Writing from a Side Room of Her Own: The Literary Vocation of Concubines in Ming-Qing China

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I begin with some general comments on concubinage in China as background to my paper, which examines the literary practice of specific women who occupied the socially marginal position of concubines. I want to explore what implications we can draw from the intersection between social subjugation and subject positioning or self-construction in textual practice. I will discuss in particular the poetry of one concubine in which a strong sense of identity and self-representation is inscribed. Through this example, I hope to illustrate the difference made visible by literacy to female agency and identity by exploring how such women might compensate for, write against, resist, or overturn the marginality associated with concubinage through their literary vocation. Given that their personhood was denied on the social level, their literary pursuits suggest a sense of self conceptualized on premises other than the social, which point to ideas of authority, subjectivity, and self-fulfillment produced in the act of writing.

The Room off to the Side

Concubinage was a deeply entrenched social institution in the history of China. It was one among several prevailing practices of unequal gender relations and female servitude institutionalized and naturalized by the Chinese patriarchal family and social system. Although in legal and ritual contexts, a man could only marry one wife—his legal and official wife, in practice, he could have one or more concubines in addition.[1] The ingrained acceptance of concubinage is demonstrated by its practice well into the twentieth century. In China, it took the marriage laws instituted by the People's Republic in 1950 to eradicate the lingering practice. In colonial Hong Kong, concubinage was not prohibited legally until as recently as 1971.[2]

The common term for a concubine is *qie* 妾. The earliest meaning of this word is female slave. That it was later employed as the word for "concubine" indicates the low social status of such women within normative social structures in which women were located, such as family and lineage. The term *qie* also came to be used by women as the humble form for the gendered first-personal pronoun "I" that women used to refer to themselves in elocutionary acts. This elocutionary form signifies the general subordinate social positioning of women in relation to men. Another term for a concubine is *ceshi* 側 室, which literally means "side chamber"—the room off to the side. This peculiar designation derives from and is implicated in the spatial construct of the Chinese house compound and its corresponding social, religious, and cultural configuration, and the gendering and hierarchizing of its space. Within this physical configuration, the concubine was housed in separate quarters at the side or the back of the compound. The term *ceshi* positions the woman who occupies its space primarily in relation to another woman, who occupies *the* room (*shi*), or more precisely, the principal or central main room (*zhengshi* 正 室) within the master's house.[3] This woman is the principal wife, and *zhengshi* is the term that refers to her—the mistress or lady of the house. The spatial location of the *ceshi* (side room) is precisely off-center or on the margins in the layout of the house compound, just as the role of the concubine is socially and ritually marginal within the family. A concubine is not presented to the ancestors nor does she participate in the ancestral cult upon coming into the family. Thus, gendered social hierarchy is integrated into conceptualization of space, forming an interlocking grid on symbolic, social, and material levels.

The wife, whose legal and ritual status was conferred through the performance of the proper marriage rites between two families, also brought in property in the form of dowry, and thus had economic resources. In contrast, concubines were often bought from poor families and brokers, ostensibly for reproductive purposes for the patriline, but often they were obtained for purposes ranging from providing domestic services to catering to male pleasure and enhancing class status. Concubines could be given or received as gifts between men. The husband could rename her at will, and she could be disposed of at will, even if she had produced children for the husband. In describing the general status and condition of concubines, the American anthropologist Rubie Watson emphasizes that a concubine "was cut off from the outside world and became enmeshed in the private domain of her consort and his household."[4] Her ties to her natal family were usually severed. Her isolation stands in contrast to the wife, who often maintained contact with her parents, siblings, and other kin.

From vernacular fiction and popular lore, two common stereotypical images of the concubine emerge. She is an unscrupulous, ruthless, and scheming character, who would use whatever means available to defeat the other women of the house, whom she sees as rivals contending for the attention and favor of the master. Or she is the mirror opposite, that of the victim, persecuted by the principal wife or other concubines. Both the late Ming vernacular novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (Golden Lotus) and the 1993 film *Raise the Red Lantern* (dir. Zhang Yimou 張藝謀) manipulate the dark side of the gender and power dynamics of this system of female hierarchy dominated by patriarchy in the representation of concubines. But Rubie Watson believes that the concubine as victim is perhaps closer to the experience of many women who were in that position.[5]

Without denying the subjugation and commodification of women in the practice of concubinage, I argue that an approach to the experience of some concubines from the perspective of women's literary agency can show us more subtle areas of negotiation and more complex, localized configurations of gender and power relations than are evident in historical and fictional representations. More significantly, with the rediscovery of the rich corpus of women's own texts from the Ming and Qing periods, we can pay attention to the voices of the concubines themselves and their self-perceptions. The standard catalogue of women's writings by Hu Wenkai includes literary works by more than seventy concubines.[6] Thus, we are in a position to listen to those who wrote from a side room, those who endeavored to articulate their identities and subjectivities from a position designated as marginal.

So, for some women who became concubines, actually their own side room could become an important space in spite of or even because of their marginality. These women could exploit the contradiction inherent in this social and physical space, that of being separate while in bondage and confinement, which produced a zone in which some concubines were able to create and maintain a degree of autonomy and productivity. It is within the double grid of what is intended to be mutually reinforcing center-periphery spatialization and the top-bottom social hierarchization that some concubines open up a space of agency through literacy.

In the best and worst of circumstances, the "side room" can take on quite different meanings and forms, both physically and metaphorically. Besides just a room off to the side or the rear, in wealthy households it could be a side courtyard or wing within the main complex (as exemplified in *Jin Ping Mei* and *Raise the Red Lantern*), a detached lodging in the residential family compound, or even a remote country lodge away from the main residence. Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618?-64), the celebrated late Ming courtesan, was installed by her husband the famous scholar Qian Qianyi

錢謙益 (1582-1664) in the Jiangyun Lou 絳雲樓, a new lodge he built for her where they could engage in literary projects together, undisturbed by mundane domestic interference or the jealousy of the wife.[7] The legendary ill-fated young concubine Feng Xiaoqing 馮小青, also from the late Ming, and one of her latter day incarnations Li Shuyi 李淑儀 (1817-?), were banished by jealous wives to physical and emotional isolation in family villas in the countryside.[8] The wife prevented the husband from visiting Xiaoqing. In their unhappiness these women poured their energies into writing. Most of Feng Xiaoqing's poems were supposedly burnt by the vindictive wife after she died, young and unfulfilled in love. But Li Shuyi accomplished two collections of poetry—*Shuyinglou mingshu baiyong* 疏影樓名姝百詠 and *Shuyinglou minghua baiyong* 疏影樓名花百詠—during her year of exile and had them published at the precocious age of sixteen.[9]

In another metamorphosis, for the concubines of scholar-officials, this side room could be mobile and temporary, such as a house-boat, an inn, or government residence. The concubine was often the one who accompanied the husband to serve him on official journeys and postings, while the wife remained "centered" at home to manage the family. Li Yin 李因 (1616-85), the concubine of Ge Zhengqi 葛徵奇 (d. 1645), was a famous painter and poet of the late Ming.[10] Li accompanied her husband on official assignments all over China for fifteen years until his death. She painted and wrote many poems during these journeys. The poem, titled "Writing a Poem with my Husband Luxun as our Boat Departs from Guo County," shows a life in movement, as the couple began another journey by boat:

Brushing our robes, how hurriedly we depart,
Hair almost half white from worry.
Passing guests are few on the edge of the world,
Our travelling kitchen is empty of firewood.
At Meditation Pass, the mountain moon is dim,
By Fish Gate, night lamps are flaming red.
Knowing that the pine and chrysanthemums are fine,
With our hoes and books, we can bear our poverty.

舟發郭縣同家祿勳賦

撫衣去去急，
白髮半愁中。
過客天涯少，
行廚橘柚空。

禪關山月黑，
魚柵夜鐙紅。
松菊聞無恙，
鋤書可耐窮。[11]

Li Yin alludes to the austerities of travel. Being on the move, they had little contact with friends (the "passing guests"), and the portable kitchen was not stocked up. Ultimately she identifies with the simple life of a cultivated recluse by alluding to the pine and chrysanthemum, the hoe and books, associated with the fifth-century poet recluse Tao Qian. Li Yin turns the boat into the site of a productive side room.

In the polygynous household, some concubines were interested in and found opportunities for learning and employing the technologies of (self-) inscription. Not surprisingly, some of the most accomplished concubine poets and painters were courtesans who already possessed the literary and artistic skills necessary for their profession. They were trained in these arts as children so they could entertain literati clients. Liu Rushi, Gu Mei 顧媚 (1619-64), and Dong Bai 董白 (1625-51) were some of the most celebrated examples of courtesans who sought the status of concubine, or, to use the spatial metaphor, the "side room" as a privileged space and refuge from the floating world. They were successful in escaping from the courtesan life and marrying into scholar-gentry families as concubines and continued or increased their artistic and poetic production. They often took on the role of co-editors and compilers alongside their husbands, working on critical editions and anthologies.[12]

However, the more remarkable examples are young girls who were sold into concubinage, such as Li Shuyi, mentioned earlier, who writes that she was first sold by her parents out of desperate poverty to be a maid servant, the lowest on the female hierarchy within the household.[13] Most families of social standing would not want to sell or marry their daughters as concubines. Young women sold or given away as concubines were generally from economically or socially degraded families or from lower social classes.

Shen Cai (b. 1732): A Concubine of Talent

As mentioned above, historians and anthropologists have often viewed the concubine as victim and Chinese novelists often represented them as predatory. In order to provide a sense of what concubines thought of themselves and to give them their own voice, I would like to present in some detail the writings of Shen Cai 沈彩 (b. 1732), who became a concubine at the age of twelve to the scholar and bibliophile Lu Xuan 陸烜. Lu Xuan (style name Meigu 梅谷) mentions in the preface he

wrote to her collected works, entitled *Chunyulou ji* 春雨樓集 (Collection of Spring Rain Pavilion),[14] that she came from a good family in Wuxing 吳興, Zhejiang, which had declined.[15] We know little of her girlhood life before the age of twelve, when she was married to Lu Xuan as his concubine. She made one self-reference to her childhood in a colophon she wrote to a handscroll of cloudy mountains by the Song painter and calligrapher Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107), which was in her husband's collection. After evaluating the marvelous qualities of Mi's brushwork, Shen Cai was inspired by the expanse of mists and clouds in the small painting to recall briefly a relatively free and seemingly mobile childhood traveling by boat in the scenic surroundings of her native region:

> I remember when I was a child I often went back and forth between Lake Fuyu (Floating Jade) and Lake Bilang (Emerald Wave). I saw the lush green of the trees in the mist, houses along the water, and temples on Mount Bian. The shapes and lines along Mount Long were like the curves of chignons and brows. They seem to disappear into the vast expanse of white mist. All of these have gone into the painting. Opening this scroll my former haunts seem like a dream. (*Chunyulou ji*, 13.4a-b)

From the age of twelve on, the space of her side chamber, the off-center boudoir of the concubine, within the Lu family residence in Pinghu, Zhejiang, constituted the basic boundary of her physical existence.[16]

The only extensive excursion Shen Cai recorded was to a nearby river Dongxi (East Stream), where her husband took her for an evening cruise in the new family pleasure boat when she was twenty-one. In this little travel essay, she recorded her husband's invitation with his little discourse on travel: "Would you like to travel? Let me tell you about traveling. One does not need to travel amidst famous mountains and great rivers. It is simply a matter of following one's inspiration. We can just take the boat along East Stream where we can recite poetry and view the scenery. Should we make the excursion?" The essay continued to record the sensations, sights, and sounds during the cruise, and ends with her own reflection on the meaning of travel:

> We made our return late into the night. I reflect on the fact that my feet walk over six square foot of ground; I have never traveled. Now my traveling stops here, but it has more than satisfied my simple inspiration. I think that if one could not get simple inspiration, though one might travel all over the world, one would

> not have begun to travel really. Thus I record this. ("Record of a Boat Excursion on Dongxi," *Chunyulou ji*, 10.7a-b)

This short essay, which records a unique experience outside the inner quarters of the home, also indicates inversely Shen Cai's physically confined mode of existence. It also inscribes her acceptance, even affirmation, of the spatial boundary of her life by agreeing with her husband's view of the significance of the spirit and not the physical extent of travel. In contrast, Lu Xuan's brief biography in the local gazetteer *Pinghu xianzhi* highlights his interest in traveling to natural sites, and records that he visited famous mountains such as Siming and Tiantai in Zhejiang and the Yangzi and Huai River area further north.[17] Thus the lesson he gave Shen Cai involves a familiar double standard when viewed against his own practices. If we read the gender difference underlying his words, we can see that though his statement is made from an apparently universal perspective, it is aimed at convincing his concubine that there is no need for her to travel outside the home to see the world or nature. Located within a gender regime that prescribes the inner sphere of the home as the ideal space for women, neither he nor Shen Cai saw the inherent contradiction between his words and his actions.

Let us consider further Shen Cai's social status, education and environment after she entered the Lu household, and how these play into her identity formation. Lu Xuan's preface notes that when Shen Cai married into his home that "she was pretty but proper and serious, and well endowed with intelligence," and that his wife began to teach her Tang poetry and Ban Zhao's (ca.49-ca.120) classic *Nüjie* 女誡 (Precepts for Women) (*Chunyulou ji*, preface 3a).[18] Lu's wife is Peng Zhenyin 彭貞隱, granddaughter of the early Qing scholar-bureaucrat, poet, and song lyric critic Peng Sunyu 彭孫遹 (1631-1700), and herself a poet.[19] Lu further comments on Shen Cai's good memory and the efforts she has put into book learning and practicing calligraphy. This description of Shen Cai's education under the tutelage of the principal wife is reminiscent of a mother educating a daughter. In this case, the wife and concubine developed an unusually nurturing and intimate relationship.

Lu Xuan's biography in the *Pinghu xianzhi* describes him as not only a keen traveler, which means he was away from home quite often, but also a bibliophile and a medical practitioner. In a note to a poem sent to him, Shen Cai mentions that he was invited to read books at the prestigious library Tianyige 天一閣 in Ningbo (*Chunyulou ji*, 4.3b). The gazetteer noted that after he failed in the district examination, he gave up pursuing an official career. Instead he sold part of his family property to acquire books and devoted himself to scholarship and

writing.[20] Thus, the material resources for studying and writing, the literati inclinations of Lu Xuan, the poetic ability and maternal attitude of Peng Zhenyin, and the shared literary and artistic interests in the household together constituted a supportive environment for Shen Cai's poetic and artistic development.

Shen Cai's own self-representation also gives emphasis to her education and her dedication to learning. In the poem sequence entitled "Narrating in Jest" written later in life, Shen Cai summarizes the stages of her education: from its beginning under the tutelage of the principal wife, to her subsequent success at learning, and finally to her role as teacher to their children. Shen would have received some training prior to her entering her new home, but in the first poems she downplays her achievements to emphasize her indebtedness to Peng Zhenyin.

I.
Charming and small at twelve, not knowing names,
Learning to make dividing lines, I couldn't quite write.
But then I paid respects to a good teacher—the principal wife,
Opening the classics I became a young female scholar.

II.
Ten *li* of spring breeze brightens the Brocade River,
A female *zhuangyuan*, the top candidate on the examination list.
Among examples of pupils in the paternal hall of instruction,
The Lord of the East should agree to my being a student.

III.
Dare you hope to go from dullness to high ranks?
In learning characters you must at least remember your names.
The rod is imposingly placed next to knife and ruler,
In giving the children lessons I've now become the female master.

戲述二首

十三嬌小不知名，
學弄烏絲寫未成。
卻拜良師是大婦。
橫經曾作女書生。

春風十里錦江明，
女狀元標第一名。

若論鯉庭桃李例，
東君應許作門生。

敢希愚魯到公卿，
識字須粗記姓名。
夏楚儼陳刀尺畔，
課兒今作女先生。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 7.6b)

The third poem is a rare example of reference to children in Shen Cai's writings. In contrast to the practice common among women poets whose collections often include poems addressed to or about their children, it is significant that there are so few references to children in Shen Cai's writings. There is only one other reference at the end of a colophon she inscribed on a piece of calligraphy by her husband, in which she notes that he wrote and kept the calligraphy in order to show it to the children (*Chunyulou ji*, 14.8a-b). The family certainly had children. In his preface, Lu makes a passing reference to having well behaved sons and daughters (*Chunyulou ji*, preface 3a).[21] It is not possible to tell whether Shen Cai had any children of her own. But as a concubine, any children borne to her would have been considered legally and socially the children of the principal wife.[22] The ambivalent social and emotional status of the concubine-mother might explain the absence of children in her writing. In any case, Shen Cai decidedly does not take a maternal angle in constructing her identity and subjectivity in writing. Her interest is in reproducing the sensuous woman and the assiduous calligrapher as self-representations.

Inscribing and Arranging: Modes of Self-Production

When we turn to the form and content of Shen Cai's collection, we find that it is substantial and richly varied. This is not surprising once we recognize and encounter *materially* her intense focus on and dedication to writing and calligraphy. The *Chunyulou ji* contains a total of 14 *juan* (or chapters) in the following order and categories: *juan* 1 rhyme prose (6 pieces), *juan* 2-7 *shi* poetry (253 pieces), *juan* 8-9 song lyrics (66 pieces), *juan* 10-11 prose (10 pieces), and *juan* 12-14 inscriptions and colophons (61 pieces). The collection was printed in 1782 when she was thirty-one and contains the fruits of fifteen or more years of active pursuit of writing poetry and prose and practicing calligraphy. The collection was obviously conceived as the culmination of her artistic and literary achievements, and the arrangement of its contents by genre, which highlights her varied accomplishments, corroborates this interpretation.

For the purpose of publication, Shen Cai meticulously copied the entire manuscript in her own hand over a period of several months in 1781, indicating the precise date at several points of completion within the collection. At the end of *juan* 1, she records: "On the twenty-first day of the fifth month, in the *xinchou* year of Qianlong (1781), written at the Arbor of Lotus Fragrance and Bamboo Color. The end of *juan* 1." (*Chunyulou ji*, 1.8b). Then at the end of *juan* 4 she writes: "After an ailment I got up on the Double Seventh. The water caltrops have already climbed up and the autumn begonias are filling the fish basket, their fragrances absolutely pure. Wearing a smooth damask unlined robe, I write in the East Pavilion of Qijin Studio." The precise moment of completion and Shen's sensual awareness of the sight and scents of her surroundings and her body (what she was wearing) are inscribed in the text. And finally, at the end of *juan* 7: "On the twenty-third, I finished compiling all the *shi* poems. In total there are six *juan* of poetry with two hundred and fifty-three poems, and fifteen appended."[23] Hu Wenkai noted in his entry on Shen Cai that the wood blocks for the edition were carved with the calligraphy of her hand-copied manuscript, which is a much more expensive process, but it also adds further aesthetic value to the literary collection.[24]

The Feminine/Female Subject in the Text

Focusing on her poetic texts, the site of subject construction, what did Shen Cai inscribe on these pages with her brush and ink? Did she imitate, construct, or re/invent models and styles? If we examine the poetry, both *shi* and *ci*, in the collection, the focus is on an unabashedly feminine self, based on the model of representation which Maureen Robertson in her study on women poets' textual positions calls the "literati-feminine."[25] This is a female persona constructed by the male gaze and desire, as represented in the sixth century anthology of love poems *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 (New Songs from a Jade Terrace) in which the female image is eroticized and objectified in a voyeuristic presentation.[26] Indeed, Shen Cai begins the *shi* poetry section with a poem explicitly entitled "Imitating the Jade Terrace Style":

Delicate and pretty, a maiden at fifteen,
Bright, bright, inside the deep chamber.
The moon reflects on her lightly penciled brows,
The wind blows on her moist fragrant mouth.
Red beans are from the tree of longing,
Its blossoms open in the long autumn days.
Concerned how she's thinned under the sash,
She dares not embroider mandarin ducks.

效玉臺體

盈盈十五女，
皎皎在洞房。
月映眉黛淺，
風吹口澤香。

紅豆相思樹，
花開秋日長。
自憐羅帶減，
不敢繡鴛鴦。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 2.1a)

The vocabulary, the mildly erotic imagery, the metaphor of love longing (red beans, emaciated waist under the sash, mandarin ducks) all derive from the "Jade Terrace" style, or what I refer to as the boudoir-erotic style. But is this imitation, self-objectification, or self-representation? As the first piece in the *shi* section in the roughly chronological arrangement, this piece is most probably juvenilia. Fifteen *sui*, or fourteen years old, is formally the beginning of maturity for girls, the age of the girl in the poem, when girls have their hair pinned up (*ji* 笄) in a ceremony marking the rite of passage; this ritual is often also performed just before the wedding or engagement.[27] In a colophon Shen Cai wrote on a piece of calligraphy entitled "Spring Rain" by the monk Zhiyong (fifth century), she records the occasion of her own rite of passage into womanhood as her coming of age ceremony enacted with the principal wife: "This was in the *bingshu* year of Qianlong (1766) when I first had my hair pinned up and paid my respects to madam. Madam gave me this calligraphy as a token of her friendship in return. I accordingly changed the name of my pavilion to 'Spring Rain.'" (*Chunyulou ji*, 14.7a) This record is a textual and gender displacement of the consummation of the marriage with Lu Xuan. She enacts the coming of age with the wife rather than the husband, but the poem marks a self-consciousness of being an erotic object.

The anthology *Yutai xinyong* was in the family possession. One of her song lyrics is subtitled "On a spring day, written on the back of *Yutai xinyong*" (*Chunyulou ji*, 8.7a-b). Perhaps on a certain level, her own life experiences find resonance with the literary representation of the enclosed, eroticized boudoir/garden space where temporality is embodied in the cyclical repetition of nature, an orderliness different from the vicissitudes of an individual's life connected to "outside" realities or historical changes. She uses the character *gui* 閨 "boudoir" often in poem titles and poem texts

in various combinations: *yougui* 幽閨 "secluded boudoir," *honggui* 紅閨 "red boudoir," *jingui* 金閨 "golden boudoir," *langui* 蘭閨 "orchid boudoir" etc., quite in keeping with the conventions of this style of poetry. Many titles in the *Chunyulou ji* also use simple seasonal markers, lending them a generic feel. But the texts of her poems manipulate a conventionalized language to express the specific, and in the process display great sensitivity to the subtle and minute changes and variations in the microscopic, intimate nature of her experience and perception. Take for example the following couplets:

The Onset of Winter Chill

...
Butterflies, startled by the sudden cold, find it hard to settle on the grass,
Flies, loving the light warmth, easily fall into the tea.
...

初寒

...
蝶驚乍冷難依草，
繩戀微溫易入茶。
...
(*Chunyulou ji*, 6.5a)

Autumn Evening in the Small Garden

...
As I sat a long time, the green moss got moistened by white dew,
When I walk the yellow leaves set off in relief my red shoes.
...
By mistake I brushed off the firefly on my hair—
It's just the moonlight through the woods glittering on the gold hairpin.

小園秋夕

...
坐久青苔滋白露，
行來黃葉襯紅鞋。
...
錯認拂鬢螢火落，
疏林明月耀金釵。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 5.7a-b)

The following poems also capture the minutiae of her daily life presented in a feminine mode:

Written at the Spur of the Moment

I've thrown away needle and thread to relax all day.
The trellis of red wisteria has hidden the floral latch.
Tired of listening to the babbling of village ditties,
I taught the little maid the lyrics to my new songs.

遣興

針線長拋盡日閒，
朱藤一桁掩花關。
村歌厭聽斑斑曲，
自把新詞教小鬟。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 2.2b)

Early Autumn Sitting at Night Reading

In the delicate cool I love to read the *Zhuangzi*,
At the low desk in my bed, reflections on the green gauze—
The moon has set past the pavilion—I realize I've sat long,
Even the jasmine flower on my hair has already bloomed!

新秋夜坐讀書

嫩涼初喜讀南華，
柴几框床映碧紗。
月過降樓知坐久，
鬢邊茉莉已開花。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 6.3b)

Writing Characters

On the cold paired-fish inkstone it soaks up the clear wave,
I lick on the fine brush, lightly moistened with ink.

But I was watched by the maid, giggling on the side—
Cherry lips suddenly dotted with purple grapes.

作字

雙魚洗冷汲清濤，
淡墨輕濡吮采毫。
卻被鴉鬟窺竊笑，
朱櫻忽點紫蒲萄。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 2.6b)

Each small object, each minute detail, each seemingly insignificant incident, each subjective observation or musing is encapsulated in a poem. It is easy to see the influence of the boudoir-erotic language and convention in the above poems, but Shen Cai subverts that very model in using it by constituting an active feminine subject at the center of these poems, turning them into the expressive feminine mode associated with folk song traditions such as the *Book of Songs*, the popular songs of Wu, and the song cycles of Ziye of the Six Dynasties. In the poem "Writing Characters," she turns herself into the object of the gaze (third line) only to create a comical vignette: the maid is the innocent voyeur of lips messed up from the practice of calligraphy.

Shen Cai is daring in trying out the erotic potential in her poetry. Her collection contains some of the most erotic verses written by a Chinese woman poet. There are two poems entitled "Recording Events on a Winter's Night," which are thinly veiled descriptions of a memorable night spent with her husband:

Outside the thin curtain lingering snow, we discussed poetry together,
Never believing there's separation in the human world.
In dream suddenly I chanted verses of heartbreak,
Under the plum blossom canopy this was known by spring.

On pillows designed with mandarin ducks, calls of "little darling,"
The song writer of love really does have passion.
We sing again the melody of Fish Playing in Spring Water,
Keeping the candle trimmed and lit by the perfumer till dawn.

冬夜紀事二絕

疏簾殘雪共論詩，
不信人間有別離。
夢裏忽吟斷腸句，
梅花帳底被春知。

鴛鴦枕上喚卿卿，
紅豆詞人信有情。
重唱魚遊春水曲，
薰籠剪燭到天明。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 3.8a)

Other poems focus more explicitly on the body, often titled with the word *xi* 戲 "playfully" to divert the referentiality of the erotic content and emphasize the literary play, such as the song lyric to the tune *Nanxiangzi* 南鄉子 subtitled "Playfully on Taking a Bath" 戲詠浴 (*Chunyulou ji*, 9.3a). In "Playful Poem on Springtime Hills," she may well be describing her own body through the eroticized representation of nature:

Beyond the tips of apricot trees two jade peaks,
Thin clouds bind across and the green mist is layered.
If you want to see the whole body of the delicate hills,
You should ask Third Master to untie the breast covers.

戲詠春山

杏子梢頭玉兩峰，
微雲橫束翠煙重。
玲瓏欲見山全體，
擬倩三郎解抹胸。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 4.6b)

But Shen Cai can also make fun of the erotic, such as in this song lyric on bound feet, to the tune "Wang Jiangnan:"

How ridiculous!
To bend the long jade bows.
Binding them so tight they grow an underside just like a crab.

Spread out those delicate toes in a row—
They're not as good as a piece of ginger.
What flavor are they? I ask you, young lover.

望江南

戲詠纏足

無謂甚、
竟屈玉弓長。
牢縛生臍渾似蟹，
朗排纖指不如薑。
何味問檀郎。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 9.2b)

This is one of the very few poems that women wrote about the bound foot, which is the most concealed part of the feminine body. Their erotic appeal lies in their mystification, a covered fetish to be fondled and smelled but never unmasked. Shen Cai not only wrote about them but did so in a critical and satirical tone, completely demystifying their erotic appeal by exposing their "naked truth" to the male lover who could only smell but not actually see them. As women knew about the shape and looks of their own, and thus other women's bound feet, Shen Cai's "poetic" disclosure challenges the male reader in general to visualize the not-so-pretty lumpy and gnarled appearance of bound feet.

Shen Cai is conscious of the fact that she is working within the conventions of the boudoir-erotic style.[28] But her self-representation is more effectively individual because she writes in the language and convention only to subvert the cliché image of passively waiting, tear-stained, love-lorn ladies immobilized in their lonely chambers. There is a total absence of tears or melancholy in her poetry; neither is there any sense of boredom or ennui. She textualizes the boudoir environment into an energized, productive space. She transforms into poetic subjects her daily duties and activities such as serving tea to her husband, sewing and embroidering, teaching the maid, playing a musical instrument, sitting or walking in her little garden. In her self-representation, she is always occupied with meaningful activity—busy reading, studying, practicing calligraphy, and writing poetry, often deep into the night and also early in the morning. Her working at calligraphy is a recurring subject of her poems. Some of these poems describe humorous accidents and contain a light touch

of self-irony, even while she is copying the revered styles of past masters such as Yang Xin (370-442) 羊 欣 and Ouyang Xiu (1007-72) 歐 陽 修:

Learning Calligraphy

The ivory tube lightly dabbed in the ink cloud.
On a cold day I tried to copy Yang Xin's style.
Not succeeding, my hand slipped, the pointed brush fell.
It soiled my skirt of butterflies in gold appliqué.

學 書

象 管 輕 輕 蘸 墨 雲 ，
日 寒 書 格 彷 羊 欣 。
不 成 失 手 尖 毫 落 ，
竟 涴 泥 金 蛺 蝶 裙 。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 3.3a-b)

I was Copying Ouyang Xiu's Calligraphy at Night when Suddenly Embers from the Lamp Dropped and Made Burn Marks. I was Really Mad. Madam Wrote a Poem and so I Harmonized with a Quatrain.

A scroll of thin Ou style—beautiful without a blemish.
Suddenly burn marks like fallen scabs spread all over.
I won't deny that the silver stand had brought happiness,
At the autumn window I lost control and cursed the flame.

夜 臨 歐 書 ， 忽 燈 燼 落 成 燒 痕 ， 余 恚 甚 。
夫 人 有 詩 ， 因 和 作 一 絕 。

瘦 歐 一 幅 美 無 瑕 ，
忽 漫 燒 痕 似 落 痂 。
不 道 銀 釭 曾 送 喜 ，
秋 窗 失 口 嗎 燈 花 。

(*Chunyulou ji*, 4.4b)

More often, her poems on practicing calligraphy show her concentration and deep absorption. They also show her determination and persistence, at different times of the day and in different seasons. The title of another poem

describes how her husband playfully tried to snatch the brush away from behind her while she was practicing unawares, but she was holding it so tight in concentration that surprisingly he could not get it out of her hand. She thus ends the quatrain with the couplet: "Don't say that slender leeks of spring have no energy or strength/There are three claw marks on the bamboo brush" 莫道春纖無氣力，爪痕入竹有三分 (*Chunyulou ji*, 6.5a-b). Once again, slender leeks/slender fingers—a commonly fetishized part of the female body in boudoir-erotic poetry—are here given strength and meaning with the new task they are performing.

While Shen Cai takes the boudoir-erotic style as her point of departure, in many of her poems she actually turns the eroticized female object into an actively desiring subject. She takes delight in her body, in her senses, in her talents, and most of all in being a woman. Her desires include the avid pursuit of reading, learning, and writing. Shen Cai does not experience either her gender or her efforts at learning as a burden or as mutually incompatible: she celebrates both. Her poems are literally and entirely written within the boudoir. In so doing, she has turned the boudoir space into a site of production and performance.

Sequestered in her side room, she achieved a degree of artistic and literary reputation in her own lifetime. Her talents crossed beyond the boundaries of her boudoir as her calligraphy was sought by a Japanese and her poetry circulated to the capital Beijing (*Chunyulou ji*, Preface 3a, 7.7a). A few years after the publication of her collected works, seven of her poems were selected for inclusion in the anthology of women's poetry the *Jifang ji* 擷芳集 (preface 1785), a vast compilation of more than 2000 women poets compiled by Wang Qishu 汪啓淑 (fl. late eighteenth century). Her poems are included in the last *juan* of the section of poetry by concubines (*jishi* 姬侍, 70.12a-13b). In 1779, as he penned the preface in preparation for the publication of her poetry and prose writings, Lu Xuan gave more than a hint that Shen Cai's literary and artistic work properly carried out within her side room was both an economic resource and cultural capital for the family: "Now her poems have circulated to the capital, and her calligraphy has reached across the ocean. Relying on her brush like Wu Cailuan 吳彩鸞,[29] she can help out our slight resources; assisting with the management of a Li Luoxiu 李絡秀,[30] she will enhance our reputation." (*Chunyulou ji*, Preface 3a)

Shen Cai may well have brought money into the household with her publication. My research indicates that a large number of copies of her poetry collection must have been printed, which suggests that her work was popular and reached a larger audience. In contrast to other women's texts, most of which have one or two copies extant in rare book collections, Shen

Cai's *Chunyulou ji* can be found in all the major rare book collections in libraries in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou.

For Shen Cai, her subordinate status and her upbringing within a polygamous household from the young age of twelve had successfully inculcated in her an acceptance of her specific gender role as a concubine and of her confined mode of existence. Her primary duty was to serve her master without upsetting the harmony of the household. However, from her literary works, a reader would neither categorize her as a passive object and subservient woman, nor as a conniving concubine manipulating the attention of her husband in relations of power to the other women in the household, especially the principal wife, whom she treats more like a teacher and mother than a competitor for her husband's affection. Her self-representation resists stereotypes. Her poetry, while approximating certain male paradigms of the representation of women, also subverts them in the process. She has constructed a different gendered significance and space for herself through the medium and technology of writing in the space of the side chamber.

Conclusion

From examples of concubines such as Liu Rushi, Li Yin, and Shen Cai, we see that the gender regime could provide opportunities for and accommodate the literary aspirations of some women who were otherwise at the bottom of the social sphere to gain literacy and literary fame despite the many odds that such a system held against them. It provided them with a "side room," a space with possibilities. This may be read as another instance of a resilience in the Confucian gender system that enabled it to co-opt women's complicity.[31] In a poem addressed to a neighbor girl, probably an imaginary interlocuter, Shen Cai defends both the pursuit of learning and being a woman:

In Reply to a Neighbour Girl

I intone when the moon is facing the window,
Recite softly when the sun is at high noon.
The girl next door said to me:
"Reading books is to make oneself suffer in vain."
I thank my neighbor for her words,
But my heart will always look to antiquity.
It's like the bees making honey,
My life chiefly depends on it.
A thousand cases of books will surpass a hundred city walls,

The myriad affairs will seem lighter than a feather.
I just wish that it will always be like this,
Even in my next life I want to be an old woman.

答 鄰 妹

長 嘯 月 當 窗 ，
微 吟 日 卓 午 。
鄰 妹 謂 余 曰 ，
讀 書 徒 自 苦 。
多 謝 鄰 妹 言 ，
余 心 慕 終 古 。
譬 如 蜂 釀 蜜 ，
性 命 藉 爲 主 。
千 函 敵 百 城 ，
萬 事 輕 一 羽 。
但 願 長 如 此 ，
來 生 仍 老 姥 。

(*Chunyulouji*, 6.5b)

Shen Cai's writings offer a startlingly positive view of herself and her environment, as do writings by other concubines. In a sense they are the fortunate ones who have the indispensible support of their husbands. But we can still ask what meanings textual production was able to offer those in positions of subordination. With Shen Cai, what remains to be examined are the inscriptions and colophons on paintings, and essays of connoisseurship, in which she assumes the subject position and full authority of an art critic. This is true also with the many unexplored writings of other women. How should we read self-representations that, rather than offering a critique of the patriarchal family system and the tensions in the subordinated female hierarchy by registering complaint and suffering, instead seem to locate a space for agency and the fulfillment of desire within the boundaries of the polygynous system? Do our modern perspectives and cultural differences obscure and erase certain possibilities for relational experience which, if we listen to the voices of the subordinated, we may recover?

Note

I would like to thank Robin Yates and Tom Looser for their helpful comments on this paper.

Endnotes

1. There were historical, class, and regional patterns and variations in the practice of concubinage. But the practice had become widespread in the Ming and Qing and not only men from elite or wealthy families took concubines. Patricia Ebrey discusses the conditions of concubines in the Song, the pivotal period of social and economic transition to the late imperial period. See *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Chapter 12, "Concubines."
2. Rubie S. Watson, "Wives, Concubines, and Maids: Servitude and Kinship in the Hong Kong Region, 1900-1940," in Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 237.
3. The central space or hall in a wealthy household is usually where the ancestral tablets are set up for ritual observances. See Francesca Bray's discussion of the variations in *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 96-105. The principal wife's room may be located in greatest proximity to this important social and ritual space.
4. Watson, "Wives, Concubines, and Maids," 244.
5. Watson, "Wives, Concubines, and Maids," 247.
6. Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985).
7. On Liu Rushi's life and poetry, see the seminal study by Kang-i Sun Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-lung: Crisis of Love and Loyalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
8. For a detailed study of Feng Xiaoqing's life and lore, see Ellen Widmer, "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992): 111-55. On Li Shuyi's life and poetry collections, see Li Xiaorong, "Woman Writing about Women: Li Shuyi (1817-?) and Her Gendered Project" (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 2000).
9. Or seventeen *sui* in the Chinese way of counting. All references to age have been converted to actual age. For the astonishing detail concerning Li Shuyi's age when her work was published, I am indebted to Li Xiaorong.
10. See the entry on Li Yin and examples of her paintings in Marsha Weidner et al, *Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300-1912* (Indianapolis and New York: Indianapolis Museum of Art and Rizzoli, 1988), 102-5.

11. Xu Shichang 徐世昌, comp., *Wanqingyi shihui* 晚晴簃詩匯 (1929; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 9/183.8090.
12. Liu Rushi, for instance, was responsible for the section on women in the *Liechao shiji* 列朝詩集 (Anthology of Poetry from Various Dynasties). See Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 153-56. Dong Bai participated fully in the aesthetic and refugee life of her husband Mao Xiang 冒襄 during her nine years as his concubine. She compiled the *Lianyan* 奩艷, a collection of miscellaneous notes on women and the feminine, which is not extant. See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü*, 688; see also Mao Xiang's memoir on her, *Yingmeian yiyu* 影梅庵憶語, in *Xianshu sizhong* 閒書四種 (Wuhan: Hubei cishu chubanshe, 1996), 1-70.
13. Li Xiaorong, "Woman Writing about Women," 10-13.
14. Published in 1782. Copy in Shanghai Library.
15. *Chunyulou ji*, Preface, 3a. The term he used is *gujia* 故家, literally "a former family," which implies a good family that has declined in wealth and status.
16. There is no indication that Shen Cai returned home to visit, but she seems to have kept in touch with a younger sister or cousin Piaoxiang, who came to stay with her. There are several poems written to or thinking of Piaoxiang. (*Chunyulou ji*, 4.7b, 8a, 7.5b, 8.8b).
17. *Pinghu xianzhi* 平湖縣志 (1886; reprinted in *Zhongguo fangzhi congshu*, No. 189; Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1975), 1705.
18. For a translation of this classical didactic text for women, see Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China*, New York: Century, 1932.
19. In a lyric to the tune "Manjianghong 滿江紅" Shen Cai quotes two apparently famous lines by Peng Sunyu and notes that Peng Zhenyin is his granddaughter. (*Chunyulou ji*, 8.5b-6a) For Peng Zhenyin's poetic works, see Hu Wenkai, 627-28.
20. *Pinghu xianzhi*, 1705.
21. In Lu Xuan's biography, one son by the name of Lu Fang 陸坊 is mentioned. He passed the provincial examination in 1808. See *Pinghu xianzhi*, 1705.
22. See Francesca Bray's seminal discussion of how, in a polygynous household, elite women appropriated the offspring of those lower down socially in the female hierarchy, *Technology and Gender*, 351-68.

23. Though not indicated, I am assuming the remaining *juan* were copied in the same year, as the collection was printed in the following year.
24. Hu, 365.
25. Maureen Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China" *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992): 69.
26. For a complete translation, see Anne Birrell, *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986). See also my discussion of the female image generated by the male gaze in "Engendering the Lyric: Her Image and Voice in Song," in Pauline Yu, ed., *Voices of the Song Lyric in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 107-144.
27. See Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 45-47.
28. In a title within a series of bantering poems with her husband, she mentions in a note that the previous poem by her in the series "was graciously improved by madam" (i.e., the principal wife), so it does not contain a trace of feminine language (literally "the feeling of rouge" 脂 粉 氣) (*Chunyulou ji*, 4.6a). On this term see also the discussion in Kang-i Sun Chang's paper in this volume.
29. A woman calligrapher of the Tang (618-905) who supported her family with her work.
30. Li Luoxiu came from a commoner family. During a hunting trip, Zhou Jun, General of Andong of the Jin (265-316), chanced upon her ability to manage the production of a large banquet. As a result, he asked to have her as his concubine. She brought up her three sons to become successful statesmen. She obviously provides an apt and favorable comparison for Shen Cai. Li's biography is included in the *Lienü* section of the *Jin shu* 晉 書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 96.2514-15.
31. Dorothy Ko emphasizes this aspect of the Confucian gender regime in her study of women's culture in the seventeenth century, see *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).