerns with the socio-political realm as expressed in their writings should be a salient signpost that they began to embrace the world beyond the inner chambers. In expressing their political sentiments, writing women employed both *shi* and *ci* genres. In this section, I will specially focus on their interaction with conventional poetics of the *ci* as it is a vibrant area in which women poets transformed the boudoir topos.

As the *ci* form is generally divided into two stylistic categories, *haofang* and *wanyue*, these two categories also point to two distinct thematic foci: as I have shown in Chapter 1, while the former expresses sentiments associated with social and political concerns (of course, a distinctively male arena), the latter deals with private feelings and emotions often associated with the inner, domestic sphere. Women writers were presumed to "naturally" belong to the latter realm. However, influenced by historical and

⁵⁷ Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 531.

personal contexts, Ming-Qing women's lyrics such as Xu Can's complicated the issue. Their perspectives may still have been framed by "the small window" of their boudoir, but from their "small window" they began to pay attention to national crisis and to offer their opinions on historical changes. As women without access to office and political power, they did not express frustration over the difficulties of pursuing an official career as men often did. Loyalist seemed to be a legitimate political concern for a woman to embrace under the extraordinary historical circumstances of dynastic transition.

Regarded by her contemporary critics as "the greatest gentry woman poet since the Southern Song," Xu Can 徐燦 (ca. 1610—after 1677) represents an early expression of "loyalist lyrics" by women.⁵⁸ These writings provide the first indication that women authors were beginning to represent their political sentiments in the *ci* genre.⁵⁹ As a woman living through the Ming-Qing transition, Xu was deeply concerned with the dynastic fall and repeatedly used terms such as "my former country" *guguo* 故國 and "my homeland" *xiangguan* 鄉關 to show her strong emotional attachment to the fallen Ming. Ironically, her husband the Ming minister Chen Zhilin 陳之遴 (*zi* Su'an 素菴, 1605-68) surrendered to the Qing and served in high positions. They were married in the early Chongzhen Reign (1628-44). About ten years later, Chen Zhilin succeeded in passing the *jinshi* examination and was appointed a compiler in the Hanlin Academy in

⁵⁸ Chen Weisong, for example, makes such comment. See You Zhenzhong 尤振中 and You Yiding 尤以丁, eds., *Qing ci jishi* 清詞紀事 65. For recent studies of Xu Can, see Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an"; Chen Bangyan 陳邦炎, "Ping jie nü ciren" 評介女詞人 1-25; and Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 271-91. The term 'loyalist lyrics' is borrowed from Kang-i Sun Chang's discussion of Xu Can's lyrics. See Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an" 169. But I use this term in a broader sense. While Chang refers specifically to Xu's writings expressing loyalty to the Ming, I expand the term to include the lyrics of other women poets who were loyal to and concerned about their present dynasty, that is the Qing.

⁵⁹ Judging from her extant writings, Li Qingzhao did write some lyrics that can be characterized as in the *haofang* style, but she only touched on the subject of patriotism in her *shi* poetry. Moreover, in her "Ci lun" 詞論 (On the lyric), Li Qingzhao insists on the orthodox *wanyue*/feminine quality of the *ci* genre.

Beijing in 1637.⁶⁰ However, implicated by his father Chen Zubao's 陳祖苞 (?-1639) crime and death, Chen Zhilin was dismissed from his official posts and returned to his hometown in 1639.⁶¹ After the Qing established its rule in China, Chen Zhilin began to seek opportunities for himself in the new government in 1645. He was soon promoted to be Right President of Rites and Right President of the Censorate within a few years.⁶² It was a tremendous personal success for him, but his decision to serve the alien rule was considered ignominious by those who valued loyalty to one's native dynasty. While a large number of Ming officials made the same decision as Chen, many Ming loyalists chose not to serve the Qing by committing suicide or retiring from public life.⁶³ Certainly, to many of his contemporaries and later historians, Chen failed to conform to Chinese ethical standards of loyalty to one's dynasty. Significantly, his wife Xu Can was one of his critics. Xu Can was troubled by her husband's political choice. Although she could not actually stop his action, she was not afraid, through her poetry, to articulate her political stance and urge him to withdraw. Writing as both a wife and a person with independent perspectives on life and history, Xu Can's writing conflates traditional boudoir sentiments and political concerns, revealing the complicated mood of a woman who had to deal with both a tragic historical transition and crises in her personal life.

⁶⁰ *Qing shi gao* 245. 9635.

⁶¹ Chen Zhilin's father Chen Zubao was the Governor of Shuntian province at the time. In 1638, Hengshui, a city under his defense, was lost to the Qing forces. He was therefore arrested for his lax guard. He subsequently died the following year by committing suicide in prison. It was said that Chen Zhilin provided his father with poison after learning that the emperor would not pardon his father and other arrested officials. See Xu Shupi 徐樹丕, *Shi xiao lu* 識小錄 2.91a. See also Lin Yongkuang 林永匡, "Chen Zhilin" 陳之遴 325.

⁶² *Qing shi gao* 245. 9635.

⁶³ For statistics and a list of ministers who served the two dynasties, see Wakeman 1129-37. For a collection of Ming loyalists' biographical notes and poems, see Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯, ed., *清詩紀事* vol 2.

Loyalism became a major motif in Xu Can's lyrics after the fall of the Ming, but it was complicated by Chen Zhilin's affiliation with the new regime. Her song lyric to the tune *Man jiang hong* 滿江紅, subtitled "Stirred by Feelings" 有感, is a case in point:

My home after chaos—

Sorrows fill my mind, more than I can express.

Spring is leaving, the mugwort has just begun to grow;

Lichens overgrow one another.

The incense has turned to ash in the burner, but still I am too tired to rise;

My small window vaguely reflects the clouds and moon.

Ah, in this life—

How can we be like the lotus in the water?

Hearts entwined.

Tears of parting,

Full of blood.

Flowing endlessly,

Waves augment my sobbing.

Seeing flocks of wild geese returning

Increases my grief.

My kohl-lined brows pale with the mirror,

The golden moon wanes at my bedside again and again.

I ask about this spring: did you dream of our hometown,

Startled by the cuckoos?

(ZZYSY 3.5b)

亂後家山，意中愁緒，真難說。春將去，冰臺初長，綺錢重疊。鑪燼
水沉猶倦起，小窗依約雲和月。嘆人生，爭似水中蓮，心同結。
離別淚，盈盈血。流不盡，波添咽。見鴻歸陣陣，幾增淒切。翠黛每
從青鏡減，黃金時向床頭缺。問今春，曾夢到鄉關，驚鷗歇。

The entire *ci* is devoted to the description of the author's depressed feelings and emotions while she is separated from her husband. In many ways, it can be read as a typical boudoir plaint. It is late in spring, a heartbreaking season in the poetic convention: in mourning the passing of the spring, a female persona often laments the fading of her youth and beauty in the empty boudoir. Staying alone beside her "small window," the female author is also listless, full of sorrow. She does not remember how many times she has seen the moon waxing and waning, but only clearly sees her beauty as it pales in the mirror. She expresses resentment that her love cannot be like the lotus with hearts always entwined.

Some scholars believe that just at the time when the dynasty fell, her husband Chen Zhilin took a concubine.⁶⁴ In reading the sentiments expressed in Xu Can's lyrics, Chang states, "The woman poet suffered two losses, endured two forms of 'mourning'—but one kind of abandonment, abandonment by both her country and her husband."⁶⁵ One of Chen's poems, entitled "Sending Away a Concubine" 遣姬詩, suggests that he had lived with other women in Beijing before his career ended in the Ming.⁶⁶ Some of Xu's lines also reveal that their relationship was indeed in trouble for some time: "Forlorn, my

⁶⁴ See, for example, Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an" 179.

⁶⁵ Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an" 182.

⁶⁶ Chen Zhilin, *Fuyun ji* 浮雲集 662-3.

heart seems to ache / Crying and choking /Crying and choking /Old love, new favor / In this moment morning clouds are crossing over the moon” 悽悽似痛還如咽，還如咽，舊恩新寵，曉雲流月。⁶⁷ However, there is no substantial evidence to support the suggestion that Chen had formally taken a concubine. My research elsewhere shows that Xu Can and Chen Zhilin enjoyed a companionate and loving relationship throughout their long marriage. Their problem, if they had one, lay more in their different political stances.⁶⁸

However, Xu Can's troubled feelings expressed in the above lyric arise from something more complicated than a personal love crisis. Beginning with “my homeland after chaos,” this song lyric informs us that it was written soon after the fall of the Ming. At the time, Chen was serving in his post in Beijing. The separation is not caused by a husband's official post, but occurred in a difficult time when the author had not yet recovered from her emotional trauma brought on by the national tragedy. When her husband departed for Beijing, he not only physically left her behind but also abandoned the ethical principles she valued. The depression and listlessness depicted in the text are thus linked to this sorrow characterized by her as “more than I can express.” Her wish for her heart to be “entwined” with her love seems to have deeper meaning as well.

The ending of this *ci* distinguishes itself from conventional boudoir plaint poetry in a more obvious way. The author poses a question to her absent husband: did you dream of our hometown this spring? I believe that the mention of their hometown also points to their native dynasty, as home and country are inseparable as the term *jia shan*

⁶⁷ ZZYSY 1.9a-b.

⁶⁸ While enjoying a companionate marriage, Xu Can, through their conjugal poetic exchange, repeatedly articulated her different political stance and urged Chen to withdraw from officialdom. See my paper, “‘Singing in Dis/Harmony’ in Times of Chaos.”

(home) in the first line of this song lyric suggests. “The cuckoo” is a recurrent image in Xu Can’s lyrics. According to legend, the cuckoo is the incarnation of Emperor Wang of the Shu Kingdom, who abandoned his throne and disappeared because of lovesickness. The bird is believed to often spit blood while singing. In earlier Chinese poetic convention, it is more often used as a symbol of one’s ceaseless longing for a lover, but Ming loyalist poets tend to use the image to illustrate their everlasting sorrow for the past dynasty.⁶⁹

Noteworthy is Xu Can’s employment of the tune *Man jiang hong*. As Chang points out, Xu Can deliberately chose tunes traditionally associated with patriotism, such as *Man jiang hong*, to express her political sentiments.⁷⁰ This is a conscious textual strategy to write within the tradition of loyalist sentiments by following the model of the Song general Yue Fei’s 岳飛 (1103-1142) heroic articulation in this form.⁷¹ The legacy of Yue Fei as a patriotic hero and his famous lyric were widely acknowledged in the late imperial period and still are today:

Hair bristling with anger, bursting from its cap,
at the railing where I lean the beating rain has come to a stop.
I raise my eyes, gazing up, and whistle long at heaven,
A stout heart fiercely rent.
At thirty my deeds and name are merely dust and dirt,

⁶⁹ See, for example, the Ming loyalist and poet Chen Zilong’s 陳子龍 (1608-47) lines from his lyric to the tune *Dian jiang chun* 點絳脣: “In a dream I remember / The exile’s old home. / No one’s in charge of spring: / Where the cuckoo cries / Tears stain the rouged rain.” 夢裡相思，故國王孫路。春無主，杜鵑啼處，淚染胭脂。 Quoted from Yeh Chia-ying, “Ch’en Tzu-lung” 433.

⁷⁰ Chang, “Liu Shih and Hsü Ts’an” 183.

⁷¹ Many scholars have noted this association. See, for example, Chang and Saussy, eds., *Women Writers* 816; and Fong, “Engendering the Lyric” 140. For a focused study of Ming-Qing women’s appropriation of this poetic dimension to represent their political sentiments, see my paper “Engendering Heroism.”

an eight-thousand-*li* route under moon and clouds.

Do not tarry—

when youthful head has turned to gray,

we will mourn in vain.

The Jingkang reign's disgrace has not yet been wiped out.

The anguish of officers—when will it be dispelled?

Driving the war chariot, I will trample

the pass at Mount Helan.

Manly ambition will feast hungrily on barbarian flesh,

amidst talk and laughter we will quench our thirst with Xiongnu's blood.

Let us begin again by recovering our former land

and paying our respects to the court.⁷²

(*QSC* 2.1246.)

怒髮衝冠，憑欄處，瀟瀟雨歇。抬望眼，仰天長嘯，壯懷激烈。三十

功名塵與土，八千里路雲和月。莫等閑，白了少年頭，空悲切。

靖康恥，猶未雪。臣子恨，何時滅。駕長車踏破，賀蘭山缺。壯士飢

餐胡虜肉，笑談渴飲匈奴血。待從頭收拾舊山河，朝天闕。

With its stirring language, powerful imagery, and forceful tone, this *ci* portrays a typical image of martial heroism imbued with ideal masculine traits. As Fong notes, “The sustained drive, the barely contained anger and frustration, and the persistent intent (here,

⁷² *QSC* 2.1246. Translation by Grace S. Fong with minor modifications. See Fong, “Engendering the Lyric” 139-40

revanchism) are sentiments traditionally perceived as typically masculine.”⁷³ In this sense, Yue Fei’s lyric piece provides “a paradigmatic version” of the heroic song lyric, and “made ‘*Man jiang hong*’ the most popular tune pattern for [*haofang*] lyrics, particularly those expressing loyalist or patriotic sentiments.”⁷⁴ However, Xu Can does not simply perform the masculine style, but writes from a woman’s point of view. Comparing her line “My small window vaguely reflects the clouds and moon” 小窗依約雲和月, with Yue Fei’s “an eight-thousand-*li* route under clouds and moon” 八千里路雲和月, the structural parallel and the thematic echoing of these two lines demonstrate the woman poet’s conscious rewriting of her model. While Yue Fei describes his military campaigns, Xu tells us what she experiences in her boudoir life and what she sees from her “small window.” There was a long way to go before a *guixiu* could step out from her boudoir to become a hero, but Xu Can’s “small window” was opened up to the larger world.

Xu Can did not follow Chen when he went to present himself to the Qing court in 1646. She moved to Beijing with the family a year or two after Chen took up his office.⁷⁵ Although Xu Can had to follow her husband’s life trajectory, she chose to voice her different perspective on life and history, and was persistent in her political stance even though it conflicted with that of her husband. In a lyric, “To the Tune *Fengliu zi*: Stirred by the Past, Written with Su’an” 風流子: 同素菴感舊, written on the occasion of revisiting the former residence they occupied during the Ming, she expresses deep regrets about their return to the capital:

It seems like only yesterday,

⁷³ Fong, “Engendering the Lyric” 140.

⁷⁴ Fong, “Engendering the Lyric” 140.

⁷⁵ Chen Bangyan, “Ping jie nǚ ciren” 14.

But looking back it has been ten autumns.
By the Ink-washing Pond,
We had built our study.
With southern papers and ivory brushes,
We made a special kind of elegance and charm.
Flowers fall in the courtyard—how often spring wanted to depart,
But stayed for somebody.
After the night rain, flowers drooped,
In the light breeze butterflies aslant.
With the crystal curtain rolled up,
It was time to comb my hair.

The Western Hills are still there,
But do they know why I lean against the railing?
I'm afraid to raise my eyes.
Even if I could brew wine with Forgetting-Sorrow,
It would only stir my grief.
I urge the peach blossoms of former seasons
Not to bloom by the green pond;
The swallows of the past
Do not pass the vermilion tower.
I regret terribly this new pair of wings,
Leading us astray to Yingzhou!

(ZZYSY 2.7b)

只如昨日事，回頭想、早已十經秋。向洗墨池邊，裝成書屋，蠻箋象
管，別樣風流。殘紅院、幾番春欲去，卻爲個人留。宿雨低花，輕風
側蝶，水晶帘卷，恰好梳頭。 西山依然在，知何意憑檻，怕舉雙
眸。便把紅萱釀酒，只動人愁。謝前度桃花，休開碧沼，舊時燕子，
莫過朱樓。悔煞雙飛新翼，誤到瀛洲。

In the first stanza, Xu Can vividly recalls the good times they had in this old house. What she most cherishes is the scene in which the husband and wife enjoyed “singing in harmony” in their study with their matched talent and elegance. The flowers moist with “the night rain” and the butterflies teased by “the light breeze” in the inner courtyard seem also to hint at their harmonious love-making, if only in a very reserved way. Combing her hair “with the crystal curtain rolled up,” the woman seems to live a contented life in the boudoir. But the beautiful memories are soon subverted in the second stanza by her complicated feelings stirred up by their current situation. The Western Hills, her quiet “friends” who bore witness to many of her thoughts before, still stand there, but now they remind the poet of the loss of them to an alien rule. Finally, the poet’s sorrow and thoughts are uttered through two parallel lines, urging “swallows of the past” not to betray the dynasty to which they belonged, not to make a mistake like her by following the husband’s new wings. The image of “swallows of the past”—derived from the well-known lines by the Tang poet Liu Yuxi, “the swallows from the halls of the Wang’s and Xie’s of the past / Fly into the house of ordinary people” 舊時王謝堂前燕,

飛入尋常百姓家—is a nostalgic symbol for a vanished dynasty.⁷⁶ Yingzhou refers to both an isle of immortals and the Hall of Literature established by the Tang emperor Taizong, who recruited scholars for their outstanding literary talent. Being admitted to this hall was a great honour, called *deng Yingzhou* 登瀛洲 (entering Yingzhou).⁷⁷ Xu Can uses the term in the latter sense to suggest Chen Zhilin's similar position in the Qing Hanlin Academy, but subverts its positive meaning by her outcry of extreme regret: "I regret terribly this new pair of wings / Leading us astray to Yingzhou!" The concluding line is forcefully voiced, expressing her anguish over her husband's political choice.

In acting as a witness to historic upheavals, Xu Can is not alone. Other women echo Xu Can's voice. For example, in one *Man jiang hong* poem, "In the Summer of Dingyou (1657) I Read Mme. Chen Su'an's *ci*. Moved, I Harmonized with her Rhyme" 丁酉仲夏讀陳素庵夫人詩餘感和, Zhu Zhongmei 朱中楣 (1622-1672) writes, "Casting eyes towards the passes and rivers, I wipe my tears in vain / Heart-broken, with a cup of wine I invite the moon to drink." 舉目關河空拭淚, 傷心杯酒空邀月.⁷⁸ Writing after Mme. Chen Su'an (Xu Can), Zhu's lyric is also full of melancholy over the misfortune of her country. Zhu Zhongmei was the wife of Li Yuanding 李元鼎 (1595-1670), also a chief minister who served two dynasties. They became acquainted with each other when they accompanied their husbands to posts in Beijing, and exchanged several poems. She

⁷⁶ For the poem "The Lane of Black Robes" 烏衣巷, see *QTS* 365.4117. Wang and Xie refer to the two ministers in the Jin period, Wang Dao 王導 (276-339) and Xie An 謝安 (320-385), who are believed to have lived in the Lane of Black Robes in Nanjing.

⁷⁷ Ouyang Xiu, comp. *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 102. 3796.

⁷⁸ Zhu Zhongmei, *Jingge xinsheng* 鏡閣新聲 6a-b. This source of Zhu Zhongmei's *ci* I cite here is in Xu Naichang's 徐乃昌 *Xiaotanluanshi huike guixiu ci* 小檀樂室彙刻閨秀詞. However, Zhu Zhongmei also had a *shi* collection titled *Jingge xinsheng* included in Li Yuanding's *Shiyuan quanji* 石園全集. See Li Yuanding, *Shiyuan quanji* 102-9.

shared with Xu Can an interest in poetry and loyalist sentiments towards the Ming.⁷⁹ Although she was not as upset about her husband's service in the Qing as Xu was and tried to understand his taking of the office as service to the people, she herself felt deeply about the fall of the Ming. The following lines are from one of her *shi* poems, which illustrate her feelings about the dynastic cataclysm:

Every corner of the deserted city makes me mourn the millet crops,
Swallows of the past fly around, looking for painted beams.
How can I bear how wretched my home country is!
To ease my feeling, where can I step in the Canglang River?

(*Suicao xubian* 隨草續編 111)

荒城處處傷離黍，舊燕飛飛覓畫梁。
家國可堪寥落甚，怡情何地足滄浪。

At the scene of the city with scars of war, the poet's sorrow over the *li shu* (millets) arises. Reversed in word order, this term is derived from the poem "Shu li" 黍離 in the *Shi jing*, in which the Minister of Zhou mourns the loss of his kingdom, which thus became a conventional term standing for one's sorrow over one's lost country.⁸⁰ The image of "swallows of the past" also appears in this poem. Adopting these poetic conventions, the poet demonstrates her emotional reaction to the dynastic cataclysm. However, she does not end her poem on this level, but goes further when she offers her reflection on this historical tragedy in the final line. The allusion to the river Canglang used in this line embraces several levels of meaning. The term originally comes from a folk song of Chu,

⁷⁹ Deng Hongmei has offered a brief introduction to the life and lyrics of Zhu Zhongmei. See Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 239-42.

⁸⁰ "Shu li," *Shi jing* (*Maoshi* # 65). For an English translation of this poem, see Waley, *Book of Songs* 306.

“When the water of the Canglang is clear, it can be used to wash the strings of my cap /
When the water of the Canglang is muddy, it can be used to wash my feet” 滄浪之水清兮，
可以濯我纓。滄浪之水濁兮，可以濯我足， which is cited in classics such as the “Yu fu”
漁父 (Fisherman) in the *Chu ci* and *Mencius* 孟子 to illustrate their intended points.⁸¹

While the former work discusses how one should adapt to one’s broader historical milieu, the latter reaches the conclusion that, as with the different conditions of the river that cause people’s different reactions, a country’s fall is not due to the attack of its enemy, but to the faults of its own people. Judging from the overall meaning of her poem, Zhu Zhongmei uses the allusion to show that she finds it difficult to make peace with the new age.

Zhu Zhongmei also injects her historical reflections into the depiction of the boudoir space, as her *ci* to the tune *Lang tao sha* 浪淘沙, subtitled “Stirred by Feelings in the Rain” 雨中感懷, shows:

Fragrance wafts through my small window,
I see swallows pecking at the masses of flowers.
Rain spatters, interrupting the sounds of a far-off bell.
Hearing nothing from my family, where can I seek their news?
I wait for the new wild geese.

Gazing across, our feelings should be the same,
My thoughts of returning home are hurried.

⁸¹ For “Yu fu,” see Wang Yi, comp., *Chu ci* 7.298. For the citation in *Mencius*, see *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏 7A: 55, 2719. Translation based on James Legge’s in Legge, *The Book of Poetry* 299.

Moist clouds extending far off lock up the Ming palaces.

If one asks about the profound matter of historical change,

It's been three years.

(*Suicao* 隨草 97)

香度小窗中，燕啄花叢。雨聲滴碎遠來鐘。家信杳然何處覓，且待新
鴻。 睽越此情同，歸念匆匆。濕雲迢遞鎖明宮。爲問滄桑無限事，
今已三逢。

Zhu Zhongmei's husband Li Yuanding began to serve in the Qing court in 1645, and retired in 1659. As the final lines indicate, this song lyric must have been written around 1647, three years after the fall of the Ming. At the time, the author would have been living in Beijing, far from their native home in Jishui, Jiangxi province. The author begins by locating her perspective from the "small window," and gradually reveals her point of view, a gaze which looks far afield. The boudoir filled with fragrance, and swallows and flowers in the spring garden, constitute a typical feminine setting, within which, according to boudoir poetic conventions, one expects to find tender sentiments such as lamentations of unrequited love. However, the rain that arrives startles the poet from dwelling on the serene scene of her garden and her listening to the sounds of a bell that may bring news from her distant home. The song lyric then turns to the motif of homesickness. Although Zhu Zhongmei shows in one poem that she understands her husband's service in the Qing, she repeatedly expresses in other poems her desire that her husband withdraw from officialdom. The "return home" is a political gesture to preserve one's integrity. The author casts her gaze upon the past Ming palace, demonstrating that the sentiment of missing her home is intimately connected to that of mourning for her lost

country. She seems to use the rain and clouds as metaphors of the Qing, a violent storm “locking up” her native land. Like Xu Can’s writing discussed earlier, this song lyric by Zhu Zhongmei also provides a broad view of her distant home and former country from the perspective of her “small window.”

Despite these differences in degree, the poems examined here demonstrate that women’s vision of the world around them went beyond the feminine space of the boudoir, and their political sentiments further expanded the thematic scope of boudoir poetry. Associating the boudoir with political sentiments was not these women’s original contribution. The Southern Tang poet Li Yu was a precedent; he appropriated the boudoir plaint as tropes and conceits for expressing his nostalgic sentiments for the loss of his kingdom.⁸² The late Ming poet Chen Zilong’s lyrics written in the context of his love affair with Liu Rushi and his loyalist activity also created a feminine space evoking mixed feelings of loyalism and personal love.⁸³ However, Xu Can and Zhu Zhongmei’s writings, due to their subjective, gendered position, had a special significance in their cultural context; in expressing their political sentiments, they crossed gender boundaries. The perfect representation of her sustained loyalist sentiments in her lyrics was much appreciated by Qing critics, as exemplified by this comment by the Qing *ci* scholar Tan Xian 譚獻: “In expressing sentiments about the ‘rise and fall,’ the Grand Secretary (Chen Zhilin) pales beside her”興亡之感, 相國愧之.⁸⁴ The term “sentiments about the ‘rise and fall’” (*xing wang zhi gan*) used here does not simply refer to feelings about historical

⁸² See Samei, *Gendered Persona* 146–48, 188–89.

⁸³ Yeh, “Chen Tzu-lung”; Chang, *The Late Ming Poet Ch’en Tzu-lung*.

⁸⁴ As quoted in Chen Bangyan, “Ping jie nǚ ciren” 10.

transition in general, but specifically to patriotic sentiments for a fallen dynasty valued in the Chinese ethical system.

Considering Gender Boundaries

When women began to confront the larger world and consider what kind of role they could play in reacting to historical change, some of them became aware of the gender restrictions imposed on females. They recognized the *gui* as a place defining and limiting women's role in society. While feeling powerless as a result of this restrictive frame, some bravely protested gender inequality in their poetry. Gu Zhenli's *Man jiang hong* subtitled "Hearing an Alarm in the Government Office at Chuhuang" 楚黃署中聞警, is a case in point:

- I am at root an aggrieved person,
2 How could I stand
The sad air of autumn?
4 Just then, it is again the moment to return home and say farewell,
To climb the mountain overlooking the river.
6 The sounds of a horn rise beyond the mist,
A few lines of wild geese reflected in the shimmering waves.
8 Trying to stand higher, I search for my former dressing tower,
Yet, who will be my companion?
10 My native place distant as a dream,
And letters far off.
12 For half a year now, I have left home.

I sigh that between the far ends of Wu and Chu,

14 Suddenly I am a lone sojourner.

On the river, in vain I'm moved by the melody of singing girls,

16 In the boudoir, to no purpose I shed tears for my country.

I must ask why women must yield to men?

18 Heaven should forbid this!

(QQC 7. 3761)

僕本恨人，那禁得，悲哉秋氣。恰又是，將歸送別，登山臨水。一片
角聲煙靄外，數行雁字波光裡。試憑高，覓取舊妝樓，誰同倚。

鄉夢遠，書迢遞。人半載，辭家矣。嘆吳頭楚尾，惻然孤寄。江上空

憐商女曲，閨中漫灑神州淚。算縞綦，何必讓男兒，天應忌！

Gu Zhenli 顧貞立 (1623—1699), a native of present day Wuxi 無錫, Jiangsu, was an assertive Ming loyalist.⁸⁵ She took the style name *Bi Qin ren* 避秦人 (one who shuns the Qin; Qin stands for the Qing), which implies her political stance against the Qing.⁸⁶ She left behind a collection of lyrics entitled *Qixiangge ci* 栖香閣詞, which contains quite a few *ci* expressing her feelings and attitude towards affairs of state.⁸⁷ As mentioned earlier, *Man jiang hong* was a well-recognized form in the masculine-style lyrics. Ming-Qing women appropriated the form in different ways to express their political concerns. Unlike

⁸⁵ For a discussion of Gu Zhenli's lyrics, see Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 257-70. There are several different sets of dates of Gu Zhenli held in recent scholarship, such as "ca.1637-ca.1714" (Chang and Saussy, eds., *Women Writers* 426); "1628-99" (Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 258), and "1623-99" (Zhang Huijian 張慧劍, comp., *Jiangsu wenren huodong nianbiao* 江蘇文人活動年表 466, 923). I adopt the dates provided by Zhang Huijian because they are more consistent with the life stages as indicated by Gu Zhenli's lyrics. In one lyric, Gu Zhenli suggests that she was married around 1638, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. See QQC 7.3760.

⁸⁶ Chang and Saussy, eds., *Women Writers* 426.

⁸⁷ In some editions of the collection, the title uses the character 棲 in stead of 栖.

Xu Can's piece subtitled "Stirred by Feelings" which is to a large extent gentle and restrained in style, Gu Zhenli's *ci* cited above bears many masculine qualities of self-representation. The author begins by introducing herself in a strong first-person voice, which is rarely heard in women's writing: "I am at root an aggrieved person" (*pu ben henren*). "Pu" is usually used by men as first-person pronoun. This is a line quoted from the Southern Dynasty poet Jiang Yan's "Rhyme Prose on Grief" (*Hen fu* 恨賦).

Identifying herself in literati rhetoric, Gu seems more conscious of herself as a person rather than a gendered subject. For the first few lines we cannot tell whether the author is female or male until she mentions her *zhuanglou* (dressing tower) and *gui* (boudoir). These terms identify the author's gender, but as the lyric progresses, she finds it problematic to identify with this position.

The mention of "the sounds of a horn" in line 7, which echoes the sub-title of this song lyric, "Hearing an Alarm in the Government Office at Chuhuang," indicates the disorder of the times, as an "alarm" usually means warning of a bandit attack or some other emergency. In these chaotic times, she was not only separated from her natal family, but was also losing her country. In reflecting upon the boudoir she inhabited as an unmarried daughter, she wishes to go back to the good old times, but even if she could physically return to her home, the larger world has changed.

Standing in the middle of nowhere, the author expresses a sense of displacement. The two lines, "On the river, in vain I'm moved by the melody of singing girls" and "In the boudoir, to no purpose I shed tears for my country," further reveal that this displacement implicates gender and politics. The phrase, "the melody of singing girls"

(*Shangnü qu*) alludes to “the music of people who have lost their country.”⁸⁸ By this phrase and the term *shenzhou* in the succeeding line, Gu unambiguously asserts her political stance, her loyalty to the fallen Ming. Meanwhile, as the *Shangnü*/singing girl is associated with the entertainment quarters where men frequented, Gu may also, from her gendered perspective, suggest a contrast between two different reactions to the historical change: While some spineless men are still entertaining themselves in the pleasure quarters after the loss of the state, she, a woman dwelling “in the boudoir,” is concerned about the country. By noting her supposed social place and her “futile” political concern, Gu Zhenli’s lyric expresses not only bitter irony, but also deep frustration for a woman with her consciousness. Thus, filled with sorrow and anger, she ends her lyric with an outcry: “I must ask why women must yield to men? / Heaven should forbid this!”

There were indeed a few exceptional women such as Liu Shu 劉淑 (1620-?) who stepped out of their boudoir to participate in loyalist resistance.⁸⁹ But socially and symbolically associated with the inner chambers, women in general were denied access to the political world. Not only Gu Zhenli, other women poets of later generations such as Chen Yunlian 陳蘊蓮 (fl. 1840) also acknowledge that there is no institutional place for women in the outer realm. In the beginning of her poem, “Inscribed on the Painting of Mme. Cheng Joining the Army” 題程夫人從軍圖, she claims:

Men born into this world,

⁸⁸ “The melody of singing girls” is derived from the Tang poet Du Mu’s 杜牧 lines, “Singing girls do not know the sorrow of the fallen state / They are still singing the ‘Flowers of the rear courtyard’” 商女不知亡國恨，隔江猶唱後庭花。 See *QTS* 35.1245. The “Flowers of the rear courtyard” was the title of a tune created by the last emperor of the Chen Dynasty, which became a convention referring to the music of a fallen dynasty. See *QTS* 35.1245.

⁸⁹ On Liu Shu’s life and lyrics, see Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 214-19. Another similar example is Qin Liangyu 秦良玉 (d. 1668), who provided military aid for the Ming dynasty. For a biography of Qin Liangyu, see Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period* 168.

Their meritorious business is to pursue noble rank.
Women located in the inner chambers,
Their ambitions cannot be fulfilled.
Reading thousands of books in vain,
How can a woman ascend up to Yingzhou by her brush?
Full of knowledge and tactics, what is the use?
How can she enter the general's camp to give military advice?
[...]

(XFGSC 2.2a)

男兒生世間，功業封王侯。
女兒處閨閣，有志不得酬。
讀書空是破萬卷，焉能簪筆登瀛洲？
胸懷韜略復何用，焉能帷幄參軍謀？

It is not known who this Mme. Cheng is. According to the clues provided from the title and content of the poem, she painted a portrait of herself carrying a sword. In inscribing this painting of Mme. Cheng (maybe at the request of Cheng), Chen Yunlian composed a sixteen-line *yuefu* style poem. She begins with a bold observation on the unequal allotment of gender roles. She understands well gender boundaries prescribed by her society; assigned to the inner chambers, there is no way for a woman to pursue a career as depicted in Cheng's picture. She then bursts with emotion as she poses two rhetorical questions on the purposelessness of women's learning and talents. *Deng Yingzhou* and *can junmou* (to give military advice) are the highest recognitions of literary and political talents in her society, but women have no access to them, even though they have

mastered equivalent knowledge and skills. She goes on to acknowledge in the poem that there are indeed exceptional cases such as the legendary heroine Mulan:

In a thousand years, I only heard the story of Mulan,
Who threw away hairpins and earrings to join the army on behalf of her
father.

[...]

Madam also has the same aspiration,
Painting a portrait carrying a sword to join the army.
Let's wish that our august dynasty has no war,
Don't lament the woman in this picture growing old.

(*XFGSC* 2.2a-b)

千載僅聞木蘭事，代父從征棄簪珥。
夫人有志亦相同，畫作從軍佩劒容。
但求聖代無征戰，莫嘆蛾眉老此中。

Although she admires Cheng's aspiration to be a Mulan, she hopes that there will be no opportunity for Cheng to fulfill her ambition. As she understands well the virtual impossibility of women transcending the boundaries of the inner chambers, with this ending the poet both expresses her wish for peace and finds a solution to relieve the sorrow of women such as Cheng who are frustrated by gender restrictions. While Chen Yunlian observed the unfair treatment women received in her society, she could not do anything about it. Her poems written later suggest that she reacted to disorder only from the social place prescribed to her.

Despite Chen Yunlian's wish for peace, in the years following wars came to plague her "august dynasty" and her home in Tianjin. Chen Yunlian was married to Zuo Chen 左晨, a native of present day Changzhou. As one of Chen's poems suggests, in 1837 Zuo Chen went to take his official post in Tianjin.⁹⁰ Later Chen Yunlian also followed him to Tianjin.⁹¹ A port city close to Beijing, Tianjin is a place of crucial military significance. In 1840 after the first Opium War broke out, the British navy sailed north from Guangdong and captured the Dagou forts of Tianjin.⁹² To avoid the war, Chen Yunlian was forced to leave home and take refuge in Baoyang. She records this experience in a group of four poems titled "Writing my Feelings while Traveling at Night" 旅夜書懷. Next to the title, she provides a brief preface: "There is a warning of foreign invaders at the gate of Tianjin, so I take shelter in Baoyang" 津門夷警避居保陽. The first poem is subtitled "Examining My Sword" 看劍:

Blown about, who cares about me? I shed tears secretly,
 We left home hurriedly, how difficult it will be to return!
 Deep in the night, with heart beating I sit up and trim the lamp,
 Only to examine carefully the sword of Wu.
 (XFGSC 3.17b)

飄泊誰憐淚暗彈，出門草草返何難。
 夜深膽怯挑燈坐，但把吳鉤仔細看。

⁹⁰ "In the Autumn of the Year Dingyou [1837] Sending off My Husband to the North" 丁酉仲秋送外北上, XFGSC 2.14b-15b.

⁹¹ "Saying Goodbye to My Mother When I'm about to Go to Tianjin" 將赴津門別母, XFGSC 2.17a-b.

⁹² Twitchett and Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History*, vol. 10: 196.

While she had hoped that Mme. Cheng would not have to use a sword in battle, she now prepares to use one herself. However, her sword would be put to a different use. Her action of examining a sword under a lamp may remind us of Xin Qiji's 辛棄疾 (1140-1207) gesture portrayed in his lyric, but the desolate situation and disturbed feelings expressed in her poem are in sharp contrast with Xin's as shown below:

Drunk, I trimmed the lamp and examined my sword;
Waking up from a dream, I heard bugle calls sounding from camp to camp.
Roasted meat of the "eight-hundred-*li*" oxen were portioned out to my
soldiers.
Frontier music rolled out from fifty zither strings.
On the battlefield I do the autumn inspection of my men.⁹³
醉里挑燈看劍，夢回吹角連營。
八百里分麾下炙，五十弦翻塞外聲。
沙場秋點兵。

Whether writing a reality or fantasy, Xin's lines depict the image of a general commanding his troops with pride and powerful gestures. He might be frustrated by difficulties, but he is not afraid of anything. His sword will be used in battle to kill his enemy. But the woman is in a very different situation. Homeless and helpless, she has to use the sword as a last resort to protect herself from harm; it is most likely that she would take her own life if her body were threatened by defilement.

The British navy's threat to Tianjin was temporarily resolved by negotiation; the Qing government paid a pricey ransom.⁹⁴ However, Chen Yunlian did not live a peaceful

⁹³ Trans. by Xinda Lian with modifications. Original lines are also quoted from him. See Lian, *The Wild and Arrogant* 82.

life thereafter. A decade later, she found her life being threatened again by the Taipings. In 1853 the Taiping troops began their northern campaign. In October the troops pressed on the suburb of Tianjin.⁹⁵ Magistrate Xie Zicheng 謝子澄 (? -1853) organized local militias to defend the city.⁹⁶ Chen Yunlian acted as a witness to this historical event. She composed a group of twelve quatrains, “Recording the Events of Destroying the Bandits at the Gates of Tianjin” 津門剿賊紀事, which also includes a preface noting the dates: “Beginning from the ninth month [October] of the Guichou year [1853] and ending in the second month [March] of the Jiayin year [1854]” 起癸丑九月迄甲寅二月.⁹⁷ The first poem reads:

Pressing on the city, the bandits are rampant,
 In the inner chambers, I pity myself discussing military affairs in vain.
 If the evil fog of Chi You extends to me,
 Composing “Huai sha,” I plan to follow Qu Ping.
 (XFGSC 5.2b)

賊勢鷗張逼郡城，自憐閨閣枉談兵。
 蚩尤妖霧如延及，便擬懷沙效屈平。

Once again, the poet shows the powerlessness of being a woman in the inner chambers when confronting social upheaval. She may want to react to the conflict as active male heroes do, but she knows that as a woman there is no institutional outlet for her actions. As always, she could only resort to the extreme form of self-defense, suicide, to protect her integrity and chastity. While in the previous poem the woman poet only suggests her

⁹⁴ Twitchett and Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History* vol. 10: 199.

⁹⁵ *Qing shi gao* 20.727.

⁹⁶ For a biography of Xie Zicheng, see *Qing shi gao* 491.13583-5.

⁹⁷ XFGSC 5.2b-4a.

suicidal thoughts, in this poem she unambiguously expresses her intent to commit suicide in case of emergency. The way in which the poet refers to the Taipings as Chi You, the evil rebel who defies the Yellow Emperor in legend, reveals the woman poet's dread of the destructive force of the rebellion and her loyalty to the regime to which she belongs. If her integrity and chastity are threatened, she is determined to commit suicide as did Qu Yuan (*zi* Yuan, name Ping). "Huai sha" (Embracing sands) is believed to be the last writing by Qu Yuan before he drowned himself in the Miluo River upon learning that his country fell to the Qin.⁹⁸ By invoking Qu Yuan as her role model, Chen Yunlian demonstrates her intent to choose loyalty, purity, and integrity, values celebrated in her culture, over her life. This seems to be the only way for her to empower herself from her gendered position under the extreme circumstances.

As the Taipings were defeated by the Qing troops and local military forces, Chen Yunlian survived along with the city. However, countless women known and unknown did choose to end their lives during the turmoils of the Ming-Qing period.⁹⁹ It is not the purpose of this chapter to explore the issue of women's suicide in the context of disorder, but I would like to point out within the limits of my current study that their suicidal tendency in extremely difficult situations had much to do with the social restrictions placed upon them that foreclosed other possibilities for them to respond to disorder.

Chen Yunlian's contemporary He Huisheng's 何慧生 (?-1858) writing and experience provide another case in which a woman considered gender boundaries in time of chaos. He Huisheng was a native of Shanhua, Hunan. She was married in 1853 as the

⁹⁸ Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shi ji* 史記 84. 2486-90.

⁹⁹ In her examination of suicide writings by several exemplary Ming-Qing women, Grace S. Fong aptly illustrates the cultural significance behind these women's choice of suicide. See Fong, "Signifying Bodies."

second wife to Long Qirui 龍啓瑞 (1814-58), a prominent scholar and official in the Qing.¹⁰⁰ Long obtained his *jinshi* degree in 1841, and was appointed a compiler (*xiuzhuan* 修撰) in the Hanlin Academy.¹⁰¹ He later worked as the Provincial Literary Chancellor (*xuezheng* 學政) in Hubei before returning to his hometown Guilin, Guangxi in 1850. When the Taipings attacked Guilin in 1852, he organized military forces and successfully defeated the Taiping troops. In 1856 he received a post in Jiangxi and worked there until he died in 1858.¹⁰² The couple's marital life lasted only five years, but separation was also a typical situation they had to deal with due to the husband's career.

It is not clear when the following poem was written, but the poet clearly speaks as a *sifu*/longing wife in it:

The Lament of a Longing Wife

Bright, bright the cool moon; a cool wind sighs,
 Tapping the window, ceaseless the sound of falling leaves.
 On the front steps crickets chirr and pause,
 Gilded scissors generating chill, dewy air spreads.
 Sewing a robe for you, my tears shed in vain.
 How can I become a wild goose in the vast sky
 Flying southwest to follow you ten thousand *li* away?
 (MSYGSC 4a)

思婦歎

涼月皎皎涼風鳴，打窗落葉無停聲。

¹⁰⁰ MSYGSC, “Ba” 跋 1a. For a biography of Long Qirui, see *Qing shi gao* 82.13291-2.

¹⁰¹ *Qing shi gao* 82.13291.

¹⁰² *Qing shi gao* 82.13292.

階前蛺蝶曉還駐，金翦生寒露氣橫。

縫君衣，淚空揮。

焉能化作長天雁，從君萬里西南飛。

What the author adopts is an ancient-style *yuefu*. Whether in terms of the speaking voice or language, the poem is a typical version of the boudoir complaint. Given the context of the poet often separating from her husband, the performance of the abandoned woman persona in this poem is not merely a poetic exercise. In ending the poem, the persona expresses a strong desire to go beyond the boudoir to follow her beloved. Over-determined by the *sifu* convention, the sense of being confined in the boudoir expressed in these ending lines may still apparently fall into the traditional boudoir sentiments. However, they may convey deeper meanings if we link them with another poem put before the poem cited above in He Huisheng's collection, "Wandering in the Fields after the Clear-Bright Day" 清明後郊行:

After the Clear-Bright day, spring grows old,

Idly, I roam in the outskirts of the city.

Grasses growing in the race course,

Flowers falling, beating on fishing boats.

The newly risen river broadens out, reaching the level of the dike,

A long bridge links a temple in wilderness.

Sighing over myself trapped in the camp of women,

Living year after year in vain.

(MSYGSC 2a-b)

春老清明後，閒行負郭田。草長盤馬地，花落打魚船。

新漲平隄闊，長橋野寺連。嗟余困巾幘，空自度年年。

In this poem, the poet describes what she views as she strolls in the spring suburb. But the natural scene outside the boudoir does not make her forget where she belongs. The seasonal changes remind her that time passes, yet her years spent in the boudoir are meaningless. The feeling of ennui typifies the poems with the theme of a woman dwelling on spring scenes, but the motif of emptiness brought up by the poet here does not fall into the conventional category of “shang chun” 傷春 (mourning spring). The phrase “trapped in the camp of women” unambiguously points to the poet’s reflection on her gender. For her, it is because she is a woman that she cannot live a more meaningful life. The diction she chose, “trap” (*kun*), reveals the degree to which she is plagued by the problem. Read in this context, her lines “How can I become a wild goose in the long sky / Flying southwest to follow you ten thousand *li* away?” cited earlier may also convey her desire to go to the outer realm as her husband freely did, although ironically by “following” (*cong*).

Having encountered the Taiping Rebellion firsthand, He Huisheng also played an active role in poetic witnessing. Her “Four Poems: Stirred by Events” 感事四首, written after 1853, record the worsening situation: “Imperial troops have been exhausted / yet rebels and bandits are still rampant” 王師已疲困，盜賊尚縱橫.¹⁰³ As she began to be concerned with the national cataclysm, He Huisheng felt more compelled to reflect on her place in society. Following the four poems mentioned above, she composed another group, “Four Poems: Boldly Expressing My Opinion” 放言四首, two of which further discuss the gender issue that she initiated in previous poems. Poem one reads:

¹⁰³ MSYGSC 4a-b.

The world is disturbed, completely filled with wind and dust,
Wanting to requite the emperor's favor, I'm ashamed of this body.
If the court could have used womankind,
There would definitely have been a Mme. Xian in Gaoliang.
(MSYGSC 5a)

天涯擾擾盡風塵，欲報君恩愧此身。
若使朝廷用巾幗，高涼應有洗夫人。

Having described the country in crisis, He Huisheng expresses her desire to dedicate herself to the country. However, like Chen Yunlian, she also realizes that because she is a woman she is not qualified to enter the political sphere. She then suggests that if the court, by which she means the political system of her time, allowed a place for women, there would be heroines like Mme. Xian who could save the country (it is most likely that she would have been one). Mme. Xian 洗夫人 (ca. 512-602), also known as Mme. Qiaoguo 譙國夫人, was the wife of Feng Bao 馮寶, the Prefect of Gaoliang Prefecture in the Liang and Sui dynasties.¹⁰⁴ She played an instrumental role in helping her husband with administrative and political affairs. She was especially recognized for her successful suppression of rebels in the region.¹⁰⁵ Gaoliang was located in the west of Guangdong, which was close to Guangxi where the Taiping Rebellion started. The woman poet is confident that women could make significant contributions to curb the chaos if they were legally allowed to do so. As she goes on to claim in the second poem, she does intend to take heroic actions like Mme. Xian did:

¹⁰⁴ See "The Biography of Mme. Qiaoguo" 譙國夫人傳, Wei Zheng 魏徵, comp., *Sui shu* 隋書 80.1800-03.

¹⁰⁵ Wei Zheng, comp., *Sui shu* 80.1801-02.

How I wish I could go to the battlefield ten thousand *li* away!

Would I have refused to join the army on horseback?

Laughing at those mediocre ones calling themselves men,

Did they throw aside brushes for our sacred emperor?

(*MSYGSC* 5a)

恨不沙場萬里行，豈辭馬上請長纓？

笑他碌碌稱男子，投筆何嘗爲聖明。

In direct and forceful tones, He Huisheng voices her eagerness to participate in military campaigns. The beginning two lines read as though she is talking back to someone questioning her intention. After providing an affirmative answer, He Huisheng goes on to criticize men, the first-class citizens in her society who, in her opinion, lack first-class qualities. “Throw aside brushes” *toubi*, an allusion to the story of Ban Chao 班超 (32-102), refers to those who changed their scholarly career to join the army when the country was in a state of emergency.¹⁰⁶ Yet, He Huisheng is not convinced that those so-called men indeed care about the country. As the title “Fang yan” suggests, these poems were intended to boldly voice her opinion. Indeed, her proclamation of herself as a heroine who could save the country and her condemnation of those incapable and disloyal men are striking statements in her time. Frustrated by the unfair treatment by their society, women such as Gu Zhenli and He Huisheng can become cynical about the male gender in their writings.

¹⁰⁶ For the biography of Ban Chao, see Fan Ye, comp., *Hou Han shu* 47.1571.

Although He Huisheng could openly express her critique on gender inequality in her poems, she could not actually fulfill her ambition. She could only entrust her husband to indirectly fulfill her ambitious goals:

Poem Presented to My Husband

Recalling the old days scribbling in the embroidered boudoir,
Among fresh green willows, it is the home of the Xie's daughter.
If it is not migrating orioles who pass on news,
Who will convey the spring message to Qin Jia?
All over the world is smoke and dust,
Who has the mood to talk about love?
Trapped in the camp of women, I'm without talent,
But I hope that your meritorious efforts continue to build on Wencheng's.
(MSYGSC 5a)

贈外

回思繡閣昔塗鴉，楊柳依依謝女家。
不是流鶯傳消息，誰傳春信與秦嘉？
橫流四海盡煙塵，哪有心言兒女情。
我已無才困巾幘，願君勳業繼文成。

This poem is included almost at the end of He Huisheng's collection. It was most likely written between 1856 and 1858 while Long Qirui was serving in his post in Jiangxi. In it, the poet begins by nostalgically recalling her earlier years as an unmarried daughter in her boudoir. Despite the humble way of referring to her writing (or painting) as "scribbling" *tuya*, her self-declaration as "the daughter of the Xie family," the recognized

talented woman Xie Daoyun 謝道韞 (fl. 376), demonstrates her pride for her learning and poetic talent. Importantly for her, with her talent she makes herself a wife intellectually compatible with her husband. Qin Jia and his wife Xu Shu 徐淑 in the Han period were the earliest example of a couple who exchanged poetry.¹⁰⁷ Calling her husband Qin Jia, the woman poet is in fact emphasizing her matched talent. However, in the world of beacon smoke and battlefield dust, she is in no mood to express love to her husband, but encourages him to establish himself in his political career, because being a woman there is no way for her to achieve similar status. In the last couplet, the poet repeats herself by mentioning “being trapped in the camp of women;” she contrasts this with her husband’s career by which he could match the accomplishments of Wencheng, the Ming scholar and minister Liu Ji 劉基 (1311-75) who helped found the Ming.¹⁰⁸ This contrast again conveys her discontent with her gender status.

In 1858 Long Qirui died in his office in Jiangxi. Soon after He Huisheng committed suicide.¹⁰⁹ Four sons survived her including her stepson Long Jidong 龍繼棟. According to Long Jidong’s recollection, she was extremely saddened by her husband’s death. Her suicide appeared to be well planned and determined: she dressed up and then hanged herself on the lintel of her bed after the completion of her husband’s funeral.¹¹⁰ She wrote a letter before committing suicide, but Long Jidong does not mention its contents nor is it included in He’s collection. It is curious that as an outspoken poet, she did not write a poem before ending her life. Perhaps, because she thought that her suicide was done for personal reasons, she felt no need to justify her action. As Long Jidong

¹⁰⁷ See *YTXY* 1.30-32.

¹⁰⁸ Wencheng is the posthumous title of Liu Ji. See *Ming shi* 明史 128.3782.

¹⁰⁹ *MSYGSC*, “Ba”1a.

¹¹⁰ *MSYGSC*, “Ba”1a.

suggested, the direct cause to He Huisheng's suicide was most likely her overwhelming sadness over her husband's death.¹¹¹ Regardless of the reasons behind her suicide, one thing is certain: she had no good reason to convince herself to live. Her death physically perpetuated the predicament repeatedly claimed in her poems, "being trapped in the camp of women."

However, the poems she left behind symbolically transcended the physical frame in which she was trapped. He Huisheng's collection, *Meishenyinguan shicao* 梅神吟館詩草, was published posthumously in 1874 by her stepson Long Jidong. It contains one *juan* of sixty *shi* and four *ci* poems. In addition to Long Jidong's postscript, there are over ten contributors who wrote prefaces and inscription poems to the collection (all of them appear to be men). Almost everyone remarks on the poet's distinctive voice, and gives a high evaluation of her transformation of the feminine poetics generally associated with women poets. Most of these comments focus on He Huisheng's unusual gesture—her intention to "throw aside the brush," and offer their admiration for the unusual qualities of both her poems and personality. Jiang Da 蔣達 (*zi* Xiafang 霞舫), for example, expresses his amazement in his endorsement poem: "Surprisingly nowadays the inner chambers can generate such writing!" 閨閣於今竟有之!¹¹² In lavishing their admiration, some also point out that it was the chaotic time that helped produce such an unusual woman poet. In his preface, Zhang Jinyong 張金鏞 especially elaborates on this point:

Several times, she expresses her wish to follow the example of Ban Chao to discard the brush (for action). How profound and forceful she sounds!

¹¹¹ MSYGSC, "Ba" 1a.

¹¹² MSYGSC, "Ti ci" 題詞 1a.

As we see in this world, others make their words as if they inhaled clouds, cut jade to be elegant, rouge themselves to become beautiful, and wear jewels to enhance their brilliance; these really cannot be spoken of in the same breath as her! However, willow catkins rise because of wind. What [ordinary women] compose are all lines like those characterizing snowflakes in the Xie family. In their poetry spring is better than autumn; lines like the Su's comments on the moon are rare. Hanchen's [Long Qirui's *zi*] words are indeed true. Isn't her style created by the times?¹¹³

幾欲學班生之棄筆，淵淵乎！礪礪乎！以視世之吸雲爲言，磨玉奏雅，研紅成麗，茹碧迸采，誠有不可同日語者。然而，絮起因風，皆謝庭賦雪之句；春勝于秋，尠[鮮]有蘇家評月之譚[談]。翰臣言不虛也。則豈非時爲之歟？

In this passage, Zhang attempts to analyze why He Huisheng's poetry stands out with its weighty thematic matter and vigorous style. Having criticized poems of superficial, artistic beauty (ironically, Zhang's own parallel prose falls into the same category), Zhang claims that this style, presumably feminine for him, has shaped a tradition, which can be traced back to Xie Daoyun. As Susan Mann observes, Xie Daoyun is often invoked by Qing writers as an emblem of talented literary women; the catkin motif also becomes a cliché referring to women's poetic talent (*yongxu cai* 詠絮才). The phrase "willow catkins rise because of wind" adopted in Zhang's preface carries double meanings. On the one hand, it is an adaptation of Xie's original line "More like willow catkins tossed up by the wind" 未若柳絮因風起, a line with which Xie won a poetic

¹¹³ MSYGSC, "Xu" 1a.

contest on writing about falling snow.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, Zhang means that women imitate Xie's style like catkins driven by wind. He is suggesting that women writers, modeled on Xie Daoyun, generally engage with poetry of tender sentiments and superficial beauty, rather than with Su Shi's style of poetry on heroic and political matters. For Zhang, He Huisheng's poetry could fall into the former category, but at an historical juncture of social disorder, the woman poet developed a poetic style similar to masculine poetics. In agreement with Long Qirui, Zhang concludes that He Huisheng's poetry was the product of her time. Zhang's mention of Long Qirui here is to echo Long's words quoted earlier in this preface:

[Long] told me: "Since she was married to me, she has encountered chaotic times and our life has encountered many incidents. Her talent is buried in the domestic chores [...] feeding the family has become her responsibility. Therefore, she has rarely composed poetic pieces recently."¹¹⁵

諗余曰：“自嬪于吾，還時多故。里閭椎埋……饘飩亦是職，緝商綴羽，今亦俛矣。

This passage quoted from Long informs us of the circumstances of He Huisheng's poetic practice after she was married; two factors influenced her poetry, the larger historical background and her personal situation as a housewife. Although Long focuses more on how the latter affected the quantity of his wife's poetic production, drawing on Long's information Zhang reaches a conclusion which focuses on the former. Perhaps, Zhang

¹¹⁴ For the story recording Xie Daoyun's poetic talent and this poetic line by her, see Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 131.

¹¹⁵ *MSYGSC*, "Xu" 1a.

was more inspired by He Huisheng's own poetic voice. As mentioned earlier, He Huisheng once refers to herself as "a daughter of the Xie's" when recalling her unmarried life. But in asserting "All over the world is smoke and dust / Who is in the mood to talk about love?" she seems to suggest that she has already given up the tender, delicate poetics associated with Xie Daoyun.

An endorsement poem to He Huisheng's collection signed by He Guochen 何國琛 reads:

Beacon fires leap across passes and mountains—suffering is not yet over,
Deep in the boudoir, she searches for poetic lines—stirred by autumn's
lament

Sweeping away powder and rouge, she intends to set aside the brush,
Reciting, she gazes upon winds and clouds, leaning against the tower.

(*MSYGSC*, "Ti ci" 1b)

烽火關山苦未休，深閨覓句動悲秋。

掃除粉黛思投筆，吟眺風雲愛倚樓。

From the secluded boudoir to the world burning with beacon fires, from a concern with powder and rouge to a focus on the "winds and clouds" (historical changes), this poem aptly summarizes He Huisheng's life and works. It captures the poetic transformation that not only He Huisheng but also other women discussed in this chapter achieved in their poetry. Inspired by He Huisheng's self-representation, He Guoshen could reproduce the new textual position and voice constructed in the former's writing. This case demonstrates that the new mode of representing women in the boudoir brought forth by women poets did influence their contemporary's literary representations of women.

Conclusion

In examining the poems by women in the context of social disorder, I have traced how the boudoir/*gui* is treated in their writings, and have shown how these women offer their responses to tumultuous historical changes from their perspectives framed by their gendered space. While social upheavals destroyed the placid lives of countless women, it also brought an unusual historical juncture for them to reflect on their place in society. Unlike the poems examined in previous chapters which depict the boudoir as a central setting, in this chapter it more often functions as a critical notion discussed by the authors as they are displaced from this space or as they examine it from a critical distance. In a few cases the boudoir is described in its conventional setting, as does Xu Can in her lyrics. However, whether it is a visible poetic setting or a discursive concept, the boudoir merges into a larger background of the author's social and historical experiences of war and chaos, or becomes a framework for the authors to reflect upon their social, political and personal circumstances. In other words, it is not treated as an enclosed feminine space paralleling the author's interiority, but examined externally by the author. If we say that women authors as represented by those in the *Zhengshi ji* negotiate the conventional boudoir poetics in order to craft a new feminine space, the authors examined in this chapter are not concerned with the textual representations of the boudoir, but connect it to their broader social and historical concerns as they begin to consider the social meaning of the *gui*.

Compared with those we have heard from the *Zhengshi ji*, the poetic voices examined in this chapter—with the exception of Wu Chai—tend to be grieved and plaintive: some complain that war destroyed their peaceful and comfortable boudoir life,

some express their deep sorrow over the loss of their beloved, some mourn the fall of their native dynasty, and some protest the restrictive boundaries of women defined by the inner chambers. As the voices in the *Zhengshi ji* represent “the tones of a well-managed age” which are “at rest and happy,” the voices examined in this chapter can be primarily characterized as “the tones of an age of turmoil” which are “bitter and full of anger.”¹¹⁶ Living through times of chaos, these women’s writings indeed reflect their social and historical contexts. Although their bitter and angry voices are not ideal expressions by the orthodox poetic standard, their contemporary critics understand the extraordinary circumstances under which these voices were produced. For example, in his preface to the poetic collection of Wang Caipin 王采蘋 (1827-after 1893), a widow living through the Taiping Rebellion, Xu Zhenyi 許振禕 begins by claiming, “Since ancient times, the works by outstanding women of the inner chambers can express plaint!” 夫古來閨傑之作可以怨矣!¹¹⁷ He then goes on to link her poetry with Qu Yuan’s writing and the lamentation songs of complaint in the *Shi jing*. For him, one can create immortal works from the experiences of adversity as long as one upholds one’s integrity. As we have read in this chapter, male critics especially recognize women’s embracing of high cultural values such as loyalism in their poetry; the critics see this as an admirable transcendence by women of the boundaries of their gender.

¹¹⁶ Great Preface, quoted from Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* 43.

¹¹⁷ Wang Caiping, *Duxuanlou shigao* 讀選樓詩稿, “Xu” 1a. Wang Caipin was another woman poet who lived through the Taiping rebellion. Her *Duxuanlou shigao* contains ten *juan* of *shi* poetry produced from 1840 to 1891, which includes a number of poems written about her experience escaping the war. I do not discuss her poems in this chapter because they are not related to my theoretical focus, the *gui*, but her collection deserves an in-depth study from the perspective of how social disorder influenced women’s life course and their approaches to the writing of poetry.

Curiously, none of these critics touches upon the issue of systemic gender inequality brought up by women such as Gu Zhenli and He Huisheng. Perhaps, this issue is either too sensitive to discuss or it poses a social impasse for which they have no solution. Or they simply are completely unconscious of gender inequality as a problem.

Chapter Four

Convention and Intervention: The Boudoir in Gu Zhenli's Song Lyrics

Ming-Qing women poets, as a new literary force, collectively reinscribed the space of the boudoir with their own socio-historical experiences and perspectives. Whether conforming to the limits of contemporary ideology or reflecting on extraordinary historical circumstances, the boudoir became a sort of “public” sphere in which they could display commonly shared experiences through poetry. In this chapter, through a case study of Gu Zhenli's 顧貞立 (1623-99) song lyrics, I would like to move on to explore how a woman poet deliberately adopts an “individualist” or “nonconformist” approach to represent a self-identity that she perceives as different from socially recognized models. As she searches for alternative modes of self-representation, her lyrics create a heterogeneous poetics of the boudoir, revealing complex interrelations between her conceptions of self and other, and cultural codes of femininity. By approaching Gu Zhenli's boudoir poetics as a case study, this chapter aims to examine one woman's problematic relation to gender ideology and poetic discourse centered on the site of the boudoir. Through examining Gu Zhenli's various textual strategies in representing the boudoir within the context of her life and *ci* collection, I hope to show an individual woman's entry into the poetic tradition and her literary agency in attempting to carve out an alternative discursive space for her self-expression. Above all, I believe that with its combination of conventionality and unconventionality Gu Zhenli's boudoir poetics provides an illuminating case that can be set against the larger background

outlined in the preceding chapters, and thus can deepen our understanding of the ways in which Ming-Qing women poets participated in the meaning production associated with their gendered identity and location.

Gu Zhenli's transgressive voice and idiosyncratic self-image made her stand out among Ming-Qing writing women. In her comprehensive survey of the history of women's lyrics in pre-modern China, Deng Hongmei was the first to bring Gu Zhenli and her lyrics to critical attention. She claims that Gu Zhenli's lyrics represent a "breakthrough" in conventional aesthetics of the lyric; they neither "carry on the tradition of the boudoir plaint" nor "follow the teaching of *wenrou dunhou*."¹ For Deng, Gu Zhenli's lyrics comprise a "heterodoxy" (*yishu* 異數) in the realm of Qing women's poetry. Although brief and somewhat impressionistic, Deng's observations shed light on the significance of Gu's lyrical voice in challenging both gender-based social etiquette and conventional feminine poetics. From the theoretical perspective of the relationship between the poet's subjectivity, individual literary agency, and poetic discourse, I intend to probe more deeply into Gu Zhenli's lyrical world. I will not merely examine the transgressiveness of her mode of representation, but will also relate this mode to others adopted in her lyrics. The continuum between the poet's performance of the modes of boudoir poetics prevalent in her time and her deliberate disruption of these modes reveals the poet's complicated interaction with conventions of femininity as she struggled for self-understanding and representational space within the limitations of the existing symbolic order.

¹ Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 258.

Gu Zhenli was active as a poet in the early Qing. Her achievements in both *shi* and *ci* poetry were acknowledged by the famous early Qing scholar Chen Weisong 陳維崧 (1628-82) in his *Furen ji*.² However, her unconventional lyrical voice gained greater recognition in the later period.³ Gu Zhenli's earliest collection of *shi* and *ci* poetry, titled *Qixiangge shi ci* 棲香閣詩詞, seems to have never been published.⁴ While her *shi* poetry was selectively published later by a male relative, Gu Xiangquan 顧響泉, in the *Liangxi shichao* 梁溪詩鈔,⁵ her *Qixiangge ci*, the *ci* collection which has been more widely circulated and is still extant, was not published until 1823 by Li Zhiling 李芝齡.⁶

As the boudoir is a central site for the construction of femininity in *ci* poetics (discussed in Chapter 1), Gu's reflections upon her self and her place in society as a woman in her *ci* emerge clearly in her negotiations with the symbolic space of the boudoir, whether subverting gender conventions associated with this space or exploring alternative representations for articulating her idiosyncratic sense of self. Her lyrics reveal a range of different modes of representing the boudoir. Unlike other women's poetry collections, such as Zuo Xijia's,⁷ the sequence of poems in Gu Zhenli's *ci* collection does not chronologically mirror the phases of her life and poetic practice.

² Chen Weisong, *Furen ji* 56-7.

³ For examples of the comments on Gu Zhenli's lyrics by critics of later generations, see You Zhenzhong and You Yiding, eds., *Qing ci jishi* 288-89.

⁴ Hou Jian 侯暕, "Postscript to the *Qixiangge ci*." Quoted from You Zhenzhong and You Yiding, eds., *Qing ci jishi* 288.

⁵ I have not been able to locate this collection yet. The *Zhengshi ji* includes four *shi* poems by Gu Zhenli. See *ZSXJ* 2.13b-24a.

⁶ What is more accessible to scholars today is not this first version published in 1823, but the one reprinted in 1896 in Xu Naichang's *Xiaotanluanshi huike guixiu ci*. I have not been able to find the 1823 version yet. None of major libraries in China hold it. I know its existence only through Hu Wenkai's *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* and the *Qing ci jishi huiping*. The latter includes several excerpts from the prefaces and postscript to the 1823 version *Qixiangge ci*. See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 804; You Zhenzhong and You Yiding, eds. *Qing ci jishi*, 288.

⁷ See Chapter 3.

However, these lyrics demonstrate a process of transformation through which one can trace the author's adaptation of textual strategies for different expressive needs. Several contrasting and even contradictory depictions of the boudoir space stand out in her lyrics. Roughly related to her life course as a woman, the shifting modes of representing the boudoir space reveal some development of self-identity. However, there is by no means a linear, progressive evolution through these modes. Rather, I find in them a struggle between different identities and sets of meanings. The author's positioning in relation to the boudoir is not unitary, nor is there consistency in her ways of dealing with the associated conventional feminine codes. Instead, the boudoir in her lyrics is rendered ambivalent, heterogeneous, and multifaceted. The following sections will examine an array of major modalities of the boudoir as inscribed in Gu Zhenli's lyrics, followed by a general evaluation of her transformative poetics of the boudoir.

Emulating the Boudoir Convention

Gu Zhenli mastered and could perform with great skill the conventional mode of boudoir poetics and aesthetics. Interspersed in her collection are a number of lyrics in this category. Emulating classical models of boudoir poetry was an important stage in her practice of *ci* writing. The following lyric to the tune *Huan xi sha* exemplifies the ways in which she synthesizes elements from well-known boudoir poems:

Lingering in a sweet dream, I regret being awoken.

Who let orioles twitter, playing in this new clear weather?

Suddenly chilly then turning warm, it is the Qingming Festival again.

Behind closed gates flowers fall, spring so quiet,

Incense consumed in the sleeping-duck burner, the day so dreary.

On this long day I idly pluck the jade zither.

(QQC 7.3759)

好夢留人悔卻醒。誰教鶯語弄新晴。乍寒還暖又清明。

門掩落花春寂寂，香消睡鴨晝沈沈。日長閒自理瑤琴。

This lyric is laden with a familiar lexicon and imagery that can be easily traced back to their sources of inspiration. The opening of the first lyric is indebted to the well-known poem titled “Spring Complaint” 春怨 by the Tang poet Jin Changxu 金昌緒, a classic in the *guiyuan* tradition:

I hit and startle the oriole

Not to let it cry on the branch.

When it cries my dream is interrupted,

I cannot then reach Liaoxi.

(QTS 768.8724)

打起黃鶯兒，莫教枝上啼。啼時驚妾夢，不得到遼西。

Liaoxi was the frontier where soldiers stood guard. By presenting a brief drama in simple and colloquial language, Jin’s poem poignantly illustrates the theme of the boudoir plaint in the voice of a soldier’s wife. Being waken from sleep by the chirping of birds is a common poetic motif,⁸ but the specific elements “dream” and “orioles” and the syntactic structure (compare the phrases “who let” *shei jiao* and “not to let” *mo jiao*) used by Gu Zhenli in conveying the bird’s disturbance of the persona’s dream all echo those in Jin’s

⁸ For an example in which the poet uses this motif, see Meng Haoran’s 孟浩然 (689-740) poem, “A Spring Dawn” 春曉, QTS 160.168.

poem. We do not know what the persona dreams about in Gu Zhenli's lyric, but the inspiration of Jin's poem on her own description of a dream disturbed by a chirping oriole is clear. The succeeding lines go on to depict a scenario in the spring boudoir and courtyard which we have encountered in Li Qingzhao's lines, also to the tune *Huan xi sha*:

Beside the quiet window, spring in the small courtyard is deep.

Layered curtains are not hooked up, shadows are heavy.

Leaning against the tower, speechless, I pluck the jade zither.

(LQZJ 67)

小院閒窗春已深。重帘未卷影沈沈。倚樓無語理瑤琴。

Although Gu Zhenli does not directly adopt the diction of these lines, each of the lines in Gu's lyric is a faithful translation of the boudoir scene and sentiment presented by Li Qingzhao, not to mention her borrowing of the central image of the persona plucking the zither. In brief, Gu's lyric presents a generic depiction of the boudoir in which intertextual links with poetic predecessors constitute the very fabric of textuality.

Qin Guan, the important poet in the *wanyue*/feminine style (discussed in Chapter 1), is another model for Gu Zhenli's *ci* writing. In the following example, the similarity between Gu's and Qin's lyric is particularly striking:

To the Tune *Huan xi sha*

All day long the curtain droops, too lazy to hook it up,

For no reason a spring thought appears on the eye brows.

Catkins flying and flowers falling, the dream lingers on and on.

Waves of light chill—the vermilion door is quiet,
Strands of drizzling rain—the small window is dim.
The east wind, hard to retain, breaks the heart.

(QQC 7.3759)

盡日簾垂嬾上鉤，無端春思在眉頭。絮飛花落夢悠悠。
翦翦輕寒朱戶寂，絲絲細雨小窗幽。東風腸斷不堪留。

Qin Guan's lyric has been discussed in Chapter 1. For the sake of comparison, I cite this poem again:

To the Tune *Huan xi sha*

An expanse of light chill rises up to the small tower.
This cloudy morning is listless as the end of autumn.
Light smoke and flowing water are dim in the painted screens.
Free-flying catkins are light as a dream,
Boundless threads of rain fine as sorrow.
The ornamented curtain idly hangs on a small silver hook.
漠漠輕寒上小樓。曉陰無賴似窮秋。淡煙流水畫屏幽。
自在飛花輕似夢，無邊絲雨細如愁。寶帘閒掛小銀鉤。

Not only do the two works adopt the same rhyme, from imagery to diction, from motifs to the major theme, Gu Zhenli's lyric is a closely rephrased version of Qin Guan's work. The only significant difference is that Gu is more explicit in revealing the boudoir theme. In the term "spring thought" (*chunsi*), a conventional suggestion of romantic love, the gender of the persona in Gu's poem is more explicitly brought out because the subject of *chunsi* conventionally points to a woman.

The lyrics by Gu Zhenli cited above, among others, appear to be simply the utilization of established compositional codes and subject positions. Without contextual information we cannot determine whether they were merely literary exercises or written for self-representation. However, her extension of the boudoir convention into the context of her personal life is apparent in two lyrics written in relation to her husband, “To the Tune *Nan xiang zi*: Thinking of the One Faraway” 南鄉子: 憶遠:

Poem One

The phoenix mirror is covered from clear light.
Don't try on light make-up in front of the bamboo blind.
Spring clouds in the green mountains have all been consigned to—
Autumn frost.
If you want to examine my many sorrows, they cover the hair on my
temples.

In a lingering dream I'm tired and heartbroken.
Not waiting for autumn shades to brew a tender cool,
I light up the brazier and drop down the embroidered curtain—
Keeping the fragrance within.
A strand of gentle smoke keeps me company in the long night.

(QQC 7.3769)

鸞鏡掩清光，莫向簾前試淺妝。翠嶺春雲都付與，秋霜。驗取多愁掩
鬢傍。殘夢倦堪傷。不待秋陰釀嫩涼。自撥爐熏垂繡幙，留香。一
縷柔煙伴夜長。

Poem Two

The shadow of flowers accompanies my loneliness.
The season of thick cassia fragrance is wasted.
Prime years pass by in the snap of fingers like a dream—
The beautiful moon
How many times will it be full in front of my window?

After moving the Boshan incense burner
With the screen blocking the Xiang River, I sleep alone.
Chill penetrating layers of bed-curtains, my poem is not finished—
On Xue Tao's paper.⁹
I will always have new lyrics—don't pass them around recklessly.

(*QQC* 7.3769)

花影伴淒然。辜負濃香桂子天。彈指韶光如夢也，嬋娟。能得窗前幾個圓。 移過博山煙。屏掩瀟湘獨自眠。冷透重幃吟未就，濤箋。總有新詞莫浪傳。

As the subtitle of these two lyrics indicates, they are written thinking about the husband who is traveling away from home. The speaking voice expresses primarily the sentiments of a longing wife in the boudoir, lamenting her loneliness and her ephemeral youth and beauty. The images through which she conveys these meanings are also borrowed from the repertoire of conventional signifiers. She encloses the interior of the boudoir with embroidered curtains and painted screens, the mirror reflects her aging, flowers contrast

⁹ A kind of paper created by the Tang courtesan poet Xue Tao 薛濤 specially used for the writing of poetry.

with her fading beauty, and the bright moon witnesses the passing of her youth. However, the time-honored themes and sentimental tone are refreshed with an insertion of difference. For example, in the second stanza of the first lyric, Gu writes: “Not waiting for autumn shades to brew a tender cool / I light up the brazier and drop down the embroidered curtain.” Unlike the typical abandoned woman persona, who tends to be obsessed with her emotional trouble and unconcerned for her own welfare, this gesture signifies action taken by the persona to alleviate loneliness and to care for herself. Also noteworthy is Gu’s signature as the writing subject projected in the second lyric. In claiming that she can always come up with new lyrics and urging the intended reader (her husband) not to “pass them around recklessly,” the voice is authorial, self-conscious, and proud.

Although we cannot date these poems, judging from the overall performance of Gu’s song lyrics I suggest that they represent an early stage of her lyric writing. Gu Zhenli was self-reflexive about her poetic practice. In her lyrics, she often comments on the style or nature of her (previous) writing not only from the perspective of poetic criticism but also in Buddhist terms. A lyric to the tune *Huan xi sha*, which recollects some memorable moments of her earlier years, sheds some light on her poetic pursuit at the time:

But I loved flying orioles to wake me up in the dawn.

Through the bamboo blind, the new moon shimmered in front of the
window.

The apricot blossoms were blooming—I recall that year.

Poems lamenting green leaves and grieving over red flowers consumed
my natural intelligence.

Beside the blue creek and white rocks, the season of washing clothes.

I wrote wonderful lines of the Southern Tang style on the hem of my skirt.

(QQC 7.3779)

卻愛流鶯喚曉眠。一簾新月漾窗前。杏花開也記當年。

怨綠愁紅銷慧業。青谿白石浣衣天。南唐佳句寫裙邊。

The phrase “I recall that year” indicates that the poet is writing of her past. As the lyric continues, we see that what the poet primarily recalls from her past were both her devotion to and enlightenment by poetry. The first line alludes to the poetic cliché of orioles waking up the lonely wife in the boudoir discussed above, but it rewrites the allusion with a different attitude. In contrast with the complaint of the wife persona, Gu’s line displays a cheerful mood more typical of a young, carefree girl excited about getting up early to embrace a new day. The image of blooming apricot trees then emerges from the memory, leading to the next motif in this lyric—“lamenting green leaves and grieving over red flowers”—the sorrow over the passing of spring and, by extension, youth and beauty. These images, which characterize the conventional boudoir lifestyle and sentiments, are rewritten by the poet as a critical summary of her own poetic engagement at the time. Her reference in the last line to the lyrics of the Southern Tang, an important period in the development of *guiyuan ci*, echoes this characterization. However, these lines reveal an ambivalent attitude. In mentioning her improvisation of “wonderful lines of the Southern Tang style” on her skirt, the poet conveys her pride in her own talent and the poetic inspirations that emerge from everyday life. But as she views her writing as

“consuming her natural intelligence” *xiao huiye*, she may be also suggesting the negative force of her devotion to poetry in terms of the Buddhist view of artistic speech, and especially embellished feminine language, as harmful to one’s nature.¹⁰ In any case, those “wonderful” lines written on her skirt would eventually be washed away. Although the author may not necessarily suggest this meaning by the motif of washing clothes, her later poetic practice indicates that she attempted to move beyond the poetry she perceived as belonging to the Southern Tang style.

In sum, whether imitating classical models or recording experiences resonant with the literary tradition, the lyrics in this category to a large extent reiterate conventional, feminine textual positions and voices. From imitating classical models of representation to trying to insert her consciousness as a writing subject, these lyrics illustrate one way in which Gu Zhenli entered into the tradition of boudoir poetics. The stylistic categories *wanyue* and *haofang* had been well-established by Gu Zhenli’s time. However, Gu’s collection does not contain any lyric that coherently or systematically emulates the established models of the *haofang* style, although the appropriation of masculine rhetoric and style plays an instrumental role in her transformative boudoir poetics.¹¹ Gu Zhenli’s entry into *ci* writing, which began with conventional feminine language, was very much determined by her gender status. Although these lyrics only assume a small portion in her collection, they represent a crucial stage in her poetic training and expression.

The “Empty Boudoir”: Representations of Confinement

¹⁰ The case of Jiang Zhu 江珠 (1764-1804) provides an example in which a woman poet was struggling over the dilemma of having to give up her poetic engagement for Buddhist practice. See Grant, “Little Vimalakirti” 286-307.

¹¹ For her appropriation of the heroic mode in the form of *Man jiang hong* in order to protest gender inequality, see my paper, “Engendering Heroism” 30-34.

Most of Gu Zhenli's lyrics appear to have been written after her marriage. The examples to be examined in this section focus on the feelings about marital and/or widowed life in the boudoir. As indicated by the titles or ways of addressing the named reader, the textual subject of these lyrics is marked as the poet speaking in her own voice. While we should not treat these lyrics simply as records of Gu Zhenli's lived experience, we also cannot read them as merely textual expressions without relating them to her personal life. Thus, I would like to read them as self-statements under the signature of Gu Zhenli; where necessary, I will contextualize these poetic expressions with her historical experiences. Only in this way, I suggest, can we fully appreciate the significance of Gu's lyrics as they were written and received in their historical context.

Gu Zhenli was married to Hou Jin 侯晉 (*zi* Rongbin 蓉濱), a minor official also from her native region Wuxi.¹² In one lyric, Gu Zhenli claims that she and her husband were mismatched: "Although I'm not talented, I dare dislike my husband who is not my match" 無才敢去嫌天壤.¹³ This assertion is likely a gesture through which the poet shows her unusual personality; we cannot, thus, take it at face value as a summary of Gu Zhenli's relationship with Hou Jin. However, in both her direct assertions and evident nostalgia for her former life as an unmarried daughter, her lyrics portray marriage as a downturn in her life. As she claims in her famous lines: "I must ask why women must yield to men / Heaven should forbid this," Gu Zhenli is discontented with her gendered condition.¹⁴ Marriage, the ultimate social institution defining a woman's role, was a specific source of unhappiness for her. In her lyrics in this thematic category, she depicts

¹² You Zhenzhong and You Yiding, eds., *Qing ci jishi* 288. As Gu Zhenli addresses Hou Jin as Rongbin in a lyric to be discussed below, presumably it is his courtesy name.

¹³ *QQC* 7.3785. I shall cite and discuss this lyric in its entirety below.

¹⁴ *QQC* 7.3761. For my discussion of this lyric, see Chapter 3, 198-201.

the boudoir as the enclosure of a bitter self, a self trapped in the role of wife (and perhaps a widow in later years), and forced to deal with various hardships.

Poetic exchange with husbands was a productive channel of sharing and communication for many Ming-Qing women poets. In Gu Zhenli's 160 lyrics, however, there are only three explicitly written in relation to her husband. This fact supports Gu Zhenli's claim that she and her husband were not intellectually compatible. In addition to the two lyrics, "Thinking of the One Faraway" discussed earlier, there is the following lyric to the tune *Man jiang hong*, subtitled "Thinking of the One Faraway; at the Time Rongbin is Traveling in the North" 憶遠, 時蓉濱北游. In it, the torrent of emotions cannot be adequately characterized as the usual "sorrow over separation" (*li chou*):

- Wild geese weep over the west tower,
2 Heaven also appears wasted away,
With the wretched yellow and sad green.
4 Unable to bear it,
I sing long as I cry,
6 Beside the lonely lamp, my tears flow like torrents.
Having pawned everything, it's hard to keep my wedding robes,
8 When drunk I like to write the character "empty."
If you ask what breaks my heart:
10 Whatever topic I compose,
It's lines of the "Long Gate."
12 Hills on the screens still,

The incense smoke fine.

14 I can't bear to listen to the end—

Chilled crickets chirring on the steps.

16 If you measure my sorrow over separation,

It adds up to the sky and fills the earth.

18 The homeland is indistinct beyond the setting sun,

The fair one seems to be somewhere along the Xiang River.

20 Sitting in the boudoir

On this pitiful night

22 Haggard is this person.

(QQC 7.3766)

雁泣西樓，天亦瘦、慘黃愁翠。難消受，長歌當哭，孤燈瀉淚。典

盡難留嫁日衣，醉來卻喜書空字。問斷腸、吟就是何題，長門句。

屏山靜，鑪煙細。聽不了，寒蛩砌。數離愁多少，撐天塞地。故國迷

漫殘照外，美人宛在瀟湘裡。坐閨中、對此可憐宵，人憔悴。

This lyric brings forth two major motifs. First, the detail that she has to pawn her dowry indicates the straitened circumstances under which she lives. The struggle to make ends meet is a compelling and recurrent theme in Gu Zhenli's lyrics. Elsewhere, she describes how she has to sell her needlework to feed the family:

To the tune *Man jiang hong*

Cutting colored silk into flowers,

2 I've patterned an imaginary golden chamber,

And unfolded the shapes of flying dragon and dancing phoenix,

- 4 Blue paulownia and tall bamboo.
Behind closed doors I'll add tonight's strands again,
6 Laying down the needle, I'll exchange my work with millet for tomorrow.
By now, I have surrendered to eternal poverty.
It could make me cry.¹⁵

(QQC 7.3768)

剪綵爲花，曾譜出空中金屋。翻花樣龍飛鳳舞，碧梧修竹。閉戶再添
今夜綫，停鍼便換明朝粟。到如今袖手任長貧，真堪哭。

While half of the lines are devoted to demonstrating her craft, any sense of pride is soon subverted by her bitterness that all these beautiful things are created only to barter for food. The clothes she wore or brought to her husband's home on the wedding day must have been made by her at her natal home in preparation for her trousseau. As such, they would have been symbolically important to her as witnesses to her passage from unmarried daughter to wife. The loss of her wedding clothes makes the condition of poverty even more emotionally difficult. As "a female form of property that stood outside orthodox Confucian beliefs about joint family ownership," the dowry was primarily available for the disposal of the wife.¹⁶ There are cases of women voluntarily contributing their dowry to help out financial difficulties in their married life with pride and writing

¹⁵ Trans. by Kathryn Lowry with modifications in lines 2 and 6. See Chang and Saussy, eds., *Women Writers* 428. Note that the crucial difference in line 6 is my use of the verb "exchange" *huan* 換 instead of "soak" in Lowry's translation. Her rendition might be based on another similar character "渾," but the original texts included in both *Quan Qing ci* and Xu Naichang's *Xiaotanluanshi huike guixiu ci* use "換."

¹⁶ Bray, *Technology and Gender* 265.

poetry to show such “virtuous” action.¹⁷ Gu Zhenli, however, viewed the exhaustion of her dowry as a sign of her failing marital life.

Her bitterness about using up her dowry is related to the second motif. By alluding to the “Changmen fu” 長門賦 (Rhapsody on the Long Gate) by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179-117 B.C.), Gu Zhenli brings up the issue of her problematic relationship with her husband (Line 11).¹⁸ The Long Gate Palace was the residence of the estranged imperial consort Chen (Chen Huanghou 陳皇后) of Emperor Wudi 武帝 of the Han dynasty, who had turned his amorous attention to another consort. Hoping to regain the emperor’s favour, she commissioned the famous writer Sima Xiangru to write “Changmen fu.” The rhapsody moved the emperor and helped restore her to favour.¹⁹ The allusion to this story in Gu Zhenli’s lyric suggests a similar crisis in their relationship: her husband might have other sexual or love interests. The significant difference, however, is that she, not a ghost male writer, is herself the lyric writer. Whether her purpose is to move her husband or to complain, Gu Zhenli’s lyric conveys a negative view towards marriage, not only in regard to the problematic relationship with her husband but also the difficulties of household finances.

The emotional intensity and instability evident in this lyric are striking. Eruptive, unrestrained, and forceful, the sentiments expressed in the first stanza surpass the decorum of the conventional boudoir plaint. Unlike the typical abandoned woman who is represented as passive and listless, the persona is portrayed as energetic and active in

¹⁷ For an example of a woman who portrays a moral gesture of donating her dowry to the husband’s family, see Hang Wenru 杭溫如 “Handing in My Treasure Box” 繳奩, ZSJ 8.19b-20a.

¹⁸ Sima Xiangru’s authorship of the “Changmen fu” is debatable. For a discussion and an English translation of this *fu*, see Knechtges, *Court Culture* 47-64.

¹⁹ Knechtges, *Court Culture* 50.

managing her strong emotions. Her sorrows are released and complaints expressed through singing, weeping, drinking, and meditating. Far from fearing to reveal her inner feelings, the poetic persona confronts the intended reader (her husband) with her intense emotions. In describing how strong her *li chou* (sorrow over separation) is, Gu Zhenli adopts a grand gesture comparable to the *haofang*/masculine style: “If you measure my sorrow over separation / It adds up to the sky and fills the earth.” The sentiment engendered in the boudoir becomes so powerful that it cannot be contained within but breaks into the outside world, filling the universe (*cheng tian se di*).

By the end of the lyric, however, the poet’s persona seems to be both emotionally and physically exhausted. While the lyric begins with a broad view of the depressing autumn scene, the enclosed surroundings of the boudoir gradually come to attract her attention: the screens are immobile, fine lines of incense smoke rise from the burner. But as the crying of autumn insects stirs her feelings, she projects her gaze afar once again: “The homeland is indistinct beyond the setting sun / The fair one seems to be somewhere along the Xiang River.” The meaning of these two lines is difficult to determine as the terms *guguo* (hometown, or the former country) and *meiren* (beauty, fair one) are rich in meaning and cultural significance. First, the *meiren* associated with the Xiang River (in present day Hunan) may allude to the legend of Xiangfei 湘妃, the two loving and virtuous wives of the mythical ruler Shun 舜, who died of grief and became goddesses of the Xiang River after Shun’s death. In a way, the lines can be read as the poet’s attempt to see through the eyes of her husband who is traveling far from home: he looks back to his hometown and to the “fair one” who longs for his return. This reading brings forth the

conjugal love suggested by the story and thus complicates Gu Zhenli's earlier expression of resentment towards her marital life.

Another possibility is to read *guguo* as indicative of the poet's projection of her gaze upon her native place and former country. Gu after all lived through the Ming-Qing transition. By the "fair one" she may refer to herself, sadly trapped in an area far from her old home. Nostalgia for her natal home and/or the fallen Ming is a recurring theme or motif in Gu Zhenli's lyrics. The element of loyalist tendency need not be irrelevant to Gu's feelings towards her husband and marriage as expressed in the first stanza. Private feelings are often intertwined with political sentiments in the lyrics of women who lived through the Ming-Qing transition (discussed in Chapter 3). Moreover, the unsatisfactory marriage in which she lived, when set against the broader background of national trauma, conveys a situation of greater complexity than was normal for a conventional boudoir persona. This makes the feelings expressed at the end of this lyric even more despondent.

Despite the ambiguity of these two lines, the closure of this lyric suggests a strong sense of confinement within the boudoir. Although the point of view shifts outwards and inwards in turn as the lyric progresses, it finally returns to the interior. Gu seems unable, ultimately, to surpass the confines of the boudoir, allowing herself to languish passively in sorrow. With this ending, all the cries and struggles presented earlier in the lyric appear to have been in vain.

The boudoir as represented in palace style poetry is a metaphor for the emotional void of the female persona caused by the absence of the male lover. Ming-Qing women poets often adopt the image of the "empty" boudoir (*kong gui*) in their poetry. But this same term is infused with different meanings. Bing Yue, one of the authors included in

the *Zhengshi ji* discussed in Chapter 2, represents her *kong gui* as a spiritual retreat free of worldly concerns such as wealth and fame.²⁰ As line 8, “When drunk I like to write the character ‘empty’” in “Thinking of the One Faraway; at the Time Rongbin is Traveling in the North” suggests, Gu Zhenli also attempts to engage with the Buddhist concept of “emptiness” in her perception of boudoir life. Her self-abandonment to despondency at the end of the lyric, however, demonstrates the failure of Buddhist practice to bring transcendence. Unlike the authors represented in the *Zhengshi ji*, who in general reconstruct the boudoir as a space in which women can enjoy domestic life, Gu Zhenli goes out of her way to emphasize the sense of confinement and bitterness that comes with dwelling in the boudoir. She writes in the first of the two lyrics to the tune *Yi Qin E* 憶秦娥 subtitled “Thinking of My Sister-in-Law” 憶嫂氏:

The moon beside the west window
 Invites me and my thin shadow to become the unique three.
 To become the unique three
 In pure sorrow and empty coldness,
 All having nothing to say.

Inscribing with the golden hairpin I scrape off the paint on the railing.
 Smoke curling up from the incense burner; screen hills are still.
 Screen hills are still.
 The maid urges me to sleep,
 But I’m afraid of the coldness of the thin quilt.

²⁰ See Chapter 2, 134-5.

(QQC 7.3758)

西窗月。邀人瘦影成三絕。成三絕。清愁虛冷，都無話說。 金釵

劃損闌干漆。鑪煙裊篆屏山寂。屏山寂。侍兒促睡，單衾寒怯。

The opening lines of this lyric are conceived under the influence of Li Bai's lines in his poem "Drinking Alone by Moonlight" 月下獨酌 in which Li animates the moon and his own shadow as his merry-making companions:

Here among flowers a single jug of wine,
No close friends here, I pour alone
And lift cup to bright moon, ask it to join me,
Then face my shadow and we become three.²¹
[...]

(QTS 182.1853)

花間一壺酒，獨酌無相親。舉杯邀明月，對影成三人。

A poet of great personality and creativity, Li Bai constructs an ironic world of "solitude"—himself and his imagined friends. In populating his surroundings, Stephen Owen argues, Li Bai demonstrates his "creative self-sufficiency" rather than loneliness.²² My reading, however, differs from Owen's. The created companions are proven to be useless to alleviate his loneliness. As Li Bai continues to write in the succeeding lines of the poem, the moon and his shadow fail to provide company in a way he desires: "The moon never has known how to drink / All my shadow does is follow my body" 月既不解

²¹ Trans. by Stephen Owen in *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry* 138.

²² Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry* 138.

飲，影徒隨我身。²³ The final dismissal of these companions by the poet makes the sense of loneliness poignant. Inspired by Li Bai's lines, Gu Zhenli also imagines the moon and her shadow as company, yet makes them only witnesses of her loneliness within the boudoir. In mentioning "the unique three," she emphasizes their isolation from the rest of the world. The three strengthen the feeling of each other's isolated being. They are together, yet unable to communicate with each other. This is a moment of absolute loneliness. From the second stanza on Gu Zhenli's perspective focuses only on the enclosed world of the boudoir. The strokes of her hairpin on the railings record the degree of this bitter struggle. Moreover, as the subtitle of this lyric, "Thinking of My Sister-in-Law" indicates, the expressed feelings are directed to or intended to be shared with this female relative.

In the second lyric to the tune *Yi Qin E*, Gu Zhenli refers to her sister-in-law as Qin E, an abandoned woman persona established in a lyric by this tune title attributed to Li Bai.²⁴

The moon beside the west window
 Throws light on me every night as if it knew me.
 As if it knew me,
 It shines through the blinds and enters the curtain,
 Going out of its way to look for me.

At this moment, in the empty boudoir I'm truly distressed!
 I know far away Qin E is also weeping.

²³ Trans. by Stephen Owen in *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry* 138.

²⁴ For the poem, see *QTS* 890.10051.

Qin E is weeping,
You and I have suffered all kinds of sorrows
Over separations in life and death.

(QQC 7.3758)

西窗月。照人夜夜如相識。如相識。穿簾入幕，故來尋覓。空閨
此際真愁絕！遙知尚有秦娥泣。秦娥泣。與君嘗盡，生離死別。

By alluding to the image of Qin E, Gu Zhenli perceives the three of them as sharing the same sorrowful situation. Deng Hongmei claims that Gu Zhenli was widowed when writing these two lyrics, “Thinking of My Sister-in-Law.”²⁵ The phrase “separations in life and death” possibly suggests the loss of her husband. However, whether she was widowed or not at the time, what Gu Zhenli inscribes in the space of the empty boudoir are the bitter feelings of a woman trapped in it.

In this lyric Gu begins again with the image of the moon. While the moon is portrayed as a quiet companion in the first lyric, here it is further personified as an old friend who has come purposely to visit her. This can be read as a pathetic fallacy, underlying which may be the opposite fact that it is the poet who gazes upon the moon every night and persistently seeks its companionship. However, this imagined comfort immediately turns out to be a prelude to an emotional breakdown as the poet cries out her distress at the beginning of the second stanza. At this moment, she can no longer contain herself. The double usage of the adverb, *zhen* (really, truly) and the complement *jue* (utmost) conveys the extreme degree of her emotion: “I’m truly distressed” (*zhen chou jue*). Particularly, *zhen*, a colloquial word used in an expression of direct response to a

²⁵ See Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing ci shi* 262. However, she does not provide source of information or elaborate why she thinks so.

certain condition with which the speaker is confronted, interrupts the impersonal, picturesque effect produced by the primarily imagistic language of the first stanza. This rupture in stylistics marks the subjective assertion of the author in reacting to her emotional entrapment in the boudoir.

In the lyric “To the Tune *Pusa man*: I Cannot Sleep on an Autumn Night” 菩薩蠻: 秋宵不寐, she adopts a similar approach:

At the sound of pounding clothes on frosty rocks my grieved heart breaks,
At the chirr of crying crickets my sorrow is pressed on.
Dewy leaves fall in the empty courtyard,
Shining through the window, the moon is doubly bright.

Just wrapping myself up in the morning quilt,
It is hard to continue the dream I had before the spring.
Light silks are stored in the jade box,
All the empty boudoirs are equally afflicted.

(*QQC* 7.3759)

霜砧碎擣愁腸裂，啼蛩絮語愁心切。露葉墮空庭，窗穿月倍明。
朝衾隨便擁，難續春前夢。玉匣閣輕紈，空閨一樣酸。

Most of the lyric is constructed through a cluster of highly imagistic elements: “frosty pounding-clothes rocks,” “crying crickets,” “dewy leaves” falling in “the empty courtyard,” “bright moon” shining through the window, and so on. Encountering these stock images one after another, a reader could easily conclude that this lyric reproduces another generic version of the *guiyuan ci*. The assertion in the last line, however, breaks

with these formulaic descriptions. This assertion stands out with its direct discursiveness and unusual choice of the descriptive *suan* (literally sour, by extension meaning afflicted or grieved), a word not preferred in the poetics and aesthetics of femininity. In this way, Gu Zhenli invests the voice with a personal style. Her concluding remark ends with a gendered empathy by asserting the commonplace of women suffering in the empty boudoir, and her predilection for “strange” diction succeeds in giving her poem novelty.

In a number of lyrics, Gu Zhenli refers to her boudoir as *kong gui*. She may, following convention, mean the situation of a wife or widow without a husband’s presence, but we cannot say that these lyrics simply fall into the category of conventional boudoir complaints. What she emphasizes is not the lovesickness of the persona but the pressures of specific domestic problems and struggles with conflicting emotions, articulating the space of the boudoir from a woman-centered perspective.

“I Just Won’t Learn these Manners of the Boudoir”:
In Search of an Alternative Space for Self-Representation

Whereas Gu Zhenli sees marriage as a downturn in her life, her former life in the boudoir as an unmarried daughter appears to be a paradise to which she persistently returns in her dreams and memories. In a lyric to the tune *Ta suo xing*, Gu Zhenli includes a relatively long preface to articulate the feelings that stir her as she prepares to write the lyric:

When I was not yet married, every year in the spring month all my aunts returned home to visit their parents. Our grandparents would bring several of us cousins together; we would give ourselves up to feasting and making merry. Since the year Wuyin [1638] and Jimou [1639], we all married like the Three Stars entering the door, bearing fruit to benefit the house. We can no longer get together but can only entrust our feelings to the evening

clouds and spring trees. At this moment when the moon looks pale and the lamp is green, my feelings are difficult to dispel. Therefore, I compose this lyric. (*QQC* 7.3760)

余未出閣時，每至春月，諸姑歸寧，大父母攜表妹數人，流連讌笑。

自戊寅、己卯，各各三星入戶，蕢實宜家，不相聚首，惟寄情於暮雲春樹耳。月白燈青，有懷難遣，爰賦此詞。

Using phrases derived from the *Shi jing*, Gu briefly outlines the important events related to her and her cousins becoming wives and mothers.²⁶ However, for Gu, the transition into these roles also deprives them of the happiness and freedom they had enjoyed as unmarried girls. The preface is followed by the lyric which enriches the above narrative with more recollections of the lost paradise:

A halo surrounds the green lamp,
Chill invades my kingfisher-blue sleeves.
Since the Double Ninth, I've waited in vain for news from letters.
In past years we competed with new fashions in the boudoir,
Now recalling those days, it is impossible to return.

On moonlit nights we joined our beds side by side,
In the morning we embroidered together beside the window.
Going to view lanterns and pick vegetables, we often went hand in
hand,

²⁶ The phrase, “the Three Star entering the door” is derived from the “Chou mou” 綢繆, *Shi jing* (*Maoshi* #118). For an English translation of this poem, see Waley, *Book of Songs* 87. The phrase, “bearing fruit to benefit the house” is borrowed from “Tao yao” 桃夭, *Shi jing* (*Maoshi* # 6). For an English translation of this poem, see Waley, *Book of Songs* 106.

Vaguely in dreams, we reunited and felt the hardship of parting,
Waking up, I only gain sorrow upsetting my heart.

(QQC 7.3760)

暈掩青燈，寒侵翠袖。音書望斷重陽後。昔年閨閣鬥新妝，而今追憶
難回首。 夜月聯床，曉窗同繡。踏燈挑菜頻攜手，夢中依約聚難
分，覺來贏得愁腸逗。

She juxtaposes two temporalities of the boudoir by shifting between the present and past. Poignantly, she returns to where she begins, the moment of her emotional pain. What temporarily removes her from this sad reality is the memory of the days in which she enjoyed the company of her cousins. What she recalls are typical “girly” activities. This nostalgia for her former boudoir life is a recurring theme in Gu Zhenli’s lyrics and, I believe, a significant way in which she tries to escape the unhappiness of her married life. However, this imaginative, temporary flight is not ultimately sufficient. Her final solution to this problematic situation as demonstrated in the lyrics to be examined in this section is so radical that she would reject even those associated with her sweet memories.

The poet’s reflections on her writing make explicit the intentions underlying her textual transformation. In a lyric indicated as written in 1672, when she was forty-eight years old, Gu offers a commentary to her own *ci* writing in which she informs the reader of her wish to go beyond what she perceives as her limitations:

To the tune *Nan xiang zi* 南鄉子

[...]

I feel ashamed to say I’m good in the arena of the lyric,
What I’ve written are always verses lamenting fragrance and rouge.

How can I transform the long river into wine—

One thousand goblets

To cleanse the heart of heroic men and women once for all?

(*QQC* 7.3771))

羞說擅詞場，總是愁香怨粉章。

安得長流俱化酒，千觴。一洗英雄兒女腸？

The middle-aged Gu Zhenli was already a recognized poet in her time. The humble position she takes here, however, is not out of modesty (it is against her flamboyant style in other lyrics), but a self-critique of her *ci* writing. She may exaggerate in characterizing her writing as always being “verses lamenting fragrance and rouge,” an idiom referring to the boudoir plaint and, by extension, feminine poetics in general. It may be also true that, by this time, she had been mostly engaged in and famous for the feminine style. Her contemporary Chen Weisong, for example, records only three typical *guiyuan* lyrics by her in the *Furen ji*.²⁷ However, Gu’s negative evaluation of her lyrical style reveals that she was dissatisfied with the “feminine” nature of her writing. While feminized song lyrics expressing private sentiments of love were also problematized in the male social and political domain, Gu Zhenli’s self-critical attitude may suggest a deeper frustration with the fact that her engagement with the poetic feminine was greatly determined by her gendered status. Finally, posing her quest for the magical power to transform a river into wine, Gu allegorically expresses her dissatisfaction with the current feminine status of her lyrics (maybe also of her life) and expresses the desire to transcend her perceived limitations. The prodigious ability to drink is a common trope manipulated by literati

²⁷ Chen Weisong, *Furen ji* 56-57.

poets to express frustrations over failed political pursuits or to demonstrate an unrestrained, heroic manner. Borrowing this masculine gesture, Gu Zhenli is literally making recourse to the oppositional masculine/*haofang* style in order to transform the feminine-gendered conventions by which her writing is limited. We have seen some *haofang* touches in the lyrics examined in the preceding section, and I will continue to show in this section how she developed a mature, coherent self-representation inspired by the literati's *haofang* poetics.

The new textual position Gu Zhenli found for herself, particularly in her later years, was not of seeking escape from the condition of confinement but of speaking out against it from within that very condition. She developed a distinct mode of expression, which breaks free from social or symbolic systems restricting her personality and inclinations. She created an image of herself as a non-conformist, not only against what she perceived as vulgar feminine fashions, but also in opposition to the orthodox meanings of womanhood. By sweepingly subverting gender conventions, I would argue, she made a significant move to transcend the symbolic order associated with women and the boudoir. This sense of subversion is clearly expressed in several of her long lyrics; the similar organization and phrasing of these lyrics reiterate alternative positions and ways of expression.

In these lyrics, Gu Zhenli tends to begin by demonstrating her unconventionality as a woman, as the first stanza of the following lyric to the tune *Man jiang hong* exemplifies:

Gait resembling after falling from a horse, make-up imitating weeping
I just won't learn these manners of the boudoir.

I'm used to being careless and lazy,

Chewing petals and blowing leaves,

Discarding powder and rouge.

I have too many illnesses to be able to manage household chores,

Although I'm not talented, I dare dislike my husband who is not my
match.

Looking at every strand on my temples,

How long can they remain black?

Don't make vain attempts.

墮馬啼妝，學不就、閨中模樣。疏慵慣、嚼花吹葉，粉拋脂漾。多病
不堪操井臼，無才敢去嫌天壤。看絲絲、雙鬢幾時青，空勞攘。

As discussed in Chapter 2, Shen Huiyu and other authors in the *Zhengshi ji* often adopt terms similar to “gait resembling after falling from a horse” and “make-up imitating weeping” as synecdoches for “vulgar” or “immoral” femininity to critique feminine vanity and artificiality.²⁸ In this lyric, Gu Zhenli also claims a critical distance from what she terms “these manners of the boudoir.” However, she is not thereby joining Shen Huiyu in asserting a correct aesthetic standard. Rather, she attempts to show that she is not concerned with conforming to any feminine trait: she is idle and lax rather than diligent and observant, and she destroys and discards flowers and rouge rather than wear them. She goes even further by challenging the basic moral requirements for womanly virtue. First, she excuses herself from household responsibility because of illness. Illness

²⁸ For Shen Huiyu's poem, see Chapter 2, 111-13.

is a common theme or motif treated in Ming-Qing women's poetry.²⁹ As Fong insightfully points out, women poets not only represent illness as "an apt signifier of femininity" but also turn moments of illness into "an alternative temporality" in women's lives for self-reflection, meditation, and other creative and intellectual activities.³⁰ While Gu Zhenli may not actually have been exempted from household chores during illness, as were many women in more well-to-do families, her utilization of illness as an excuse to shun her domestic duties is an open challenge to the norms of womanhood. Even more surprising is the bold condescension she expresses toward her mediocre husband. The line she uses is derived from the story recorded in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 in which Xie Daoyun, the icon of young female talent, shows her displeasure at the intellectual inferiority of her husband compared with the talented men in her family, "In this one household, for uncles I have A Da, Zhonglang, and for cousins and brothers I have Feng, Hu, E and Mo. But I never thought that there could be such a [stupid] person as Wang Lang between heaven and earth" 一門叔父，則有阿大、中郎；群從兄弟，則有封、胡、遏、末。不意天壤之中，乃有王郎。³¹ As Nanxiu Qian points out, it appears that Xie Daoyun is comparing her husband with her male relatives, but in fact she is complaining that he is a mismatch for her.³² In claiming to have no talent in comparison with Xie Daoyun, yet still adopting an equally arrogant attitude towards her husband, Gu Zhenli portrays herself bluntly as a transgressive woman: she ignores the

²⁹ For a recent study of women's poetry on illness in Late Imperial China, see Fong, "A Feminine Condition?"

³⁰ Fong, "A Feminine Condition" 10.

³¹ Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu* 19.26, 697. For an English translation of the *Shishuo xinyu*, see Richard B. Mather. For a discussion of this story, see Qian, *Spirit and Self* 146-48.

³² Qian, *Spirit and Self* 147.

prescribed roles for women in the domestic sphere, slighting both household responsibility and her husband's authority.

However, her denial of domestic responsibilities does not mean that she is entirely carefree. The ending of this stanza suggests an effort to persuade herself not to be burdened with worldly concerns. The second stanza of the lyric goes on to show the specific strategies which she adopts in coping with the problems in her life:

I should not think of
Richness and glory,
But pull myself together
In the wretched situation.
In the realm of books,
I seek deep enjoyment alone.
Last night in my tower my new dream is sweet—
A clear wind sent me to Jasper Terrace.
To dispel idle sorrows,
A high pillow is a magic remedy,
A treat provided by the Fairy Feiqiong.³³

(*QQC* 7.3785)

應不作，繁華想，收拾起，淒涼況。向牙籤境內，自尋幽賞。昨夜樓
頭新夢好，清風吹送瑤臺上。散閒愁、高枕是良方，飛璫餉。

³³ (Xu) Feiqiong is a female immortal, who lives in Jasper Terrace (*yaotai*) and can bring people to the immortals' land through dream. For the record of Xu Feiqiong, see Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guang ji* 太平廣記 70.433.

As the term “Richness and glory” suggests, Gu’s dream about her life may have included those achievements that belong to the world of men in addition to a better material situation. The decision not to dream of a life unattainable to her but to cheer herself up in the midst of adversity is both a resigned and positive gesture. The poet tries to make peace with her destiny. Unable to extricate herself from these circumstances, she decides to appreciate her life in its own right. The changed perspective indeed takes her beyond the mundane to Jasper Terrace, the immortals’ land. She thus concludes that her dreams can provide escape from sorrow and pain. The critical turned detached attitude expressed in this lyric contrasts sharply with the bitterness about the confinement in the lyrics examined in the previous section. They can be read as signposts of her spiritual transcendence.

The binary organization of the lyric in which she begins by attacking conventional codes of femininity and concludes by portraying her alternative self-image recurs in many of Gu Zhenli’s lyrics. To show this typical structure, I quote the following lyric to the tune *Qinyuan chun* 沁園春 in its entirety:

Combing tresses into chignons,
Bound feet squeezed into bow-shaped shoes—
I have never gotten used to these.
As for cooking and household management—
Setting out teapot and cups,
And taking care of housecleaning—
These should be my duties.
Still I’m thankful to profound Providence

For allowing me to be born a person of crude manner and grand talent.

I am growing old!

In the shadow of the setting sun,

Fleeting scenes urge one on.

Illness bears no harm for an idle body,

Just place it in the ruined garden and deserted terrace.

Accompanied by rich incense and a soothing zither,

Facing south to rule a hundred cities,

Having a full shelf of books,³⁴

Silk scrolls in piles.

A whiff of fragrance rises as I brew tea while writing,

Just a few spots of autumn flowers planted by my own hands.

Forget about everything else!

Flies' heads and snails' horns—

What do they have to do with me!

(*QQC* 7.3761-62)

掠鬢梳鬢，弓鞋窄裏，不慣從來。但經營理料，茶鐺茗盃，親供灑

掃，職分當該。還謝天公深有意，便生就、粗疏邱壑才。將衰矣！斜

陽日影，短景頻催。閒身不妨多病，且憑他位置、廢苑荒臺。伴

³⁴ These two lines allude to “The Biography of Li Mi”李謐傳, see my discussion below in the text.

香濃琴靜，百城南面，青編滿架，湘軸成堆。一縷茶煙和字煮，只數
點秋花手自栽。都休也！蠅頭蜗角，於我何哉！

Similar to the textual move in the previous example, Gu begins by asserting her disdain for feminine fashions. Few women in Gu Zhenli's time wrote about the bound foot, let alone openly attacking the culturally embedded practice.³⁵ In claiming "I have never gotten used to these," Gu Zhenli explicitly voices dissent. This is another instance in which she demonstrates the divergence of her position from culturally recognized feminine attributes. On the one hand, she appears to adopt a less radical stance towards domestic duties than that in many of her other lyrics. On the other hand, admitting these responsibilities does not necessarily mean that she is happy to play her prescribed part. In the first stanza of another lyric to the tune *Man jiang hong* she clearly asserts her "natural" inclination against the process of becoming a woman:

I was born unrestrained and haughty
Into an unfortunate and floating life,
Feeling numb and dispirited.
I once managed
Flowered patterns on the embroidery stand,
And the palindrome on the loom,
Making towers and terraces in emptiness.
I'm afraid to call myself a disciple of the Goddess of Needlework,
But all over the country, girls in the boudoir have been taught this.

³⁵ Another example is Shen Cai 沈彩 (b. 1732), who was born much later than Gu Zhenli and also expresses her negative attitude towards the bound feet in poetry. See Fong, "Writing from a Side Room" 55-56. The *Zhengshi ji* also includes a poem by Li shi 李氏 criticizing this bodily practice, see "Bow Shoes" 弓鞋, ZSXJ 6.25b.

Now I can no longer stand

To look at the remnants of silk floss and thread.

My mind lazy, heart turned to ashes.

嘯傲生成，薄游身世，慘澹情懷。也曾經料理，繡床花樣，回文機
杼，空裏樓臺。怕向鍼神稱弟子，但通國、閨娃受教來。今難再，看
殘絲剩綫，意懶心灰。

In this self-reflection, she focuses on her own socialization in womanly work such as weaving and embroidering, proper training for girls raised in the boudoir. Some of her other writings indicate that Gu became proficient in these traditional skills, and, indeed, she occasionally professed pride in her ability. However, she confesses in this lyric a reluctance to be “a disciple of the Goddess of Needlework.” Given this confession, her weariness in doing needlework is not due to the typical mood of ennui associated with the boudoir, but a statement to demonstrate her personal stance against this womanly practice and one resisting the subjection of woman by society. While Gu’s own preoccupations as represented in her lyrics indicate that an engagement in either womanly work or other cultural activities did not necessarily mean the exclusion of the other, the discarding of needlework asserted in the context of this lyric is symbolically important in suggesting the intentionality of her transition from a traditional womanly role to one in which she would be free to pursue what she prefers.

Echoing this resistance to the conventional roles of women is the pride she takes in her “inborn” personality—“a person of crude manner and grand talents.” This is an image whose masculine connotations make it unconventional as a woman’s claim. In the lyric to the tune *Man jiang hong* quoted above, she also characterizes herself with the

term *xiao 'ao* (unrestrained and haughty), a term by convention used to describe a manner of spontaneous response to one's true feelings and freedom from social restrictions. Male literati authors often adopt this term to represent their free spirits and unconventional life style, intentionally distanced from the dark realm of socio-politics. Tao Qian, for example, writes in one of his famous "Drinking Wine Poems" 飲酒詩: "Being unrestrained and haughty under the east veranda / Having somehow found my life again" 嘯傲東軒下, 聊復得此生.³⁶ In repeatedly emphasizing that she was born to be such a person, I believe Gu Zhenli attempts to maintain her differences from the conventional meanings attached to being a woman, thus emphasizing an alternative self-identity.

In the second stanza of the lyric to the tune *Qinyuan chun*, Gu Zhenli elaborates further on her unconventional characteristics. Once again, she plays with the signifier of illness: she is willing to accept illness and she prefers to situate this "sick" body in "the ruined garden and deserted terrace." This place likely refers to her boudoir/studio which is ironically named Qixiangge (The Fragrance-Nesting Pavilion) because she writes in another lyric "I laugh at the Qixiang, for its garden and terrace have always been ruins." 笑栖香, 從來苑廢臺荒.³⁷ This willing "sickness" and "marginality" reveal a poignant sense of self-displacement, an ironic demonstration of an individual's agency in resisting the normative subject position he or she is supposed to claim. She contents herself in this displaced lifestyle by self-indulgence in the pleasure of music, books, tea, and gardening. These activities or signifiers are commonplaces in literati culture, and also alternative resources of inspiration for Ming-Qing women's literary culture. However, they are

³⁶ *TYMJ* 90-91. Trans. by James Hightower with one modification. I translate the term *xiao 'ao* into "unrestrained and haughty" instead of "complacent" in his original translation. See Hightower, trans. & annot., *The Poetry of Tao Qian* 134.

³⁷ "To the Tune *Duoli*" 多麗, *QQC* 7.3772.

particularly significant for Gu Zhenli in helping her not only to escape from the women's concerns and activities she disdains, but also to be positive in dealing with the impossibility of women pursuing public, political careers. Her lines, "Facing south to rule a hundred cities / Having a full shelf of books," are adapted from "The Biography of Li Mi" 李謐傳, in which Li Mi claims, "If a great man owns ten thousand scrolls of books, why would he need to demonstrate his power by facing south to rule a hundred cities" 大丈夫擁書萬卷, 何假南面百城?³⁸ Although as a woman Gu did not have the option of entering the political arena, by turning to self-cultivation she could achieve a kind of self-empowerment.

Most of the lyrics examined in this section appear to have been written by Gu Zhenli in her old age. The voice is that of an elderly woman retrospectively examining her life and asserting an independent stance that she feels at ease to express. As an elderly woman, she feels free to be herself and do as she likes. As shown in the second stanza of the lyric to the tune *Man jiang hong*, Gu Zhenli establishes her sense of subjectivity in terms of eccentricity:

Clarity still remains in my eyes and ears.
Even if my hair has turned to frost and snow,
Let the body be what it will.
To my little sister by Green Creek,³⁹
I send hurried letters to ask for verses.
With my sickly sister-in-law in her widow's boudoir,
Together we compose poems with challenging rhymes.

³⁸ Wei Shou 魏収, comp. *Wei shu* 魏書 90.1938.

³⁹ It is located in present day Nanjing, Jiangsu.

By nature eccentric like mist and clouds—who would be like me?

There is the dappled shadow of

The plum tree on Lone Hill.⁴⁰

In the dream of Jiangnan,

While many flowers are not yet awakened,

She would bloom in the snow.

(QQC 7.3762)

清神猶餘眼耳，便霜鬢雪鬢，任屬形骸。與青谿小妹，飛牋索賦。嬌

閨病嫂，險韻同裁。痼癖煙癪誰得似，有疏影、孤山一樹梅。江南

夢，想群花未醒，雪裏偏開。

In this stanza, Gu presents a self-image with deliberate strangeness. While the young, attractive female body, well-taken care of to retain its youth and beauty, comprises the centre of conventional boudoir poetics and aesthetics, Gu focuses instead on her body's signs of aging. Importantly, this aging does not concern her. She seems to go beyond the external conditions of her life and body. She only expresses appreciation that she is still able to actively engage in her poetic pursuits. She works hard to avoid mediocrity. In challenging herself with the composition of *xian yun*, an exceedingly difficult rhyme pattern, she is, evidently, convinced that only poetry of outstanding quality can match her exceptional personality. The "sickly sister-in-law in her widow's boudoir," who shares many common experiences with Gu, as shown in other lyrics, is represented as one of only a few understanding companions. She concludes that she is an "eccentric" by nature. The details of "strangeness" stated in earlier lines are all intended to illustrate this nature.

⁴⁰ It is located in present day Hangzhou, Zhejiang.

By posing a rhetorical question, “who would be like me?” and claiming “the plum tree on Lone Hill” as her double, Gu goes further to elaborate on the cultural values behind her eccentricity. The image of the plum tree that Gu adopts here alludes to the Song poet and hermit Lin Bu 林逋 (967-1028), who became a recluse on the Lone Hill, close to Hangzhou. He is famous for his fondness of and poems written on plum trees. His poem, “The Small Plum Tree in the Mountain Garden” 山園小梅, is recognized for its masterful characterization of the aesthetic and moral values of the image of the plum tree.⁴¹ The poet himself has also become the icon of a lofty recluse who purposefully disengages from the vulgar world. Through embracing the pure and noble spirit as embodied in the image of plum tree, Gu goes out of her way to choose a different path from that of her peers, those whom she suggests in the term *qun hua* (the many flowers).

In claiming an eccentric self-identity in the poetic space of the boudoir, Gu Zhenli echoes her contemporaries, including women such as Zhou Qiong 周瓊. In her *shi* poetry, Zhou also expresses her unwillingness to be an ordinary woman:

I always admire the chivalrous bone and feel ashamed to be wearing
powder and rouge,
How can I be willing to learn from those with moth-like eyebrows to dress
myself pretty?
Wind crossing the meandering railings, I plant bamboos in idleness.
Flowers hide the small baluster, I burn incense in serenity.
In this stormy world there are no sympathetic eyes,
Who recognizes my unique wildness in this world?

⁴¹ QSS 106.1217-18.

每憐俠骨慚紅粉，肯學蛾眉理艷粧。

風度曲欄閒種竹，花迷小檻靜焚香。

波瀾世路無青眼，誰識人間我獨狂？⁴²

The “wild” (*kuang* 狂) and “arrogant” (*ao* 傲) self-image Gu and Zhou adopt is not their unique invention. First, the loyalty to a “true” self evinces the continuing influence of late Ming trends that emphasized individualism and expressionism such as Li Zhi’s 李贄 (1527-1602) notion of “innocence” (*tongxin* 童心) and the Gong’an School’s “nature and inspiration” (*xingling* 性靈).⁴³ Second, the “wild” and “arrogant” poetic self was well-established in masculine-styled lyrics.⁴⁴ In a lyric to the tune *Zhegu tian* 鷓鴣天, Lu You composes the following lines, which could be the very source of inspiration for Gu’s construction of self-image:

I’m obsessed with being unrestrained and putting on a haughty air,

Let the body grow old and waste away,

There’s no harm in smiling wherever I go.

I always know that the Creator has a contrary mind:

Letting a hero grow old seems to him an ordinary matter!

(*QSC* 3.1583)

貪嘯傲，任衰殘，不妨隨處一開顏。元知造物心腸別，老却英雄似等閒！

⁴² “In Reply to Zhang Cichen in His Rhyme” 次韻答張詞臣, Deng Hanyi, *Shiguan*, *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* vol. 39: 449.

⁴³ Many scholars note the influence of these late Ming trends on women’s literary culture. See, for example, Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 59-60. See also Zhong Huiling, *Qingdai nü shiren yanjiu* 清代女詩人研究 5-21.

⁴⁴ Xin Qiji, for example, is known as a creator of these images. For a study analyzing the images of the self constructed in Xin Qiji’s lyrics, see Lian, *The Wild and Arrogant*.

Disregarding external conditions and placing more confidence on the inner self, Lu You is gesturing a retreat from the pursuit of fame and success in the socio-political domain to which he belonged. Whether this self-transcendent gesture is successful or not (in fact, it is belied by the deeper frustration as suggested in the last two lines), it inspired women such as Gu Zhenli to attempt to escape from their womanly roles at least in writing.

The incorporation of literati cultural ideals into their self-representation, as shown in Chapter 2, was an approach commonly adopted in Ming-Qing women's poetry. However, in appropriating literati poetic discourses, Gu Zhenli's lyrical voice represents a radical stance challenging the gender-based social and poetic conventions. As the recurring binary structure of the lyrics examined in this section shows, Gu Zhenli's non-conformist subject position evolves through two phases: dis-identification from the womanly role assigned to her and self-invention of an eccentric personality. Transgression becomes a necessary way for Gu Zhenli to escape from her subjection. The claim that "I just won't learn these manners of the boudoir" summarizes her radical stance against conventional gender ideology. Simultaneously, deconstructing conventions of femininity paves a way for her self-invention.

By means of the song lyric, she establishes a distinct subjectivity in the discursive space of the boudoir. The following lyric illustrates the powerful effect resulting from this textual transformation:

To the Tune *Man jiang hong*

The soul of the flowers picked to pieces,
Dream of the hometown remote,
Wrapped up in a quilt, I get up.

At this moment of extreme sorrow,
The lamp dims as incense turns to ashes,
Double gates are deeply shut.
Holding the brush I want to compose the melody of red rain,
But tears already stain my black robe.
Removing the golden hairpin
I idly stir the ashes of the lamp,
And write the character “sorrow.”

Affairs of past and present
I get drunk and forget about them.
Death is going home,
Life is a temporary lodge.
Let the jealous mouths of others
Pity or condemn me.
Unrestrained and putting on a haughty air, I’ve long been the aged
Phoenix’s companion,
Rough and careless I like to act like an obtuse immortal.
I ask, since the beginning of time
Who has sunken into a situation as wretched as mine?
There shouldn’t be another.

(QQC 7.3763)

摘碎花魂，鄉夢杳，擁衾還起。淒絕處，燈昏香燼，重門深閉。握管
欲吟紅雨曲，啼痕先把青衫漬。卸金釵、閒自撥燈灰，書愁字。
今古事，醉而已。死歸也，生如寄。任旁人妒口，或憐或鄙。嘯傲久
成衰鳳侶，粗疏好與頑仙似。問從來、淪落孰如予，應無二。

This lyric includes a brief preface informing us of the circumstances under which it was written: “On a rainy night in the cold spring, I could not sleep. I got up to sit in front of the stove and asked for wine to be brought in. I drank happily till I finally became drunk and wrote this.” 春寒夜雨不能成寐，復起擁爐命酒，陶然竟醉，賦此。 In the first stanza the poet employs a familiar strategy to depict the depressing interior of the boudoir as a parallel with a troubled mind. The literal inscription of the character “sorrow” (*chou*) within the boudoir suggests that she may have sunk again into an emotional morass. However, as the second stanza goes on to show, the poet’s perspective (through drinking) is suddenly elevated beyond her sorrow, treating even life and death with a sense of detachment. Armed with this attitude, she becomes positive in dealing with what she perceives as a hostile world. She realizes that there may be attacks by those with “jealous mouths” (*du kou*), but she is ready to confront them with a confident and strong self-image. Anything that others might consider undesirable—her unfortunate life experience and eccentric manners—are transformed into labels of the “unique” self-image she claims. In other words, she affirms her eccentricity or otherness as the very constituent of her self-identity.

In studying the poetics of Emily Dickenson and Marianne Moore, Sabine Sielke has observed the significance of eccentricity in their self-representation: “Eccentricity served both poets as a refuge, a sacrosanct space, a kind of magic hat under which to hide,

write, and handle life as well as a strategy for self-presentation by self-dramatization.”⁴⁵

In the case of Gu Zhenli, we see how the claim of an eccentric personality provides an edge for her to “act out” her non-conformity to the conventions of femininity. The non-conformist approach, while not exclusive to Gu Zhenli, constructs a subject position outside or in excess of the socially and culturally recognized models of female identities because of its radical stance. By this way of de/construction Gu Zhenli finds an alternative framework for her self-representation and consequently transforms the boudoir poetics.⁴⁶

Representing the Feminine “Other”

While Gu Zhenli deconstructs conventional feminine language to construct an eccentric subjectivity in the series of lyrics portraying self, she consistently employs conventional feminine codes in representing and communicating with her female friends and relatives. The lyrics written to and about other women make up a significant portion of Gu Zhenli’s collection. From notes of thanks to letters expressing intimacy and admiration, one can see that these lyrics functioned as important tokens of friendship and love, revealing Gu Zhenli’s active socialization with other women. Scholars such as Dorothy Ko have illustrated the significant dimension of female companionship in the inner chambers as documented in Ming-Qing women’s poetry.⁴⁷ I do not intend to explore Gu Zhenli’s social interactions with other women, but will attempt to show her textual strategies in representing other women in relation to her self-representation and how this is situated in

⁴⁵ Sielke, *Fashioning the Female Subject* 34.

⁴⁶ My use of the word “deconstruction” here refers to Gu’s ways of sweepingly attacking conventions of femininity and normative womanhood in her lyrics.

⁴⁷ See especially her discussion of the poetic exchange between Lu Qingzi 陸卿子 (fl. 1590) and Xu Yuan 徐媛 (fl. 1590) in Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 266-74.

the larger scheme of her boudoir poetics. Importantly, I hope to explore what this representation of other women means in the construction of her subjectivity.

There are about thirty lyrics in the *Qixiangge ci* explicitly noted as written to or for other women. Striking is the degree to which Gu Zhenli relies on the repertoire of language and imagery established in the boudoir convention in this group of lyrics; this is especially true of the lyrics written for more “public” social occasions, such as the celebration of a friend’s birthday and the offering of thanks for favors and presents. In these occasional poems, Gu unabashedly adopts conventional feminine terms to represent the image of the addressee and express her admiration. The two lyrics to the tune *Huan xi sha* are such an example. In the preface to these lyrics Gu writes, “Younger Sister Zhang sent me a pair of shoes. I am composing this lyric to thank her, and also presenting it to Younger Sister Wang for her to smile at.” 張妹惠鞋賦謝, 兼呈王妹一哂. Having expressed her frustration over the impossibility of seeing Zhang in the first lyric, she goes on to write the following lines in the second: “The lotus petals you sent me are as tapered as the phoenix head / Traces of powder still bear marks of your slender fingers.” 寄來蓮瓣鳳頭尖, 粉痕猶印指纖纖.⁴⁸ In a lyric cited earlier, Gu Zhenli asserted her repulsion by the custom of foot binding, but now she appears to appreciate the feminine beauty with which they are associated. The lotus petals are an elegant, figurative term for shoes for bound feet.⁴⁹ Gu Zhenli not only uses this beautifying term but also goes on to describe the beautiful features of the shoes in more detail. Of course, what she appreciates is not merely the shoes themselves, but also the wonderful craft of her friend.

⁴⁸ *QQC* 7.3782.

⁴⁹ For a book-length study of the “lotus shoes,” see Ko, *Every Step A Lotus*.

She sees the shoes as made by personal “touches” and as an extension of the maker’s bodily charm, such as her delicate fingers.

The details of the “lotus shoes” are in fact situated in a larger world of delicate, feminine beauty constructed in this lyric. The first stanza is wholly devoted to presenting the images of the two women—the poet’s persona and the addressee—in the boudoir setting:

To protect myself from spring chill I’m afraid to roll up the curtains,

Poetry papers and embroidery sheets—I haven’t touched.

The jade beauty, are you also wearied with thinking of somebody?⁵⁰

(*QQC* 7.3782)

養護春寒怕捲簾，吟箋繡帖不曾拈。玉人可也思慊慊。

The poet begins by depicting a woman dwelling in the enclosed space of the boudoir who is in delicate health and listless, suggesting a condition of lovesickness. Only the question posed at the end points to another woman who is perceived to be in the same mood. This is a woman to woman talk, suggesting that they are longing for each other. The “lotus shoes” are presented and appreciated as a token of their loving relationship.

The way in which Gu Zhenli depicts this image in the boudoir setting contradicts her critical attitude and voice against gender conventions projected in the lyrics examined in the above section. We do not know when this lyric valorizing the “lotus shoes” was written, but this positive use of the cultural and literary codes of femininity prevalent in her time is commonly found in her lyrics addressed to other women, some of which were

⁵⁰ The first two lines of this stanza could also be read as description of the “jade beauty,” the addressee as imagined by the poet. In my translation, I understand the poet as the subject because she is more likely the one who has not touched “poetry papers and embroidery sheets” as the addressee just made shoes for her.

obviously written in her later years. Gu's consistent employment of feminine language in these occasional poems seems to function as a conventional means of social intercourse with other women, that is, it functions as a communal language. As she notes, her lyric sent to Zhang was also presented to another female friend, Wang, for her amusement. This note suggests that Gu's adoption of the feminine speaking position and conventional expressions were meant as a performance, undermining the seriousness of her expressed feelings. Thus Gu's ambivalent attitude towards conventional femininity should be considered within the context of the female homo-social community.

In her essay "Voicing the Feminine," Robertson points out that in addressing other women, the speaking voice adopted by late Ming and Qing women poets is highly ambiguous. The voice of the speaking subject is often an admixture of various elements derived from both "the literati-feminine and the literati-masculine voices from both friendship poetry and love poetry."⁵¹ In particular, the employment of the literati-lover's voice by a woman to express her admiration for another woman is intriguing. On the one hand, Robertson suggests, it can be 'read in' as a woman's appropriation of the literati tradition to express female friendship; on the other hand, in some cases, such as that of Wu Zao, speaking to other women in the voice of a lover can be 'read out' as expressing a sexual, love relationship.⁵² These two tendencies can both be found in Gu's writing. While the poem cited above exemplifies the former, the latter is particularly shown in lyrics sent to one individual woman, whom she refers to as Xianyuege 纖月閣 (The Pavilion of the Slim Moon), the studio name of this woman.

⁵¹ Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine" 97.

⁵² Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine" 97-98.

Although contemporary critics such as Chen Weisong referred to another woman poet, Wang Lang 王朗 (zi 仲英),⁵³ as Gu's most active partner of poetic exchange, judging from Gu's lyrics there appears to be an especially intimate bond between Gu and the less well known Xianyuege. The *Zhengshi ji* includes a brief entry for Xue Xianyue 薛纖月, identifying her as a native of Wuxi, Jiangsu, and includes one poem by her titled "Poem Sent to Madame Hou."⁵⁴ Gu Zhenli was also from Wuxi and her husband's surname was Hou. She also has one lyric addressed to Madame Xue. This Xue Xianyue recorded in the *Zhengshi ji* is evidently Xianyuege, and her anthologized poem supports her association with Gu Zhenli. In the *Qixiangge ci*, there are six lyrics indicated as written to Xianyuege. In these lyrics Gu presents a special relationship with Xianyuege on a complex continuum of friendship, love, and desire.

To illustrate Gu's textual strategy and position in representing Xianyuege's image and their relationship, I would like to focus on the following piece to the tune *Shui diao ge tou* 水調歌頭, subtitled "Sent to Xianyuege" 寄纖月閣. This long lyric unfolds a complex emotional journey. It begins by recollecting a moment of tender love and care in the past, goes on to reflect on the current frustrating situation of separation, and concludes by considering the uncertain future of their relationship. Let's begin with the first stanza:

On the tenth day of the third month,
I still recall that moment last year.
Heavy fragrance filling the painted pavilion, the rain was slight,
Among the flowers, I came to know your ice-pure charm.

⁵³ She is presumably the Younger Sister Wang mentioned earlier.

⁵⁴ *ZSXJ* 4.10a-b.

One-of-a-kind tender feelings and a chivalrous spirit,
You indeed understand the ups and downs I feel within.
Smiling at the hopes of our pure hearts
Bring relief to years of regrets.

But then you would be startled by the gray hair on my temples.

三月初十日，猶憶去年時。濃香畫閣微雨，花裏識冰姿。一種柔情俠
骨，真解箇中冷暖。一笑素心期，消釋頻年恨，還驚兩鬢絲。

One of the primary situations dealt with in Gu's lyrics to Xianyuege is separation. Remembrance of and longing for her thus become the major means for Gu to hold her close. Beginning with a specific date that is meaningful only to the writing subject and addressee, the lyric and the gate of memory are immediately opened onto a private matter. This way of opening is reminiscent of that of Wei Zhuang's famous lyric to the tune *Nü guan zi*:

The seventeenth day of the fourth month,
It was exactly a year ago today
When I parted from you:
to restrain tears, I pretended to lower my face
and half-frowned in shyness.⁵⁵

(HJJ 3.47)

四月十七，正是去年今日。別君時。忍淚佯低面，低頭半斂眉。

In his lyric, Wei Zhuang speaks in the voice of a woman who recalls the moment of saying goodbye to her male lover and expresses her never-ending thought of him (in the

⁵⁵ Trans. by Robin D. S. Yates with modification of the first line for the first line of the original text I cite differs from that used by Yates. See Yates, *Washing Silk* 242.

second stanza). Borrowing this personalized way of opening the lyric, Gu Zhenli recalls a moment belonging to her and Xianyuege, their intimate contact in both physical and spiritual terms. As the line “Among the flowers I *came to know* [*shi*] your ice-pure charm” suggests, this appears to be a crucial moment in the development of their relationship. Through employing rich, sensual details to depict the setting of their contact, Gu first pays attention to the feminine and delicate charms of the addressee. The term “ice-pure charm” characterizes not only physical beauty but also a noble manner. In the succeeding lines, Xianyuege is further represented as a caring and understanding soul mate. She is not only full of tender affection (*rouqing*), but also “chivalrous” (*xia*) in spirit, a spirit which matches Gu Zhenli’s self-proclaimed personality. Only the poet does not anticipate a reunion soon: when the two understanding hearts encounter each other again, they may also find themselves getting old.⁵⁶

As the second stanza goes on to show, this treasured relationship is also burdened with difficulties:

Many obstructions,

Difficult to meet,

Easy to separate.

⁵⁶ Due to the lack of pronoun and indication of tense, the last two lines of this stanza are ambiguous. The activities depicted in these lines can also be understood occurring in the past: “With a smile to each other, our hearts encountered / Bringing relief to years of regret / But I /we (or you) were also startled by the gray hair on our (or my) temples.” In this way, these lines express their feelings when they met each other rather than anticipating a reunion, and “years of regrets” may refer to Gu’s or their previous unhappy life(lives). This means Gu and Xianyuege became close friends in their later years. The word *qu nian* in the first line, normally understood as “last year” as used in Wei Zhuang’s line, is also problematic when linked with the long passage of time suggested in the later lines. If we think Gu desires a reunion any time soon to relieve her regrets about separation for years, *qu nian* should be translated into “the year of departing” as allowed by the ambiguity of classical Chinese language to fit in the long time frame. But we can still accommodate the meaning of “last year,” if we understand that the poet expresses her wish to get together again while she is realizing that it is difficult to do so in the near future as I suggest. The difficulty to meet expressed in the second stanza supports this reading. The above readings are all possible. These differences caused by linguistic ambiguity, however, do not undermine the complicated nature of the relationship between Gu Zhenli and Xianyuege as represented in the lyric.

What's more I'm sick with sorrows,
Your dressing table so close at hand, yet I cannot follow you.
Now that our destiny has diminished to this,
I don't know how it will be in the future.
Meetings and partings are always unpredictable,
I can't speak all on this small stationary,
But my spirit rushes to you along with the evening clouds.

(*QQC* 7.3773)

多間阻，難相會，易相離。況兼愁病，咫尺妝臺未可隨。今已緣慳若
是，向後不知何似。聚散總難期，賤短言不盡，神與暮雲馳。

Gu's elaboration on the difficult situation confirms that there is indeed a strong relationship between the two women. Although the physical distance seems not to be a problem they need to overcome, there are other frustrations. "Many obstructions" suggest that in addition to explicit problems such as poor health, there might have been human efforts to prevent them from getting together. If this is true, their contact may not have been deemed acceptable by their families or society. "Difficult to meet / Easy to separate," derived from Li Shangyin's line, "It is difficult to meet, but it is also difficult to part" 相見時難別亦難, may convey this meaning as well.⁵⁷ As Li's original love poems "Untitled" (*Wu ti* 無題) elicit the reader's imagination of forbidden passion, the situation Gu depicts in her lyric can possibly be read in a similar sense. "Now that our destiny has diminished to this / I don't know how it will be in the future." In saying this, the poet is talking seriously about a real yet uncertain relationship. As she writes

⁵⁷ "*Wu ti*" 無題 (untitled), *QTS* 539.6168.

elsewhere, “Even if time has taken the affair away / It would be after all given to confusion” 便時移事去，總付茫然。What is the affair? Why is she confused about it? Like Li Shangyin’s mysterious love poems, Gu’s lyrics to Xianyuege also pose many unanswered questions. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that Gu merely draws on clichés for self-dramatization. Whether or not the relationship between Gu and Xianyuege can be considered homoerotic, Gu’s appropriation of the poetics of love and desire developed in the literati tradition creates a complicated female-female relationship in the song lyric.⁵⁸

It is noteworthy that in these lyrics to Xianyuege, while representing the latter as an object of appreciation, Gu Zhenli simultaneously projects her own subjectivity. She speaks as a subject who not only enjoys the companionship of Xianyuege but also appreciates her feminine charm and beauty. As the following lyric to the tune *Fenghuangtai shang yi chuixiao*, subtitled “Sent to Xianyuege” 寄纖月閣 shows, Gu contrasts her self-image with that of Xianyuege:

My body like wood and dirt,
My hair is frosty,
My feelings are not like those of the past.
Even if time has taken the affair away,

⁵⁸ In her recent study, *The Emerging Lesbian*, Tze-lan D. Sang traces the changes of terms in representing female same-sex relations in Chinese literature (mostly fiction) beginning from the late imperial period to the late twentieth century. As she points out, the critical conception of homosexuality was not introduced until the early twentieth century. Scholars such as Dorothy Ko tend not to view female romantic bonds as expressed in Ming-Qing women’s writing as “protolesbians.” (Sang 40) In briefly revisiting Ming-Qing women’s expressions of female-female intimacy, she argues that their expressions are limited by “their understanding of the male-female hierarchy and the necessity not to cause a permanent breach of gender norms.” (63) For her discussion, see Sang 37-65. A woman who audibly challenged gender conventions in her self-representation, the case of Gu Zhenli may complicate Sang’s claim. Gu’s poetic exchange with Xianyuege from the perspective of lesbianism deserves further study beyond the scope of this chapter.

It would be after all given to confusion.
What I recall most is Daoyun in the orchid boudoir
Thinking of me and loving me with such special attention.
Entrusted to fish and wild geese,⁵⁹
Stamped in pink with a delicate seal,
Letters written on jasper paper are frequently sent.

Beautiful as the moon,
I know far away at this moment,
You're holding up a flower beside the bamboo curtain,
But you fall asleep while keeping the flower company.
In tea bowls made of mottled bamboo,
Dewdrops and pearls are ground.
You must be tired from reading the *Zhuangzi*,
Beside the screen,
You softly pluck icy strings.
Fine smoke rises from the incense burner,
A thread of which lightly curls up
Reaching your pearl hairpin.

(*QQC* 7.3773)

土木形骸，風鬟霜鬢，心情不似當年。便時移事去，總付茫然。最憶
蘭閨道韞，承相念、著意相憐。鱗鴻便，纖纖粉印，頻寄瑤牋。

⁵⁹ In Chinese poetic convention these two kinds of animals play the role of messenger.

嬋娟，遙知此際，正簾下拈花，卻伴花暝。對湘紋茗碗，露滴珠研。

應是南華倦讀，屏山側、低按冰弦。爐煙細，一絲輕裊，吹上珠鉤。

In the second stanza, Gu Zhenli projects a long and close gaze upon Xianyuege. She describes in her imagination how the addressee is dwelling in her boudoir. Although Gu represents herself as an elderly woman, the image of Xianyuege in her mind has not changed over time. She does not spend much ink directly describing Xianyuege's appearance, but elaborates on her surroundings and the activities in which she is engaged, presenting a refined, exquisite, and elegant world in which Xianyuege fits perfectly. Although "the beauty" carries out a range of activities such as meditation (as suggested by the Buddhist term *nian hua*), making tea, reading, and playing the zither, she is portrayed as quiet, serene, and at ease. What Gu presents is an ideal image of *guixiu*—"Daoyun in the orchid boudoir"—an image fashioned in Ming-Qing women's literary culture. Through her depiction of sensual details, however, Gu Zhenli turns the image of Xianyuege into an object of her gaze. Moreover, the detail ending this stanza, a thread of incense smoke curling up to the hair of "the beauty," moves the vector of the gaze to close contact with the woman she is thinking of and admires.

In contrast to the idealized representation of Xianyuege, Gu portrays herself as a woman who has lost her youthful look and character, an image which is by no means desirable in light of conventional standards of feminine aesthetics. However, while this image of an elderly woman is represented in her self-assertive poems as having transcended worldly concerns, here she expresses a sense of feeling lost and dazed regarding their relationship. She continues to long for their love. Although she may have lost herself in the feelings, but she has not lost the subjectivity she established for herself

in that relationship. She acts as a speaking subject of her passion. Whether or not the ambiguous expression “*zhuoyi xianglian*” (love with special attention) suggests something more than friendship, in writing of her relationship with Xianyuege Gu Zhenli borrows the idioms from the discourse of heterosexual love and desire and represents herself as the subject of these emotions.

Gu Zhenli’s reliance on conventional feminine discourse in her writings to other women contradicts the textual position and self-identification adopted in her transgressive lyrics. On the one hand, her shifting position points to the instability of subjectivity constructed in the text. On the other hand, this should also be understood in the framework of Ming-Qing women’s communal ethos. First, as a member of this community, Gu Zhenli plays with the feminine language as a means of communication with other women. Second, in the particular context of her relationship with Xianyuege, she speaks of her feelings of love and desire without threatening the integrity of her subjectivity as a non-conformist. She represents Xianyuege as the feminine “other” from an objective distance.

Conclusion: A Disrupted Poetics of the Boudoir

This concluding section aims to provide an overall evaluation of Gu Zhenli’s transformative poetics and subjectivity construction centered in the discursive space of the boudoir. The different, even contradictory, expressive modes found in the corpus of Gu Zhenli’s lyrics constitute both the richness and heterogeneity of her poetics. Her inscriptions on the boudoir produced an effect of poetic “disruption.” I see this effect on two levels. First, read in the continuum of Gu’s different modes of depicting the boudoir, her subversive assertions against the gender conventions associated with the boudoir

represent a breakthrough in traditional boudoir poetics. As illustrated earlier, she deconstructs the feminine space of the boudoir and establishes an eccentric female subjectivity through appropriating masculine-style language and imagery. Second, the effect of disruption also takes place on a more concrete level. The utterances of the speaking subject within one text are shot through with stylistic incongruities: feminine discourse is often interrupted by masculine rhetoric, and the imagistic, evocative language interrupted by discursive statements or assertions in a direct, colloquial style. I view these stylistically incongruent insertions as traces of negotiation, marks of her subjective intervention into the poetic tradition.

Following Julia Kristeva's theory of poetic language and subjectivity formation, the Western feminist critic Sabine Sielke relates poetic disruption to the construction of female subjectivity in her study of Dickinson and Rich's writing, reading ruptures of their texts as "traces of the processes of subject constitution and as subversions of the symbolic order."⁶⁰ Sielke argues, "Subjectivity—be it historical or fictional—involves selecting from a wide range of institutional frames, discourses, grammars, tones of voice, and imagery that allow for locally transgressive moves and may envision alternative positions, or "third event[s]."⁶¹ Her point of view echoes Rita Felski's in maintaining the flexibility of language and the symbolic order that allows for individual agency, but her analysis of the significance of Dickinson, Moore, and Rich's unorthodox poetic practice in relation to their literary agency is specifically illuminative in understanding Gu Zhenli's transformative poetics. As she points out, "[T]he unorthodoxy of their texts

⁶⁰ Sielke, *Fashioning the Female Subject* 22.

⁶¹ Sielke, *Fashioning the Female Subject* 220.

underlines that subject and subjectivity are never completely modeled according to prearranged fashions.”³

Although coming from a different cultural context, Gu Zhenli’s lyrics are a salient illustration of an individual woman’s agency in challenging the limits of poetic language and the stereotypes of female subjects. The heterogeneous poetics of Gu’s lyrics can ultimately be read as a negotiation with the gendered poetics particular to the *ci* genre. The impulse underlying her textual transformation has much to do with her consciousness of gender. She struggled not only between her socio-cultural categorization as a woman and her subversive subjectivity, but also between the influence of feminine poetic conventions, which supposedly befit her gender status, and the impulse to search for alternative modes of self-expression. As Sielke states, “If woman escapes from her subjection, it is for her ability to shift position in discourse.”⁴ In her lyrics, Gu Zhenli demonstrates a complicated positioning vis-a-vis the boudoir, which involves oppositional strategies of both identification and dis-identification from conventions of femininity. While her shifting textual positions can be viewed as a destabilization of the subject position in literary texts, they can also be seen as symbolic moves deliberately chosen by Gu Zhenli as a historical agent.

³ Sielke, *Fashioning the Female Subject* 220.

⁴ Sielke, *Fashioning the Female Subject* 108.

Conclusion

By focusing on several significant historical moments and representative cases, my dissertation has examined how Ming-Qing women poets represented the *gui*/boudoir in relation to the Chinese literary tradition, their socio-historical circumstances, and subject constitution. In other words, I have attempted to establish a poetics of Ming-Qing women's poetry with regard to their normative gender location, a poetics which not only helps us understand the recurrent themes, motifs, and imagery pertaining to Ming-Qing women's texts, but also sheds light on the levels of mediation between women's writing and their social and cultural milieu. To conclude, I argue that while their writings are closely connected to the tradition of feminine poetics associated with the boudoir, they simultaneously re-conceived the boudoir as a distinctive textual territory encoded with their subjective perspectives and experiences.

Viewing Ming-Qing women's writing as a practice of multiple signification, I have assumed that there are social, cultural, and literary processes underlying their transformative poetics of the boudoir. Two interconnected critical issues are at stake in this study: the effect of language on gender and the effect of gender on language. As shown in Chapter 1, the boudoir as an inherited poetic space had been carried forward by poets of both genders for centuries. The boudoir in its conventional sense, a space of the women's chambers that evokes feminine beauty and sentiments, assumed a significant place in both *shi* and *ci* poetry. This long-standing literary tradition established a culturally recognized mode of women's (or womanly) experience. The performance of

conventional textual positions and artistic effects associated with the boudoir is a commonplace in women's poetry. One can find that Ming-Qing women poets demonstrate an imaginative continuum in employing this mode of boudoir poetry. Some of these poems appear to have no marked references to the poet's actual life and experience, but seem to be merely inspired by the literary past. These poems are significant in revealing a predetermined textual construction of feminine subjectivity and its influence on women's entry into the literary tradition.

However, women also lived outside of the poetic convention. When they became writing subjects, they projected the subjective perspectives and experiences that were determined in part by the social and historical conditions under which they lived. They not only wrote the tradition anew, but also bestowed the cultural signifier of the boudoir with much broader and richer meanings emerging from women's social and cultural lives. They rendered the *gui* into a discursive space whose scope was far beyond the sensual and emotive space as constructed in poetic convention. Ming-Qing women's own depictions of the boudoir not only construct a textual territory distinct from poetic convention, they are also diverse within themselves: different women writers or the same writer under different circumstances perceive and represent this space differently. Their making sense of boudoir life in their writings was not only influenced by their socially gendered consciousness and commonly shared cultural ideals, but also based on their nuanced experiences and self-perceptions. Some women did choose not to sacrifice the freedom of expressing their personal interest and life style for the sake of female propriety. The boudoir as inscribed in women's texts is far more complex than as a cultural ideal in dominant discourses. Sometimes it appears to be a peaceful environment

in which women enjoy their everyday life; sometimes a prison within which women find themselves confined; sometimes a lost paradise which women persistently pursue in memories and dreams. The boudoir is a space full of ambivalent inscriptions, a site of struggle over the meaning of life as women, of female subjectivity. In searching for self-meaning and exploring the affects evoked in this symbolic space, Ming-Qing women's writing of the boudoir reveals a complex process of self-understanding. The nuances of women's perspectives on and perceptions of gendered boundaries result in rich poetic expression and strategy.

In this study, I have viewed women writers as revisionists. The dynamic relationship between the literary tradition and the creativity of an individual writer is by no means exclusive to women, but it is germane to take the gender status of the authors into account in this study. While we should not essentialize the relationship between female gender and certain literary forms, we should acknowledge the concurrent development of Ming-Qing women's literary culture and the vibrant site of their representations of boudoir life. I have not discussed the boudoir poetry by Ming-Qing male poets at length in this dissertation, but my research shows that men tended to perpetuate stereotyped images of women and the boudoir established in the poetic tradition. This does not imply that only women can "truly" represent themselves. Rather, the difference emerged from the different subject positions and experiences of men and women in relation to the *gui*.

Women authors' subjective experiences of the *gui* influenced them as both social and writing subjects. Boudoir poetry is a poetic tradition focusing on the image and emotions of women, yet it has a problematic relation to the historical subject positions

and experiences of Ming-Qing women. It was imperative for them to reconstruct the poetic genre to accord with their experience and vision. Specifically speaking, there are discrepancies between the abandoned woman persona and the *guiren* or *guixiu* identity which orthodox gender ideology calls on women to claim. As Catherine Belsey points out, “the displacement of subjectivity across a range of discourses implies a range of positions from which the subject grasps itself and its relations with the real, and these positions may be incompatible or contradictory.”¹ Thus, the revisionary impulse of the women authors examined in this study came from their foremost interest in rewriting the stereotypical images and feminine codes which were unable to adequately represent them in light of normative gender ideology and alternative self-conceptions. As poems examined in Chapter 2 illustrate, women’s attempt to seek a coherent subject-position within contradictory discourses, in order to conform to normative ideological and aesthetic standards, was a major force underlying their transformation of conventional boudoir aesthetics and poetics.

The transformative power of writing women demonstrated in the boudoir poetics was also due to the unprecedented development of women’s literary culture in the Ming-Qing period. This culture not only encouraged more and more women to participate in literary practice, but also cultivated new feminine ideals—such as the *guixiu* image—and lifestyles with which women could align. Although there were different emphases concerning the qualities of a *guixiu*, her literary talent was maintained as an essential component. The image of a devoted woman poet, for example, established an unprecedented persona in the boudoir setting. Women’s participation in cultural activities

¹ Belsey, “Constructing the Subject” 50.

enriched their poetic imagination in depicting their boudoir life and fashioned new female subjects.

Literate women's culture, however, was not merely limited to the women's sphere. It is evident that many women read extensively rather than merely focusing on literatures centered on the female gender. Their exposure to broader and richer cultural traditions and trends took their visions beyond the inner chambers. Many were inspired to embrace ideals and values which transcend gendered roles and concerns. Importantly, they projected this broader vision in their depiction of the boudoir life. Although the boudoir is still explicitly or implicitly depicted in their poetry, the sentiments associated with it fundamentally change the tone of the boudoir as a poetic space. In particular, as social upheavals increasingly pushed women to the forefront of historical change, from the "small window" of their boudoir some women poets cast a gaze outward, offering their perspectives on history and society. Their inscription of political sentiments such as loyalism into the boudoir space is remarkable.

As the *gui*/boudoir was a defining boundary of women's place in society, some women writers consciously invoked this conception of the *gui* to reflect on their gender roles. They used it as the symbol of their gender status, but questioned and resisted their subjection as women. In reacting to the social disorder in her time as a woman who had no way to play an active role, Chen Yunlian's lines "Women located in the inner chambers / Their ambitions cannot be fulfilled" (quoted in Chapter 3) are representative.² The *gui*, in her understanding, places restrictions on women while being a normative gender location for them. Echoing Chen yet taking a radical stance, Gu Zhenli went further to schematically subvert gender conventions associated with the *gui*. While the

² See Chapter 3, 202.

self-expression in her lyrics reveals subjectivity in process, as the author she demonstrates an individual's agency in moving across different discourses of subject-positions by strategies of de/constructing. Her self-displacement from the conventional feminine subject constitution and her self-representation as an eccentric is a significant transformation of gendered identities associated with the boudoir space.

Ironically, it is because the thematics and stylistics of their writing go beyond the inner chambers that women such as Gu Zhenli won the high compliments of their contemporary male critics. Like the separate sphere ideology which assigned women to the *gui*, many critics in the Ming and Qing presumed that women's writing was predetermined by their gender status. Thus, they often showed their amazement when encountering cases in which some women were able to transcend conventions of femininity and perform poetics supposedly belonging to the men's domain. For example, in commenting on a poem by Zhou Qiong (quoted in Chapter 4),³ which presents a self-image challenging the conventional role of women, the anthologist Deng Hanyi notes: "This is a poem by a lady from the inner chambers, but it bears the air of tragedy and grandeur. The author is indeed not an ordinary woman" 閨媛詩卻有一種悲歌慷慨之氣，固非尋常女流。⁴ Contrasting the poetic style and gender of the poet, Deng's comment represents the recognition of women's transcendence of gender conventions associated with the *gui*/boudoir, not only in terms of poetics but also in terms of cultural assumptions about women's creativity.

In reconstructing their image and the space of the boudoir, Ming-Qing women poets demonstrate a creative mobilization of available discourses to accord with their

³ For my discussion of this poem, see Chapter 4, 261-62.

⁴ Deng Hanyi, *Shiguan*, *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* vol. 39: 449.

various expressive needs. Through adjusting and refashioning “the scripted voices and conventional scenarios of tradition,” they discursively transformed the traditional feminine space associated with the boudoir.⁵ Their literary agency manifests itself in its active interactions between the literary past and present, textual and historical experiences, ideology and literature, and negotiations with binary gendered categorizations. As Sabine Sielke puts it, “As we acknowledge subjectivity as a partly predetermined, partly self-determined interrogation of discourses, history turns out a dialogue [sic] and process mediating between past and present (texts).”⁶ By taking into account social and cultural determinants in Ming-Qing women’s discursive practice as well as their individual literary agency, my study shows that as both recipients and agents of their broader culture, women were able to adopt in their writing variable positions and strategies that internalized or criticized prevalent ideas and conceptions of their gender.

My dissertation sets out to put Ming-Qing women’s writing at the center of analysis, bringing forth the significance of their participation in and contribution to literary practice as a socially and culturally determined group. I have attempted to illustrate how their subjective experiences with the *gui* influenced the ways in which they transformed the boudoir topos. The notion of women’s experience has been controversial in Western feminist criticism. As it is also critical in my study, I would like to revisit some representative debates on this issue and wish to make the case of Ming-Qing women’s literary practice to address it. The following tendencies in relation to the notion of women’s experience are problematized: the insistence on a universal and essential experience of women, and the purview of texts written by women and belief in women’s

⁵ Robertson, “Changing the Subject” 217.

⁶ Sielke, *Fashioning the Female Subject* 219.

writing as records of their lived experience. Elaine Showalter's critical stance, as reflected in her book *A Literature of Their Own*, has been criticized as 'a biologically based essentialism' and 'an inadequate biographically based approach.' The French feminist theorist Toril Moi is probably one of the most critical, arguing that Showalter's 'gynocritics' implies a traditional humanist position, assuming the text to be a 'transparent medium' through which human experience can be seized. It bears the weakness of all experientially based position: inadequate attention to the literariness of women's works, inability to appreciate the modernist and avant-garde texts; oversight of the mediated nature of women's self-expression.⁷ All these criticisms rightly point to the limitations of Showalter's reflectionist model. However, in Janet Todd's words, they are "a determined misreading of the method of historical enquiry and a refusal to acknowledge the context in which [Showalter's] criticism was produced."⁸

To identify common experiences of a certain group of women that are constitutive of the meanings of the female gender is not to pointlessly "pursue an ideal of quintessential female experience."⁹ As Felski maintains, "[G]ender constitutes a difference which manifests itself in a diversity of ideological and cultural practices and which is institutionalized in fundamental ways in the distribution of political and social power within society."¹⁰ The notion of women's experience, I would argue, is a valid basis for feminist literary analysis to the extent that it is taken as a socio-cultural category evolving with its historically specific context. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter narrows her study to British women writers who published novels after 1840, for this

⁷ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 75-80.

⁸ Todd, *Feminist literary History* 1.

⁹ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 45.

¹⁰ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 45.

group of women has 'a special history susceptible to analysis.'¹¹ While acknowledging important differences between women writers such as class and ethnicity, she contends, "Women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space."¹² Drawing on the studies of anthropologists, sociologists, and social historians, she claims that women in a historically specific context indeed share some common political, social, and cultural experiences. In Chapter 1 of *A Literature of Their Own*, "The Female Tradition," she takes the cases of post-industrial England and America to support her claim that secretive and ritualized bodily experiences such as puberty and menstruation, child-rearing, house duty and so on constituted essential components of a female subculture.¹³

In describing her critical model, Showalter suggests, "The first task of gynocentric criticism must be to plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity and to describe the forces that intersect an individual woman writer's cultural field."¹⁴ The *gui* constructed in Late Imperial Chinese society, for me, provides such a locus for us to systematically study Ming-Qing women's socially and culturally gendered experiences. Ming-Qing women's literary culture was elaborated and theoretically established in Dorothy Ko's book, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*. She depicts a dynamic culture of gentrywomen in seventeenth-century Jiangnan built on their literary activities as readers, writers, and editors. Her use of *women's culture* is indebted to Gerda Lerner's definition of the term, focusing on "the familial and friendship networks of women, their effective

¹¹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 50

¹² Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 260.

¹³ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 14-15.

¹⁴ Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 264.

ties, their rituals.”¹⁵ Thus, she often uses it interchangeably with ‘communities of women’ in her book. The literary culture that she is describing is structured by three kinds of women’s communities: the domestic (family-based), the social (neighbors and friends), and the public (poetry clubs). In meticulously distinguishing between these communities, Ko attempts to show the expanding women’s sphere in the fluid society of the day. Based on kinship and family connections, gentrywomen indeed cultivated an important cultural arena for themselves in the enlarged space of the inner chambers allowed by the gender system of Late Imperial Chinese society. Through these commonly shared experiences of women, one can see a strong sense of female solidarity, the implied unity of culture. For me, these are rich sources out of which women’s distinct literary identities and forms of expression are generated.

Although I do not frame my study with such a cultural model, it is in many ways informed by social and historical studies of the female culture such as Ko’s. My dissertation moves from the social and historical description of female culture to the textual analysis of women’s representations of the *gui*. Moreover, I go further to show how they connect this with their broader social and historical experiences. As my previous chapters have shown, the distinctiveness of the female territory of textual production and its connection to the so-called general culture and mainstream literary tradition can be well illustrated through the analysis of women writers’ depiction of the *gui*. As a theoretical anchor, it helps us to theorize a poetics of Ming-Qing women’s poetry which can account for their collective experience as well as individual differences in poetic expression.

¹⁵ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 14.

Above all, I see the remarkable transformation of the boudoir poetics as brought about by the emergence of this critical mass of women authors. Their reconstructions of images of women and the boudoir were meaningful to both themselves and their society, and were definitely not merely discourses or enunciations, evacuated of their role as productive historical subjects. The study of their literary practice through a modern lens not only enriches our understanding of China's literary past, but also helps us to reflect on our theoretical perspectives and approaches to literary studies in general.

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- HQYGSC* Yang Shulan 楊書蘭. *Hongquyinguan shichao* 紅蘂吟館詩鈔. 1878. Copy from the McGill-Harvard-Yenching Ming-Qing Women's Writings Database. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/index.htm>>
- HSZGKL* Huang Daozhou 黃道周 and Cai Yuqing 蔡玉卿. *Huangshizhaigong kangli weikangao* 黃石齋公伉儷未刊稿. Copy in the Cornell University Library.
- LYXGSG* Zuo Xijia 左錫嘉. *Lengyinxianguan shigao* 冷吟仙館詩稿. In *Zeng Taipu Zuo furen shigao heke* 曾太僕左夫人詩稿合刻. 1891. Copy from the McGill-Harvard-Yenching Ming-Qing Women's Writings Database. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/index.htm>>
- LQZJ* Li Qingzhao 李清照. *Li Qingzhao ji [jian zhu]* 李清照集 [箋注]. Ed. Xu Peijun 徐培均. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002.
- MSYGSC* He Huisheng 何慧生. *Meishenyinguan shicao* 梅神吟館詩草. 1878. Copy in the Shanghai Library.
- OYXQJ* Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修. *Ouyang Xiu quan ji* 歐陽修全集. Hong Kong: Guangzhi shuju, 1975.
- PQGYG* Wu Chai 吳茝. *Peiqiuge yigao* 佩秋閣遺稿. 1888. Copy from the McGill-

Harvard-Yenching Ming-Qing Women's Writings Database.

<<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/index.htm>>

- QMS* *Quan Ming shi* 全明詩. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990.
- QQC* *Quan Qing ci* 全清詞. *Shun Kang juan* 順康卷. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002.
- QSBC* Shen Deqian 沈德潛, comp. *Qing shi bie cai* 清詩別裁. Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1958.
- QSC* Tang Guizhang 唐珪章, comp. *Quan Song ci* 全宋詞. Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1977.
- QSS* *Quan Song shi* 全宋詩. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1991.
- QTS* *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985.
- TYMJ* Tao Qian 陶潛. *Tao Yuanming ji* 陶淵明集. Ed. Lu Qinli 逯欽立. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1979.
- XFGSC* Chen Yunlian 陳蘊蓮. *Xin角度 shicao* 信芳閣詩草. 1859. Copy from the McGill-Harvard-Yenching Ming-Qing Women's Writings Database. <<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/index.htm>>
- YFSJ* Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩, comp. *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003.
- YXGSC* Dong Baohong 董寶鴻. *Yinxiangge shichao* 飲香閣詩抄. 1851-61. Copy in the Shanghai Library.
- YTXY* Xu Ling 徐陵, comp. *Yutai xinyong [jian zhu]* 玉臺新詠 [箋注]. Ed. Mu Kehong 穆克宏. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985.

- ZSJ Yun Zhu 惲珠, comp. *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集. 1831.
Copy from the Harvard-Yenching Library.
- ZSXJ Yun Zhu 惲珠, comp. *Guochao guixiu zhengshi xuji* 國朝閨秀正始續集.
Ed. Miaolianbao 妙蓮保. 1836. Copy from the Harvard-Yenching Library.
- ZZYSY Xu Can 徐燦. *Zhuozhengyuan shi yu* 拙政園詩餘. *Xiaotanluanshi huike guixiu ci* 小檀欒室彙刻閨秀詞. Comp. Xu Naichang 徐乃昌. 1896.

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